THE MOST IMPORTANT SEFER TORAH IN THE WORLD

By Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz - February 10, 2016
The Zohar remarks that even a sefer Torah can be subject to luck – some are destined to be used prominently, while others are fated to gather dust and be ignored. If that is so, I know of one of the luckiest Torah scrolls in the world, which, despite the fact it sits humbly in a bomb shelter in Jerusalem, is arguably the most important sefer Torah in the world today.

This sefer Torah was donated in response to a terrible tragedy. Shira Banki, a 16-year-old student, was murdered last summer while marching in the Jerusalem Pride Parade. Her assailant was a haredi Jew who despised gay rights. Sadly, judging from pashkevil (posted) notices put up after her murder, a significant number of people in the murderer’s community supported this horrible crime.

At the same time, this murder disturbed many other Orthodox Jews who were disgusted that the Torah was used as a justification for bloodshed. In particular, this horrible crime had a profound impact on Dr. Mark Wainberg, a leading AIDS researcher who is also an observant Jew. For him, this was a clash of the two worlds he lives in. He’s a past president of an Orthodox synagogue and at the same time works side by side with the LGBTQ community in the battle against AIDS.

**READ: LIVING WITH HIV IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY**

Mark decided to do something dramatic in response to this awful murder: he pledged to donate a sefer Torah in Shira Banki’s memory. Shira had been
murdered in the name of Halachah, and the murderer said the Torah was on his side. In response, this sefer Torah declares loudly that the Torah stands on the side of Shira, on the side of dignity, decency and the Jewish People.

After months of preparation, the day arrived. Shira’s family asked that the Torah be given to a disadvantaged community. After some investigation, an Ethiopian synagogue housed in a bomb shelter on the periphery of Jerusalem was chosen to receive it. A few dozen members of the synagogue, some members of Shira’s family and friends, and members of the Israeli AIDS research community gathered for the dedication.

And there something remarkable occurred. Jews of every background – haredi, secular, Ethiopian, Ashkenazi, American and Israeli – pulled together to dedicate this Torah. Shira’s mother, Mika, remarked in her speech that “Just like Jews have suffered together for generations, so it is fitting that when we are finally in our own country that we be together, for good and for bad, without checking each other’s tzitzit.” And for a moment in this ramshackle synagogue, that hope came true.

That’s why Shira’s Torah is exceptional. There are those who carry the Torah in the name of animosity and division. But this Torah is different. It’s a Torah of unity and humanity. The Talmud compares the Torah to a song (“Shira” is the Hebrew word for song). The point of this metaphor is that like any song, the words are incomprehensible without fully understanding the melody. You need to follow the tune in order to know the purpose and emotion behind those words. The Torah cannot be understood without hearing its inner melody, without hearing the song of the Jewish People.

**READ: IS THE TORAH LITERAL OR FIGURATIVE?**

For a contemporary Orthodox Jew, there are struggles that arise when reading some sections of the Torah, including the prohibition against homosexuality. I cannot diminish the authority of what is black-letter law, but at the same time, I cannot forget the incredible humanism implicit in seeing in every human being a reflection of the divine. As I struggle with these questions, I recognize that I may not merit a way to find a reconciling verse. But nevertheless, I can still find guidance in the melody of the Torah, whose tune is one of kindness, charity, blessing and life. And Shira’s Torah sings this melody, a melody the Jewish
The most important sefer Torah in the world so sorely needs.

Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz

Canada's only WHOLESALE OUTLET for all your Judaica needs
60 Doncaster Avenue, Thornhill • 905-482-2025