



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > Day One

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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June 12, 2016  
Shavuot - Day One

**Where Does the Torah  
Originate From?**



# Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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## ABSTRACT

When was the first Torah ever written?

The Talmud says that Moses wrote thirteen Torah scrolls before he passed away.

In another place the Talmud says that the "the art of inscription and engraving, the stylus and the tablets," all of which were used to engrave the Ten Commandments, were created twilight (*bein hashmashot*) at the end of the sixth day of creation. And yet another Talmud states that the Torah precedes creation (by 2,000 years!), when it was written as "white fire upon black fire."

So which one is it? Was the Torah first written 2,000 years before creation, right before the first Shabbat on the sixth day of creation, or at Mount Sinai?

Perhaps the answer lies in the 613th mitzvah, which requires every individual to write a personal Torah scroll.

Writing a Torah scroll, or even one letter in it, is like receiving it at Mount Sinai.

Sure beats buying one on Amazon.

Shavuot

Day One

Where Does the Torah Originate From?

## WHERE DOES THE TORAH ORIGINATE FROM?

### 1. Heaven or Hell (Joke)

A writer, after a long and successful life, passed away and was given the option of going to heaven or hell.

She decided to check out each place first. As she descended into hell, she saw row upon row of writers chained to their desks in a steaming sweatshop. As they worked, pounding on keyboards and glued to their thesauruses, they were repeatedly whipped with leather lashes.

“Oh my,” said the writer. “Let me see heaven.”

A few moments later, as she ascended into heaven, she saw rows of writers, chained to their desks in a steaming sweatshop. As they worked, pounding on keyboards and glued to their thesauruses, they, too, were whipped with leather lashes.

“Wait a minute,” said the writer. “Heaven is just as bad as hell!”

“Oh no, it’s not,” she heard the reply. “Here, in heaven, your work gets published.”

### 2. Bestseller of All Time

The bestseller of all time – selling in the billions of copies – was first published 3,328 years ago today. It happened on Mount Sinai, as the Jewish people stood at the foot of the mountain, and G-d gave them the Torah, or what some call the Bible.

Today, on the festival of Shavuot, we celebrate that event, as we remind ourselves that, from that moment on, it became our responsibility to study the Torah, to live the Torah, and to use its teachings to become “a light unto the nations” (to quote Prophet Isaiah<sup>1</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 49:6.

The Torah is the most profound document in existence. It is the blueprint for the world, revealing the inner (and outer) workings of reality, and humanity's guide for living an optimal, divine life.

The Torah's guidance is conveyed via its 613 mitzvot, which educate and inform us how to be the best, most soulful human beings we could possibly be.

These mitzvot – which actually means connections – tells us how to serve and connect with G-d, how to relate to and connect with our fellow human beings, what to eat, what to wear, when to pray, and everything in between.

### 3. The 613th Mitzvah

The final 613th mitzvah, the culminating mitzvah of the Torah, tells each one of us to write a Torah scroll.<sup>2</sup>

This mitzvah is derived from the following verse in the Book of Deuteronomy, where G-d tells Moses and his successor Joshua:

*“And now, write for yourselves this song [i.e. this Torah] and teach it to the Children of Israel...”*<sup>3</sup>

Writing is a powerful medium. From the Declaration of Independence to a street sign on a highway to the SEO-conscious titles of a webpage, the written word is perhaps the single most influential and powerful tool in existence. It is how we human beings communicate, how laws are set down, how history is chronicled.

The 613th mitzvah instructs us to use the most profound medium – writing – to publish and publicize the most profound book, the Torah.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See the Chinuch, Mitvah #613; Mishneh Torah, Beginning Ch. 7 of Hilchot Mezuzah, Tefilin, and Sefer Torah

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 31:19.

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on how this mitzvah is fulfilled, see Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 17ff, vol. 24, p. 207ff. (An English synopsis may be found at [chabad.org](http://chabad.org).)

What is the essence of this mitzvah, how do we fulfill it, and how does it enhance our lives today, 3,328 years after Sinai?

## 4. The Talmud

The Talmud states something very interesting – and, at first glance, perplexing – about the writing of a Torah scroll:

Whoever purchases a Torah in the shuk is considered to have stolen a mitzvah from the shuk; but if he wrote it, scripture considers it as if he received it at Mount Sinai. Said Rav Sheshet: If he checked it, even [if he checked] but one letter, it's considered as if he wrote it.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the Talmud, Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher and codifier of Jewish law known as the *Mishneh Torah*, rules:

Even if a person's ancestors left him a Torah scroll, it is a mitzvah for him to write one himself. If a person writes the scroll by hand, it is considered as if he received it on Mount Sinai. If he does not know how to write it himself, [he should have] others write it for him. Anyone who checks even a single letter of a Torah scroll is considered as if he wrote the entire scroll.<sup>6</sup>

Why is writing a Torah scroll so important? Why not simply purchase a Torah in the shuk, bazaar, or marketplace, or on Amazon for that matter? Why is buying a Torah seen as stealing a mitzvah from the shuk?

It is understood why the actual Torah scroll from which we read on Shabbat and holidays must be handwritten; but why does each person have to write a personal scroll?

Finally: If this is one of the 613 mitzvot, and the culminating mitzvah no less, why then don't people write Torah scrolls for themselves?

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<sup>5</sup> Menachot 30a.

<sup>6</sup> Mishneh Torah, beginning of Ch. 7 of Hilchot Mezuzah, Tefillin, and Sefer Torah.

Sure, every synagogue has one, but why doesn't every person have one? If the mitzvah is to write a Torah scroll, why don't most Jews, save for a few scribes, fulfill this mitzvah by writing personal Torah scroll, or at least hiring professional scribes to do so?

## 5. When Was the Torah Created?

To answer this question, we must first ask another, more basic one: When was the Torah first "created"?

There are two seemingly contradictory Talmudic statements with regard to the creation, writing and composition of the Torah.

In one place, the Talmud states that ten things were created during twilight (*bein hashmashot*) at the end of the sixth day of creation prior to the beginning of the first Shabbat. These things include "the art of inscription and engraving, the stylus<sup>8</sup> and the tablets." This is an apparent reference to a verse in the Book of Exodus, which speaks of the engraving of the Ten Commandments:

*Now the tablets were G-d's work, and the inscription was G-d's inscription, engraved on the tablets.*<sup>9</sup>

In another place (just a little further down on the very same page<sup>10</sup>), the Talmud states something else – in fact, something blatantly contradictory: that the Torah was created *before* the creation of the world.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Avot 5:6; Pesachim 54a. Ten things were created at twilight: the mouth of the earth [that swallowed Korah]; the mouth of the well [that provided water for the Israelites in the wilderness]; the mouth of the donkey [that spoke to Balaam]; and the rainbow; and the manna; and the staff; and the stylus; and writing/engraving, and inscription; and the tablets.

<sup>8</sup> As per Rashi's commentary to Pesachim 54a. An alternative explanation is that "the writing (*ha'chtav*)" refers to the forms of the letters, while *hamichtav* refers to the actual engraving of the letters on the tablets. Some also maintain that this refers to the letters in general, not only those of the tablets.

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 32:16.

<sup>10</sup> Pesachim 54a.

<sup>11</sup> Based on Proverbs 8:22.

And lest you think that perhaps it wasn't written down then, we have the statement of the great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, that it was indeed written down then as "white fire upon black fire." On top of everything else, the Midrash states<sup>12</sup> that the Torah preceded creation of the world by 2,000 years!<sup>13</sup>

How to make sense of that?

## 6. At Twilight

The explanation, my friends, is contained in the secret of twilight. Why were these ten items created at twilight on Friday eve and not during the six days of creation when everything else was created?

Well, consider that twilight<sup>14</sup> could be three things: 1) day or night; 2) day *and* night; or 3) a third, independent dimension transcending both day and night.<sup>15</sup>

Twilight represents the interface between day and night. In our case, Friday at twilight – as the sun sets on the sixth day of creation – is the bridge between existence and Shabbat.

During the six days of creation all life's necessities were created. Everything essential for life to exist was put into place. The sages<sup>16</sup> explain why the human was created on Friday, on the last and sixth day of creation, because the six days of creation are like the preparation of a feast

<sup>12</sup> Genesis Rabba 8:2.

<sup>13</sup> Commentaries discuss the meaning of "two thousand years prior to creation," though there was no time before time was created. Here is not the place to elaborate on this. One brief point to be made, however, is that this does not refer to physical time, but conceptual time – that Torah precedes the state of existence, as in, "alpayim shono – a'a'lecho chochma, a'a'lecho binah," which precedes the six/seven emotions of the six/seven days of creation.

<sup>14</sup> For the following, see Sichot Kodesh 5737 vol. I, pp. 764-771. Likkutei Sichot vol. IV, p 1220-1224. Toldot Yaakov Yosef, Shemini (p. 304-305).

<sup>15</sup> See Mefaneach Tzfonot, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> Sanhedrin 38a and Rashi.

– a set table with all life’s necessities, which was made all ready and prepared so that the human can then *enter into the feast immediately*, and partake in the feast of life and in fulfilling his and her calling to refine and transform the universe into a divine home. Thus, everything necessary for man’s survival on earth was created before he was.

But then comes Shabbat, the seventh day, when G-d finished the work and no creation took place. G-d’ “rested” and “returned” to His “natural” state which transcends existence. A state of complete pleasure and spiritual delight.

This plays itself out today as well: During the six days of the week we are preoccupied with our work in the material world (as G-d was preoccupied with creating this world during the six days of creation). Through our efforts during the six-day workweek we develop all the resources we need to survive and exist in this world. Then comes Shabbat. On Shabbat we rest – we experience transcendence. We refrain from work as we are elevated to a spiritual state (as G-d “rested” and “returned” to His “natural” state which transcends existence).

The workweek represents the natural world; Shabbat represents the supra-natural world. Six days of the week we are involved in material work. Shabbat is a state of transcendence.

Now we can understand the significance of twilight: Twilight is the bridge between the natural, predicable, biological workweek and the supra-natural, miraculous, transcendent Shabbat.

This will also explain the ten things created at twilight on Friday eve: If everything necessary for man was created in the six days prior to his creation, why then create ten more things during twilight, after man was already created and after he ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? If these ten things were necessary for man to live, they should have been created before him, and if these ten things were not essential for man to live, then why create them at all?

This conundrum is reconciled with a profound teaching: Everything *necessary* for man’s *survival* was created before man during the six days of the natural workweek. But, having every commodity necessary for survival isn’t why humanity was created.



After the eating of the forbidden fruit, when the holy and good was confused with the profane and dark, resources were needed to live, not only in survival mode, but in transcendental mode, so man could transform the mundane and profane into the holy and the sublime. Thus, during that twilight right before Shabbat, G-d created all the *supra-natural* tools needed for man's transcendence. And these ten things paved the way for the transcendence of Shabbat.

These ten things were not created on Shabbat itself but during twilight, for though they lead to the supra-natural, they still need to be connected to the natural, and serve as a bridge between the two.

## 7. Necessity vs. Transcendence

Now we will also understand the reconciliation between the seeming contradiction of when Torah was created – prior to creation or during twilight on Friday.

As the blueprint of existence, which informs and guides all of creation, Torah certainly preceded existence. The world could simply not exist without its blueprint.

But then came the other ten things, including the “the art of inscription and engraving, the stylus and the tablets.” These weren't necessities, but luxuries – tools to achieve transcendence. These were created after everything else, during twilight of the sixth day.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, there are two levels of Torah:

1. As a necessary blueprint of existence – which precedes existence.
2. As a force that allows us to achieve transcendence – the engraved tablets. And that was created Friday eve at twilight, when we were given powers to fuse the transcendent Shabbat and our mundane world.

<sup>17</sup> See Likutei Sichot vol. 4, pp. 1220; Hitvaaduyot 5742, vol. IV, pp. 2240-2243, 2249-2253; Hitvaaduyot 5745, vol. IV, pp. 2068-2069, 2079-2080; et al.

## 8. Written vs. Engraved

The major difference between the Torah scroll that preceded creation and the letters and the tablets that were created during twilight, was that the former was *written* as “white fire upon black fire,” while the latter was *engraved* on stone. The former was written, the latter was hewn.

Written letters represent one entity acquiring another, like purchasing an item in a shuk, or on Amazon. Hewn letters are part and parcel of the tablet itself.

The former are necessary for life to exist. The latter are transcendence.

At Sinai we received the engraved tablets – created at twilight of the first Friday of creation – the power to imbue our lives with utter transcendence.

Only forty years later did Moses (before his passing) write thirteen Torah scrolls.<sup>18</sup> One can say, that the written Torah scroll reflects the “written” Torah (“white fire upon black fire”) which precedes – and is necessary for – existence.

When we read the Torah today – every Shabbat and holiday, including a few minutes ago in this hallowed synagogue when we read about the Sinai experience – we are infusing our experience with the “written” Torah (as a necessity) with the transcendence of the engraved Torah.

Imagine that: As we just read the story of Sinai and the Ten Commandments – and we all stood hearing it, men, women and children, even newborns – we literally recreated the Sinai experience! As the Midrash says<sup>19</sup> that when we read and hear the Ten Commandments each year, it is considered as if we are standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah.

And receiving it in an engraved form – engraved in the souls and beings of every one of us, man, woman and child!

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<sup>18</sup> See Deuteronomy Rabba 89:9. Gittin 60a. Menachot 30a. Rambam, introduction to commentary on Mishnayot and Mishneh Torah. Ramban introduction to commentary on Torah; et al. See Shaloh, Toldot Adam, Beit HaBechira 4 for a discussion on the nature of Torah prior to Sinai.

<sup>19</sup> Pesikta D’Rav Kahana on Exodus 19:1. Cited in Rokeach section 296.

## 9. Sinai Today

How do we access the Sinai experience today? How do we download that engraved and ingrained energy, so that the Torah becomes one with us, part of us, not merely something we acquire, not merely some information we purchase or download?

What is the difference between something we buy in a market or shuk and something that we receive? The former is a commodity, the latter a pleasure.

Perhaps we may say that, today, we may acquire the Sinai experience through the 613th mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll.<sup>20</sup>

Of course, we can buy a Torah scroll via a transaction in a marketplace, like any other commodity which we need to stay alive. But there is another way.

At Mount Sinai, when G-d gifted us with the Torah, He engraved its truth onto our DNA. This level of Torah, we can't acquire. This we must receive and integrate inside our being.

When you *read* the Torah, it is like acquiring a spiritual download from the marketplace. But when you fulfill the 613th mitzvah of *writing* a Torah scroll then you are revealing how your very physical fiber itself is one with divinity and spirituality. The physical act of writing a Torah is who you are, the DNA you received directly from Sinai.

## 10. Practical Takeaways

Here are two practical things you can do today to fulfill the 613th mitzvah of writing a personal Torah scroll:<sup>21</sup>

- purchase a letter in a Torah scroll
- fill your home with holy books

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<sup>18</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, pp. 25-26; vol. 24, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> See Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, pp. 25-26; vol. 24, p. 215.

If checking one letter in a Torah is considered as if you received the Torah at Sinai, how much more so is purchasing a letter in a Torah with the scribe as your messenger!

If, as many commentators assert,<sup>22</sup> we fulfill the mitzvah of writing a Torah scroll by purchasing and being a part of printing books, then what better way then to fill our homes with holy books.

Both of these are easily implemented and their upside is immense.

## 11. Hemingway Hall (Humor)

A visitor to a certain college paused to admire the new Hemingway Hall that had been built on campus.

"It's a pleasure to see a building named for Ernest Hemingway, the author of such classics as *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *Death in the Afternoon*," he said.

"Actually," said his guide, "it's named for Joshua Hemingway. No relation."

The visitor was astonished. "Joshua Hemingway...hmm, I don't seem to recollect. What did he write?"

"A check."

## 12. Doing the Write Thing (Conclusion)

We are all writers. We all do the right thing. Some of us write books, some of us write checks, some of us right wrongs.

Reading and writing is the difference between "acquiring something in the shuk," and "receiving something at Sinai."

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<sup>22</sup> See Rosh and other sources quoted in Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 17ff.

When we read the Torah, we demonstrate how we are acquiring divine wisdom and downloading heavenly thoughts; but it is still one entity acquiring another entity. When, however, we write a Torah scroll, check even one letter, buy a letter, buy books and fill our homes with them, then we reveal how the Torah is part of us, is one with us, is engraved and ingrained into us.

This gift the Jewish people received at Mount Sinai and when we live like this today it is, in the words of the Talmud, as if we are receiving the Torah at Sinai anew.

Chag Sameach!

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