

Rabbi Bec Richman

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5782

Sermon - "Torah in Our Hands: Lessons from the Physical Scroll"

I dunk my body
in an inkwell of water.
Ready my hands,
my heart,
my lips
to speak words
my ancestors spoke
wrote
passed
told
buried.

At home,
in the dark,
intention pours out like easy rain
and the quill
 - cut and ready -
dips in,
gathers close,
holds tight.

Exhalation is
whispering the words I will write,
scratch of the quill
on animal skin
turned parchment,
the low hum of the light --
nothing more.

They forgot to tell us
to keep our shoulders down
to keep our hair pinned back
to keep our bracelets off to the side
to make sure the babies were fast asleep
before we wrote.

But I will not sign this work,
each scroll a mystery of inheritance.

Who wrote with a purple quill?
Who wrote with bellies full of babes,
with breasts begging for release?
Who wrote, hidden?
Who made their own ink,
stretched their own hides,
passed on in hushed delivery?

In the studio,
I paint and write
with what I have.

At the mikveh,
blue waters hold secrets --
white space around black words, too:
Processed skin,
hair lines and splotches of color
from a doe
echo our voices and our bodies,
tuck us quietly
into the telling.

~ ~ ~

As a woman - more importantly, as someone who is not a man, one of the most
powerful jobs as a scribe is to pour hours and hours of labor into writing a sacred text,
only to pass it along without signing my name.

I like to imagine that there are scrolls buried in genizas or hidden away that were written
by women long, long ago.

I like to imagine our daughters writing their own scrolls publicly.

And so when I stand before an open sefer Torah, I imagine the unwritten space and the
thick ink holding more stories than the words tell themselves.

~ ~

On this day of Rosh ha-Shanah, a day of celebrating new beginnings, the physical *sefer Torah* - the scroll itself and all that has gone into making it - the scroll has so much to teach us about creating, telling, passing on, teaching, and living our collective stories, written and still unfolding.

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In one of the final lines of communication between G!d and Moshe, which we will read this coming Shabbat from *parashat Vayeilech*, G!d says: *v'atah kitvu lachem et hashira hazot v'lamdah et b'nei yisrael simah b'fihem* - Write for yourselves this poem and teach it to the people of Israel, put it in their mouths (Deut 31:19).

Rabbinic and medieval commentators pick up this verse and parse from it the *halakha*, the law, that it is incumbent on each and every person to write the poem of Torah as a *sefer* - a written scroll - themselves.

In the Talmud, Rava teaches: *Af al pi sh'hinichu lo avotav l'adam sefer torah, mitzvah lichtov mishelo, she'ne'emar v'atah kitvu lachem et hashira* - even if a person's ancestors left them a *sefer Torah*, It is a mitzvah - a commandment - to write a scroll of one's own, as it says in Deuteronomy: **Now, therefore, write for yourselves this song** (Sanhedrin 21b).

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Torah is a song that needs to be scribed, written down again, over and over, in each generation, *within* each generation, by each and every able hand.

And so for as long as Torah has been on our people's lips, we have been writing down and re-transcribing, inking the words our ancestors inherited and spoke and taught.

~ ~ ~

Safrut is the ancient practice of scribal arts, of laws and customs that guide hands across stretched hide, that serve as a roadmap for the journey of each curve, each straight line, each prickle and crown that we dress our letters in when we write sacred texts.

But it is so much more than how to write, more than how to move a quill across a page or form a shape that will be recognizable to a reader so they can speak the words of our people through chanted verse.

Safrut is the vessel through which we carry our stories, the channel that guides us through tumultuous history with rootedness in tactile sacred objects, the backstory of the scrolls we kiss and lift and wrap and dance with at every life stage, a template for how to live in this world, a roadmap for us as we start a new journey, a new year of our lives.

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I picked up, cut, and shaped my first turkey feather in 2017. I think that what initially drew me to safrut - to Hebrew letters made with ancient and timeless tools - was the physicality of bringing Torah into being. It's work that a robot or computer can't do, because it requires spiritual grounding and attentiveness. It's work that asks us to be selfless in writing, to copy words with the tiniest flourishes of our own hand. It's quiet, which was appealing to me as an introvert. It's slow, precise and yet imperfect, and oh so satisfying when the letters begin to flow.

There was also a part of me that was drawn to work that I know has, for so long, and in so many communities still is, steered away from the world of women. **To take Torah quite literally into my own hands is to reclaim it as *of* and *for* us all** - that's a project I am deeply invested in.

So I was called, even as I was deeply skeptical of how I would ever be able to learn the trade to dive in.

In the beginning, I thought that learning safrut would be all about letters. Surely, my lessons would be practical instruction on how to form and hold a quill, move my hand, and slowly make my letters look as seamless as those in the scrolls we read from.

I was surprised, and at the time, I admit, chagrinned, to learn that in fact to be a scribe is to be a student of *halakhah*, Jewish law. The writing and the aesthetics -- those parts were mostly about practice, something I had to do on my own.

Details of *halakha* are often painfully extensive, self contradicting, and wildly wrapped up in the tiniest of details. But unlike any text I had encountered before, Keset Hasofer - one of the key Ashkenazi compilations of *halakha* on writing - pulled me right in, drew my questions out and parched my lips with a thirst for understanding each and every instruction imparted to the scribe.

Ultimately, becoming a mother years into my learning and practice would help me to understand the spiritual power of these *halakhot* in a whole new way.

I love my child immensely and deeply and want for him only the most careful, most loving, most invested caregivers to watch over him. I have a detailed list of instructions for how to care for him, how to prepare his food and read to him and play with him and get him ready for walks and set him up for success at every transition. Sometimes, my instructions seem to turn in knots over themselves. Don't give him animal crackers before lunch. But if he is really upset and you're worried that he won't eat anything, then maybe use your best judgement and offer him a couple as a transition into the rest of lunch.

Such is the story, animal crackers notwithstanding, with Torah. **Safrut is mothering sifrei Torah, our most precious, into right and comfortable, sacred being in the world.**

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On this day of Rosh ha-Shanah when we say *hayom harat olam* -- today the world is being born -- I want to share with you some of the *halakhot*, some of the laws of writing, that might help us create ourselves anew in this year.

One:

Sifrei Torah, tefillin, u'mezuzot - tzrichin lichtov otan b'kavannah g'dolah, lishmah. V'tzarich sh'yomar chen b'fiv kodem sh'hu matchil lichtov, d'hainu kodem sh'matchil sefer Torah, tzarich sh'yomar: "Sefer Torah zeh ani kotev l'shem kedushat sefer Torah."

Sifrei Torah, tefillin and mezuzot must be written with great concentration and *lishmah* (for their own sake) and this must be verbalised before one begins to write. That is, before starting to write, the scribe must say "I write this sefer for the holiness of a sefer Torah." (Keset HaSofer 4:1).

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Before beginning a new scribal project or initiating a repair - no matter how small - a scribe must pause and recite this formula of intention, transforming the tactile into the spiritual.

Intention brings us into the present, focuses our mind on the task at hand, and gives us a sense of direction as we move forward. The scribe doesn't say: "This sefer, I will *write* for the holiness of a sefer Torah," she says: *Sefer Torah zeh ani kotevet l'shem kedushat sefer Torah*. "I **write** this sefer for the holiness of a sefer Torah." The intention is in the present, active, tense. The scribe speaks her intention into being.

From this we learn the power of setting and speaking intention as a catalyst for immediate unfolding and for giving meaning to even simple tasks and plans.

This year:

- I am present with my family.
- I read more fiction.
- I devote time each month to a new social action project.
- I make time for walks in nature.

In speaking the intention, we initiate and invest in the process.

Lesson one: Take time to set intentions for what we want to do and how we want to be in the world. Let the intention be the beginning of the story, ushering it into being.

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Two:

Hakulmus - af al pi sh'l'achar sh'asah bah m'lachtah ainah nichreta klal bichtav, mi kol makom tzarich l'dakdek sh'tehei kulmus na'eh.

The kulmus - the quill or pen - Even though it doesn't make the writing look any different, in any event we should take care to have a nice-looking pen (Keset Hasofer 3:6).

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When you look at a sefer Torah, all that you can know about the quill used to write the sefer is the size of the nib, based on the width or thickness of the horizontal strokes of letters. Nonetheless, the scribe should write with a nice looking instrument, perhaps

keeping some of the feathers on the end of the quill or - if you are so inclined - decking your quill out in purple paint and sequins, as is my teacher's practice.

For the scribe, this makes for a more pleasant writing experience, but it also imbues the text itself with hidden beauty. Making the world more beautiful is only sometimes about what others can see; often, beautifying our world comes in little, quiet, subtle ways. But these snippets of attention to making a pen, an office space, a sanctuary, a tent, just a little more beautiful perhaps give us, like the scribe, an extra dose of joy and pleasure - and this is sacred.

Lesson two: Find ways, even small, to make your corner of the world just a little bit more beautiful.

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Three:

Tzarich sh'lo t'dabek shum ot b'chevratah; eleh kol ot tehiyeh mukefet g'vil.

No letter may touch another; rather each letter must be completely surrounded by parchment. (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 32:4)

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It's easy to notice the vast unwritten spaces in the columns and above and below the panels of writing in a sefer Torah. What is harder to notice but essential to ensure is that each letter has space to breathe, surrounded by threads of blank space. Not even a hair of ink can touch between two letters.

Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish teaches in the Talmud Yerushalmi: the Torah that the Holy Blessed One gave to Moses was given to him as "white fire engraved with black fire; she was fire enwrapped in fire, hewn from fire and given through fire" (Yerushalmi Shelamim 6:1, 49d).

In the words of Rabbi Rachel Zerin¹:

"Torah is not just the story written down in ink. Torah is the black and the white, the ink and the parchment, the words and the spaces that surround them. The Torah of black fire is finite, both in the sense that it is a fixed, definable text, and

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<https://images.shulcloud.com/1205/uploads/2018-HHD-Sermons/The-Story-the-Torah-of-White-Fire-Tells.pdf>

in the sense that it is limited, bound by what the words say. But when we inherit the Torah of white fire, we inherit a Torah of infinite possibilities. This Torah is the space between the text...we...inherit a divine invitation to constantly see something new in the text ourselves - or, perhaps, to newly notice something that was always there.”

Lesson three: Make and value spaciousness. Find in that space new stories, new insights, unwritten possibilities.

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And, four:

V'amar Rava: Sefer Torah sh'balah - gonzin oto etzel talmid chacham v'afilu shoneh halachot. Amar Rav Acha bar Ya'akov: u'vichli cheres, sh'ne'emar: u'n'tata bichli chres l'ma'an ya'amdu yamim rabim.

And Rava said: A Torah scroll that became worn out is interred and buried next to a Torah scholar. Rav Acha bar Ya'akov said: And when it is buried, it is first placed in an earthenware vessel, as it is stated in Jeremiah 32:14: “And put them in an earthenware vessel, that they may last for many days” (Megillah 26b:16).

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There are times when a scroll can be repaired. Just this past week, I had the privilege of repairing a couple of letters in one of our scrolls. We always try to fix a scroll when we can.

But there are times when a scroll is beyond repair. Perhaps something horrible happens and the Torah scroll is damaged in a tragic accident, flood, or fire. More often, the scroll simply grows old. Letters crack and flake, the ink fades -- time washes over. In these cases, when a scroll is beyond repair, our job is to let go. And, like a human being, we wrap the scroll and bury her. Her stories will live on, even as her body is laid to rest within the earth.

Lesson four: When something we love and hold dear is beyond repair, it is a sacred act to let go.

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In the last year and a half, I have thought so many times about all the scrolls all over the world sitting, leaning, waiting patiently in arks sealed and darkened by distant days and services. Thanks to chumashim, printed editions of Torah, endless online resources, and the Torah nestled in our bones, we have even through this pandemic still had access to words of Torah. After all, according to the rabbis, words of Torah are honey and milk², water³, a fig tree⁴, fire and wood⁵, wine and oil⁶ -- all resources and sources of energy of this physical earth, mostly renewable and continually produced. Thank goodness the words of Torah are timeless and eternal.

But we also need and are so sustained by the physicality of the sefer, the scroll itself - the smell and feel of a sea of parchment stitched together; bold black ink surrounded by crisp off-white space; wooden handles creaking with each lift; and the timeless visual power of bounded columns of written words.

For me, as a scribe and an artist and a visual, experiential learner, the sefer Torah grounds me in the tactile, physical, manual, and aesthetic work of this world.

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When we scribe words of Torah, we do so with a *chumash* - a printed edition of Torah - as our guide. But, even with that written guide, we are instructed to speak out loud each word before writing it, in order that the holiness of the breath of reading each and every word which comes from the scribe's mouth is drawn over the words (Keset HaSofer 4:6).

Torah is meant to move through us - through our bodies and through our spoken words onto processed parchment, stretched and sanded and ruled for us to ink ancient words over and over once more. We speak these teachings from their ancient places through our living breath and hand onto the page, enlivening Torah each time we do.

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² Kol Bo 52:10

³ Mishneh Torah, Torah Study 3:9

⁴ Eruvin 54a:27

⁵ Taanit 7a

⁶ Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:2:8

Lo bashamayim hi - It is not in the heavens, we read this past Shabbat in *parashat Nitzavim*. Neither is it beyond the sea, *ki karov eilecha hadavar me'od b'ficha u'vil'avcha la'asoto* - In fact, Torah is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

Torah is of this manifested world, moving from our hearts through our mouths and hands into held form. And it is this - the combination of a set of teachings we long passed on through oral tradition, and the bounded, holdable, scroll that is Torah.

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HaYom Harat Olam - today the world is being born. This we can say of this day, the head of the year. But we can also say this of each and every scroll; it too is both the continuation of and the birthing of a new world.

This year, may we be blessed to come close to Torah - to her words and to her physical manifestation. Like the scribes who have brought these scrolls to our arks and our tables, may we set intention that guides our pathways and elevates our spirits. May our work and our lives be beautiful and beautified. May we learn to leave space and find within it unwritten possibilities. May we learn to lay each other and our sacred scrolls down to rest when their time has come. And may we forever carry forward, in told and physical form, the memories, stories, and spirit of our people.

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my lips
to speak words
my ancestors spoke
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At home,
in the dark,

intention pours out like easy rain
and the quill
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scratch of the quill
on animal skin
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They forgot to tell us
to keep our shoulders down
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I paint and write
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Processed skin,
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from a doe
echo our voices and our bodies,
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~

L'shanah tovah u'metukah - to a good and sweet year.