



Baila Vorhand

On Writing the Torah of a Gadol

Though happy enough in school, I had an intellectual and spiritual bent in a way that no educational institution could satisfy. When my father gave me a shiur of Harav Moshe Wolfson, shlita, I was introduced to a whole new level of reality and began hungrily asking for more.

Eventually, the wonderful couple who took care of producing the cassettes asked me to help them out. Since I had listened to every shiur a few times over the years, I was the perfect candidate for re-listening to every shiur, titling and categorizing it.

After I married, my husband and I took over the operations, eventually transferring everything to digital, a website and TorahAnytime. The passion that fueled me through this arduously painstaking task was my desire to invite others into the Gan Eden of

this unique, elevated Torah.

Around nine and a half years ago, somebody asked me if Rav Wolfson's shalosh seudos drashos were available in English translation. I immediately felt a burning desire to fill this need, and contacted a talmid who was an experienced writer to ask him if he could do it. He insisted that it was an extremely complex and difficult task, one he was too overwhelmed to even begin contemplating. Another person who had written some of the Mashgiach's Torah in English years before claimed that it was simply impossible to write at the pace of an entire drashah per week.

When I saw that no one wanted to do it, I thought, "Maybe I should?" I hire a babysitter so I can go to the weekly shalosh seudos in Emunas Yisrael as a means of keeping myself

emotionally, intellectually and spiritually energized, so I hear the shiur. Maybe I could write it.

First, I called the Mashgiach to ask if I could have the notes. He was skeptical. "It's very hard work," he said. I told him, "Let me try. Worse comes to worst, I won't be able to do it." Immediately, he told me to come pick them up.

It was hard. Much, much harder than anything I'd ever done. Shvitz-inducing. There are many esoteric terms in chassidic Torah — how do you even say "this is a bechinah of that" in English? I had always thought I understood the shiurim, but now I realized that there were many basic terms that I didn't fully understand. That first one took me 14 hours (!) to write.

After it was done, my husband brought a few copies to shul to see who could proofread and help with the sources. A few men took it. One gave me a long speech about how I shouldn't do this because as a woman unfamiliar with the Gemaros, I had made mistakes.

Another man (the one who ended up becoming my weekly editor for that year) was very excited. "This is great! It's done very well. There are a few mistakes and missing sources, but no big deal at all." My husband brought back both of their edits. The one who had been so critical had made three corrections. The one who was positive and encouraging had made dozens....

The next step was running it by Rav Wolfson. I was paralyzingly anxious for the day or two it took to get an answer. Baruch Hashem, he was extremely happy with the results, almost shocked that I had been able to do it. He handed my husband back the essay with a huge smile and a few edits in between the lines. Those pages with his edits are precious mementos of that year.

I got a generous and steady source of

funding and spent quite a busy year writing each essay, passing it on to the editor, getting it approved by the Mashgiach, and finally, printing copies to put in shul and emailing them out — all in time for people to read on the following Shabbos.

Throughout that year I learned a lot from the Mashgiach's feedback. On a simple level, I learned information, as he provided me with details I'd missed. But I also learned patience — sometimes I had a hard time understanding something and the Mashgiach patiently explained it to me, either in writing or on the phone, until I understood it.

I also learned the importance of independent thinking. I had to understand the Torah in a way that made sense to me, and only then could I write it. Rav Wolfson was very encouraging of that.

But the most important thing I learned was from what the Mashgiach didn't let me write. Sometimes, a concept was too foreign, confusing, or lofty for the average English-speaker. Rav Wolfson taught me, "When you teach Torah that is above the level of the students, you are not doing them a favor. To the contrary, you are harming them."

When the year ended, I knew it was time to move up to the next level — a book. I sent Rabbi Nosson Scherman a few essays and he was incredibly encouraging, although he did say I would need to simplify the material to make it publishable. But how could I "simplify" it? I had worked for an entire year by sheer grit alone; I had no real skills or training.

Rabbi Shimon Finkelman explained that first-time writers need editors, but it was almost impossible to find someone qualified for this



level of editing because any talmid chacham who was an expert English writer as well was already employed. B'hashgachah pratis, he had just met a retired man of exactly this caliber and he made the connection for me. The stage was set for my first book.

I began to realize that while the essays I had written had value, I wouldn't be able to make them into a book without completely rewriting them. If I would have to do that anyway, perhaps I should cover a different topic for my first book, one that no one had ever written about before. That is when the idea of writing a sefer on Eretz Yisrael was born.

When I received the first chapter back from the editor, I understood the depth of work really required to take an abstract, spiritual piece of Torah and make it warm, relatable and relevant.

But then, my sponsor backed out. There was no way for me to pay the editor, and without one, there would be no book. After feeling depressed for a few days, I took a single positive action. On the bottom of the dvar Torah that I emailed each week, I announced that I was looking for financing for a sefer. A few very kindhearted people donated small amounts, but a few hundred dollars doesn't help when you need at least \$20,000 (yes, that's how much it costs... think twice before borrowing books — buy them to encourage authors to keep writing).

Then, a student of the Mashgiach who runs an institution and fundraises millions of dollars a year responded to my email with, get this, a donor list! He knew around ten people of financial means who would be delighted to help put out Rav Wolfson's Torah. I reached out to them and they were helpful — at least the sefer could continue being written and edited.

But the real breakthrough happened in the least expected way.

I had developed a policy of telling every person who came to pick up CDs or MP3s of the Mashgiach's shiurim that I need funding for a sefer on Eretz Yisrael. Out of the blue, a man who had recently picked up an MP3 called. "I'm sponsoring the entire sefer."

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What?

"I'm selling a property in Eretz Yisrael and I want the maaser of this sale to sponsor the entire sefer." Although he ended up as only a partial sponsor, his phone call cured me of a deep anxiety. No longer was I worried. If Hashem could send me money so quickly and unexpectedly, I would simply start letting go and trusting Him.

Sacred Soil took a few years, and through seeing what the editor did, I learned how to really write. When I noticed that he was making fewer and fewer corrections, I realized I had become a real writer!

Through it all, Rav Wolfson reviewed each chapter as it was ready. He was very excited, viewing it through a prism much higher than everyone else (well, obviously). He saw it as a sign from Hashem that we are very close to the Geulah, as ehrliche Yidden growing in their love of Eretz Yisrael will bring Moshiach.

The question then was, as a female writer, where do I put my name on the book? There were contradictory opinions, so I asked Rav Wolfson. His response is an eye-opener for every woman who feels she has a treasure inside she needs to share. In his elevated, gentle, melodious way, he asked, "What would Klal Yisrael have done had Devorah HaNeviah not written Shiras Devorah? What would have

been the Haftarah for Shabbos Shirah? What would Klal Yisrael have done had Chanah HaNeviah not written Shiras Chanah? What would be the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah?" In the end, I put my name on the inside cover, satisfying the sensitivities of most.

After so many years of toil, the response to the book was a relief. People were very excited that Torah on this level was available in English in an easy-to-read style, and Yidden who love Eretz Yisrael (there are so many precious Yidden like that!) couldn't get enough. Many women who are attracted to deep Torah learning also saw my writing of this sefer as a personal validation.

But the path is forward, and my dream had always been to publish Rav Wolfson's parashah and Yom Tov Torah. When my husband mentioned my intentions to a man deeply involved in kiruv kerovim, drawing from Jews closer to Hashem, he was adamant. "No, the Mashgiach's emunah shiurim are much more important." Those in the publishing field concurred.

The chiddush of Rav Wolfson's emunah shiurim is that the era when he started giving them to his talmidim was way before the awareness had developed of how crucial it was to teach these basics of Torah. They are also incredibly holistic and pure, covering emunah from many angles and untainted by the defensive tone that pervades many works on emunah.

I ended up titling it The Core of Emunah, because I wanted to bring out what Rav Wolfson stressed: Emunah is not merely the intellectual foundation upon which everything stands — which, of course, it is as well — but it is at the core of reality and of every neshamah.

Though I had already written a book, writing The Core of Emunah was a whole new experience, because in emunah you have to be exact. Rav Wolfson encouraged me to just go for it. "Write the sefer as best as you can and then I'll review the manuscript," he said. While writing, I came up with certain questions regarding hashkafic details, but Rav Wolfson told me to stick to the basics. "Set the foundations. Don't polish the doorknobs."

When trying to publish, I faced unexpected rejection and almost fell apart. Rav Wolfson kept me going. "Hashem will help. This is the Satan. This sefer is very needed so he is trying to stop you." Of course, in the end, the sefer did come out. All of the pieces fell into place and I learned a little emunah in the process....

Now, I am finally able to do what I wanted to do in the beginning — write the Mashgiach's divrei Torah on the parashah and Yamim Tovim. Am I on secure financial footing? Do I see the path to the finish line?

I've learned so much through writing the Mashgiach's Torah. I've learned the power of saying "Let me try." I've seen the encouragement a Gadol will give to a person — regardless of gender — who is trying to fill the world with Hashem's light. On a technical level, I've learned a skill. I've also learned about the tremendous responsibility that the mashpia has to the mekabel, the patience and exquisite calibration required to fit the teachings to the receiver's ability to absorb.

And I've also learned to take this holy work step by step, to curiously and happily wait to see how Hashem will help me this time. ●



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**1570 52ND STREET
BROOKLYN, NY 11219**

PHONE: 718-853-4107

EMAIL: AARONB18@GMAIL.COM

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