

Parashat Vayelech 5769 – Shabbat Shuva
Rabbi David Englander

Toward the end of Parashat Vayelekh we find the verse that many consider to be the 613th commandment of the Torah. V'atah kitvu lachem et hashira hazot – therefore, write down this poem – so what commandment is this? It is interpreted as the commandment to each and every Jew to write their own personal copy of the Torah. This commandment presents quite a number of challenges, not the least of which is that it is not clear [to me and to others] that the p'shat of the verse is referring to the whole Torah. But if it is referring to the whole Torah, I think the translation of 'hashira hazot' as 'this poem' is really helpful to understanding the Torah not as a book of history or science, but a book of endless meaning, of a search for truth, of a pathway to spirituality, a book of mystery and accessibility, of profound beauty, and, as we'll see, a poem that needs to be recited out loud, and also interpreted and absorbed by the listener as continually relevant.

Fortunately we live in a day and age when many have fulfilled the commandment as it is interpreted above: how do you write your own Torah? Even by filling in (or more likely, helping a scribe to fill in) a single letter of a Torah. Others utilize the time honored tradition of hiring a shaliach to fulfill the mitzvah for them, sponsoring the writing of an entire Torah, thus fulfilling the mitzvah. I've been to a few sessions of 'filling in a letter' and it is an incredibly meaningful experience for those who participate.

There are other ways of fulfilling the commandment – if not its letter then certainly its spirit, is suggested by Professor Ismar Schorsch, who says that the way we can fulfill the commandment of writing our own Torah is by learning to chant the Torah from the scroll. That's how we come to 'possess' the scroll itself, and slowly, slowly, we have to build our cadre of readers who feel the joy of laboring in this most difficult of synagogue skills.

Is Professor Schorsch going above and beyond a reasonable interpretation of this verse/mitzvah by saying what he does? As it turns out, there are many others who have re-interpreted this mitzvah, from a traditional stance, to mean more than writing or commissioning a Torah to be written. What would you think is the reason people through the centuries haven't felt comfortable with the writing of a Torah scroll as a mitzvah? For one, think of what most of our sifrei Torah do day to day – they sit. And sit, and sit some more. During a hurricane they get packed up in special Torah receptacles (if anyone calls them garbage cans I will deny it!). At one time scrolls were books – they were in use, and by writing many Torah scrolls – even personal Torah scrolls – more people were being given the opportunity to learn from them. But now that our scrolls basically sit – this is since the advent of printing – has the commandment to write a scroll been superseded?

From: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/nitzavim/kle.html>

The author of *Hayyei Adam*, who lived [in the early 19th century] after the invention of printing, sums up the discussion as follows (rule 31.50):

Some say that in this era the commandment is to **acquire** a Bible, Mishnah, Gemara, and works of *posekim*, and that this takes precedence over writing a Torah scroll; for in those days it was actually the custom to learn by heart from the Torah scroll, but in our times it is better to learn from printed books. Some say that all the same there is still a positive command to write oneself a Torah scroll, and G-d-fearing Jews fulfill all these obligations if it is within their reach. If it is beyond their reach and striving for it would lead to abandoning Torah studies -- for a person might not have books of Gemara and *posekim* -- it seems patently clear to me that these works take precedence over a Torah scroll, for surely **studying** the Torah is more important than **writing** a Torah, insofar as one may sell a Torah scroll in order to afford to study Torah. It also seems to me that providing [books] to those who study the Torah takes precedence over writing a Torah, contrary to the masses who believe that writing a Torah scroll is the very most elevated of commandments and that through this alone can one assure oneself of the world to come, and who do not contribute to equipping those who wish to study the Torah. Therefore they walk in darkness, and what is more, when the scroll is given to the synagogue they squander money on feasts and candles and many expenses, and if they only listened to the words of the Sages they would realize that it is better to spread around their money to the poor and to those who study Torah.

An explanation of this comment is offered by Dr. Alexander Klein, of the Department of Mathematics at Bar Ilan University (something else to love about Israel – the math department writes *divrei Torah*!): “The author of *Hayyei Adam* says in no uncertain terms that it is better to support those who study Torah than to spend considerable sums of money on writing a Torah. If the object of the commandment is to encourage study of the Torah and to have more people study, then in every era one must find the most appropriate ways to fulfill the intention of the commandment, even at the cost of putting aside the literal sense of the commandment. This example shows how the *halakhah* has evolved in the case of one of the 613 commandments – commandment 613.”

Dr. Klein points out that for centuries we have tried to live up to not only the letter of the law but to live up to the essential meaning of the law as well, such as we are able to derive it. To focus all manner of money, time, and energy on writing a Torah might take away from the point of all that effort, which is to learn, and we might say, as the siddur does, to learn, to teach, to study, and to practice.

Of course on Shabbat shuva our spiritual focus is on the writing of other kinds of books – the powerful metaphor of the book of life, and the strides we try to make to be worthy of being inscribed for a good year, whatever such an inscription might actually look like. The point of the metaphor isn't that there is a book somewhere – this is the challenge of taking ownership of the concept for ourselves. We could pray day and night, ‘inscribe me in the book, inscribe me in the book’ and miss out on what that supplication is supposed to lead us to – an examination of ourselves and our souls, a pledge to improve and to move forward in our development as Jews and human beings even one small step. We have to take care of the work of being worthy. Shabbat shuva, these ten days of reflection and repentance, are the days we are called on to be especially mindful of that task.