

The Jewish Nation and Books

Category: Devarim, Vayelech

Why are we so particular about books and everything about them?

Books in the Home

A study of little kids learning to read in 1st and 2nd Grades went around several years ago. It shows that children from homes with lots of books succeed far more in school and get higher grades than kids from homes without too much to read.

The study's researcher reasoned that the cause was rooted in parents reading with, and therefore teaching, their children, which would explain why they knew so much. So he came back to participating parents, asking whether they actually read with their kids—and discovered that they did not at all!

The high grades were not a result of joint study with parents—so how did books influence the capacities of these students?

The researcher discovered that a child from a book-bearing home knows that study and knowledge have a place of importance and value to his parents, and this fact influences their tendency for scholastic success. Additionally, when the shelves are loaded with books, it is not unusual for the child to take a book in hand from time to time and read a little, adding to his general knowledge.

People of the Book

The Jewish Nation is called “the People of the Book.” Let's take a look and see what the relationship between the Jewish people and books is.

Everyone knows that a Jew must give 10 percent of his earnings to charity. This is known as “ma'aser,” and it is a mitzvah from the Torah. However, there are specific cases when one is permitted to use maaser monies to purchase specific items.

According to halachah, Jewish law, if a man does not have enough standard money, he may use maaser money to pay for a quality Jewish education for his

children. He can pay tuition with that 10 percent set aside for tzedakah—because Judaism doesn't see children's Jewish education as a personal matter, but a communal need for all of Jewry. In other words, that money is tzedakah—no less than any other worthy cause.

In like manner it is permitted to use maaser money to purchase holy books. It is of great importance for the Jew to have holy books in his home, to the extent that it is considered not a personal need but rather, a communal need for the entire Jewish nation.

Furthermore, everyone knows the Torah's first mitzvah, "be fruitful and multiply," but not everyone knows the Torah's last mitzvah, which appears in our parshah this week: "Write this song for yourselves." There is a mitzvah for every Jew to personally write "this song," meaning a Torah scroll, as Maimonides rules explicitly: "It is a positive commandment upon every Jewish man to write a Torah scroll for himself as the verse states, 'Write this song for yourselves,' meaning, write the Torah scroll which contains this song."

Still, the question remains: Why don't Jews regularly engage in this mitzvah? True, it is an expensive mitzvah that costs quite a bit, but at the very least, one can start writing a Torah scroll by hiring a scribe right after his Bar Mitzvah. Every Bar Mitzvah boy, right after his Bar Mitzvah, can use his Bar Mitzvah gift monies to have a scribe start writing a Torah scroll just for him. And if the money is not enough, he'll earn enough money here and there to have the scribe continue, until the scroll is completed.

Doing the Mitzvah

But the Rishonim, the leaders of medieval Jewry, explain that the whole mitzvah only applies when the scroll would be the only Torah scroll available, and the one literally studied from. Before the Talmudic Era, when none of the Oral Torah was committed to writing, G-d wanted each individual to physically possess a Torah scroll from which to directly study Torah. In our day, however, explain the Rishonim, when we don't study out of the Torah scroll itself but rather, out of books, this mitzvah means we must amass printed books, books of Torah study from which we can learn Torah amply. In this manner, we fulfill the mitzvah of "writing this song for yourselves."

Additionally, we see the honor Jews render books. The great Maharal of Prague, leader of Prague's medieval Jewish community, writes that when two men want to simultaneously enter a room and one is holding a holy book, the one carrying the book enters first.

Jews don't leave holy books on the floor, and even don't sit on a chair upon which there is a holy book—rather, they first pick up the book and then sit down.

This is an explicit halachah in Shulchan Aruch: “It is forbidden to sit on a bed with a Torah scroll on it,” to which renowned authority, the Rama, added, “and the same applies to all other holy books.”

When one sefer, or holy book, is placed upon another, there is a specific order of which goes on top—for example, if you have a Chumash, a Navi and a Gemara, you put the Navi on top of the Gemara and the Chumash above both. Likewise, you never put a sefer upside down.

There is an additional halachah: when you are studying Torah and you want to take a break, you can't leave your sefer open and just walk away. Rather, you must close the sefer before you leave—and another halachic commentator writes that “one who leaves a sefer open and leaves will forget his learning.”

Years ago, a fire broke out in the synagogue in Malakhovka (an area of Moscow), in which many seforim were burnt, although the Torah scrolls were spared. A great funeral was held at which all the destroyed seforim were buried at the local cemetery.

The Author's Investment

But why indeed do we Jews have such respect for seforim?

Chasidism explains that the first word of the Ten Commandments, “*Anochi*,” Hebrew for “I” (as in “I am the Lord your G-d”), is an acronym for *ana nafshi ksavis yihavis*, which, translated literally, means “I myself wrote gave.” This means to say that G-d Himself wrote and gave the Torah.

But the Rebbe always explained that “*ana nafshi*” means that G-d inserted His *nefesh*, His very essence, into the Torah—meaning that the Torah is not just another book, but a “piece” of G-d. The Rebbe also explained that since tzadikim,

holy Jewish leaders, are like their Creator, there is a “piece” of each tzadik in the books they write, since they inject their very souls into their writings.

What emerges, however, is that Judaism sees the author himself in the book. Therefore, when we hold a Gemara containing the words of Rabbi Akiva, it is as if we are holding hands with Rabbi Akiva. Thus, when two men want to simultaneously enter a room and one is holding a book, it is obvious that the book-bearer goes first as a sign of respect—after all, it’s not him but Rabbi Akiva entering the room. For the same reason, when one places one book upon another, Moses (the Chumash) goes before Samuel the Prophet, and both go before Rabbi Akiva, in generational order.

That’s also why we close the book when we stop learning—because when a person is studying from a book, say, Maimonides, it’s as if he’s personally studying with Maimonides. And to get up and walk out in the middle of personal meeting with Maimonides is simply a chutzpa. One really ought to ask permission to leave—and does so by closing the book before departing. This is also the reason for burying destroyed seforim, because we are not dealing with just books, but with the very souls of those who wrote them.

But with all this, the greatest honor one can render Jewish books is: to study them.