

**RABBI AARON**

Editor, Torah Tidbits

**GOLDSCHIEDER**

# A Walking Sefer Torah

A beautiful and true story is told about the meeting of two great Talmudic minds several decades ago. When Israeli Chief Rabbi HaGaon HaRav Avraham Shapira visited America, he gave a shiur at Yeshiva University attended by that institution's famed Rosh Yeshiva, HaGaon HaRav Joseph B. Soloveitchik. At the end of his lecture, Rabbi Shapira approached Rabbi Soloveitchik and kissed him. When some of those present remarked that one is not allowed to kiss even one's own children in a synagogue, Rabbi Shapira responded: "But one is allowed to kiss a Sefer Torah." (Eulogy for the Rav, R. Norman Lamm)

The above anecdote is an apt introduction to one of the Rav's most exquisite derashot which he presented in honor of his father's yahrzeit on Shevat 3, 5719. He spoke about the identification of a Jew with a *Sefer Torah*. Every Jew, in essence, represents a walking *Sefer Torah*.

This idea is portrayed in a number of

Talmudic statements and was developed by the commentaries. The Rav cited many examples; we will cite only three:

"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 garment." (*Moed Katan* 25a).

- "How foolish are people who stand for a *Sefer Torah* but don't stand for a great person." (*Makkot* 22b)

- Nine people and the ark (in the synagogue) are sufficient to make a minyan (*Berachot* 47b)

- The illustrations above reflect how this notion pertains to both the domain of Jewish thought and to halacha.

The equation of the Jew and a *Sefer Torah* has acute relevance. The Rav focused on a particular idea concerning writing of a Torah Scroll that is often overlooked. Namely, the fact, that a Torah does not acquire holiness automatically.

Consider the following: The *sofer* (scribe) who prepares the *Sefer Torah* must imbue the Torah with his own holiness. The preparations of the hides must be developed into parchment expressly for the purpose of producing a Torah. The writing also must be done with particular intent. The *sofer* must have correct thoughts when writing, otherwise the Torah is not valid. It is the individual who installs his personality, "his feelings, his dreams...his joys and sadnesses,

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his courageousness and vulnerability” into the sanctification of the scroll (*Beit Yosef Shaul*, Vol. 4, 1994, p.73).

But how is it, asked the Rav, that one can imbue holiness into another item? Does that not assume that there is a *kedusha* that already exists and is present that can be transferred to the item? Indeed. This is exactly how it operates. Each person is born with an internal holiness. Each person, therefore, has the potential to transfer that holiness and imbue it in another item.

The Rav interestingly pointed to particular halacha regarding writing a Torah which requires the sofer to enunciate each word before he writes the word (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 274:2). Some would say that this is mandated to promote accuracy. The Rav suggested a deeper reason. The word must steam through the heart and soul of the writer and only then does the word attain the sanctity needed to be placed on the parchment. (Ibid. p.78)

The Rav directs our attention to a moving midrash that depicts the final days in Moshe's life.

The gemara (Sota 13b) states: “R. Eliezer HaGadol said: Over twelve square miles, the area of the camp of Israel (in the desert), a heavenly voice proclaimed: Moshe, the great scribe of Israel, has died.” Although Moshe did indeed write a sefer Torah, the word “scribe” here does not refer to the mechanical art of writing. If it did, what would be the meaning of the adjective “great?” How would this phrase, “the great scribe of Israel,” do justice to the greatness of Moshe Rabbeinu? Did Moshe have beautiful handwriting? R. Eliezer the Great was referring to a different kind of script, to the art of writing God's

living word on the passionate vibrant human heart, and impressing God's image on the receptive and questing human personality. Moshe was a scribe in the same way that Sefer Yetzira calls God a scribe: “The world was created through three things: sofer, sefer, sippur (scribe, book, and a story).”

Man is similar to a *Sefer Torah* in that it requires intent and effort to fashion the human character into an exquisite work of art. A Talmudic passage describing the last moments before Rabbi Elazar's death is suggestive of this view: “Rabbi Eliezer raised his two arms and placed them on his heart and he said,”Woe to you, my two arms, as they are like two Torah scrolls that are now being rolled up, and will never be opened again” (*Sanhedrin* 68a). One must exert effort in crafting a life of *kedusha*; it does not come naturally. ■



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