A sefer Torah (Torah scroll) embodies holiness and we relate to it as a holy object. We stand up in its presence, we kiss it when it passes us and we provide a proper way to escort the sefer Torah as it moves from place to place. Additionally, we protect it from acts that are not befitting of a holy object: we store it in an upright position, we make sure that it is never placed on the floor and when the Torah is no longer usable, we provide it with a proper burial.

In this article, we will explore the notion that each and every Jew represents a walking sefer Torah. This idea, which is alluded to in a number of Talmudic statements, was developed by a number of commentators.

The Talmudic Sources

The most explicit source comparing a Jew to a sefer Torah is found in two places in the Talmud in a statement by R. Shimon ben Elazar. In the midst of a discussion about when one tears one’s garments over death or other tragic events, the Talmud states:

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר העומד על המת ביאת יציאת נשמה חייב לקרוע למה זה דומה לספר תורה שנשרף שחייב לקרוע.

Mo’ed Katan 25a

It seems to me that the soul in the body is like the names of G-d that are written in the sefer Torah that infuse the entire sefer Torah with its holiness. If we follow the analogy, the entire body is holy and should be treated with holiness. The body is infused with holiness when the soul enters the body.

R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson, Divrei Sha’ul 340:5, notes that there is a story recorded in the Talmud about how the Romans killed R. Chanina ben Tradyon that supports Ramban’s analogy:

All parts of a sefer Torah are holy. However, it is the names of G-d that are written in the sefer Torah that infuse the entire sefer Torah with its holiness. If we follow the analogy, the entire body is holy and should be treated with holiness. The body is infused with holiness when the soul enters the body.

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The Chag HaSemikhah celebration includes a dedication of a sefer Torah in honor of Moreinu HaRav Hershel Schachter, shlit’a. This article discusses the various ways that a Jew, and specifically a Torah scholar, is compared to a walking sefer Torah. Rav Schachter embodies this ideal through his scholarship, his refined middos and his care and concern for all of klal Yisrael.

A Walking Sefer Torah

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series • Purim 5777
They found R. Chanina ben Tradyon who was sitting and learning Torah and gathering crowds publicly, and there was a sefer Torah in his arms. They took him and wrapped him in the sefer Torah, surrounded him with branches and lit the branches. They brought sponges of cotton, soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that he would not die quickly. His daughter said “Father, this is how I should see you?” He said to her “If they only burned me, it would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned with a sefer Torah, He Who will seek retribution for the desecration of the sefer Torah will also seek retribution for my desecration.” His students asked him “Rebbi, what do you see?” He said to them “The parchments are being burned, but the letters are flying away.” [They said to him] “You too should open your mouth and allow the fire to enter you.” He responded “It is better that the one who placed it remove it, but one may not destroy himself.”

Avoda Zara 18a

R. Nathanson notes that the dialogue between R. Chanina ben Tradyon and his students (according to Maharsha’s interpretation) is based on the assumption developed by Ramban that a person is comparable to the parchment of a sefer Torah and the soul is comparable to the letters.

R. Moshe Sofer notes a halachic ramification of the comparison of a person to a sefer Torah. The Gemara states:

אמר מר ושם מספרא ספריס שבלוש עיני
אמרת לפני ממתי מה ואותו נוגה.

Mar Zutra stated: The worn out covers of the Sifrei Torah are converted to burial shrouds for a neglected corpse and that is their proper disposal.

Megillah 26b

R. Sofer wonders why it is permissible to use the cover, which is imbued with holiness, for a seemingly mundane act: He writes:

הרי צור לוחמי מפי ספרין תורה לכותב
 masaḥot יד وأضافים לתוכם כותב, כי הוא נוגה.

Rava stated: How foolish are people who stand up for a sefer Torah but don’t stand up for a great person.

Makkot 22b

There is a verse in the Torah (Vayikra 19:32) stating that one must show honor to a Torah scholar by standing up for him. Rava doesn’t understand why people would choose to stand for a sefer Torah, but not for a Torah scholar. One can question Rava’s statement: If we are all compared to a sefer Torah, why should these people be motivated to specifically honor a Torah scholar on the basis that he is compared to a sefer Torah? Why is there any special honor due to a Torah scholar on the basis that he is comparable to a sefer Torah?

Based on the comments of R. Soloveitchik, one can answer that there are two levels where one can open your mouth and allow the fire to enter so that your body will be burned internally and your soul will ascend and fly upward.

According to R. Sofer, a person can be treated as an accessory of holiness (tashmish kedusha) for certain purposes. R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik of Brisk (1820-1892) adds that when a person reaches a certain level, he is not simply treated as an accessory of holiness, but rather as an actual object of holiness:
be compared to a sefer Torah. On a basic level, every Jew is compared to a sefer Torah, but as an accessory of holiness. Just as we don’t stand up when the cover for a sefer Torah is brought into the room, there is no obligation to stand for every individual. However, a Torah scholar is compared to a sefer Torah on a level where he is considered an actual object of holiness. For this reason, Rava questioned the logic of those who stand for a sefer Torah because of its status as an object of holiness and not for a Torah scholar who attains the same level of holiness.

There are many other allusions in the rabbinic sources comparing a Jew to a sefer Torah. In the next few sections, we will explore some of those comparisons and what we can learn from them.

Relating to Ourselves as Sifrei Torah

Viewing ourselves as representations of sifrei Torah bears a certain responsibility. R. Yechezkel Levenstein (1895-1974) notes that we must treat our minds as if they are sifrei Torah:

> אוסר כמה שצריך להישאר על הקלש, חיות
> זלקש את כבודהו של תורה, חיים שתחסלו
>אמות כמות בניוatz הפשך, גם נשים
>משתמש בפשך לזרוק בברךحا ובו מתה ותלך
>ספ מום להו, שקול חדות היא הוי
>לזמן פקודה הפשך שתחסלו,.tbl
>ל筮חלח רביה של תורה ותלך
>לאברוחי ימי אברוחה הקדשה והמטות.

As much as we must guard our mind, we must sanctify it with the holiness of a sefer Torah since the mind is truly like an actual sefer Torah ... If a person uses his mind for nonsense it is similar to throwing a sefer Torah into the street. The mind is holy and it must be...
Rabbi Soloveitchik remarks that there are two mitzvot that relate to the development of a child. First, there is the mitzvah of chinuch, training. This mitzvah only applies before the child’s bar/bat mitzvah. The second mitzvah is the mitzvah of talmud Torah. This mitzvah does not only include the intellectual pursuit of learning Torah, it also includes the study of how to perform mitzvot, the study of the fundamentals of faith and participating in an educational program that leads one to become a G-d fearing Jew. Regarding this mitzvah, the father’s obligation does not stop at bar/bat mitzvah. Rather it continues until the young adult can take responsibility for his/her own education.

The chinuch stage is a preparation for the talmud Torah stage. Just as one cannot write on a sefer Torah if the skin is not softened and purified, a child cannot become fully engaged in the talmud Torah process until he is softened and purified. His character traits must be refined, he must learn certain skills and he must be acquainted with the basic concepts of Judaism.

R. Soloveitchik also notes that a sefer Torah does not acquire its holiness automatically. The sofer (scribe) who prepares the sefer Torah must imbue the Torah with holiness. In applying our analogy to a person, we are left with the following paradox: If a person is compared to a sefer Torah, he must imbue himself with holiness. However, if he is not already imbued with holiness, how can he impart holiness onto himself? Where does the holiness come from?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that each person is born with a certain internal holiness. Each person has a responsibility to transfer that holiness so that it is apparent externally.

Rabbi Soloveitchik comments that this idea appears in the laws of writing a sefer Torah:

בְּטַל מִמְּזוֹג בְּיוֹרָה לָדַע אֲשֶׁר שְׁעֵה חֶסֶנָן אַּל עַל פָּנָיו שֶׁאָסַר לַחֲמָס אֲשֶׁר אָחָשׁ שֶׁל שֶׁכֶם

The sofer must have another sefer Torah (or its text) in front of him to copy from for it is forbidden to write a single letter by heart and he must recite each word orally before writing.

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 274:2

When the sofer recites the words that he is writing, it symbolizes the transference of holiness from the internal to the external.

The Letters of the Torah

A number of Kabbalistic and Chasidic sources present a variation to the idea that a person is a walking sefer Torah. According to this variation, the Jewish people as a whole are representative of a sefer Torah, with each person comprising one letter. The acronym used to express this is:

ישראל = יש עוד רבע אוורא לתרת

Israel= There are 600,000 letters in the Torah.

The number 600,000 represents the entire Jewish people. The Jewish people as a whole is compared to a Torah which also has 600,000 letters.6

The Radomsker Rebbe (R. Shlomo Chanoch HaKohen Rabinowitz, 1801-1866) suggests that one of the messages we can derive from this idea is how we treat our fellow Jew. His suggestion is based on the concept of mukaf g’viv, the concept that dictates that every letter of the sefer Torah must be surrounded by parchment on all
Every sefer Torah has 600,000 letters which corresponds to the 600,000 souls of the Jewish people that stood on Har Sinai ... In each generation, the root of the souls that accepted the Torah at Har Sinai are still apparent. From this we learn an important lesson that each person must guard himself from encroaching on anyone else, for if not, his portion in the Torah is invalid. So R. Tzadok expresses two aspects of the idea that the letters of the Torah represent each Jew. Each person has his own portion in Torah, nevertheless, his portion does not limit him (to other areas of Torah) ... and learning Torah serves to unite all portions of Torah.

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R. Tzadok expresses two aspects of the idea that the letters of the Torah represent each Jew. First, each person has his own portion in Torah. Each person has his own insights in Torah that nobody else will discover. Whether it is a question that has not yet been asked, a new way of understanding an idea, or a different way of organizing information, each person has the ability to discover his own personal portion of Torah. Second, the Torah serves to unify the Jewish people. Each person represents one part of a whole. Each person’s share in Torah is available to everyone else.

This Torah To Go issue marks the commemoration of three events that celebrate the Torah. Purim is a day categorized by Chazal as a day of reaccepting the Torah. The Chag HaSemikhah celebrates the passing on of our mesorah to a new generation of Torah scholars. The dedication of a sefer Torah celebrates kavod HaTorah. As we celebrate these events, we should keep in mind the lessons we learn from the sefer Torah. We should constantly remember that we represent a walking sefer Torah, both as individuals and as members of the Jewish people.

Endnotes

1. This article was adapted from an article written for the B’Lev Echad program in memory of the eight students of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav and Yashlzatz who were murdered by a terrorist on Rosh Chodesh Adar II 5768. It also appeared in the Benjamin and Rose Berger Shavuot To-Go® 5769. The author thanks J.Z. Spier for his initial research and coordination of the program.

2. Regarding the practice of tearing one’s garments upon witnessing a death, see Gesher HaChaim 4:9.

3. Ramban seems to be consistent with his own opinion in Milchamot HaShem, Sukkah 4b, that the parchment of the sefer Torah only receives its holiness from the letters that are written on it. His comments in Milchamot HaShem imply that even if the name of G-d is not written on the parchment, but there are eighty-five letters of the Torah text on the parchment, the parchment is infused with holiness.

4. A meit mitzvah is a corpse that is discovered and there are no relatives to take responsibility for the burial.

5. R. Soloveitchik developed this idea in a lecture that was originally given on Shevat 3, 5719 in Yiddish. The Yiddish notes were compiled by Dr. Hillel Zeidman and were translated to Hebrew by R. Shalom Carmi. The article appears in Beit Yosef Sha’ul, Vol. IV (1994).

6. In reality, there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. There are also many more than 600,000 Jews. See R. Moshe Sofer, Chotam Sofer, page 72b of his Commentary to Maschet Chullin, who deals with this question.

7. Menachot 34a.