

## Hitlamdut

The term Hitlamdut/התלמדנות means to internalize what you learn. A Mitlamed/מתלמד is someone who can see how any particular situation or learning applies to her life. The word is the reflexive form of the verb, “To Learn” or למד, in Hebrew. Maimonides, in his laws of Torah Study writes that Hitlamdut is the essence of Torah learning. Torah learning is not just for the sake of gaining information. Rather, it’s purpose is to impact and transform our lives. Hitlamdut is the quality that makes our learning transformative. When we practice Hitlamdut:

1. Our learning comes alive. Habit and learning by rote undermine spiritual growth. When we read the Torah portion of the week for the umpteenth time and think, “I’ve read this story about Abraham before,” and feel nothing new, we are not practicing hitlamdut. You are a mitlamed when you hear the Abraham story again and see something you never saw before. You see the story with new eyes and realize how a certain detail relates to your life. Such realizations energize us, make the texts come alive and keep us growing. This is one type of hitlamdut.
2. We grow from our experiences. We experience all kinds of things, good and bad, all day long. Our children don’t do what we ask them, we get an award at work, a storm knocks out our electricity for a week. These experiences may not impact us at all. We may take them in stride or we may explode in anger and then move on. The mitlamed looks for the learnings in these experiences. Hmm, my children are still not listening when I ask them to set the table. What can I learn about myself from this? Maybe I don’t speak to them in the right tone? Maybe I need to play with them more before dinner time? The mitlamed reads life as learning opportunities.

Hitlamdut is not a middah. It is a stance of learning and growth with which we approach life.

Hitlamdut is the first step in Mussar practice. Late 20<sup>th</sup> century Mussar master Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe z”l warned of two dangers when beginning to work on your middot. The first is arrogance. Whenever we work to improve ourselves we are in danger of thinking we are better than all those schlubs out there who aren’t trying to become more kind, generous or patient. I’ve experienced this most starkly in my eating practice. Because of health reasons, my wife and I eat primarily a raw-vegan diet. Many times in my workplace during lunch I feel superior with my salad to those people eating pizza and fries. Such an attitude is obviously bad for relationships, but it is also bad for your own spiritual growth. The other danger is self-criticism and despair. Our efforts at self-improvement usually start with enthusiasm and energy. I remember a time I wanted to become more organized. I committed to keeping track of my activities every 20 minutes of the day. I kept a detailed journal for about four days. I then couldn’t keep it up and I got sick. I think my body was telling me that I took on too much. This is what Rav Wolbe calls the כח המרידה – the force of inner rebellion. Similarly I’ve heard from many Mussar students over the years that their practice is just giving fodder to their inner critic. When they can’t journal everyday or remember to focus on the middot, they feel like failures.

Hitlamdut is an antidote to these two challenges. When we practice Hitlamdut we are just practicing something, not claiming that we can do it well. When I want to work on the middah of



Savlanut/Patience while standing in a long check-out line at the supermarket I will say to myself, “What would a patient person feel like now?” rather than force myself to actually be patient<sup>3</sup>. The difference in these approaches is profound. If everything is just practice, than there is nothing for me to be arrogant about. I’m not claiming to be patient, I’m just practicing patience. Similarly, this approach undermines the critical and rebellious voice. What is there to criticize or rebel against, I’m just practicing something.

At a gathering of his students in North America Rav Wolbe asked, “What is the main thing you learned from me?” One student said, “Patience,” another, “Hesed,” and another “Trust” and so on until the dozens of students answered. At the end Rav Wolbe exclaimed, “I have no students!” “What are you talking about” they asked, “We learned so much from you.” He answered, “My main thing is Hitlamdut. That is what I am here to teach!” A stance of Hitlamdut is the beginning of all middot growth<sup>4</sup>.

We apply a stance of Hitlamdut to all we do in our practice. One aspect is observation. This is a place where mindfulness practices dovetails nicely with Tikkun Middot and Mussar. We try to see the familiar as new. A classic practice is to take a rote activity like brushing teeth and notice how you brush your teeth. Or notice how you say a bracha (blessing) that you say many times a day. See outside of the habit and watch yourself or others. Another aspect is an attitude of acceptance towards our imperfection. If we feel we need to be perfect, there is no room for learning. When I can accept that I am not perfect at Chesed or organization, there is room to learn. Finally, a perspective that life continuously presents me with learning opportunities helps me see my experiences as such. The goal of hitlamdut is to break out of rote living and let the growth begin!

#### *Questions for consideration:*

What are one or two areas of your life in which it is easiest for you to show interest? These can include an area of your work, family life or hobby. In what ways does your focus in one of these areas tend to get rote or routine?

In what ways can it be difficult or challenging for you to pay attention outside of these areas of interest? For example, I am naturally drawn to the inner life and can easily spend hours reading spiritual texts and meditating. I find it difficult to pay attention to and show interest in home repairs, even when these are calling out to me!

Another aspect of Hitlamdut practice is letting what we learn make a real impact on the way we feel and think about the world. What is an example of something you learned/observed recently that really had an impact on you? That “got inside.” How did it feel?

Imagine applying this Hitlamdut approach to your Torah study. How might this change the way you study? What is a recent example of a connection you were able to make in your Torah study?

In what ways might practicing Hitlamdut make a difference in your roles as a rabbi, friend, parent, colleague or spouse?

---

<sup>3</sup> This technique was developed by Rabbi Avi Fertig, author of [Bridging the Gap](#)

<sup>4</sup> As told by Rabbi Aryeh Wolbe, Rav Wolbe’s grandson.



## Learn the Sources

### A Stance of Learning and Growth: Hitlamdut

*The Hebrew word “Hitlamdut” means to adopt a stance of being a learner and have what we learn impact us. It is the reflexive form of the Hebrew root for learning – L.M.D..ט.נ.ל. Our source text is from Aley Shur, volume 2, a popular contemporary book of Mussar instruction by Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe (d. 2005, Israel) and studied regularly by thousands of people around the world. Rav Wolbe was one of the foremost teachers of Mussar in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and advocated Hitlamdut, or being a Mitlamed/et (one who engages everything s/he does as a learner) as the starting point and most important aspect of working on our middot. He warns that working on one’s middot often can lead to arrogance and destructive self-criticism. Hitlamdut serves as an antidote because one who sees himself as simply practicing and learning will diffuse negative self-criticism and has nothing to laud over other people. Rav Wolbe calls this approach a “way of life” and can be applied to book learning and learning from life in general.*

*Rav Wolbe describes the practice of Hitlamdut by quoting from the Mishna (220 CE) and a commentary by Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv (d. 1898, Kelm, Lithuania). Rav Simcha Zissel was one of the primary disciples of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (d.1883, Konigsberg), the founder of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Mussar movement.*

“Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as it says, ‘From all my students I gained wisdom.’ (Mishna Avot 4:1)

R. Simcha Zissel Ziv, founder of the Kelm Yeshiva writes:

Every person that has a special feeling for a certain endeavor will be extremely sensitive when she sees any little thing having to do with that endeavor. For example: When a tailor meets someone he will immediately look at his clothes, the shoemaker –at the shoes, the milliner –at the hat. Similarly a merchant will be very sensitive to any words or actions that will have an impact on his merchandise. Another type of person would not see or hear any of these things because his heart is not given to inquire and investigate anything from these matters because he has no desire for them...all of this, if one is not engaged in such activities will not notice them when performed by others. If this is the case, then one who “learns from every person,” behold, this is a great “merchant,” he trades in everything and thus he understands the necessity to learn from the other and thus is called “Wise.”

R. Simcha Zissel’s intention is thus: The tailor looks just at the other’s suit, the shoemaker only at the shoes, the milliner only at his hat. Similarly the one who is [careful about performing all the mitzvot] only looks at how the other observes the details of the mitzvot and the lover of Hesed (acts of kindness) at his acts of loving kindness. But the one who learns from all people, learns from the other ALL that she has to teach, even things that until now were outside the realm of his interests he understands and learns from the other. The one who learns from all people is open to learning from everything that she sees in the world.

Questions:

In what ways do your natural area (s) of focus tend to get rote or routine?

In what ways can it be difficult or challenging to look for “learnings” outside of your natural area of focus?



Another aspect of Hitlamdut practice is letting what we learn make a real impact on the way we feel and think about the world. What is an example of something you learned/observed recently that really had an impact on you? That “got inside.” How did it feel?

Imagine applying this Hitlamdut approach to your Torah study. How might this change the way you study? What is a recent example of a connection you were able to make in your Torah study?

In what ways might practicing Hitlamdut make a difference in your roles as a rabbi, friend, parent, colleague or spouse?



## For Further Study

### Hitlamdut Sources<sup>5</sup>

*The following sources from the Babylonian Talmud and a commentary on the Mishna explore different aspects Hitlamdut:*

#### Source 1: Eruvin 100b

“Rabbi Yochanan said: If the Torah had not been given, we could learn modesty from a cat, not stealing from ants, fidelity from a pigeon, and proper sexual relations from a rooster who appeases its partner before engaging in sexual relations.”

אמר רבי יוחנן אילמלא לא ניתנה תורה היינו למידין צניעות מחתול וגזל מנמלה ועריות מיונה דרך ארץ מתרנגול שמפייס ואחר כך בועל

#### *Questions for Consideration*

What is something you have learned from animals or the natural world?

What conditions need to be there for you to engage in this type of learning?

#### Source 2: Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura (d. circa 1515, Jerusalem) commentary on Mishna Avot 4:1

*Mishna:*

בֶּן זֹמָא אוֹמֵר, אִיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from all people.

*Commentary:*

הלומד מכל אדם - ואע"פ שהוא קטן ממנו שכיון שאינו חס על כבודו ולומד מן הקטנים ניכרים הדברים שחכמתו היא לשם שמים ולא להתיהר ולהתפאר בה:

*One who learns from all people* – Even though the other is of lesser stature. Since such a person is not concerned for his/her own honor and is willing to learn from those of lesser stature, it is evident that the wisdom acquired is for the sake of heaven and not simply to show off and aggrandize the self through it.

<sup>5</sup> These sources are culled from Aley Shur II, pgs.



*Questions for Consideration*

Rav Ovadia points out that being overly concerned with our self-image can get in the way of real learning.

In what ways has this particular obstacle impacted you?

What are other obstacles do you encounter to learning from others?

**Source 3: Talmud Bavli Sota 2a**

“Rebbi<sup>6</sup> says: Why is the Torah portion about the Nazir (the person who vows to refrain from wine and having his/her hair cut) put next to the Torah portion about the Sota (the suspected adulteress who was assumed to have engaged in excessive drinking which led to her infidelity)? To teach that all who saw the adulteress woman in her degraded state would surely swear off drinking.”

רבי אומר למה נסמכה פרשת נזיר לפרשת סוטה לומר לך שכל הרואה סוטה בקלולה יזיר  
עצמו מן היין

*Questions for Consideration*

Rebbi is teaching us that when we see someone having a hard time, rather than blame them for their struggles,, we should look at ourselves and know that we are vulnerable to the same problems.

What is your instinctive reaction when you hear about a friend, acquaintance or colleague got him or herself into trouble? If blame is in the mix of reactions, why do you think this is?

Choose an incident where you witnessed or heard about someone struggling with consequences of poor decisions. Now apply what they are struggling with to your own life – how might you be similarly vulnerable?

Another aspect of Hitlamdut is treating all that we do, including just going through life, as practice. We are always just practicing, and should not be so self-righteous or arrogant to think that we are perfect or invulnerable. Why is this approach important to Hitlamdut, being a self-reflective learner?

---

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi, or Judah the Prince, redacted the Mishna, the foundational text of Jewish oral law, around the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.



## Hitlamdut Practices

### ***Kabbalot***

A Kabbalah is a small, concrete practice that you accept on yourself to grow in a particular middah. Kabbalot are best if they are limited and concrete and easy to do. The goal of a Kabbalah is to bring unconscious thoughts and feelings into awareness, thus making choice possible. If a kabbalah is continued for several weeks it can also serve to habituate the practitioner to a desired behavior.

Part one – For the first weeks of this time of practice choose a small, routine practice in your life from which to learn each day. For example - brushing teeth. The idea is not to brush your teeth better, but to notice what you can learn from the act of brushing your teeth. If you say blessings over food or other things regularly – what can you learn from the actual practice of saying the blessing? Again, the goal is not to say the blessing with more Kavana (intention), but to glean something from the experience of how you say the blessing.

Part two – For the second weeks of this time of practice notice what you can learn from the small actions of others at least 3x/each day. These can be three things from the same person or from different people. For example, in synagogue one Shabbat a friend of mine handed me a Bible just before we got to the Torah reading. I was just about to go get one for myself. I learned from him about seeing the needs of other people and doing something kind for another person. The goal of the practice is to open us to noticing others with an eye toward what we can learn.

### ***Sichot Chaverim Chevruta***

A sichat chaverim literally means a discussion among friends. In Rebbe Nachman's circle it meant a conversation about spiritual matters in which each party shares their experience with spiritual growth. The purpose of the conversation is to give support and inspire each other by hearing stories about practice.

Set up a 20-30 minute period of time to talk with your partner as least once between meetings. During this meeting you will split the time evenly. Choose one person to talk first. During the first person's time the listener's job is to give full attention to the speaker and ask questions that will help the speaker understand his or her situation better. Do not give any advice or try to solve a problem. Use a timer to insure that the session is split evenly between both partners.



Fill in dates for your practice period in the top row. Check each day you do the practice. This form can be printed on card stock paper and folded over into a tent to put on a desktop or dresser for easy viewing.

Kabbalah															
Chevruta															

Kabbalah															
Chevruta															

## ***Kabbalot***

A Kabbalah is a small, concrete practice that you accept on yourself to grow in a particular middah. Kabbalot are best if they are limited and concrete and easy to do. The goal of a Kabbalah is to bring unconscious thoughts and feelings into awareness, thus making choice possible. If a kabbalah is continued for several weeks it can also serve to habituate the practitioner to a desired behavior.

Part one – For the first weeks of this time of practice choose a small, routine practice in your life from which to learn each day. For example - brushing teeth. The idea is not to brush your teeth better, but to notice what you can learn from the act of brushing your teeth. If you say blessings over food or other things regularly – what can you learn from the actual practice of saying the blessing? Again, the goal is not to say the blessing with more Kavana (intention), but to glean something from the experience of how you say the blessing.

Part two – For the second weeks of this time of practice notice what you can learn from the small actions of others at least 3x/each day. These can be three things from the same person or from different people. For example, in synagogue one Shabbat a friend of mine handed me a Bible just before we got to the Torah reading. I was just about to go get one for myself. I learned from him about seeing the needs of other people and doing something kind for another person. The goal of the practice is to open us to noticing others with an eye toward what we can learn.

