

YK sermon 5782 - The Transformative Power of Torah

Pop quiz: who here knows how many *mitzvot* there are in the Torah? Right, 613 as identified by the Talmud. And the most famous list was created by the great 12th century scholar Moses Maimonides – known as the Rambam. In his book, *sefer ha-mitzvot*, he lists *all* of the *mitzvot* in order from 1 to 613.

Next question in the quiz: According to Maimonides – what is the *first* mitzvah in the Torah? Correct, *P'ru u'rvu* – “be fruitful and multiply”, which appears as a command to Adam and Eve at the conclusion of Gd’s creation. This designation makes sense because chronologically in the Torah, this command is indeed listed *first*, and it *also* makes sense because if there is no procreation the rest of the mitzvot are rendered, well . . . academic. And we know that not everyone can *biologically* fulfill this mitzvah so there are *plenty* of *other* ways to fulfill it - through supporting the sanctity of life and by enhancing the lives of those already created.

OK, so far the questions have been relatively easy. But, do you know what the *last* Mitzvah is - number 613? As you might imagine, it is based on a verse from the very *end* of the Torah, Deuteronomy 31:19, when Moses instructs the Children of Israel: (quote) “*v’atah kitvu lachem et hashira hazot*” - “Therefore, write down *this poem* and *teach* it to the people of Israel...” In counting this as a *mitzvah*, Maimonides used the rabbinic understanding of this verse in the Talmud, which interprets the instruction to “write down this poem” to be a command: *tzarikh adam likhtov sefer l’atzmo* - that **each and every Jew should write a Sefer Torah**, a scroll of the Torah, for him or herself.

“But do the math!”, you might protest, “Thank Gd, there are millions of Jews! Do we really need millions of torah scrolls!? Look in the *aron*

hakodesh - the Ark - we have multiple Torah scrolls for the congregation, isn't that enough?! We are happy to share!" "Not relevant" – says the Rambam – “even though *we, as a community*, don't need to have a Torah *written for* every member – *you, as the individual need to write* a Torah! It is about *process*, not product. Thus, the mitzvah is that each and every Jew must *personally* help bring a Torah into this world! You cannot complete the full cycle of mitzvot without it. And that is why we are going to embark on a very special project at Beth El this year to actually fulfill this mitzvah ourselves! More on that later.

But for now, let us ask why? What prompted the rabbis of the Talmud to interpret that verse as a *mitzvah* for *every* Jew to participate in the writing of a Sefer Torah? To answer, and I am indebted to Rabbi Alan Lucas for his writings on this subject, there is an intriguing connection some commentators make between the first and last mitzvah of the Torah: the very first *mitzvah* is the expectation that we will make **more people** and the last mitzvah is the expectation that we will make **more Torahs**. In fact, my good friend and colleague Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove argues that the first and last mitzvah of the Torah are really the *same* mitzvah, that is they are *about the same thing* -- about proliferation, continuity, transmission and growth. Our *first* responsibility is to make sure that there are more of *us* in the world and, then, our most important *accompanying* responsibility is to make sure there is **more Torah** in the world. To *live* fully, *is* to embody *Torah*.

I love this poetic reading of the relationship between these *mitzvot*, seeing procreation and the spreading of Torah as bookend mitzvot for Jewish life. *Life* is a gift from Gd, as well as from those who came before us. *Life* is a blessing. We are *honored* to be alive. As such, life should be *shared* and, to the best of our ability, be passed on to others. Whether that be by literally giving the gift of life to someone or by performing the sacred duty of *facilitating and enhancing* the life of people in the world.

So too is Torah. *Torah* is a gift from God *and* those who came before us. *Torah* is a blessing. We are *fortunate* to have *Torah* in our lives and *it too* should be shared as much as possible! As we recite every evening during the Ma'ariv service about the Mitzvot of the Torah, “*Ki Hem Hayenu v'orekh yameinu uvahem negeh yomam valayla*, “They are our life and the fullness of our days and on *them* we will meditate day and night”.

Thus, for Torah to be an active force in our lives, it has to be lived! It has to be folded into the *very fabric* of our everyday existence. As it says in the Torah about the mitzvot, “*Chai bahem*” *live* by them! If the Torah remains in the Ark and you remain in your seats – the power of Torah has not been realized! It is when you *embody* Torah, study Torah and create Torah that it comes alive!

To illustrate, Elie Wiesel tells a story of how *Simchat Torah* was celebrated in the concentration camp of Buna, a sub camp of Auschwitz. But how does one celebrate *Simchat Torah* in a *death* camp? They had no food, no clothes and certainly no Torahs. Wiesel wrote that they stood there looking at each other, no one was sure what to do, until the rabbi said, “It is *Simchat Torah* – we are *obligated* to celebrate, we *must* dance”. But dance, how? He was an old rabbi surrounded by a bunch of emaciated Jews. Indeed, they said to him, “We have no Torahs to dance with? Where in a death camp will we find a Torah?” So the rabbi approached a small starving child and asked, “How old are you, child?” “Thirteen”, replied the boy. “Have you studied Torah?”, the rabbi asked. “Some,” replied the boy. “What is the first word of the Torah?”, asked the rabbi. “*Bereishit*”, replied the boy. “Good” said the rabbi smiling and he proceeded to lift up the boy who weighed practically nothing – and carried *him* in his arms like a Torah and began to dance and sing. Soon the others formed a circle around the rabbi and they began to pass the boy from one to another – embracing him – singing and dancing, celebrating Gd’s gift of the Torah.

In this story, life and Torah are inextricably intertwined. One inspires the other. Life is Torah and Torah gives life. In this case, the boy literally embodied the Torah, and Torah was spiritually expressed by this special community of Jews who celebrated an important Jewish holiday in impossible circumstances and brought joy and meaning to a place of sorrow and fear. And that is what I believe the Rambam really meant when he wrote: *tzarich adam lichtov sefer torah l'atzmo*. Literally, as I shared, this means “each of us must write our own sefer Torah”. But the word, “L’atzmo” can be defined *differently*, to mean “to” or “of” “ourselves”. **Thus, in spiritual terms this command really means we are each obligated to make ourselves a Torah -- each of us are asked to embody Torah and therefore perpetuate its meaning through the way we live life and by how we incorporate Torah into our daily actions.**

So the real question is, “how”? How do we fulfill this command to embody Torah? The first way we do this is through Torah **study**. As I taught on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, in one of the most famous rabbinic passages of the Mishnah, the rabbis list a number of Jewish values and then they say, “*Talmud Torah Kneged Kulam*” - “And Torah learning equals *all* of them”. Thus, learning Torah is glorified here as the single most important mitzvah. Why? Ingenious insight for this singular designation is found when the rabbis ask in the Talmud: which is greater, action or study? The answer, (quote) “Study . . . because, Study *leads* to action”. In other words, study is especially important because it is both a mitzvah and a *machsir mitzvah* - an important activity on its own and also a gateway to all of the other mitzvot and all of our values. Studying Torah leads to the knowledge needed for effective and proper action. Studying Torah leads to the ability to make conscious informed choices. Studying Torah leads to the meanings *behind* the actions we take. And studying Torah provides the inspiration and encouragement we need to actually carry out the deeds we should be doing. As John Maxwell wrote, “Live to

learn and you will really learn to live”. To create Torah and to live Torah, we have to study it and understand it.

So please, please study with me this year, or with any of the incredible teachers Beth El and the wider Jewish community offer. To get started, we have a Beth El brochure with all of our classes, both in print and online, we have a whole library full of amazing books and Dvds, or you can call Rachel Kamin our Director of Lifelong Learning and discuss with her where might be the best place to start. Learn Torah this year, be inspired, and then go out renewed and ready to make the world a better place.

And study, as we just learned from the Talmud, will lead directly to another important way to fulfill the mitzvah of embodying Torah: *living* the values of Torah in the everyday. One story that illustrates this poignantly in an ironic and powerful way, considering what I just taught you about learning, is about the second Lubavitcher rebbe. He was a renowned scholar who lived to study Torah. And thus he was rightly respected and considered wise. However, he was once so intent on his studies that he failed to hear the cries of his own new baby son. His father, the first rebbe, heard these cries, went down, and took the infant in his arms. He then rocked the baby back to sleep. After, he went down to his son, who was still focused on his studies and was oblivious to what had happened, and said, “my son, I’m not sure what it is that you have been studying, but if it made you block out the cries of your own son, it most certainly was *not* Torah. Living such a deep and intensive life of Torah means significantly more than immersing oneself in the secrets of our textual tradition; it means *embodying* Torah, studying it so that we might *live* it, through our words, our bodies, our hearts, and our deeds.” To embody and live Torah, study *must* lead to deeds that reflect the values Gd has taught us *in* the Torah.

One such value, of course, is exemplified by a familiar phrase, “*V’ahavata lerei’achah camocha*” the command “to love your neighbor as you love yourself”. Our Torah constantly repeats the imperative to care for the stranger, widow, orphan and poor -- for anyone who is in need. And the great sage Hillel echoed this value with his famous saying, “*Im ein ani li mi li, u’kh’she’ani le’atzmi, ma ani?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me, **but if I am only for myself, who am I?**” We cannot hold back our compassion for others, refraining from action, sitting in indifference, indecisiveness, or fear. To live Torah is to *act* on our values, even if that is one small step at a time. We fulfill, spread and create Torah by going beyond ourselves and answering the cries of those in need, in their time of need.

I remember personally, the first Rosh Hashanah after my twins were born, about ten years ago, we went as a family to deliver packages of food for Maot Hittim, so that people less fortunate had what *they* needed in order to enjoy a festive meal for Rosh Hashanah. I remember thinking, here I am today, with my whole family, in 2011 fulfilling the *ancient* command from our holy Torah to take a portion of the crops from the field and distribute them to those in need before the holiday. In performing this mitzvah, in embodying Torah in that way, I felt so fortunate, felt so connected to my history and felt such a strong spiritual impulse-- it is hard even for me to put that feeling into words. But as I reflect, I know that my knowledge of the Torah both inspired my action and also imbued the carrying of it out, with deep fulfilling meaning. Torah served as both a touchstone for lasting personal meaning *and* created a way to bring the value of compassion for others to life for me *and* for those I was serving.

As Proverbs states, Torah is “*Etz Hayim Hee*” -- “it is a tree of life for those who hold fast to it”. Torah represents the foundation of our religious tradition. Torah deepens our life through study, reflection and guidance. Torah inspires us and stirs us to take actions that will carry us

beyond ourselves, to enrich the world and make it a better place. Torah *can* truly be the “Tree of Life” that helps sustain goodness in the world and which imbues our life with fulfillment and meaning.

This is why we, at Beth El, have decided to embark on an ambitious and exciting program this year – to help *you* personally fulfill the last mitzvah in the Torah, number 613 –to write a *sefer torah* for yourself. In celebration of Beth El’s 75th anniversary, we have commissioned a Sofer, a Torah scribe, to write, for our congregation, a *new* Sefer Torah! Therefore, at Hanukkah time we will inaugurate this initiative and celebrate as a community -details of course to follow.

What is even more special is that though a scribe in Jerusalem will be writing the new Beth El Torah, for it is a very special skill, when he comes to the end of a section – he will *not* complete it. Rather he will sketch an outline of the final letters of that section and these parchment sections will be brought from Jerusalem here to Beth El at various times during the year and we –*all* of us - will have the opportunity to literally take a quill in our hands, dip it into the ink, just as the scribe does, and *personally participate* in the writing of our Torah! And at that moment, when you sit with quill in hand, life and Torah will meet. At that moment, you will embrace Torah and Torah will embrace you!

What is more, during the course of the next 10 months, when each and every one of our Beth El families will be invited to write our Torah, you will *also* be privileged to engage in a series of *educational* opportunities -- grandparents, parents and children can participate in learning and activities that will further deepen the meaning of this sacred privilege. For example, you will learn how a Torah is written and created, as well as how to prepare to personally write in it and help create one.

We are also planning a yearlong *celebration!* When we kick things off we will be hosting a concert by the band, **613** - a professional Jewish

acapella group with a perfect name! And we will be organizing a trip or two to Israel, during which we can hopefully visit with our sofer and see him in action (among many other great activities). Plus, throughout the year we will hold festive gatherings, during which we will rededicate ourselves to the study of Torah, to joyously exploring the meaning of Torah in our lives, and to assessing how Torah will inspire our daily actions. It will be a yearlong celebration of Torah and Torah study. And it will culminate in your *personal* moment of writing and creating our Torah and fulfilling mitzvah 613.

As you can see, this is way more than a Torah writing project. This will serve as a touchstone for Torah living and as an inspiration to carry forward our tradition with pride and energy. I am convinced that at the moment you take quill in hand and place the ink on the parchment – not only will a Torah be written but as Rabbi Lucas writes, “a Jew will be transformed. It will be a sacred moment during which worlds will collide and your *neshama*, your soul, will open to new possibilities”. You will experience the transformative power of Torah.

(pause) This is *also* going to be an important fund raising project for our congregation. You will be given an opportunity to sponsor different aspects of the writing of the Torah. Just to be clear, you will be able to participate in the writing of the Torah, and in *any* of the educational and celebratory events, **whether or not** you choose to participate in the sponsoring of it. Your participation in the mitzvah is the number one priority. And, conversely, you will also be able to participate in the *sponsoring* of the Torah, whether or not you choose to write in it. Though, of course, I hope you will do both.

We also anticipate that a successful sponsorship program will enable us not only to cover the cost of creating a new Torah but to raise the funds necessary to continue the important work of *teaching* Torah and *living*

Torah here at Beth El, which we do day in and day out. A successful Torah project this year will mean that next year we will be a stronger congregation both religiously and financially – I hope you will join us in making this dream come true. This Torah project will revitalize our congregation in ways we can now, only imagine.

As Jews – we do believe that we were given two wonderful gifts – life and Torah. We have a sacred responsibility to enjoy both and we have a sacred responsibility to ensure that life and Torah do not end with *us*. We must make sure to pass it on and share it with others! And we think the Torah writing project is a perfect way to help us do just that!

I truly believe this is going to be a very powerful experience for all of us and feel privileged to be a part of bringing this experience to Beth El. Imagine every time you come to shul and the ark opens, or when a child comes to the Torah for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, or when *you* come to the Torah for a yahrzeit or other occasion – imagine when you look at the Torah on any and all of these occasions, you will be able to say, “I wrote that Torah! That is my Torah! And I am that Torah too!” Just as a parent may look at a child that he or she has helped raise and think, “even after I am gone, in some way I will continue through them” – so too you will be able to look at this *Torah* and know that long after we are gone – it will be here -- continuing to inspire and perpetuate Judaism -- thanks to you.

Therefore, over the upcoming year we, the members of Beth El, are not just creating *a* Torah – we are creating Torah. *Tzarich adam lichtov sefer torah l'atzmo* – The Rambam chose his words very carefully –it is not enough to write a Torah. You have to write it “for” or “of” yourself! And so you must write *your* Torah: with the quill we will give you, with the classes that allow you to learn, and through the actions you will take based on the Torah values you hold dear.

Thus, the moment has arrived for each of us to pick up that quill left to us by prior generations, by loved ones who, though separated by time and space, remain forever in our hearts – generations of Jews close and distant – who made it possible for us to exist. As Rabbi Lucas wrote, “We dip the tip of the quill in the inkwell of our tears and we fill in the outlined letters left open by the generations before. We take that same quill and we outline letters of our own, leaving them for *others* to fill in as *they* will see fit”.

This is the mitzvah we will perform this year. Let us begin with mitzvah number 1 and embrace life and enhance the lives of all around us. Then let us travel through all of the mitzvot to 613, creating Torah of, for, and with ourselves. *Zot hatorah asher sam moshe...* this is the story of our people, the Torah handed down from Gd to Moses, from generation to generation – the story that to this day that inspires us to appreciate the sacredness of life, instructs how to live with holiness and inspires us to create Torah, for and of ourselves, by acting each day upon the treasured values we hold dear. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah - may we all be inspired for a year of life and Torah, Amen!*