



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Vayalech: Reading (and Owning) Jewish Books

What books are on your bookshelf?

Is it worthwhile owning books in a digital age? Our music and photo collections are now electronic, as are our many aspects of our work documentation. Should we own books? Maybe it is just a waste of space and resources!?

What does Judaism have to say about the question of books and libraries?

Parashat Vayalekh contains the final *mitzva* in the Torah which is the instruction to write a book. That every Jewish man should write a Sefer Torah:

We have been commanded that each male must **write** a Sefer Torah for himself...and if he cannot write it himself, he should purchase one or commission a person to write it for him, as it states: Write this Song for yourselves (Deut 31:19) – the indication is the entire Torah which includes the [song of Haazinu]. The Talmud states: Even if one's father bequeathed a Torah scroll to his son, the son is obligated to write another scroll. (Maimonides. Sefer Hamitzvot. Positive command 18)

The Sefer Hachinuch disagrees and thinks that it is about having a scroll at hand to study with.

The *mitzva* is that each Jewish male should **own** a Sefer Torah...God commanded that each Jew should have a Torah at hand so that he can read from it regularly and he won't need to go to a friend to obtain it. This will ensure that he will learn to fear God, and be knowledgeable regarding its beautiful and precious *mitzvot* [commandments]."

For the Sefer HaChinuch, the emphasis is that owning this text affords each person a constant opportunity to study Torah (hence the male is obligated – because *halakha* mandates men to learn Torah and not women.)

**Please discuss** the difference between the ideal of Rambam and the Sefer Hachinuch.

- Can you imagine the emotional contrast of a person who wrote the Torah scroll – every letter by hand – and a person who simply owns it?
- Try to articulate why that would be so different? Is the Rambam interested that you merely own a Torah or would he like you to feel and experience Torah?

Now we don't actually study from a Sefer Torah, the 13-14<sup>th</sup> Century scholar, Rabbeinu Asher (the Rosh) comments on this:

Certainly, it is a great *mitzvah* to write a Torah scroll.... This applies, however, to the earlier generations when they would use Torah scrolls to study. At present, when Torah scrolls are written and placed in synagogues for communal reading, the *mitzvah* incumbent on all Jewish males who have the capacity, is to write *Chumashim (Bible)*, sets of Mishna and Talmud, and their commentaries and to engage intellectually... For [the purpose of] the *mitzvah* of writing the Torah is to study it, as it is written: ...and teach it to the children of Israel, placing it in their mouths.

Most people today do not write a personal Torah, they don't even own a Torah, but they are more likely to have a set of Jewish texts which they will use for regular study.

When my eldest son was approaching his bar mitzva, I took my son to the Judaica store- the *Sefarim* store - to make a wishlist of books guests could buy for him. I still clearly recall my father taking me to this experience before my bar mitzva.

I asked my son what he wanted. He didn't really know, so I suggested that we buy the basic books that a person who wants to learn Torah should have. We chose a *Mikraot Gedolot* [Bible with commentaries], several legal texts on Shabbat and Jewish life, Rabbi Hirsch and Nechama Leibowitz on Chumash, a set of *Mishna*, *Sefer Hachinuch*, and much more. His grandfather was buying him a full set of Talmud. My son asked me why I was selecting these specific books, and I answered that these are fundamental books that one should have and study. As the list grew in length, my son started getting nervous, and asked me: "Are you saying that I have to know ALL OF THESE!?" I realized that he was wondering how he could possibly absorb all of it!

But what is the basic Jewish bookshelf? What is basic Jewish literacy? Why is it important?

I would say very simply that in every culture there is a corpus of knowledge. There are the "Great Books", the intellectual and cultural works that form the bedrock of each and every civilization. And that in order to function successfully, to become

productive, or to play a central role, to lead, one must have absorbed that bookshelf. It is about being knowledgeable and culturally articulate.

What is literacy for us as Jews? For sure, it will differ within our sub-communities. But I have a feeling that if we wish to be "Torah" Jew, a person who lives with religious thoughts in our consciousness, a person who doesn't merely follow a robotic set of ordinances and prescriptions but can have a role in understanding and shaping our Jewish experiences, then we need to be knowledgeable and fluent. It is from within the traditional bookshelf that we obtain that literacy, that set of ideas, and it is only once we speak that language that we can really think "Jewishly" in the absolute sense of the word.

And it might be precisely this principle that underpins the *mitzva* of Talmud Torah - daily Torah study. We need to refresh our knowledge-base, to encounter new ideas with regularity. We need to be conversant with our Torah texts and concepts in the same manner that we check our emails and favorite web-pages daily (or multiple times a day), for these are the experiences that give substance and perspective to our fleeting experiential reality.

When my father ensured that I would have a Torah library for my bar mitzva, and when I did the same for my son, we were putting the books on the bookshelf as an aspiration and expectation, as a goal and hope for the type of adult Jew that this boy should become. Since that visit to the bookshop, my son has graduated school and progressed to several years of study at a Yeshiva and loves Torah study. One day he looked at his books, and said: "Wow! Thank you for making sure I had all these!" It was a heart-warming moment.

**So please discuss at the table:**

- What are the texts that give us Jewish literacy?
- Is a Jewish bookshelf important?
- What Jewish books do you think a person should own?
- How can you increase your Jewish knowledge this year?

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova!