

Auto-Replication
An Analysis of the Final Two Mitzvot in the Torah

Va Yelech 5782

I.

Rambam, in a celebrated passage in his *Yad ha-Hazaka*, notes that both love and fear of the Almighty are cultivated through the study of science. As one cultivates scientific understanding, one catches a glimpse, and truly, but a glimpse, of the indescribable Intellect which is the author of the cosmos all around us.

For me, one of the most profound illustrations of this Maimonidean doctrine was having the opportunity to study DNA replication. Learning about the complex mechanism involved in the double helix of nucleotides separating, and the various cellular components that were involved in the transcription of the coded genetic information from the DNA, was itself an inspiring experience.

Yet, above all, the aspect of the process which most moved me then, and, many years later, continues to move me the most, is the very notion that the source of DNA replication was DNA itself. That is to say, encoded within the nucleotide sequences in the DNA are certain groupings of nucleotides that, when properly interpreted by the cellular machinery, are actually a set of instructions orchestrating the replication of the DNA itself.

It occurred to me a number of years following my exposure to the processes of DNA replication that the Torah actually worked in precisely the same fashion. Encoded within the Torah, in the final two of the six hundred thirteen mitzvot, both found in Parshat VaYakhel, is actually the blueprint for Torah replication. The penultimate mitzvah in the Torah is *hakhel*, a once every seven year event which is an obligation to reenact the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The final mitzvah in the Torah is the obligation incumbent upon the individual to produce a *Sefer Torah* of his own.

Astonishingly, the Torah has prescribed, in its final sequences, the basis of its own replication. By requiring both the public reenactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, as well as the production of a *Sefer Torah* by the individual Jew, the Torah has itself ensured its perpetuation from one generation to the next.

If DNA is the blueprint for the natural, biological universe, and Torah is the blueprint for the spiritual universe, how profoundly appropriate it assuredly is that both DNA and Torah have mandated their own self-replication.

II.

There are two distinct components to the perpetuation of the Torah: of course, at the most basic level, there is the production of Sifrei Torah themselves, to ensure the ongoing presence of Sifrei Torah in the Jewish community, which will be read from, and studied. This is particularly true for the view of Rosh, who assumes that this mitzvah encompasses other sifrei kodesh which should be used for study.

Yet, there is an additional element vital for the continuity of our heritage, namely, not merely the production of new Sifrei Torah, but the public re-acceptance of the Torah every seven years which is the very essence of the hakhel commandment. Without public re-acceptance of the Torah, surely, the newly produced Sifrei Torah will languish in disuse and neglect. And, conversely, if there are no Sifrei Torah being produced, even public re-acceptance of the Torah will not suffice to ensure that the actual content of Torah is being transmitted from one generation to the next.

Further, as noted by the Talmud, when it comes to the production of Sifrei Torah, it is insufficient for one who possesses a Sefer Torah, even in pristine condition, inherited from one's parents, to suffice with that scroll. On the contrary, one is obligated to produce one's very own Sefer Torah. This highlights the dimension of personal connection to Torah which this mitzvah encapsulates. The entire Jewish people experienced revelation at Sinai collectively; the mitzvah of ketivat Sefer Torah, by contrast, underscores the connection each individual must have with Torah.

Finally, as noted by Arukh Ha-Shulchan in his celebrated introduction to Choshen Mishpat, the mere fact that the Torah chooses to describe the composition of an entire Sefer Torah as a "shirah" underscores the harmony which is achieved when each and every individual makes their own personal contribution to the communal "*kol Torah*."

III.

It is striking that, in conjunction with the final mitzvah in the Torah, Moshe notes that this "song" will never be forgotten by the Jewish people, *ki lo tishachab mi'pi zaro*. As noted by Rashi, we have, in conjunction with this mitzvah, a promise that the Jewish people will never "entirely" forget the Torah, "she'lo tishtakach Torah...l'gamrei."

Rashi is alluding to a Talmudic dispute regarding the future relationship between the Jewish people and Torah. It is fascinating to note that Rashi appears to be aligning himself with the minority position of R. Shimon b. Yochai, which was issued as a rejoinder to the Chachamim who had gathered in Kerem B'Yavneh, and on the basis of a passage in Amos, had indeed concluded that Torah would be forgotten at some future date. R. Shimon b. Yochai reacts in almost apoplectic terms, “chas v’shalom she’lo tishtake’ach Torah mi’Yisrael,” noting that while there may be a diminution of Torah knowledge, and clarity of understanding, *halakha berurab u’mishnah berurab*, the specter of outright evisceration is beyond the pale.

R. Shimon b. Yochai’s minority view seems predicated on the notion that Torah is a “morasha”, and not a yerushah. One of the primary distinctions between these categories is that while the latter can be foolishly squandered, the former cannot be. As such, R. Shimon b. Yochai determined that even if there may be much left to be desired in a future generation, there could simply never be the utter loss of Torah.

This deeply held conviction seems to comport seamlessly with a comment R. Shimon b. Yochai made to his son upon leaving the cave for the second time. While R. Shimon had not yet reconciled himself to a world in which mundane activities had to be engaged after twelve years of uninterrupted immersion in Torah, the additional twelve months in the cave proved useful in this regard. If R. Eliezer, his son, still struggled to make sense of those who were engaged in what was surely chaye sha’ah, R. Shimon emerged, the second time around, with a different perspective.

As such, he reassured his son, the Torah learning that you and I engage in will sustain the world. Clearly, R. Shimon maintained that Torah study would be perpetuated in every generation, even if it was the province of a tiny minority.

IV.

If the two mitzvot in Parashat VaYelech are best understood as a diad meant to ensure the successful transmission of Torah between generations, another enigmatic dimension of the parshah comes into clearer focus.

Twice, once in conjunction with writing the Sefer Torah, and subsequently, in conjunction with placing it next to the Aron, Moshe appeals to the “bnei Levi ha’nosim et Aron berit Hashem,” the members of the tribe of Levi charged with carrying the Aron. While Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni compellingly argue that it is actually the Kohanim who are being addressed, as opposed to the Bnei Kehat who typically carried the Aron, it is striking that Moshe appeals to their role as those “who carry the Torah.”

And yet, if we understand the central motif of VaYelech to be one of transmitting the Torah, the description, particularly as it applies to the Kohanim who are charged with teaching Torah, could not be more apt. Moshe is conjuring the image of Torah being transported from place to place, and transmitted from one generation to the other. The role of the Kohanim in ensuring this transmission, particularly, as the Rebbe par excellence is prepared to exit the historical scene, is particularly consequential.

Indeed, much as the final two mitzvot in the Torah ensure a certain measure of its perpetuation, *ki lo tishachach mi'pi zaro*, the truth is that the Kohanim ensure another dimension. Their responsibility to teach Torah to each succeeding generation is the most robust guarantee that no matter how great the loss of Torah figures- and no one could be compared to Moshe in this regard- the enterprise of Torah study continues unabated.