

A Walking Sefer Torah

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A Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) embodies holiness and we relate to it as a holy object. We stand up in its presence, we kiss it when it passes us and we provide a proper way to escort the Sefer Torah as it moves from place to place. Additionally, we protect it from acts that are not befitting of a holy object: we store it in an upright position, we make sure that it is never placed on the floor and when the Torah is no longer usable, and we provide it with a proper burial.

In this study guide, we will explore the notion that each and every Jew represents a walking Sefer Torah. This idea, which is alluded to in a number of Talmudic statements, was developed by a number of commentators.

The Talmudic Sources

The most explicit source comparing a Jew to a Sefer Torah is found in two places in the Talmud in a statement by R. Shimon ben Elazar. In the midst of a discussion about when one tears one's garments over death or other tragic events, the Talmud states:

R. Shimon ben Elazar states: If someone is present when a person dies, he is obligated to tear (his garments). What is this similar to? It is similar to a Sefer Torah that tore, where there is (also) an obligation to tear (one's garments).

Mo'ed Katan 25a

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר העומד על המת בשעת יציאת נשמה חייב לקרוע למה זה דומה לספר תורה שנשרף שחייב לקרוע.
מועד קטן כה.

The Talmud clearly compares the loss of an individual to the tearing of a Sefer Torah.² The commentators offer a number of explanations as to why a person is comparable to a Sefer Torah. The most poignant explanation is offered by Ramban (Nachmanides 1194-1270) who states:

It seems to me that the soul in the body is like the names of God (written) on the parchment. It is merely a parable to convey the message that it is a great loss and cause for alarm and a person must tear his garments as if a Sefer Torah was burned before him.

Ramban, Mo'ed Katan 25a

ולוי נראה שהנפש בגוף כאזכרות בגוילין, ומשל בעלמא הוא לומר שהוא הפסד גדול וחרדה רבה וחייב אדם לקרוע עליה כאילו נשרף ס"ת לפניו.
רמב"ן מועד קטן כה.

² Regarding the practice of tearing one's garments upon witnessing a death, see *Gesher HaChaim* 4:9.

All parts of a Sefer Torah are holy. Yet, it is the names of God that are written in the Sefer Torah that infuse the entire Sefer Torah with its holiness.³ If we follow the analogy, the entire body is holy and should be treated with holiness. The body is infused with holiness when the soul enters the body.

R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson, *Divrei Sha'ul* 340:5, notes that there is a story recorded in the Talmud about how the Romans killed R. Chanina ben Tradyon that supports Ramban's analogy:

They found R. Chanina ben Tradyon who was sitting and learning Torah and gathering crowds publicly, and there was a Sefer Torah in his arms. They took him and wrapped him in the Sefer Torah, surrounded him with branches and lit the branches. They brought sponges of cotton, soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that he would not die quickly. His daughter said "Father, this is how I should see you?" He said to her "If they only burned me, it would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned with a Sefer Torah, He Who will seek retribution for the desecration of the Sefer Torah will also seek retribution for my desecration." His students asked him "Rebbi, what do you see?" He said to them "The parchments are being burned, but the letters are flying away." [They said to him] "You too should open your mouth and allow the fire to enter you." He responded "It is better that the one who placed it remove it, but one may not destroy himself."

Avoda Zara 18a

מצאוהו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ומקהיל קהלות ברבים וס"ת מונח לו בחיקו הביאוהו וכרכוהו בס"ת והקיפוהו בחבילי זמורות והציתו בהן את האור והביאו ספוגין של צמר ושראום במים והניחום על לבו כדי שלא תצא נשמתו מהרה אמרה לו בתו אבא אראך בכך אמר לה אילמלי אני נשרפתי לבדי היה הדבר קשה לי עכשיו שאני נשרף וס"ת עמי מי שמבקש עלבונה של ס"ת הוא יבקש עלבוני אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מה אתה רואה אמר להן גליון נשרפין ואותיות פורחות אף אתה פתח פיך ותכנס [בך] האש אמר להן מוטב שיטלנה מי שנתנה ואל יחבל הוא בעצמו.
עבודה זרה יח.

R. Shmuel Eidels (1555-1631) *Maharsha ad loc.*, explains further:

The students asked him "what do you see" etc., they also saw the same thing, but they inquired about it to give him perspective so that he wouldn't cause himself more suffering, but rather allow himself to die quicker. Their message was that just as you see the parchment burning which is the physical embodiment of the Torah, but the spiritual (essence) which are the letters, are flying up, so too, you should open your mouth and allow the fire to enter so that your body will be burned internally and your soul will ascend and fly upward.

Avoda Zara 18a

וא"ל תלמידיו מה אתה רואה כו' שהם ודאי ג"כ ראו כן אבל שאלו על כך כדי לתת לו דמיון שלא יצטער כל כך וימות מהר וזה שאמר [ו] לו כי כמו שראית גליון נשרף שהן גוף הס"ת והרוחני שהם האותיות פורחות למעלה אף אתה עשה כן פתח פיך ויכנס האש ויהיה גופך נשרף אף בפנים ונשמתך והרוח שבך יהיה עולה ופורח למעלה
מהרש"א עבודה זרה יח.

³ Ramban seems to be consistent with his own opinion in *Milchamot HaShem, Sukkah* 4b, that the parchment of the Sefer Torah only receives its holiness from the letters that are written on it. His comments in *Milchamot HaShem* imply that even if the name of God is not written on the parchment, but there are eighty-five letters of the Torah text on the parchment, the parchment is infused with holiness.

R. Nathanson notes that the dialogue between R. Chanina ben Tradyon and his students (according to Maharsha's interpretation) is based on the assumption developed by Ramban that a person is comparable to the parchment of a Sefer Torah and the soul is comparable to the letters.

R. Moshe Sofer notes a halachic ramification of the comparison of a person to a Sefer Torah. The Gemara states:

Mar Zutra stated: The worn out covers of the Sifrei Torah are converted to burial shrouds for a neglected corpse⁴ and that is their proper disposal.

Megillah 26b

אמר מר זוטרא מטפחות ספרים
שבלו עושין אותן תכריכין למת
מצוה וזו היא גניזתן
מגילה כו:

R. Sofer wonders why it is permissible to use the cover, which is imbued with holiness, for a seemingly mundane act: He writes:

One must understand why they allowed using covers for burial shrouds for a neglected corpse. Granted that this is the method of disposal, nevertheless, they are still accessories of holiness and how can one use them for the mundane? One must conclude that the corpse is also considered an accessory of holiness because a Jewish person is compared to a Sefer Torah.

Chatam Sofer, Megillah 26b

דהרי צריך להבין מאי טעמא התירו
לעשות מטפחות תכריכין למת מצוה,
נהי שזו היא גניזתן, מ"מ תשמיש
קדושה, איך ישתמשו בו חול. וצ"ל
דהאי נמי תשמישי קדושה, דאדם
ישראל הוי כס"ת.
חתם סופר מגילה כו:

According to R. Sofer, a person can be treated as an accessory of holiness (*tashmish kedusha*) for certain purposes. R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik of Brisk (1820-1892) adds that when a person reaches a certain level, he is not simply treated as an accessory of holiness, but rather as an actual object of holiness:

A Torah scholar is not categorized as an accessory of holiness but rather as actual kedusha.

Introduction to Teshuvot Beit HaLevi

דהת"ח לא הוי בבחינת תשמיש קדושה רק
בבחינת עצם הקדושה.
הקדמה לשו"ת בית הלוי

R. Soloveitchik's comments give a deeper insight into a statement of the Gemara:

Rava stated: How foolish are people who stand up for a Sefer Torah but don't stand up for a great person.

Makkot 22b

אמר רבא כמה טפשאי שאר אינשי דקיימי
מקמי ספר תורה ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה
מכות כב:

There is a verse in the Torah (Vayikra 19:32) stating that one must show honor to a Torah scholar by standing up for him. Rava doesn't understand why people would choose to stand for a Sefer Torah, but not for a Torah scholar. One can question Rava's statement: If we are all compared to a Sefer Torah, why should these people be motivated to specifically honor a Torah scholar on the basis that he is compared to a Sefer Torah? What special honor is due to him?

⁴ A *meit mitzvah* is a corpse that is discovered and there are no relatives to take responsibility for the burial.

Based on the comments of R. Soloveitchik, one can answer that there are two levels where one can be compared to a Sefer Torah. On a basic level, every Jew is compared to a Sefer Torah, but the holiness is only on the level of an accessory of holiness. Just as we don't stand up when the cover for a Sefer Torah is brought into the room, there is no obligation to stand for every individual. However, a Torah scholar is compared to a Sefer Torah on a level where he is considered an actual object of holiness. For this reason, Rava questioned the logic of those who stand for a Sefer Torah because of its status as an object of holiness and not for a Torah scholar who attains the same level of holiness.

There are many other allusions in the rabbinic sources comparing a Jew to a Sefer Torah. In the next few sections, we will explore some of those comparisons and what we can learn from them.

Relating to Ourselves as Sifrei Torah

Viewing ourselves as representations of Sifrei Torah bears a certain responsibility. R. Yechezkel Levenstein (1895-1974) notes that we must treat our minds as if they are Sifrei Torah:

As much as we must guard our mind, we must sanctify it with the holiness of a Sefer Torah since the mind is truly like an actual Sefer Torah ... If a person uses his mind for nonsense it is similar to throwing a Sefer Torah into the street. The mind is holy and it must be dedicated to the purpose for which it was created- to understand and internalize the Torah and the mitzvot and to lead a person to a purposeful life and to everlasting and eternal happiness.

**Collection of Talks of R. Yechezkel Levenstein
(as recorded in Chochmat HaMatzpun, Vol. 16, p 303)**

ועד כמה שצריך לשמור על השכל,
חייבים לקדש אותו כקדושת ספר
תורה, כיון שהשכל באמת כספר תורה
ממש ... ואם האדם משתמש בשכלו
לדבר הבאי דומה הוא לזורק ספר תורה
לרחוב, השכל קדוש הוא וחייב להיות
מקודש למטרה שלשמו נברא, להבין
ולהשכיל בתורה ומצוות ולהוביל את
האדם למטרת חייו ואושרו הקיים
והנצחי. (קובץ שיחות)
חכמת המצפון חלק טז דף שג

There are a number of components included in using our *seichel* (mind) properly. First, there is the intellectual component. God gave humans the intellectual capacity to understand, analyze, reason, imagine, and solve problems. We are expected to do our part and use our intellect in a way that we represent a Sefer Torah. Second, there is a behavioral component. God gave us the ability to choose between right and wrong, between good and evil. We are expected to make choices that reflect our status as walking Sifrei Torah. This is not limited to choosing to perform *mitzvot*. It also includes choices to improve our character traits.

The Preparation Process of a Sefer Torah

Rabbi Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993)⁵ comments that just as producing a Sefer Torah requires a certain process, developing oneself as a Jew requires a certain process. He notes that there is an interesting comparison between the preparation process of a Sefer Torah and the development of

⁵ R. Soloveitchik developed this idea in a lecture that was originally given on the Shevat 3, 5719 in Yiddish. The Yiddish notes were compiled by Dr. Hillel Zeidman and was translated to Hebrew by R. Shalom Carmi. The article appears in *Beit Yosef Sha'ul* Vol. IV (1994).

a person during childhood and adolescence. There are two stages to the process of producing a Sefer Torah. The first stage is called *ibud*, processing, where the skin of the animal is softened in order to prepare it for writing. The next stage is the actual writing of the Sefer Torah.

Rabbi Soloveitchik remarks that there are two *mitzvot* that relate to the development of a child. First, there is the mitzvah of *chinuch*, training. This mitzvah only applies before the child's bar/bat mitzvah. The second mitzvah is the mitzvah of Talmud Torah. This mitzvah does not only include the intellectual pursuit of learning Torah, but it also includes the study of how to perform *mitzvot*, the study of the fundamentals of faith and participation in an educational program that leads one to become a God fearing Jew. Regarding this mitzvah, the father's obligation does not stop at bar/bat mitzvah. Rather it continues until the young-adult can take responsibility for his/her own education.

The *chinuch* stage is a preparation for the Talmud Torah stage. Just as one cannot write on a Sefer Torah if the skin is not softened and purified, a child cannot become fully engaged in the Talmud Torah process until he is softened and purified. His character traits must be refined, he must learn certain skills and he must be acquainted with the basic concepts of Judaism.

R. Soloveitchik also notes that a Sefer Torah does not acquire its holiness automatically. The *sofer* (scribe) who prepares the Sefer Torah must imbue the Torah with holiness. In applying our analogy to a person, we are left with the following paradox: If a person is compared to a Sefer Torah, he must imbue himself with holiness. However, if he is not already imbued with holiness, how can he impart holiness onto himself? Where does the holiness come from?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that each person is born with a certain internal holiness. Each person has a responsibility to transfer that holiness so that it is apparent externally. Rabbi Soloveitchik comments that this idea appears in the laws of writing a Sefer Torah:

The sofer must have another Sefer Torah (or its text) in front of him to copy from for it is forbidden to write a single letter by heart and he must recite each word orally before writing.

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 274:2

צריך שיהיה לפניו ספר אחר שיעתיק ממנו
שאסור לכתוב אות אחת שלא מן הכתב וצריך
שיקרא כל תיבה בפיו קודם שיכתבנה.
שלחן ערוך יורה דעה רעד:ב

When the *sofer* recites the words that he is writing, it symbolizes the transference of holiness from the internal to the external.

The Letters of the Torah

A number of Kabbalistic and Chasidic sources present a variation to the idea that a person is a walking Sefer Torah. According to this variation, the Jewish people as a whole are representative of a Sefer Torah with each person comprising one letter. The acronym used to express this is לַתּוֹרָה = יש ששים ריבוא אותיות לתורה (Israel= There are 600,000 letters in the Torah). The

number 600,000 represents the entire Jewish people. The Jewish people as a whole is compared to a Torah which also has 600,000 letters.⁶

The Radomsker Rebbe (R. Shlomo Chanoch HaKohen Rabinowitz, 1801-1866) suggests that one of the messages that we can derive from this idea is how we treat our fellow Jew. His suggestion is based on the concept of *mukaf g'vil*, the concept that dictates that every letter of the Sefer Torah must be surrounded by parchment on all sides. Therefore, if two letters touch each other, the entire Sefer Torah is invalid.⁷

Every Sefer Torah has 600,000 letters which corresponds to the 600,000 souls of the Jewish people that stood on Har Sinai ... In each generation, the root of the souls that accepted the Torah at Har Sinai are still apparent. From this we learn an important lesson that each person must guard himself from inappropriately encroaching on one's friend regarding his business and he should not be jealous if he sees his friend with something he doesn't have. (The reason for this is) that just as regarding a Sefer Torah, the Torah is invalid if two letters touch each other because of the mukaf g'vil concept, so too every Jew must guard himself from encroaching on anyone else, for if not, his portion in the Torah is invalid.

Tiferet Shlomo, Shavuot, pg. 141a

כי כל הס"ת שיש בה ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה הם משורש ששים רבוא נשמות בני"ש שעמדו על הר סיני ומהם נעשה התורה כמש"כ הקדמוני ישראל ר"ת "יש ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה" ... וכן כל הדורות יש בהם שורש הנשמות שקבלו אז התורה במעמד הר סיני. ומזה יוצא מוסר השכל שצריך כל אדם לשמור א"ע לבל יהיה בו שום צד נגיעה והשגת גבול בחבירו בעסק פרנסתו ולא יתקנא בו אם יראה אצלו מעלה יתירה ממנו. כי כמו בס"ת אם יש בה נגיעה היא פסולה כי צריך להיות מוקף גויל כן כאו"א מבנ"י צריך לשמור מכל צד נגיעה כי אם לא כן נפסל חלק שורש נשמתו באותיות התורה.

תפארת שלמה שבועות דף קמא

R. Tzadok HaKohen (1823-1900) also addresses this idea and explains how this idea is significant both on an individual level and for the Jewish people as a whole:

But the merit of Torah (study) does not come to (fruition the same way as) prayer does with an increase of influence. Rather, its merit increases automatically through Torah study for it is the root of potential abundance for all Jewish souls, for it is known that their root is in Torah because there are 600,000 letters representing the 600,000 souls. While each letter is different from the rest, and each person has his own portion in Torah, nevertheless, his portion does not limit him (to other areas of Torah) ... and learning Torah serves to unite all portions of Torah.

Resisei Leilah no. 43

אבל זכות התורה אינו בא בתפלה על רבוי ההשפעה רק שהיא ממילא מתרבית ע"י התורה ששם הוא שורש קבלת השפע של כל הנפשות מישראל. דידוע דשרשם בתורה דס' רבוא אותיות נגד ס' רבוא נפשות כנודע. והגם דמ"מ אין כל אות דומה לחבירו וכל א' יש לו חלק ידוע בתורה מ"מ מצד חלקו אין לו גבול לומר שדבר זה נמנע כלל. כי כל חלק עצמו כשמגיע לעיקר שרשו ודביקותו בכל הרי מתדמה לכל שאין לו גבול כלל וע"י התורה הוא התאחדות החלק בכל. רסיסי לילה אות מג

⁶ In reality, there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. There are also many more than 600,000 Jews. See R. Moshe Sofer, *Chatam Sofer*, page 72b of his *Commentary to Masechet Chullin*, who deals with this question.

⁷ Menachot 34a.

R. Tzadok expresses two aspects of this idea. First, each person has his own portion in Torah. Each person has his own insights in Torah that nobody else will discover. Whether it is a question that has not yet been asked, a new way of understanding an idea, or a different way of organizing information, each person has the ability to discover his own personal portion of Torah. Second, the Torah serves to unify the Jewish people. Each person represents one part of a whole. Each person's share in Torah is available to everyone else.

As we celebrate Shavuot, we should keep in mind the lessons we learn from the Sefer Torah. We should constantly remember that we represent a walking Sefer Torah, both as individuals and as members of the Jewish people.

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