**Yom Kippur Shacharit- 5780**

Radlett

Torah scrolls are just like people-they come in all shapes and sizes. There are tall scrolls, and small scrolls, scrolls that are heavier and scrolls that are lighter; scrolls from which we can read easily, and scrolls whose ink has faded a bit, or whose writing is less clear. And all share a common denominator: they were crafted with love and the utmost care and reverence.

One of the highlights of my week is the Kabbalat Shabbat service we hold every Friday morning for the youngest members of our community and those who care for them. What a privilege it is so see them race up on the bimah, gather around the ark, possibly shove each other out of the way as they reach for the handles on the Ark, try to get those doors open so we can wish each of our Torah scrolls “Shabbat Shalom”! There is always that wonderful, somewhat magical moment when a child has grown enough so that they can finally reach the door handle to the ark, and you can see the satisfaction in their eyes, even if they are standing on the highest point of their tippy toes. And then we have the friendly argument over which scroll we should wish Shabbat Shalom to first- the big one, the little one, the red one, the blue one or the other red one. Every week, through their eyes, I am reminded of the central place that a Torah scroll holds in our tradition, and the honour that has been bestowed on our community and that we have been blessed with the responsibility of looking after five of them.

A Torah scroll is not merely an object that we read from on Shabbat morning or on festivals- it has a story, it holds our heritage, its creation is nothing short of awe inspiring, and the kavod, the honour we give it reflects both its emotional value and its financial investment. We flinch when we see a scroll being handled with less care then we are comfortable with and we gasp and tremble when we think a scroll might inadvertently take a tumble. And while not everyone might be up to scratch on the laws of kashrut, many of us, dare I say most of us, have heard that if we witness a scroll falling, we are expected to fast for forty days (sunrise to sunset, not a full Yom Kippur fast).

Year after year at Simchat Torah we celebrate the conclusion of the reading of the scroll in a joyous fashion and rejoice in beginning anew a text that we know and that we look forward to visiting with again, to studying, to engaging with, like an old friend or a much loved book.

Rabbi Yehoshua Avraham of Zitmar[[1]](#footnote-1) taught the following

“Our sages teach us that the Torah was created two thousand years ago. This is difficult to understand, since the Torah contains the accounts of many events that happened after creation. How then can the Torah speak of creation, Adam and Eve, Noah, the holy Patriarchs, and all the other happenings recorded in the Torah? All these things had not yet happened. Actually, when the Torah was first created, it was a mixture of letters; the letters of the Torah were not yet combined into words as they are now. Whenever anything then happened in the world, these letters were combined, and the words were recombined to form the account. As soon as an event [that was to be recorded in the Torah] took place, a combination was immediately formed, corresponding to that event. If a different event had taken place, the letters would have combined different. The Torah is God's wisdom, and it has no end.”

What if on this day of Teshuvah, of introspection, of self examination, of self appraisal, we considered the Torah scroll as a metaphor for a year in our life? What if we used today as our own personal Simchat Torah- an opportunity to revisit our lives, our own personal Torah scrolls? What we do tomorrow will not necessarily be drastically different from what we did last year on the tomorrow after Yom Kippur, and it might not be drastically different from what we will do next year on the tomorrow after Yom Kippur, but it is tomorrow in 5780, not 5779 or 5781, and we could choose to approach tomorrow and the days that follow in the same way that we approach re-reading the text of Tanakh that we find in our Sifrei Torah. “Turn it, and turn it again” taught Rabbi ben BagBag in Pirkei Avot. Each year we are invited to delve into the text- the words are familiar, but each year, each reading cycle, we get to discover new interpretations, something else will catch our attention depending on our personal circumstances, depending on the context in which we live or that we are experiencing, be it a political situation affecting society or our personal trials and tribulations.

What if we were to treat our lives with the same deference, reverence and honour with which we treat the Sefer Torah? Our lives after all are carefully crafted, and as precious and holy as the object we so carefully protect in the Ark.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“Moses received Torah" but not all of the Torah "at Sinai." And not all that was revealed to Moses was conveyed to Israel; the meaning of the commandments is given as an example. Together with the gratitude for the word that was disclosed, there is a yearning for the meaning yet to be disclosed. There is a theory in Jewish literature containing a profound parabolical truth which maintains that the Torah, which is eternal in spirit, assumes different forms in various eons. The Torah was known to Adam when was in the Garden of Eden, although not in its present form. Commandments such as those concerning charity to the poor, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, would have been meaningless in the Garden of Eden.[[2]](#footnote-2).”

Just as Rome was not built in one day, the Israelites were progressively, and we are still progressively, being explained the text, according to Rabbi Heschel. In the same way, while it would be so much easier to assume that later today, as we hear the final Shofar blast, just like magic, all is forgiven, and we can begin a new cycle, with a clean slate and start fresh, that is not actually the point of Yom Kippur- today we are meant to take stock, carefully consider how we read the scroll of our lives last year, and the year before, consider all of that which we experienced, our successes, our highlights, and what challenged us and consider how we want to revisit the scroll we are about to restart, enriched by the previous year. The scroll that opens ahead of us is an invitation to be expounded and examined, studied and considered, enlightened by all that which has affected us- we cannot leave our worries and troubles behind, much as we might want to, they are part of our stories, but we can use them as we delve into the year ahead.

In the following poem adapted from Father Michel Quoist, Rabbi Allan Malle describes the day to day chaos which can take over our lives, and the risk we run not treating our days and our lives as sacredly as we treat so many other things.

I went out, God

People were coming and going

Walking and running

Everything was rushing: cars, trucks, the street, the whole town.

People were rushing not to waste time.

They were rushing after time,

To catch up with time.

To gain time.

Good-by, Sir, excuse me, I haven’t time.

I’ll come back, I can’t wait, I haven’t time.

I must end this letter I haven’t time.

I’d love to help you, but I haven’t time.

I can’t accept, having no time.

I can’t think, I can’t read, I’m swamped, I haven’t time.

I’d like to pray, but I haven’t time.

You understand God, they simply haven’t the time.

The child is playing, he hasn’t time right now...later on...

The schoolboy has his homework to do, he hasn’t time…Later on…

The young man is at his sports, he hasn’t time..Later on…

The young married man has his house; he has to fix it up. He hasn’t the time..Later on…

They are dying, they gave no….

Too late!…They have no more time!

And so all people run after time, God

They pass through life running-hurried, jostled, overburdened, frantic, and they never get there.

They still haven’t time.

In spite of all their efforts they’re still short of time.

Of a great deal of time.

God, you must have made a mistake in your calculations.

There is a big mistake somewhere.

The hours are too short,

The days are too short,

Our lives are too short.

You who are beyond time, God, you smile to see us fighting it.

And you know what you are doing,

You make no mistakes in your distribution of time to humankind.

You give each one time to do what you want them to do.

Bet we must not deface time,

Waste time,

Kill time,

For time is a gift that you give us,

But a perishable gift,

A gift that does not keep.

God, I have time,

I have plenty of time,

All the time you gave me,

The years of my life,

The days of my years,

The hours of my days,

They are all mine,

Mine to fill, quietly, calmly,

But to fill completely, up to the brim.

Days are like scrolls, write on them what you want to keep.

Adapted by Rabbi Allen Maller from a prayer by Father Michael Quoist

A few days ago, on Shabbat, we read from parashat Vayeleich which can best be described as the beginning of the end. We are reaching the conclusion of the Torah narrative, and the Israelites are instructed to place the Sefer HaTorah beside the Ark of the Covenant which also contains both set of tablets on which are inscribed the Ten Commandments. One set is whole; the other was broken when Moses threw it on the ground after discovering the golden calf. And so, in one sacred vessel, we find contained our history and our heritage, and our brokenness carefully kept alongside that which makes us whole.

What if we were to treat ourselves as the sacred vessels that we are, vessels which hold holiness and preciousness? What if we were to look at ourselves with the same excitement with which our youngest members look at out Torah scrolls on a Friday morning? What if we actually were as kind to ourselves as we strive to be to others?

 Chazak Chazak, venitchazek- “be strong, be strong and let us be strengthened” are the words we exclaim each time we conclude a reading of a book of Torah, as an acknowledgement of the progress we make, of the new opportunities that open ahead of us. Chazak Chazak Venitchazek- may 5780 be for you and those you care about, a year of growth and new opportunities, a year of comfort, familiarity and new discoveries, and above all a year filled with love and blessings.

1. (Quoted in Sefer Baal Shem Tov) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. God in Search of Man [↑](#footnote-ref-2)