

Torah Talk - מאמרי תורה



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Parashot Nitzavim-Vayelech
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פרשת נצבים-וילך
כ"ה באלול תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 29:9-31:30

In these *parashot*, Moshe describes the *brit* (covenant) between Hashem and Bnei Yisrael (the Israelites), urging Bnei Yisrael to uphold the *brit* and honor the Torah so that they may be rewarded with life in the land of Yisrael. He concludes his speech to Bnei Yisrael, blesses Yehoshua, and instructs the community to gather every seven years to read publicly from the Torah. Hashem predicts the eventual straying of Bnei Yisrael.

The second-to-last *mitzvah* in the Torah appears in *parashat Vayelech* and reads as follows (31:9-13):

ט ויכתב משה, את-התורה הזאת, וייתנה אל-הכהנים בני לוי, הנשאים את-
ארון ברית ה'; ואל-כל-זקני ישראל. י ויצו משה, אותם לאמר: מקץ שבע
שנים, במעד שנת השמטה--בחג הסוכות. יא בבוא כל-ישראל, לראות את-
בני ה' אלהיך, במקום, אשר יבחר: תקרא את-התורה הזאת, נגד כל-
ישראל--באזניהם. יב הקהל את-העם, האנשים והנשים והטף, וגרך, אשר
בשעריך--למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו, ויראו את-ה' אלהיכם, ושמרו לעשות,
את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת. יג ובניהם אשר לא-ידעו, ישמעו ולמדו--
ליראה, את-ה' אלהיכם: כל-הימים, אשר אתם חיים על-האדמה, אשר
אתם עברים את-הירדן שמה, לרשתה.

9 And Moshe wrote this Torah, and delivered it to the *kohanim* the sons of Levi, that bore the ark of the covenant of Hashem, and to all the elders of Yisrael. **10** And Moshe commanded them, saying: 'At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles[Sukkot], **11** when all Yisrael has come to appear before Hashem your God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this

Torah before all Yisrael in their hearing. **12** Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and revere Hashem your God, and observe to do all the words of this Torah; **13** and that their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn to revere Hashem your God, as long as you live in the land where you go over the Jordan to possess it.'

Many interesting traditions surround the modern-day use of a *Sefer Torah*, a Torah scroll. We rise upon the opening of the ark in synagogue, remain standing while the Torah is “standing,” and sit only when the Torah has rested in its place on or around the *bimah*, the dais or pulpit. In addition, there is a tradition, developed in the 15th century, to fast for 40 days (during daylight hours only) should a Torah fall and hit the floor. The first inanimate object that one saves from a burning building is supposed to be a Torah scroll.

Why all of this veneration for a physical object when we know that we Jews worship only the Ineffable One and never any corporeal manifestations of the Divine, or of anything else for that matter?

What we are venerating is not the scroll itself, but the ideas contained in the scroll that make the Torah scroll intrinsically holy. In fact, the writing in the Torah scroll is considered so holy that one is not supposed to touch the parchment of the Torah with bare hands, although we clearly manipulate the *atzei chaim*, the wooden poles on the bottom and top of the Torah. You may have seen in your synagogue that when the parchment needs to be adjusted, for example, while rolling up the Torah, people will use their *tallitot* as a barrier in order to not touch the parchment with their hands.

We are a people who venerate ideas and revere those who are behind these ideas. Mohammed was the first person to refer to Jews as “the people of the book.” Even in the 7th Century CE, he recognized that we are a religion of morals and ethics which had been transmitted from generation to generation and continue to be taught throughout the ages.

This is why the *mitzvah* above is to “assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear,

and that they may learn...” It’s not enough to write or to own a physical Torah. Rather that Torah must be taught, transmitted, and heard, decade after decade, generation after generation, so that we can assure the continuity of Jewish values and mores and share those values with the world at large, being a “light unto the nations.”

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How does us standing when the Torah is standing show respect for the ideas in the Torah?
- Plato said that only Forms or Ideas are perfect; that once they take on a physical structure, they no longer are. For example, the Form [Idea] of a chair is perfect, but no actual chair is. What is your reaction to this statement?
- Imagine being at *hakhel*, the assembly once every seven years when all of the Jews together heard the Torah being read in Yerushalayim. What might that experience have felt like?