

# CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



## CAN YOU HELP ME RESOLVE THIS CONTROVERSE-Y?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The ambiguities of inflammable pajamas and pitted dates pose dangers to life and tooth, and it's incredibly frustrating when a question one has mooted is declared moot. That's why it's not clear whether the use of [contronyms](#), words that mean themselves and their opposites, should be sanctioned or rather sanctioned.

Let us peruse this selection from [Aleï Tamar](#), the monumental 20<sup>th</sup> century Yerushalmi commentary by [Rabbi Yissachar Tamar](#).

The verb H-G-H has two meanings in Tanakh and Talmud:

- Superficial and simple speech
- Intellectual analysis

See in the dictionaries of Scripture under "h-g-h", and in [The Complete Arukh](#) under "h-g"

So, too, the noun "higayon" has these two meanings

- Shallow and simplistic speech, as here and on Berakhot 28
- Intellectual analysis, as in "higayon" in Tehillim 9 and 19 והנה הפעל "הגה" יש לו בתנ"ך ובתלמוד שתי הוראות:

(א) הדבור השטחי והפשוט

(ב) החקירה העיונית,

ראה במילוני המקרא ערך "הגה", ובעה"ש ערך "הג", וכן השם "הגיון" יש לו שתי הוראות אלו,

(א) הדיבור השטחי והפשוט, כמו כאן ובברכות כ"ח,

(ב) החקירה העיונית, כמו "הגיון" בתהלים ט ופ"ט . . .

According to [grammarly.com](#), the verb "peruse" can mean either "to skim or read without attention to detail", or else "to read or examine in detail". "Perusal" therefore seems a perfect translation of "*higayon*". The question is whether Rabbi Tamar is correctly assigning meanings to contexts.

"Here" for Rabbi Tamar is Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:1. The relevant Mishnah reads as follows:

All Israel – they have a portion in the World to Come,  
as Tanakh says:

*and your people, all of them righteous, when the World comes  
will inherit land ...*

But these don't have a portion in the World to Come:

One who says

"There is no (source for the) resurrection of the dead in the Torah", or "The Torah is not from Heaven", and the epikoros;

Rabbi Akiva says:

Also one who reads in The External Books.

And one who whispers over a wound, saying

*"Every ailment that I placed on Egypt – I will not place on you,  
because I am Hashem your healer";*

Abba Shaul says:

Also one who is **hoge**h the Name by its letters.

כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא

שנאמר

ועמך כולם צדיקים לעולם יירשו ארץ. . .

ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא:

האומר 'אין תחיית המתים מן התורה', ו'אין תורה מן השמים',

ואפיקורס;

רבי עקיבא אומר:

אף הקורא בספרים החיצונים;

והלוחש על המכה ואומר כל המחלה אשר שמת במצרים לא אשים עליך

כי אני ה' רפאך

אבא שאול אומר:

אף ההוגה את השם באותיותיו.

Abba Shaul forbids **pronouncing** the Name. His use of h-g-h therefore does not quite match any meaning of "peruse", or of *higayon* as explained by Rabbi Tamar.

However, Rabbi Tamar is not commenting on the Mishnah, rather on the Yerushalmi (which is most likely citing a *beraita*):

Rabbi Akiva said:

Also one who reads in The External Books  
such as the books of Ben Sira and the books of Ben La'anah,

but the books of Hamiram,

and all books written from then on –

one who reads them is like one who reads a letter.

What is the reason?

*"and more than those, my son, be careful . . . [making books  
without end,*

*and much lahag exhaustion of flesh]" –*

for *higayon* – they were given;

for exhaustion – they were not given.

רבי עקיבא אומר

אף הקורא בספרים החיצונים –

כגון ספרי בן סירא וסיפרי בן לענה,

אבל סיפרי המירם,

וכל ספרים שנכתבו מיכן והילך –

הקורא בהן כקורא באיגרת.

מאי טעמא?

יותר מהמה בני הזוהר (וגו') [עשות ספרים הרבה אין קון

ולדג הרבה יגיעת בשר] –

להגיון – ניתנו;

ליגיעה – לא ניתנו.

Rabbi Tamar comments:

Here too, its interpretation is that as opposed to Sacred Scripture, these are given “for higayon” meaning for the simple reading, in accordance with its form without deep analysis requiring exhaustion of flesh, and (without) giving them additional interpretations  
ואף כאן ביאורו  
שבנגוד לכתבי הקודש, ניתנו הם "להגיון",  
ר"ל הקריאה הפשוטה כצורתה,  
מבלי להעמיק חקור ביגיעת בשר  
ולתת להם ביאורים נוספים.

Astonishingly, even though the verse (Kohelet 12:12) speaks of *labag* and *yegiah*, and the Yerushalmi contrasts *yegiah*/exhaustion with *higayon*, Rabbi Tamar does not connect *labag* with *higayon*. Rather, he treats *higayon* as introduced by the Yerushalmi solely because it seems the appropriate antonym for *yegiah*.

Rabbi Tamar cites Berakhot 28b as the other context where *higayon* unquestionably refers to shallow reading.

A beraita:

When Rabbi Eliezer fell (mortally) ill, his students entered to visit him.

They said to him:

Our master, teach us the *paths of life* so that we may merit thereby the life of the World to Come.

He said to them:

Be cautious regarding the dignity of your fellows;  
and prevent your children from **higayon**  
and place (your children) between the knees of scholars;  
and when you are praying - know before Whom you are standing;

for that you will merit the life of the World to Come.

תנו רבנן:

כשחלה רבי אליעזר, נכנסו תלמידיו לבקרו.

אמרו לו:

רבינו, למדנו אורחות חיים  
ונזכה בהן לחיי העולם הבא.

אמר להם:

זהרו בכבוד חבריכם,

ומנעו בניכם מן ההגיון,

והושיבו בן ברכי תלמידי חכמים,

וכשאתם מתפללים - דעו לפני מי אתם עומדים,

ובשביל כך תזכו לחיי העולם הבא.

This passage contains few if any contextual clues to the meaning of *higayon*. Rashi famously comments that it refers to study of Scripture, and many others have understood it as referring to philosophy or formal logic (although Rabbi Tamar plausibly claims that this meaning of *higayon* is post-Talmudic). Rabbi Tamar's claim that it refers to simple or simplistic reading is based on the assumption that such reading should be discouraged and complex reading encouraged.

Even that assumption is not enough to justify his reading. Many commentators who understand *higayon* here as referring to complex reading limit the restriction to “your children”, meaning that it addresses curricular order rather than final

educational goals. They encourage simple reading of Torah for children (or adults) who cannot yet handle complexity.

Rabbi Tamar's translation of *higayon* in Yerushalmi Sanhedrin must therefore stand on its own. How does he read the Yerushalmi overall, and what other assumptions is his reading based on?

The Yerushalmi draws a contrast between books which must not be read, on penalty of losing the World to Come, and books which are “like reading a letter”, which presumably means that reading them is permitted. It seeks to root this distinction in Kohelet 12:12, which concludes with the phrase *yegiat basar* = *exhaustion of flesh*. Based on this verse, it contends that X category of books is “given for *higayon*” but not “given for *yegiah*”. Is it the category that must not be read, or rather the category that may be read because it is like reading a letter?

One might hope that reading the verse as a whole would be helpful. But the first part of Kohelet 12:12 is also ambiguous. The opening phrases are commonly translated “But more than those, my son, be careful **OF** making books without end”. But Rabbi Tamar notes that the Targum to that verse reads as follows:

ויתר מהון בני הזדהר למעבד ספרי חוכמתא עד לית סוף

But more than those, my son, be careful **TO** make books **OF** WISDOM without end

The Targum's reading is adopted among others by Abravanel and Netziv in their introductory apologia for publishing books.

I am also not certain how the Targum reads the end of the verse, or whether it is compatible with the Yerushalmi. The Targum translates

ולמעסק בפתגמי אורייתא

ולאסתכלא בליאות בשרא

and to engage with the words of Torah  
and to become wise with exhaustion of flesh.

This plainly connects *להג* to *higayon*, and understands *higayon* as intense engagement. Moreover, it does not seem to leave any room for a substantive contrast between *yegiah* and *higayon*, and therefore seems incompatible with the Yerushalmi's reading.

So I do not understand how the Yerushalmi roots its categories in the verse; or how Rabbi Tamar thought it did. I don't even understand whether the Yerushalmi understands the verse to be opposing books or celebrating them, since it (perhaps like *higayon*) can legitimately be cited both ways. I would very much appreciate your ideas for resolving this controversy-y.

*Shabbat shalom!*