

The Ultimate Collector's Item

Category: Holidays, Rosh Hashana

Do you ever struggle with giving presents? How about the most Jewish collector's item—the book that has stayed the same for thousands of years...

Jews and Collectors

Good Yom Tov!

Every self-respecting Jew on this planet collects something!

Some people—more than just some, actually—are into rare coins. There are people who are prepared to pay huge amounts of money for one single coin from the Bar Kochva era, for example.

Others among us collect things that are bigger and more expensive items than ancient coins: classic cars. I've heard of a Jew who owns a car from 1907 and another one who has quite a collection of vintage Rolls Royces and other vehicles from the 1920s. Both of these collectors, obviously, hover over their collections and guard them with their very heart and soul.

Yet others collect old handmade grandfather clocks—you know, the ones that have swinging pendulums inside them that keep them going. Each one costs about \$10,000. I heard of a collector who has seven of them.

Then you have people who collect stamps. They have albums filled with stamps to no end, and they invest their very soul into their hobby. There are men who collect fancy ties, and there are women who have large collections of shoes.

Bottom line? Everyone collects something.

I once visited the home of a Jew who had a collection of glassware. He had closets filled with glass items of every conceivable type. He gave me a guided tour of the house. Over the course of several hours, he explained the intricacies of each item—how each was made of a slightly different kind of glass, etc. He even opened his display cases to let me touch and hold some of the items, and was not at ease until he saw that I gained an appreciation of how valuable his glassware

collection really was.

Nowadays, some people's homes are more museums than homes! This piece of art was painted by So-and so, that item is made of special material, and every piece of furniture comes with a 15-minute explanation.

As a matter of fact, if people would just put together visitors' guides of their homes, complete with a photograph and explanation of every item, they could possibly get away with never having to have any guests! Somebody wants to come over your house? Just give him your visitors' guide and you're done!

But we're not done yet. There are people who collect Judaica items, like old kiddush cups. Others collect old Kesubahs. I know of a Jew whose Kesubah reads "Bergen Belsen." This is a Jew who lost his wife and child in the Holocaust, and immediately after the war, he met another woman who had also lost her spouse. So before they left Bergen Belsen, after liberation, they got married in Bergen Belsen—and their Kesubah says so. This Kesubah is definitely a collector's item—such a Kesubah you don't find anywhere and it was donated to a Holocaust museum.

But lest you feel that the rabbi is getting left out here, rest assured that I'm also a collector: I collect Jews to come to minyan. I collect Jews to come to Torah classes. I collect Jewish kids in Hebrew School.

That's because there's one collector's item that is the greatest item anyone could have: the Torah.

Our Book

In the course of his life, Moshe Rabbeinu wrote exactly 13 Torah scrolls, and he completed them on the day of his death and gave one to each of the Twelve Tribes. As for the 13th, he ordered that one to be placed in the most secure location the Jewish Nation has ever had: inside the Kodesh HaKodashim, the Holy of Holies.

The Tanach tells us the story of King YOSHIAHU, who was a child of eight when his father, the previous king, was assassinated. He was immediately made king at that tender age. But unlike his father and grandfather, YOSHIAHU was a good and

righteous man who wanted to bring the Jewish People back to Judaism—at that time, they all were idol “collectors.” Everyone had an idol bigger than the next guy’s idol. They literally worshipped man-made idols and statues. And King Yoshiahu wanted to change this.

So one day, King Yoshiahu ordered a full inspection of the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple. He had all the nooks and crannies and corners and rooms fully inspected—and, to their shock, they discovered the actual Torah scroll that Moshe Rabbeinu had personally written.

This, understandably, was profoundly inspiring to the king, and he started a repentance campaign for the entire nation. We’re talking about 800 years after Moshe had written the scroll.

Even today, Jewish archaeologists in Israel and elsewhere are looking for the oldest Torah scroll existing—and not because Jews love antiques. Rather, it’s because there is a practical benefit to finding the oldest Torah scroll.

In the Five Books of Moses, there are over 304,000 letters. Now, every Torah scroll is written precisely the same way. However, there is a dispute over one single letter: whether that letter should be the Hebrew letter aleph (the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet) or the Hebrew letter hey (the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet). The word in question is the word “daka,” and there is a dispute whether the last letter of “daka” should be an aleph or a hey.

Whether it ends with an aleph or a hey doesn’t change the meaning or context of the word. It’s like the name Yehudah. Some people spell the Hebrew name Yehudah with a hey at the end and some spell it with an aleph, but it doesn’t change the name at all—it’s simply a question of correct spelling.

So when it comes to “daka,” the Chasidic custom is to spell it with an aleph at the end, while other communities spell it with a hey at the end.

The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe once related that when he once visited the city of Prague and visited the synagogue of the legendary Maharal MiPrague, Rabbi Yehudah Loewy of Prague, he was shown a very old Torah scroll that was said to have been reviewed by Ezra the Scribe himself. That would make it about 2,500 years old at the time—and in that Torah scroll, the word daka was spelled with an aleph at the end.

And so, to this very day, Jews are trying to find the oldest Torah scroll so they could decide once and for all what the correct spelling is.

But what's shocking about this whole story is that we're talking about a scroll that has over 304,000 letters in it, written over 3,300 years ago—and after all the migrations and catastrophes and exiles that the Jewish Nation underwent, the only thing that's changed is one little letter; the only thing there is an argument over is a single letter.

And the reason this has happened, my friends, is because every Jewish community, and essentially, every Jew, had a copy of the original. Everyone had a printed copy of the Torah, what we call the Chumash, in their house, out of which they would study and teach the children—and everyone took pains to protect it. They didn't put it in an antiquities case for display only. Quite the contrary—they constantly used it; every day, they studied from this copy.

Thus, if they found one letter missing, they would quickly correct it.

On the other hand, if you have a book lying closed in a box and after years, you open it and discover that certain letters have faded, you don't remember what they originally said, and so you don't know how to fix it.

With the Torah, however, it's studied every day—and so if you discover that one letter is starting to fade, you immediately correct it. And that's why we have arrived at this amazing concept—that after 2,000 years, there is only an argument over one letter.

Buy Him a Chumash!

The lesson is that we need to see to it that every Jew has a Chumash in his or her house. It's not fitting that "the People of the Book" do not have "the Book" in their homes.

I'm not asking you to obligate yourselves to open the Book—I'm just saying that it should be in the house.

For starters, the very fact that you have a Chumash in the house brings blessing into your house. And a side benefit is that maybe your kid will open it and start reading it, and he or she will take an interest in it. You might even experience a

miracle, finding yourself opening the book in a “moment of weakness.”

Now I’ll bet that many of you are sitting there thinking, “the rabbi doesn’t know who he’s talking to! I have not one but two Chumashim in my house! What does he want from me?”

But, my friends, today is Rosh Hashanah, and all of world Jewry is one big body. And so, now is the time for every Jew to be concerned about every other Jew.

You know, sometimes people “break their heads” trying to think of the perfect gift to buy their friends for their 40th birthdays. They think, “What can I buy for him that he doesn’t have already?”

Thank G-d, we live in a day and age when people have not just what they need but also what they want—so chances are that if it’s something they want, than they already have it. Which means that you can’t buy if for them—you’re too late.

So here’s a simple suggestion: Buy him a Chumash.

While you may have a Chumah, or even two, I’ll bet you that your friend who has everything—you know, your friend over whom you’re racking your brains trying to figure out what to buy him—doesn’t have a Chumash. And you won’t have to worry that someone else will buy him the same present, either.

And to make this present even more special, go ahead and have your friend’s Hebrew name inscribed in gold stamp on the front cover, so that he’ll always remember his Jewish name.

The famous lawyer Nat Lewin tells the story that when Ruth Bader Ginsburg was appointed to the Supreme Court, an international Jewish attorneys association decided to throw a dinner in her honor and give her an award upon the momentous achievement of becoming the first Jewish woman ever appointed to the highest court in the United States.

And Mr. Lewin, being the president of the United States division of this international organization, was the one who had to give her this honor.

So, since her name was Ruth, and the dinner was to be held before the holiday of Shavuos, Mr. Lewin decided to give her a Megilas Rus, the Book of Ruth, written on parchment in the Hebrew calligraphy used to write Torah scrolls. And at the

dinner, Lewin presented her with the gift and spoke about the connection between the holiday and the ancient heroine Ruth.

The following year, another Jew was appointed to the Supreme Court: Stephen Breyer. This time, a dinner in his honor was expected—and Lewin thought, what could he give this judge as a gift?

So he asked Justice Breyer what his Jewish name was, and Breyer answered that he didn't know but that he would ask his brother. So after a bit of an investigation, Breyer sent a fax to Mr. Lewin that his Hebrew name was Shlomo Ben Yitzchak.

Mr. Lewin received the fax while he was visiting Israel. So he immediately got the idea in his head that Justice Breyer's name was the same as Rashi, or Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchok, the famous commentator on the Torah and the Talmud.

So immediately, Mr. Lewin set out upon the streets of Meah Shearim, the most religious section of Jerusalem, to find something that had to do with the name "Rashi." And in one of the little shops, he found a beautiful lithograph of the words "Shma Yisrael" surrounded by the words of Rashi's commentary

on that entire paragraph. It was written in the famous Rashi font.

So at the party, Lewin spoke at length about Justice Breyer's Hebrew name and how it is the same name as the famous Jewish commentator Rashi. He then presented Breyer with the gift. Justice Breyer very much loved the gift, and hung it in his office, where he greatly cherished it.

But the story's not over yet.

A short time after that, Justice Breyer was visiting London, England, where he stopped in a synagogue for services. When the gabbai, who is a sort of usher, was notified that this Jewish visitor was no less than a justice of the United States Supreme Court, he approached him and said, "Justice Breyer, we would very much like to give you an aliyah. What is your Jewish name?"

Unfortunately, Breyer couldn't remember his Jewish name at the moment. So the gabbai waited a moment and then politely went on his way. But then, suddenly, Breyer called out, "Wait a second! I know! I know! My name is the same name as Rashi..."

So you never know. When you give your friend a gift of a Chumash, or if you give your child a Chumash or even Siddur (prayer book), make sure it also has their Hebrew name on it too. You'll be happy to discover that as the years and decades go by, it'll be the only present that they truly cherish and keep.

So as this New Year gets underway, let's dedicate ourselves to collecting the items that truly have the most worth: mitzvos. And when the occasions arise, let's enrich the collections of our family and friends with those items that ultimately mean the most: Chumashim and siddurim—and with their Hebrew names inscribed.