

THE LAST MITZVAH OF THE TORAH

Parshas Vayelech

by Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

Uppermost on the minds of all on these sacred Days of Awe is the wish to be inscribed in the Book of Life. "On Rosh Hashana their destiny is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live..." (Musaf for Yomim Noraim, based on Yerushalmi Rosh Hashana 1:3). The blessings to loved ones and to Klal Yisroel is for a KSIVA VACHASIMA TOVA. It is most significant that concomitant with this inscription in the book of life, an ordinance is given, in this week's Sidrah, to write a "book of life," i.e. the Toras Chayim: "Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach thou it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths..." (Devorim 31:19). According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) from here is derived the Mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah, Scroll, which is the last of the six hundred thirteen Mitzvoths. The Rabbenu Asher (Rosh) states that "today when the written scrolls are no longer used for the purpose of study, except for the reading of the Torah during services, this Mitzvah is fulfilled by purchasing Chumashim, volumes of Mishna and the Talmud, and their commentaries, in order to learn in them" (quoted in Yoreh Deah 170:2).

It is in connection with this Mitzvah that the Torah proclaims to Israel reassuringly that "It will not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed (31:21). Herein is accorded to Klal Yisroel a divine guarantee of a Torah saturated future. Herein is a Chumash testimony in what direction the old year signals to the new year. Ignorance will become obsolete. Learnedness is the trend of the future. This divine promise is apparently given with the stipulation that this song be "before them" (ibid.), implying that an inviting shelf of Seforim be before them always (see Ibn Ezra, ibid.) at the home, where most of the leisure time is spent. The very presence of Torah books tend to promote study.

The Torah world will remain eternally indebted to the publishers of hundreds of volumes of Torah thought in English and Hebrew, including the complete Talmud. It is the result of years of arduous research by recognized scholars, helping learners on different levers. They are handsomely bound, to encourage a Torah bookshelf in every Jewish home.

Most people are "pragmatic" enough to get their money's worth, and thus spent time learning in the books for which good money is expended. The last of the Taryag Mitzvohs is fulfilled only when one buys Seforim "in order to study them" as the Rosh states, not when one buys them to decorate his home ostentatiously with a rich private collection. How rewarding when one spends his precious evening hours instead of by the television, with these volumes that uplift and sharpen the mind.

In Parshas Nitzovim, too, the published book is regarded as the powerful source to sustain the knowledgeable Jew. "For this commandment ... is very near to you - in your mouth and your heart - to perform it" (30:14). Rashi comments, "For the Torah has been given to you in a written (book) form, and orally" elaborating upon it.

The description of Torah as a song is worthy of contemplation. The Talmud speaks disparagingly of one who studies without melody (Megila 32a). The rhythm and melody aspect is so intrinsic a characteristic of learning that the whole Torah is called "song." The implication may be that the harmony of the multidimensional approach to Torah study should be employed. The strains of "Eee bois eima and V'ee bois eima," which is often found in the Talmud, are symbolic of such balance and melody in understanding profound Talmudic insights. Hence, in this 613th Mitzvah, comprehensive of all the other Mitzvohs, the Torah is called a song. True, the simple meaning of the ordinance is to write the song of HAAZINU, the portion which follows (32:1-43), and which is called a SHIRA (see Rashi 31:19). However, the RaMBaM explains in accordance with the above quoted Talmudic statements, that it refers to the whole Torah, which also includes HAAZINU.

Since this reference comes in connection with the Mitzvah of writing a Scroll, it is comprehensible, according to above quoted Rosh, that it also implies the harmoniousness of a selected assortment of commentaries on the Chumash, the Talmud and some of its great expounders, Midrashic texts and its interpreters, the Codes and its later authorities. A Torah library, smaller or larger, is not only a symbol of a Jewish home. It has the capacity to make the home more Jewish.

Moshe must have known the powerful impact of this mitzvah, of himself writing

a Scroll, upon the Heavenly decision to inscribe one in the Book of Life. Says Reb Yamai in a remarkable comment in the Medrosh (Devorim Rabba 9:9): When Moshe heard of the decree that his last day on earth has come, what did he do? He wrote thirteen Torahs, one for each of the twelve tribes, and one for the ark. Said Moshe: "Because I am occupied with the Torah which is 'all life', perhaps the decree of death will be annulled." This effort was not altogether in vain. The Al-mighty promised him future achievements, (see conclusion of the Medrosh). During these awe-filled days of repentance when the decree of life is in the balance, Moshe's method surely helps to tip the scale to the side of life.

At this time of soul searching, and seeking out merits - "Inscribe us in the Book of Merit", it is appropriate to suggest that the purchase of a Sefer, a Torah book, for new insights, is in itself a consequential merit, deserving of inscription in the book of life.