

Rav Kook Torah

by Rabbi

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Even in the Hour of Death

While the verse is speaking of ritual impurity connected with death, the Sages derived an important lesson about Torah study:

“Rabi Yonatan said: One should never abstain from attending the Beit Midrash and Torah study, even in the hour of death. As it says, ‘This is the Torah: when a person dies in a tent’ (Bamidbar 19:14). Even in the hour of death, one should engage in Torah study” (Shabbat 83b).

Why did the rabbis stress that one should study Torah in all situations, even on one’s deathbed?

Eternal Light

All societies have codes of moral conduct. The primary function of a moral code is to regulate communal life, so that members of society will assist rather than harm one another. It follows that these codes of behavior are only necessary when one is part of a community.

One may look at the Torah as simply a body of moral teachings, and as such, only relevant during one’s lifetime. In fact, the Torah is more than just a moral code. All of its teachings, even those which regulate society, are meant to

uplift society in a way that prepares both its collective spirit as well as its individual members for eternal life.

Torah study remains relevant even during one’s final moments, as one prepares to leave the transient life of this world and enter eternal life.

The Tent of Torah

Rabi Yonatan used the metaphor of one studying in the “tent of Torah”. This tent is not a place of private, individual study. Rather, it signifies a fellowship of Torah scholars, the mind-sharpening milieu of the Beit Midrash. One might think that this form of communal study is only important to cultivate friendship and camaraderie. The Sages, however, emphasized that Torah study of the Beit Midrash is deeply bound to eternal holiness. This collective study sanctifies time and elevates life.

Thus, even at the hour of death, one should be engaged in Torah study. All of Torah, even those laws which serve to regulate society, illuminate life with a timeless light. Its details are permeated with nobility and holiness. So that “when a person dies”, he should remain “in the tent” – in the company of scholars who love and cherish Torah. Then one will continue to grow in its eternal light, “going from strength to strength.”

As the Sages taught: “Torah scholars have no rest, not in this world nor in the next” (B'rachot 64a).

Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 163-164