

The Narrow Bridge

גשר צר מאוד

HOLIDAY INSIGHTS

Short Divrei Torah on Shavuos

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לע"נ פעסל בת ישראל מנחם / לזכות חילינו

HUMBLE MOUNTAIN

Kotzker Rebbe

The Almighty chose Har Sinai upon which to give the Torah, for it was the lowest of the mountains. Why didn't Hashem choose a valley in which to give the Torah?

To be considered an "undistinguished" valley and not boast about it is not a remarkable characteristic. But if one is considered a "mountain," possessing the same virtues and distinctions of which others boast, and yet he does not behave with conceit and vanity, that is considered extraordinary humility!

UNIQUE POTENTIAL

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

Shavuos commemorates and celebrates the giving of the Torah when the entire Nation was stationed at Sinai - demonstrating that everyone received an equal share in this invaluable commodity. This is as true today as it was thousands of years ago: No individual or group can claim ownership of the Torah; it is available for all who want to come and take it. In fact, the Medrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 1:7) says that for this reason, the Torah was specifically given in the desert, a place which is as much mine as it is yours.

While this is certainly true, it can still feel disheartening to see those with obvious natural ability shining in their Torah learning, while those with weaker skills struggle and do not seem to achieve as much. If the Torah was given to everyone equally, why do we not seem to accomplish as much as others when we toil just as hard, or even harder?

The answer is that "accomplishing" in Torah is not calculated according to the amount of information that one learns. Each of us is given different talents, skills, and struggles, and it is up to us to push ourselves as much as we can toward accomplishing what we can accomplish within our own ability, not within the ability of others. Therefore, someone with a natural talent to retain details may be better versed in Torah matters, but if he has not

toiled, or if he has not internalized the lessons that he has learned, then he is not as "accomplished" as much as someone who has put in more effort or internalized their learning to a greater level.

This can be illustrated with a parable of a quintessential village water carrier carrying two pails of water across his shoulders. One day, the water carrier hears one bucket crying and asks why it is sad. "Look at the other bucket, it's so perfect and whole and carries all of the water you fill, not spilling a drop. Now look at me. I'm cracked all over. When you fill me up, by the time you've reached the village, I'm half empty because the water has fallen out through my cracks and holes," the bucket sobs.

"Listen to me," answered the water carrier, "Look down at the ground as I carry you to the village. See those beautiful flowers? They're only on your side. They're there only because of you! It is only because of your cracks and holes that the water can fall out and produce these beautiful flowers. So, while you are only focusing on your weaknesses, you aren't realizing the tremendous beauty that is coming from you!"

Similarly, if we solely focus on our flaws, then we will not realize the beauty that we are able to create with the tools that Hashem has given us. In this aspect, Hashem has given each of us an opportunity to achieve in Torah just as much as everyone else, but it is up to us to discover our unique capabilities and strive toward bringing them to fruition.

TIME OF FORGIVENESS

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

Every morning we recite the blessing, "Who teaches Torah to His nation, Yisrael."

On Shavuos, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev exhorted his followers to do *teshuvah* (repent). "Although we usually associate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with *teshuvah*, on those days Hashem has the role of Melech, a king, and the Talmud says that a king may not forgive an offense against the crown. But on Shavuos, Hashem is a Teacher of Torah, and a teacher may forgive an offense."

REVELATION FOR ALL

Baal Shem Tov

And G-d descended upon Mount Sinai. (Shemos 19:20)

The word “*vayeired*, And He descended,” appears in numerous other verses. On each occasion, Targum Onkelos translates it into the equivalent phrase in Aramaic. The one exception is in the above verse that introduces G-d's giving of the Torah at Sinai. In this case, Targum Onkelos uses the Aramaic “*itgelli*,” meaning, “He revealed Himself,” from the Hebrew “*hitgalut*, self-revelation.”

In truth, *hitgalut* also implies a descent of sorts, because it connotes a revelation that is so powerful that it reaches down to the spiritually lowest and furthest regions of existence. That is precisely what occurred at the Giving of the Torah; the revelation was of such a nature that allowed every Jew - from Moshe, the ultimate prophet, down to the lowliest member of our people - to effectively receive the G-dly revelation.

COLLECTIVE JOY

Rebbe Nachman

The truest joy comes from fulfilling the *mitzvot*. The more a person forms some estimate of the true greatness of G-d, the greater the joy he is able to feel with every mitzvah he performs. He begins to realize how privileged he is to perform the will of the Holy One, Who alone is, was, and will be for all eternity. The joy of all the *mitzvot* we perform throughout the year is collected together, as it were, on the Three Festivals. This is what makes up the joy of the festival. All the good points of all the *mitzvot* performed throughout the year are joined together and concentrated in the festival, and the joy becomes truly palpable.

If we make an effort to search for the holy joy that is to be found in performing the *mitzvot* on the other days of the year, then this “festival joy” will be accessible to us every day of the year. But on the actual festivals themselves, the joy is something special. The Torah itself commands us, “You should rejoice on your festival” (Deuteronomy 16:14). The joy of the festivals themselves is made up of the joy of all the *mitzvot* of the whole year. There are no limits to this joy. (Likutey Eitzot, The Three Festivals # 2; see Likutey Moharan I, 30:6)

ELEVATING THE MUNDANE

Lubavitcher Rebbe

Why was the Torah given on a mountain? The difference between level ground and a mountain is not qualitative; both are made of dust and earth. A mountain is just more of that earth collected and heaped up into a larger mass. The fact that the Torah was given on a mountain teaches us that a Jew's purpose in life is to take that earth-physical matter, elevate it, and transform it into holiness.

STRENGTH OF UNITY

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

One of the prerequisites for receiving the Torah was *achdus*, unity, and loving all Yidden, as it states (Shemos 19:2), “ויהיו כל ישראל שם ויחן” - And Yisrael encamped there, opposite the mountain.” Rashi writes, “[The singular form of ויחן, instead of the plural ויחנו, denotes that they encamped before Har Sinai] as one man, with one heart, but all the other encampments were [divided] with complaints and with strife.” Reb Akiva Eiger zt'l says that the הר, mountain, represents the *yetzer hara* (see Succah 52a). So ויחן שם ישראל נגד הר means that when the Jewish nation is united, they can conquer the *yetzer hara*.

PIECES TO THE SAME PUZZLE

Chiddushei HaRim

Just as the Torah is comprised of five separate books, independent units, nevertheless, they form one Torah. Similarly, Klal Yisrael is comprised of many different factions - Kohanim, Levim, Yisraelim, Chassidim, Misnagdim - each with their own function, all forming one great Nation, cherished by G-d!

EVEN THE BEST AUTHOR

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The Midrash states that before giving the Torah to Bnei Yisrael, Hashem offered it to the other nations, but all of them rejected it.

Rav Yaakov Yosef of Polna'ah was the first student of the Baal Shem Tov to write down his teachings (in his sefer Toldos Yaakov Yosef). He traveled to various Jewish communities to sell the sefer, but was bitterly disappointed because he had few customers. He complained to the Rebbe Reb Wolf of Zhitomir, “I have written down the master's precious teachings, and no one is interested in them.”

Reb Wolf tried to console him. “Hashem is the author of the Torah, the source of life,” he said. “Can there be anything more precious? Yet when He offered it to various nations, no one was interested. Why do you expect to fare better than Hashem?”

FREE OF SIN

Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

Shavuos is the only Biblical festival in which the Torah does not require that a *korban Chatas* (sin offering) be brought. For on Shavuos, the day on which the Torah was received, every Jew is in the category of a convert, who is considered to be a young child who was just born. Just as a newborn infant is without sin, so too are the Jewish people without sin on Shavuos.

NEVER TOO LATE

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

There are those who explain why we have the custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuos as follows: Milk is different from other drinks. When other liquids spoil they become unusable. Milk though, when it “spoils”, it can be made into cheese and other food products even more valuable than the milk. This is the message to us as we accept the Torah. You should never despair and give up hope. Even if someone *chas v'shalom* has become “spoiled”, he shouldn't assume that he is lost forever. On the contrary, one can always pick himself up and move forward, even from a lowly situation of being “spoiled” and become even greater than he was before.

HOLY VOWS

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The obvious reason for the name of the Yom Tov of Shavuos is that *shavua* is a week, and this Yom Tov is celebrated seven weeks after the bringing of the Omer (Devarim 16:9-10). The Ohr HaChaim adds another reason. “*Shevuah*” means an oath. At Sinai, Hashem and Bnei Yisrael exchanged oaths, swearing eternal allegiance to each other. Although we have gone through periods of severe suffering, we have never separated from Hashem, and Hashem has never abandoned us.

In the Talmud, the Yom Tov of Shavuos is referred to as *Atzeres*, which means “withholding.” Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev says that whereas the festivals of Pesach and Sukkos have special *mitzvos* - matzah, sukkah and *arbaah minim* - Shavuos has no unique *mitzvah*, and is characterized only by our abstaining (withholding) from work.

(Similarly, Rabbi Shais Taub explains, on the other Festivals we celebrate an aspect of our relationship with Hashem; on Succos we build Succos to celebrate how Hashem protected us, and on Pesach we eat matzah to celebrate the Exodus. But on Shavuos we celebrate the relationship itself, the eternal bond we share with Hashem.)

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Tzemach Tzedek

Before Klal Yisrael was worthy of receiving the Torah on Har Sinai, Hashem ordered, “You shall sanctify today and tomorrow, and let them cleanse their clothing” (Shemos 19:10). The command to sanctify today and tomorrow was given to Moshe Rabbeinu. Indeed, in every generation, the leader of that generation has the power to elevate the world and imbue it with additional holiness. However, this must first be preceded by the preparation of cleansing the clothes. In other words, each individual person must first work on himself to cleanse the garments of his soul - his thoughts, deeds and actions - before asking for help from Above.

GIFT OF TORAH

Rabbi Shimon Schwab

The phrase *Mattan Torah* (Giving of the Torah) is related to the word *matanah* (gift), since the Torah wasn't merely “presented” or “given,” but was a special gift which created a profound and permanent impression upon the Jewish people and bound them to Hashem and His Torah forever.

In addition, the Talmud teaches that just as Hashem gave Moshe the “gift” of Torah (for, despite Moshe's greatness, it would have otherwise been impossible for him to master the Torah in forty days and nights), He will ultimately grant the gift of Torah to anyone who strives diligently to learn it.

GAINING PERCEPTION

Rebbe Nachman

The joy we experience on the three major festivals can give us a share in the Inner Light of G-d. This brings new life to the soul and the mind, through which we gain our perception of G-d. (Likutey Moharan I, 30:6)

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

On Shavuos we read the story of Rus (Ruth), the destitute Moavite convert who approached Boaz, the leading Torah authority of the generation and a very wealthy landowner and asked him to marry her. And he said yes!

What did Boaz see in Rus that he agreed to marry her? He saw that she was acting entirely for Hashem. (See Megillas Rus 3:10) As a result, this marriage produced King David, the ancestor of Moshiach! (Rus was the great-grandmother of King David whom the Moshiach is destined to come from.)

With this introduction, Rav Chaim Shmuelevits used to say that we see from Rus that if there is something you want in *ruchnius*, spiritual growth, if your intentions are pure and you stop at nothing, then you will get your way! (Told over by Rav Yitzchak Berkovits.)

We can develop this idea based on another incident from Megillas Rus. The opening verse says, “A man went from Bethlehem in Yehudah to live in the fields of Moav.” The very next verse tells us that this man's name was Elimelech. Why does the Megillah go out of its way to say “a man went” when it could have just told us that he was called Elimelech in the first place?

To answer this question, we must first look at the only other place in Scripture where it says “a man went,” without mentioning his name until later. This occurs at the beginning of Shemos (2:1), where “a man went from the house of Levi and he took a daughter of Levi” referring to Amram's marriage to Yocheved, a union which led to Moshe's birth. The Baal HaTurim explains the link

between these two verses in the following way: “Through this ‘going’ came the first redeemer (Moshe) and through this ‘going’ [in Megillas Rus] will come the final redeemer who is Moshiach son of (King) David.”

On the Baal HaTurim's words, Rav Yissocher Frand quotes the famous Rebbe Shmelke of Nikolsburg who says that since we see a degree of anonymity leading up to the redeemer's birth, this teaches us that the redeemer of the Jewish People can be an entirely anonymous and unassuming person. He does not have to be a great Torah leader, a descendant of a great Rabbinical dynasty or have immense wealth; rather, any Jew is capable of producing the redeemer of the Jewish People!

By recalling Rav Chaim Shmuelevits' words, we can learn how this can be done; we need a will to succeed, a yearning to become spiritually great and a pure desire to bring about the redemption. If we have these, then there is nothing that can stop us - whoever we are and wherever we come from!

JOINT OWNERSHIP

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The Midrash Lekach Tov asks, “Why didn't Hashem put off Mattan Torah until Bnei Yisrael entered Eretz Yisrael?” The Midrash answers that if the Torah had been given in Eretz Yisrael, it would have been in a portion of the land that was designated for one of the twelve shevatim. This might have led that shevet to claim exclusive rights to the Torah. Therefore, Hashem gave the Torah in the desert, which is *hefker* (ownerless), so that no one can claim exclusive rights to it. Torah belongs equally to every Jew.

OATHS AND VOWS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

Exalted is G-d from beginning to end. He desired and chose us, and He presented us with the Torah. (Akdamos)

Two of our most renowned gedolim of the past few centuries, the Rebbe Rav Shmelke zt'l of Nikolsburg (Divrei Shmuel) and Rav Pinchas zt'l of Frankfurt (Baal Hafla'ah), were brothers, sons of the Tchortkover Rebbe, Rav Tzvi Hirsh Halevi Horowitz zt'l. Even as small children they were known as prodigies, and their father was forced to assume the duty of teaching them Torah. It was a challenging job and he taught them as quickly as their brilliant minds could absorb. When they were both well below ten years of age, they were already learning Gemara with several commentaries.

As part of their study schedule, father and sons would learn together the laws which pertained to the next approaching holiday. Thus, when the holiday of Chanukah ended, their father began *Meseches Megillah* with them. Having completed it by Purim, they began learning the areas of *Meseches Pesachim* dealing with the laws of Pesach, which they finished right on target, the day before Pesach.

At this point, Shmelke, the elder of the two boys said to his father, “Tatte, we must begin learning *Meseches Shavuos* if we want to finish it in time for the Yom Tov of Shavuos.”

Their father smiled tenderly. “Shmelke, *Meseches Shavuos* does not deal with *Chag HaShavuos*.”

“I know, Father,” replied young Shmelke. “It deals with the laws of oaths; but I have a reason why we should study it now. On that first Shavuos, when Bnei Yisrael gathered at Har Sinai, the Jews took a binding oath to keep the *mitzvos* of the Torah, and that oath has been in effect ever since. I want to learn the laws of oaths so I can understand how important it is to keep a promise and how serious it is to break one. In fact, there are forty-nine blatt (double pages) in *Meseches Shavuos* and forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuos. If we learn one blatt every day, we will finish in time for Yom Tov.”

Rav Tzvi Hirsh was pleased by his son's erudite reasoning, and he happily agreed to learn according to this suggestion. They studied intensely, and when Lag B'omer arrived, they even reached a *daf* which mentions a halachah in the name of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. By Shavuos, they had finished the entire *mesechta*.

The following year when Pesach arrived, Rav Tzvi Hirsh asked his sons what they wished to learn in preparation for the holiday of Shavuos. This time the younger child, Pinchas, answered: “I think we should learn Kesubos (marriage contracts) and Kiddushin (the laws of marriages).”

The Tchortkover Rebbe was surprised. “What do these *mesechtos* have to do with Shavuos?” Now it was young Pinchos' turn to reply, and he smiled. “By *Kabbalas HaTorah*, Hashem took the Jewish people to be His chosen nation and said the words, ‘I have betrothed you to Me forever.’ He held Har Sinai over our heads like a marriage canopy. The holy words of the Torah were like our marriage contract, and He gave us a gift as well: *Torah she'baal peh* (the Oral Torah). That is why I think we should learn the laws of marriage contracts and betrothals - so we will know that the 'wedding' of Klal Yisrael and the Ribono Shel Olam was a valid one and that both He and His people are obligated to fulfill all the points of the contract.”

Rav Tzvi Hirsh couldn't help beaming with pride from his son's well-reasoned words. The three scholars learned the two *mesechtos* in record speed - learning close to 200 blatt - until forty-nine days later, when they celebrated both the holiday of Shavuos and the successful completion of their studies.

INTERIOR DESIGN

Rav Yehudah Zev Segal

Decorating the shul with flowers for Shavuos is a nice custom, but a person must “decorate” himself as well. This can be done only by accepting the Torah and studying Torah.

WITNESSED WITH OUR OWN EYES

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

We are required to remember Mattan Torah constantly. “Lest you forget the things your eyes have seen” at Sinai, we are commanded (Devarim 4:9-10). The sefarim say that we should visualize the scene of the mountain aflame, the thunder and lightning, the sound of the shofar, and Moshe Rabbeinu standing at the top of the mountain.

We are told that the souls of all Yidden until the end of time witnessed Mattan Torah. The Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk said, “Not only do I remember being there, but I even remember who was standing next to me.”

As we hear the reading of the Torah on Shavuos, we should try to fulfill the mitzvah of witnessing Mattan Torah with our own eyes.

THE FIRE OF THE SIMPLE JEW

Baal Shem Tov

Torah scholars are likened to fruit-bearing trees, whereas simple Jews are likened to trees and bushes that do not bear fruit. The flame of fire appeared in a burning bush - likened to a simple Jew.

This teaches us that though the simple Jew may not understand the meaning behind performing the commandments or the words he says in prayer, he still has the fire of holiness burning in his heart. That bush is not consumed - this is the fire within each Jew which can never be extinguished.

A REBBE'S PLEA

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The Rebbe Reb Aharon of Chernobyl cited the Midrash that at Sinai all the sick were healed, and all the lame could walk again. Furthermore, Bnei Yisrael had accumulated great wealth from the spoils of Egypt. At that point Hashem personally revealed Himself to them, and they declared, “*Naaseh v'nishma*, we will do, and we will listen.”

“Ribbono shel Olam! Replicate those conditions,” Reb Aharon pleaded. “Heal all the sick and give everyone abundant wealth. Then reveal Yourself to them as You did at Sinai, and You will see how diligently Jews will observe Your Torah!”

PROPER PREPARATIONS

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

There are twice the amount of pesukim about preparing for Mattan Torah (26) than pesukim which discuss Mattan Torah itself (13). This suggests that preparation is the highest level. As chassidim say, “The preparation for a mitzvah is greater than the mitzvah itself.”

DESCENDING TO ASCEND

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

In the third month of Bnei Yisrael's departure from the land of Egypt, on that very day they came to the desert of Sinai. They had journeyed from Refidim and had come to the desert of Sinai. (Shemos 19:1-2)

The Torah describes how, in the third month after being redeemed from slavery in Egypt, Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai and prepared themselves for the great and awesome day on which they were to receive the Torah. What is unusual is the wording of the pasuk: “In the third month they came to the Sinai desert. They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai desert.” Why is their arrival at Har Sinai heralded not once, but twice?

Rav Shloime Kluger zt'l gives us a penetrating insight into the makeup of the Jewish Nation at the time that Hashem gave them the Torah. This is based on the Gemara (Berachos 34): “In the place where *Ba'alei Teshuvah* stand, even great *taddikim* are unable to stand.” As unbelievable as it may sound, one who sincerely repents his sins and dedicates his life to overcoming his past misdeeds, is rewarded with a merit and standing that the greatest and most righteous people in the illustrious history of the Jewish people are unable to attain! If a person is able to channel his considerable strength of character to turn away from a life filled with what modern society has to offer, he is deemed a towering personality within the folds of Torah-true Yiddishkeit.

Chazal tell us that Bnei Yisrael sinned in Refidim; “*Sherafu yedayhem min haTorah* - They softened their hands (and minds) from the Torah.” However, immediately after that, they did repent and were thus deemed worthy of the greatest of treasures: *kabalas haTorah* - accepting the Torah on Har Sinai.

This, then, says R' Shloime, is what the pasuk is coming to teach us. “In the third month ... they came to the Sinai desert” - arriving righteous and worthy of this treasure. And how did they reach this ultimate level of purity and exaltation? It was only because, “They traveled from Refidim and came to the Sinai desert” - when they sinned deeply and, in turn, did a full and thorough repentance. This alone allowed them to attain the lofty level of *Ba'alei Teshuvah*, the highest degree that a mortal can attain. Then, and only then, “ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר” - Yisrael camped by the mountain.”

ATTAINING KNOWLEDGE

Rebbe Nachman

There are many different ways to honor the festivals - with fine food and drink, with beautiful clothes, with pure and holy thoughts, with joy and openheartedness, and so on. Through honoring the festivals you can attain the knowledge of G-d, and you can draw this knowledge down into the heart, which is the seat of passion and desire. (Likutey Eitzot, The Three Festivals # 7)

TAKING A STEP FORWARD

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

The Gemara (Shabbos 86b) tells us that the Torah was not given at night so that it would not seem like it was given in secret and under the cover of darkness. The Maharsha explains that if it would have been given in such a way, the nations of the world would have said, "If only the Torah would have been given openly, we would have accepted it." Therefore, the Torah was given during the daytime and openly so that the nations could not give this false claim when accounting for their actions.

The question arises, however, that although the Torah was given in the daytime, the nations of the world were in their own lands far away from Mount Sinai. If so, couldn't they still claim, "We were nowhere near Mount Sinai, but if we would have been there, we would have gladly accepted the Torah"?

Perhaps the answer is that accepting the Torah was more than physically being present at Mount Sinai - it was about a commitment to the *mitzvos*. As such, being far away from Sinai would not have been an adequate excuse. As such, when the nations of the world heard about the giving of the Torah, if they would have chosen at that moment to commit to the Torah, this would have been enough and would have led to them fully receiving the Torah.

The same message can be said for us. Even if we do not feel able - right now - to take the steps toward total mitzvah observance in every area of our lives, Shavuot is the time for at least a commitment toward this goal. At least to say, "this is where I want to be!"

If we are able to take even a single mitzvah that we know we need to strengthen and commit to further stringency, then we would have taken to heart the true meaning of Shavuot and tapped into the great potential of this holy day.

PROVIDING THEIR DEFENSE

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

In relating Mattan Torah, Moshe told Bnei Yisrael that Hashem forbade them to ascend the mountain, and that "I stood between Hashem and you" when Hashem said "I am Hashem, your G-d... You shall have no other gods" (Devarim 5:5-7).

The Maggid of Mezeritch said that this was an extraordinary kindness of Hashem, Who foresaw that the Jews may commit the sin of the Golden Calf. By singling out Moshe to ascend the mountain and delivering the commandment, "You shall have no other gods" in the singular, He gave Moshe the ability to enter a defense plea for the Jews by saying, "The Jews thought this commandment was intended for me and was not binding on them," thereby mitigating the severity of their sin.

JOY TO ALL

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

The Torah states (Devarim 16:10-11), "Make the holiday Shavuot for Hashem your G-d...and be happy...you, your son, your daughter...the convert, the orphan, and the widow that is among you."

The Pele Yoetz (Yomim Tovim) writes, "On yom tov, we must bring joy to the poor. Therefore, before yom tov, give tzedakah to the poor – each person according to his abilities. The Zohar says: 'On yom tov, Hakadosh Baruch Hu visits the homes of the poor, and if they don't have enough food, Hashem cries for them...'"

Rabbeinu b'Chayeh writes, "The obligation [to help the poor for yom tov] applies for all holidays... [Nevertheless], the Torah writes the mitzvah about Shavuot because Shavuot is one day, while Pesach and Succos are seven and eight days. One might think giving tzedakah before Shavuot isn't as important as before the other yomim tovim. Therefore, the pasuk emphasizes that we shouldn't be lenient... We must give tzedakah for Shavuot, just as we must for all other holidays..."

FOLIAGE OF REMEMBRANCE

Rabbi Mordechai Banet

On Shavuot we decorate our homes and shuls with greenery and plants such as those that grow on the riverbanks to recall the foliage that Yocheved, the mother of Moshe Rabbeinu, used on the seventh day of Sivan to line the inside of the basket bearing her infant son.

ILLUMINATION OF WISDOM

Rebbe Nachman

The illumination that radiates on Shavuot is a supremely exalted level of Divine wisdom, fine and subtle in the extreme. And this wisdom is in itself an expression of G-d's lovingkindness and compassion. For compassion is bound up with wisdom and perception, as explained elsewhere.

ALWAYS A WAY HOME

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

Reb Leibel Eiger taught that out of all potential things to precede the giving of the Torah, the Torah tells us about Yisro joining Klal Yisroel. Was there nothing else more fitting?

The lesson for us is that is if Yisro - who was an idolator, and even a leader of idolators, serving as their priest - was nevertheless able to leave his past and become a servant of Hashem, then the Jewish People - who are Hashem's chosen nation - certainly have potential to draw close to Hashem, despite what we may have done in the past.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Rabbi Daniel Kalish

A bochur asked me, “How many guys are in Yeshiva?” I answered him: “One. You.”

Now, it could be he thought I was just being cute. But actually, I'm just trying to give over the Torah the same way the Torah was initially given: 'וּיְחַן' - 'HE' was there! The giving of the Torah was for each individual alone! Yes, we were all there together, but it's as if the Torah was given to every single one of us individually!

THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

The Torah contains no explicit mention of a festival called Mattan Torah - Giving of the Torah. It was the Jewish people themselves who chose to call the holiday of Shavuos “*Zman Mattan Toraseinu* - the Season of the Giving of Our Torah,” above all the names mentioned in the Torah. As we say in our Shavuos tefillos, “And You, Hashem our G-d, gave us festivals and seasons of rejoicing, this Shavuos festival day, the season of the Giving of our Torah.”

Shavuos, like Pesach and Sukkos, the other festivals mentioned in the Torah, aims to instill in us the quality of gratitude. If Pesach teaches the Jews to be grateful for the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, Shavuos reminds the Jews to be thankful for being rooted in their own homeland. This gratitude is expressed by calling the holiday *Chag Hakatzir* - the Harvest Festival and *Chag Habikurim* - the First Fruits Festival. These two Biblically inspired names express the satisfaction of the Jew in having his own land and his own produce and fruit.

We are certainly pleased and grateful for having Eretz Yisrael and for being an agricultural nation, but throughout the generations, the Jews also sought to show the Master of the Universe that they are grateful to Him for their spiritual endowment: that most precious of gifts, the holy Torah. Therefore, with the name *Zman Mattan Toraseinu*, the Jewish people sought to express their gratitude to the Creator for giving them the Torah, by virtue of which the Jews became the chosen people.

FOR ALL AGES

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

It is customary to bring small children to shul to hear the *kriah* (Torah reading) of Mattan Torah. The Gaon of Vilna explained, “The Torah says that Moshe conveyed the Torah to the elders of the nation (Shemos 19:7). But the response was not limited to the elders alone. The entire nation responded in unison, 'We will do everything that Hashem commands' (ibid. 19:8). Young, as well as old, accepted the Torah with great enthusiasm. That is why children should hear the reading of the Torah on Shavuos.”

BEYOND NATURE

Rebbe Nachman

The festival days cry out, proclaim and reveal Divine will, which rules over all.

There is no such thing as the “inevitability of nature.” Every festival commemorates the awesome signs and miracles that Hashem performed on our behalf – all of them contrary to nature...

Through these awesome signs and wonders it was revealed that everything comes about through the will of Hashem alone. There is nothing inevitable about nature at all. You must just take care to direct your ear and heart to the holy message that is thus proclaimed. The more carefully you attend to this message, the greater the joy of the festival you will attain.

REINFORCING THE FAITH

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The Midrash says that when Hashem offered the Torah to Bnei Eisav they asked, “What's written in it?”

“You shall not kill,” Hashem proclaimed.

“Then we cannot accept the Torah,” was the response. “Our ancestor was blessed, 'You shall live by the sword.'”

Bnei Yishmael asked in their turn, “What's written in the Torah?”

“You shall not commit adultery,” Hashem said.

“We cannot accept that,” they decided, “because we are a lustful people.”

Why did Hashem offer the Torah to these nations? So that they would not be able to complain that Hashem showed favoritism to the Jews, saying, “If you would have offered the Torah to us, we would have been Your nation.” They had their chance, and they rejected it.

The Chiddushei HaRim asked, “But the other nations may still complain. You told us the Torah says *lo sirtzach, lo sin'af*, but to the Jews You said '*Anochi Hashem Elokecha* – I am Hashem, your G-d.' Had You said that to us, we would have accepted it.”

And the Chiddushei HaRim answered, “The Torah is intended to enable a person to overcome undesirable natural instincts. The children of Eisav are bloodthirsty, and the children of Yishmael are lust driven. That is why Hashem challenged them with their natural inclinations. Jews are not bloodthirsty or lust-driven; the Jewish weakness is that they are skeptical. Even after seeing many Divine miracles, they still lacked emunah. That is why Hashem challenged them with “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.”

Hashem said to us that we are an *am keshei oref* - a stubborn people. As we re-accept the Torah on Shavuos, we should be aware that we need to constantly reinforce our emunah.

GLORIOUS ORIGINS

Rabbi Dovid Hoffman

And all the people saw the sounds, the flame, the sound of the shofar, and the mountain emitting smoke... (Shemos 20:15)

Mashal: A certain rich man once betrothed his daughter to a fine, albeit poor, young man. They agreed that the wedding would take place in the young man's hometown on a certain date and that the young couple would settle in that town. When the wedding date approached, the bride and her family set out in a golden carriage. In every town through which they passed, the bride's father spent money lavishly, and the newspapers reported on the fabulous wealth of the bride's family. In the groom's town, the bride's family was greeted as royalty.

The bride's father saw that the groom looked a bit troubled. When he inquired as to why, he answered, "Even with your generous dowry, how will I ever maintain the lifestyle my bride is used to?"

"Don't worry," said the bride's father with a smile. "My daughter and I both know that she will live a simpler life from now on. I merely arrived in this way so that you would appreciate where she came from and always do your best to give her everything that you can."

Nimshal: By *Kabbalas HaTorah* (the accepting of the Torah), the pasuk states: And all the people saw the sounds, the flame, the sound of the shofar, and the mountain emitting smoke. Hashem had many ways to present the Torah to Bnei Yisrael. What was the purpose of this grand spectacle? Rav Moshe Sternbuch shlit'a explains that the Torah is the daughter of Hashem, the King of kings, Who betrothed her to a "commoner." In order to remind us of the Torah's glorious origins, Hashem gave her away amidst a spectacular show of fire and sound.

WHERE IS THE MERCHANDISE?

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

On Shavuos night it is customary to recite Tikkun Leil Shavuos, a sampling of all portions of the Torah, both the Written and the Oral.

The Rebbe Reb Aharon of Karlin used to enter the *beis midrash* on Shavuos night and exclaim, "Where is the merchandise? Produce the merchandise!"

He explained, "A merchant displays samples of his merchandise for the customers to see and choose from. But if the merchant has no merchandise that he can deliver, there is no purpose in his displaying samples. You are providing samples of the Torah. Where is the merchandise to back up the samples?"

It is related that the Maggid of Dubno spent Shavuos night studying Talmud. When the Vilna Gaon asked him why he was not saying Tikkun Leil Shavuos, he answered, "The Rav can say Tikkun because he has the Torah in stock to back it up. I have only the samples."

FOR THE LOVE OF THE TORAH

Rabbi Moshe Kormornick

Yom Tov was given to us in order that we develop a closer relationship with Hashem (See the Sfero, Vayikra 23:2). The Mishna Brura writes that Chol Hamoed too is included in this opportunity. Together with Yom Tov, it forms a weeklong festival geared towards developing our love and fear for Hashem as well as learning His Torah. (Orach Chaim 530:1,2)

This being the case, the Darchei Mussar says that we can understand that on Pesach and Succos we have the chance to achieve this level of closeness because there is an entire week that we are engrossed in learning, davening and other acts of holiness. But Shavuos is only one day! (This is according to Biblical law. However, outside of Israel, two days of Shavuos are kept.) What can we possibly achieve in one day?

There is another question that we need to address. There are some people who are against the custom to stay up to learn the entire Shavuos night. They say, "Think about it. On Shavuos, you end up doing a lot less learning than any other day in the year. You want to stay up all night, so you rest the day before. Davening starts later and the meal lasts longer, so by the time you start learning you're already tired. You get so tired through the night that you aren't thinking straight, until the morning comes and after davening you sleep the whole of the next day. Surely it is better to go to bed at a reasonable time, get up early the next day and learn through the day?!"

Rav Yitzchak Berkovits answers their claim as follows; it is true that if the goal of Shavuos was to learn as much as possible, it may be better to do as these people suggest, especially in today's generation where lack of sleep affects us so much. However, the goal of Shavuos is to show an expression of our relationship with Hashem and our love for His Torah. The goal of Shavuos is not to learn as much as possible. We stay up all night to express how much we appreciate the Torah, and this is achieved through learning at a time of self-sacrifice with a love and excitement, not by turning the most amount of pages. (At the same time, Rav Yitzchak Berkovits explains that many great Torah scholars, who felt that they could not learn properly at night, went to sleep so that they could learn with greater clarity the next day. However, this was a personal preference as opposed to a "stand" against the custom.) "It is for this reason," explains Rav Berkovits, "that when I am asked what one should learn on Shavuos, I tell them that it is clear that they should learn whatever brings them the most amount of *ahavas haTorah*, love for the Torah."

The entire day of Shavuos is a day when we renew our relationship with Hashem and His Torah. So, returning to our original question, why is it enough for us to have one day of Shavuos? Do we not need an entire week?

Rav Niman answers with a parable: In the middle of the night, a man is wandering alone, lost in the pitch black. He is walking along a path, not knowing where it will lead,

when eventually he comes to a fork in the path he is taking. He stumbles around, looking for a road sign. He feels a plank of wood with arrows pointing right and left - he's found the sign, but because it is so dark he cannot make out any of the words. Then, all of a sudden, there is a flash of lightning, and in that moment, he sees the writing on the sign and begins to head along the right path home.

So too on Shavuot, in order to reaffirm our relationship with Hashem and to re-clarify the direction where we are heading, we only need one moment, one expression and one demonstration of our abundant joy over the Torah that He gave us. From the expression of *ahavas haTorah* that we show on Shavuot night, we are able to follow the right direction in our daily living, our Torah learning, and our relationship with Hashem throughout the entire year.

HUMBLE CONFIDENCE

Rabbi Avraham Twerski

The mountain that Hashem selected for Mattan Torah is the lowest of the Sinai range, and was chosen to emphasize that Torah can be acquired only by the humble. One of the Chassidic Rebbes asked, "Why didn't Hashem give the Torah in a valley, which would be an even more graphic symbol of humility?"

"Too much humility can be dangerous," the Rebbe answered his own question. "Shmuel HaNavi chastised Shaul Hamelech for submitting to the will of the people to spare the cattle of Amalek, saying, 'You may be small in your own eyes, but I have made you the leader of the people' (Samuel I 15:17). You should have exercised your authority as king. Your humility was misguided."

Giving the Torah in a valley would have indicated that humility in the extreme is desirable. Really, one must maintain a feeling of *chashivus* (importance) and self-esteem even when humble.

HERE OR THERE

Rabbi Yaakov Klein

Before the Jewish People accepted the Torah and said "*Na'aseh V'Nishmah* – We will do and listen," Hashem held the mountain over their head and provided them with an ultimatum – "If you accept the Torah then good, but if not then there will be your burial."

Many of the commentators are puzzled as to why Hashem said "there will be your burial"; wouldn't the word "here" be more appropriate?

The answer is that the opposite of accepting the Torah is the opposite of *Na'aseh V'Nishmah*, it is the desire to always be somewhere else, to be someone else, to have someone else's circumstances, etc. That type of life is detached from the Torah, the "Eitz Chayim - The Tree of Life," it is the opposite of life...

If a person is always looking elsewhere, then "there" will be his burial. But when we are present, and live the "Torah life," then we are truly living... then we are living the good life.

ALL FOR ONE

Rabbi Berel Povarsky

There would not have been *Maamad Har Sinai* if even one Yid was missing.

YEARLY RE-ACCEPTANCE

Rabbi Elimelech Biderman

Chazal say, "A person is obligated to imagine as if he himself received the Torah on Har Sinai." (Psikta Zuta, V'eschanan)

We must visualize this because every year, we receive the Torah again. On Shavuot, we aren't solely celebrating the holy gift of the Torah that we received in the year 2448 (3335 years ago). But rather, each year, on Shavuot, there is another Mattan Torah (Giving of the Torah) taking place.

The Chasam Sofer (Toras Moshe ה"ד בשבועותיכם) writes, "We celebrate Pesach to remind us of what occurred, that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim. Succos is also to remind us of what transpired. But Mattan Torah isn't only a memory, but a new reality that today we received the Torah from Hashem *yisbarach*."

This means, according to the Chasam Sofer, that there is a fundamental difference between Shavuot and all other holidays. Shavuot wasn't established as a commemoration but rather as a time to receive the Torah again, each year, anew.

(The Midrash (Psikta 12, Yalkut Shimoni Yisro 271) states, "Hakadosh Baruch Hu says to the Jewish nation, 'My children read this parashah [of Mattan Torah] each year, and I will consider it as though you stood before Me on Har Sinai and received the Torah.'")

SOCIETY OF KINDNESS

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Shavuot is when we celebrate the giving of the law at Har Sinai. The fact that we read Ruth's story at this time tells us that society cannot be made by laws alone. It needs something more - the unforced, unlegislated kindness that makes us reach out to the lonely and vulnerable, even if we are lonely and vulnerable ourselves. Then and now, society needs the kindness of strangers.

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