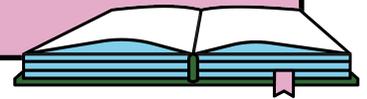


Studying Torah in a State of Flow

In this source sheet from our partners at Pardes, we explore our experience of Torah and finding our state of flow as we study. You can study this on your own or with a *havruta* (study partner). We invite you to move through these sources in whatever way speaks most to you: You can go from start to finish, or you can jump around, focusing on the pieces that resonate most. At the end of the source sheet, you'll find several ways to take your study to the next level.

We are grateful to
Pardes for contributing
this activity



7

Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d, Ruler of the Universe, Who sanctified us with G-d's commandments and commanded us to be engrossed in the words of Torah.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר
קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְעַסֵּק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה:

In this time, when so much seems lost and confusing, the Torah itself, as well as Torah study, can be a real source of solace.

What does it mean to be engrossed in the words of Torah?

One way to interpret this is that we are being blessed, through the study of Torah, to experience the state-of-being called "flow." Flow was identified by the Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, in order to be in a state of flow, you need to be experiencing several things, including:

- intense and focused concentration on the present moment
- a loss of reflective self-consciousness
- a sense of personal agency over the activity
- a feeling that time is moving differently for you (in fact, in flow, one's subjective experience of time is altered)
- a feeling that the activity you are doing is intrinsically rewarding
- feeling so engrossed in the experience that other needs become negligible

When was the last time you felt a sense of flow?

What activities give you that feeling of being so engrossed that you don't even know how much time has passed?



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2

Every day, as part of the morning *Shacharit* prayer service, we have the opportunity to say the above blessing on being engrossed in Torah, with this follow-up:

Hashem our G-d, please make the words of Your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your people Israel. And may we and our descendants, and the descendants of our descendants, and the descendants of Your people the House of Israel, all know Your Name and be students of Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to G-d's people, Israel.

וְהַעֲרַב נָא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶת־דְּבָרֵי
תּוֹרַתְךָ בְּפִינוּ וּבְפִי עַמֶּךָ בֵּית
יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְנִהְיֶה אֲנַחְנוּ וְצִאֲצָאֵינוּ
וְצִאֲצָאֵי עַמֶּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּלָנוּ
יֹדְעֵי שְׁמֶךָ וְלוֹמְדֵי תּוֹרַתְךָ. (י"א
תּוֹרַתְךָ) לְשִׁמְךָ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה
הַמְּלַמֵּד תּוֹרָה לְעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל.



Which/how many of the components of flow, listed above, can you identify in this prayer?

Which conditions enable you to achieve flow during Torah study? In other words, are you more engrossed and immersed when learning solo? In a *havruta* (study pair)? When listening to a lecture?

3

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, known as "the Rav," was one of the foremost rabbinic figures of the twentieth century. Here's how he describes his flow-like experience of Torah learning:

"Whenever I enter the classroom...I ask myself, can there be dialogue between young students and an old teacher...? Whenever I start the *shiur* (Talmudic study session), the door opens up and another old man comes in and sits down. He is older than I am. He is my grandfather — his name is Reb Chaim Brisker. Without him I cannot say my *shiur*. Then more visitors show up. Some of the visitors lived in the eleventh century and some lived in the twelfth century; some lived in the thirteenth century and some even lived in antiquity: Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, Ravad, Rashba... What do I do? I introduce them to my pupils and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says something and the Ravad disagrees. A boy jumps up — he has another idea. The Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what the young boy meant — another boy intervenes. We call upon Rabbenu Tam to express his opinion, and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence... We speak together. We discuss. We enjoy each other's company...There is...a friendship, a comradeship between young and old, between antiquity and Middle Ages and modern times."

—Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (1974)

Which of the components of flow did the Rav seem to be experiencing when he studied and taught Torah? Have you ever had a similar learning experience to the one the Rav is describing?



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Even when you hold it in your arms
 you have not grasped it.
 Wrapped and turned in upon itself
 the scroll says, Not yet.

Even when you take them into your eyes
 you have not seen them; elegant
 in their crowns the letters stand aloof.

Even when you taste them in your mouth
 and roll them on your tongue
 or bite the sharp unyielding strokes
 they say, Not yet.

And when the sounds pour from your throat
 and reach deep into your lungs for breath,
 even then the words say, Not quite.

But when your heart knows its own hunger
 and your mind is seized and shaken,
 and in the narrow space between the lines
 your soul builds its nest,

Now, says Torah, now
 you begin to understand.

—"Torah" by Barbara D. Holender, from *Lifecycles, Vol. II*,
 Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997

Which of the components of flow does the poet seem to be experiencing in her interactions with Torah?
 Have you ever had a similar Torah experience to the one the poet is describing?
 What does flow in Torah study feel like to you?

5

After we have acknowledged the blessing of Torah learning as that of "flow," and asked G-d to make the study of Torah as "flowy" as possible for us and our families, we complete the daily Torah Blessings with the following expression of gratitude:

Blessed are You,
 Hashem our G-d,
 Ruler of the Universe,
 Who chose us from
 among all the
 peoples and gave us
 G-d's Torah. Blessed
 are You, Hashem,
 Giver of the Torah!

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'
 אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם
 אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל
 הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ
 אֶת־תּוֹרָתוֹ: בְּרוּךְ
 אַתָּה ה' נוֹתֵן
 הַתּוֹרָה:

In your opinion, what exactly are we thanking G-d for in this text?
 Do you feel that Torah uniquely enriches your life? If so, how exactly? *(Does it enrich your life through the study itself? By serving as a set of guiding principles and values? As a source of belonging and a shared reference point with family and community? Something else?)*



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To celebrate how the Torah enriches your life, we offer the following ways to take your gratitude to the next level:

1. Craft your own blessing that expresses how or why you feel grateful for the opportunity to learn Torah. This can begin in the traditional way — "Blessed are You, Hashem our G-d..." — or you can go for a more modern and streamlined approach, with something like, "Thank you for... ." Then, the next time you are about to do some Torah study, take a moment before you begin to make it 'official' by reciting your personal Torah blessing.
2. Both the Rav and Barbara Holender, each in their own way, describe vibrantly and intimately what it feels like for them to study Torah. Whether in poem or prose form, share what Torah study feels like to *you*. This could even take the form of a tweet or a photo you post on Instagram.
3. Practice learning Torah in a state of flow. There are many exercises that can help you hone your ability to enter into a state of flow. [This article in PositivePsychology.com](https://www.positivepsychology.com) lists several exercises you can try, including one called the Pomodoro technique, which can specifically help those who are anxious about not achieving flow or are procrastinatory about making a first attempt at it. In this technique, you set an alarm for 25 minutes, during which time you "focus solely on your task intensely." Knowing that your time will be up in just 25 minutes can allow you to let go and enjoy, and before you know it, the alarm will ring!
4. Create fixed times for Torah. Consider pairing other flow activities — exercising, cooking, even laundry-folding or cleaning — with bite-sized Torah content and study to help you elevate your experience (check out Pardes' [podcasts](#) on a wide range of Torah topics). This can help integrate meaning, inspiration, and gratitude into our otherwise banal routines.



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