

Write Down this Song for Yourselves – כתבו לכם את-השירה הזאת

Seth Winberg

Shavuot is all about God giving the Torah to the Jewish people (*mattan torah*). The Talmud includes an opinion that when an individual writes a Torah scroll (*sefer torah*), it is as if he or she received the Torah at Sinai. In the sources below, you are invited to explore sources that speak about the *mitzvah* for each individual Jew to write a *sefer torah*. My hope is that by studying this *mitzvah*, you will find yourself a little closer to the experience of receiving the Torah.

The commandment to write a Torah scroll is based on the following verse:^{*}

Deuteronomy 31

(19) Therefore, write down this song for yourselves and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel.

דברים פרק לא

(יט) ועתה כתבו לכם את-השירה הזאת ולמדה את- בני-ישראל שימה בפיהם למען תהיה-לו השירה הזאת לעד בבני ישראל.

The **contextual meaning** of this commandment is that God is speaking to Moses and Joshua (“for yourselves”) and telling them to write the song in the following chapter of Deuteronomy (“Listen, O heavens...” / האזינו השמים).

Another **rabbinic tradition** understood the verse to be a commandment for every Jew to write a Torah scroll—just like the scrolls we read from in our synagogues:

Sanhedrin 21b

Rabbah said: even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: ‘Therefore, write down this song for yourselves...’

סנהדרין כא:

אמר רב[ה]: אף על פי שהניחו לו אבותיו לאדם ספר תורה - מצוה לכתוב משלו, שנאמר: ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה.

In the **thirteenth century**, Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh) had the following innovative approach to the commandment to write a *sefer torah*:

Laws of a Torah Scroll

And I say that surely it is an important commandment to write a Torah scroll. And it is wrong to sell it, unless [the money is used] for further Torah study or marriage. And so Maimonides wrote: ‘it is a positive commandment on every Jew to write a Torah scroll...’

This was in previous generations, when people wrote Torah scrolls and learned from them. But today, when we write Torah scrolls and place them in synagogues to read from them publicly, it is a commandment for every Jew, according to his or her ability, to write copies of Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and commentaries—and to study them with their children. The

הלכות קטנות לרא"ש (מנחות) הלכות ספר תורה

ואומר אני דודאי מצוה גדולה היא לכתוב ס"ת וגם אין למוכרו אלא ללמוד תורה ולישא אשה. וכ"כ הרמב"ם ז"ל (פ"ז מהלכות ס"ת) דמצות עשה היא לכל איש ישראל לכתוב ס"ת לעצמו שנאמר ועתה כתבו לכם את השירה הזאת...

וזהו בדורות הראשונים שהיו כותבים ס"ת ולומדים בו. אבל האידנא שכותבין ס"ת ומניחין אותו בבתי כנסיות לקרות בו ברבים מצות עשה היא על כל איש מישראל אשר ידו משגת לכתוב חומשי התורה ומשנה וגמרא ופירושי' להגות בהן הוא ובניו. כי מצות כתיבת התורה היא ללמוד בה כדכתיב ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפיהם.

^{*} My thanks to Rabbi Yoscher Katz for inspiring me to investigate the commandment to write a Torah scroll.

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commandment to write a Torah is in order to study from it as it says, 'teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths.'

Rosh's argument is that the original purpose of the *mitzvah* to write a Torah was for every Jew to own and study the foundational text of the Jewish people. By the thirteenth century, it became prevalent

Have you ever contributed to the publication of a book?

Rosh takes the rationale to write a Torah—'teach it to the people'—literally, but he understands the commandment more broadly than those who apply it to Moses and Joshua. Can you explain why Rosh might have done this?

for Torah scrolls to be placed in the ark of the synagogue. Like our own experience, it was rare for an individual to own a Torah scroll and learn from it at home. Accordingly, Rosh concludes that the *mitzvah* can be performed by writing copies of the Torah, not in the form of scrolls, but in volumes for personal study, and by producing volumes of Mishnah and Talmud.

Rosh's ruling raised some eyebrows. The idea that we can investigate the rationale behind a *mitzvah* and subsequently change our performance of the *mitzvah* has long been subject to controversy. While some rabbis rejected Rosh's

position, other rabbis sought to understand his argument in a more palatable way. See for example the words of Rabbi Yosef Karo (author of the *Shulhan Arukh*):

And so it seems to me that Rosh only sought to renew the writing of *humashim*, the Talmud, and their commentaries, that is, to show that they too are included in the commandment to write a *sefer torah*. And to show that writing these books is a greater *mitzvah* than writing a *sefer torah* and placing it in a synagogue to be read from publicly. But of course it is still, today, the foundation of the *mitzvah* to write a *sefer torah* and read from it with one's children! That way one acts according to the custom of previous generations.

בית יוסף, סימן ער

ולכן נ"ל שלא בא אלא לחדש לנו חיוב כתיבת חומשים וש"ס ופירושיהם שגם אלו בכלל מצות כתיבת ס"ת, ושזה יותר מצוה מלכתוב ס"ת ולהניחו בבהכ"נ לקרות לו ברבים, אבל לכתוב ס"ת ולקרות בו הוא בניו פשיטא שזוהי עיקר קיום מ"ע גם בזה"ז, שהרי נוהג בו כמנהג הדורות הראשונים.

Do you find this explanation of Rosh convincing?

Why or why not?

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Another striking position on the commandment to write a Torah scroll emerges from Rabbi Aryeh Leib ben Asher Gunzberg's *Shaagat Aryeh* (printed in 1755):

<p>Nevertheless, I could argue that today we are exempt from the commandment to write a Torah scroll, because even great sages of the Talmud were not expert at variant spelling, as it says: Rav Yosef said to Abbaye: they [previous generations] were experts, but we are not experts.</p> <p>And if this is true, there is no commandment to write a Torah scroll in these generations...</p>	<p>שאגת אריה, סימן לו</p> <p>מ"מ יכולני לפטור מדין אחר ממצות כתיבת ס"ת בזה"ז, משום דאפילו בימי אמוראים לא היו בקיאים בחסרות ויתירות כדאמר ליה רב יוסף לאביי בפ"ק דקדושין (ל, א) אינהו בקיאים בחסרות ויתירות אנן לא בקיאינן....</p> <p>אם כן אפילו מדרבנן בטלה מצות כתיבת ספר תורה בדורות הללו...</p>
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The author of *Shaagat Aryeh's* position is that since we do not have a perfectly accurate text of the Torah, **we cannot truly fulfill the commandment to write a Torah scroll**. Some disagree with this position, arguing that the text of our Torah scrolls is fine, and not a hindrance to performing this commandment. Others agree with the author of *Shaagat Aryeh's* position that we cannot fulfill the biblical commandment, but still maintain there is a rabbinic commandment to write a Torah scroll. The rabbinic commandment may be performed in a variety of ways, including contributing money to write, maintain, or fix a Torah scroll.

We have learned about **several understandings** of the commandment to write a Torah scroll: (1) **the commandment was for Moses and Joshua to write the song Haazinu**; (2) **there is a commandment for every Jew to write a Torah scroll for him or herself**; (3) **the commandment can be fulfilled by writing and publishing books related to Torah**; (4) **there is no longer a way to fulfill the mitzvah in our time**.

Which of these understandings resonates most with you?

Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal Epstein said that the expression “these and those are the words of the living God” is one of the reasons the Torah is called a song—because “a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.”

How will you contribute your voice to the harmonies of Torah learning this Shavuot?