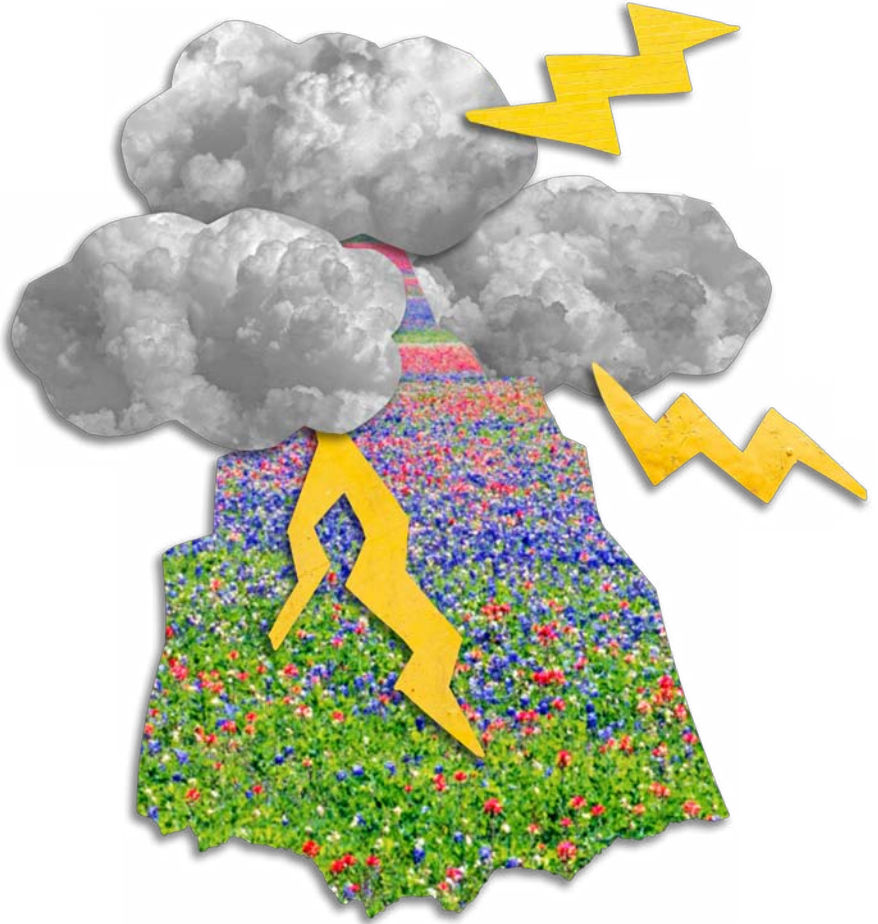


A S H A V U ' O S R E A D E R



A Time for Torah

Original Essays by the Staff of the Cincinnati Community Kollel

ABOUT THE COVER:

The Torah says that when G-d revealed Himself on Mount Sinai, there were “thunder, and lightning, and heavy clouds on the mountain.” (Exodus 19:16)

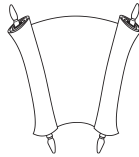
Later, before summoning Moses back onto the mountain to receive the second set of Tablets, G-d told him to warn the people that “the sheep and the cattle must not graze in front of the mountain.” (34:3)

Our Sages infer from this that G-d had covered the mountain in greenery.

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A Time for Torah

original essays by the staff of the



**Cincinnati
Community Kollel**

5758–5774

The original Shavu'os Reader bore this dedication:

קונטרס זה מוקדש
לעילוי נשמת
האשה הכשרה והיקרה
מרת **מאיה** ע"ה
בת ר' אלישר גדעון ולילי אלדד שיחיו
ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

THIS SHAVU'OS READER
IS DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF

MAYA ELDAD ע"ה

Throughout her brief life she taught to all
the importance of *shalom*, *sh'miras halashon*,
and dedication to Torah.

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Preface

ALTHOUGH WE LIVE EACH DAY BY THE TRUTHS OF THE TORAH, Shavu'os is the day we celebrate G-d's granting of His eternal gift to us.

We stood, united, at Mount Sinai, when G-d gave us His Torah, not to each one of us as individuals, but together; collectively, we received the Torah that we share as a people.

In that spirit, we present these essays about Shavu'os and the giving of the Torah. sharing with you some of the Torah thoughts of the staff of the Cincinnati Community Kollel, past and present. We hope you enjoy them, and we look forward to your responses and to hearing your Torah thoughts, as well—a most fitting celebration of our Torah.



Rabbi Meir Minster



Rabbi David Spetner

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Shavu'os and the Real Date of the Giving of the Torah

The holiday of Passover, when we reenact the Exodus from Egypt, and the holiday of Shavu'os, when we mark the giving of the Torah, are undeniably linked. As we count the days between them with *Sefiras ha'Omer*, we affirm this linkage.

However, it is not merely the holidays which are connected; not surprisingly, the events themselves which these days represent are inherently interdependent. Even before Moses accepted the task of leading the Jewish people out of Egypt, G-d presented the success of the mission as pivoting on the events that were to transpire on Mount Sinai. In the course of their first conversation, G-d made the following statement to Moses:

... And this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship G-d on this mountain.¹

Rashi, as we will see, understands this verse as G-d's response to Moses' doubts about the people's merit to be redeemed. Redemption from Egypt was possible, G-d answered, because the Jewish people would later accept the Torah at Sinai. This is a very profound concept: G-d will save the Jewish people based on the merit of a future event. Furthermore, we see that the giving of the Torah was not only the purpose of the Exodus but the very means by which it was able to happen.

Ordained by the late Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg of Ner Israel Rabbinical College, **Rabbi Meir Minster** oversees the academic excellence of the Kollel's staff scholars.

¹ Exodus 3:12

When G-d speaks of the Jewish people accepting the Torah, we immediately associate this with the day of Shavu'os, the time of the giving of the Torah. Therefore, we would conclude that it was the events of Shavu'os that G-d was referring to as the source of the people's merit to be redeemed.

A closer look, however, will challenge our assumptions. Let us examine the words of Rashi:

And in answer to that which you asked, "What merit does Israel possess that they should depart from Egypt?" I have a matter of great consequence dependent on this departure of the Israelites from Egypt. For they are destined to receive the Torah on this mountain three months after they leave Egypt (lit., at the conclusion of three months from their departure from Egypt).²

Rashi's choice of words in this last statement is difficult to understand. As our counting of the Omer will attest, there are only fifty days between the Exodus (marked by Passover) and Shavu'os, the time G-d appeared to the Jewish people and gave them the Torah!

A simple solution to this problem is to suggest that Rashi does not literally mean three *complete* months; rather, Rashi is referring to the fact that the Exodus occurred during the Hebrew month of Nissan, which was followed by the month of Iyar, and early in the next month, Sivan, G-d appeared on Mount Sinai. Thus, the giving of the Torah took place in the third month after the Exodus.

Although this approach certainly resolves the problem it is undoubtedly a forced reading of the Rashi.³ The question must also be raised that if Rashi's choice of words is merely to identify the month in which Shavu'os falls, why not use its proper name—Sivan? Also, the Midrashic commentary on this verse (which Rashi is paraphrasing) makes no mention of the month at all. What does Rashi add by giving us this well-known fact?

There is another approach⁴ to understanding Rashi, a far more novel idea, which accepts the words of Rashi literally, and thereby solves the difficulties raised: Rashi is truly referring to a point of time precisely three months after the Exodus.

A careful look at the calendar will place this date as the seventeenth

2 Ad loc.

3 Especially with respect to the Hebrew word *l'sof*, which means "after," or "at the end."

4 See *Sifsei Chachomim*, ad loc., par. 5, where both of these answers are offered.

of Tammuz, a day now associated with many historical tragedies which occurred over the generations.⁵ The first of the tragedies that occurred on this date was the smashing of the Tablets, when Moses descended from Mount Sinai and saw the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf.

Obscured by this great sin and the ensuing events is this very point, that this was the day that Moses came down with the Tablets and the Torah for the Jewish people. This day was intended to be the day the Jewish people would receive the Torah.⁶ To clarify that point: The Ten Commandments were given on Shavu'os and G-d taught Moses the remainder of the Torah over the next forty days. The Jewish people, however, did not have access to the Torah until Moses came down from Mount Sinai at the end of those forty days and presented it to them. Hence, the day Moses came down, the seventeenth of Tammuz, was intended to be the day the Jewish people would receive the Torah.

Typically, however, we do not associate any day other than Shavu'os with the giving of the Torah, and understanding Rashi's meaning in this light would seem odd, unless we were to consider a reference in the Talmud⁷ and Rashi's comment there. The Mishnah there concludes with a verse:

Go forth and gaze, O daughters distinguished by loyalty to G-d,
upon the King to Whom peace belongs, adorned with the crown
His nation made for him, on the day He became one with Israel,
and on the day His heart was gladdened.⁸

The Mishnah explains that “the day He became one with Israel” refers to the giving of the Torah, and “the day His heart was gladdened” refers to the consecration of the Temple. Rashi, based on the context of the Mishnah,⁹ explains that the giving of the Torah here refers to Yom Kippur, the day Moses came down with the second set of Tablets—and not Shavu'os!¹⁰ It emerges now that both Shavu'os (the time G-d initially offered or “gave” the Torah to his people) and

5 See Talmud, Ta'anis 26a, for a list of five events.

6 Ta'anis 26b

7 Note Rashi's use of the word *l'kabbel*, “to receive.” The common reference to Shavu'os is *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah.

8 Song of Songs 3:11—translation based on Artscroll's allegorical rendering.

9 See also Talmud, Ta'anis 30b, for further support of Rashi's explanation.

10 Bartenura, ad loc., adds that the day of consecration also refers to Yom Kippur, which fell out during the time of the consecration of the first Temple.

Yom Kippur (the day they actually received the Torah) carry the title of *Mattan Torah*— the giving of the Torah.

Although it is Yom Kippur that we are now equating with Shavu'os, this is because the sin of the Golden Calf delayed that element of *Mattan Torah*, namely the receiving of the Torah. From a pre-Exodus perspective, however, the seventeenth of Tammuz was anticipated to be the day the Jewish people would receive the Torah. This is the day, three months from the Exodus, that Rashi refers to in his comments to Exodus 3:12, the day which G-d pointed to as the justification for allowing the Jews to leave Egypt.

The question that we must ponder is why this day, the seventeenth of Tammuz, is favored by Rashi over Shavu'os as the crucial day on which the redemption from Egypt hinged.¹¹ What is Rashi telling us by ignoring Shavu'os, the day of the giving of the Torah, with all of its obvious importance, and instead choosing the day Moses was to come down with the Torah, as the day the Jewish people earned their redemption?¹²

Perhaps the answer lies simply in the point of distinction between the descriptions of these two days. Shavu'os is the day G-d gave (offered) us the Torah; the seventeenth of Tammuz (or, in reality, Yom Kippur) is the day we received the Torah. To be the people to whom G-d *offered* the Torah was not enough to allow them to be taken out of Egypt; they still had to *receive* the Torah, to accept it, and to make it a part of their lives. Only a people that were to live their lives according to the Torah could be redeemed from Egypt. In order to begin that process they needed to have the Torah in their midst.

To use the metaphor of the verse from Song of Songs, this was the time of the marriage of the Jewish people with G-d. The offering of the Torah was G-d's marriage proposal to Israel, but a proposal merely offered is only that—a proposal. It does not mandate change or signify a new way of life for either party. Once the proposal is accepted and implemented, however, lives are forever changed and the marriage creates a new reality and sense of existence for each individual. The Jewish people needed to accept the proposal from G-d and then cre-

11 This same question can be asked of the aforementioned Mishnah in Ta'anis, as well—why choose Yom Kippur over Shavu'os as “the day He became one with Israel?”

12 See *Sifsei Chachomim*, *ibid.*, who suggests that Shavu'os represents the giving of the Written Torah, and the seventeenth of Tammuz the giving of the Oral Torah, thus forming the complete Torah.

ate the reality of this marriage. This was signified and made possible by Moses' bringing the Torah to them. It was this achievement that G-d referred to as the merit by which the Jews would be taken out of Egypt.¹³ The significance of this difference can shed much light on our celebration of receiving the Torah on Shavu'os. The gift of the Torah was never meant to be an honor or a banner awarded to the Jewish people, something to be waved or pointed to with a sense of national pride. Its value to us is only as great as our commitment to its values. The Torah was given to be followed, and to the extent that we are able to incorporate its teachings into our lives, we fulfill our purpose as a people.

This is the message of Rashi's choice of dates to connect the Exodus with the giving of the Torah. Passover marks our freedom from slavery and the start of G-d's plan to form us into a people. This was not achievable, certainly, without Shavu'os, which represents the giving of the Torah. The Torah not only defines the type of people we are meant to be; it is the very reason we were redeemed from Egypt and given the opportunity to become a people. However, to merit that opportunity we needed to ultimately accept the Torah and live our lives accordingly, as signified by the events of the seventeenth of Tammuz. ❧

13 It is now most instructive to reexamine the verse in Exodus (3:12) in light of Rashi's comments. The verse speaks of worshipping G-d on Mount Sinai, which Rashi explains as receiving the Torah on the seventeenth of Tammuz. The events of Shavu'os, where G-d merely presented the Torah, could hardly be described as an act of worship. The significance of seventeenth of Tammuz is that it represents the Jewish people's commitment to incorporate the Torah into their lives and to define themselves as a people that worships G-d, as well as representing the actual start of that worship.

Shavu'os and the Meaning of the Second Day of Yom Tov

When the Jewish people boldly entered into the covenant with G-d with the famous statement of “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*—we will act and [then] we will listen,” they exhibited an unquestioning faith in G-d and his Torah by accepting the Torah “sight unseen.”

It was not so simple, though, says Midrash Tanchuma.¹ The Talmud² tells us that “the mountain (Mount Sinai) was held over them like a barrel,” in essence forcing them to accept the Torah!

The resolution, says the Midrash, is that the people had faith in was G-d and, by extension, His finite Written Torah. What they had to be forced to accept was the Oral Torah, a Torah that would be under the control and decision-making power of man. That they were unwilling to accept, and it had to be forced upon them.

Few things have been less understood than the Rabbinic institution of a second day of Yom Tov (Festivals) in the Diaspora. A full six days a year are spent in Rabbinic Yom Tov, and this seeming incursion into our lives deserves examination.

First, a bit of history.

Every month in the Hebrew calendar is either twenty-nine or thirty

A fifth-generation Midwesterner, **Rabbi David Spetner** served as a congregational rabbi in Richmond, Virginia before moving to Cincinnati in 1995 to help establish the Kollel.

1 Parashas Noach

2 Shabbos 88a

days long, since the moon takes over twenty-nine and a half days to complete its orbit around the Earth. Accordingly, the first day of the next month will fall on one of two days (the thirtieth or the thirty-first). Until the fourth century CE and the establishment of a fixed calendar, this determination was made by a Jewish court, based on the testimony of witnesses who had seen the new moon. With the court in Jerusalem and a great Jewish population in the Diaspora, primarily in Babylon, how was the start of the new month—and the correct dates of the holidays—communicated to the Diaspora?

The Mishnah³ describes a system of bonfires on the mountaintops from Jerusalem to Babylon that would be lit, thereby informing the Diaspora of the correct date of the new month in a matter of minutes. The Mishnah goes on to report how the *Tzedokim* (Sadducees), avowed enemies of the Rabbis and the Oral Torah, began to light their own fires in order to confuse the Diaspora and spoil the system of communication. Subsequently, the court was forced to send notarized agents to the communities of the Diaspora, a process which would take weeks—and would force the communities to keep what was normally a one-day Festival for two days, due to their doubt over the correct day of the month. Even after the permanent calendar was established, and the doubt as to the day of the month universally removed, the practice of keeping two days of Yom Tov in the Diaspora remained.

The basis for maintaining two days of Yom Tov even with the benefit of a calendar, is recorded in the Talmud.⁴ There we are told how the Sages of Israel urged the Sages of Babylon to heed “the custom of their fathers,” and to practice two days of Yom Tov. This was necessary, they said, in case the study of Torah were to be outlawed by the government, causing the application of calendar calculations to become skewed.

The Talmud’s technical rationale notwithstanding, how are we, in the age of universal and instant communication, supposed to understand the need for a second day of Yom Tov? And even if we are ready to submit to the reasoning of our Sages, how are we to relate to the spiritual themes and prayers of our holidays, such as judgment on Rosh Hashanah, joy on Sukkos, freedom of Passover, etc., when Yom Tov observance on these additional days is due merely to technicalities?

3 Rosh Hashanah 22b

4 Beitzah 4b

In order to begin to approach this issue, we must first assimilate an idea expressed by the Vilna Gaon. He explained that in every Rabbinical law where a rationale is given, there are many additional, unrecorded, and even mystical reasons for the law. Therefore, he explains, although the given reason for a particular Rabbinical law may no longer exist, the law still remains in force.

There is a famous question regarding the name given to the holiday of Shavu'os in our prayers, *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, The Time of the Giving of Our Torah. The date of Shavu'os is given in the Torah as fifty days after the bringing of the Omer offering. The Omer was brought on the sixteenth of Nissan, making the date of Shavu'os the sixth of Sivan, and in the Diaspora, the sixth and the seventh. There is a dispute in the Talmud⁵ whether the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan or the seventh.

The discussion, however, is not merely academic, as the disagreement in the Talmud revolves in part around a technical point in the laws of niddah. In *Yoreh De'ah*,⁶ the law is codified in accordance with the view that the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan. If this is so, how do we say *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, The Time of the Giving of Our Torah, in the prayers of the first day of Shavu'os if it wasn't given until the second day?

Rav Yehoshua Isaac Shapiro (nineteenth-century Rav of Slonim), in his work *Emek Yehoshua*, offers an answer based on a statement in the same passage in Shabbos that we mentioned above.

The Talmud writes that although G-d had asked Moses to prepare the people for the Revelation at Sinai for two days prior to the event, Moses added a third day of preparation. This postponed the Revelation by a day and, indeed, G-d responded by not giving the Torah till the next day!

Based on this, Rabbi Shapiro explains that the essence of our receiving the Torah was not just a matter of learning information; it was taking control of the reality of Torah. Since the Torah is the blueprint of the universe, when the Sages would decide one way or another in a point of law, it would now become a reality affecting both the physical and spiritual worlds. Our first act as the possessors of Torah, says Rabbi Shapiro, was Moses' postponing of the Revelation and G-d's holding

5 Shabbos 86a-88a, the end of the ninth chapter

6 Chapter 196

Himself “bound” to man’s decision! Therefore G-d, by not giving us the Torah on the sixth of Sivan, was giving us control over the Torah. Hence both the sixth of Sivan and the next day, when the Revelation actually took place, are *Z’man Mattan Toraseinu*.

With this background we may now appreciate a cryptic comment of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Rav Menachem Azarya Mipano, in his work *Asarah Maamaros*. He writes that G-d gave us the Torah on the day after the Biblical Shavu’os in order to allude to His approval of the future, Rabbinical second day of Yom Tov, which would fall on that day. What does this mean? Why does the second day of Yom Tov need a place at Sinai?

We mentioned earlier that the keeping of a second day came as a result of the activities of the *Tzedokim* (Sadducees). Is that mere coincidence? Are the myriad mitzvos and prayers performed by millions of Jews over thousands of years in no way a response to that ancient heretical group?

The *Tzedokim* are described throughout the Talmud as the opponents of the Oral Torah and the role of the Sages in interpreting the Written Torah. What were the *Tzedokim* really challenging? They weren’t challenging the Sages’ ability to legislate the Torah the way any government creates laws. What they refused to believe was that the decision of the Sages had a cosmic reality. To the *Tzedokim*, halacha was just man-made law, but the Sages understood that G-d was responsive to their decisions, as He was to Moses’ postponement of the Revelation at Sinai.

The second day of Yom Tov is a significant expression of Divine response. Our holidays are called *mo’ados*, meetings, because they are times when we and the Divine connect in a unique way. In creating a second day of Yom Tov, the Sages were not merely asking us to pretend we are conducting Yom Tov, but were extending that sanctified time when we meet with our Creator, known as *mo’ed*, or Yom Tov. As such, the eighth day of Passover is also imbued with a Divine influence of freedom, and the second day of Shavu’os with Torah, and so with the other holidays.

The need for a second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora, where we lack the sanctity of the Holy Land, was not just a practical, halachic need to resolve the doubt created by the *Tzedokim*. It was a need for six additional days of Rabbinically-created Divine reality, with which to spiritually fortify ourselves against the new philosophy of the *Tzedokim*.

This need was foreseen at Sinai and was alluded to by Moses's Rabbinic decision to postpone—and by G-d's consent.

The philosophy of the *Tzedokim* was that Rabbinical Judaism is nothing more than an arbitrary, legalistic structure, devoid of any relationship to the Divine. Since its introduction, this outlook has remained alive in one form or another, making the warning of the Sages of Israel to the Diaspora to “heed the custom of our fathers” as important today as it ever was. ❧

Rabbi Tzvi Fishman

Torah for Every Jew

or “Flowers for Every Jew”

THERE IS A KNOWN CUSTOM OF DECORATING HOMES AND SYNAGOGUES IN honor of the holiday of Shavu'os. The *Mishnah B'rurah* adds¹ that there was once a custom of giving flowers to every individual in the synagogue!

The well-known reason for decorating one's home and synagogue is in order to remember that Mount Sinai was decked in greenery when Hashem gave us the Torah, as the Torah states:² “The sheep and the cattle must not graze in front of [Mount Sinai].” It clearly seems that there was greenery on the mountain—that's why Hashem had to command them not to pasture their flocks there.³

But if this is so, why do we need to dispense flowers to each individual? Wouldn't it suffice just to decorate the house and the synagogue?

The Rema describes this custom⁴ and explains that it helps people

A native Ohioan, **Rabbi Tzvi Fishman** joined the Kollel this past October, after many years of advanced study in Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, New Jersey.

1 O.C. 494:3 (*Hilchos Pesach*)

2 Exodus 34:3

3 *Mishnah B'rurah*, *ibid.*

remember the *happiness* of the Giving of the Torah. What does this “happiness” refer to?

Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner writes⁵ that through studying Torah, one earns both the good of this world and the good of the World to Come—a fulfilled life, a life of happiness; a life that is *authentic*. Simply through Torah study, one merits all of the above, because the Torah is the source of all blessings. This explains why the Giving of the Torah was such a happy occasion.

A deeper understanding of this idea is found in the *Amidah* of the Shabbos and holiday prayers: “*V’sein chelkeinu b’Sorasecha*—give us our portion in Your Torah.” Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner points out⁶ that every Jewish soul is derived from a letter in the Torah. Because of this, every Jew has his own, unique way of learning and enjoying Torah study, his own style and preferences—e. g., theory versus practical law, a quick or slow pace, etc.

(This also explains why Hashem gave us the Torah in the wilderness—to teach us that, just like the wilderness is open to all, the Torah is for each and every Jew.)⁷

So we pray: “Hashem, grant us each our portion”—as if to say, “in my specific way, that I should be able to enjoy the Torah.” This is an amazing idea! Hashem created the Torah in such a way that every person, on his own level, can connect to the Torah and get satisfaction and fulfillment. With the realization that we have our own personal connection to Torah study, one can find true happiness.

King David tells us⁸ that the words of the Torah “are sweeter than honey.” One has only to dive into Torah study and he is guaranteed to find his path in learning. Then he will share King David’s experience of sweetness.

This is also why the Torah uses an otherwise strange expression when it describes the making of the Menorah for the *Mishkan* (the Candelabra for the Tabernacle)—“The Menorah *shall be made*,”⁹ as

4 *Shulchan Aruch*, O. C. 494:3. The Rema only speaks of putting out “grasses,” i.e., greenery, but *Kaf HaChayyim* explicitly says there was a custom to put out flowers..

5 *Nefesh HaChayyim*, *Sha’ar* 4, chapter 17

6 *Ibid.*, chapter 32

7 See *B’midbar Rabbah* 1:6.

8 Psalms 19

9 Exodus 25:31

opposed to “You shall make the Menorah.” Rashi explains¹⁰ that Moshe had a hard time figuring out how to create the Menorah, which was supposed to be hammered out of a solid block of gold. Hashem said to him, “Throw the block of gold into the fire, and the Menorah will rise out of it.”

Why was only the Menorah difficult to make, when Moshe was able to make many other utensils himself?

The Menorah is symbolic of the Torah.¹¹ At times it may seem hard to study Torah—it might be hard to focus, you might not have the right state of mind, or maybe you’re just not in the mood. But Hashem told Moshe, just throw that piece of gold in the fire and a beautiful Menorah will emerge. The same is true of Torah study; at times it may be hard to learn, but one must remember the lesson of the Menorah and just jump in! Sit down and learn, no matter what else is going on. Then you will experience the true sweetness of Torah.

This explains why there was once a custom to dispense flowers to each and every individual, as if to say, “Here is *your* portion of the Torah that Hashem created *for you*. Come and enjoy the holy Torah.”

Through this we can truly celebrate the holiday of Shavu’os with great joy and gratitude. Just come and taste it!

A good *Yom Tov* to all. 🌸

10 Commentary, *ibid.*

11 See Talmud, Bava Basra 25b: One who wants to be wise should pray toward the south, because the Menorah was on the south side of the Sanctuary.

Thank G-d I'm Not There

EVERY YEAR AT SHAVU'OS TIME, MY ROSH HAYESHIVA (DEAN), RABBI CHAIM Leib Epstein, would tell us the following Gemara:¹

On Shavu'os Rav Yosef would say, "Make me a young calf, for if not for this day, how many Yosefs would there be in the market place?"

Rashi² explains:

If not for this day, when I learned Torah and was uplifted, there are many people in the marketplace whose name is Yosef. What would differentiate between them and me?

This is a fascinating insight into Shavu'os. Because the Jews received the Torah, their status changed, and they became exalted and chosen; therefore, we celebrate this momentous occasion with a holiday every year.

I would like to offer a deeper understanding of this idea. I will preface with a story.

A wealthy *chassid* (disciple) of the Avnei Nezer was once forced to spend Shavu'os in a Cantonist village.³ The *chassid* was very disappointed about spending such an uninspiring holiday, and immediately after *Yom Tov* ended, he hurried back to his teacher.

Upon his arrival, he lamented his fate.

Rabbi Isaac Kahn joined the Kollel in 2011; he currently oversees the Kollel's programming for Sephardic and Israeli Jews. He also teaches eighth grade Judaic Studies at Cincinnati Hebrew Day School.

1 Talmud, Pesachim 68b

2 Commentary, ad loc.

3 The Cantonists were victims of forced conscription in Tsarist Russia from 1827 to 1856, when every canton (an area smaller than a county but larger than a village) was forced to send a quota of young men to attend government schools and then serve up to 25 years in the army. Jewish communities were forced to send boys, as

The Avnei Nezer asked him if anyone had said a Torah thought.

The *chassid* answered in the affirmative, that the “Rabbi” of the village, who knew just a bit more than the rest of the people, had spoken.

In his speech, the man had quoted the famous Gemara⁴ which says that Hashem held the Mount Sinai over the Jewish nation and said, “If you accept, good; but if not, *there* will be your burial.” Asked the speaker, what does it mean, “there?” Shouldn’t it say “here?”

He had answered with an extremely powerful idea: Hashem was not speaking to just Moshe, Aharon, or the rest of that generation. Rather, he was speaking to all Jews of all times—“Be connected to Torah, or else you will be *there*, on the outside.” The man had concluded his speech by explaining, “That described *us*! We are on the outside, and the only thing maintaining us is the Torah.”

And with that, the Cantonists had burst into heartfelt dancing.

Upon hearing this, the Avnei Nezer exclaimed that he would travel the whole of Russia just to hear such pure and inspiring words.

We live in a world where the “there” is a very powerful society, exerting many directional pulls. Outside cultures are sometimes very tempting, but allowing ourselves to get snared will doom our fate to burial, there, on the outside.

So what is the solution? To be connected to the Torah. Then we will be uplifted and part of the Holy Nation. Through this, one can lift himself up to a higher level than that of the regular “Joe” in the marketplace.

This was possibly what Reb Yosef meant when he said, “I am celebrating today that I am part of those who accepted the yolk of Torah, and was not snared by all that was being offered “there.”

As we enter into the holiday of Shavu’os, it is a good time for introspection. Where are we, really—“here,” or “there?” May we all merit to always have a meaningful connection with the Holy Torah. ❧

well, in an attempt to undermine their Jewish education. The government schools pressured students to convert to Christianity, the military training actively encouraged conscripts to become thieves, and, of course, no accommodations were made to allow for kashruth and the observance of the Sabbath and holidays. There were, though, a few Cantonists who remained true to Hashem against all odds, despite beatings and persecution. After being released from the army, the group in this story felt unwelcome among the other veterans, so they set up their own small shul.

⁴ Talmud, Shabbos 88a

Shavu'os— A Time for Torah

In the Shavu'os prayers, we thank G-d for giving us the holiday of Shavu'os, which we refer to as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, the time commemorating the giving of the Torah. We customarily stay up through the night, studying Torah. Some have the custom of going through the *Tikkun*, a collection of verses and phrases representing a cross-section of the entire Written and Oral Torah.

Yet with all of its fanfare and celebration, and cheesecake to boot, Shavu'os in the 5700's¹ seems a far cry from what must have occurred on Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago. Are we to relate to our modern-day observance as simply a commemoration of that awesome day, to which we have little connection? If there really is more to the Yom Tov than mere commemoration, how can we modern-day Jews bridge the gap of the millennia which separates us so profoundly from the day of our inauguration as a nation?

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, in his collected writings, has several profound insights into the workings of the Jewish calendar, and he establishes a unique manner through which the Jewish people can relate to annual “commemorations” of events.² A brief analysis of some of his concepts will enable us to connect in a more meaningful way with the Sinai experience and, in general, with the various Jewish Holidays.

Rav Dessler quotes Rav Tzvi Hirsch Brodie, of the Talmud Torah

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1 The Jewish calendar counts years from the Creation, following the chronology given in the Bible; the secular year 2000 corresponded with the Jewish year 5700. The Revelation on Mt. Sinai took place in the Jewish year 2448 (1312 BCE), 3,310 years before this essay was first published (in 1998).

2 Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav MeEliyahu*, Vol. 1 p. 103, Vol. 2 pp. 17-18, Vol. 4 p. 113

of Kelm, as saying, “Time doesn’t pass us by; rather, *we pass through time.*” The choice in emphasis may seem quite arbitrary, but a closer analysis reveals a startling difference.

There is a famous Midrash which states, “G-d looked into the Torah and created the world.” That is to say, the Torah acted as the metaphysical blueprint of Creation for the entire universe. Long before the existence of parchment and ink, the verses in the Torah—which, for example, coronate G-d as our King, or which instruct the methods of animal sacrifice—bespoke G-d’s “need” to create a physical world, in which to house flesh-and-blood “subjects,” and animals to slaughter.

In the twentieth century, particularly with the work of Einstein, the scientific world became aware of the fact that time itself is a limited dimension. It can therefore be altered; hence we can go “beyond” time. Rav Dessler expresses essentially the same idea, with perhaps a far more profound implication. We, as spiritual beings, he says, exist in a physical world, and are indeed bound, during our lifetimes, to a physical body. However, our knowledge regarding *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, dictates that our souls have existence outside of the physical restraints of the body. Therefore, says Rav Dessler, we as Jews supercede the physical limitations of time. In fact, our souls, our Sages say, were present at the revelation of Mount Sinai; and after death, our souls will eventually, if we merit it, bask in the glory of the Garden of Eden.

If so, asks Rav Dessler, why did G-d stress the factor of time in the creation of the world, specifically orchestrating the Genesis story in seven days?

The answer, he explains, relates intimately to the paradox of an Infinite Creator creating a physical universe. Our Sages made the observation that the degree of physicality in the world relates inversely with the manifestation of G-dliness in the world. This is seen in the very root of the Hebrew word *olam*, world, which is based on another Hebrew word, *he’elam*, or hiddenness. That is to say, G-d created a world (*olam*) in which He is “hidden” (*ne’elam*). The more physical an item is, and the deeper we understand the workings of the physical laws surrounding it, the more we will tend to see the item as divorced of spiritual qualities.

Had G-d created a world of minimal physical content, His involvement would be apparent, and the need to follow His commands would be obvious. Therefore, says Rav Dessler, the creation of the world is fashioned in a highly physical manner. Moreover, to the student of sci-

ence, the universe appears to have been created in a single moment in time. This is in sharp contrast to the way we are taught by the Sages to view Creation—as an ongoing occurrence. As we say in the morning blessings of *Shema*, “...Who renews, in His goodness, every day, always, the work of Creation.” G-d is constantly and intimately involved in Creation. In fact, the Talmud says that if, for a moment, G-d did not actively “will” the world into existence, it would cease to be.

The task of a Jew therefore is to see beyond the physical world, to the One who created it. To the extent that we are able to see G-d’s involvement in the world, we are able to make the “*olam*,” or world, more revealed.

This need to look beneath the surface of apparent reality, says Rav Dessler, should also affect our approach to the existence of time. Time is another physical element of Creation in the universe, as is seen in the seven-day order of Creation. To the extent that we can look beyond time, to view ourselves outside of the framework of time, we can see spiritual elements which time hides. Thus, for example, the Sabbath is not truly a weekly day of rest, a time to restore the physical energies after six days of toil. In truth, it is an avenue for reflection, and it allows us to repeatedly reacquaint ourselves with the reality that G-d is the only Creator, and that our productivity is entirely dependent upon His permission.

To relate this to our original point of discussion, it becomes apparent that our approach to Jewish holidays is totally different when contrasted with secular holidays. A country may commemorate an event from long ago with a turkey, or a day without business. Yet there is nothing intrinsic about the day, *per sé*. The Jewish calendar, however, is not a linear scale of time, where the present moment becomes further and further removed from any connection to an ancient event. Rather, we are to look at the calendar, in the analogy of Rav Matis Weinberg, as a spiral staircase where each year on a particular day we reconnect (hopefully on a higher level) to the spiritual potentials that are inherent in the day.³ Thus, the holiday of Shavu’os is not a commemoration of the long-ago reception of the Torah; it is an annual opportunity to connect to the day which has the strongest infusion of the concept of Torah reception.

(Why there needs to be an annual cycle in which different days

³ Rabbi Matis Weinberg, *Patterns in Time*, Vol. 8 pp 39-42

have different infusions—e.g., one day most strongly connected with repentance (Yom Kippur), and another period most intensely connected with joy (Sukkos), etc.—is not specifically dealt with in Rav Dessler’s writings. Perhaps G-d “assessed” that we are unable to connect to all of these spiritual concepts on a daily basis, and need an annual cycle through which to internalize the experiences of the different elements of spirituality before coming back to the same element.)

In light of these insights of Rav Dessler, the custom of Torah study on the night of Shavu’os, which was questioned at the onset, is a totally appropriate means of connecting to the concept of accepting the Torah. In fact, by selecting bits and pieces which comprise the entire Torah as the emphasis of the evening’s study, we connect to acceptance of Torah in the manner in which it was given—in its entirety.

If we take this analysis one step further, we can appreciate yet another aspect of the significance of Torah study on this night.

We refer to the time of Passover as *Z’man Cheruseinu*, the Time of Our Freedom. Yet, in reality, Passover represents not freedom in and of itself, but a road to freedom. Passover begins the daily counting of the Omer, which culminates with the resultant time of Shavu’os. In relation to the concept of freedom, a Baraisa⁴ in Avos (6:2) has the following insight. The tablets of the Ten Commandments were the “handiwork of G-d,” as it were. The Baraisa continues:

‘...And the script was G-d’s script, engraved (*charus*) on the Tablets.’ (Exodus 32:16) Do not pronounce the word (lit., read) “*charus*,” but rather “*cheirus*” (which means freedom). For there is no freer man than one who engages in the study of Torah.


When our Sages say that a word can be read two ways, they are not just noting a similarity in the letters; rather, they are saying that there is an intrinsic connection in the words. Therefore, the engraving of the tablets itself, which symbolizes Torah study, is connected to *cheirus*, freedom. How does learning Torah bring one to freedom?

With Rav Dessler’s comments about our appreciation of time, we can begin to understand the power of Torah and the true import of the Baraisa we have mentioned. Torah study is the quintessential means by which we can come to see G-d’s involvement in the world. To the extent that we reinforce in our minds the concepts of spirituality that the Torah teaches, and to the degree that we can break through the

⁴ See Appendix to this volume.

barriers of physicality in the realms of the natural world, we become free—unbound by nature’s limitations and the restrictions of time.

Thus, the inherent infusion of holiness on the special day of Shavu’os has much to offer us. The opportunity exists to reconnect to the annual reception of the Torah. As we relive the Sinai experience through the study of Torah, we consciously reawaken ourselves to the reality of G-d’s involvement in the physical world. This in turn aids us to summon our energies in the pursuit of the spiritual. That is the ultimate freedom.

May we merit to feel the ecstasy of freedom on this Shavu’os night, as we connect to G-d through His Torah. May we all merit to the coming of *Moshiach*, the Messiah, when we will experience the ultimate freedom from physicality, as an entire nation. 

Rabbi Boruch Leff

Shavu’os: Relax and Reflect

Passover has its Seder. Purim has its Megillah. Chanukah has its menorah. Sukkos has its sukkah. Shavu’os, however, seems to be quite a barren holiday in terms of mitzvos. True, many have a custom to remain awake the entire night, studying Torah on Shavu’os, but this is merely a custom. The Torah does not prescribe any particular directive to be performed on Shavu’os. This unique aspect of Shavu’os, in contrast to the other Yomim Tovim, is extremely surprising.

Shavu’os is certainly more significant, more inspirational than any of the other Festivals. The others derive their validity, both legal and spiritual, from the giving of the Torah—which occurred on Shavu’os. Why then must we struggle to find meaning and growth from Shavu’os?

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Beyond the special sacrifices brought on the festival, why shouldn't the Torah assist us, as it characteristically does, by requiring a mitzvah of some kind that would call to mind the Revelation on Mount Sinai? Why isn't there a mitzvah to recount the story of Sinai, similar to the mitzvah on Passover of reliving the Exodus? (Although in Deuteronomy 4:9-10 the Torah commands us to remember the events of Sinai, we do not find any particular mention that this should take place on Shavu'os.) What is the Torah's message in this blatant omission? Indeed, we now appreciate the Ramban's comment¹ that the Torah's presentation of Shavu'os is a *chok*, a decree which we can not understand.

Yet we can make an attempt. However, our quest for a solution to this problem must begin with another question.

The most common understanding of the significance of Shavu'os is that it is, as our Sages describe it, *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, the appointed time when our Torah was given. Yet the Torah never mentions this. The Torah refers to Shavu'os in five places, yet is silent about any relationship to Mount Sinai. Shavu'os is called the Festival of the Harvest;² a holiday of the wheat harvest;³ an almost anonymous festival taking place fifty days after Passover;⁴ the Day of First Fruits;⁵ and simply Shavu'os, the Festival of Weeks.⁶ Nowhere does the Torah offer a hint or a whisper that Shavu'os is celebrated as a commemoration of the Giving of the Torah! How can such a fundamental aspect be left out?

The Maharal⁷ offers a perplexing solution. Freely translated:

Concerning the question that people⁸ ask—that if the holiday

1 Commentary to Deuteronomy 16:12

2 Exodus 23:22

3 Exodus 34:22

4 Leviticus 23:16

5 Numbers 28:26

6 Ibid., Exodus 34:22, Deuteronomy 16:9 and 16:16

7 *Tiferes Yisrael*, end of Chapter 27

8 Note the use of the term "people," (in general), as if Torah scholars (in particular) would never ask such a question. This would be in accordance with the rule the Rabbeinu Bachya establishes in his commentary to Leviticus 23:24, that the more esoteric the subject, the shorter and more vague the account in the Torah. True understanding is reserved for unique individuals, not for the masses. This rule would apply to Shavu'os.

of Shavu'os celebrates the giving of the Torah, why doesn't the Torah mention this, especially since the Sages describe it in the liturgy as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*—this is not a question at all. G-d gave us Festivals so we could rejoice in them, but it is difficult to rejoice in Shavu'os due to the fact that on it we received the Torah, which is a yoke and a burden upon us. This is why the gentiles rejected the Torah. Now, it is true that we accepted the Torah upon ourselves when we proclaimed “*Na'aseh v'nishmah*—we accept to do it and then we will hear what it is,” but, in actuality, G-d forced us to accept it against our will, by placing a mountain over our heads.⁹ So how could the Torah refer to Shavu'os as a Festival of the Giving of the Torah, when G-d forced it upon us? (A festival is for rejoicing.)

The Maharal continues to explain a similar phenomenon concerning Rosh Hashanah, in which the Torah does not refer to it as a Day of Judgement.

Since judgement is not received well or desired by people, the Torah does not mention it. Nor does it mention anything associated with a negative [connotation] when referring to a holiday.

The Maharal's words are shocking! Impossible! Can any holiday be understood as negative? Could the memory of the giving of the Torah at Sinai really be a cause of distress?

We shall return to this Maharal later and make it, we hope, less horrifying.

For now, there is a common misconception concerning Shavu'os that must be addressed. If you were to ask someone to explain what the focus of Shavu'os is, no doubt he or she would tell you that the focus is the mitzvah of studying Torah. While this may be true if measured by a standard of time—we do spend the entire Shavu'os night studying Torah—it is somewhat inaccurate.

The Torah's understanding of Jewish Festivals is fundamentally different when compared to non-Jewish holidays. Non-Jews commemorate events, while Jews reexperience them. Every Festival is an opportunity for growth, because the Festival is infused with spiritual forces that were unleashed due to an historical event.¹⁰ On Shavu'os the Jewish People received and accepted the Torah. Thus, every year we accept

⁹ See Talmud, Shabbos 88a

¹⁰ See Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Volume 2, p. 21, as well as the essay “Shavu'os—A Time for Torah,” in this booklet, by Rabbi Yuval Kernerman.

the Torah anew, and we must find ways in our personal service of G-d to strengthen our commitment to the Torah on Shavu'os.¹¹

So, what then, is the focus of Shavu'os?

It seems that the focus should be a reestablishment of our connection to the Torah. Torah is one of the four items that are in need of constant strengthening,¹² but it is on Shavu'os when this reinforcement takes on added importance.

Actually, the Kli Yakar¹³ explains that Shavu'os is not described in the Torah as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu* because Torah should be constantly reaccepted renewed, daily.¹⁴ This is the symbolism of the "new meal offering" brought on Shavu'os. In a similar vein, the Kotzker Rebbe explains that Shavu'os is not called *Z'man Kabbalas Toraseinu*, the appointed time for the acceptance of the Torah, because, although the Torah was given on Shavu'os, we accept it constantly.¹⁵ Rav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, dean of Ner Yisroel in Baltimore, once said that Shavu'os has no calendar date and is described in the Torah simply as "fifty days after Passover," because acceptance of the Torah is not particular to a specific calendar date. But all would agree that Shavu'os is a most potent time for a stronger acceptance and renewal.

Rav Tzadok HaCohen¹⁶ asks a very stimulating question on the verse, "And the entire nation was seeing the thunder... The nation saw, and trembled..."¹⁷ Why does the Torah describe the Children of Israel as "seeing" (present tense) and then as "having seen" (past tense)?

Rav Tzadok explains that the use of the present tense is really a description of all generations throughout Jewish history. Every Jew has the ability to access the spiritual sounds and sights of Sinai right now, because they are part and parcel of the subconscious of the Jewish soul. In a similar vein, Sfas Emes¹⁸ states emphatically that "all understanding and insight that Jews have gained throughout the generations derives from the impactful sounds of the Sinai experience."

11 Ibid., p. 40

12 See Talmud, Berachos 32b

13 Commentary to Leviticus 23:16

14 See Rashi to Exodus 19:1

15 See *Imrei Shamai*, Moadim p. 312

16 *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 50

17 Exodus 20:15

18 volume 4, p.26

As Rav Dessler pointed out, Shavu'os is the day when the Revelation on Mount Sinai's spiritual effects are strongest. One may assume that the access to the "Revelation on Har Sinai" described by Rav Tzadok is also strongest on this day. Therefore, it is easier to establish a new commitment to the Torah on Shavu'os. As *Ohr Gedalyahu* writes,¹⁹ "A person must prepare for the awesome spiritual light that is present on Shavu'os." Then he writes,²⁰ "Every year the Torah is given anew on Shavu'os, and we must be ready to receive it."

These ideas help us understand the practice on Shavu'os called *Tikkun Leil Shavu'os*. This practice, carried out on Shavu'os night, has its origins in the Zohar, and was popularized by the Arizal and his students (see Rabbi Yaakov Weingarten's *Tikkun Leil Shavu'os*). The practice involves the recitation of verses from every weekly Torah reading and every book of the Prophets and Hagiographa (*Nevi'im* and *K'suvim*). If time allows, the same procedure is done with every tractate of Mishnah. Other customs are not as demanding, but simply require one to recite a listing of all the mitzvos of the Torah while having in mind to accept them. The central theme of this *Tikkun* is not to engage in hard-core depth of study, but rather to connect oneself to all aspects of Torah. Shavu'os night is not spent simply engaged in Torah study; rather, it is used to recommit oneself to the Torah.

Whether one recites the *Tikkun Leil Shavu'os* or learns normally on Shavu'os night, one must realize that the focus of Shavu'os must be to strengthen one's commitment to Torah. It is not only a holiday celebrating the learning of Torah. We do not call the festival *Chag Mattan Torah* (the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah), but Shavu'os, which means "Weeks." The stress is on the culmination of the weeks counted—weeks spent preparing to reestablish our commitment to Torah.²¹ Our study of Torah on Shavu'os should be a reflection of the depth of our appreciation of—and commitment to—accepting the Torah.

Having established Shavu'os as the festival for a strong recommitment to Torah, we return now to the perplexing Maharal cited earlier. We wondered what the Maharal could have meant in referring to Shavu'os' connection to the giving of the Torah as a depressing, rather

19 *Mo'adim*, p. 160

20 *ibid.*, p. 166

21 Rav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory

than a joyful, memory. The solution lies in a proper understanding of our role as the bearers of the Torah.

It is often explained, especially in modern times, when many people have difficulty with the concept of a “Chosen People,” that our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai not only made us G-d’s special nation, but also infused within us tremendous responsibility. We were no longer bound by only the seven Noahide Laws, but we became responsible to keep all 613 Torah laws. We became moral leaders of the world—indeed, “a kingdom of priests”—but not a superior race.

Greater responsibility should be a cause for celebration, especially when the responsibility is to carry out G-d’s will for the world. This was the excitement exhibited in our grand declaration “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*, we accept to do and [then] we’ll hear [later what it is we are to do],” because we trust that G-d is concerned only in our best interests.

But responsibility can come together with a feeling of burden. (See Talmud, Horiyos 10b: “You think I’m giving you power? I’m actually making you *slaves!*”) It is this point that G-d was conveying by holding the mountain over our heads. Torah in this world is not voluntary, subject to man’s choice to accept it. It is a necessary burden of instructions that enable the world to exist.²² While it may be true that “G-d wanted to increase the merits of the Jewish people; therefore, He gave them many mitzvos,”²³ it is only natural that Jews feel a sense of difficulty and burden at times. We appreciate the beauty and greatness of the Torah and the spirituality and meaning that it injects into our lives, but there are times when we feel overwhelmed by the vastness of the demands of the Torah. In a sense, we actually requested of G-d to “force” us to accept the Torah, so that these nervous feelings wouldn’t overtake us at Mount Sinai. (See *Or Gedalyahu*, p. 82, for a beautiful parable concerning a mentally ill patient who asks his friends, while in a healthy state of mind, to restrain him from causing damage to himself or others.)

So it is this fear, says the Maharal, which can make Shavu’os quite unnerving. If we internalize the awesome responsibility that Mattan Torah at Sinai places upon us, we could not react instinctively with festive rejoicing. The Torah acknowledges this and therefore does not mention the giving of the Torah explicitly, with regard to Shavu’os.

²² see *Tiferes Yisroel*, Chapter 32

²³ Mishnah, Makkos 23b

Rather, the stress of Shavu'os in the Torah is placed upon the gratitude that we should have to G-d for providing new crops and fruits.

Only in the Oral Torah do we discover that Shavu'os is the festival celebrating the giving of the Torah. After a mature realization, we can and we do rejoice immensely in the fact that G-d has given us His treasure—His instructions for living. After introspection we can realize that this “burden” is really the key to life itself, and that realization is exhilarating. Rav Tzadok²⁴ suggests that this is the reason why the Talmud²⁵ states that on Shavu'os everyone agrees that there is a physical mitzvah to eat, drink and feast (whereas regarding other festivals there is a dispute), because the body feels this burden most strongly. (The soul, in contrast, is spiritually inclined.) It is the body that must demonstrate that, ultimately, it too appreciates the “burden” of the Torah.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the Torah does not prescribe a specific mitzvah for Shavu'os. On other holidays, the Torah gives specific directions, both in letter and in spirit, how to fulfill the laws intended for those festivals. At times one can “get lost” in the performance of a mitzvah and fail to achieve significant general growth due to a lack of focus on the meaning of the festival. The Torah accounts for this, but for most holidays allows the fulfillment of a mitzvah to suffice.

On Shavu'os, however, the Torah does not want us to be “distracted” by the performance of any specific mitzvah. The Maharal has shown us that Shavu'os is a day of grand, “burdensome” implications. As Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch writes:²⁶

Shavu'os... represents purely spiritual matters and therefore has no mitzvah-symbol of its own, no outward expression in action of its significance. This would seem to suggest that Israel would cease to exist if the significance of... Shavu'os, which concerns the national soul of Israel, were to disappear from the minds of Israel.

The Giving of the Torah is far too powerful to enable any expression of mitzvah through physical action to be meaningful. The Torah encompasses all mitzvos. No one particular mitzvah could suffice. A mitzvah obligation would actually detract, not enhance. G-d gave us a

24 *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 56

25 *Pesachim* 68b

26 *Horeb*, p. 98

festival to commemorate the giving of the Torah, in which we refrain from performing creative work—but that is all. We are to refrain from work in order to establish a proper atmosphere for contemplation on the meaning of the day. Our Sages call Shavu'os *Atzeres*, which means simply “refraining from work.” This is the sole festival aspect of Shavu'os,²⁷ in order to allow a focus on the implications and responsibilities of receiving the Torah. *S'forno*²⁸ explains the name *Atzeres* to mean “absorption” of the spirituality of the day. Rav Tzadok²⁹ cites the Arizal, who explains both Shemini *Atzeres* and Shavu'os/*Atzeres* in this manner, as well. Indeed, Shavu'os offers “little else” but pure, simple basking in the holiness and splendor of the day.

We must ask ourselves some difficult, penetrating, and even shocking questions on Shavu'os. How strongly are we connected to the Torah? Are there areas in which we find the Torah to be burdensome? Are we Jews both on the outside and internally, or is there room to enhance our real, genuine inner selves? Are we fully committed to all aspects of the Torah, or can we use an overhaul in our spiritual growth? What is the purpose of life? What is the meaning of our existence?

Ruth contemplated these questions and decided to convert to Judaism. It is perhaps for this reason (in addition to the classical reasons) that we read the Book of Ruth on Shavu'os.

(According to the *Sh'lah Hakodosh*, cited by Rav Matisyahu Solomon,³⁰ Shavu'os is actually a Day of Judgement, on which G-d evaluates our deeds and asks these very questions. On Shavu'os the world was recreated through the giving of the Torah, and G-d judges on the anniversary of recreation as well as on Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of Creation itself. G-d judges particularly on the commitment (or lack thereof) to Torah study. *S'fas Emess*³¹ states that every year on Shavu'os we receive the ability to learn and understand all parts and levels of the Torah that we are to engage in that year. Later,³² *S'fas Emess* connects

27 See *Ta'amei Minhagim*, p.279, for a similar explanation from R' Levi Yitzchak Berditchev.

28 Commentary to Leviticus 23:36

29 *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 34)

30 *Mat'nas Chaim*, p. 318


31 Numbers, p. 25

32 *Ibid.*, p. 33

33 Rosh Hashanah 16a

this homiletically to the Mishnah³³ that says fruit trees are judged on Shavu'os—man's "fruit" is mitzvos and good deeds.

The Torah poses solutions to all of these questions and we should seek them and apply them to our lives. We should choose an area of growth and strengthen our commitment to it on Shavu'os. We must also commit to the responsibility of applying the Torah's teachings to every aspect of our lives, and let the Torah's beauty be our guiding inspiration. If we appreciate the Torah for what it truly is, we will better appreciate our lives. We will then realize that Shavu'os is bereft of mitzvos only because we are bereft of complete Torah observance. Shavu'os is an opportunity to think deeply about our real connection to Torah.

So, this Shavu'os, let's take a contemplative walk and think about these extremely significant issues. Only then will we have fulfilled the maxim, "If you have experienced a Jewish holiday and haven't profoundly changed as a result, you've missed the point of the Jewish holiday!" 

Rabbi Reuven Pelberg

The Milk and Meat of Shavu'os

Aside from of the spiritual import of the Shavu'os holiday, this period also conjures up images in our minds of cheesecake, blintzes, and ice cream. The widely practiced custom of eating dairy products on Shavu'os is mentioned in the *Code of Jewish Law*¹ by the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis).

There are several reasons offered for this custom.

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1 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 494:3

The Rema suggests that one will be reminded of the *Shtei Halechem*, the two special loaves of bread offered in the Temple on Shavu'os. Because there is a prohibition against using the same bread for both dairy and meat, one will eat his dairy meal with one loaf of bread and will eat his meat meal² with another loaf of bread. Consequently his meals will consist (at least in part) of two loaves.

*Mishnah B'rurah*³ mentions another reason. Prior to receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish People were not commanded to follow the laws of kashrus. Then, immediately after receiving of the Torah, it would have been difficult for the Jewish People to prepare a meat meal, because of the intricate laws involving meat. Therefore they prepared dairy meals—the laws governing dairy foods are less complex. To commemorate this aspect of the Sinai experience we eat dairy products.

Although the widespread custom is to eat dairy at some point on Shavu'os, many also eat meat, in honor of the holiday. This presents a difficulty, because Jewish law requires one to keep meat and milk separate. Aside from keeping one's dishes separate, one must also eat them at separate times. A brief overview of the laws pertinent to our discussion is therefore in order.⁴

In general, after eating meat, one must wait a period of time (one, three, or six hours, depending on one's custom) before eating dairy products. There are two reasons given for this rule. First, the fatty residue of meat remains in one's mouth⁵ (mixing milk and meat is prohibited even inside one's mouth). Second, one might find meat in between one's teeth.⁶

In contrast, when one eats dairy first, no waiting period is required.⁷ (One exception to this rule pertains to the eating of "hard cheese." In general, hard cheese is defined as cheese that has been aged for six months. One who eats hard cheese must wait before eating meat products, as one waits between eating meat and dairy.)⁸

2 See *Mishnah B'rurah* 529:11 for the requirement to eat meat on a festival.

3 494:12

4 For a detailed analysis of these laws, see *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah* 89.

5 *Taz, Yoreh De'ah* 89:1; *Shach*, *ibid.*, 89:2

6 *Ibid.*, in the name of Rambam

7 See *Bais Yosef, Tur, Orach Chaim* 173, in the name of Zohar: Some do not eat dairy and meat in the same meal.

8 Rema, *Yoreh De'ah* 89:2.

Another issue relates to eating meat following regular cheese or other dairy foods. After eating these dairy foods one must rinse his mouth well, with water or another liquid. Alternatively, one may wipe or clean one's mouth with a substance that won't stick to the roof of the mouth. (An example of this is bread made with wheat.) In addition, it is best to wash one's hands with cold water up to the knuckles⁹ prior to partaking of the meat, because we are afraid that there might be a dairy substance or grease on one's hands. Checking one's hands to see if they are clean also suffices. There is an opinion that states that one should say the Grace after Meals, or the applicable blessing on finishing the cheese meal, before eating the meat.

A final issue is that one is forbidden to use the same tablecloth or placemat for both dairy and meat, because we are afraid that the crumbs of one might mix with the food of the other. Because of this, one must use different tablecloths or placemats for dairy and meat.

Based on the above concerns, we can readily understand why many people eat some dairy meals and some meat meals on Shavu'os, but don't eat meals consisting of both. It is a mitzvah to eat meat on Shavu'os, as it is on every festival. It may also be a "mitzvah" to eat cheesecake on Shavu'os. If we plan to eat dairy and meat at the same meal, let's make sure we do it properly.

A good *Yom Tov* (holiday) to all! 🥂

⁹ *Darkei T'shuva* 89:26

The Holy Language of our Holy Torah

The holiday of Shavu'os, with its central theme of *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, Time of the Giving of our Torah, draws attention to an often underappreciated dimension of Torah. As we focus on the Revelation at Sinai, it is important that we recognize that this was only the beginning of an ongoing communication from G-d to the Jewish people. Through the Torah, G-d speaks directly to each and every generation of world Jewry and to each and every individual Jew.

The language chosen for this communication, Biblical Hebrew, is often referred to by our Sages as *Lashon HaKodesh*, the Holy Tongue.¹ In the following pages, we will reflect upon the unique nature of *Lashon HaKodesh*, and the ramifications of this “holiness.”

Why “Holy?”

In his *Guide to the Perplexed*,² Maimonides writes that the *kedusha*—holiness—of this language derives from the fact that concepts pertaining to base, bodily functions have no unique, distinctive names in this language, and are referred to only by euphemism. The Maharal³ differs, arguing that the holiness of *Lashon HaKodesh* is innate and not merely the result of a lack of vulgar terminologies. He says that it is actually *because* of its holiness that *Lashon HaKodesh* is void of such

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1 As examples, among many, see Talmud Bavli, Berachos 13a, Sotah 33b and 49b, Beraishis Rabbah 18, or Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 25

2 3:8

3 *Nesiv Hatz'nius*, chapter 3

verbiage. As he argues, nothing is intrinsically devoid of sacred potential.

Nachmanides⁴ rejects all such approaches, charging that the Torah has no qualms about addressing any body part or bodily function. He proposes that the title of *Lashon HaKodesh* derives from its use as the language of Torah and prophecy, coupled with the fact that it was utilized by G-d in creating and naming all of the world's components.

Ramifications of “Holiness”

The very fact that the Holy Tongue is so named has been cause for legal discussion regarding the parameters of its use. In fact, Hebrew's sanctity has been cause for suggestion that it not be treated as a language like all others. The *Shulchan Aruch*⁵ rules that secular matters may be discussed using *Lashon HaKodesh*, even in an environment in which Torah study would be prohibited (e.g., foul-smelling). However, *Magen Avrohom*, quoting the *Sefer HaChasidim*, deems it an act of piety to avoid the use of *Lashon HaKodesh* in such circumstances. In his glosses (ad loc), the Chasam Sofer extends this concept to apply to spiritually vile places as well; he suggests that speaking *Lashon HaKodesh* in the proximity of houses of pagan worship would fall into the “best avoided” category. Accordingly, the Chasam Sofer advances the idea that this is why *Lashon HaKodesh* was not commonly spoken during the Babylonian Exile—and, he adds, this was the cause of a tragic “forgetting” of the language.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden⁶ takes a very different approach. He responds to a question regarding the permissibility of studying Hebrew grammar in a bathroom or similar setting, and rules that inasmuch as the student would be apt to contemplate verses of *Tanach* (Scripture), in search of examples of grammatical rules, such study is inappropriate. Though he takes a stringent approach in this situation, one can deduce that Rabbi Emden sees no problem with general use of the Hebrew language in such an environment. As Rabbi Emden himself comments, so long as *Lashon HaKodesh* was the common language of our people, it was surely used in all types of locations and environments.⁷

4 Commentary to Exodus 30:13

5 Orach Chaim 85:2

6 Responsa *Sh'eilas Ya'avetz*

7 It should be noted, however, that both of the pillars of contemporary Jewish law,

An Appreciation of “Holiness”

In a letter printed in the final pages of *Michtav MeEliyahu*, volume III, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler addresses another ramification of the sanctity of our language. Citing as his sources the *Orchos Chaim*, *Shibbolei Haleket*, and other Rishonim,⁸ Rav Dessler explains that the teaching of *Lashon HaKodesh* would optimally take its unique nature into consideration. Accordingly, instruction, even of the alphabet,⁹ would aim not only at retention, but also at the forging of a loving bond between the student and the language of holiness, even if this would slow the learning process.¹⁰ Rav Dessler acknowledges, though, that due to the limited hours dedicated to Judaic studies in many contemporary educational systems, expedient methods must be utilized, even if the aforementioned goal is forfeited.

Rav Dessler’s concession to modern methods notwithstanding, this “bond-forming, holiness-inspiring” ideal should enlighten us as to the great regard and admiration we should have for our most distinctive of languages. ❧

the *Mishnah Berurah* (ibid., 9) and the *Aruch Hashulchan* (ibid., 2) quote the ideal of the *Sefer HaChassidim* without challenge.

8 Judaic scholars who lived between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries.

9 See also *Shem Hagedolim* (entry on Rabbi Yitzchok of Acco), where the Chida addresses the sanctity of the very letters of the aleph-beis. He describes each letter as having its own spiritual root, and various combinations of letters as evoking different “spiritual lights.”

10 Hence the sing-song chanting of “*Komotz-aleph*, ‘uh,’” in classic “cheder” schools.

The Power of Unity

PIRKEI AVOS, ETHICS OF THE FATHERS, LISTS 48 CHARACTER TRAITS THAT one must have in order to study Torah properly.¹ While some of the attributes are rather obvious—such as the need to have intuitive understanding, attentive listening, and the like—others seem rather puzzling. Traits mentioned in this list also include loving fellow creatures and sharing in a friend’s burden.

At first glance, these traits seem to be out of place, but after we delve deeper into the connection between the Torah and the Jewish people, we hope to better understand why proper interpersonal character traits are vitally important to a proper understanding of the Torah.

When introducing the Jews’ arrival at Mount Sinai, the Torah states,² “*Vayichan sham Yisrael negged hahar*—he, Israel, camped there, opposite the mountain.” The Torah uses the word “*Vayichan*—he camped,” in the singular, when in fact it refers to the entire Jewish people, and it would have been more appropriate to say “*Vayachanu*—they camped.” Rashi³ quotes the Midrash, which explains that the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai “*k’ish echad, blev echad*—like one man, with one heart.” Therefore the Torah describes their camp in the singular.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz⁴ mentions that their unity was not merely superficial, with the Jews being nice to one another on the surface, but rather there was a deep love between one Jew and another. They really were like one man, with one heart.

Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz⁵ points out that we see from here that *achdus*, Jewish unity, is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah.

Now completing his third year with the Kollel, **Rabbi Dani Schon** is the energetic founder of many of the Kollel’s newest learning initiatives.

1 Avos 6:6

2 Exodus 19:2

3 Commentary, ad loc.

4 *Sichos Mussar*, p. 157

5 *Da’as Torah*, Sh’mos, p. 184

Why is *achdus* such a necessary component to receiving the Torah?

Rabbi Aharon Kotler⁶ says that the Torah is referred to as “*d’racheha darchei no’am, v’chol n’sivoseha shalom*—its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.”⁷ Rabbi Kotler explains that the word *shalom*, commonly translated as peace, is connected to the Hebrew word *shaleim*—complete. The essence of *shalom* is when an entity is unified in acting as one, and all of its many, unique parts work in harmony with each other, to form a greater whole. Since Torah is the essence of *sh’leimus* (completeness or perfection), it would not be fitting for it to be given to the Jews while they were splintered from infighting. If the Jews could not be complete in regards to interpersonal relationships, which logic dictates, then they certainly couldn’t connect to the Torah, which contains all form of *sh’leimus*, many of which are beyond the grasp of the human intellect.

Conversely, Rabbi Kotler points out⁸ that just as *achdus* was necessary to receive the Torah, it is likewise only through the Torah that the Jews can be truly united.

Perhaps we can illustrate this with the following analogy. Two people form a partnership in a business venture. Even though they have joined together, in reality they are separate—each individual joins the partnership for his own benefit, and as soon as the partnership stops providing that benefit, he will dissolve the partnership. Each party is likely not interested in the ultimate welfare of his partner; rather, he is looking out for his own good.

On the other hand, when Jews get together for Torah (initially at Mount Sinai, and nowadays for the learning of Torah, or for a Torah-related cause), they aren’t looking out for their own individual good—they are trying to make G-d’s presence be felt, through the Torah. In Torah pursuits, an individual is not focused on himself; he is focused on G-d. Only in such a manner can there ever be true unity, because it is only in this scenario that all the parties in a group truly have the same goal in mind. (We can likely apply this principle towards marriage as well, but that is for another time.)

Now that we understand the absolute importance of *achdus* among Jews in relation to their connection to the Torah, it is no surprise that

6 *Mishnas Rebbi Aharon*, vol. 1, p. 199

7 Proverbs 3:17

8 *Mishnas Rebbi Aharon*, vol. 4, p. 221

many of the traits necessary to study Torah are associated with interpersonal relationships.

We can also better understand a number of ideas and concepts relating to the time surrounding Shavu'os.

The gemara says⁹ that the Jews' acceptance of the Torah at the end of the Purim story (derived from the words "*kiy'mu v'kiblu*, they fulfilled and they accepted"¹⁰)—they upheld that which they had previously accepted at Sinai) was at an even greater level than the acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai. At Sinai, the entire Jewish nation experienced national revelation. What could possibly be more profound about the Jews' "renewal of their vows" at the conclusion of the Purim story?

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz¹¹ explains that during the Purim story, the Jews were faced with mass genocide. Therefore, they attained an even higher level of unity than they had reached at Mount Sinai. With each Jew fearing for his life, any trivial issues that had previously separated one Jew from another quickly fell by the wayside. The Jews truly joined together in fervent prayer and fasting, and it was this high level of *achdus* that served as a catalyst for an even higher level of acceptance of the Torah than was previously experienced at Mount Sinai.

Perhaps with this new understanding we can also explain why the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died specifically during the period of the Counting of the Omer, which connects Passover to Shavu'os. During this time period, a person is supposed to prepare and ready himself to accept the Torah. However, the students of Rabbi Akiva, who did not show proper respect for one another, were doing just the opposite. Therefore, their demise occurred specifically during these seven weeks.

Rabbi Dovid Hofsteder¹² uses a similar idea to explain the significance of the shofar blasts on Mount Sinai when G-d gave the Torah. He mentions that many times when the shofar is blown in Tanach (Scripture), it is used to unite the Jews. One such example is the sounding of the shofar in the wilderness, which was blown to announce an assembly of the entire nation. Similarly, the shofar is blown at the start of the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year, which frees Jewish slaves, who are then free to unite with their families. Ibn Ezra explains that the shofar was blown

9 Talmud, Shabbos 88a

10 Esther 9:27

11 *Sichos Mussar*, p. 155–6

12 *Darash Dovid, Mo'adim*, p. 254–256

at Mount Sinai to instill the fear of G-d in the Jews. Perhaps we can say that these shofar blasts also served as a catalyst, inspiring the Jews to unite. As we previously mentioned, it is impossible for there to be complete unity as long as each individual is focused on his own needs. The shofar blasts, which would cause people to focus on (that is, fear) G-d, would in turn lead to proper *achdus*, with each person focusing on G-d rather than his own needs.

May we merit to see unity among Jews, and to hear the shofar blast that will herald the coming of the Moshiach—the ultimate ingathering of the Jews.

Have a great *Yom Tov*. 🕊

Rabbi Binyamin Teitelbaum

The Depth is in the Details

IMAGINE IF YOU WERE WRITING A BOOK ABOUT A FAMILY'S TRIALS AND travails. The climax of the book would be that the family finally succeeded in overcoming their most difficult challenge yet, using an ingenious and brilliant plan!

How would it look if the next chapter were a short dissertation on the anatomy of a snail, and its effect on microorganisms that live in its immediate vicinity?

Traditionally, after a story reaches its climax, there is a staggered lowering of the storyline down to its conclusion.

However, after the Torah describes the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, we find something that, on the surface, appears to be a bit puz-

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zling. Hashem culminates His freeing of the Jewish People from Egypt with the Splitting of the Sea and, ultimately, the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. After that, one would expect that the first mitzvos given to the Jews would be those of utmost importance—maybe something like the three “cardinal sins” of murder, adultery, and idol worship, for example. Instead, we find something entirely different.

Hashem said to Moshe, “Say thus to the Children of Israel: “You saw that I spoke to you from Heaven. Do not make images [of the Cherubim on the Ark] out of silver, nor [extra Cherubim] out of gold.

“Make Me an earthen Altar. . . If you make Me a stone altar, do not make it of stones hewn [with metal tools]. . .

“Do not climb up My Altar on stairs. . .”¹

Why did Hashem choose to give us these seemingly less monumental commandments, at such a critical juncture?

I once heard an amazing explanation of this issue in the name of Rabbi Uren Reich, *shlit”a*.

There is a famous Midrash² that recounts how Hashem offered the Torah to all the nations of the world before actually giving it to the Jewish People. Each nation asked Hashem what the Torah contains, and each was told of one prohibition, like “Do not kill,” or “Do not steal.” Each nation declined, after hearing what the Torah expected them to refrain from. So it fell on us to be the only nation that accepted the Torah upon itself.

Many commentaries are troubled by this story. All of the mitzvos that Hashem told the nations about are included in the seven Noahide Laws which all nations must follow, regardless of whether or not they choose to accept the Torah. Why, then, did this provide them with grounds for refusal? It didn’t get them out of these prohibitions, either way! Additionally, why did Hashem single these Mitzvos out, in the first place?

One answer suggested is that, while the actual act of murder or theft is indeed prohibited anyway, there are many ways in which one could be seen as committing nuanced forms of murder, which remain technically permissible. For example, our Sages tell us that embarrassing someone publicly is tantamount to murder, and that not returning a

¹ Exodus 20:19–23

² Quoted in Sifrei, Deuteronomy 32:3; Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer 41; and other places

smile to a friendly neighbor amounts, to a degree, to theft. It was these smaller details that scared away the other nations. They could accept not being able to actually kill or commit adultery, but they were not willing to compromise their “quality of life” any further. By accepting the Torah, the Jews undertook to not only keep the more obvious laws, but also to comply with the more subtle directives, as well.

With this, we can now return to a more careful examination of the three mitzvos that follow the events on Mount Sinai.

Firstly, we have the prohibition against crafting the Cherubim from silver. Rashi explains that doing so would display a lack of submission to the way Hashem stipulated that the Ark be made, and it would be similar to actual idolatry!


Then comes the specification that the Altar be constructed using stone and without using metal tools. Here, again, Rashi teaches us that the reason relates to a larger issue. Since metal is used to form weapons, which cut short the lives of others, it is inappropriate to use it to make the Altar, which serves to prolong life.

Finally, we have the commandment to ascend the Altar on a ramp, not via a staircase. Once again, there lies a deeper meaning behind this seemingly bizarre mitzvah. The Priests would have to spread their legs slightly further apart on a staircase than they would on a ramp, and it is more respectful not to cause them to do so.

In all three cases, we find nuanced manifestations of one of the three “cardinal sins” mentioned earlier—idolatry, murder, and promiscuity! No longer are these just ordinary, detailed, mitzvos. Rather, they are demonstrations of what the newly-given Torah offered us. We, the Jewish people, accepted the Torah with the knowledge that it would provide us with a guide for every aspect of our lives, and with opportunities for growth that would be available to us at every turn. Immediately following the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai, Hashem showed us that in its minutiae are buried the same foundational points that one finds in the bigger, more obvious commandments.

There was once an owner of a factory, whose production line inexplicably broke down, costing him millions of dollars in lost business per day. He finally managed to track down an expert engineer, who whipped out a screwdriver and turned one screw—and the factory cranked back to life! Immediately, the engineer presented the owner with a bill for \$10,000. Affronted, the factory owner demanded an itemized copy. The expert was happy to oblige: “For turning a screw:

\$1. For knowing which screw to turn: \$9,999.”

Hashem is the Master Builder of the beautiful and vast universe in which we find ourselves. Our jobs are indeed much easier than that of the engineer. The Engineer on High has already told us which small screws we are required to turn. It is up to us to realize the power and effect that each and every turning of our hands can have. 

Appendix

Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

The Writing of the Oral Torah

THE ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION DRAW ON MANY sources, but an attentive reader will note that a good number of them are described as “Mishnah,” “Midrash,” and “Talmud.” The following paragraphs explain what these terms mean, and outline their roles in Jewish tradition.

IN THE SINAI DESERT, THE JEWISH PEOPLE RECEIVED THE Torah. It was given to them in two forms: the Written and the Oral.

The Written Torah (*Torah Shebich’sav* in Hebrew) consisted then of the Five Books of Moses. Later, the writings of the Prophets (*Kesuvim*) and the Hagiographa (*Kesuvim*, such as Psalms and the Five Megillos) were added. Together these three groups of books are referred to with the Hebrew acronym *Tanach* (Torah, *Nevi’im*, *Kesuvim*).

The Oral Torah consisted of explanations of Scripture (for instance, that tefillin—phylacteries—must be black and square), as well as additional and supplemental laws (such as the obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah).¹

¹ See *Meshech Chochma*, Leviticus 23:24.

This second Torah remained a purely oral tradition for many centuries. Eventually, the Sages decided that an outline of this tradition must be composed and written down, to ensure that its transmission would continue undisturbed. The initial phase of this composition ended toward the end of the second century CE, around 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The central component of that outline is called the **Mishnah**. It contains quotes and legal opinions from sages who lived during and immediately after the era of the Second Temple. The Mishnah is organized into six series (*sedarim*), each of which contains several volumes (*mesechtos*).

Other teachings of the Sages of this period (including *Baraisos*—literally, lessons which were “left out” of the Mishnah) were compiled in a number of works, many of which are called **Midrashim**. Midrashim are primarily concerned with explaining and expounding upon Scripture. Some Midrashim cover legal subjects, while others deal with the Biblical narrative, philosophy, and mysticism.

Over the next three or four centuries, two commentaries on the Mishnah were written. Both were called **Talmud**, and both are still studied today. One commentary, the Jerusalem Talmud, was composed by scholars living in Israel. The second, the Babylonian Talmud, became the central body of the now-written Oral Torah. Although many important works have been written in the centuries since (such as *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law), all of them draw on the principles outlined in the Talmud. ¶

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