

Torah To Go

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The final Mitzva that Moshe gave the Jewish people was that of *'kisvu lachem es hashirah hazos'* – 'write for yourselves this song' (Devarim 31:19). Chazal (Sanhedrin 21b) understand this as a command to write a sefer Torah. At first glance the song mentioned would seem to be describing HaAzinu which is written in traditional song format, just like Az Yashir after the splitting of the sea. The Rambam (Sefer Torah 7:1) explains that since it is not permitted to write just one part of the Torah this is meant as a command to pen the entire Torah. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 613) seems to understand that the meaning of the command is to write the Torah which includes 'this song'.

The Sefer HaChinuch offers a possible reason for this Mitzva. We can certainly understand that after giving all the commandments the final one would be to make sure that they are recorded and kept accessible. However, it would seem to suffice for the court to keep a sefer Torah or perhaps each shul. Why should each individual need to write their own sefer Torah? The Sefer HaChinuch suggests that human nature is that we use what is accessible to us. If we have to go to our friend's house or to shul to look up a legal question or to study Torah we are not as likely to follow through. The Mitzva is to make Torah completely accessible to ourselves and our families.

The Sefer HaChinuch adds that there is a Rabbinic extension to this Mitzva which is the writing (or purchasing) of sefarim. Books which help us to understand the Torah, Talmud, Jewish philosophy and Jewish law make the Torah accessible to us. The Rosh goes so far as to say that buying such sefarim is actually part and parcel¹ of the Biblical imperative mentioned by Moshe.

I would suggest that there are actually two aspects of this Mitzva. Certainly there is the pragmatic idea that the Torah must be accessible to us. This is certainly accomplished by having a Jewish library in our homes. However, I believe that there is also a symbolic aspect to writing your own sefer Torah. The king has an additional Mitzva to write a sefer Torah (so he must write two – see the Mishna in the 2nd chapter of Sanhedrin). As the leader of the Jewish people he must have a second sefer Torah to carry with him at all times. It goes with him wherever he goes as a constant reminder of the values and foundation that his kingship is based on.

Each individual Jew does not have the same formalized law as a king; we are not commanded to make a second sefer Torah to carry around with us. However, it would seem that this idea is the second part of our Mitzva. It is not simple pragmatic that we have our own

¹ See Tur (Y.D. 270), Beis Yosef, Shulchan Aruch and commentaries there for an analysis of whether the Rosh feels that the Mitzva to write an actual sefer Torah is supplanted by the idea of writing seforim or if he is merely broadening the Mitzva.

personal sefer Torah, or Torah library, it is symbolic of our priorities. The shas (set of Talmud) on the shelf make a statement about our priorities and foundations.

Despite the fact that we are not commanded to carry around our library with us, it would be a very natural outgrowth of this discussion. When we find a few spare moments during the day, what is it that we reach for? The answer to this question is a very important one. It will speak to the idea that we define ourselves based on that which is most accessible to us. It also relates to the idea that what we carry around with us is symbolic of our foundation. If we look around the office, the home, school and the public arena I think the answer for most is quite clear. We reach for our cell phone, or our mobile device to check our email. But what if instead of (or more realistically in addition to) our cell phone we had a pocket Mishna Brurah? What if our initial instinct when we had a moment was to reach for a sefer which would deepen our Jewish connections? I believe in this scenario we would fulfill the totality of the Mitzva of writing a sefer Torah. We would find ourselves easily within reach of growth in Torah and we would also have a clear sense of our priorities and foundations.