The Torah That You Carry

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When we think about how we are to interact with Torah, we primarily think about studying the Torah, about learning from its stories and laws. However, Rav teaches that there is an additional dimension to one’s relationship with the Torah that is not about reading or listening, but is about writing. There is a unique form of relating to the Torah that can only be expressed through transcribing it:

תלמוד בבלי מנחות
אמר רב גידל אמר רב: הלוקח ס"ת מן השוק - כחוטף מצוה מן השוק, כתבו - מעלה עליו הכתוב
כaisedו קיבלו מהר סיני.

Rav Gidel said that Rav said: One who purchases a Sefer Torah from the marketplace is like one who snatches a mitzvah from the marketplace, [but] if he writes it—the text of the Torah considers it as if he received [the Torah] from Mt. Sinai.

Rav’s teaching about the special closeness that is achieved through writing the Torah is codified by the Rambam in his laws of writing a Sefer Torah:

When writing is done with one’s own hand, it is like the Torah was given directly from Sinai.

Hilkhot Tefillin ve-Mezuzah ve-Sefer Torah 7:1

It is a positive commandment for each and every man of Israel to write a Sefer Torah for himself, as it says, Now write this poem for yourselves (Devarim 31:19). And even if his ancestors left him a Sefer Torah, it is still a mitzvah for him to write one of his own. And if he writes it in his own hand, it is like he received it from Mt. Sinai.
The Rambam teaches that every person should write a Sefer Torah for themselves, and he underscores the importance of this mitzvah by quoting Rav. One who is able to write the Torah “with their own hand” experiences a sense of true ownership over the Torah, an intimacy and immediacy with the text as if it came directly from Sinai. One can purchase a book and in that way always have access to the Torah. One can hire a scribe and purchase a scroll in order to make Sifrei Torah more generally available, but nothing compares to encountering the words of the Torah through the writing, through forming the letters and words oneself. But if the Torah can be studied and shared without my hand, why does it matter if I write the text myself? Why is writing a Torah so significant? What does writing accomplish that purchasing or borrowing a Torah from someone else cannot?

In order to explore this, we need to turn to this week’s parashah, Parashat Shoftim, where we see that the expectation of writing a Sefer Torah is highlighted for a king:

Devarim 17:18–20
And it will be when he ascends to the throne, and he will write for himself a copy of this Torah, Mishneh Torah, on a scroll, from before the priests from Levi. And it will be with him and he will read from it all of the days of his life, so that he should learn to fear HaShem his God, to observe all of the matters in this Torah, and all of these laws to do them. So that he not consider himself better than his brothers, and so that he not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or to the left, he nor his children in the midst of Israel.

From these verses, we learn that aside from the general expectation of an ordinary person to have their own Torah, the king of Israel is required to write and have his own copy of the Torah, “Mishneh Torah.” The Talmud explains that the reason the king has these separate instructions regarding writing his Sefer Torah is that, whereas an ordinary person has to write a single scroll, the king has to write two!

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1 See Sefer HaHinukh, Mitzvah 613.
2 See the explanation of the Ro’sh (Rabbeinu Asher ben Yehiel, 12–13th cent. Germany and Spain) in the first section of his Laws of a Sefer Torah.
When we look closely at the king’s obligation to write two Torahs, we see that they each serve an entirely distinct function. One is a complete, “official” Torah for the king to keep in his library and have available for reference. This is the scroll that we normally envision when we think of a Sefer Torah. However, his second, his Mishneh Torah, has to be carried by the king wherever he goes and is worn on his arm as an amulet. This could not possibly be a full-size Torah with the entire text of the Five Books written in it. Rather, it is a selection from the Torah.

What does the king write in this smaller Torah? Many commentaries assume that this selection must be the Ten Commandments, which can be read as a distillation of the Torah’s core principles. But perhaps the portable Torah is a record of this very section of the Torah which deals with the laws of the king. This Torah is the Torah which only the king writes and carries with him at all times in order to remind himself of his own unique responsibilities. This Torah is personalized for the king and he fills it with the passages that are uniquely relevant to him. It is not the most famous section of the Torah or the most universal or the most comprehensive; to the contrary, it is the Torah that he—and maybe only he—needs, the words that will keep him focused and grounded as he goes through his day.

It is this kind of Torah that will actually fill the purpose of לברוח רמ לבב:מאתי לבלתי סור מי מזמה So that he not consider himself better than his brothers, and so that he not turn aside from the commandment. On this piece of parchment he writes down the mitzvot that he is liable to forget; he writes down the verses that he most needs to hear. It is this Torah in

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3 This additional detail, that the second Torah was worn as an amulet, is not present in all manuscripts. It is not in Jerusalem Yad HaRav Herzog 1 (known to be one of the best and most accurate manuscripts of Sanhedrin), but it is present in Munich 95 and Florence II-I-9 editions.
4 See Torah Temimah to Devarim 17:18.
5 Devarim 17:20.
particular which will keep him humble and keep him vigilant. It is this Torah which reminds him that, even though he is a king with tremendous power over others, underneath his robes he is just a human being who struggles like every human being to gain and maintain control over himself.

Though we are not ourselves kings, perhaps the commandment to write a Torah, as opposed to merely purchase one, is a reflection of our participation in this ideal. When you purchase something that has been written or printed for you, all of the words and all of the verses come as a package. If there is a verse you do not want to encounter, it can be safely ignored. Writing the Torah forces you to comb through the text of the Torah, encountering each letter and each verse, and committing it to parchment or paper. It is a process that allows you to sense that not every verse or commandment or story feels the same. Some passages will feel relevant and comforting, some passages will feel challenging and alienating, some passages will feel new, and some will feel well-worn. The purpose of writing the Torah is to evaluate your relationship to the text and identify what is uniquely significant to you. Where do you feel strong, and where do you feel weak? What is the Torah that feels less pressing, and what is the Torah that you absolutely must carry with you wherever you go?

The Zohar Hadash⁶ states that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, which correspond to the 600,000 people who were alive at the giving of the Torah. This idea supports the importance of finding one’s own letter in the Torah, the place in the text where one’s own special place is carved out. But when we actually count the letters of the Torah, there are only 300,000 letters.⁷ How do we find ourselves in the Torah? What if our letter isn’t there? This problem is solved by writing one’s own Torah. Adding the 300,000 letters that you contribute to the 300,000 letters that you receive is what completes the Torah. It is this process that enables a person to find the element of the Torah that speaks most to them.

Even if you do not, in fact, write a second Torah, this law testifies to the power of writing, the power of paying attention to the individual components of the Torah, as opposed to merely flipping a page—or even worse, purchasing a book and never opening it. The commandment to write your own Torah is a commandment to pay attention to the text in a more careful and more personal way, to extract what is most relevant and meaningful, and to carry it with you, allowing it to keep you humble and to keep you inspired.

⁶ Shir HaShirim, p. 74. After the initial printing of the Zohar, manuscripts with additional and some variant teachings were found. This work, or version, is known as the Zohar Hadash, the “new Zohar.” In some ways, it is a Mishneh Torah of the Zohar.
⁷ Or 304,805 letters.
Perhaps there is a deeper understanding of the opinion which suggests that the personal Torah carried by the king was the Ten Commandments. Yes, the Ten Commandments are the most condensed version of the Torah, but that is not the entirety of their significance. The Ten Commandments were the portion of the Torah that was placed in the *Aron* (ark) and carried wherever *Benei Yisrael* went on their sojourns in the desert. The Ten Commandments represent a Torah that is portable.

But that is not all that they represent. In the *Aron* there were two sets of tablets, one set that was broken and a second that was complete.\(^8\) The two Torahs that the king writes represent a comprehensive Torah and a selective Torah, a general Torah and one that is personal. The Ten Commandments also represent two Torahs, one of failure and one of success, one of sin and one of forgiveness.

This is the second lesson of writing two Torahs. The Torah that you write for yourself has to have a two-fold quality; it must be a Mishneh Torah. It has to reflect the elements that you love and contain the elements you struggle with. It has to remind you of the aspects of yourself that you want to improve and also confirm for you the aspects of yourself that you feel most proud of. A Torah that is entirely critical will undermine your efforts, and a Torah that is entirely positive will trick you into thinking that your work is done. You have to keep in front of you both your brokeness and your wholeness. You have to be reminded not to become arrogant, and you have to remember that you are still a king.

There is a well-known story told of Reb Simḥah Bunem of Peshischa,\(^9\) that he walked around with these two Torahs in his pockets. On one slip of paper he wrote, “בשבילי נברא העולם, the world was created exclusively for me,”\(^10\) and on another slip of paper he wrote, *אֶנֶּנְיָא עַמֶּר אָפֶר* I am but dust and ashes.\(^11\) At all times, Reb Simḥah Bunem had the piece of paper that he needed to look at, to be reminded either of how far he had to go or of how far he’d already come. And at the same time, when he was looking at one, he knew that he had the second in the other pocket. So even when he was discouraged, he knew that encouragement was just a slip of paper away.

The Torah in its entirety is intended to apply to everyone and be interpreted for any age. The Mishneh Torah of the king presents us with a different model of a Torah that we write for ourselves, a Torah that we carry with us, a Torah which is unique to our needs. This is a Torah

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8 Talmud Bavli Menaḥot 99a.
9 Poland, 1765–1827.
10 Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5.
11 Bereishit 18:27.
that we tailor to ourselves, a Torah which speaks to us because it is about us and because we pay attention to it.

Wishing you a Shabbat of brokenness tempered by wholeness.