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ONE PEOPLE - ONE HEART

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ROSH CHODESH ADAR - FEBRUARY 24 2009

At 12:00 pm EST, there will be a live Internet broadcast of a Hachnasat Sefer Torah taking place at Yeshivat Mercaz Ha'Rav on the one-year yartzeit of the massacre. Students and communities will unite as they watch this event together with Jews around the world. The 45-minute broadcast will include the end of the Hachnasot Sifrei Torah, inspiring speeches, and the conclusion of the worldwide siyum. The broadcast will be available replay to communities anytime later that evening.

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“A WALKING SEFER TORAH”

B'LEV ECHAD WORLDWIDE HACHNASAT SEFER TORAH

FEBRUARY 24 2009 - ROSH CHODESH ADAR 5769

Center for Jewish Leadership and Learning
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A Community Partnership with Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

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A Walking Sefer Torah

Introduction

Today we will witness the dedication of eight Torah scrolls in memory of the eight students of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav and Yeshivat Yerushalayim LaTze'irim who were killed by a terrorist last year. A Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) embodies holiness and we relate to it as a holy object. We stand up in its presence, we kiss it when it passes us and we provide a proper way to escort the Sefer Torah as it moves from place to place. Additionally, we protect it from acts that are not befitting of a holy object: we store it in an upright position, we make sure that it is never placed on the floor and when the Torah is no longer usable, we provide it with a proper burial.

Questions for thought:

- What if you were told that each Jewish person represents a walking Sefer Torah?
 - Would that change the way you relate to yourself? How so?
 - Would that change the way you relate to others? How so?
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In this study guide, we will explore the notion that each and every Jew represents a walking Sefer Torah. This idea, which is apparent in a number of Talmudic statements, was developed by a number of commentators. We will present some of these ideas and provide a way of discussing how these ideas apply to you.

The Talmudic Sources

The most explicit source comparing a Jew to a Sefer Torah is found in two places in the Talmud in a statement by R. Shimon ben Elazar. In the midst of a discussion about when one tears one's garments over death or other tragic events, the Talmud states:

R. Shimon ben Elazar states: If someone is present when a person dies, he is obligated to tear (his garments). What is this similar to? It is similar to a Sefer Torah that tore, where there is (also) an obligation to tear (one's garments).

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר העומד על המת בשעת יציאת נשמה חייב לקרוע למה זה דומה לספר תורה שנשרף שחייב לקרוע.
- Mo'ed Katan 25a

The Talmud clearly compares the loss of an individual to the tearing of a Sefer Torah.¹ The commentators offer a number of explanations as to why a person is comparable to a Sefer Torah. The most poignant explanation is offered by Ramban (Nachmanides 1194-1270) who states:

It seems to me that the soul in the body is like the names of G-d (written) on the parchment. It is merely a parable to convey the message that it is a great loss and cause for alarm and a person must tear his garments as if a Sefer Torah was burned before him.

ולי נראה שהנפש בגוף כאזכרות בגילין, ומשל בעלמא הוא לומר שהוא הפסד גדול וחרדה רבה וחייב אדם לקרוע עליה כאילו נשרף ס"ת לפניו.
- Ramban, Mo'ed Katan 25a

All parts of a Sefer Torah are holy. Yet, it is the names of G-d that are written in the Sefer Torah that infuse the entire Sefer Torah with its holiness.² If we follow the analogy, the entire body is holy and should be treated with holiness. The body is infused with holiness when the soul enters the body.

Questions for thought:

- How do you view the relationship between the body and the soul?
 - Are they two conflicting components of our being or can they work together?
 - How does Ramban's comment shed light on this question?
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¹ Regarding the practice of tearing one's garments upon witnessing a death, see Gesher HaChaim 4:9.

² Ramban seems to be consistent with his own opinion in *Milchamot HaShem, Sukkah* 4b, that the parchment of the Sefer Torah only receives its holiness from the letters that are written on it. His comments in *Milchamot HaShem* imply that even if the name of G-d is not written on the parchment, but there are eighty-five letters of the Torah text on the parchment, the parchment is infused with holiness.

There is a story recorded in the Talmud about how the Romans killed R. Chanina ben Tradyon that supports Ramban's analogy:

They found R. Chanina ben Tradyon who was sitting and learning Torah and gathering crowds publicly, and there was a Sefer Torah in his arms. They took him and wrapped him in the Sefer Torah, surrounded him with branches and lit the branches. They brought sponges of cotton, soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that he would not die quickly. His daughter said "Father, this is how I should see you?" He said to her "If they only burned me, it would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned with a Sefer Torah, He Who will seek retribution for the desecration of the Sefer Torah will also seek retribution for my desecration." His students asked him "Rebbi, what do you see?" He said to them "The parchments are being burned, but the letters are flying away."

מצאוהו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ומקהיל קהלות ברבים וס"ת מונח לו בחיקו הביאוהו וכרכוהו בס"ת והקיפוהו בחבילי זמורות והציתו בהן את האור והביאו ספוגין של צמר ושראום במים והניחום על לבו כדי שלא תצא נשמתו מהרה אמרה לו בתו אבא אראך בכך אמר לה אילמלי אני נשרפתי לבדי היה הדבר קשה לי עכשיו שאני נשרף וס"ת עמי מי שמבקש עלבונה של ס"ת הוא יבקש עלבוני אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מה אתה רואה אמר להן גליין נשרפין ואותיות פורחות.

- Avodah Zarah 18a

Questions for thought:

- What did R. Chanina ben Tradyon mean when he said "the parchments are being burned but the letters are flying away"?
- How does his statement relate to Ramban's analogy?
- How does his statement relate to the death of an individual?

There are many other allusions in the rabbinic sources comparing a Jew to a Sefer Torah. In the next few sections, we will explore some of those comparisons and what we can learn from them.

Relating to Ourselves as Sifrei Torah

Viewing ourselves as representations of Sifrei Torah bears a certain responsibility. R. Yechezkel Levenstein (1895-1974) notes that we must treat our minds as if they are Sifrei Torah:

As much as we must guard our mind, we must sanctify it with the holiness of a Sefer Torah since the mind is truly like an actual Sefer Torah ... If a person uses his mind for nonsense it is similar to throwing a Sefer Torah into the street. The mind is holy and it must be dedicated to the purpose for which it was created- to understand and internalize the Torah and the mitzvot and to lead a person to a purposeful life and to everlasting and eternal happiness.

ועד כמה שצריך לשמור על השכל, חייבים לקדש אותו כקדושת ספר תורה, כיון שהשכל באמת כספר תורה ממש ... ואם האדם משתמש בשכלו לדבר הבאי דומה הוא לזורק ספר תורה לרחוב, השכל קדוש הוא וחייב להיות מקודש למטרה שלשמו נברא, להבין ולהשכיל בתורה ומצוות ולהוביל את האדם למטרת חייו ואושרו הקיים והנצחי. (קובץ שיחות)

- Collection of Talks of R. Yechezkel Levenstein
(as recorded in Chochmat HaMatzpun, Vol. 16, p 303)

There are a number of components included in using our seichel (mind) properly. First, there is the intellectual component. G-d gave humans the intellectual capacity to understand, analyze, reason, imagine, and solve problems. We are expected to do our part and use our intellect in a way that we represent a Sefer Torah. Each individual person may have a different way of achieving that goal.

Question: What can you personally do to achieve that goal?

Second, there is a behavioral component. G-d gave us the ability to choose between right and wrong, between good and evil. The verse states:

I have summoned heaven and earth as witnesses that I have placed life and death, blessing and curse before you. You shall choose life in order that you and your offspring shall live.

העדתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ החיים
והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים
למען תחיה אתה וזרעך.
- Devarim 30:19

We are expected to make choices that reflect our status as walking Sifrei Torah. This is not limited to choosing to perform mitzvot. It also includes choices to improve our character traits. We all have our own challenges that we need to work on.

Question: How does envisioning yourself as a walking Sefer Torah help deal with those challenges?

Imbuing Ourselves with Holiness

Rabbi Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) notes that a Sefer Torah does not acquire its holiness automatically.³ The sofer (scribe) who prepares the Sefer Torah must imbue the Torah with holiness. In applying our analogy to a person, we are left with the following paradox: If a person is compared to a Sefer Torah, he must imbue himself with holiness. However, if he is not already imbued with holiness, how can he impart holiness onto himself? Where does the holiness come from?

What do you think?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that each person is born with a certain internal holiness. Each person has a responsibility to transfer that holiness so that it is apparent externally.

³ R. Soloveitchik developed this idea in a lecture that was originally given on Shevat 3, 5719 in Yiddish. The Yiddish notes were compiled by Dr. Hillel Zeidman and was translated to Hebrew by R. Shalom Carmi. The article appears in *Beit Yosef Sha'ul* Vol. IV (1994).

Rabbi Soloveitchik comments that this idea appears in the laws of writing a Sefer Torah:

The sofer must have another Sefer Torah (or its text) in front of him to copy from for it is forbidden to write a single letter by heart and he must recite each word orally before writing.

צריך שיהיה לפניו ספר אחר שיעתיק ממנו שאסור לכתוב אות אחת שלא מן הכתב וצריך שיקרא כל תיבה בפיו קודם שיתבנה.
- Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 274:2

When the sofer recites the words that he is writing, it symbolizes the transference of holiness from the internal to the external.

Questions for thought:

- What do you think it means to transfer the holiness?
- How does this relate to maximizing our potential?
- What areas in your life have inherent holiness waiting to be transferred?

The Letters of the Torah

A number of Kabbalistic and Chasidic sources present a variation to the idea that a person is a walking Sefer Torah. According to this variation, the Jewish people as a whole are representative of a Sefer Torah with each person comprising one letter. The acronym used to express this is **יש ששים ריבוא אותיות לתורה = ישראל** (Israel= There are 600,000 letters in the Torah). The number 600,000 is the number that represents the entire Jewish people. The Jewish People as a whole is compared to a Torah which also has 600,000 letters.⁴

Question: What is the significance of representing a single letter in a Sefer Torah, both as an individual and as part of a collective whole?

The Radomsker Rebbe (R. Shlomo Chanoch HaKohen Rabinowitz, 1801-1866) suggests that one of the messages that we can derive from this idea is how we treat our fellow Jew. His suggestion is based on the concept of *mukaf g'vil*, the concept that dictates that every letter of the Sefer Torah must be surrounded by parchment on all sides. Therefore, if two letters touch each other, the entire Sefer Torah is invalid.⁵

The Radomsker Rebbe writes:

⁴ In reality, there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. There are also many more than 600,000 Jews. See R. Moshe Sofer, *Chatam Sofer*, page 72b of his *Commentary to Masechet Chullin*, who deals with this question.

⁵ Menachot 34a.

Every Sefer Torah has 600,000 letters which corresponds to the 600,000 souls of the Jewish people that stood on Har Sinai ... In each generation, the root of the souls that accepted the Torah at Har Sinai are still apparent. From this we learn an important lesson that each person must guard himself from inappropriately encroaching on one's friend regarding his business and he should not be jealous if he sees his friend with something he doesn't have. (The reason for this is) that just as regarding a Sefer Torah, the Torah is invalid if two letters touch each other because of the mukaf g'vil concept, so too every Jew must guard himself from encroaching on anyone else, for if not, his portion in the Torah is invalid.

כי כל הס"ת שיש בה ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה הם משורש ששים רבוא נשמות בני"י שעמדו על הר סיני ומהם נעשה התורה כמש"כ הקדמוני' ישראל ר"ת י"ש ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה" ... וכן כל הדורות יש בהם שורש הנשמות שקבלו אז התורה במעמד הר סיני. ומזה יוצא מוסר השכל שצריך כל אדם לשמור א"ע לבל יהיה בו שום צד נגיעה והשגת גבול בחבירו בעסק פרנסתו ולא יתקנא בו אם יראה אצלו מעלה יתירה ממנו. כי כמו בס"ת אם יש בה נגיעה היא פסולה כי צריך להיות מוקף גויל כן כאו"א מבני"י צריך לשמור מכל צד נגיעה כי אם לא כן נפסל חלק שורש נשמתו באותיות התורה.

- Tiferet Shlomo, Shavuot, pg. 141a

Question for thought:

- The Radomsker Rebbe provides two examples of how we should not encroach on others. What modern-day examples can you give where people encroach on others?

R. Tzadok HaKohen (1823-1900) also addresses this idea and explains how this idea is significant both on an individual level and for the Jewish people as a whole:

But the merit of Torah (study) does not come to (fruition the same way as) prayer does with an increase of influence. Rather, its merit increases automatically through Torah study for it is the root of potential abundance for all Jewish souls, for it is known that their root is in Torah because there are 600,000 letters representing the 600,000 souls. While each letter is different from the rest, and each person has his own portion in Torah, nevertheless, his portion does not limit him (to other areas of Torah) ... and learning Torah serves to unite all portions of Torah.

אבל זכות התורה אינו בא בתפלה על רבוי ההשפעה רק שהיא ממילא מתרבית ע"י התורה ששם הוא שורש קבלת השפע של כל הנפשות מישראל. דידוע דשרשם בתורה דס' רבוא אותיות נגד ס' רבוא נפשות כנודע. והגם דמ"מ אין כל אות דומה לחבירו וכל א' יש לו חלק ידוע בתורה מ"מ מצד חלקו אין לו גבול לומר שדבר זה נמנע כלל. כי כל חלק עצמו כשמגיע לעיקר שרשו ודביקותו בכל הרי מתדמה לכל שאין לו גבול כלל וע"י התורה הוא התאחדות החלק בכל.

- Resisei Leilah no. 43

R. Tzadok expresses two aspects of this idea. First, each person has his own portion in Torah. Each person has his own insights in Torah that nobody else will discover. Whether it is a question that has not yet been asked, a new way of understanding an idea, or a different way of organizing information, each person has the ability to discover his own personal portion of Torah. Second, the Torah serves to unify the Jewish people. Each person represents one part of a whole. Each person's share in Torah is available to everyone else.

Acceptance of Torah through Unity

The siyum that we are all about to participate in is a testament to R. Tzadok's idea that Torah is a unifying force. People from all over the world, of all ages and all walks of life got together to learn a portion of Torah. Together, we learned the entire Torah. In a way it is very similar to R. Tzadok's model of each person discovering his portion in Torah in a way that unifies the entire Jewish people.

The name of the B'lev Echad program is based on a comment of Rashi. Rashi notes that when the Jewish people accepted the Torah they stood at Har Sinai "*k'ish echad b'lev echad*," like one person with one heart. They put all differences aside in order to accept the Torah as one unified people. In order for us to fully engage in Torah, we must also put aside our differences and accept the Torah like one person with one heart. We must combine all of the letters of the walking Sifrei Torah to complete the Sefer Torah that represents the entire Jewish people.

As we participate in this amazing Sefer Torah dedication, we should keep in mind the lessons we learn from the Sefer Torah. We should constantly remember that we represent a walking Sefer Torah, both as individuals and as members of the Jewish people.