Learning as Speech: Tosefta Peah in Light of Plotinus and Origen

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One of the most well known sayings of the Sages is 'vetalmud Torah keneged kulam', 'the study of Torah is equivalent to them all' (M Peah 1, 1). This passage was incorporated into the daily prayer book, to be recited immediately after the blessing over study, and thus shaped generations of Jewish consciousness. Learning Torah was the supreme commandment. Those more familiar with rabbinic literature know that this 'keneged kulam' or 'keneged kol hamizvot' formula was not limited to study and was used to privilege a number of commandments, among them circumcision (T Nedarim 2, 1), living in the land of Israel (T Avoda Zara 4, 3), Sabbath observance (PT Berakhot 1, 5, 3c) and zizit (BT Shavuot 29a). It is worth pointing out that the Tosefta Peah opens in the same way as the Mishna but deletes the series that contains the keneged kulam phrase, thus making Torah study one among many equals. This well accords with that same Tosefta's last chapter wherein it is declared that 'charity and acts of loving-kindness are equivalent to all the commandments in the Torah' (T Peah 4, 19). One can view this formula, keneged kulam as hyperbole, a simple rhetorical flourish. But certainly the context here is influential if not determinative. The first chapter of the Mishna Peah may be attributed to the school of thought in rabbinic culture that accorded primacy to Torah study. However, there is no doubt that there was another trend within that tradition that considered deeds more important than study, intimated by the last chapter of Tosefta Peah. In this the latter school it stands to reason that acts of charity and loving-kindness held the supreme position.

Here we will explore the context of this phrase that accords Torah study ultimate value. More specifically we will try to evoke from this text how exactly Torah study was carried out. The results will be compared to Porphyry's depiction of Plotinus, the great third century Neo-Platonist. Plotinus' stark philosophic figure provides a rich
backdrop to the position taken in the Tosefta text, which was compiled during Plotinus' lifetime. Finally we will compare both of these positions with that of Origen, the Christian luminary and, according to Porphyry, Plotinus' classmate. I will try to show three different valuations of speech in these contemporaneous works, Plotinus, Origen and the Tosefta.

Peah is a tractate in both the Mishna and Tosefta that treats the biblical commandment to allow the poor to reap the produce of the 'corner' (Hebrew, pe'ah) of the field. Since the Bible did not specify the size of the corner, the Mishna and the Tosefta begin by stating that indeed there is no defined measure and therefore the more one leaves for the poor the more praiseworthy it is. We will bring the Tosefta text in its entirety.

1. Things that have no measure: the corner, and the first fruits, and pilgrimage appearance, and acts of loving-kindness, and study of Torah. The corner has a minimum measure but no maximum measure. One who makes his entire field a corner, it is not a corner.

2. For these things retribution is taken from a person in this world and the principal remains for the world to come: for idolatry, for illicit relations, for murder and for evil talk above all else (keneged kulam). Merit has principal and has fruit, as it says: *Say the righteous man ... for such men eat the fruit of their actions* (Isaiah 3, 10).

3. Transgression has principal but has no fruit, as it says: *Woe to the wicked evil* (Isaiah 3, 11). If so, how do I interpret (meqayem): *They should eat the fruit of their ways* etc. (Proverbs 1, 31)? A transgression that yields fruit, has fruit; one that does not yield fruit has no fruit.

4. A good thought, God (*Hamaqom*), blessed be He, refines (alt. combines it with deed). An evil thought God does not refine, as it says: *If iniquity you see in my heart, God will not hear* (Psalms 66, 18). How then do I interpret *Listen land, behold I will bring evil on this people the fruit of its thoughts* (Jeremiah 6, 14)? Rather, thought that yields fruit God combines with the deed, thoughts that do not yield fruit God does not combine with the deed.
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The first halakha parallels the opening of the tractate in the mishna and adds to it two comments regarding a minimum measure and one who declares an entire field to be pe’ah. The second halakha is the negative mirror image of the second half of the first mishna and we will bring them side by side:

**Mishna Peah 1, 1b**

These are the things of which a person eats of their fruit in this world and the principal remains for him in the world to come: honoring one’s father and mother, acts of loving-kindness, bringing peace between a person and his friend, and study of Torah is above everything else (keneged kulam).

**Tosefta Peah 1, 2a**

For these things retribution is taken from a person in this world and the principal remains for the world to come; for idolatry, for illicit relations, for murder, and for evil talk above everything else (keneged kulam).

The Tosefta supplies the negative counterpart to the Mishna, retaining the same triad structure, though here of the most heinous sins, crowning them with the ultimate sin, evil talk. The continuation of the Tosefta includes two sets that reflect positive and negative sides (merit/transgression; good/evil thought) and it stands to reason that at one point the original source included both our mishna (1,1b) and the Tosefta 1,2a.¹ Our source begins with deeds (calling them devarim, things, rather than commandments), and each positive commandment finds a close negative counterpoint: illicit relations versus doing acts of loving-kindness (hesed),² bloodshed versus bringing peace, and evil speech versus studying Torah. The contrast of honoring parents with idolatry appears not to fit the pattern, at least at first glance. But once one recalls that in late antiquity religion was first and foremost ta

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¹ At stake is whether this hypothesized original source was the text from which the Mishna quoted and thus the Tosefta retains the older formulation or whether the Tosefta has constructed a new evenly balanced source on the basis of the Mishna and simply deleted the ‘well known’ mishna from the supplementary material.

² Note the unusual use of hesed in incest of a brother and sister at Lev. 20, 17. Here in the Tosefta we might have two different uses of hesed, one positive and one negative.
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*patria*, those things practiced by your parent, idolatry seems to be not only a rebuff to the one God but also an abandonment of the ways of the parents. The Mishna and Tosefta privilege speech (learning and evil talk - *keneged kulam*) while the Tosefta moves on to thought and deed, *ma'aseh* (*T Peah* 1, 4). It might very well be that the term ‘things’ was influenced by the insertion of this text in the context of the laws of Peah which begins: ‘These are the things (*devarim*) that have no measure’. Yet it could also be that the source is playing intentionally on the ambiguity *devarim* that can include both things and words, especially since it reaches its apogee with speech.

It would appear then that the act of *talmud Torah* was understood here as a negative equivalent of evil speech. Since our source is so meticulous about differentiating between speech, deed and thought, it follows that Torah study is essentially a speech act. I will try to prove here that for the Sages study was intrinsically a process of speech valorized over thought. This is not merely an educational strategy of oral instruction or loud reading, which have their counterparts in Greek and Latin sources. Nor is it the same as the dialectic method used so effectively by Socrates. The essential nature of Torah study is speech even if one is studying by oneself. I will try to sharpen this point by contrasting the rabbinic stance to those of Plotinus and Origen.

The most obvious proof of Tannaitic insistence on orality is the well known paucity of references to books or scrolls of any kind (save the Bible of course) in the rabbinic learning environment. Even scriptural study on Shabbat was done without benefit of the written text. Only when the need arose were books taken out to check a reference - *ואם צריך לו דבר провер נוטל ובודק* (*T Shabbat* 13, 1). This very Tosefta describes three kinds of learning: ‘reading’ (*qorin*) ‘reciting’ (*shonin*) and ‘expositing’ (*dorshin*). Only the first was done with an open book and it was simply reading aloud. This is the standard verb for a lectionary reading (*M Megilla* 3, 4 - 4, 6). This kind of reading reflects public ritual reading rather than study. In public study, even the Scripture

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3 This is an oft-used opening in Mishna and Tosefta literature.
4 I owe this clarification and intensification of my point to a comment made by David Martinez of the University of Chicago.
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would have been committed to memory at a relatively young age and would be recited (shonin) rather than read. The recitation might be a kind of declamation or simply an oral repetition of the material, while the last verb dorshin would imply some kind of interpretation or commentary. The last two verbs seem to correspond fairly well with the descriptions of recitation and explanation (exegesis) in classical Greek education.

If silent reading was not the preferred way for study then the other two options were speech or contemplation. It is Torah as talk and speech that is emphasized in the Tosefta as opposed to Torah as a contemplative act. We do find other ways of studying but they are reserved for times when Torah talk is inappropriate. Two examples come to mind, though the one is recorded in Amoraic literature. The first is R. Hiyya, who while bathing in the bathhouse 'casts his eyes over the entire book of Psalms-Haggada'. In the context of the story, R. Yishmael b. R. Yosi was offended that R. Hiyya did not recognize his presence by showing him respect. It is clear then that R. Hiyya was not holding a book in his hand but rather was using some memory technique to review this aggadic work on Psalms. The other example is the Mishna's decision that one who is impure because of a seminal emission 'says in his heart' but does not recite a blessing.

5 M. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, Oxford 2001, pp. 67, 184 n. 16, presents a different view with which I differ. C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tubingen 2001, pp. 468-469, rightly points to some exceptional occasions of private study that involved reading (qorin) from a scroll, among them T Shabbat 1, 13. See further T Shabbat 1, 11 that permits reading from Scripture until the night of Shabbat. S. Lieberman (*Tosefta Kifshutah*, part III, pp 9-10) aligns this with M Shabbat 16, 1 wherein reading was opposed since it might cause 'desuetude of the house of study' (bitul beit hamidrash). We might be witnessing here the early attempts to solidify the status of the public study house rather than an ideological commitment to oral recitation of Scripture.


7 See S. Naeh’s remarks in his article, 'Craft a Memory …' (Hebrew), *Meḥugerei Talmud* 3 (2005), pp. 543ff. Compare the use of the verb skeptomai in the description of Plotinus’ method of contemplation, cited on the next page. See Y. Sussmann’s article in the same volume of *Meḥugerei Talmud*, pp. 209-384, which presents the definitive statement on orality and the rabbis.

8 *Meḥarer belibo*. According to M. Moreshet, *A Lexicon of the New Verbs in Tannaitic Literature* (Hebrew), Ramat Gan, 1980, the verb kirher in rabbinic
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(M Berakhot 3, 4). In the parallel in the Tosefta R. Meir holds that in such a case one may read the Shema but without ‘making it audible to his (own) ears’ (T Berakhot 2, 12).9 These alternate ways of study or prayer were adopted only under duress,10 while in the main study was oral recitation, certainly in public and probably also in private. It appears that this predilection for oral recitation and loud reading was common to the cultures of the Mediterranean societies, but the rabbinic view of the spoken goes beyond the dictates of educational considerations or reading methods.

We find a privileging of speech over deed or thought elsewhere in rabbinic literature. While I treat one of the main sources elsewhere, it is important to note here a much less known Tosefta at ‘Arakhin 2, 10 that says:

See how much the Torah is more severe with slanderers than thieves. The rapist, the seducer and the thief pay fifty11 sela but do not receive lashes, while one who slanders receives lashes and pays one hundred sela; the Torah is more severe with words than with the deed. It is said, And when one strikes one’s father and mother he will surely die (Exodus 21, 15), and it is said, And when curses one’s father and mother he will surely die (ibid., 17) - this is by stoning and this is by strangulation; the Torah is more severe with words than with deed ...12 Slander and cursing are given more severe penalties than physical violation of the victims.

God’s Torah was given to Israel orally and in a written copy. Torah study in rabbinic culture became an almost exclusively oral audible
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affair. It is true that reading in the Greco-Roman world was generally also audible. Yet we see that even on the Sabbath there is an effort to sequester the written Torah and promote oral study. This too finds its analogy in the Greek philosophical tradition that valorized oral learning over written works. This tradition was vehemently advocated by Socrates and avidly pursued by philosophical schools in late antiquity. The comparison I should like to make though is to the status of thought as opposed to speech. We will look at the work of a philosopher whose work was edited at about the same time as our Tosefta, in the mid to late 3rd century C.E. and then return to consider how talmud Torah was done in rabbinic circles.

Plotinus was one of the greatest if not the greatest philosopher of late antiquity. He spent most of his life in Rome, save a long stay in Alexandria where he and the Church Father Origen were said to have studied together under Ammonius. His student Porphyry portrays his teacher in his biography and catalogues Plotinus' corpus. Interestingly the work begins with Plotinus' disparagement of anything that had to do with the body ('Plotinus seemed ashamed of \([\text{aischunomeno}]\) being in the body') and the philosopher's objection to having a physical portrait made of him ('Is it not enough to have to carry the image in which nature has encased us without your requesting me to agree to leave behind me a longer lasting image of the image \([\text{eidolou eidolon}]\)')\(^{13}\). As we will see there seems to be a parallel between this attitude to body and Plotinus' disregard for writing, to which we now turn.

This is Porphyry's description of how Plotinus composed his works:

When Plotinus had written anything he could never bear to go over it twice; even to read it once was too much for him as his eyesight did not serve him well for reading. In writing he did not form the letters with any regard to appearance or divide his syllables correctly, and paid no attention to spelling. He was wholly concerned with thought \((\text{alla monon tou nou echomenos})\)

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and, which surprised us all, he went on in this way right up to the end. He worked out his train of thought from beginning to end in his own mind, and then he wrote it down, since he had set it all in order in his mind (eskepteto), he wrote as continuously as if he was copying from a book.\textsuperscript{14}

It was thought and contemplation that were Plotinus' preoccupation. In the same paragraph he is described as being able to keep up his part of a conversation while not diverting his concentration from another issue he had been contemplating before the conversation began. This uncanny ability to seemingly sever his thought from ongoing speech is quite remarkable. Plotinus' ultimate goal was 'to be united to (enothernai),\textsuperscript{15} to approach the God who is over all things',\textsuperscript{16} which he is said to have attained four times in his lifetime.

So to this god-like man above all, who often raised himself in thought, according to the ways Plato teaches in the Banquet, to the first and transcendent God, that god appeared who has no shape nor any intelligible form, but is throned above intellect and all the intelligible.\textsuperscript{17}

This mystical Neoplatonism sought union with God and divested itself of transient forms.\textsuperscript{18} Thought was the stepping stone to union that was above it. Writing and speech were poor substitutes for contemplation or illumination.

Plotinus' view of Egyptian hieroglyphs has been shown in a recent study to evince his preference for images over 'the descent into cursive script and the discursive thought …' which 'were a later development both in writing and in thought'.\textsuperscript{19} Plotinus' description runs as follows:

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., chap. 8, p. 29. See P. Cox's analysis of this passage and comparison to Socrates in her classic work, \textit{Biography in Late Antiquity}, Berkeley 1983, pp. 116-117. Her analyses of the biographies of Origen and Plotinus have been foundational for my work here.

\textsuperscript{15} Literally, 'to thrust in' or 'upon'.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., chap. 23, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 69.


Inscribing in their temples one particular image of one particular thing, they manifested the non-discursiveness of the intelligible world, that is that every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is subject of statements, all together in one and not discourse or deliberation.\textsuperscript{20}

With this brief overview of the preeminent philosopher, we should move onto his fellow student Origen and see the latter's outlook regarding language and thought. Origen, the great Christian scholar from Caesarea, reflected on the nature of biblical language in his first homily on Leviticus. There we read:

As 'in the Last Days', the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh of Mary, proceeded into this world. What was seen in him was one thing; what was understood was something else. For the sight of his flesh was open to all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, even the elect. So also when the word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of flesh, so here with the veil of the letter so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within it is perceived as divinity.\textsuperscript{21}

The word of God comes to us, according to Origen, disguised, wrapped in a physical layer that needs to be stripped away in order to reveal the true spiritual message. An even more telling metaphor in the \textit{Homilies on Leviticus} is adduced by M. J. Edwards as emblematic of Origen's method: 'Only when the surface, the mere letter of the written text is broken like the loaves before the feeding of the multitude, can the spirit emerge'.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{20} Ibid., p. 346, citing \textit{Enneads} V.8.6.6-9.
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Scripture as concealing spiritual instruction. The words need to be re-searched in order to allow them to yield their secrets. It is Scripture, according to Origen, which when properly understood will lead a person to progress in spiritual elevation and possible mystical experience of God. Divine words are essential but are perceived always to be pointing beyond themselves. They are a body that contains a soul.

Now we may return to our Tosefta and highlight the differences in approach. In Tosefta Peah, thought is inextricably linked to deed. Thought means the intention to do a good deed. It does receive its own reward independent of the deed but it is far from the contemplative ideal we saw in Plotinus. The highest goal is working with words and speech and using them properly. How did the Tosefta arrive at such a position?

Speech in rabbinic thought was the vehicle of both creation and revelation. One of the names of God in rabbinic times was 'He who spoke and the world became'. Revelation was for them quintessentially a speech act, though some Sages claimed that God's words had also a visual dimension. God's fiery words could, according to them, be seen as well as heard. It appears then that speech was the creative act par excellence for the Sages. Study demanded speech as the foundation of creativity. Dialogue would take preference over contemplation for these Sages. It is such dialogue and debate that is the hallmark of rabbinic literature.

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23 Origen, like Plotinus, describes his mystical longing for the 'Bridegroom's' presence. See Miller, ibid., p. 174 citing the first homily on the Songs of Songs.
25 A. Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, London 1927 (repr. New York 1968), p. 89 who claims that 'this ancient name' is to be found already in 'Sumer-Babylonian' literature. G. F. Moore (vol 3, p. 126 n. 146) saw the Sumerian connection as 'superfluous' while E. E. Urbach, The Sages, chap. 9 n. 42 says that the comparison was based on a mistranslation of the Sumerian document. See also M Avot 5, 1.
26 See D. Hoshen, 'Torat Hazimzum' (Hebrew), Daat 34 (1995), pp. 34-60, who cites Genesis Rabbah 4, 2 (Theodor-Albeck, p. 26): 'Creation (ma'aseh bereshit) came to teach about the giving of the Torah and it turned out learning from it'.
27 It might be that some rabbinic mystical speculation was more akin to Plotinus' model, as in the description of Ben-Azzai in T Hagiga 2, 6 where he is oblivious to encountering R. Yehoshua and explains that he had been 'looking' (speculating?) at ma'aseh bereshit.
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Since books were not generally written, when a Sage's oral tradition was not passed on it was lost to posterity. Oral Torah would remain for posterity only to the extent that it was transmitted to one's students. Another Tosefta passage at Ahilot 16, 8 (Zuckerman ed., p. 614) gives a good account of the processing of traditions and learning. It begins with a law concerning a priest who surveys land next to an area known to contain graves. Despite the potential for impurity in the neighboring land, he is allowed to eat his priestly food (teruma) or according to another explanation priestly food mixed with regular food.

One who surveys is allowed to eat bedimo. One who searches in the rubble is not allowed to eat bedimo. R. Yoḥanan's students asked him, the surveyor may he eat? He said to them, he does not eat. They said to him, you taught us that he does eat. He said to them, well spoken. A deed that my hands have done and my eyes have seen and I forgot, what my ears have heard how much more so?

It was not that he did not know but he wished to stimulate (lezarez) the students. Some say that it was Hillel the Elder who was asked, and not that he didn't know but he wished to stimulate the students.

R. Yehoshua says, He who recites (hashoneh) but doesn't labor ('amel) is like a man who sows but does not reap; and one who learns Torah but forgets it is like a woman who gives birth and buries. R. Akiva says, Sing me constantly, minstrel.

28 See R. Eliezer's comments at B Sanhedrin 68a, Shmuel Hakatan 'took the keys with him'; cf. Semaḥot 8.
29 The meaning of bedimo is disputed. Either it means a mixture of priestly and non-priestly food or is simply another name for teruma, food given to the priest that must be eaten in purity. See Albeck's comments to M Ahilot 16, 3-4.
30 Our text reads: 'it was not that he knew', but the parallel story in T Parah 4, 7 reads as I've translated here. I think that it is the correct meaning of our text as well even though it and the next line about Hillel lack the double negation.
31 Hillel was not a priest, which would demand a change in the wording of the text. See R. David Pardo, Hasdei David, ad locum.
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We have three generations of scholars reflecting on the evanescence of learning. Rabban Yoḥanan, whether his is a feigned loss of memory as the Tosefta would have it or not, stresses to his students that even seeing and doing do not necessarily etch a law indelibly into one's memory. How much less can one rely on the sense of hearing to guarantee that the learning be retained. We should pay attention to the anonymous comment in the Tosefta that claims that Rabban Yoḥanan's forgetfulness was an educational ploy. The same motif recurs when Rabban Yoḥanan forgets a procedural detail concerning the red heifer in T Parah 4, 7. In the parallel to that account the Sifre on Numbers, piska 123, changes the verb, Rabban Yoḥanan wished to 'strengthen' (lehazeq) his students. Would Rabban Yoḥanan really have staged his error and then dramatized it in order to encourage his students, as the Tosefta would have it? Or is Rabban Yoḥanan's an honest error, which the Tosefta finds hard to accept? It is interesting that the anonymous Tosefta sees misspeaking as a legitimate form of testing students. Are there parallels to this in rabbinic literature or in the classical world?

R. Yehoshua, one of the premier students of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, reflects on his teacher's comment and continues with a deceptively simple two tiered saying that encompasses recitation without 'labor' and Torah learning without retention. The one who works at retention but is not analytical enough or does not work with the material he has garnered, has been fertile but leaves the crop beckoning for harvest. One who learns and forgets, is also fertile but immediately buries and eradicates that fertility. It would seem that the order is reversed. The first statement should address memory and the next 'working' with the memorized or recited material. Might the 'labor' here be a reaction to the lack of practice in the previous anecdote,

33 A secondary variant in the Sifre reads leḥaled, to sharpen.
34 B Sanhedrin 39a attributes the two statements to different rabbis, but our text is primary. Moreover, the word 'review' (hozer) is substituted for the less frequent 'labor' ('amel) even though the next section briefs a prooftext that uses the root 'aml. A. A Halevi, Ha-Agaddah ha-Historit-Biographit, Tel Aviv 1975 p 340 sees shoneh and 'amel as equivalent to Aristotle's didaskalias and askeseos, a suggestion that merits further inquiry.
which leads to neglect and forgetfulness? I think that the traditional explanation that 'amel here means laboring in learning is the better explanation. The same phrase is used at Sifre Deuteronomy, piska 343, and seems to indicate there also labor in learning.35

It would appear, that R. Yehoshua accorded priority to memorization as the prerequisite for the next step of analysis, an issue we will deal with elsewhere. Study begins with memorization/recitation and continues with labor or constant working with the text. The latter seems to imply analysis, though this is far from certain.36 Finally, R. Yehoshua's student, R. Akiva supplies the method for retention: one has to chant Torah constantly. Only this will help preserve learning and contribute to understanding. It could very well be though that R. Akiva is responding to the almost poetical form of R. Yehoshua's comments with their colorful if morbid similes. In that case R. Akiva might be advocating crisp song-like formulations that are easily recalled. Again my own preference is to the traditional interpretation that singing the words of Torah will insure their retention.

Torah study then is perceived quintessentially as speaking words of Torah, certainly when done in a group setting but also when one is alone. I want to distinguish here between the needs of memorization and the demand that Torah study be done by speech. We saw that Plotinus composed his works in his mind and memorized them without speaking. He was even capable of continuing to work on his thoughts while carrying on a dialogue with another person.

The rabbinic paradigm whose development we have seen here, is different in the extreme. Torah study first and foremost demands speech. It is done while talking aloud, save when the circumstances do not permit. This gives us insight also into a passage in the Palestinian

35 That text also has difficult points of interpretation. See S. Fraade, From Tradition to Commentary, Albany 1991 p. 46 (and notes 94, 99), pp. 207-209. M. Kahana published a fragment of the Mekhilta to Deuteronomy cited by Fraade that is parallel to the Sifre; there the text employs the verb 'asaq, to occupy oneself, rather than 'amel. See M. Kahana, 'Dappim Min-Hamekhilta', Tarbiz 57 (1988), pp. 179, 194. Though the Mekhilta reads more smoothly, 'amel seems a more original reading than 'asaq.

36 Jaffee, Torah in the Mouth, p. 72, interprets labor: 'to master their contents'. His translation and analysis of Rabban Yoḥanan's qal vaḥomer stand correction.
Talmud (Berakhot 1, 2 3b) attributed to R. Shimon b. Yoḥai, a student of R. Akiva, that combines the two elements first mentioned in our Tosefta, Torah Study and Evil Speech:

For R. Shimon b. Yoḥai said, Had I stood on Mt. Sinai in the hour when the Torah was given to Israel I would have asked of the Merciful that two mouths be created for the human; one that would labor in Torah, and the one to do all his needs. He reconsidered (lit. returned) and said, and what if one (mouth) the world can not stand because of its slander (delatoria), had they been two how much more so?

Though the passage is in Aramaic it fits R. Shimon's well documented and unremitting demand that a person be engaged unceasingly in Torah study. For the present purposes it is a lovely commentary on our opening Tosefta. Torah study can be accomplished only through speech. But it is that very faculty that has been abused by humans to slander and speak ill of others, both in a social and a political context (delatoria). Though this motif of the tongue's power that defies efforts to be tamed is widespread in late antiquity, it again points to the steadfast link between study of Torah and speech.

I would like, by way of conclusion, to explore the emphasis on study and speech in the rabbinic world as opposed to thought in Plotinus' world and Origen's view of biblical language. It would seem that there is a connection between Plotinus' disdain for body and his disregard for writing. As we have seen Plotinus did not allow to create an image of him. His goal was to contemplate the Platonic Forms and eventually the 'One'. He eschewed secondary representations.

Origen is a fine representative of what A. Cameron has called the 'deep-seated figurality of Christian discourse'. This figurality stems

37 Compare his comments at Sifre Deut. 42, Finkelstein ed., p. 90 where he states the ideal that Israel's labors are done by others to allow Israel full time study.
39 See The Epistle of James, chaps. 3-5 and commentaries ad locum.
40 A. Cameron, Christianity and the Rhetoric of the Empire, Berkeley 1991, p. 53. Gregory Thamaturgas says: '…words are nothing other than images of what is going on in our souls'; see Address of Thanksgiving, M. Slusser tr., Washington D. C. 1998, p. 92.
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from a view that another scholar attributes to Origen: 'Origen thinks of
the text of scripture as the continuing embodiment of Christ'. Origen
was also, according to his biographer, intent on ridding himself of the
shackles of the body. He wished to liberate the soul and the spirit from
the body of Scripture. Indeed, for him Jesus' assumption of human
form was:

Condescending occasionally to him who is unable to look upon
the splendour and brilliancy of the Deity, he becomes as it were
flesh, speaking with a literal voice, until he who has received
him in such a form is able. Through being elevated in some
slight degree by the teaching of the Word, to gaze upon what is,
so to speak, his real and preeminent appearance. (Against Celsus
4. 15).42

These words point to a more elevated, more distant, more important
reality, beyond themselves.

I think that, for at least some of the Jewish Sages, the words of
Torah were essentially divine. God's words were part and parcel of
God's essence. This is why they are both represented as fire. It is
attachment to these divine words, the Torah, which is the goal of the
Sage. The Sage memorizes the entire Torah, both written and Oral,
and carries on an unremitting monologue, dialogue, or simple recitation
of the words. Thought takes place during verbal interaction with God's
words in Scripture and with one's colleagues' renditions of God's words.
For at least one and probably by extension the majority of Jewish
Sages, the physical body was no prison but a full partner with the soul
in the human's attempt to live a religiously appropriate life. So too the
words of Scripture and the words of the Oral Law were not second
best inadequate representatives of God's will. They were God's faithful
emissaries. It was in speech that God was revealed and those 'concrete'
words were to be exegeted in every possible manner. This view of
language and speech distinguishes the rabbinic appreciation of speech
from that of both Plotinus and Origen. While the latter constantly

41 Edwards, Origen Against Plato (above, n. 22), p. 146.
42 Quoted in Edwards, Origen, p. 138.
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attempted to get behind the letter, the rabbinic sages would first exhaust every possible understanding of the letter including its most literal understanding.

This seems to be a distinct approach, different from both the philosophy and the rhetoric of late antiquity. Though many in the ancient world agreed that education was best achieved by dialectic and oral instruction, the ultimate goal for both Plotinus and Origen was to go beyond the word. For the rabbinic sages understanding was achieved by talk rather than by pure, abstract thought.\footnote{B Ḥagiga 3a has a fascinating story about Yoḥanan b. Gugeda's two mute grandchildren whose lips would quiver while they sat before Rebbe. Eventually Rebbe prayed on their behalf and it turned out they had mastered their studies. In this extreme case, I think the Talmud is emphasizing their ability to form the words with their lips even if no sound emerged.}

We have established that for the early rabbis, learning was done through recitation and talk. Its object was mastery of God's word and full understanding of it. The understanding might be fanciful or simple, allegorical or \textit{peshat}, but the goal was intimacy with the words of Torah.