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Hadley Presents

Creating a Braille Sefer Torah

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, Hadley's Chief Program Officer, Ed Haines, interviews Rabbi Lenny Sarko, sharing his braille journey, including the creation of a Sefer Torah. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Lenny Sarko: Thank you.

Ed Haines: Thanks Ricky, this is going to be really interesting.

Ricky Enger: Yeah, I agree. It's so great to have you both here, and even better to have the opportunity to discuss braille. Braille is always fun to talk about. This story in particular, I think, is one of the coolest. I'm really looking forward to learning a bit more about you Rabbi Lenny, what you've done, not only learning braille, but creating the Sefer Torah in braille. Before we jump into the questions that Ed has, and start to just explore the story, why don't we get a quick intro from each of you? Ed, we'll take you first. I know you've been on the program several times before, so just a sentence or two about who you are, and what you do at Hadley?

Ed Haines: Sure, thanks, Ricky. I'm Ed Haines, and I'm the Chief Program Officer here at Hadley.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. Rabbi Lenny, how about you?

Lenny Sarko: Thanks, Ricky. Again, this is Rabbi Lenny Sarko, I am a leader of a congregation just outside of Pittsburgh. I have entered the realm of the visually impaired about six or seven years ago, through an issue of bleeding within my eyes, as a result of diabetes, which led me initially to Hadley, where I learned some English braille. As a rabbi that led me, eventually, to Hebrew braille, and eventually to this over a six-year journey, in the creation of a Hebrew braille Sefer Torah.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. I can already tell that your story is going to be an interesting one, and we're so glad that you found Hadley, and started your braille journey here. How appropriate is that? So with that, I think, Ed, you've got a lot of great questions, and we'll jump right into it.

Ed Haines: Thanks. Yeah, I sure do. Rabbi Lenny, the Sefer Torah is just such an amazing project, and I want to hear all about it. I wonder, before we do that, just to give it some context, if you could tell us a little bit about your own personal journey with braille itself?

Lenny Sarko: I entered the realm of visually impaired, which has remained, about six or seven years ago. That eventually led me to Hadley, because as a rabbi, reading is such an important part of my life, and allows me to help do my job. Although I do have some vision left, and I can do some reading, I really wanted to be able to continue to do what I do, which led me to Hadley initially. Eventually, that led me to the discussion within my job, as to what we do about Hebrew, and found out that Hebrew braille was actually invented around 1948, give or take. There isn't a lot of teaching of Hebrew braille within the United States. The Sefer Torah becomes a little bit of a different animal, but again, Hadley really helped me quite a bit in the baseline, the foundation of getting me familiar with, and beginning to use braille.

A lot of my efforts have been really placed on the Hebrew side, which is a little bit different in approach than the English. There is only uncontracted Hebrew braille, there is no contracted Hebrew braille. Certainly, its use becomes exceedingly important for the blind and visually impaired Jews that are not only in the U.S. but around the world.

Ed Haines: That makes perfect sense. You've obviously moved so far beyond that original goal of just learning to read English braille, so it's a perfect segue. If you could now just tell us about your mission to create this braille Sefer Torah?

Lenny Sarko: The Sefer Torah really goes back almost 3000 years. They developed, at that point, a weekly reading of the five books of Moses we call Torah. A number of customs grew out of that. Again, why a weekly congregational reading? Well again, books back in those days were exceedingly rare and expensive. For Judaism, the Torah itself becomes the baseline of how we learn to do our religion. It was critical for everyone that is Jewish to be able to access that information, and they developed the idea of doing a weekly reading where, across an entire year, they get through the entire five books of Moses in a public way. Then, they developed a number of customs around that public reading. One was to create a specific scroll for that, and there were some things around that scroll that became custom. For example, a Sefer scroll is 100% organic, organic from living things.

The parchment that it is written on comes from a kosher animal. It's put on rollers that are wood rollers. The inks that are typically used in a written scroll are made from gall nuts and honey. Secondly, it must be handwritten. It can't be machine done. There can be no mistakes in the various words, and letters, and columns. The last, and probably the most critical item from a blind perspective, it must be read. It cannot be memorized. It can't be memorized because memorization leads towards mistakes. We don't want mistakes in a Torah. It must be read. Blind and visually impaired Jews are considered 100% full members of the Jewish community. There is no aristocracy in Judaism. You don't have to be a rabbi to lead a service. Anyone can lead a service. Anyone can read from the Torah, and they do.

It's called an Aliyah, a high honor, to be able to read, and that is given to anyone who would like it. Blind Jews, visually impaired Jews, were never given that Aliyah, that honor, because they couldn't read. Were they really considered full members? As a rabbi, that bothered me. As somebody who became visually impaired in my sight, that bothered me. Now, there was a large number of issues related to making an initial scroll. When I did my initial investigation, I found there were no such thing as a Hebrew braille scroll in the U.S. There were none in Europe, there were none in Israel. As a rabbi, and as a Jewish person, we tend to question a lot. We start to ask the question, why? I received a large number of answers, but every time I broached those questions, there weren't answers to those questions. I went on, basically, a six-year journey, that eventually developed what became the world's first Hebrew braille Sefer Torah scroll.

Ed Haines: Wow, that's amazing. From what I understand, it's not just the Sefer Torah. At this point, you've built an entire non-for-profit organization around this project. Could you talk a little bit about that as well?

Lenny Sarko: Again, as I approached the project, we have another issue. Typically, as a Jewish community gets together, they all put some dollars into a kitty, and we buy a scroll. But Jewish blind and visually impaired are not in one community, they're spread throughout the country. These scrolls are expensive. To make a written scroll begins around $50,000, and generally heads up towards $100,000. Even the blind scroll will be in and around $50,000 to make one full five books of Moses. That also bothered me. How are we going to get these scrolls to those that need them?

I developed a program, and what's the program? We put together a nonprofit corporation, a 501c3, and we're getting grants to create as many scrolls as we can. They're going to be housed in one area. Then when a blind or visually impaired person would like to use them, they simply contact me, and I will mail them the scroll. They'll use it for a week or two, and mail it back. So their cost is really only the mailing and the insurance, not the creation of the scroll. This now becomes economically viable for them, and accessible to literally any blind or visually impaired person around the country.

Ed Haines: That makes perfect sense. I believe you haven't even stopped there. You've subsequently developed a Hebrew braille literacy program as well.

Lenny Sarko: As I began my journey to learn Hebrew braille, and I searched for some help around the country, it didn't exist. I decided to develop a course that could be done remotely, that will teach a person who knows English braille, how to read Hebrew braille. What it is, it's a set of workbooks, and the workbooks are sent to the person. Currently, there is no charge for those workbooks. When you get a workbook, it's both in English and Hebrew braille, and also a textual version. That text version is far more pictorial, so that a person that's either a spouse or a good friend, that is there, does not need to know Hebrew, and does not need to know braille, and can assist line by line, character by character, the person going through the workbooks. They can go at their own pace and learn Hebrew braille enough to be able to use the Torah scrolls. It doesn't teach conversational Hebrew, but it does teach enough for them to be able to use the scrolls.

Ed Haines: I know there are some guidelines that are involved in the creation of a Sefer Torah, and you mentioned this earlier, one of which is, it has to be created by hand, and it has to be mistake-free. I'm really fascinated to hear how you accomplish this, because you had to braille it entirely by hand, mistake-free. That's just really a huge achievement.

Lenny Sarko: Yeah, that was probably the biggest hurdle of all, in the project. How do you do this? Again, how do you make braille manually? Everyone knows, that's a slate and stylus. I don't know about you, but when I use my typical slate and stylus, I can't get through a line without making a mistake. How do we do this? How do I make it so that it can be mistake-free? Here's what I eventually came up with. We're going to make a slate, but the slate itself is going to be the size of an entire column. A typical column, just in rough numbers, is roughly two-foot by two-and-a-half foot. It's about 4,000 letters, give or take. What I do, and again, a braille dot only two millimeters in diameter, a half a millimeter high. So what I came up with is as follows: can use machines in the preparation of the materials, as long as the letters themselves are hand-done.

What I did is, used what's called a CNC machine, which is, in essence, a computerized drill, and pre-drilled the holes for each of the letters. In the case of the Alef, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, it's a lot like an A. In English braille, it's only dot one. In that particular cell, only dot one gets drilled. In that way, there is no way for me to slip and go into a different hole, because only that hole exists for that letter. I had to do that for every single letter of the Bible.

Again, why does it take six years initially? Remember, a slate and stylus is done upside down and backwards. What I had to do is take the English, make sure the Hebrew is all set, take the Hebrew, put it into the proper sequences. In a typical column in a standard scroll, you will have 42 lines of roughly 40 characters per line. I had to invert it. Then, I had to take that and convert it into CNC language, because I needed to save the money. Then, give that program to a company that has a CNC machine, to drill all 279 columns, for every single letter of the Bible.

The bad part of that is, it took so long to do that particular project. The good part is as follows. In a typical scroll, a written scroll, a scribe will take roughly a year to a year and a half to make a Torah. This took six years, but most of the time was in making the slates. Now, the slates can be used... and again, I also have matching bottom slates. You have the bottom slate, you put a piece of parchment between, you put in a top slate, they're bolted together, so that the parchment doesn't move, then it's punched.

Now that the slates are there, how many more of those columns can I make? Thousands, yes, without needing another slate. I can actually get down to making one of the five books in, basically, a month. I can also do it with help. A scribe can't really use help, because they have to know Hebrew, they have to have all sorts of other expertise to be able to do this. Who can punch a hole in a slate that's already pre-made? Anybody. Again, if we go back to kosher rules, a kosher slaughterhouse, for example, will hire non-Jewish workers, as long as there's a Jewish supervisor, the food is still considered kosher.

In this particular case, who can I get to help? Because I lead a congregation, we have a number of elderly people who are retired. This is a great project, because they can start and stop when they want. They don't need to know Hebrew. They don't need to know braille. Just hit the holes. I can actually reduce the time even further, and actually push a scroll out, an entire five books, anywhere from one to five, six months.

Ed Haines: That is just fantastic. That's real ingenuity. Frankly, my mind is blown, when I think about using a slate to do Hebrew braille, and the difference between reading left to right. There's a lot of differences.

Lenny Sarko: Here's some of the interesting things. I'd say, 99% of the rules, I can follow. Here's one that I can't. Typical Hebrew is read right to left. Hebrew braille is actually read left to right. I need to put it in left to right. Why do they do that? Because again, braille reading needs to be consistent. They don't want somebody to approach a page in Hebrew, and all of a sudden say, "Which way do I have to go," and all that kind of stuff. Again, that doesn't really change the essence of what we have.

Here's another difference. A typical scroll will be justified both on the right and left side. How do they do that? A typical scroll, they'll take the end of the line, and they'll elongate or squat their letters. I can't do that. It's got to be consistent. I get to the end of the line, if I can't fit the word, it just goes to the next line. Interestingly enough, standard written scroll will run anywhere from 225 to 290 columns. It takes me 239 to create a scroll. It's not like a braille book, where it's five times the size. It's no bigger or smaller than a regular scroll. In a typical scroll, they'll have some interesting, we'll call it anomalies, for no better term. For example, there's a number of letters within the scroll that are either extra large or extra small.

Again, I can't change my size, but here's what I can do. There is no six dot Hebrew letter. If I have an extra small letter in a particular word, it will be preceded by a six-dot cell. If it's extra-large, two six dot cells. That tells the reader it's extra-large or extra small. Also, there's some really interesting spacing issues. For example, if you get to the end, there's something called Haazinu, the song of Moses, the poem of Moses. It's in a very poetic spacing. I can actually repeat that spacing in the braille scroll, without any problem. The same thing with other areas that are like that throughout the scroll. For example, when you get to the 10 Commandments, that's spaced a little bit differently. I can match that same spacing in the braille scroll.

Ed Haines: I had another question about some differences in guidelines, too, it's more related to reading than actually the creation of the scroll. I'm aware that, traditionally, people who read from the Sefer Torah, they don't actually touch the manuscript. I'm assuming there's an exception that's made for braille readers.

Lenny Sarko: The lack of touching is not what they call a Halakhah, a legal precept, but a custom. The inks in a written scroll is organic. Eventually, you're going to start to smear them, damage them, because of the oils or dirt from your fingers. Typically, in a written scroll, they use what's called a Yad, which is a pointer. Even some people who take the pointer, you're not really supposed to touch the letters. You're supposed to follow it above. But, it's not a legalistic rule, it's a custom because we don't want to damage the scrolls. In the braille scroll, you want to touch it, because it's strictly by feel. As long as you don't start pressing the dots like bubble wrap, you're good to go.

Ricky Enger: That does bring to mind a question for me, which is, is the parchment that you use the same as you would use for a printed scroll? Because sometimes, braille dots do not show up as well, or feel a bit fainter on some paper than others. Do you use that same parchment?

Lenny Sarko: Great question, Ricky. Yes. Here's one of those questions that I got at the beginning of the project: how will braille take to parchment? We know you can't use regular paper. You use almost a card stock for braille writing. One of the comments that I got back, from all the various ones I got, "The braille will never hold up against the parchment, and even if it does initially, remember, what do we do with these scrolls? It's two rollers, so we're going to roll up the parchment back and forth, back and forth." That squished the dots. It turns out, we use cowhide for parchment. It turns out cowhide is both very strong, but also very flexible. The cowhide takes the braille dots very nicely, thank you. Because it's tough, even when you roll it, it does not damage the dots. I have rolled test dots on test scrolls. It never affected the dots. So the parchment that I use is the exact same parchment, and I get it from the exact same places that the written scrolls come from. The Torah rollers, same place that they get theirs, I get mine. There is absolutely no difference in materials used, except that I create dots, and they put inks on. The parchment itself is exactly the same.

Ed Haines: That's fantastic. It's almost, it was meant to happen, obviously. Finally, most important question, I suppose, if you could tell our listeners how they could participate in your program, and how they could request the Sefer Torah to read in their own synagogues?

Lenny Sarko: How many Jewish blind and visually impaired are there in the United States? Turns out there's around 200,000 blind, and a little over 200,000 visually impaired. That's over 400,000 people in the U.S. alone. Remember, this is Hebrew, so it can be theoretically used anywhere around the world. The easiest way to contact me is probably through the website. I have my email and phone number there. The website for the project is www.devarim, D as in dog, E V as in Victor, A R I M as in Mary, dot org. If you just hit the little contact button, you'll see all sorts of ways to write me, to email me, to call me. For those that are visually impaired, or partially sighted, or sighted, that is interested, there's pictures of the braille scroll on that site, that you can see, and a description of the projects as well.

Ricky Enger: Excellent. Of course, we will have that link in our show notes, for everybody listening. It's been just amazing hearing your ingenuity, and your passion for this project. Six years seems like a very long time. I would imagine that all that time you put into this is well worth it, both for you, and for others who are interested in learning Hebrew braille, and in reading the Sefer Torah.

Lenny Sarko: Might I just interrupt and do one more comment, because I think it's an important comment for me especially as a rabbi. This stuff doesn't only help those who are blind or visually impaired. Those that have already used the scroll, and I've gone there, and participated in their congregations- their congregations, their families, their friends, the entire community that they're there will show up on that day, and the pride, and the happiness, and the joy not only emanates from the person doing the reading but the entire community. It becomes a real lift for everybody. It's just a real positive experience all the way around.

Ricky Enger: Yes, thank you for sharing that. That's amazing. Of course, thank you for stopping by, and just sharing your story. This has been so fascinating.

Lenny Sarko: Yeah. I want to thank again, Hadley, for all their help to me in the past. I probably couldn't have gotten to this point without them.

Ricky Enger: We're certainly glad to have you. Thank you.

Lenny Sarko: Thank you. Or, as they say in Hebrew, Shalom.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P O D C A S T, at hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.