

***Reclaiming the Lost Art of Torah Study: I***  
***From Chaos to Order***

**The First Missing Step**

It is a truism in the world of learning Gemara that it is necessary to have a good grasp of the *shakla vetarya* before venturing into the study of *Tosafos*, *Rishonim*, etc. It is also often stressed that the foundation needs to be laid by taking apart the particular Mishnah upon which the *sugya* is based, understanding the various halachos being presented, how many parts it can be divided into etc., so that one has a good grasp of what the Gemara is doing in its treatment of the Mishnah.

These are all of course true and there are many excellent works devoted to helping the beginner learn how to do this. (In truth, Talmud students at any level would probably benefit from these works!)

What I would like to propose here is that there is a step being skipped in this procedure.

**The World of the Mishnah**

No sugya, and no Mishnah, exists in isolation. The Gemara, of course, is arranged around the Mishnah, but each Mishnah is part of a carefully and intentionally crafted structure called a masechta.

We may often assume that the general structure or topic of a given masechta is known to us. Actually, though, this is often far from the truth. It is possible to study a given masechta for months, and even to review it numerous times, without once taking a step back to contemplate the general structure, the order of the perakim, the reason for the inclusion of various topics, and so on.

We may tend to view these issues as peripheral. Yes, we know that they are engaged by some Rishonim and Acharonim, but we view this as *parpera'os laTorah*, as interesting tidbits of information not necessarily related to, or impacting upon, the real work of plumbing the depths of a sugya.

The somewhat bold claim I wish to make is that in this seemingly tangential pursuit lies part of the secret to clearer, more rewarding and truly meaningful learning.

**Entering the Mind of Chazal**

When you take a step back and enter the world of the masechta of Mishnayos as a unit, you are entering into the mind of the author/editor of the Mishnah (whether this was Rabi Yehuda HaNasi or possible sages long before him). What was his mission in composing this masechta? Which aspects of Torah was he seeking to clarify? How did he decide which aspects to bind together in one tractate? How did he decide in which order to present the various topics? And how did he decide in which order to present the various details of each topic?

## **Metamorphosis**

When you enter into this space, some magical things happen:

1. The topics of the Mishnah become more personally relevant. You are on board the broader mission of *Chazal* to clarify and distill the details of the mitzvos.
2. The Masechta as a whole takes on a shape. You begin to view it as a living entity with contours, colors and personality.
3. You begin to see – better, to feel – how each Mishnah, and by extension each sugya, is not operating on its own, but is rather a part of a larger whole. This enriches your understanding of, and connection to, each sugya and each concept.
4. The connection that we are all searching for in our learning – to Klal Yisrael, to the Giver of the Torah, to spirituality – is accessed when we step into the broader picture and appreciate how it is being built from bottom up. It is when we can actually see the branching out of the broader picture into the details that we apprehend the Torah closer and closer to its source.

## **Desperate for Structure**

Whether or not your conscious mind is aware of it, your subconscious mind is always seeking context and structure. Even when we think we completely understand a given topic, our subconscious mind – which is where the great bulk of learning really takes place – is begging for more context, more background. The broader the foundation we give it, the better equipped it is to process what we are learning into a larger context and to build on that foundation.

## **Nothing Like Experiencing It**

I have tried to articulate what I think happens when this exercise is attempted, but there is no substitute to actually experiencing it. I invite you to take whichever masechta you are currently studying – whether *bekiyus* or *iyun* – sit down with a *Mishnayos*, and map out the masechta. If you do, please share your experience and insight via the email address below.

## **Precedent from *Rishonim***

In our next segment, we will examine how one of the *Rishonim* invested enormous efforts in this activity, as well as how he explains the reason for his efforts.

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