

## The Last Commandment in the Torah

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The first commandment in the Torah is *p'ru u'rvu*—be fruitful and multiply—and we have celebrated that commandment this morning with Ruby's naming.

But what is the last commandment in the Torah? Often it is identified with the last *parshiot* of the Torah, Vayelech, which we read this morning, and *Vezot HaBrachah*, Moses's last poem, and is understood to be the mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll.

Some of my rabbinic colleagues have taken this to heart and, on sabbatical or in retirement, studied the art of the scribe and written their own *claf*, parchment, for the mezuzah, or even in one case, the entire scroll of Esther. The actual writing of a Torah scroll is one way of fulfilling this commandment—but it may not be that accessible to those of us with terrible handwriting and less-than-wonderful hand/eye coordination.

Maimonides explains that we can also fulfill this mitzvah by contributing to another person's writing a Torah scroll, as we did about a decade ago when we commissioned a new Torah scroll to be written for our congregation, and many members took part in writing a letter. Also, Maimonides, perhaps in his role as scholar, credits those who proofread a scroll, a more technical exercise, as having fulfilled this mitzvah.

This ties into the book our book group is discussing tomorrow, the Aleppo Codex. It is thought that Maimonides had access to this very early and carefully written book of the Torah, with its vowels and trope marks from one of the most famous of the Masorites of the Geonic period, and that he used that to check the quality of other scrolls of the time. The story of that particular codex and its travels from Syria to Israel makes for fascinating reading.

In the Ashkenazi world in the period before printing, this mitzvah was explained as an incentive to create more scrolls, or books, in a world in which they were scarce. Everyone should have a scroll, the commentators explain, and if they have one from their father, still they should write a scroll, so that they can lend one to a neighbor who is too poor to have their own scroll. It would seem that there was a shortage of books even after the inventing of printing, as we know from the Eastern European custom of four students studying a page of Talmud, from the same book, one from each side, such that one student accommodated himself to reading Hebrew upside down.

But what about today? There is no shortage of books, and even if we don't have a text available there is Sefaria, an entire Jewish library available for free online. What is the meaning of this commandment for us?

In the commentaries on this commandment, we find the question, What is more important, to purchase a Torah scroll or to support Torah study? On this the rabbis speak with one voice, as in this responsum: Don't waste your money on a big party to celebrate a new Torah scroll, with uneaten extravagant food. It is better to support study, as the essence of this commandment is to preserve the

Torah from one generation to the next. Spend your money on education, both of scholars and of children.

The Hebrew word for *inscribe* can also mean to repeat or to teach, and thus it is *veshinantam levanechah*, and you shall instruct your children, that is the real significance of this commandment.

This understanding of the 613<sup>th</sup> commandment was interesting to me in relation to a 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar's creation, as it were, of a 614<sup>th</sup> commandment following the Holocaust. The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim famously declared that continuing Jewish life and denying Hitler a posthumous victory was the 614<sup>th</sup> law," referring to the 613 mitzvot given to the Jews in the Torah.

Putting Fackenheim's teaching in the context of the commandment to write a Torah scroll, with the understanding that this meant to continue Jewish learning, gives it a more life-affirming and positive tone.

Each of us can do something, by studying personally and by supporting education, to fulfill the 613<sup>th</sup> commandment, and by doing so we will support also the continuance of Jewish life, from one generation to the next.