

Parshat Vayelech 5780

At the end of his life, Moshe who (at Hashem's behest) had relayed to the Jewish people 612 Mitzvot is instructed to give them the 613th and final one:

"Now therefore write down for yourselves this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be my witness within the people of Israel". (Devarim. 31: 19)

According to the literal meaning of the passuk, Hashem is speaking to Moshe and Yehoshua and is referring to the song in the following chapter, *"Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; Hear, O earth, the words of My mouth."* Chazal, however, gave it a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write – or at least take some part in writing – a Sefer Torah,

The Gemorah in ([Sanhedrin 21b](#)) quotes the Amorah Rava: who 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: Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel."*

Ibn Ezra (1089-1167 Abraham ben Meir Ibn a distinguished Jewish biblical commentator), interpreted the phrase *"write down for yourselves"* as referring to every Jew not just Moshe and Yehoshua. Indeed Rambam (1135-1204) (Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah, 7:1) understood the following:

"Every Jew is commanded to write a Torah scroll for himself, as it says, "Now therefore write this song," meaning, "Write for yourselves [a complete copy of] the Torah that contains this song," since we do not write isolated passages of the Torah [. Even if one has inherited a Torah scroll from his parents, nonetheless it is a mitzvah to write one for oneself, and one who does so is as if he had received [the Torah] from Mount Sinai. One who does not know how to write a scroll may engage [a scribe] to do it for him, and whoever corrects even one letter is as if he has written a whole scroll"

The Rosh (Rav Asher ben Yechiel 1250 or 1259 – 1327 an eminent Rav and Talmudist best known for his comments on Talmudic law), took a different

approach to this mitzvah. In keeping with the customs at that time, Torah scrolls were (as they are today) kept in synagogues' arks, and were not used for studying. The Rosh argued that the commandment need not be understood literally, but instead could be applied to books that are written for individual Torah study. In the 16th century, Rabbi Joseph Caro (1488-1575, author of the [Shulchan Aruch](#)), wrote that he was surprised by the Rosh's conclusion. Surely he did not mean to exclude the writing of a Torah scroll, but he must have meant in addition to the writing of a scroll?

According to the 18th-century commentator, Rabbi Abraham Danzig (1748—1820 best known as the author of the works of Jewish law called "Chayei Adam" and "Chochmat Adam"), said that a Jew's obligation was to own, and not necessarily write, sacred books for studying. As printed books became more prevalent, the gap between the cost of writing a Torah scroll and printed Jewish sacred texts would only grow, and thus this mitzvah came to be understood as encouragement for studying Torah, as opposed to the more narrow understanding of writing one

Why this mitzvah and why at the end of Moshe's life? And why is it the last of all the mitzvot?

Rabbi Lord Sacks said *"The oral tradition is here hinting at a set of very deep ideas. First, it is telling the Israelites, and us in every generation, that it is not enough to say, "We received the Torah from Moses," or "from our parents." We have to take the Torah and make it new in every generation. We have to write our own scroll. The point about the Torah is not that it is old but that it is new; it is not just about the past but about the future. It is not simply some ancient document that comes from an earlier era in the evolution of society. It speaks to us, here, now – but not without our making the effort to write it again.*

"Hence the Torah ends with the last command – to keep writing and studying Torah. And this is epitomized in the beautiful custom, on Simchat Torah, to move immediately from reading the end of the Torah to reading the beginning. The last word in the Torah is Yisrael; the last letter is a lamed. The first word of the Torah is Bereishit; the first letter is beit. Lamed followed by beit spells lev, "heart." So long as the Jewish people never stop learning, the Jewish heart will never stop beating. "

