

דברים לג:ד

תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב:

דברים יא:כב

כי אם שמר תשמרון את כל המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם לעשותה לאהבה אתה' אלהיכם ללכת בכל דרכיו ולדבקה בו:

ספרי דברים פרשת עקב פיסקא מה

כי אם שמור תשמרון את כל המצוה הזאת - שמא תאמר ישנו בני הזקנים, ישנו בני הגדולים, ישנו בני הנביאים, תלמוד לומר: כי אם שמור תשמרון - מגיד שהכל שוים בתורה. וכן הוא אומר: (דברים לג:ד) תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב - כהנים, לויים, וישראלים אין כתוב כאן אלא קהלת יעקב. וכן הוא אומר: (דברים כט:ט) אתם נצבים היום כלכם. [מה אילו זה שעמד וקיים תורה בישראל לא היתה תורה משתכחת מה אילו לא עמד שפן בשעתו עזרא בשעתו רבי עקיבה בשעתו לא היתה תורה משתכחת...]

Deuteronomy 33:4

The Torah which Moses commanded us, is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.

Deuteronomy 11:22

If you shall surely observe all this commandment that I have commanded you today, to do it, to love the Lord your God, to walk in all God's ways and to cleave to God.

Sifre to Deuteronomy 11:22 (#48)

If you shall surely observe all this commandment: Lest you say, "There are the children of elders, the children of the great ones, the children of the prophets [let them study the Torah]." Therefore, it is written: You shall surely observe — this verse teaches us that everyone is equal when it comes to study of Torah. And thus it says: The Torah that Moses commanded us is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. (Deut. 33:4) It is not written, "Priests, Levites and Israelites," rather, "The [entire] congregation of Jacob..."

The holiday season concludes with *Shmini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah*, celebrated in Israel on one day and in the Diaspora on two separate days. The holiday of *Simhat Torah* is not mentioned in the Torah and developed as a celebration marking the conclusion of the annual Torah reading cycle. The day is markedly joyful as we dance with the Torah scrolls in synagogue and as we call people to the reading of the final Torah portion.

The fourth verse that we read: The Torah which Moses commanded us is the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob (Deut. 33:4), is both descriptive and prescriptive. Torah is our inheritance, our birthright, commanded by Moses to the entire people. As *Sifre* points out, we could reasonably expect that Torah is meant for an elite, capable of studying the text at the highest levels. By calling Torah an inheritance, the verse undercuts that claim. Like the land of Israel, Torah is the inheritance of all the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is not simply a text to be studied, Torah is a conversation between God and the people of Israel — it is our national story, our life blood and it belongs to all of us.

Enter a Jewish nursery school where traditional prayers are recited and you will undoubtedly hear this classic — *Torah, Torah, Torah, Torah, Torah, Torah, Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*, the words of this verse set to a simple melody. These children are not engaging in scholarship; they are imbibing the message that Torah is theirs.

But what happens when we shut the doors of our schools. What happens when we determine that IQ, “good” behavior, long attention spans, and reading fluency determine who will and who will not receive a Jewish education? That violates the message of this verse. Torah is not earned by passing an entrance exam; it belongs to every Jewish child and every Jewish adult simply by virtue of being part of the congregation of Jacob.

This *Simhat Torah* as we celebrate again the completion of the Torah reading cycle, let’s commit to beginning this next cycle by sharing Torah equally among all of its heirs.