The gemara in Kiddushin (32a) cites a debate about whether a teacher/Rav can waive the honor due him from a student- to be *mochel al kevodo.* Rav Yosef allowed this relinquishment but surprisingly, Rav Chisda disallowed this renunciation of honor. Ultimately, the debate surrounds a seminal question: Is the honor or prestige afforded a Torah teacher his personal province? Since a teacher is merely conveying Torah of Hashem, perhaps the honor is due G-d and can’t be surrendered by a human teacher- a mere icon representing something larger than himself. Alternatively, by studying, a Rebbe has personalized Torah and perhaps the honor is due him as a personal entitlement which he can waive.

This general debate about whether Torah can be personalized, or should remain as the unattainable Divine word, stems from an interesting grammatical discrepancy embedded in the second verse of Tehillim: “Ki im b’torat Hashem cheftzo u’btorato yehgeh yomam v’laylah (a person should crave the Torah of G-d while ruminating upon his [own] Torah day and night )”. The initial clause of this verse portrays Torah as “Torat Hashem” implying that it can’t be possessed by a human being. By contrast, the concluding clause of the pasuk defines Torah as “Torato” (the Torah of the “ish” or person referenced in the previous pasuk). This latter phrase implies that Torah is, indeed, “occupied” by the person who studies and internalizes Torah. The second verse of Tehillim already distills the core contradiction between an “inaccessible” Torah of G-d and a “humanized” Torah.

This duality in the verse in Tehillim, and the consequential halachik debate about mechillat kavod, showcases a fundamental paradox about Torah. As a distillation of Hashem’s infinite will, Torah is likewise infinite and celestial. It belongs to a different world and originates in a different sphere. The version of Torah delivered to humans isn’t the only ‘version’ of Torah – it is merely *our* version of Torah; Torah itself supersedes human cognition and experience. Even “our” version of Torah had to be snatched from Heaven by Moshe while fending off angels who vehemently opposed its delivery to a terrestrial sphere. Moshe ultimately descends with his “plunder”, carrying two tablets upon which the word of G-d is engraved for human comprehension. Yet even this humanized Torah lies beyond human convention. Chazal highlight the supernatural nature of the original Torah which Moshe delivered: the script upon the luchot was unlike any other form of composition as its letters were suspended in supernatural fashion. Additionally, the Torah fonts delivered at Sinai were formatted as black fire upon white fire – a form of media which baffles the human imagination. The text of the original sefer Torah and the engraved letters upon the luchot were unlike any human convention! These divinely authored Torah items reflected a world beyond human experience.

Yet despite its expanse and un-containability, Torah was formatted specifically for human experience and, directly addresses all conditions of human experience. In defeating the angelic opposition to Har Sinai, G-d reminded the challengers that humans and not angels give birth, decease and exhibit the life-cycles which the Torah addresses. Despite our limitations and moral failures, Torah is earmarked for humans, as it provides a guide for life on earth. Though Torah is rooted in a sphere beyond the ken of human experience, it is meant to pervade and elevate human experience and mustn’t remain distant and detached in Heaven. The tension between the Torah of G-d and the Torah of Man generated suspense at Har Sinai.

Classically, this question of “whose Torah is it” and the dichotomy between a Divine “unattainable” Torah and a “personalized” human Torah affects the actual experience of Torah study. Returning from Bavel and facing the erosion of Torah interest and respect, Ezra imposed a mikvah requirement for married men prior to Torah study. Ultimately, this attempt backfired, as it obstructed Torah study, and this decree was subsequently rescinded. Similarly, throughout Jewish history, Torah study was conducted only while standing and not sitting, a posture which accurately captured the awe of the original Torah delivery at Har Sinai. Ultimately, as this demand also boomeranged and curtailed Torah study, it too was relaxed.

Throughout history we have struggled to strike the delicate balance between the gravitas of Torah and the need to personalize and deformalize Torah study. Torah possess an enormity and a magnitude which surpasses human scale and when we study, we trespass upon foreign ground while entering a realm beyond human scale and experience. Alternatively, we absorb Torah more fully when we personalize it and shrink it into our human frame. Too much gravitas and too much awe prevents Torah from binding to our core identity and from percolating into every nook and cranny of human personality. In fact, the Torah itself recognizes the need to deformalize the experience of Torah study to better enable its penetration. The section of keriyas shema instructs us to study Torah across a a full range of human circumstances “while you reside at home and when in transit”. The ensuing verse even encourages us to study Torah in various positions of human posture- “while reclining and while arising”. By relaxing the formal demands of Torah study, the Torah encourages a more authentic and internalized experience.

I remember once interviewing a boy for admission into Yeshiva. He mentioned with concern that he heard that in my yeshiva they studied Torah in their pajamas. I acknowledged that often, I myself learn, while drifting off to sleep, in my pajamas. This interaction captures an interesting facet of the aforementioned dichotomy. Should a strict and formal dress code be imposed for Torah study? Without question, a formal dress code will reinforce the awe of the experience in the same way that Shabbat dress codes demarcate Shabbat as different and distinct from the rest of the week. Shabbat, however, is meant to be severed from the week but perhaps Torah should be more integrated with our routine? Obviously, the answer to this question is contextual and differs from individual to individual and community to community. However, the question of dress aptly captures the challenge of generating awe while assuring integration.

This general dichotomy becomes even more challenging when we try to create a logical system for understanding and classifying Torah. Our attempts to systematize Torah, implies that it can be subjected to human logic and to human systems of thought. If it is purely a transcendent Torah of G-d, perhaps it should be studied and analyzed without attempts to identify patterns or create systems to capture the overall logic of Torah. This question arose in the 16th century as Rav Yossef Ka’aro – the author of the Shulchan Oruch- suggested an overarching and universal system for achieving halachik conclusions or pesak. Halachik disputes would always be decided based on a majority of three renowned halachik authorities (Rabbi Yitzchak Alfasi or the Rif, the Rambam and the Rosh). Some were opposed to his attempt to systematize or mathematize since Torah is too untamed to be disciplined by human logic or a human system of dispute-mediation. Ultimately, the strategy of the Shulchan Oruch was broadly accepted but the ideological debate remains intact. Can Torah be simply subjected to human patternization or should its original Divine “unattainability” be preserved.

We constantly strive to strike that balance between the Torah of G-d and the Torah of Man. Informalized Torah study feels more “natural” and ideally allows Torah to fuse itself to our complete identity. Too much casualness in Torah study dilutes the power and the glory of the Divine word.

“V’tein chelkeinu b’toratecha”- we each seek our own portion and we each carefully calibrate our own distillation between these two necessary ingredients of Torah experience.

Chag Samei’ach