



The Poetry of Torah, Part 1

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In Parashat Nitzavim Moshe's grand oratory comes to a close, and in Parashat VaYelekh he turns to the process of writing the Torah down. The *parashah* records two distinct acts of writing, in two very different styles: a book and a poem.

The writing of the book¹ is first described in a very general way, simply as Moshe writing down “this Torah,” seemingly of his own initiative:

דברים לא:ט

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וַיִּתְּנָהּ אֶל הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי לֵוִי הַנִּשְׁאִים אֶת אֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' וְאֶל כָּל זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deuteronomy 31:9

Moshe wrote down this Torah and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi, who carry the Ark of the Covenant of the Eternal, and to the elders of Israel.

¹ Technically, a “*sefer*” is a scroll, not what we call a “book” (which is a sort of codex). But the word “book” can encompass any item of written literature of significant enough length.



We have seen images of Moshe writing things down in books, here and there, earlier in the Torah's narrative.² But it is in last week's *parashah*, Ki Tavo, that Moshe begins to refer to the Torah **itself** as a "Book": *Sefer HaTorah*, The Book of the Torah (Deuteronomy 28:61).³ This usage continues into our *parashah*, which opens by calling the whole congregation into what it calls, "the covenant that is **written in this Book of the Torah**" (הַכְּתוּבָה בְּסֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה הַזֶּה) (Deuteronomy 29:20). What Moshe hands to the priests, then, is presumably meant to be the final record of that book.

Yet before the Book of the Torah is declared complete, God intervenes and tells Moshe to add something else, in another form of writing:

דברים לאיט

וְעַתָּה כָּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלִמְדָה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמָּה בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת
לְעֵד בְּבִנֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

² In Exodus, God tells Moshe to write the memory of the victory over Amalek, בְּסֵפֶר "in the book" (Exodus 17:14). After the revelation, we read that Moshe "wrote down all the words of the Eternal," (Exodus 24:4) and then "took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the ears of the people" (Exodus 24:6). Just before Moshe descends from his second stay on Mount Sinai, God tells Moshe: "Write down these commandments, for in accordance with these commandments I make a covenant with you and with Israel" (Exodus 34:27). In Numbers 33:2, we are told that "Moshe wrote down all the departure points of their journeys."

³ The word "תורה - *torah*" literally means something like "instruction." It is used sometimes in the Torah to refer to a particular teaching, and sometimes to just the general concept of God's instructions. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the term refers specifically to the teaching of Moshe in Deuteronomy itself—that is, his words from Deuteronomy 1:6 through Parshat Nitzavim, and it is certainly possible to understand even the phrase *Sefer HaTorah* in this more limited way, to refer only to sections of Deuteronomy. (This is, for example, the way the Mishnah in Sotah [7:8] understands Moshe's subsequent command to read "this Torah" during the *mitzvah* of *hak'hel*, Deuteronomy 31:11). In the book of Joshua, it is referred to as *sefer torat Moshe*, the Book of Moses' Teaching, though this may also be a reference only to Moses' Teaching in Deuteronomy. By the time we get to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the general term "*torah*," "*torat Moshe*," or "*sefer torat Elohim*," is used, and seems to refer to something larger than just the teachings of Deuteronomy. The Ramban, meanwhile, takes a maximalist approach, and understands even the writing of the Torah in our *parashah* to include all five books of Moshe's prophecy, "from 'In the beginning' (Genesis 1:1) to 'in the eyes of all of Israel' (Deuteronomy 34:12)." For more on this question, see Molly M. Zahn, "What is 'Torah' in Second Temple Texts? Available here: <https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-is-torah-in-second-temple-texts>.

Deuteronomy 31:19

Now **write for yourselves this poem** and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, so that this poem will be a witness for Me with the people of Israel.

Again there is the use of the definite article: “*hazot* - this.” What is “**this** poem”? Rashi and the Ramban both understand it to refer to the upcoming Ha’azinu poem that will make up most of next week’s *parashah* (Deuteronomy 32:1-43).

So Moshe does as instructed, and undertakes a second act of writing:

דברים לא:כב

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיְלַמְּדָהּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deuteronomy 31:22

Moshe wrote down this poem on that day, and taught it to the Children of Israel.

It is only then—two verses later—that Torah report that the “book” writing project has been completed:

דברים לא:כד

וַיְהִי כְּכֹלֹת מֹשֶׁה לִּכְתֹּב אֶת דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל סֵפֶר עַד תָּמָם.

Deuteronomy 31:24

So it was that Moshe completed writing of the **words of this Torah upon a book, to their very end.**



When Moshe first wrote the Torah down in book form and delivered it to the priests, he likely assumed he was handing over a finished product. But it is only after Moshe has written the additional poem that the words of the Torah are described as completed “to their very end.”

This sequence signals strongly to us that the process of writing the Torah down cannot be considered complete without poetry. Moshe’s first attempt to write the Torah down was pragmatic—writing as a form of record-keeping. He wanted to preserve the history of the Israelite journey and the legal terms of the covenant so that they would not be forgotten. His mission was, quite literally, **prosaic**. And there is surely a need for that kind of writing.

But God signals to Moshe that the Book of the Torah, in order to earn its place as sacred scripture, must be more than just a record. It must also contain beauty and rhythm, majesty and metaphor. It must use writing not only as a utilitarian form of communication, but also as an artistic form, an attempt to capture something transcendent in words. The act of writing down the Torah must also contain a **poetic** element.

That emphasis on the essential place of poetry in the experience of Torah is echoed even further in Parashat VaYelekh’s final verse:

דברים לא:ל

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה בְּאָזְנוֹ כָּל קֹהֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עַד תָּמָם.

Deuteronomy 31:30

Moshe spoke, in the ears of the whole community of Israel, **the words of this poem—to their very end.**

The echo in that closing phrase, “*ad tumam* - to the very end,” exactly as the words of the book were described, suggests that not only is the writing of the Torah incomplete without poetry, but that words of Torah only reach their “very end,” the fulfillment of their potential, when they are chanted aloud, as poetry should be. So when we hear the Torah chanted aloud in *shul* every week—even if the content happens to be prosaic—we are participating in the poetic form of the Torah.

Leyning is not the only practical application of the Torah’s connection to poetry. In Maimonides’ standard account of the 613 commandments, the last commandment in the Torah is derived from the very verse in our *parashah* in which God tells Moshe, “Now write for yourselves this poem.” A *midrash* from Sifrei Devarim, noting the plural, “**for yourselves**,” understands this charge not only as a completion of Moshe’s act of writing the Torah, but also a mandate that every person write their own complete Torah scroll.⁴

This last *mitzvah* in the Torah, to write a complete Torah scroll, is quite a challenging one! One must study the scribal arts, procure the right parchment, and spend hours carefully transcribing the whole Torah, word for word. This *mitzvah* is so difficult to accomplish that the Poskim (Jewish legal thinkers) discuss whether or not it can be fulfilled by paying someone else to do it, or even just by studying from a Torah scroll.⁵ Few people manage to do the writing itself.

Whether or not one is ambitious enough to take on the project of writing an actual Torah scroll, the derivation of this *mitzvah* from a verse that tells us to **write ourselves** a poem,

⁴ On the identification of “this poem” with the whole Torah, tune in next week for Part 2!

⁵ See the Rosh, in Menahot, Hilkhos Sefer Torah 1: “כי מצות כתיבת התורה היא ללמוד בה כדכתיב ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפייהם. וע”י הגמרא והפ”י ידע פ”י המצות והדינים על בוריים לכן הם הספרים שאדם מצווה לכתבם - Because *mitzvah* of writing the Torah is in order to learn it, as it is written (in Deuteronomy 31:19) ‘and teach it to the Children of Israel, place in in their mouths.’ And since through study of the Talmud and its commentaries, one comes to understand the commandments and the laws to their depth, therefore that, in itself, constitutes the scroll that a person is obligated to write.”



suggests that we ought to take seriously the possibility that we are all, in a sense, obligated to write a poem to the Torah. That is, a full experience of Torah should not only be a **receiving** of the record of the teachings of our God and our teachers, but also a **responding** with words of our own—words of praise and lament, words of faith and fear, words of poetry and song, words as witnesses to our experience of Torah.

As we near the close of this cycle of reading through the *sefer torah*, the whole book of the Torah, it is a good time to ask not only how have we been shaped by the Torah this year, but also how will we respond? Will it be a poem or an essay, a song or a painting? What will you contribute to the Torah this year? What will you add to the Torah you have received?

