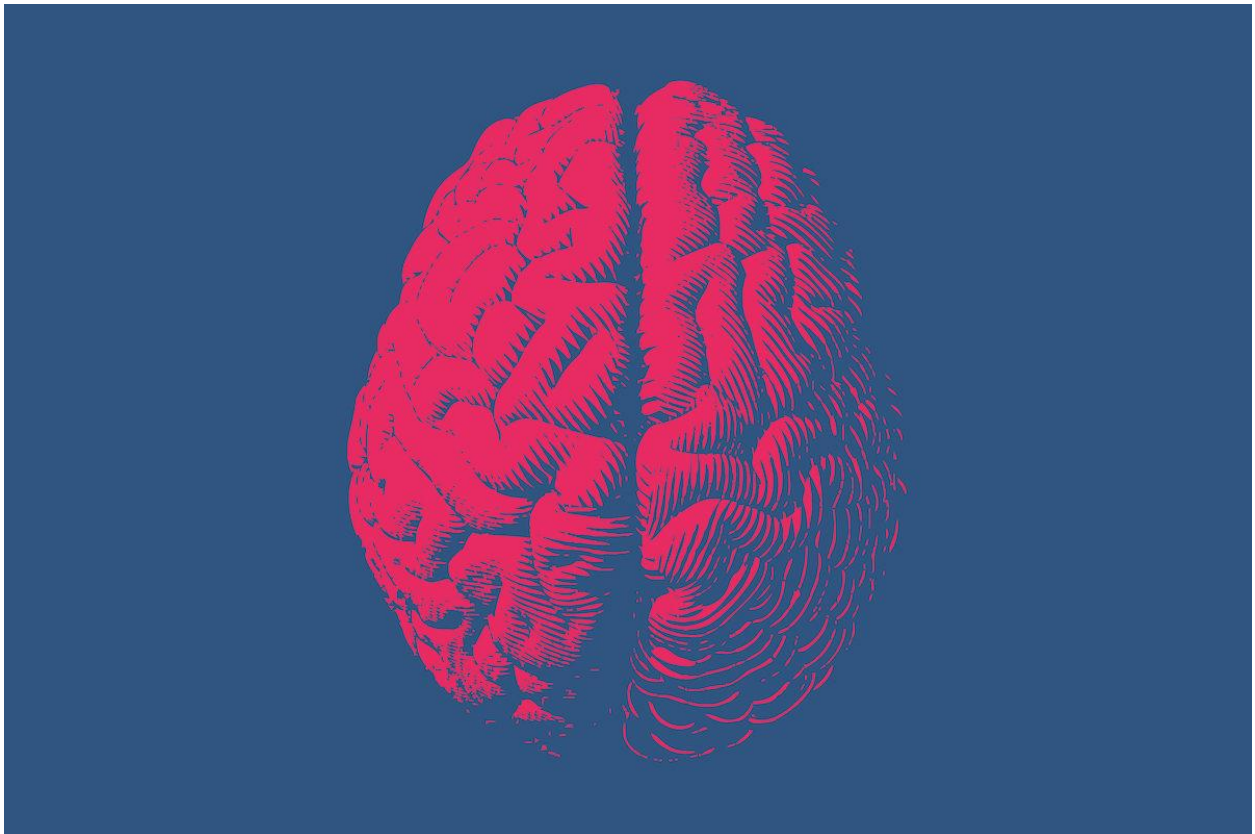


7 Ways the Torah Can Actually Sharpen Your Mind

By Meg Adler Jan 8, 2019



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Torah study isn't just Jewish tradition — it is a tool that can help children become willing to try on new ideas, and it challenges them to always ask new questions. Engaging with Torah is like doing yoga for the mind: it keeps our perspectives flexible and creativity strong.

Anyone, at any age, can study Torah — advanced degrees are never necessary to simply ask, “How is this text relevant to our world today?”

As a Jewish educator, I encourage my students to study Torah with audacious creativity while still honoring traditional methods and practices. For example, I teach my students to approach any text using the Pardes method — analyzing multiple layers of meaning within — but only after they have dramatically acted out the story on their own.

More than anything, I want students to learn *how* to think, not *what* to think. Doing this is living a Torah way of life, and raising thoughtful, creative and independent thinkers who aren't afraid of honest, respectful dialogue – something our world desperately needs.

So without further ado, here are my seven reasons why Torah study is good for your mind.

1. Holding Multiple Interpretations

Studying Torah is an art. When we sit down to read the stories or laws, we can interpret them in so many different ways. For example: Maybe the story of Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden is about her disobedience to Adam, or maybe it's about her audacity and desire to make her own choices. Neither idea is right or wrong! Torah study is not about winning a debate — instead, it means holding our ideas in tandem with other interpretations, even if they are in direct conflict.

2. Beginner's Mind

Every year the Jewish people read through the entire Torah, week by week. Come fall, it's time to finish up the last chapter and start all over again at the beginning (and we have been doing this for centuries). When we study this way, we practice what the Zen Buddhist tradition calls “beginner's mind.” The text is not new, but we approach the text as if we are first-time students, eager to unpack the wisdom hidden within. This orientation humbles and challenges us to set aside what we think we know, and opens our mind to learn more.

3. Creative Problem Solving

Sometimes the Torah doesn't make any sense. Like, how is it possible that Moses wrote the Torah if it continues after he — spoiler alert! — dies?

The rabbinic practice of *Midrash* deals with this by smoothing over the pot-holed Torah with creative stories that explain the text's problems. It's like Torah fan-fiction! For example, one might ask, why was Abraham chosen to be the father of the Jewish people? Well, the writers of *Midrash* wrote stories from Abraham's youth (including the one where he smashes the idols) to explain why he was such an exceptional human.

4. Connection to World Community and Ancestry

When we read the Torah every Shabbat, we connect to Jews all over the world who are reading the exact same words. While you might not love every portion,

when we read Torah on the prescribed schedule, we connect to Jews everywhere. Better yet, when we tap into this rhythm and calendar, we synchronize with our ancestors and live in their wisdom.

5. Meaning in the Mundane

Yes, some Torah portions are boring. Or rather, some have less narrative and more lists and lists and laws and lists. But the more boring the text, the more challenged we are to find its nuggets of meaning. In fact, boredom is the most fertile ground for new insight. While the boredom of not knowing what to do and the boredom of a Torah genealogy may not be the same, the principle still applies: allowing for boredom means allowing for creative growth.

6. Confronting the Horrible

Sometimes, Torah is dangerous. Portions of the Torah can seem to condemn LGBTQ folks or affirm slavery. It's all in there. Some people would have us skip it or rip it out, but I do not look to Torah for unequivocal righteousness. Instead, in Torah I find a harsh but honest reflection of our world. While the content of Torah is not our moral compass, *studying* Torah forces us to confront the ills of our world and demands that after we close our books, we work to heal all life on Earth.

7. Not a Solo Sport

Finally, studying Torah is ideally done in small groups of 2 to 5 called *chevruta*. When we study with others, we learn how to work on a team towards a common goal of understanding the text. We practice disagreeing respectfully and try out new techniques of proposing and defending our ideas. Studying in small group puts you in the driver seat of your own learning, with co-pilots to help you on your way.

Ultimately, studying Torah helps us to find a way to be in the world. Yes, I'd like my students to know who Moses and Miriam are. And yes, the Torah has some good lessons. But most importantly, Torah study teaches us *how* to think and engage in the world. That is our Jewish legacy.