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Finding Your Voice in the Song of Torah

The sounds of Shabbat morning prayers echo through two distant synagogues. In one, a Moroccan congregation sways to the rise and fall of the cantor's ancient North African melodies, responding with traditional calls of encouragement. In another, Chassidim with black coats and long side-locks rock vigorously, led by their holy Rebbe.

The customs, the dress, the very atmosphere – everything seems worlds apart. Yet in both sanctuaries, they read from a Torah scroll that is letter-for-letter identical to its counterpart across the world. This remarkable paradox – perfect

textual uniformity across 3,500 years alongside vibrant diversity in its expression – hints at a profound truth contained in the Torah's final mitzvah.

The Final Commandment of the Torah

In this week's Torah portion, God commands: "Write for yourselves this song and teach it to the children of Israel" (Deuteronomy 31:19). Our Sages teach that this verse comprises the 613th mitzvah: every Jew must write his own Torah scroll.¹ This interpretation leaves us with a number of questions:

- Why does God call Torah a song?
- Why must each person write their own scroll?
- Why is this His final commandment?

The answers to these puzzling questions lie in understanding Torah's most fundamental characteristic.

The Harmony of Uniqueness

In his landmark work on Jewish law², Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein explains that God likens Torah to a song because both achieve their fullest expression through harmony. In a harmony, distinct voices coalesce into a flowing fullness of sound. If any voice is missing, the song loses dimension and depth. The more variety, the more beauty.

This explanation challenges our assumptions. The Torah's text and laws remain completely uniform! Wouldn't an unchanging text demand conformity, with everyone thinking and serving God identically?

The Zohar teaches that, at the Revelation at Mount Sinai, God presented a unique facet of Torah to all six hundred thousand souls present. This revelation affected not just those physically present, but the souls of all Jews throughout time.³ Each soul got a portion in Torah completely unique to him—one that only he can bring out into the world.⁴

Through years of study, I've experienced this firsthand. As my understanding deepens, I find myself uncovering subtle nuances and fresh perspectives that add new dimensions to familiar texts. Each insight feels like illuminating another facet of an already brilliant diamond, revealing more of God's light into the world. This weekly series of essays represents my own journey of discovering and sharing my portion in Torah - a collection of insights that, God willing, will inspire others to reach new insights of their own.

But these personal discoveries point to something far deeper. The Zohar teaches, "God looked into the Torah and created the world. Man looks into Torah and sustains the world."⁵ Torah isn't merely a book of laws and lessons, or even just a means to connect with God – it both forms and sustains the very fabric of existence. When we actualize our unique portion in Torah through learning, teaching, and living it, we become co-creators in existence itself.

This gives new meaning to our daily prayer, "Give us our portion in Your Torah - וְתֵן חֵלקֵנוּ בְּתוֹרַתְךָ" We ask not just for understanding, but for the power to become a co-creator in God's universe. Just as a Torah scroll becomes invalid without any letter, the world remains incomplete without each person's distinctive expression of Torah.

Writing Your Way to Revelation

Perhaps the greatest symbolic act of acquiring your portion in Torah comes from fulfilling the very mitzvah we've been exploring—writing a Sefer Torah, a Torah scroll. The Ktav Sofer,⁶ along with the Sefer HaChinuch,⁷ explain that writing our own scroll, rather than relying on inheritance, represents our commitment to forge a personal relationship with God and His Torah.

Writing a Torah scroll serves as the perfect culmination of all 613 mitzvot because it encapsulates Torah's ultimate purpose: providing an unchanging foundation through which each person discovers and expresses their unique spiritual identity. The scroll remains constant letter by letter, yet becomes new again through each person who engages with it, writes it, lives it, and shares their distinctive understanding with others.

To bring this idea home, the Talmud⁸ states that one who writes a Torah scroll is as if he received it at Mount Sinai. Just as each soul at Sinai received its unique portion in Torah, through writing our personal Torah scroll, we recreate our direct revelation. We don't just copy words – we

claim our spiritual inheritance and manifest our distinctive role in Torah's eternal symphony.⁹

Discovering Your Portion

While we can fulfill the mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll by commissioning a scribe, writing a single letter, or buying Torah books, we must also pursue our most elevated mission: discovering our personal portion in Torah. This journey begins with learning Torah deeply, engaging with its unchanging text and timeless principles. Through this process, we gradually uncover our unique portion—that special understanding only we can contribute. Finally, as the verse concludes, we must "teach it to the children of Israel," enriching the collective harmony with our individual voice.

I'd like to offer a few practical ideas to begin uncovering your unique portion in Torah:

- Keep a notebook to capture Torah ideas that spark your interest.
- Track the topics and questions that naturally draw your attention.
- Explore connections between different areas of Torah and other wisdom.
- Research areas of Torah that resonate with you most deeply. The wealth of online lectures from great Rabbis and Rebbetzins provides endless opportunities for learning. (Please reach out if you'd like suggestions!)
- Share one insight each week with someone in your life.

The Eternal Symphony

Like a grand symphony where each instrument plays its unique part while contributing to a

harmonious whole, Torah enables us to express our individuality while remaining rooted in sacred tradition. The text never changes, but its music constantly evolves through the unique harmony of every Jew in every generation.

May we all be blessed to find our unique portion in Torah, partnering with God in the revelation of His infinite light into our world.

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

1. Sanhedrin 21B
2. The Aruch HaShulchan
3. Derech Eitz HaChaim Section 9 - The Ramchal elaborates that within Torah's flame dance countless colors, with each Jewish soul connecting to its own unique understanding. Just as a mighty hammer shatters rock into countless sparks, so too does Torah shine with sixty myriads of interpretations, one for each Jewish soul.
4. Nefesh HaChaim 4:11
5. Zohar, Parshat Terumah 161b
6. Sefer HaChinuch: Mitzvah 613
7. Ktav Sofer Al Hatorah, Vayeilech, 31:19
8. Menachos 30a
9. Rabbi Dessler (Michtav M'Eliyahu Volume 3, Page 332-333) unveils the profound depth of this teaching: When a person writes a Sefer Torah according to halacha, the kedusha of a Sefer Torah descends upon it, and it's actually as if it was written by the hand of God and given to him at Mount Sinai! And not only in this mitzvah, but in all actions of mankind we imitate, and, in a certain sense, become Godly.



The Choice of Life

As a native of Liverpool, I sometimes like to quote the Beatles. Do you remember their song, "Dear Prudence," from the White Album? I am told that the song came from when the Beatles were in Bangor with the Maharishi. There was a girl there called Prudence who went into a coma and the song was written for her: "Look around ... the sun is up, the sky is blue, it's beautiful and so are you, dear Prudence, won't you come out to play." It's as if they were saying to Prudence, "You know there is a gorgeous, real world out here, so why are you running away from it?"

In this week's portion, God commands us to "Choose life." This is the only time in the entire Torah that we are actually told to "choose" something. So what exactly is the nature of this choice?

People often think that free will is a choice between good and evil. When you think about it, though, no one makes decisions that way. Even the most despicable person does not wake up in the morning and say, "Let me see what evil I can do today." Such people are as much deranged as they are evil. We human beings always choose to

do good. The problem is that often we rationalize what "good" really is, and we end up doing bad.

Exactly what are we choosing?

We are choosing between that which we know to make sense, and that which we know to be more comfortable. "I know I should apologize, but it's much easier not to. I know I shouldn't talk badly about someone, but it's so easy to do so. I know that I should spend some time with my wife after a long hard day at work, but I'd much rather put my feet up and watch TV." In each case, the former choice will bring me a more long-term sense of fulfillment. The latter choice is more comfortable, but in the long term, it will leave me feeling empty.

This is the essence of free will. Do I choose life - taking the pain in order to achieve long-term fulfillment? Or do I choose death - taking the easy way out and thus escaping the pains of life?

Running away from life is a death that, while not as terminal as the real thing, is equally soul-destroying.

Prudence was choosing death, and the Beatles wrote her a song: Why choose death, when life is so beautiful?

Choose life, the Torah commands. Death may be more comfortable, but life is much more worth living.

Jewish Education

Judaism has always understood that a people's future is only as great as the values it manages to inculcate into its youth. In line with this, the Torah does not command individuals to study Torah. Rather it commands us **"to teach Torah to our children."** A fascinating Midrash says that when the Messiah comes, everyone will go out to meet him - with the exception of school children who will stay in class to study Torah!

Perhaps this explains the absence of television sets in many religious homes today. It is felt that the potential gain from watching educational programs is **more than canceled out** by exposure to less savory programs. Why subject a child to impurity while trying to inculcate values of holiness?! Moreover, even in instances where the programs are beneficial, often those hours could be better spent reading.

This issue of education plays a role in this week's Torah portion, Vayelech. A central topic discussed in the Parsha is the *Hakhel* (literally "gathering") observance. Once every seven years during the era of the Holy Temple, every Jewish man, woman, and child is commanded to go up to Jerusalem. There, the king reads sections of

Deuteronomy focusing on the covenant between God and the Jewish nation. The purpose of this, explains the Torah, is for the people to hear *"so they will learn and shall fear the Lord your God."*

Interestingly, the next verse specifically singles out babies, stating: **"And the children who do not know - they shall hear and shall learn to fear the Lord your God."** What possible benefit can there be to schlepp along "children who do not know"? It is not simply because their parents have no alternative means of childcare! Rather, the Torah makes it clear that the children's presence at the *Hakhel* ceremony will cause them *"to learn to fear the Lord Your God."*

The Sfas Emes, a Chassidic master of the last century, gives several reasons for this command. First, he suggests that conscious cognition is not the only way that human beings learn things. Even though an infant may not consciously understand what is being said at the *Hakhel* ceremony, **his soul can still be very much affected.**

Furthermore, the Sfas Emes notes, when the child grows up he will have a greater appreciation of the importance of Torah study, knowing that his parents carried him for miles and miles just so he could hear the king read from the Torah! Experience bears this out: Many of the greatest Torah scholars came from poor homes, where the parents sacrificed basic of necessities in order that their children should receive the best Torah education.

In the final analysis, it is not what we give to our children, **but the sacrifices that we make for**



Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31)

basic compendium

them - particularly in the area of education - that really counts.

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