

Beginners Torah Lesson # 1: How to Study the Torah

By Rabbi Edward Levi Nydle

Ephraimites who are new to the Torah need some basic principles to help them understand how to properly study and interpret the Torah. Proper Torah study will help them to understand the *mitzvot* in the Torah and their application in our everyday lives. Let me help you by giving you a few pointers in learning Torah that will make a world of difference. Hopefully these beginner helps will prevent you from falling into the trap of misinterpreting word meanings, verses, and texts.

No communication, be it written or oral, verbal or nonverbal, can be understood without interpretation. We often interpret the communication without even being aware of how we came to that interpretation and understanding. Torah must be interpreted in order to understand it. Therefore, we have to know the rules of interpretation in order not to misunderstand the Torah and to know what it really says. Misinterpretation brings misunderstanding. Misunderstanding brings wrong doctrine!

We assume everyone reading this agrees upon the inspiration of the Torah and that Yahweh gave the Torah to Moshe. Therefore, it being from Above, every jot and tittle must be taken seriously. The Sages teach us that every passage of the Torah has 70 facets, referring to the 70 members of the Sanhedrin, whose purpose was to interpret the law. The Torah has many levels of intended meaning to the reader. Also, interpretation of the Torah must have a deep respect for the significance of every word and phrase in the text. Yahweh has placed in the Torah everything the reader needs to hear to understand the text! It is our job to dig deep within the text to find what He is saying.

The rabbis have set up four categories of interpretation of the Torah called *PDRS* or *PaRDeS* =paradise.

- *P'shat*, the plain simple ,literal meaning of the text
- *Drash*, the homiletic meaning (from this *MiDrash*)
- *Remez* , the hidden or esoteric meaning
- *Sod*, the hidden, mysterious, gematria

P'shat is the basic meaning of a text. No Scriptural interpretation EVER abandons its *P'shat*-Plain Sense! This means that NO MATTER WHAT OTHER INTERPRETIVE MODES ARE APPLIED TO THE TEXT, THE TEXT ALWAYS RETAINS ITS PLAIN SENSE AND HAS TO BE RECKONED WITH IN THAT MANNER! Even *P'shat* has several levels of interpretation. This means we must apply the rules of grammar, language, compositional syntax, history, culture, geography, and just plain common sense to the text. Remember that interpretation strives for simplicity as its aim of understanding. The simple interpretation is preferred over the more complex one. An interpretation that resolves several difficulties raised by the text has a ring of truth to attach to it.

The starting point in ALL Scriptural interpretation is to know WHAT the text is saying. This seems obvious! But yet knowing what every word or sentence means is not so obvious. That means we HAVE TO WORK FROM THE ORIGINAL HEBREW TEXT. Translations are merely man's attempt to interpret the text and ALL TRANSLATIONS ARE OPEN TO DISPUTE! No translation is "inspired". This puts the person who only knows English at a great disadvantage over the beginning Hebrew student. He is left to the mercy of the translators or mistranslators, whichever the case may be. We cannot approach any text casually because we might miss the opportunity of seeing what lies underneath the text. This requires some knowledge of the Hebrew language.

Next, we must consider HOW the text is being said. That means we have to pay attention to the adjectives, nouns, pronouns, and proper nouns used in a text. We watch for word plays, repetition, word associations, verbal nuances, and the like. We may have to express this verbally to understand the text.

One of the rules of hermeneutics is that we must interpret on the basis of text-in-context. That means any text must be interpreted and is dependent upon the context within which it is found. Words can change meaning when they exist in different contexts and settings. This means every part of the passage derives its meaning from its surrounding context. A text out of context is a pretext. This is called the Contiguity principal-or deriving clues to the interpretation from the neighboring text, chapter, or book.

The Torah is one unified document. We must also look for similarities between texts. In order to understand one text of the Torah, one must be familiar with another section or the whole of the Torah. There are rare words or phrases that appear in different sections of the Torah. This help us to link together two seemingly unconnected verses and sections by verbal association within the two texts.

I must stress that we are to take a text at face value or the Plain Sense of the text. Too many people unfamiliar with the rules of Torah interpretation try to spiritualize or allegorize the texts of the Torah!

We have to know if we are dealing with poetry, prophecy, history, songs, or legal laws or *mitzvot*. We cannot allegorize a legal section of the Torah. We have to look at the plain meaning and put ourselves in their shoes AT THE TIME to find the meaning of the text.

There is a BIG difference between saying, “This verse MEANS such and such” and “This verse can serve as an illustration or principle to teach us about such and such”. By saying the first we are assigning a specific literal meaning to the text, while the latter might help us to come to an understanding of another text or principle within the Torah. It is so important that we understand this rule of Torah interpretation. If we do not apply this rule then we will misinterpret many of the plain legal aspects of Torah commands that Yahweh has given us and try to spiritualize them away. We can only arrive at the literal meaning of the text after careful study of the text and its original Yahweh inspired meaning. However, we can say it serves as an illustration of a principle within Scripture without declaring it to be the original meaning of the text. This is done especially when we try to bring things into our lives as practical application. **PRACTICAL APPLICATION IS THE LAST STEP OF TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION! THIS IS WHERE WE BECOME DISHONEST IN THE INTERPRETATION OR HANDLING OF THE TEXT AND THE TORAH. WE CANNOT ASSIGN MEANINGS TO A TEXT OR COMMAND THAT ARE NOT THERE IN THE ORIGINAL COMMANDMENT.** Let me say this about practical application- we MUST look to see HOW they applied this commandment in ancient Israel, and how they understood the text. We also need to look at HOW THE JEWISH PEOPLE APPLY THIS COMMAND TODAY! They do not have all things correct; however, they DO HAVE THE MAJORITY OF THINGS RIGHT! They have preserved the Torah for us for thousands of years! We read in the *Brit Chadasha*:

- “What then is the advantage of the Yehudite, or what is the value of circumcision? MUCH in every way! Because firstly indeed that THEY were entrusted with the WORDS OF ELOHIM. **Romans 3:1-2**

Remember that the Torah scroll was not written with any chapters and verses. Sentences are not marked off. These are Medieval “Christian” additions to the Scriptures and sometimes tend to muddy the waters more than they help! Sometimes they break up whole thoughts by the chapter divisions. In the Hebrew Scroll there are not any forms of punctuation or vowel pointing either. These were all added later by the Oral Massoretic tradition. So, we cannot always trust the vowel pointing to know the correct Hebrew word or pronunciation of the word. Many texts were changed by the Massoritics to hide the verses and words pointing to Yahshua as the Moshiah. One vowel point can change the meaning of a whole verse!

We have to become experts of the text! We have to study, study, and study! We have to familiarize ourselves with all the tools of the student of the Scriptures! We have to become ardent users of the various Concordances, Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, Commentaries, and works of the Sages. Good reference materials are a MUST for the serious student! A WORD OF CAUTION: we have to be aware of prejudices of the writers and compilers of various works.

We must also rely upon the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Set-apart Spirit) to be our teacher of the Torah. **Tehillim 119:18** says, “Open my eyes, that I might behold the wonderful things from Your Torah.” Yahshua said, “But the Helper, the Set-Apart Spirit, whom the Father shall send in My Name, He shall teach you all, and remind you of all I said to you.” **Yochanan (John) 15:26** *the Scriptures*. Look for passages of the Torah when reading the *Brit Chadasha* (Renewed Covenant). This will help the *Ruach* to show you how the early Body of Messiah interpreted the passage, and also how they practiced the *mitzvot*. It is essential for us to see the spirit behind the commandment to understand WHY Yahweh gave it to Israel in the first place at Mt.Sinai. This means we have to know both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Each *mitzvah* has a literal and spiritual meaning. Yahweh wants us to know and observe both!

Study is not an end in itself. We have to become doers of the Word also. There comes a time when we have to apply the teachings we are learning to our lives in order to rise up and become Messianic Yisrael! Every Torah teacher must encourage his students to practice the Torah and apply what they are learning.

Last of all: WE MUST ALL STAY TEACHABLE AND BE WILLING TO CHANGE OUR OPINIONS WHEN SCRIPTURE PROVES US TO BE WRONG! None of us have all the TRUTH. We must be willing to look at different teachings and viewpoints to see if they have any validity based upon the Scriptural proof presented to us.

I pray this first short introductory lesson on the Torah has been helpful to you as a student of the Word of Yahweh. May Yahweh bless your understanding and studies of His Word. And may He grant you Wisdom, Understanding and knowledge.