

Parshat Shoftim: The King's Two Torah Scrolls

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In Parashat Shoftim, we find many mitzvot directed to the King of Israel. Among them is the mitzvah to write a Torah:

“And it shall be, when he sits upon the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a scroll, out of that which is before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life; that he may learn to fear Hashem his G-d, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to do them; so that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left; to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children, in the midst of Israel” (Devarim 17:18-20).

Rashi, based on Sanhedrin 21b, explains that in fact the King is to write two Torah scrolls. This is implied by the word mishneh - double. One copy is to accompany him at all times. The other is left in his treasury. (Rambam, based on the Talmud, rules that if the King inherited a Torah scroll, he need only write one).

But why two Torah scrolls? And why keep one hidden away in the King's treasury?

As the leader of the Jewish People, the King needs a Torah by his side. Not just a political leader, the King looks to the Torah for counsel. He guides his flock with its sage advice. According to the

Ramban, this Torah keeps him humble. The King binds it to his arm and constantly refers to it. It is always with him. The Mishnah (Sanhedrin 2:4) states: “ ...When he goes to war - he brings it with him, when he returns - it returns with him, when he sits in judgment - it sits with him, when he sits down to eat - it sits with him...”

This Torah is constantly ‘in use.’ It represents how Torah informs our daily lives. It is a Torah that responds to the challenges of the modern world. A Torah which exists not just in ‘theory,’ but rather in practice. It is ‘applied Torah.’

The King of Israel has to be able to roll his sleeves up and address the real needs of the people (See, for example, Berachot 4a).

But the danger in working ‘down in the trenches,’ is that one may be tempted to make accommodations or concessions; to modify or adapt the Torah to fit his needs, or the needs of his people.

This is why the King needs the second Torah. This second Torah, which symbolically sits in his treasury unused, represents the unbending principles that never change; the tried and true tradition that does not accommodate, nor is modified. This Torah that is left in the King's treasury, pristine and untouched; unsullied by the rigors of ‘practical application.’ The King returns to it, and it guides him as well. It ensures that his ‘day to day Torah’ is in consonance with the ‘eternal Law.’ It ensures that he remains true to the Mesorah.

Historically, the Jewish People did have Torah scrolls, which were kept for the purpose of preserving a pristine Mesorah. According to the Midrash (Devarim Rabbah 9:9), before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu wrote thirteen Torah scrolls, one for each of the twelve tribes, and one to be placed in the Holy Ark. Should someone later come along and try to make any changes to our holy Torah, they would be able to take out and examine Moshe's own Torah, written by his own holy hand. Similarly, the Mishnah (Mo'ed Katan 3:4) refers to a Sefer Ezra, or Sefer Azarah, which was kept in the Holy Temple and used to correct all the other Torah Scrolls (see Rashi to Mo'ed Katan 18b, s.v. afilu b'Sefer Ezra).

A story is told about a Shul that needed a new Torah scroll. The best sofer who could be found was commissioned to do the work. When it came time to find a me'il, or cover for the Torah, the synagogue's Board of Directors met and decided to hold a contest. Local artists would submit their designs, and the best cover would be chosen. The winning entry had a beautifully embroidered picture of Jerusalem: Gold, silver, copper, crimson, red, blue, white and purple were skilfully used. It was magnificent. But when it came time to put the cover on the scroll, the cover was too small. Oy! Now what? The Board of Directors met again and decided that unfortunately it cannot be used. The artist who made the cover was not about to see his hard work be for naught. He asked, "Can't we just cut the Torah to make it fit the cover?"

In reality there are not 'two Torahs,' but one. We engage the modern world, but we do so with the age-old principles of our Torah. No, we cannot "cut the Torah to make it fit the cover." We respond to the needs of our community and its individuals with great sensitivity, but remain solid and steadfast in our commitment to Torah values.

This message is especially relevant when navigating the choppy waters and challenges of the State of Israel. The King's two Torah scrolls remind us that our tradition, our Mesorah, is our guide, our compass, in navigating the challenges of this ever-changing, modern world.