



# לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה *La'asok B'divrei Torah* To Engage with Words of Torah

ברכת התורה גדולה מאוד מאוד – ערוך השולחן א:מז:ז  
*Birkat HaTorah* is very, very great. — Rabbi Yehiel Michel  
Epstein (Aruch Hashulchan 1:47:7)

The rabbis of the Talmud considered Torah study to be among the most worthwhile and fundamental things that a person could do. After washing, dressing, and — according to some — praying, Torah study should be the next activity on the list. The rabbinic sages wondered what someone might do should they want to study before it was time for morning prayers. Their decision was to author a prayer for this occasion.

The Talmud, in many places, is a record of the conversations held among rabbinic scholars as they tried to find the best path to understanding or fulfilling God's word as written in the Torah. In trying to formulate a blessing for Torah study, the rabbis authored three, the first of which is *תּוֹרָה לְעִסּוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה* (*la'asok b'divrei Torah*). The others are a longer blessing, which asks that Torah learning be pleasant and that not only we but also our children and our children's children are worthy of Torah study, and a shorter blessing, which references chosen-ness and recognizes God as the giver of Torah.

The wording of the prayer seems notable because of the choice of verb, *la'asok*. This word is most often translated as “to engage in,” “to occupy oneself with.” This seems to differ from many of the *berachot* for *mitzvot* (commandments) which deal with physical actions (to light, to sit, to wash, etc.). The idea of engaging could be seen to evoke a spiritual and/or emotional element as well.

## Introduce Daily Learning

Teach the *berachah* and recite it with students at the beginning of class each day or at an appropriate moment during each class session. Reflect with students about how saying the *berachah* before learning affects their learning.

## Choose Your Words Wisely

Discuss the choice of the verb לְעִסּוֹק. Why did the rabbis choose this verb instead of a different verb, such as “to read,” “to learn,” or “to study”? How is engaging or being occupied with something different than reading about it, studying it, etc.? Why might it be important to “engage” in learning Torah?

## Write On

The rabbis wrote three prayers for Torah study; *la'asok b'divrei Torah* is the most commonly known. Have students write their own *berachot* for Torah study. What elements should they include?



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### To Engage with Words of Torah

#### Find Your Place

Ask students when they think one should say *Birkat HaTorah*. Students locate *Birkot HaTorah* in a *siddur*. Where does it appear in the liturgy? What comes before it? What comes after it? Why do you think it appears where/when it does?

#### Delve into a Blendspace

1. Listen to all of the videos that contain music. (You may choose to have students close their eyes or turn away, so that they are only listening, not listening and watching.) Students discuss which music they think most suits the intent or mood of the prayer.
2. Watch the video that contains sign language. Ask students to try to pair the motion with the Hebrew word. (Hint: Some signs look like the noun or verb the sign is describing.) Have students learn to sign the prayer as they say it. Though American Sign Language (ASL) is an official language with many standard signs and rules of grammar, it changes as does spoken American English. Ask students if there are any signs they might change and what the new signs might look like.
3. Watch the videos that contain English words. Find the [words](#) to Rick Recht's version and the [lyrics](#) to Dan Nichol's version. Have students choose which version they think captures the mood of the prayer. Ask them to write song lyrics or a poem on the theme of the prayer.

#### Learn Torah about Learning Torah

Learn this section of the Talmud about when one should recite Birkat HaTorah. Reflect on how it applies to learning today.

Tractate <i>Berachot</i> 11b	ברכות יא:
Rav Huna said, "For Torah, one must say a <i>berachah</i> but, for Midrash, one does not need to say a <i>berachah</i> ."	אמר רב הונא למקרא צריך לברך ולמדרש א"צ לברך
And Rabbi Elazar said, "For Torah and for Midrash, one needs to say a <i>berachah</i> but, for Mishnah, one does not need to say a <i>berachah</i> ."	ור' אלעזר אמר למקרא ולמדרש צריך לברך למשנה א"צ לברך
Rabbi Yohanan said, "Even for Mishnah one needs to say a <i>berachah</i> [but for Talmud one does not need to say a <i>berachah</i> ]."	ור' יוחנן אמר אף למשנה נמי צריך לברך [אבל לתלמוד א"צ לברך]
And Rava said, "Even for Talmud one needs to say a <i>berachah</i> ."	ורבא אמר אף לתלמוד צריך לברך

Why do you think the rabbis of the Talmud would want to limit when to say a *berachah*? Why would they want to expand opportunities to say one? What additional subjects might require *Birkat HaTorah* today? Which ones would not?