Vayelech is the very shortest parsha, only thirty verses long. Moses tells the people, “I am now a hundred and twenty years old, and I can no longer go forth” (Devarim 31:2). He will not be leading them across the Jordan into the Promised Land. He then summons his successor Joshua and, in the presence of the people, gives him words of encouragement. He instructs the people to gather every seven years to hear a public reading of the Torah.

At the end of his life, having already given the Israelites 612 of God’s commands, Moses gave them the final mitzvah: “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel” (Devarim 31:19).

It may seem like God was speaking to Moses and Joshua and only referring to the song in the following chapter, “Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth” (32:1). However, Oral Tradition gave this verse a different and much wider interpretation, understanding it as a command for every Jew to write, or at least take some part in writing, a Sefer Torah:

Said Rabbah: Even though our ancestors have left us a scroll of the Torah, it is our religious duty to write one for ourselves, as it is said: “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be My witness against the people of Israel.” (Sanhedrin 21b)

The logic of the interpretation seems to be, first, that the phrase “write down for yourselves” could be understood as referring to every Israelite (Ibn Ezra), not just Moses and Joshua. Second, the passage goes on to say (31:24): “Moses finished writing in the book the words of this law from beginning to end.” The Talmud offers a third reason. The verse goes on to say: “That this song may be My witness”, implying the Torah as a whole, not just the song in chapter 32 (Nedarim 38a).

Thus understood, Moses’ final message to the Israelites was: “It is not enough that you have received the Torah from me. You must make it new again in every generation.” The covenant was not to grow old. It had to be frequently renewed.

So it is to this day that Torah scrolls are still written as in ancient times, by hand, on parchment, using a quill – as were the Dead Sea Scrolls two thousand years ago. In a religion that focuses on holy words, and that is almost without holy objects, the Torah scroll is the nearest Judaism comes to a physical object that has sanctity.

Judaism is the story of the love between a people and a book, the Book of books.
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The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, one
of the great yeshiva heads of the nineteenth century) interprets
offered striking explanations.
The word (shira) in Hebrew means both a song and a
prose; the word shira appears five times in this passage. It is clearly a
key word. Why? On this, two nineteenth-century scholars
offered striking explanations.
The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893, one
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it to mean that the whole Torah should be read as poetry, not
prose; the word shira in Hebrew means both a song and a
poem.
To be sure, most of the Torah is written in prose, but the Netziv
argued that it has two characteristics of poetry. First, it is
allusive rather than explicit. It leaves unsaid more than is said.
Secondly, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning,
sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence
construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the
surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not.
In this brilliant insight, the Netziv anticipates one of the great
twentieth-century essays on biblical prose, Erich Auerbach’s
“Odysseus’ Scar.” Auerbach points out that biblical narrative is
spare and understated, not at all like a work of fiction. For
example, explains Auerbach, in the story of the binding of Isaac
into space. When he told Ilan the story of the tiny Sefer Torah,
Ilan was inspired to take it with him aboard the space shuttle,
Columbia. In a live telecast from aboard the space shuttle, Ilan
held up the Sefer Torah and told its story to millions of people.
“This was given by a Rabbi to a scared, thin young boy in
Bergen-Belsen,” said Ilan from the space shuttle… “It represents
more than anything the ability of the Jewish people to survive.
From horrible periods, black days, to reaching periods of hope
and belief in the future.”

Joseph knew then that he had kept his promise to the Rabbi.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:
1. Why was the Sefer Torah so important to Joseph? What
did it represent to him?
2. Why do you think Ilan Ramon chose to take it to space
with him?

If we take this command to refer to the whole Torah and not
just one chapter, what is the significance of the word “song”
(shira): “Now therefore write down for yourselves this song”?
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example, explains Auerbach, in the story of the binding of Isaac
we do not know any of the usual narrative details: what the
main characters look like, what they are feeling, what they are
wearing, what landscapes they are passing through.
The decisive points of the plot alone are emphasised, what lies
between is non-existent; time and place are undefined and call
for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed,
only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the
whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and
directed towards a single goal, remains mysterious and “fraught
with background.”
A completely different aspect is alluded to by Rabbi Yechiel
Michel Epstein, author of the halachic code Aruch HaShulchan.
Epstein points out that the rabbinic literature is full of
arguments, about which the sages said: “These and those are
the words of the living God.” This, says Epstein, is one of the
reasons the Torah is called “a song” – because a song becomes
more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in
complex harmonies.
I would suggest a third dimension. The 613th command is not
simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah
new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not
enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It
must speak to us affectively, emotionally.
Judaism is a religion of words, and yet whenever the language of Judaism aspires to the spiritual it breaks into song, as if the words themselves sought escape from the gravitational pull of finite meanings. There is something about melody that intimates a reality beyond our grasp, what William Wordsworth called the "sense sublime. Of something far more deeply interfused. Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns. And the round ocean and the living air."

Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul.

The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, symbolises the fact that though the Torah was given once, it must be received many times, as each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the pristine voice heard at Mount Sinai. That requires emotion, not just intellect. It means treating Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God’s libretto, and we, the Jewish people, are His choir, the performers of His choral symphony. And though when Jews speak they often argue, when they sing, they sing in harmony, as the Israelites did at the Red Sea, because music is the language of the soul, and at the level of the soul Jews enter the unity of the Divine which transcends the oppositions of lower worlds.

The Torah is God’s song, and we collectively are its singers.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The story of the Jewish people, especially after the second Temple, is about one of the great love affairs of all time, the love of a people for a book, the Torah. Much of the rabbinic literature, especially the tractate Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, reads like an extended poem in praise of Torah and the life of learning. The Torah was, said the Rabbis, the architecture of creation, written in letters of black fire on white fire. It was, said a later mystical tradition, nothing less than a single extended name of God. For Rabbi Akiva it was the very air Jews breathed. It was life itself...

The result was a constant dialogue with revelation. In Talmud study Jews found themselves entering into a conversation not only with the Torah but with successive generations of its commentators, Hillel and Shammai, Rav and Shmuel, Abaya and Rava, Rashi and the Tosafists, Rambam and Ramban. On virtually every subject they had access to a millennial heritage of wisdom. Landless and powerless, they inhabited a mental universe whose horizons in space and time were vast. And as each community, each age, added its chiddushim, its new insights into the ancient text, they could feel some of the excitement of Sinai. Judaism is not a religion of continuing revelation, but rather one of continuing interpretation.

Radical Then, Radical Now, p. 157-159

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does the Jews’ love of the Torah manifest itself (i.e. where can we practically see it)?
2. How can you be a link in the chain of “writing the Torah” and renewing it in our generation?
3. Why do you think there is a mitzvah for every person to play a part in the writing of a Sefer Torah themselves?
4. How do the Netziv and the Aruch HaShulchan explain that the Torah is like a shira?
5. What is Rabbi Sacks’ alternative interpretation?
6. How do we make the Torah new in every generation and what does this have to do with the Torah being likened to a shira?

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THE CORE IDEA

1. It could either be referring to a mitzvah given to Moses and Joshua to write down the song that appears in the following chapter, or a mitzvah to all of the people, to write down the entire Torah, which the verse describes as "a song".

2. This is a way for every person to create a connection with the Sefer Torah, and to feel an ownership of the Torah in a general sense. We should each play a role in keeping the Torah and passing it on to others. The Torah is not just for the Prophets, Priests, and scholars. It belongs to each and every one of us, and we must take ownership and develop a relationship with it.

3. We renew the Torah in every generation by learning it, teaching it, and adding our own commentary and understanding of it, applying it to our own modern world. We can do this through our understanding of both the narrative and philosophical parts of the Torah, as well as the legal parts and the application of halacha in general.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. During a period where the Jewish people were facing a very real threat of extinction and annihilation, the Sefer Torah represented thousands of years of tradition and survival. This was especially true for Joseph while he was in the camps. It also represented faith that the Jewish people and Judaism will survive for eternity. This is what the Sefer Torah represented to him in the years that followed the war, when against all the odds the Jewish people not only survived, but began to thrive once again.

2. Ramon said he was taking the Torah scroll "from the depths of hell to the heights of space." And by doing that, he made it ‘an article of hope.’ Ilan Ramon was Israel’s first astronaut. He was a fighter pilot in the Israeli army, and had flown many dangerous and important missions to protect the State of Israel. His mother was also a survivor of the Holocaust, having been in Auschwitz during the war. Who better to represent the eternity of the Jewish people and faith that the Jews would always survive and thrive. He played his own part in continuing the story of the Rabbi, of Joseph, and of the Jewish people and their Torah, when he held up the tiny Sefer Torah and explained its significance in the live teleconference from aboard the space shuttle Columbia.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Answers might include the way they treat the physical Sefer Torah, such as the reverence and respect shown to it. Examples of this are; standing up when the Torah is removed from the ark, kissing it when it is carried past, not touching the parchment directly, and fasting in the case where, God forbid, a Sefer Torah is dropped, and dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah. However, the passion for the words written in the scroll can also be clearly seen in the dedication Jews have always shown to learning Torah. This is how they have earned their reputation as the People of the Book.

2. The Torah is renewed in each generation as new interpretations are found and the message and values of the Torah are applied to contemporary times. This can be achieved through continuing and developing interpretations of both the narrative and philosophical parts of the Torah, as well as the legal parts and the halacha in general.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See The Core Idea, answer 2

2. See The Core Idea, answer 3

3. The Netziv interprets the verse to mean the Torah should be read as poetry, not prose; the word shira in Hebrew means both a song and a poem. The Torah is similar to poetry in that its meaning is allusive rather than explicit. It leaves more unsaid than is said. Also, like poetry, it hints at deeper reservoirs of meaning, sometimes by the use of an unusual word or sentence construction. Descriptive prose carries its meaning on the surface. The Torah, like poetry, does not. The Aruch Hashulchan draws our attention to the fact that the rabbinic literature is full of arguments, about which the Sages said: “These and those are the words of the living God.” This is one of the reasons the Torah is called “a song” – because a song becomes more beautiful when scored for many voices interwoven in complex harmonies.

4. Rabbi Sacks suggests that the 613th command is not simply about the Torah, but about the duty to make the Torah new in each generation. To make the Torah live anew, it is not enough to hand it on cognitively – as mere history and law. It must speak to us emotionally. Words are the language of the mind. Music is the language of the soul. We must treat the Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung because music is the language of the soul.

5. The 613th command, to make the Torah new in every generation, expresses the fact that though the Torah was given only once, it must be received many times. Each of us, through our study and practice, strives to recapture the Divine voice heard at Mount Sinai, as well as develop the chain of interpretation, contributing our own voice in our generation. This requires emotion, not just intellect, and therefore means treating the Torah not just as words read, but also as a melody sung. The Torah is God’s song, and we are all its singers.