



King Saul

Rembrandt

I will attempt to plot a trajectory of interpretation of what seemingly appeared to be a straightforward commandment, that of the writing of a Sefer Torah by the potential king of Israel as described in Deut. 17:18-20.

The reference to the Torah as “Mishneh Torah” however, triggers a rabbinic misreading of the word “Mishneh”, not as the plain sense i.e. a reviewed or rehearsed Torah, nor even as a repetitive Torah (as in the Book of Devorim=Mishneh Torah), rather the root “sheni” or second I.e. he must write a second Torah.

The Talmud goes on to claim that he must wear one at all times (presumably to consult in matter of law) however the second one is placed in his treasure house, hidden from public view.

The Hassidic interpretation picks up on this theme of two Torahs to elucidate the obscure reason to hide the second Torah in a dazzling mystical interpretation.

Let us examine the texts sequentially.

When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching (Torah) written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws.

(Deut. 17:18–19)

Rashi is cited below:

<p>18And it will be, when he sits upon his royal throne, that he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah on a scroll from [that Torah which is] before the Levitic kohanim.</p>	<p>יְחֹהֵיגָה כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עַל כִּסֵּא מִמְלַכְתּוֹ וְכָתַב לּוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר מְלִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם:</p>
<p>And it will be, when he sits [upon his royal throne]: If he does this, he merits that his kingdom will remain established. — [Sifrei]</p>	<p>וְהִיא כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ: אִם עָשָׂה כֵן כְּדָאֵי הוּא שְׂתִתְקִיִּים מְלִכּוֹתוֹ:</p>

<p>two copies of this Torah-: Heb. מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה i.e., two Torah scrolls, one that is placed in his treasury, and the other that comes and goes with him (San. 21b). [I.e., a small scroll, which the king carries with him. Thus the Talmud derives מִשְׁנֵה from שְׁנַיִם, two.] Onkelos, however, renders פְּתֻשָּׁגִן, copy. He interprets [the word] מִשְׁנֵה in the sense of repeating and uttering. [I.e., one copy of the Torah, which the scribe would write while uttering the words before he writes them, deriving מִשְׁנֵה from שִׁנּוּן, studying .]</p>	<p>את משנה התורה: שתי ספרי תורה. אחת שהיא מונחת בבית גזזיו ואחת שנכנסת ויוצאת עמו. ואונקלוס תרגם פתשגן, פתר משנה לשון שנון ודבור:</p>
<p>19And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord, his God, to keep all the words of this Torah and these statutes, to perform them,</p>	<p>יְטוּהִי־תָהּ עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לִירְאֵה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו לְשִׁמּוֹר אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:</p>
<p>the words of [this] Torah: [This is to be understood] according to its apparent meaning [namely a commandment written in the Torah].</p>	<p>דברי התורה: כמשמעו:</p>
<p>20so that his heart will not be haughty over his brothers, and so that he will not turn away from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, in order that he may prolong [his] days in his kingdom, he and his sons, among Israel.</p>	<p>כְּלַבְלֵתִי רוּם־לִבּוֹ מֵאֶחָיו וּלְבִלְתִּי סוּר מִן־הַמִּצְוָה יְמִין וּשְׂמֹאל לְמַעַן יֵאָרֶיךָ יָמִים עַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו בְּקִרְבֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p>
<p>and so that he will not turn away from the commandment: Not even from a minor commandment of a prophet.</p>	<p>ולבלתי סור מן המצוה: אפילו מצוה קלה של נביא:</p>
<p>in order that he may prolong [his] days [in his kingdom]: From this positive statement, one may understand the negative inference [i.e., if he does not fulfill the commandments, his kingdom will not endure]. And so we find in the case of Saul, that Samuel said to him, “Seven days shall you wait until I come to you to offer up burnt-offerings” (LSam. 10:8), and it is stated, “And he waited seven days” (LSam. 13:8), but Saul did not keep his promise and neglected to wait the entire [last] day. He had not quite finished sacrificing the burnt-offering, when Samuel arrived and said to him (LSam. 13:13-14), “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept [the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you...] so now your kingdom will not continue” (LSam. 13:13-14). Thus we learn, that for [transgressing] a minor commandment of a prophet, he was punished.</p>	<p>למען יאריך ימים: מכלל הן אתה שומע לאו. וכן מצינו בשאול שאמר לו שמואל שבעת ימים תוחל עד בואי אליך (שמואל א' י, ח) להעלות עולות וכתוב ויחל שבעת ימים (שמואל א' יג, ח) ולא שמר הבטחתו לשמור כל היום, ולא הספיק להעלות העולה עד שבא שמואל ואמר לו נסכלת לא שמרת וגו' ועתה ממלכתך לא תקום (שם יג ז - יד). הא למדת, שבשביל מצוה קלה של נביא נענש:</p>
<p>he and his sons: [This] tells [us] that if his son is worthy of becoming king, he is given preference over any [other] person. — [Hor. 11b]</p>	<p>הוא ובניו: מגיד שאם בנו הגון למלכות הוא קודם לכל אדם:</p>

Rashi interprets this phrase quite literally and explains that this Torah was intended to be with him at all times. It served as the King's spiritual compass, and reminded him of his bearings and of his sacred mission.

The Talmud comments as follows:

And he shall write in his own name a Sefer Torah. When he goes forth to war he must take it with him; on returning, he brings it back with him; when he sits in judgment it shall be with him, and when he sits down to eat, before him, as it is written: and it shall be with him and he shall read therein all the days of his life.

(M Sanhedrin 2:4)

A Tanna taught: And he must not take credit for one belonging to his ancestors. Rabbah said: Even if one's parents have left him a Sefer Torah, yet it is proper that he should write one of his own . . .

(BT Sanhedrin 21b)

לא צריכא לשתי תורות וכדתניא (דברים יז, יח) וכתב לו את משנה וגו' כותב לשמו שתי תורות אחת שהיא יוצאה ונכנסת עמו ואחת שמונחת לו בבית גנזיו

The Gemara dismisses Abaye's objection: No, the ruling of that baraita is necessary to teach that the king is commanded to write two Torah scrolls; he writes one scroll as does any Jew, and he writes an additional scroll because he is king. And this is as it is taught in a baraita: The verse states: "That he shall write for himself a second Torah in a scroll, out of that which is before the priests the Levites" (Deuteronomy 17:18). This teaches that he writes for his sake two Torah scrolls, one that goes out and comes in with him at all times, and one that is placed in his treasury.

אותה שיוצאה ונכנסת עמו (עושה אותה כמין קמיע ותולה בזרועו שנאמר (תהלים טז, ה) שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד כי מימיני בל אמוט) אינו נכנס בה לא לבית המרחץ ולא לבית הכסא שנאמר (דברים יז, יט) והיתה עמו וקרא בו מקום הראוי לקראות בו

The baraita continues: With regard to the one that goes out and comes in with him, he makes it very small, like an amulet, and he hangs it on his arm, as it is stated: "I have set the Lord always before me; He is at my right hand, that I shall not be

moved” (Psalms 16:8). This alludes to the small Torah scroll that is always on his right hand. He does not go into the bathhouse with it, nor into the bathroom, as it is stated: “And it shall be with him and he shall read from it” (Deuteronomy 17:19), meaning, it shall remain in a place that is appropriate for reading from it.

Ramban comments that the king needed to internalize the eternal lessons of the Torah to the extent that they [the lessons contained in the Torah] remain with him all the days of his life.

The Rambam notes that if the king inherited one Sefer, he would write the second one on his own. If, however, he did not own a Sefer Torah, he would be obligated to write two sefarim.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer, known as the Chasam Sofer, explains that the Torah needed to be in the possession of the king at all times since he would need to make difficult decisions throughout his reign – often far from his palace. The Torah would serve as his guide to which he can consult with [read from, as the pasuk states] whenever he needed guidance.

The question arises; why was there a need for two Sifrei Torah, and why was the second one stored in his treasure house, of all places?

Rav Shlomo Kluger (1785-1869) offers the following insight into these two Sefer Torahs.¹

The pasuk describing the appointment of the King uses the double language of Som Ta'sim - You shall surely place upon yourselves. The Rabbis infer from here that the fear of the King must be upon the people. We no longer have the ability to relate to this concept. We have not experienced an absolute monarchy in modern times. But when there was an absolute monarchy, if one looked at the king in the wrong way the result could be "Off with his head!" It was actually a mitzvah to appoint a king that the people would be afraid of.

A king is not a friend or a pal. He is the ruler, with all the trappings of majesty. On the other hand, at the end of the section dealing with the monarchy, the Torah emphasizes concern "That his heart not become haughty over his brethren and that he not turn from the commandment right or left" [17:20].

¹ <https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5760-shoftim>

This almost seems to contradict the earlier language. When the President of the United States goes anywhere to speak, the band plays "Hail to the Chief". Everyone snaps to attention. His every proclamation is accompanied by "Hail to the Chief". After a while, this can go to his head. Certainly such treatment could also go to the head of a Jewish King, who by law is obligated to act in a manner that should inspire fear in his subjects. This can undoubtedly lead to lack of humility.

Therefore, the pasuk "Lest his heart become lifted above his brethren" serves as a counterbalance. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The Jewish Monarch must act like a king when he is in front of the people, but he is not allowed to let his heart get carried away.

He must remember who he is and remember who the Only King [G-d] is.

Rav Shlomo Kluger says that this is what is meant by the fact that the King writes two Torah scrolls for himself - one with which he goes out and one which remains at home. When he goes out he has to wear the Torah of "You shall surely place upon yourselves a King" - he must act like a King and instill awe like a King. But when he returns home and settles down into the privacy of his own abode, he must be aware of the Torah that is hidden away at home. That is the Torah of "Lest his heart be lifted above that of his brethren". The lesson is that power corrupts.

I remain bothered by the wording Mishneh Torah as referring to two Torah's...

This verse is the textual source for the phrase mishneh torah referred to above. The more accurate rendering is "a copy of this torah," as reflected in Targum Onkelos's translation פתשגן אורייתא הדא (as opposed to a recapitulation of the Torah). This meaning can be derived from the use of the term mishneh kesef in Gen 43:12, referring to the double amount of money with which Joseph's brothers returned to Egypt, and the term lechem mishneh in Exod 16:22, referring to the double amount of manna that was collected on Fridays. Thus, mishneh torah is to be explained as an additional copy of the torah scroll, a doubling, as it were, of the original copy.

Yet the rabbinic interpretation was that of mishneh as *sheni* as in a second Torah.

Fast forward to a dazzling explanation based on mystical sources that comes from the Lithuanian Hassidic school represented by the Slonimer dynasty.

עוד י"ל ענין משנה התורה ע"פ מד"א בספה"ק
 דכשם שיש ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה כנגד ששים
 רבוא נשמות ישראל, כך יש ששים רבוא פירושים
 לתורה. לכל נשמה יש פירוש מיוחד לתורה המלמד
 ליהודי בכל דרכיו את יעודו ותפקידו בעולמו. ומכח
 זה נשמת אדם תלמדנו, שמהיכן יודעת הנשמה אלא
 שיונקת היא מהפירוש שלה בתורה. וזהו ענין הס"ת
 שמונחת לו בבית גנזיו, בית גנזיו מרומז לס"ת של
 הנשמה, הפירוש המיוחד שבתורה השייך אליו.

The previous Slonimer Rebbe interprets the ambivalent meaning of Mishnah Torah

One can interpret the meaning along the lines of the holy books that claim that there are 600000 letters of the Torah, equivalent to the 600000 souls of Israel. This mystical notion was already described in the Zohar.

The parallelism between letters of the Torah and souls also tropes off the letter mysticism of Abulafia and Sefer Yetsira where the very building blocks of the spiritual universe, the very periodic table are the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This claim furthered the theory by suggesting that every soul who stood at the Revelation on Mt Sinai was represented to was given one of these letters. Every soul has a root in the Torah and a claim.

Now the Rebbe stretches this further by claiming that there are 600000 interpretations to the Torah precisely because each soul was given a unique divine revelation that only he or her was privy to. To each is given a unique interpretation within Torah he must claim that will reveal his purpose and witness in this world.

This is the meaning of the second hidden Torah in the treasure house. It represents the Sefer Torah of the soul (neshama) that interpretation unique within Torah relevant only to him or her.

As opposed to the first Torah he writes which 'goes in and out with him' which represents the general Torah all Israel shares in its discourse, its commonality of history myth and purpose.

This dazzling duality of public/private, common/individual, shared/personal, reveals the depth of how far the 20th century Hassidic rebbes have imbibed the notion of the self, the individual, and the validation of each person's share within the ecclesia of Knesset Yisrael, yet all the while owning one's own unique and divinely authored personal real estate in the Torah which teaches him or her their own unique interpretation that makes up the whole.

There is no hint of the outer limits of interpretation, the heretical nature to many who have interpreted the Torah not in line with the classical rabbinic methods (the hermeneutical principles for example). This is a freewheeling latitude of open minded welcoming democracy of values.

Furthermore the two Torahs reflect two divergent ways of learning. The first is the common discourse of Torah we all share. The back and forth of Talmudic debate, the ways we arrive at a consensus of halachic option, the rules by which we interpret the written law.

Then there is implied a different non didactic way of approaching Torah. Not data mining for information or case law, not the accumulation of reams and reams of Talmud, slowly building a data base of knowledge by which to apply to new situations, rather constant searching of texts to find that unique interpretation which speaks to one's soul.

It is as if we swim in the sea of Talmud mining it for data points that light up one's soul. I am reminded of my youth listening to classical music (with Charles, of course!) awaiting the next piece that would completely floor me, after which I would constantly repeat the performance until it was hackneyed. I think the search

for Torah's that move me to tears or excite me are precisely the kind of Torah's he is talking about when he claims it is the very soul interpretation unique within Torah that then teaches him or her, AND IT IS FROM THIS POWER THAT THE SOUL TEACHES HIM OR HER.

For “where would a soul know...if it not from its feeding of its own unique interpretation it has rooted in Torah”. This is the Sefer Torah of the soul/neshama.

In fact this “unique interpretation” is the very opposite of the didactic *shteiging* in Torah we are accustomed to when thinking of “Torah”. The “knowledge” I believe he is speaking of is not a rational interpretive hermeneutic for anyone might then have access to it and it would not be unique.

This “*peirush*” this interpretation that teaches this unique soul its path in life and task is an intuitive experimental knowledge, that aha moment when one just knows a truth (not merely a fact). It might be the interpretation unique to this soul might even conflict with the regnant party line interpretation yet nevertheless be true for this soul.

We have followed the trajectory from the plain meaning of the text, through the rabbinic commentaries and the Talmudic claim of “Two Torah's”, one public and one private, to the mystical and highly individual spirituality that stands side by side with the exoteric torah, implying two revelations, one public and one uniquely private but BOTH of equal authority.