

## Scribing a New Torah: Source of Strength and Inspiration

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This is not what we expected. We are not where we expected we would be at this time. In Hebrew, the word “expect” comes from the root letters: *tzapah*. These same letters are used to form the Hebrew word *mitzpeh* – a “look out point.” Weeks ago, we looked out over the landscape of time and fully anticipated that, by now, we would most certainly be back together again...that life would be returning to a more familiar normal....that we would be celebrating these Holy Days in the fullest sense of the word.

And yet, we know that while we may not be where we thought we would be, it is important to acknowledge that we are not where we once were.

A number of us, thankfully, are able to be here in our Sanctuary.

And, blessedly, our newly developed comfort with technology has made it easy for us to be together virtually as well.

Remarkably, due to the heroic efforts of scientists around the world, we now have an effective vaccine for Covid.

And, it is anticipated that, in the weeks ahead --- though, admittedly not soon enough --- a vaccine will be available for our youngest children as well.

Carefully, many of us are gathering with family and friends....are grateful to have our kids in school.....and are emerging slowly into an albeit uncertain world.

Viewed through the lens of the Torah’s central metaphor: journey – our path is not dissimilar from that legendarily experienced by the Children of Israel as described following the Exodus. Freed from Egyptian servitude, the Israelites had, at long last experienced their redemption. At that moment, we can well imagine, that the people were filled with joy. Newly confident with the knowledge that God was on their side, the Israelites understandably anticipated a future of limitless possibility. Yet, no sooner had this people taken their first sweet steps of freedom, we read in the text that:

*VaYaseiv Elohim et ha’am derecho ha’midbar, Yam Suf.*

“And so the people were made to journey in a roundabout way, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.”

Frustratingly, for the people, there would be no straight path to Promise. It’s a lesson that is all too familiar.

In the text, recognizing the challenging circumstance, God reached out to the Children of Israel to offer guidance and support. After seven weeks of wandering, the people reached Mount Sinai and God presented them with the Torah. In some respects, it is counterintuitive that the Torah was given at this point in the journey of the Israelites. God surely knew that it would take the people forty years to reach the Promised Land. Why give them the Torah now? Why not just wait until they entered the land and then give them the commandments that would mark their new beginning as a people? The reason, our rabbis tell us, is that the Torah is more than simply a menu of mitzvot.

Throughout the ages, Torah has been understood to be many things: It is, for example, an *Eitz Chayim* – a Tree of Life. As well, we are taught that it is the *Ketubah* – the marriage contract that united the Children of Israel and God in a relationship of love. For the mystics, the Torah was the blueprint used by God when creating the world. It exists – they said – as ‘black fire written upon white fire’ --- a force of

such transcendent power that it was capable of shaping creation itself.

No wonder, then, that as the Israelites faced an uncertain future - one whose path was certain to be filled with unexpected turns – with both progression and regression - God chose to ground them with the strength of Torah.

It is with this in mind, as we step into this time of Covid transition and a year of our own ‘circuitous wandering,’ that we too, as a Beth Shalom community embrace Torah in a new way. As you may have already heard, joyfully, we have engaged an outstanding Soferet – a Torah scribe, Ariela Housman - who will create a brand new Torah for our congregation.

This project is historic on a number of levels. First, in the life of our own congregation, we have never before commissioned a scroll to be written. There is tremendous excitement in that. And while, a number of communities have penned a full Torah, at any one time, there are only a handful of congregations doing so. Our choice of a scribe is also noteworthy. Ariela is proudly one of the few female scribes of Jewish sacred text in the world. This intentional decision on the part of our community is our way of leaning into the value of equity and of elevating the voices and work of women. A native of the Boston area, but currently living in Chicago, Ariela will be with us several times – both in-person and online - during the life of our project. When she is with us, she will teach, meet with all ages – from our children to our sages - and enable us all to be ‘front-and-center’ as we follow along with her parasha progress. In a word, during the coming year, Ariela will become part of our TBS family. And, we are thrilled to have her!

It will take about fifteen months for the entire Torah to be written. We will begin this journey together, appropriately, soon after the holiday of Simchat Torah, just as we start the annual reading cycle of Torah. And, we anticipate that the Torah will be completed, also fittingly, at Chanukah – Judaism’s holiday of “dedication” - in mid-December 2022.

We have called our ceremony of starting: *Simchat Beresheet* – literally, a “Celebration of Beginning.” It will take place on Sunday afternoon, October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Now, in fulfillment of the commandment: “Know thy congregation” – I will immediately respond to the question that just popped into the mind of every Patriots fan in here.....and ‘out there’: Tom Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers play the Pats in the Sunday night game on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. Both at-home tailgating and Torah will be possible that day! Our celebration of Torah – which will be held here at TBS - will feature festive music, special ritual, our first visit by Ariela, and our witnessing her ceremonially penning the very first word in the Torah: “*Beresheet*.” Our ritual will, of course, be livestreamed for all to see.

Guiding our Torah crafting efforts will be an exceptional leadership team of Rachel Happel – TBS Senior Director of Learning and Engagement, Wendy Gutterson – our Board’s Executive Vice President, and Bernice Sue Behar – who is a distinguished past president of our community. As our TBS Sefer Torah Project gets underway, I wish to express my own heartfelt thanks to them for all that they have already done to prepare us for this journey and for all that is yet to come. Not surprisingly, we anticipate that many other TBS members, lay leaders, and professional staff will also be stepping forward to help lead the way.

Importantly, there will also be an opportunity for all of you to participate in the writing of our new Torah. During the coming year-plus, there will be dozens of times when you - either individually or together with members of your family – will be able to physically be part of the writing of letters or words in our new Torah scroll. In this way, you are all invited to participate in actually crafting our congregation’s new text.

Each opportunity will involve personal time with Ariela as she does her work. After placing a tallit upon your shoulders – should you choose to wear one – and reciting a special blessing, Ariela will pen the next letter in our scroll. She will then share with you and those who may be with you where she is in her scribing and some background information about the art of Torah writing. As Rachel, Wendy, and Bernice Sue shared in their vision statement for this project, “we want as many hands and hearts from our community involved as possible.”

According to rabbinic tradition, to participate in the writing of a Torah scroll is to fulfill the 613<sup>th</sup> mitzvah - the very last commandment in the Torah. Specifically, the mitzvah is that every Jewish individual is – in their lifetime – supposed to write an entire Torah. The command is found towards the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, where we read:

*V'Atah Kitvu lachem et ha'shirah ha'zot v'lam'dah et b'nei Yisrael.*

“And now, write for yourselves this song” – in other words, the Torah – “and teach it to the Children of Israel.”

Now, our rabbis were well aware that it is well-beyond the capacity of most people – let alone of every person – to inscribe their own Torah. And so, to provide assistance, our Sages turned to a particular requirement related to a Torah's usage. In the Talmud, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Babylonian Sage by the name of Rav Sheshet taught that whoever corrects or enables the writing of one letter in a Sefer Torah, it is considered as though that person had written the entire scroll.” The reason behind this – our rabbis explain - is that there is a Torah injunction that states that if even a single letter in the Torah is illegible, then the entire scroll is considered to be *pasul* – or not Kosher for ritual use. Therefore, by extension, the rabbis reasoned, that if a person corrects or participates in the fashioning of a single letter – because that letter is essential to the entire scroll's status of acceptability – that person, then, is given credit for having written the full scroll. Most certainly, when it came to facilitating the performance of a mitzvah, one could say that the rabbis were creative.

As I shared earlier, the Torah is known for being *Torat Chayim* a source of life and strength for all who embrace it. This most certainly comes through in the sacred narratives of Genesis through Deuteronomy. Interestingly, though, this also comes through in some of the lesser known physical elements that a *sofer* or *soferet* must consider when writing a Torah text. Indeed, it is inspiring to note how many of the regulations regarding how a Torah is written are complemented by a powerful teaching of Jewish ethics and ideals.

There is a story in the Talmud that recalls how, over 2,000 years ago, in the early centuries BCE, a synagogue in Alexandria, Egypt used a Torah which had God's name repeatedly written in gold. When the Sages learned of this, rather than being pleased that God's name had been adorned in this way, they declared that it was improper for gold to be used not only in God's name, but in the writing of any letter in the Torah. Their reasoning was that not only did the gold call to mind the sin of the Golden Calf, but also that the precious material did not appropriately reflect the values of simplicity and humility emphasized by the Torah and Jewish life.

In another example of how Torah's form speaks to Jewish values, there is a rabbinical understanding that that there are 600,000 letters in a Torah scroll. (The truth is that there are actually far fewer letters in the Torah --- 304,805 to be exact.) The number 600,000 is important in Judaism because, traditionally this is said to have been the number of Israelites that left Egypt. Symbolically, therefore, this has become the number used to describe the entirety of the Jewish community. The ethical teaching brought forward here is that, if the illegibility of a single letter out of 600,000 in the Torah makes an entire scroll not Kosher.....then – continuing the analogy – this means that if a single soul in the Jewish community is in pain.....is diminished.....is broken.....then it is said that the entire community is affected – and must

therefore respond.

One fascinating final example of a Torah structural requirement that points beyond itself and highlights a Jewish ideal is related to a rule regarding the maximum length of a single line of Torah text. According to one authority, a line may not have more than thirty letters. This number was chosen because it equals three times the number of letters in, what according to early Biblical manuscripts is the longest word in the Torah. In the Book of Genesis – towards the end of the story of Noah – one will find the word: *L'Mishp'cho'tei'hem*. Those familiar with Hebrew will immediately hear in this the root-word: *Mish'pachah*.....“family.” Its choice as a guide for how lines of the Torah are to be structured speaks volumes of how Judaism focuses on the importance of the family to help structure a community. As well, it is hard not to hear in the rule regarding the three-time repetition of the word family an allusion to *l'dor va'dor* – “from generation to generation.”

During the coming year, in our working together to write our new Torah scroll, we will explore many more of the numerous physical elements that make up a Torah's creation – as well as the meanings behind them. Also, we will thoughtfully consider the history of the Torah, its origins and development as a sacred text, and, most certainly, the wisdom taught through the narrative itself.

There is still one final Torah image that we are called to reflect upon on this Rosh Hashanah morning. It is the image of each of us scribing our own Torah – our own sacred story - through the ways that we live. The 11<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda powerfully alluded to this when he reminded us that “days are scrolls and that we should write upon them only that which we want to be remembered.”

During this season of seasons, not only is our hope to be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life, but also that we will inscribe blessing for ourselves as we pen our own life's next chapter. Rosh Hashanah, appropriately, places before each of us a fresh page of parchment.

May we be inspired in our writing.

May our community's Sefer Torah Project kindle amongst us a spirit of creativity, renewal, and hope. And may the day come soon, when the Torah's most radiant vision of Promise will be fulfilled – the building of an *Olam Chesed* – a world of love for ourselves and for all peoples everywhere.

Amen.