

Write Your Own Torah: Inscription, Invention, Inclusion

by Jennifer Lewis

During the period between pesach and shavuot, we have been counting the 49 days of the omer. Today also represents the 74th day of social distancing, a period when we have been unmoored from our community gatherings and observances. Each of us has had to invent a Jewish life absent our familiar community rituals and routines. In what ways have each of us had to "write our own Torah"?

In this short talk, I consider three related topics for this unusual shavuot:

Why does it matter to write something down?

How have we responded during this period, individually and collectively, to the injunction to "write your own Torah"?

How might the directive to "write your own Torah" lead us to more inclusive institutions and values in our time?

#1) The act of writing

Exodus 24:3-4

(3) Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the LORD and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, "All the things that the LORD has commanded we will do!" (4) Moses then wrote down all the commands of the LORD.

שמות כ"ד:ג'-ד'

(ג) וַיִּבֹא מֹשֶׁה וַיְסַפֵּר לָעָם אֶת כָּל־דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה וְאֵת כָּל־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וַיַּעַן כָּל־הָעָם קוֹל אֶחָד וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה: (ד) וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁכַּח בַּבֶּקֶר וַיָּבִין מִזִּבְחַת תַּחַת הָהָר וּשְׂתֵימֵי

Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.

עֲשֶׂה מִצְוָה לְשָׁנִים עָשָׂר שְׁבַטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

1) Why is it important that Moses writes down the Torah? How would your understanding of Torah be different if it were entirely oral?

2) How does *writing* help us know, understand, remember, internalize, learn? See [this article](#) about how physically writing notes contributes to understanding.

2) Writing your own Torah

Deuteronomy 31:19

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

דברים ל"א:י"ט

(יט) וְעַתָּה כָּתְבוּ לָכֶם אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלַמָּדָה אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְרָהּ בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תְּהִיָּה־לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנְיֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Note the plural language in verse 19 above: כָּתְבוּ לָכֶם.

Although it refers to the poem at the end of the chapter, it is the basis for the idea that each person is commanded to write their own Torah. What does that mean?

Sanhedrin 21b:19

Rava said: Even if one's parents left him a Sefer Torah, yet it is a mitzvah to write one of

סנהדרין כ"א ב:בנ"ג

אמר (רבא) אף על פי שהניחו לו אבותיו

his own, as it is written: Now therefore write ye this song for you.

Mishneh Torah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and the Torah Scroll 7:1

(1) It is a positive commandment on every Jewish man to write a Torah scroll for himself as it says "Write for yourself this song", that is to say 'Write for yourself a Torah which has in it this song', because one does not write the Torah only in segments. Even if one's ancestors left him a Torah scroll, it is a mitzvah to write one for himself. If he wrote it by his own hand, it is as if he received it from Mount Sinai, and if he doesn't know how to write, others can write it for him. One who corrects a Torah scroll, even a single letter, it is as if he wrote all of it.

Sefer HaChinukh 613:1-2

For each person to write a Torah scroll for oneself - we have been commanded for each person in Israel to own a Torah scroll...

Among the roots of this mitzvah, it is because it is well-known among people that they do everything according to that which they find

לאדם ספר תורה מצוה לכתוב משלו
שנאמר (דברים לא, יט) ועתה כתבו לכם
את השירה

משנה תורה, הלכות תפילין ומזוזה וספר
תורה ז'א'

(א) מצות עשה על כל איש ואיש מישראל
לכתוב ספר תורה לעצמו שנאמר ועתה
כתבו לכם את השירה כלומר כתבו לכם
תורה שיש בה שירה זו לפי שאין כותבין
את התורה פרשיות פרשיות ואע"פ שהניחו
לו אבותיו ספר תורה מצוה לכתוב משלו
ואם כתבו בידו הרי הוא כאילו קבלה מהר
סיני ואם אינו יודע לכתוב אחרים כותבין לו
וכל המגיה ספר תורה ואפילו אות אחת
הרי הוא כאילו כתבו כולו.

ספר החינוך תרי"ג:א'-ב'

(א) לכתב כל אחד ספר תורה לעצמו -
שנצטוינו להיות לכל איש מישראל ספר
תורה...

משרשי המצוה, לפי שידוע בבני אדם

prepared for themselves, and therefore God commanded us, each and every one of the Children of Israel, to have a Torah scroll prepared and available to him, so that he can read it always and will not have to go looking for it at his friend's house.

שהם עושין כל דבריהם לפי ההכנה הנמצאת להם, ועל כן צונו ברוך הוא להיות לכל אחד ואחד מבני ישראל ספר תורה מוכן אצלו שיוכל לקרות בו תמיד ולא יצטרך ללכת אחריו לבית חברו.

Arbaah Turim 2:270:2

My master, my father, the Ro"sh, of blessed memory, wrote that this was written only for the earlier generations, who would write a Torah scroll and learn from it. But nowadays, when we write a Torah scroll and place it in the synagogue to read from it publicly, it is a positive mitzvah incumbent on all Jews who have the means to do so to write volumes of the Torah, and Mishnah, and Gemara, and their commentaries, and to read from them - him, and his sons. For the mitzvah of writing a Torah is in order to learn from it, as it says: (Deut. 31:19) "and teach it to the people of Israel, place it in their mouths."

ארבעה טורים ב'ע"ר:ב'

(ב) וכתב אדוני אבי הרא"ש ז"ל שזה לא נאמר אלא לדורות הראשונים שהיו כותבין ספר תורה ולומדים בה אבל האידנא שכותבין ספר תורה ומניחים אותו בבית הכנסת לקרות בהם ברבים מצות עשה על כל ישראל אשר ידו משגת לכתוב חמשה חומשי התורה ומשנה וגמרא ופירושיהם להגות בהן הוא ובניו כי מצות כתיבת התורה היא כדי ללמוד בה דכתיב (דברים לא: יט) ולמדה את בני ישראל שימה בפיהם

According to each of these sources, why is it so important that each person write down the Torah?

#3: "Writing Our Own Torah" and the Multiplicity of Voices

Arukh HaShulchan (R. Yechiel Mikhel Epstein, 1829-1908): Introduction to Choshen Mishpat

All of the arguments of the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, and the Geonim and Halakhic decisors, for one who understands them correctly - these are all the words of the Living God, and they all have a place in Jewish law. And on the contrary: This is the glory of our holy and pure Torah. The entire Torah is called a "song," and the beauty of a song is when the voices are all different, and this is the essence of the pleasantness...

ספר ערוך השולחן: הקדמה על חושן משפט

וכל מחלוקת התנאים והאמוראים, והגאונים והפוסקים באמת, למבין דבר לאשורו – דברי אלקים חיים המה, ולכולם יש פנים בהלכה. ואדרבה: זאת היא תפארת תורתנו הקדושה והטהורה. וכל התורה כולה נקראת "שירה", ותפארת השיר היא כשהקולות משונים זה מזה, וזהו עיקר הנעימות

According to R. Epstein, why is it important that everyone add their voice to the Torah conversation?

In her [May 15 article in the New York Times](#), Amanda Taub notes that countries with women leaders may have been especially successful in combating the corona virus because diversity of opinion might have been strategically advantageous in this crisis:

"Varied information sources, and leaders with the humility to listen to outside voices, are crucial for successful pandemic response, Devi Sridhar, the Chair of Global Health at the University of Edinburgh Medical School, wrote in an op-ed in the British Medical Journal. "The only way to avoid 'groupthink' and blind spots is to ensure representatives with diverse backgrounds and

expertise are at the table when major decisions are made,” she wrote.

Having a female leader is one signal that people of diverse backgrounds — and thus, hopefully, diverse perspectives on how to combat crises — are able to win seats at that table. In Germany, for instance, Ms. Merkel’s government considered a variety of different information sources in developing its coronavirus policy, including epidemiological models; data from medical providers; and evidence from South Korea’s successful program of testing and isolation. As a result, the country has achieved a coronavirus death rate that is dramatically lower than those of other Western European countries."

How might Taub's article be connected to R. Epstein's idea above? How might writing our own way in the last weeks contribute to our community diversity as we emerge from this time? How might we connect that to R. Shimshon Rafael Hirsch's text below?

“If I had the power, I would provisionally close all synagogues for a hundred years. Do not tremble at the thought of it, Jewish heart. What would happen? Jews and Jewesses without synagogues, desiring to remain such, would be forced to concentrate on a Jewish life and a Jewish home. The Jewish officials connected with the synagogue would have to look to the only opportunity now open to them to teach young and old how to live a Jewish life and how to build a Jewish home. All synagogues closed by Jewish hands would constitute the strongest protest against the abandonment of the Torah in home and life.” - Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (German Rabbi 1808-1888)

We have been forced to create our own Jewish lives in isolation from our community in the last 74 days, in the face of crushing loss all around us. There is no good that outweighs this. As we have all struggled to manage the death, the separation, and the threat of illness in our midst, we have had to reinvent our Jewish practice. From this period of deep despair, what have we invented and discovered in ourselves that we would bring forward when we emerge?

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