



# STUDY AS AN EDUCATIONAL LEISURE ACTIVITY: THE CASE OF ISRAELI SOCIETY

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## Abstract

*The research literature on leisure indicates that it is perceived differently by sector and culture. In Israel, one's affiliation with religious or non-religious groups affects one's perception of leisure and its legitimacy. The common activities of religious and secular people include studies in general, and Torah study in particular, as activities carried out by choice and for pleasure. In this research Torah study is considered in its wide meaning, as including all traditional Jewish texts. The research sought to try and understand various characteristics of people who study Torah as a leisure activity and to illuminate aspects rarely addressed in the academic literature, mainly students' perception of study efforts, importance of studies, the contribution of studies and satisfaction with studies. The sample included 234 respondents divided into three groups: Torah students (56) who were studying in a hevruta (collaborative) format, Torah students (50) who were studying a course by participating in lectures, and a control group (128) who were studying other theoretical topics by participating in lectures. The findings of this research indicate that Torah study nowadays takes place not only as an obligation but rather also as an elective activity in formal courses and hevruta study groups – an activity that transcends the religious dimension and involves a choice and pleasure for all learners. Additionally, Torah students perceived their studies as having greater contribution, more important and more satisfying than students of non-Torah subjects. The method of study (collaborative vs lectures) did not affect these perceptions. The findings may have applied implications beneficial to society in general. The research findings illuminate the potential of Torah study as a leisure activity and its capacity to unite various sectors in Israeli society.*

**Keywords:** leisure activity, culture, religious, Israeli society, Torah study

## Introduction

The research literature on leisure indicates transformations in the perception of Torah study from that of a religious activity with sacred dimensions to one that sees Torah study as a shaper of leisure culture in the various streams within Jewish society (Davidovitch & Lazar, 2017). Torah study is not merely an obligatory activity, the worship of God, rather also a diverse leisure activity engaged in by choice, which takes place also beyond the obligatory practice in places of prayer and study halls, places of holiness. Many researchers have referred to the different definitions of leisure: as time, as activity, as a mental state of mind, and as a value. Moreover, researchers related to the perception of leisure in traditional-religious society versus the attitude to leisure in modern society (Davidovitch, 2016; Soen & Rabinovich, 2011).

In Israel, to a certain degree, religious affiliation determines people's cultural inclinations in general and their perception of leisure in particular (Davidovitch, 2019). With regard to the role of Torah study in Jewish culture, it is evident that while over the generations Jewish culture sanctified Torah study and particularly the discourse between man and God (Davidovitch, 2016), at present Torah study serves in practice more as a leisure activity that is part of one's social activities and is engaged in by choice. Hence, significant changes have occurred, facilitating

the introduction of innovation and shifts in the perception of Torah study as a leisure activity (Layosh, 2015).

Torah study occurs not only in synagogues, which are in essence a place of prayer, a place of thrice daily religious ritual, a place of Torah lessons, of rabbinical sermons. In addition, Torah study in the synagogue unites people in a congregation, such as on holidays, Rosh Hodesh, and special Sabbaths, while also enabling interpersonal encounters as part of gatherings that occur not only on Mondays and Thursdays and Sabbaths – the days on which the Torah is traditionally read (Layosh, 2015). In fact, Torah study as an extra-curricular activity takes place on all days of the year, it is a type of club with designated contents, one that includes refreshments, a dress code, language, and behavior norms that encompass something of the current relevant social discourse.

In the community that defines itself secular as well, changes have occurred in the perception of Torah study. In recent years it is possible to see that more secular people participate in study activities as part of the preservation of Jewish tradition (Azulay, 2010). Hence, the current study will focus on the perception of Torah study as a leisure activity that does not necessarily take place in a synagogue. In Israel, in the last decade, accelerated developments are evident concerning leisure activities in diverse populations. The individual is confronted with a wide spectrum of many different unique leisure activities. Among these activities, studies in general and Torah study in particular have become an activity engaged in by choice and enjoyably (Azulay, 2010; Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010).

The current study relates to Torah study in its wide meaning, including the constitutive Jewish texts. The study aims to examine the differences in the perception of Torah study as leisure activity among Israeli men and women, secular and religious, who choose to study Torah as part of their leisure activities. Study is an educational leisure value and activity in the Israeli society. This study will explore the association between the characteristics of leisure in the research literature and those of Torah study, in the aim of examining Torah study as a leisure activity (Davidovitch & Soen, 2016).

Leisure is gradually occupying a significant place in human life. Many studies have been written on the association between quality of life and leisure (Nehushtan, 1980) and on the contribution of leisure activities to one's quality of life (Grant & Kluge, 2012; Heintzman & Patriquin, 2012; Mannell & Snelgrove, 2012). Many researchers have related to the various definitions of leisure: as time, as activity, as a state of mind, and as a value (Davidovitch & Soen, 2016; Katz-Gerro, Raz et al., 2009; Soen & Rabinovich, 2011).

In recent years, people have more leisure time and can choose how to fill it. Western culture includes a wealth of leisure activities (Hayush, 2018; Passmore & French, 2003). Some researchers relate to leisure as a significant resource in one's life (Davidovitch & Soen, 2016; Weber, 2010).

Culture affects the type of leisure customary in a certain society (Weber, 2010). In Israeli society, leisure is receiving gradually more legitimization. During the 70 years since independence a change has occurred, from a society that sanctifies labor – to a society that sanctifies leisure as a value. The existential exigencies have changed, and the new generations have been raised into a reality of a society of abundance. This is true of other cultures, where labor is perceived as a means of reaching an aim – and the aim is leisure. It is evident that leisure is culture dependent. This is manifested mainly in the amount of time devoted to leisure, the type of activities, and the level of activity (Katz-Gerro et al., 2009; Soen & Rabinovich, 2011). Where in the past studies showed that Israelis have a long workday, recently it is evident from the research that Israelis devote the same amount of time to work and leisure. Leisure activity is characterized as voluntary rather than an obligation. In addition, it is characterized by pleasure and reflects one's personal motivation (Passmore & French, 2003). Israel is defined as a developed country from a cultural respect (Aguilar & Hurst, 2007; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre,

1989; Delle Fave & Massimini, 1988). This is evident in the wide array of leisure activities that constitute a resource for one's quality of life (Hsieh et al., 2004). From among the wide range of possible leisure activities, the current study will focus on Torah study. Studies (Passmore & French, 2003) indicate that the engagement with studying as a leisure activity is an opportunity for learning and acquiring knowledge and skills, personal growth, and improving self-efficacy. Additionally, it has been suggested that leisure activities are essential for one's health and for improving one's quality of life (Hsieh et al., 2004).

The association between leisure and quality of life has been under investigation for years. All the studies on the benefits of leisure or the rewards of leisure found a positive association between participation in leisure activities and quality of life (Grant & Kluge, 2012; Heintzman & Patriquin, 2012; Mannell & Snelgrove, 202). In addition, leisure activities were found to enhance one's self-esteem. Leisure activities have also been found to reduce the impact of negative life events (self-protection) (Kleiber et al., 2002). These findings point to leisure and studying as settings for acquiring resources that contribute to one's quality of life.

As early as 1953, Nash, similar to Newman and colleagues (2014), contended that leisure activity causes satisfaction and pleasure. He classified various activities in leisure culture as positive and negative activities. Positive activities include active participation in a group and/or participation that activates the mind. Hence, there is a hierarchy in the choice of leisure activities; the most positive activities are those that generate a pleasurable, enjoyable emotional reaction accompanied by involvement and satisfaction (Mundy & Odum, 1979).

In order to explore the significance of Torah study, the efforts invested in it and its contribution to the learners' satisfaction with studies, the present research compared a group of people who study Torah and a control group of people who study other theoretical contents in the same setting. The Torah students group too was divided in two: a group studying a course and attending lectures and a group studying in a *hevruta* (collaborative) form. This division of the Torah students was done in order to explore the possible effects of different methods of Torah study.

### *Leisure culture and Jewish culture*

The exposure of Jews to leisure culture began mainly during the rule of the Roman Empire. At that time, Jews considered leisure activities and the leisure culture to be impure, a despicable abomination, and kept their distance from them, although this was one of the many influences of Roman culture, which was a big and strong culture that left a mark even many years after its decline. In this period there were various leisure activities such as public games, theatre, and performances, perceived by local Jews as pagan ceremonies. The assumption of the historians is that in this period Jews did not participate in the games and performances. Some say that attending the performances was forbidden for the Jewish community at that time (Davidovitch, 2019). Analysis of talmudic sources indicates that the simple people did visit contemporary places of entertainment (Davidovitch, 2019), although the negative views of the rabbinical leaders, as well as their perception of leisure and revulsion at it, are evident from the talmudic literature.

Consistent with the sources and with Tractate Avot, Rabi Frankel (1981) determined that an exemplary Jewish figure is one who has no leisure time. Leisure is understood as a waste of time that could be utilized for Torah study, as one is instructed to labor in Torah, to sit and study Torah, whenever he has spare time. Judaism guides all one's ways, including with regard to leisure. Halachically, one should not waste time and every moment should be filled with content. Contemporary culture breached these boundaries as well and has reached the observant public, such that it is possible to see observant people reading books, newspapers, watching movies, going on outings, etc. Nevertheless, it is evident that being religious mostly causes

people to avoid permissive forms of entertainment (Ne'eman, 2008) and there is an attempt to combine modern leisure with traditional Torah-based contents, the new with the old.

Jewish tradition was found to have had a great influence on Jewish culture and on Israeli culture. Jewish tradition relates to leisure as something inconsequential, secondary, with no inherent value. According to the Jewish perspective, one's time is sacred for Torah study and leisure does not have equal value to that of Torah study (Davidovitch, 2016).

This is true of Israel too, in its first years, when the value of labor was supreme, and leisure was a means of expressing the loftiness of the value of labor. In this period, songs were written about labor and work and books praised war and warriors.

Notably, there are differences between various Jewish groups with regard to their perception of the world in general and of cultural and artistic activities (Davidovitch, 2019). Religious affiliation has been found to determine people's cultural affiliation and belonging to a group or sub-group that leads to the shaping of the individual, as a common world view and point of origin are formed within the group. With regard to leisure, for example, Davidovitch (2019) explains that the group can affect how its members perceive poetry, theatre, cinema, or engaging in sculpture and music.

Hence, although throughout history Jewish culture sanctified mainly Torah study (Davidovitch, 2016), in practice the synagogue also served as a leisure activity, as it was a means of enhancing people's unity and communality. At present in Israel, Jewish society is very different than historically. Observant Jews are divided into groups, with the main ones being the ultra-orthodox and the national religious, which differ and contain different subgroups. Both the ultra-orthodox and the national religious observe the religious precepts and live a life guided by Jewish law, but the national religious are conscious of combining this with modern life and contemporary culture. In addition, among the ultra-orthodox and ultra-orthodox women, significant changes are occurring with regard to leisure culture, enabling the entrance of innovations and transitions (Layosh, 2015). Hence, among different groups and sub-groups, various cultural activities are emerging (Katz-Gerro et al., 2009). Namely, precisely due to the difference between the secular and religious culture, different cultures will emerge among religious teens, for instance, than among secular teens.

In summary, leisure culture within the Jewish community has undergone changes over the years, where at present there are groups that encourage a combination of life guided by Jewish law with contemporary culture that encourages a leisure culture (Ne'eman, 2008).

### *Torah Study as a Leisure Activity*

Studies indicate that the population of Torah students in Israel has changed over the last decades, with a process of diversification. One of the developments that indicate the change that occurred in the population of leisure learners is that in addition to men, women too are studying Torah. In recent years this topic has been a focus of research attention (Bar-El, 2009; Brown (Hoizman), 1996; Elor, 1998; Halivni, 1997; Ross, 2007). Moreover, a change is evident in the motivation underlying studies (Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010). At present, not only religious people study Torah as a religious precept, guided by the saying "And the study of the torah is equal to them all" (Mishna, Tractate Peah 1:1), but rather a wider and more diverse public is studying Torah by choice as a leisure activity, integrating interest, pleasure, inspiration, uplifting, and enrichment (Davidovitch & Soen, 2016). Studies show that the groups are diverse and characterized by a different "profile" of learners than in the past (Azulay, 2010; Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010). The "new" groups constitute a diverse sociocultural cross-section (Bhabha, 2002).

It is said that since the murder of Prime Minister Rabin, due to the fracturing and trauma experienced by Israeli society, a "revolution of Jewish renewal" is emerging (Bhabha, 2002;

Sheleg, 2010), one that crosses sectors and genders, embracing traditional and other contents and study methods. This Jewish renewal (Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010) is manifested among other things in the domain of Torah study, with a different time and place, teachers and students, nature of discourse and study methods.

This renewal encompasses a breach of the stigma whereupon studies necessarily take place in a "Yeshiva", i.e., a Jewish institution for Torah study (Shenhav, 2001). The change is evident in the establishment of pluralist batei midrash (study centers) where Torah is learned as a leisure activity, such as Elul, Kolot, Alma, Bina, and an umbrella organization called Panim, which unites 60 organizations engaged in studying Jewish Israeli culture. These study centers gather together students from a wide social range. From students in secular yeshivas in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the circle of students has grown to include Nahal groups and study groups abroad (Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010). The shared studies are part of dynamic identity processes taking place in Israel (Sheleg, 2010) and are challenging the traditional division into sectors (Shenhav, 2001) and particularly the dichotomous "religious/secular" distinction (Ben David, 2016; Sheleg, 2010).

One of the developments indicating the change occurring in the population of leisure-based students is that in addition to men, women too are studying Torah in recent years, and this change has been researched repeatedly (Bar-El, 2009; Brown (Hoizman), 1996; Elor, 1998; Halivni, 1997; Ross, 2007). Leibowitz referred to this when he said: "Distancing the study of Torah from women is the denial of a basic right, her 'Jewishness' becomes inferior to that of men... this situation is unbearable..." (Leibowitz, 1982). Women's entrance into the world of Torah study reflects a lengthy process of development and socialization, where women are entering areas previously characterized by a distinctly male majority, from which they had been barred (Blum-Kulka et al., 2008; Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013).

### *Torah Study Contents*

Torah study deals mainly with universal contents of the relation to the Other. The following are several examples of the universality of perception of the Other.

The philosopher Levinas (1981) prioritized the issue of the Other and relates to one's responsibility towards the other person. Levinas' philosophy is linked to his intensive interpretation of the Talmud and scriptures (Epstein, 2001) and to having been a victim of the Holocaust. In his book "Otherwise than Being" (Levinas, 1981) and "Totality and Infinity" (Levinas, 1981), Levinas tries to examine what could have allowed such an enormous ethical failure as World War II and, on the other hand, what could have prevented the evil or the indifference towards it (Levinas, 1971). The claim is that in order to enable the existence of the world, each person should take responsibility for the Other and do good unto him (Epstein, 2001).

The relation to the other is manifested, as stated above, both in the Torah and in modern psychology. In his book "How Does Analysis Cure?" (2005), psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Kohut (who founded the self-psychology orientation) relate to the other as an attempt to experience the inner life of another while simultaneously maintaining a position of objective observation (Blum-Kulka et al., 2008). Self-psychology (Kohut, 2005) speaks of a person as dependent on the view of his surroundings in order to see himself. Empathy is an important way of achieving this goal (Blum-Kulka et al., 2008).

In Buddhist thinking as well, seeing the other is presented as a basic value of relationships. It emphasizes compassion for the other and love as the act of attachment (Burstein & Lahav, 2010).

### *Torah Study Methods*

The methods of study as a leisure activity may affect the quality of studies and their perceived effects on the student's quality of life. The methods of Torah study in a leisure-based environment are varied (Goodman, 2017; Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013), including face-to-face lectures, studies via electronic media, and self-study. The classical talmudic method is studying in a collaborative group called *hevruta*. The *hevruta* is a study group consisting of 2-5 people who learn together (Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013). The Talmud presents this unique study suggestion and advocates learning together (Tractate Shabbat 63a). In the last decade, there is increasing interest in the *hevruta* form of studying (Kent, 2008). Students read the text studied to their peers and share their understanding, questions, and queries with them (Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013). The research has found that studying in a *hevruta* creates discourse, portrays controversy, and encourages thinking out loud. The many voices and the text-based controversies may enrich and inspire the students (Goodman, 2017; Teomim-Ben Menachem, 2013).

Torah students encounter the text and their peers, who might serve as a support group and a group of affiliation, a group whose needs and fields of interest are similar to their own, and thus contribute to their quality of life (Yalom & Leszcz, 2006). In their book "Theory and Practice" (Yalom & Leszcz, 2007), they list therapeutic elements that improve the well-being of a person who participates in a group. These elements might, in their opinion, be beneficial for group member, and they include: universalism, instilling hope, imparting information, altruism, corrective reconstruction of the primary family group, and developing socialization techniques (Yalom & Leszcz, 2006).

This is what text-based bibliotherapy does for the understanding of the human soul (Angel, 2014). In this process, a creative encounter may occur between the client, the therapist, and the text. In this encounter there is a potential that the text will be used as a therapeutic tool facilitating an unthreatening approach to the emotional world (Dweiry, 2006; Cohen, 2006). The text might build a bridge to the unconscious world, a type of additional "third voice" that enables expression, processing, and insights. Text-based learning in a group (Yalom & Leszcz, 2006) as a leisure activity might offer enrichment and expression to people studying Torah, as well as development and change (Goodman, 2017), and bring about an improvement in the quality of life of those who choose to study Torah in their leisure time. Also, those studying face-to-face might enhance their life knowledge, meaning, and spirituality. In this study we examine the differences between two ways of studying Torah, course lectures and *hevruta*.

### *Motivation to Study Torah*

Motivation to study Torah as a leisure activity is another manifestation of the shift that is occurring among Torah students (Ben David, 2016; Goodman, 2017; Sheleg, 2010). The "new learners" come to study Torah due to their desire, interest, free choice, and intrinsic motivation, rather than extrinsic pressure or constraints. The Theory of Self-Determination distinguishes between different types of motivation according to the reasons or aims that drive action. The basic distinction is between intrinsic motivation that relates to the interest or enjoyment derived from the activity itself (Assor, 1999), and extrinsic motivation that relates to motives that are unrelated to the activity itself, rather stem from a need or effort to achieve a certain result, distinct from the activity per se (Assor, 1996). It may be assumed that the motivation to study Torah in one's leisure time is related both to studying contents that arise from the encounter and to the psychosocial benefits that accompany learning with other people (Bhabha, 2002; Sheleg, 2010).

Learning in one's leisure time contents related to relations to others, responsibility, and support of others, might constitute a means of building/expanding a significant pool of resources for the learner (Grant & Kluge, 2012; Heintzman & Patriquin, 2012; Mannell & Snelgrove, 2012).

### *Research Purpose*

There were two research aims:

1. To examine the differences in the perception of studies (time invested, their perceived contribution and importance, and satisfaction with them) between Torah students and students of another theoretical topic.
2. To examine the effects of study methods (collaborative *hevruta* and formal lectures) on the students' perception of the studies.

These aims were examined among adult Israeli men and women, secular and religious, who chose to learn as part of their leisure activities.

### *Research Hypotheses*

This study compared the perception of studying as a leisure activity between a group of Torah students and a control group studying another theoretical subject. The group of Torah students was divided in two: a group that was studying in a collaborative *hevruta* format and a group that was studying by attending a course lecture. The hypotheses of the current study were:

1. The perceived significance of studying and the amount of effort invested in studying would be higher among the two groups of Torah students than among the control group.
2. The level of satisfaction with studies and of their perceived contribution would be higher among the two groups of Torah students than among the control group.

## **Research Methodology**

### *General Background*

In this research Torah study is considered in its wide meaning, as including all traditional Jewish texts. The study included 234 respondents divided into three groups: Torah students who were studying in a *hevruta* (collaborative) format, Torah students who were studying a course by participating in lectures, and a control group who were studying a theoretical topic face-to-face by participating in lectures.

### *Sample Selection*

The study included 234 respondents divided into three groups: a group of Torah students in the *hevruta* method, consisting of 56 respondents (23.9% of the research respondents), a group of Torah students who were studying a course by participating in lectures, consisting of 50 respondents (21.4% of the research respondents), and a control group consisting of 128 respondents who were studying a theoretical topic in a course by participating in lectures, constituting 54.7% of all respondents. The distribution of the categorical personal characteristics of the respondents in the three research groups is presented in Table 1, while the means and standard deviations of the continuous personal characteristics are presented in Table 2.

**Table 1**  
Distribution of the Categorical Personal Characteristics in the Three Research Groups

		Research groups						$\chi^2$
		Hevruta Torah students		Torah course students		Controls		
Characteristics	Values	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Gender	Men	36	64.3	34	68.0	29	22.7	***44.86
	Women	20	35.7	16	32.0	99	72.3	
Marital status	Married	13	23.2	3	6.0	47	36.7	***17.76
	Single	43	67.8	47	94.0	81	63.3	
Religiosity	Secular	12	21.4	7	14.0	97	75.8	***90.22
	Traditional	11	19.6	11	22.0	20	15.6	
	Religious	33	58.9	32	64.0	11	8.6	
Socio-economic status	Low	18	32.1	6	12.0	32	25.0	6.58
	Medium	31	55.4	33	66.0	74	57.8	
	High	7	12.5	11	22.0	22	17.2	

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

It is evident from Table 1 that there are highly significant differences in the composition of the groups.  $\chi^2$  analyses found significant differences between the groups in gender, marital status, and religiosity. With regard to gender, it is evident that the percentage of men in the two Torah student groups is larger than that of the women, while in the control group only about one quarter are men.

With regard to marital status, it seems that most of the respondents were single. Moreover, the percentage of the single respondents in the group of face-to-face Torah students is one third higher than in the two other groups.

A significant difference was found between the groups in religiosity as well, where in the two Torah student groups the percentage of religious respondents was much higher than that of the religious in the control group. Hence, it appears that there is a congruence between the group variable and religiosity, such that religiosity will not constitute a distinct variable in the statistical analysis. With regard to socio-economic status, no significant difference was found. Most of the respondents in the three research groups define their status as average.

Three continuous personal characteristics were explored: age, years of schooling, and study hours per week. In order to check for differences between the three research groups in these measures, one-way analyses of variance were conducted. The means and standard deviations, as well as the results of these analyses, are presented in Table 2.



**Table 2**  
*Means and Standard Deviations for the Measures of Age, Years of Schooling, and Study Hours per Week, in the Research Groups*

Measures	Research groups						F(2, 248)
	Hevruta Torah students		Torah course students		Controls		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Age	55.91	16.43	56.48	12.21	59.73	12.71	2.01
Years of schooling	16.43	4.40	17.42	3.79	17.51	4.16	1.38
Study hours per week	10.98	11.98	8.98	7.62	6.68	7.90	*4.49

\* $p < .05$ .

It is evident from Table 2 that the mean age of all the participants is fairly high, above 50, with no significant differences between the groups. The mean for years of schooling in all the groups is fairly high, more than 16 years, with no significant differences between the groups. Analyses of variance found a significant difference only with regard to study hours per week. The number of study hours of *Hevruta* Torah students is higher than among the formal lectures Torah students and the controls. A Scheffé analysis found a significant difference between the *Hevruta* Torah students and the control group.

#### *Instruments*

The research participants completed a questionnaire that included:

- *Demographic questionnaire* – The questionnaire was compiled for the current research. It included several measures that relate to various personal characteristics of the respondents. The categorical personal characteristics include gender, marital status, religiosity, and socioeconomic status. Age was measured as a continuous variable.
- *Questionnaire on the type and manner of studies* –The questionnaire included questions on the topic studied in one's leisure time, the location of the studies, the weekly and yearly number of hours devoted to studying the subject, encounters with the other students beyond the formal setting, the manner of studies (via *hevruta* or face-to-face), and whether the participant's family members study with him. Four additional questions requested that the participant rank his or her evaluation of the studies on 5-point Likert scales (1=not at all; 5=very much): satisfaction with studies, contribution of studies, extent of efforts (study hours per week), and the importance of learning the subject studied.

#### *Procedures*

The study was conducted after receiving the approval of the institutional ethics committee at Ariel University. This was followed by the distribution of 350 questionnaires, from June 2019 to October 2020. The respondents studying theoretical courses were recruited from the Brookdale Institute at Bar-Ilan University. In this institute people come to study various theoretical disciplines during their leisure time, as well as from groups of friends who study in various private settings. Those studying in the *hevruta* method were recruited from Kolot, a pluralist organization that operates Torah study groups in Israel.

The questionnaires were collected by the researcher prior to COVID-19 and in its duration. During the period of COVID-19, when no classes were held in these settings, e-mails were sent to students in Brookdale and Kolot, with a request to complete the questionnaires. In addition, people studying in the *hevruta* method in other settings and in groups established privately, were also contacted. Some received questionnaires in person and others preferred to complete them via e-mail or digitally. The questionnaires completed manually were collected by the researcher, while those completed digitally were concentrated in a single file. No respondents were rejected by the researcher. All participants signed an informed consent form.

Of the 350 questionnaires distributed, 43 were not completed in full and thus were not included in the study, and 73 questionnaires were not completed at all. The response rate was 67%. The final sample included 234 respondents.

### Data Analysis

In order to check for differences between the three research groups (*Hevruta* Torah students, face-to-face Torah course students, and controls) in the categorical personal characteristics (groups of learners, gender),  $\chi^2$  analyses were conducted. In order to check the differences in continuous personal characteristics (age, years of schooling, weekly study hours, financial status), one-way analyses of variance were conducted.

To check the research hypotheses related to the differences between the three study groups in the continuous measures, 2×3 (Group×Gender) MANOVA analyses were conducted. Notably, when checking the distribution of the continuous research measures, normal distribution was found in all measures.

## Research Results

To explore the correlations between the continuous research variables regarding perception of studies (namely, evaluation of study efforts, importance of studies, the contribution of studies and satisfaction with studies), Pearson correlations were calculated for the entire sample and separately for each of the three research groups. Table 3 presents the correlations in the entire sample between these variables, which are all significant.

**Table 3**

*Correlations between Study Efforts, Importance of Studies, Contribution of Studies, and Satisfaction with Studies*

	Study efforts	Importance of studies	Contribution of studies
Study efforts	.....		
Importance of studies	***44.	....	
Contribution of studies	***40.	***44.	.....
Satisfaction	**19.	**18.	***22.

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

The results indicate significant correlations among all four variables.

Differences between the three research groups – In order to investigate the two research hypotheses focusing on the differences between *Hevruta* Torah students, Torah course with lectures students, and the group of respondents not studying Torah (henceforth: “the control group”), comparing between male and female students, 2×3 (Group×Gender) MANOVA

analyses were conducted. The dependent variables in these analyses were study efforts, importance studies, perceived contribution of studies and satisfaction with studies.

*Study efforts and importance of studies* – The research respondents were asked to evaluate their study efforts and the importance of studies. According to the first research hypothesis, the efforts and importance would be higher among the two Torah study groups than in the control group.

The two-way MANOVA analysis found a significant difference between the three research groups,  $F(4, 454) = 3.80, p < .01, \beta = .03$ . However, no significant difference was found between the male and female students,  $F(2, 227) = .03, p > .05$ , and no Group×Gender interaction was found,  $F(4, 454) = 1.27, p > .05$ . Table 4 presents the means of the three research groups and the findings of the analyses of variance conducted for each measure separately.

**Table 4**

*Means and Standard Deviations for Study Efforts and the Importance of Studies in the Two Torah Student Groups and in the Control Group*

Measures	Research groups						$F(2, 229)$	$\beta$
	Hevruta Torah students		Torah course students		Controls			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Study efforts	3.82	96.	3.84	84.	3.59	98.	2.00	02.
Importance of studies	4.66	48.	4.69	51.	4.34	74.	***7.65	06.

\*\*\* $p < .001$

It is evident from Table 4 that the analyses of variance for each measure separately found a significant difference only for the measure of the perceived importance of studies. Paired comparison Scheffé analyses found a significant difference in this measure between the two groups of Torah students and the control group. Among the Torah students, the perceived importance of studies was higher than among the students in the control group. These results support the research hypothesis that relates to the differences between Torah students and non-Torah students with regard to the importance of studies.

*Satisfaction with studies and contribution of studies* – The research respondents were asked to evaluate to what degree they are satisfied with the studies and to what degree they appreciate the contribution of the studies. According to the second research hypothesis, satisfaction with studies and the perceived contribution of studies would be higher among the two Torah study groups than among the control group.

The two-way 2×3 (Group×Gender) MANOVA analysis found a significant difference between the three groups,  $F(6, 452) = 3.04, p < .01, \beta = .04$ . However, no significant difference was found between the male and female students,  $F(3, 226) = 1.26, p > .05$ , and no significant Group×Gender interaction was found,  $F(6, 452) = .77, p > .05$ . Table 5 presents the findings regarding the differences between the three research groups for each measure separately.

**Table 5***Means and Standard Deviations for Satisfaction and for the Perceived Contribution of Studies*

Measures	Research groups						<i>F</i> (2,229)	$\beta$
	Hevruta Torah students		Torah course students		Controls			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Satisfaction	4.10	45.	4.20	49.	3.97	60.	*3.49	03.
Contribution of studies	4.29	35.	4.31	42.	4.04	59.	***7.79	06.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

It is evident from the table 5 that significant differences were found between the research groups in the three measures, where the differences in the contribution of studies were greater than the differences in satisfaction. Scheffe analyses for checking the differences between the three research groups found significant differences between the two groups of Torah students and the control group on both measures. It is evident from Table 5 that the means for satisfaction and for the contribution of studies were higher in the two groups of Torah students than among the control group. These findings support the second research hypothesis whereby the contribution of studies and satisfaction would be higher among the two groups of Torah students than among the control group.

## Discussion

This innovative research aims to fill a gap in the literature by exploring several aspects of adult learners' perception of Torah studies, rarely addressed in the academic literature. A literature review found no reference to engagement in Torah studies driven by free choice and intrinsic motivation. The participants in this research were adult Israeli men and women, secular and religious, who chose to study Torah as part of their leisure activities.

The main focus of the research was to explore Torah learners' perception of the efforts they invest in the study, the importance of studies, the contribution of studies and satisfaction with studies. This exploration also involved researching possible effects of study method, i.e., the amount of effort invested collaborative *hevruta* vs. course lectures, on the learners' perception of the studies.

Before discussing the results of hypothesis testing it is interesting to note that there were similarities as well as great differences in the demographic composition of the Torah and control groups. While average age (above 55) and educational level were similar, highly significant differences were found in terms of gender, religiosity' and marital status. The Torah learners were mainly religious single males while the controls were mainly secular females with twice as many married participants than among the Torah learners. Still, about one third of Torah learners were women.

The demographic characteristics of the Torah learners found here reflect the growing trend in the last two decades when gradually more people, men and women, secular and religious, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, are choosing to study Torah in their leisure time. Apparently, Torah study has undergone a fundamental transformation from being perceived as an obligatory religious activity to an activity with personal-social-communal-cultural meaning. The learners in the present research chose to study Torah in their leisure time from among a wealth of available leisure activities, and such a choice is based on intrinsic motivation rather than the precept of "Recite it day and night".

The first hypothesis focused on the differences between the study groups in the measures of perceived study efforts and perceived importance. The perceived efforts and importance were expected to be higher among the two Torah study groups than among the control students. The first part of the hypothesis was rejected. No significant differences in perceived efforts were found between the groups. Learners in all groups were similarly engaged in their chosen leisure studies. The amount of perceived effort in both groups was rather high (a mean score close to 4 on a 1-5 point scale). Future studies should refine the definition and expand the measurement of "effort" that included only one item in the present research. For example, it is interesting to differentiate between physical efforts needed for commuting and accessing the place of learning, and mental efforts needed for effective learning. A wider and more complex view of "effort" may reveal differences between learners of different study subjects.

A surprising finding was revealed while exploring the effect of Torah study method on perceived investment. Whereas no significant differences were found among the groups in terms of perceived effort, a separate statistical analysis on the count of hours devoted to the study revealed that the number of study hours of *Hevruta* Torah students was much higher than among learners in the two other groups. This finding is surprising since it conflicts with the finding of the similarity in *the subjectively perceived* efforts found among all three groups. This conundrum indicates that the greater investment in total hours among *hevruta* learners does not translate to differences between the groups in terms of perceived efforts invested in studying. It therefore appears that the perception of effort is dependent on more than one factor, the actual method of study. As suggested above, the definition of effort should be refined to include aspects such as mental and emotional investment.

In support of the second part of the hypothesis, the perceived importance of studies was significantly higher among the students in the two Torah study groups than among the respondents in the control group. This finding coincides with the fact that the majority of Torah students were religious which suggests that most of them were probably born and raised in religious environments and were already familiar with Torah studies through the educational system in their youth and regular synagogue attendance throughout life. Therefore, their chosen leisure activity is a continuation and even maintenance of a traditional way of life.

The results support the second hypothesis whereby satisfaction and contribution of the studies would be higher among Torah students than among the control group. Indeed, significant differences were found between the two Torah groups and the control group. Among the Torah learners, satisfaction with studies and perceived contribution of studies were higher than among the controls. Additionally, a significant association was found between the perception of the contribution of studies and satisfaction with studies. Thus, the more the learners feel that the studies are beneficial, the more satisfied they are with the studies. This finding corroborates the research results of Cohen (2006), who contends that there is an association between studying and satisfaction).

This research has several limitations. First it was carried out in the center of the country and several populations that live in the periphery were not represented among the participants. Second the research measures may have been too brief and should be expanded in future studies so that each variable be assessed by more items than in the present research. The measure of effort may have been too vague and/or too general and should be refined and expanded to include both physical and mental aspects.

## Conclusions and Implications

This pioneer study examined the differences in the perception of studies (time invested, their perceived contribution and importance, and satisfaction with studies) between Torah students and students of another theoretical topic. Additionally, it sought to compare the effect

of the study method (collaborative *hevruta* vs attending course lectures) on these perceptions.

The results indicated that among the Torah students, regardless of the method of study, the perceived importance of studies was higher than among the controls. These results partly support the first research hypothesis because no differences between the groups were revealed for perceived efforts invested in learning,

Consistent with the second hypothesis, the perceived contribution of studies and satisfaction from studies were higher in the two groups of Torah students, regardless of the study method, than among the control group.

Therefore, it appears that Torah students' perceptions of their study as a leisure activity contributed more, was more important and more satisfying than the perception of students learning non-Torah subjects. It also appears that the study method (*hevruta* vs participation in course lectures) was not associated with any of the above perceptions. These research results provide evidence that there is a reason why more and more people opt for Torah studies nowadays.

The only difference found between the group was the actual number of hours devoted to studying that was higher among the collaborative *hevruta* group than among the two other groups (Tora-lectures and non-Torah lectures), yet' this difference was not translated to an increased perception of greater investment among the *hevruta* students.

Notably, no gender differences were found between the groups and no significant interactions were found in the statistical analyses.

The research has several theoretical and applied implications. First, it conceptualizes Torah studies as a voluntary leisure activity for diverse populations. As stated, in the last two decades gradually more people, men and women, secular and religious, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, are choosing to study Torah in their leisure time. This growing trend transcends the Yeshiva-Torah-oriented time and place and involves free choice and enjoyment to the students, irrespective of being secular or religious. Such a transformation of Torah studies motivates and justifies the investigation of the contribution of these studies to students' perceived satisfaction. Some of the benefits of Torah studies as a leisure activity in terms of the significance, importance and satisfaction were uncovered in this study.

This pioneer study can motivate further research that continues examining the perception of Torah study a leisure activity by the Jewish population as an activity with communal and personal meaning.

The research results also have applied implications. Assuming that the perceived satisfaction with Torah studies can be generalized to more general satisfaction, we may be able to consider using these studies as a potential resource for improving the students' psychological well-being. A possible suggestion is to establish study groups that explore ancient and traditional texts to learn about universal morals, values, the human soul, intimate relationships, family, and building a better society.

Moreover, due to the ever-growing trend of Torah studies as a leisure activity, they also have the potential to unite the various sectors of Israeli society.

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