

Rosh Hashanah 5773
September 17, 2012
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
“Zot Hatorah - This is the torah...”

How many *mitzvot* are there in the Torah?

613

The great 12th century scholar Moses Maimonides – known as the Rambam – wrote a book, *sefer ha-mitzvot*, where he lists all the *mitzvot*, all the commandments found in the torah and he lists them from 1 to 613. According to Maimonides – what mitzvah is the very first of the 613 mitzvot?

P’ru u’rvu – “be fruitful and multiply.” It is interesting to consider whether this merits being the first mitzvah because it can be found right in the beginning – literally, or whether it merits being mitzvah #1 – because without it – all the rest of the *mitzvot* are academic. But either way, it is the first mitzvah of the torah.

And the last? Mitzvah 613 – do you know what that is?

It is based on a verse from the very end of the torah: Deuteronomy 31:19 where Moses instructs the children of Israel: “*v’atah kitvu lachem et hashira hazot*, Therefore, write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel...” Maimonides expressed the rabbinic understanding of this verse and understood the direction to write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel to be mitzvah # 613, that it is incumbent on each and every Jew to write a *sefer Torah*, a scroll of the Torah for him or herself.

“But, as someone recently and famously protested, “rabbi, do the math! There are millions of Jews! Do we really need millions of torahs? “Rabbi, have you looked in the *aron hakodesh* – have you looked in the ark of our shul – I am a member of Temple Beth Sholom – a shul that is blessed with many *sifrei torah* – many Torah scrolls, more than enough Torah scrolls!” “Not relevant” – says the Rambam – “even though *we* don’t need to have a torah written – *you* need to write a torah! Each and every Jew must personally help bring a torah into this world! Your life will not be complete until you do.

Not sure how to write a torah? Don’t worry – I think we can help.

Don’t you find it more than a bit interesting that the very first mitzvah of the torah is the expectation that we will make more people and the last mitzvah of the torah is the expectation that we will make more torahs. I’d almost think that God was trying to tell us something... My friend and colleague Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove, the rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue believes that this makes perfect sense and argues that the first and last mitzvah of the torah are really the same mitzvah, that is they are about the same thing -- about propagation. That our first responsibility is to make sure that there are more of us in the world and that our last responsibility is to make sure there is more Torah in the world.

It is actually quite poetic if you think about it. Imagine a world without the first mitzvah – you are given the gift of life – and you spend however many years allotted to you – enjoying that

gift, reveling in the gift – using the gift – and then you die. How sad, when you realize that you had the chance to share your gift with others – to give others the gift of life – to bring children into the world – so they too could know the gift of life and share in the wonders that had been granted you. How selfish to be granted such an incredible gift and to keep it all to yourself, to hoard it only for yourself. If a person inherited a great deal of money and insisted on spending every penny of that inheritance only on themselves - we would call that person a miser, selfish, pathetic. So what would we call someone who hoards the gift of life?

From my son, Ari, I learned the following torah: the first words of prayer which a traditional Jew recites every morning – before he or she even gets to shul – even before he or she gets out of bed – we are taught to recite the following words of thanks: *modeh ani lefanecha, melech chai v'kayam, she-he-chezarti bi nishmati b'chemlah – rabah emunatecha*. “I am grateful to You, God, that you have given me life - ...” Every morning – when we first open our eyes, while we still lie in bed – as we awake and realize that once again we have been given the gift of life – a new day, another day – the first thing, the very first thing we do is say, “thank you” – we express our gratitude for this first and most fundamental of gifts without which all other gifts of creation are irrelevant - and Ari pointed out that he found the sequencing of the words in this prayer quite interesting. It does not say “*Ani modeh*” -- I am grateful – rather it says, “*Modeh ani*” – “Grateful am I.” First comes gratitude – then comes I – my sense of gratitude should precede my sense of self.

I believe the torah is saying something similar by placing *P'ru u'rvu* – “be fruitful and multiply” as mitzvah number one in Judaism. Our gratitude for this most fundamental of gifts should leave us with the desire to share it – to bring new life into the world and to increase the human race. Gratitude leads us beyond the self – *Modeh ani*.

I must permit myself one aside. My emphasis on this first mitzvah of *P'ru u'rvu* – “be fruitful and multiply” – on the obligation to have children – opens me to the criticism that I might be insensitive to the needs of those who sit in our midst today desirous of having children but unable to do so due to infertility challenges. By speaking so forcefully about the importance of having children am I not rubbing salt into the wounds of those who so desperately want to fulfill this mitzvah but by no fault of their own – find their efforts and prayers unfulfilled? I certainly hope that my comments today do not increase anyone’s pain. As your rabbi, my intention is to ease your pain – or at the very least to share your pain. Your prayers are our prayers.

The liturgy for these High Holy Days are filled with references to families struggling with infertility – Sarah and Abraham, Hannah and Elkanah. Your prayers are at the very heart of what we do here today. If the point of this first mitzvah is to appreciate that life is a gift – one not to be taken for granted, there is no one that appreciates the preciousness of this gift more than those who struggle with the challenges of infertility – we hope this will be a year when your prayers are answered. We are so grateful to live in an era where medicine has made such advances and enabled parents to have children where previously it was impossible. But we also understand there is more than one way to be a parent – that surrogacy and adoption are also meaningful paths to parenthood – to sharing the gift of life.

When I was on the Law Committee of our Movement a few years back, I had the privilege to vote in favor of a *teshuvah* – a paper submitted by Rabbi Kass Abelson and Rabbi Elliott Dorff called “The Mitzvah Child”. You know we Jews love to ask questions. The torah tells us to give *tzedakah* – to give charity – and immediately the rabbis in the Talmud – ask “how much?”

10% comes the answer. “Gross or Net?” we ask. “Build a sukkah!” And we ask – “how big does it have to be? How small can it be? So it should come as no surprise that if there is a mitzvah to have children – the question is explored regarding how many. And traditionally the answer is given that we fulfill our mitzvah when we replace ourselves. And if you think about it – it makes perfect sense – if the motivating spirit of this mitzvah is to express our gratitude for receiving the gift of life – we express appreciation for that gift minimally by passing the gift on – if you will. But a few years ago, Rabbis Abelson and Dorff wrote a teshuvah suggesting we should go beyond the minimum, beyond replacement – especially as a generation that witnessed the destruction of 6 million of our brothers and sisters – we have a holy task to replace ourselves and them. So they suggested – replacement plus one – *l’hagdil* – to increase our numbers in the world. We cannot and should not rely on our Orthodox brothers and sisters to do all the heavy lifting in this regard – if we take this mitzvah seriously – we affirm that it matters that there are Jews in the world and that we want, we need to do our part to ensure the continuation of our people.

Now at this point, if the sociologists are correct – I suspect that there might be a difference of opinion forming in this sanctuary – a divide between the generations. I imagine many of the older members of our community nodding as I speak of the need to have children as an expression of gratitude for the gift of life, of the need to have children as an expression of commitment to Jewish community and Jewish identity – to our older members this makes perfect sense. To our younger members – not so much. I imagine many of our younger members looking somewhat confused if not outright put off that I am suggesting they decide anything as intensely personal as how many – if any children they should have for reasons other than whether or not they want them – period.

Chancellor Arnie Eisen in his ground breaking work, “The Jew Within – Self, Family and Community in America” – argues that for the older generation here today – Judaism was the foundation upon which our identity was built. Even if it was not a religious identity – for many it was a Jewish identity – and it shaped and colored much of our lives – from the people we married, to the neighborhoods we lived in, from the country clubs we joined to the foods we ate even to the way we spoke. Identity for our children is a very different matter – and it is not that Judaism does not matter, it matters very much but – it is for many – no longer the foundation upon which their lives are built – it is one of a number of identities they wear. When they wear their Judaism – they wear it comfortably, and completely and authentically – but they can take it off and move comfortably and completely in other worlds as well. As a result – the choices they are making – about where they live and how they live and even whom they marry are different than the ones we made.

For many of our young people – it is *ani modeh* not *modeh ani*. The “I” precedes everything – and if the “Me Generation” was more than a bit of a caricature – caricatures are nonetheless a depiction of sorts. I will have children, if I want to have children, I will eat what I want to eat, I want a Bar Mitzvah for my son – but I don’t want to send them to Hebrew School, I want the rabbi to bless my marriage – regardless whom I decide to marry. Our friends in Habad have been very successful by speaking to this zeitgeist. Even though they are extremely demanding with regards themselves – but for you – for you we will make no demands - - one day a week Hebrew School – no problem, Bar Mitzvah without any Hebrew school – no problem – they are the perfect Judaism for the Me Generation – like Burger King – they insist that you *can* have it your way. And maybe in all seriousness – we need to understand that both Habad and Burger King have built a very successful business based on this model.

If Chancellor Eisen (and Habad) is correct – making you happy is a necessary element if we hope to attract the next generation to Judaism. And I have come to believe that he is correct, that it *is* necessary; necessary – but I would like to argue here today – not sufficient.

When our children complained about Hebrew School, I heard many parents present the following argument: “Look I hated Hebrew School and had to go – so you’ll go and hate it just like I did!” That argument will not fly today. (Not that I think it was a very compelling argument in our day either). But today – doing things out of a sense of communal responsibility or religious obligation *alone* is a non-starter for many of our young people.

It is this understanding of a fundamental change in how Jews identify that has motivated many of the conversations and new programs here at TBS over the last number of years. From our Moreh Derech program to our decision to be more flexible in creating alternatives for Religious Education, we are willing and we are eager to do it your way. But, for us communal responsibility and religious obligation at some point have to become part of the conversation. I am willing to re-write the Modeh Ani prayer to begin with “I” but at some point we need to transition to the sense of gratitude that leads beyond the self to a larger world of communal and religious responsibility.

This is why we have embarked on an ambitious program this year – to help you fulfill the last mitzvah in the torah, mitzvah #613 – that it is incumbent on each and every Jew to write a *sefer torah* for him or herself. This is so much more than a torah writing project – and I am convinced – that at that moment you take quill in hand and place the ink on the parchment – not only will a torah be written but a Jew will be transformed - - a sacred moment where worlds will collide and your *neshama*, your soul will open to new possibilities.

I believe that my friend and colleague Rabbi Cosgrove is correct and that it makes perfect sense that the 1st and last mitzvah of the torah are about propagation – the first with regards to the human race and the last with regards God’s torah. As Jews – we believe that we were given two wonderful gifts – life and torah. We have a sacred responsibility to enjoy both and we have a sacred responsibility to ensure that life and torah does not end with us – that the world does not begin and end with me. We must make sure to pass it on – if you will – both life and torah. We fulfill the first by having children (mitzvah #1) and the last by writing a *sefer torah* (mitzvah #613) – and this year we are embarking on a wonderful project to write a torah – and to enable you to participate in this most wonderful and transformative of mitzvot!

On Sunday October 14 at 10 AM – we will gather right here, in this sanctuary to commission and inaugurate the writing of a new torah. You will be receiving an invitation in the mail in the next few days. I hope you will put it on your calendar and plan on joining us. A scribe in Jerusalem will be writing our new Temple Beth Sholom torah. As he comes to end of a section – he will not complete it. Rather he will – sketch outline the final letters of that section and these parchments sections will be brought from Jerusalem here to Temple Beth Sholom and we – you will have the opportunity to literally take a quill in your hands, dip it into the ink just as the sofer, just as the scribe does - -and participate in the writing of our torah. During the course of the next 10 months or so – each and every one of our TBS families will be invited to write our torah. When you come for your pre-arranged appointment you will proceed through a series of stations educating you and your children and grandchildren into the meaning of this sacred privilege – you will learn how a torah is written, and prepare to write one for yourself.

We are also planning a yearlong celebration – where we rededicate ourselves to the study of torah and to exploring the meaning of torah study in our lives – for example – in addition to the opening celebration on October 14, on Monday evening December 3, Rabbi Moshe Druin – our sofer –in-chief – our lead scribe will be here to lead a program titled: “The Art and Artistry of Creating a Torah”, on Monday evening January 14 I will lead a program called, “A Tour Through The Torah” where we will literally unroll a torah from one end to the other – from “In the beginning... to the torah’s very last words – *l’eyney kol yisrael*” and conduct a walking tour through the entire torah - -a not to be missed experience. Other events will include a trip to the Rare Book Room at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a visit by Chancellor of JTS, Arnie Eisen to speak on his book, “Taking Hold of Torah”. It will be a yearlong celebration of torah and torah study. And it will culminate in your personal moment writing and creating our torah. This is also going to be an important fund raising project for our congregation. You will also be given an opportunity to sponsor the writing of the torah. You will be able to participate in the writing of the torah whether or not you choose to participate in the sponsoring of it and you will be able to participate in the sponsoring of the torah whether or not you choose to write in it – I hope you will choose to do both. We hope that a successful sponsorship program will enable us not only to cover the cost of creating a new torah but to raise the funds necessary to continue the important work of teaching torah which we do here day in and day out. Specifically we hope to raise enough to eliminate our mortgage responsibility – so that all of our resources from then on can be used for torah. A successful torah project this year will mean that next year we will be a stronger congregation both religiously and financially – I hope you will join us in making this dream come true. We have already raised nearly \$200,000 through the incredible generosity of some preliminary conversations with some of you – we have a remarkable community and I know that as we move forward this torah project will revitalize our congregation in ways we can now only imagine.

Wow! All this just from writing a torah? You see that’s just the point – mitzvah 613 is about so much more than just writing **a** torah. Over the next 12 months we, the members of Temple Beth Sholom are not just creating **a** torah – we are creating torah. And if I let you leave here today without understanding the difference I have failed in teaching the true scope of this remarkable mitzvah.

Tzarich adam lichtov sefer torah l’atzmo – The Rambam chooses his words very carefully – and look how he frames this mitzvah -- *Tzarich adam lichtov sefer torah l’atzmo* - he says that every one of us is expected to write a *sefer torah*– for himself or herself. I believe the Rambam is teaching us something very profound: it is not enough to write a torah – you have to write it for yourself. That is what God did when God wrote the torah. When God wrote the torah for us – He was not copying, or tracing the words of others – no, God’s torah was an expression of God. God’s torah reflects God’s divine will and God’s unique personality – if you will.

And so too you must write your torah – and while I m dangerously close to being heretical here -- I believe that when the Rambam added the word – *l’atzmo* and insisted that we each write a torah for ourselves – that He was teaching us that each of us has within ourselves our own torah, our own unique story, our own way of living and expressing torah, our own code that reflects the essence of who we are, who God wants us to be.

If the torah remains in the Ark and you remain in your seats – mitzvah 613 cannot be fulfilled. But at the moment you sit with quill in hand – you and torah meet, at that moment you

embrace torah and torah embraces you – mitzvah #1 and mitzvah #613 coincide and the torah is fulfilled.

– Elie Wiesel tells a story of how they celebrated *Simchat Torah* in the Concentration Camp of Buna a sub camp of Auschwitz. But how does one celebrate *Simchat Torah* in a death camp? They had no food, no clothes and certainly no torahs. Weisel tells that as they stood there looking at each other, no one sure what to do and an old rabbi said, it is *Simchat Torah* – we are obligated to celebrate, we must dance. But dance how? He was an old, old rabbi surrounded by a bunch of emaciated Jews and they said – we have no torahs to dance with! Where in a death camp will we find a torah? So the rabbi approached a small starving child – “How old are you child?” the rabbi asks. “Thirteen” replied the boy. “Have you studied torah?” The rabbi asks. “Not very much,” replied the boy. “What is the first word of the torah?” Asked the rabbi – “*Bereishit*” replied the boy. “Good enough” said the rabbi and he proceeded to lift up the boy who weighed practically nothing – and carrying him in his arms he began to dance and sing – soon the others formed a circle around the rabbi –and they began to pass the boy from one to another – embracing him – singing and dancing celebrating God’s gift of the torah.

And that is what I believe the Rambam meant when he wrote: *tzarich lichtov sefer torah l’atzmo* – we are each obligated to make ourselves a torah -- “Each of us is a torah that needs to be written, that needs to be given...”

I believe this is going to be a very powerful experience for all of us - -imagine every time you come to shul – imagine when your child comes to the torah for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, imagine when you come in the presence of the torah to name your child or grandchild, to celebrate their marriage, or to honor the memory of a parent at a yahrtzeit –imagine when you look at the torah at any and all of these occasions and you will be able to say, “I wrote that torah! That is my torah! And I am that torah!”

Just as you look at your children and think—long after I am gone – they will live – and I will continue in them and through them – so too you will be able to look at this torah and know that long after we are gone – it will be here – and Judaism will continue -- thanks to you.

The moment has arrived for each of us to pick up the quill left us by prior generations, by loved ones who, though separated by time and space remain forever in our hearts – generations of Jews close and distant – who made it possible for us to exist. We dip the tip of the quill in the inkwell of our tears and we fill in the outlined letters left open by the generations before. We take that same quill and we outline letters of our own, leaving them for others to fill in as they will see fit.

This is the mitzvah we will perform this year. I so hope you will join us.

Zot hatorah asher sam moshe... this is the story of our people, the torah handed down from God to Moses, from generation to generation – the story to this day, and we hope for generations to come.