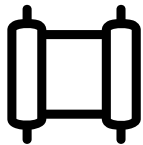


Black Letters and White Space



A Torah scroll is written with black ink on white parchment. As in many realms of life, we tend to focus on what we see (the black letters) as opposed to noticing what is not there (the blank white parchment around it). But Jewish law brings our attention to both elements, by stating that both are necessary in order for the Torah scroll to be kosher.

What are the ways in which Torah is present and clear in our lives, and what are the parts that are more ambiguous or invisible — and yet, just as important? What are the elements of Torah we wish to incorporate more deeply into our own lives? Which people, moments, and experiences that we're grateful for have strengthened our own personal Torah?

Consider these questions by exploring the texts and then engaging in the activity below:

Source 1

When we think about a Torah scroll, we usually only consider the letters themselves, written in black ink. Yet, the Talmud (Menachot 29a) rules that every letter in a Torah scroll must be completely surrounded by parchment. This requirement is called *mukaf gevil*. In other words, the white parchment around the letters is an integral part of the Torah; without it, the Torah scroll is disqualified. In fact, the white space is a higher form of Torah. It is analogous to the white fire of Sinai — a sublime, hidden Torah that cannot be read in the usual manner.

(Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, 1865–1935, quoted from *Gold from the Land of Israel*, pp. 179–181.)

Source 2

On the simplest level, black fire refers to the letters of Torah, the actual words which are written in the scroll. The white refers to the spaces between the letters. Together, the black letters and white spaces between them constitute the "whole" of the Torah.

On another level, the black fire represents the *p'shat*, the literal meaning of the text. The rabbis point to the importance of *p'shat* when stating that "the text cannot be taken out of its literal meaning." The white fire, however, represents ideas that go beyond the *p'shat*. It refers to ideas that we bring into the text when we interact with it. This is called *d'rash* — interpretations, applications, and teachings that flow from the Torah. The *d'rash* are the messages we read between the lines.

On yet another level, the black letters represent thoughts which are intellectual in nature, whether *p'shat* or *d'rash*. The white spaces, on the other hand, represent that which goes beyond the world of the intellect. The black letters are limited, limiting, and fixed. The white spaces catapult us into the realm of the limitless and the ever-changing, ever-growing. They are the story, the song, the silence. Sometimes I wonder which speaks more powerfully, the black, rationalistic letters or the white, mystical spaces between them.

(Rabbi Avi Weiss, Excerpt from [here](#))

Gratitude for Torah

These are the ways Torah (reading/ learning/engaging with Jewish texts) is present in my life:

These are the more abstract, effusive, and invisible ways Torah (ideas, concepts, interpretations, culture, traditions) impacts my life:

These are the elements of Torah I wish to incorporate more deeply into my life:

Here are some of the people, moments, and experiences that I'm grateful for that have strengthened my Torah: