

The Mitzvah of Inscribing One's Own Torah Scroll
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Happy New Year! Moshe's prelude to the poem that is parshat Ha'Azinu includes the instruction to "write down this poem". This statement, towards the end of parshat Vayeilech, has been codified as the 613th commandment; which, in literal translation, states that "Every Jewish male is bound to the task to write his own Torah scroll." I would like to discuss this mitzvah, to discuss how the interpretation of this mitzvah has been broadened historically, and then to offer my own personal interpretation of this mitzvah with an emphasis on its relationship to Rosh Hashannah and the concept of Teshuva.

As Maimonides explains: It is a positive precept for each person to write a Torah scroll, as it is said: "Therefore, write down this poem" (Deut. 31:19), in other words, write yourselves a copy of the Torah containing this poem, since one does not write excerpted passages of the Torah. Even though one's parents may have left them a Torah scroll, it is a commandment to write a scroll of their own; and if they write it with their own hand it is as if they received it at Mount Sinai. If they do not know to write, others write it for them. Anyone who proof reads a Torah scroll, even a single letter, is considered to have written one in its entirety.

Other traditional interpretations imply that the rationale for the commandment serves to proliferate the number of available Torah scrolls. And there are many other differing views as well: Chayei Adam states 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.”

There have been other more recent interpretations of the 613th mitzvah as well. Some communities raise funds by making it a project to have congregational members pay to hold a scribe’s hand while they inscribe a letter in a scroll as it is being recorded so as to fulfill the mitzvah. In other interpretations, sages have concluded that writing a copy of the Mishna or Gemara serves the same end and, therefore, satisfies the duty of this commandment as well. Still, there is even a basic controversy over whether the commandment is to be taken literally to the extent that “write down this poem” would most obviously mean to write out the poem that is parshat Ha’Azinu” rather than the entire Torah. So, it should be clear that this final commandment has always begged for interpretation as well as to its proper application as an actionable mitzvah.

I’d like to explain why I believe that “613” is one of the most fundamental mitzvot and why it is of particular significance around this time of the Jewish New Year. In Parshat Nitzavim (Chapter 30: Verses 11-14), which is read just before Rosh Hashannah, Moshe says: “For the mitzvah which I command you this day, it is not beyond you, nor is it remote from you. It is not in heaven...It is not across the sea... Rather, it is very close to you, in your mouth, in your heart, that you may do it.” Moshe says this to the gathered assembly while including ‘those who are not here with us today” which, according to the handout provided by Janet last Shabbat, many have interpreted to mean future generations. (i.e. “all of us”).

There is a common expression in Judaism that states that: “Every Jew has their own share in the Torah”, which conveys the idea that while everyone may be performing the same mitzvot, individual proclivities personalize these deeds to make the Torah uniquely one’s own. It also implies that certain mitzvot resonate more than others for each individual, either because they pose more of a challenge or because they simply come more naturally.

My thought is that this means that everyone who is actively performing mitzvot or is concentrating on their moral behavior is, “de facto,” writing their own Torah through their choices and, optimally through behavior that is the result of conscious, personalized, ethical decisions. As a thought experiment, let’s imagine a person, Itzik, who, throughout his life devoted himself, with sincerity, to the performance of mitzvot. That’s all that we know about him. Let’s compare Itzik to a second person, Naomi, who similarly devoted herself to a life of Torah values. They may have been neighbors or may have lived centuries apart in entirely different areas of the world. Both individuals were working from the same list of mitzvot, but due to societal norms as well as to the resonance and challenges of the various mitzvot vis-à-vis their respective personalities, their parental influences, geography, gender, epoch, or whom they called their Rebbe, each person’s list of accomplished mitzvot turned out quite differently. Let’s now imagine that each of their positive deeds were recorded in a book such that it could be seen which mitzvot were most wholeheartedly performed and which mitzvot had been only lightly-used or left, by strict interpretation, unperformed. Some of the mitzvot might have been equally daunting for each to perform, such as mitzvah #602: “To exterminate the seven Canaanite nations from the land of Israel,” while others such as, mitzvah #102 “Though shall not commit adultery” might have been easier for one of our subjects to obey than for the other. For our

experiment, we will imagine that there were many additional good deeds that they each performed which were not exactly mitzvot, but which were informed by Torah values, and that those many deeds, too, were recorded in their book, as annotations, in proximity to the mitzvah concepts that they were most closely derived from. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, every joyous “simcha”, visitation to a sick friend, or shiva call they made was properly recorded in this life book. Through their actions in the world they have each written their own personal, annotated Torah!

Now, let’s imagine someone, living in our time, who does not consider themselves to be strictly Halachically driven, but who behaves according to perceived moral principles, many of which are in accordance with, or derived from traditional Torah values. Perhaps that describes you. If so, YOU are writing your own Torah as well.

Some of the principles by which you live may have been clarified by the guidance of your parents or teachers or through personal reflection during this or a previous holiday season, while other of your precepts may have evolved through ongoing learning, life events, exposure to books, articles, movies, podcasts, tweets(?), etc. Whatever the genesis of these principles, if you’ll pardon the expression, the Jewish New Year might be a good time for YOU to reflect upon the values that are most important to you, many of which may be uniquely personal.

In preparation for this talk, I’ve been thinking lately about both some traditional Jewish obligations that I try to honor and also about some of the often quirky, and idiosyncratic principles that I consider important for me to abide by, that would feel TO ME like betrayal to

abandon, but which I would not want to impose on anyone else. I don't want to share any specific examples lest anyone think that I am preaching or to suggest that any of you should act as I do. I'm quite sure that many of my self-imposed rules would seem trivial if spoken publically. Hopefully, I'm speaking vaguely enough in saying, briefly, that some of my personal rules revolve around what I think I should eat or not eat, the limits of when I'll travel and for what purpose, or what my obligations are to my family and pets. These are personal precepts that are not spelled out explicitly or commonly shared by our traditions, but that I feel warrant ongoing clarification and examination. Many are purely in accordance with the traditional mitzvot, while many others are limits I impose on myself because they are important to me regardless of whether or not it is possible to reveal their possible links to Halacha. As with traditional mitzvot, some are positive precepts, suggesting things I should be doing, while others are negative precepts telling me what to avoid.

In harmony with a traditional halachic framework, where many specific priorities and habits are explicitly laid out, or even from a less traditional mindset, I am suggesting that there is also another dimension: a more individualistic approach that leaves one with the task of prioritizing principles and habits that seem to each of us important to cultivate. These are, essentially, the "annotations" that I previously spoke of, and these personally derived mitzvot seem to provide additional local color and vibrancy to each person's Torah.

So, again, using myself as an example, I feel that some of my actions will be better for my health or benefit the environment, while other mindful habits make private statements that, though they will never "go public," still matter. And while many, if not most, of these behaviors, don't come

with any guarantee of a specific outcome they still seem like responsible choices. Please don't assume that I feel that I have taken on, in any significant way, the many challenges that our damaged world presents, as it's always uncomfortable to confront just how much I should really do that gets pushed aside in the pursuit of my own interests.

Obviously, many of you are similarly engaged in the project of clarifying your own personal values. Our specific paths are unique; and our attempts to balance our individual pursuits in terms of what is morally satisfying to each of us, will likely seem foreign, or even, perhaps, unacceptable to others. For some, civic engagement may be a calling, while for others the pursuit of study, or spiritual or artistic growth comes most naturally. For many, professional work provides the brunt of their positive impact in the world, while for others it is only outside of work that they feel they are performing acts of tzedakah or acts of significance. So, despite our doubts, setbacks and failings, we each, ideally, strive to improve our behavior and to do what we feel is right with the thought that our actions matter. Isn't that the essence of Judaism; to feel that our behaviors have outcomes, that good deeds are their own reward and that we can always do more than we are doing?

My admittedly basic understanding of the concept of teshuva is that a person evolves their moral conduct so that when again faced with a situation that formerly ended with regrets, their behavior has improved. Some say that a high level of teshuva has been reached when that person has been presented again with a similar situation, still instinctively experiences the same initial negative impulses, but then responds with better behavior. Perhaps, debatably, a yet higher level might be for the person to have evolved so fundamentally in their thinking that the temptation for the

destructive reaction simply isn't there. Either way, is not the first step of this process of teshuva to clarify how one wishes to behave as a person, so they can feel that they have acted properly in a given circumstance? And doesn't the clarification and implementation of that ideal behavior reveal what one's essential, true values are?

So, by this reckoning, the commandment to write one's own Torah is an instruction to pursue meaningful mitzvot. It is a meta-commandment: Continuously define and clarify behaviors and priorities for yourself and do your best to live by them and hopefully, derive joy from them. These things are not in heaven, or across the sea but rather close to you, in your mouth and in your heart that you may do them.