

Collected Insights from Members of our Kollelim

What day is Shavuos?

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The holiday of Shavuos is arguably the most important day in the Jewish calendar. The day we received the Torah on Har Sinai was the beginning of our becoming a nation with a unified mission and goal. It is for this reason that there are many questions that arise when reviewing the references to Shavuos in the Torah.

The date and time of the holiday of *Shavuos* is omitted from the Torah. The Torah states that the festival should be celebrated after the culmination of counting fifty days "*vikarassem betzem hayom hazeh mikrah kodesh*, you shall declare on this very day there shall be a holy convocation for yourselves" without mention as to the exact day to celebrate. Why is it that the Torah does not mention the specific time and date for shavuos, whereas every other holiday the Torah clearly delineates the time and date to celebrate?

The *Magen Avraham* in his commentary to the *Shulchan Aruch* states that historically the day of the week that Bnei Yisroel received the Torah was Shabbos. The Gemara explains that Hashem was prepared to deliver the Torah on Friday, a day earlier, but Moshe Rabbeinu delayed *Matan Torah* until Shabbos. The *Magen Avraham* calculates that the actual day of Mattan Torah was fifty one days after *yitzias Mizrayim* (which occurred on a Thursday). This raises the question of whether our holiday that takes place on the fiftieth day of the omer is an accurate celebration of Matan Torah. The *Magen Avraham* suggests that we celebrate the fifty first day of sefirah to stress the significance of the *yom tov sheni shel galiyot* of Shavuos. This is even more perplexing! Why should the second day Yom Tov of galus play a role in dictating which day we celebrate our receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. Furthermore, the second day yom tov in *galus* is a dictum from the oral Torah, which should be unrelated to the celebration of our receiving the written Torah on Shavuos.

Hashem commanded Moshe (Shemos 19:10) to tell the nation to prepare themselves *hayom u'machar*, today and tomorrow, for accepting the Torah. Moshe realized that two 24 hour periods including both day and night were required to prepare for matan Torah. Since the night

time of the first day had already passed, Moshe deemed it necessary to add a third day so that there would be 2 nights and 2 days of preparation. The Kushigluver Rav, in his *sefer Eretz Tzvi*, clarifies the importance of Moshe's addition of a full 24 hour period. Moshe needed to insure that the preparation for matan Torah would include a night with each day. The delivery of the Torah would be insufficient without the night. Night symbolizes a time of darkness, a time of confusion and lack of revelation of Hashem's presence. Night symbolizes the experiences of exile. Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to emphasize that *kabbalas haTorah* is eternal and exists both in good times and in bad. Although there will be times that are dark and difficult, the bond that was created at matan Torah between Hashem and Bnei Yisroel is never severed. Even in a time which we consider dark and uncertain, the Torah must remain the focus and mainstay of our lives. This explains the Magen Avrohom who suggested that matan Torah actually occurred on *yom tov sheini shel glauyos*. Moshe felt that having matan Torah occur on the chag of the *galus*, the *yom tov sheni*, emphasizes that our *kabbalas haTorah* is not limited to time or place. It is ongoing wherever Jews live and is part of our essence.

The *Chok Yaakov* on *Shulchan Aruch* (*siman* 473) suggests that if one forgets to make the blessing of *shehechyanu* on the holiday of Shavuot he can recite the blessing the following week. In no other instance when we say *shehechyanu* do we see an option to make the bracha on another day. Shavuot differs from all other holidays as it is not restricted to a specific date and time but rather extends itself to all the days of the year. The message of the chag of matan Torah is that it is celebrated, accepted and meant to extend beyond the day of the holiday itself.

It is for this reason that the Torah is extremely vague about the exact date of Shavuot. *Kabbalas haTorah* is not bound by a specific time or place; it is a part of who we are, no matter what the date and no matter where we dwell. The *Meshech Chachmah* points out that when it comes to the holiday of Shavuot the Torah switches the language it typically uses and rather than the usual "*ldoroseichem bchol moshvoseichem*," "for generations in all places of dwellings" (which according to the gemara in *kiddushin* includes the exile) the Torah instead states *bchol moshvoseichem ldoroseichem*, for all places of dwellings and all generations. On all other holidays those living in exile may not celebrate on the same day as Israel. They are contingent on the announcement from the Bet Din which may not reach them in time. In contrast, the timing of Shavuot is established at the culmination of *sefiras haomer* and therefore those living in the exile (*moshvoseichem*) will definitely rejoice on the same day as those living in Israel. Therefore, the Torah preceded the term for dwelling by the chag of Shavuot because it is the one holiday that all areas will definitely rejoice in unison. This further highlights the essence of matan Torah, by placing "*moshvoseichem*," "all dwellings" first, demonstrating that the acceptance of the Torah is global and eternal and not restricted to a place or time.

Intrinsic Jewish Unity

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One of the central themes of the episode of Har Sinai is the immense unity that the Jewish People enjoyed as they encamped at the foot of the mountain. Rashi, in his famous comment

citing the Midrash on the verse, ויחזן שם ישראל נגד ההר, extrapolates from the usage of the singular *vayichan* rather than the plural *vayachanu*, notes that the Jews were, "*k'ish echad b'lev echad*", like one individual with one heart.

In an odd twist, however, in an earlier comment Rashi attributes those very same qualities of unity and togetherness to the Egyptians! In Shmos 14:10, the Torah says regarding the Egyptians pursuit of the Jews at the banks of the Red Sea, "ויהנה מצרים נוסע אחריהם" with the singular voice *nose'ah*, rather than the plural *nos'im*. There too, Rashi states, citing the Midrash, that the Egyptian people were united, but in a slightly different way: "*b'lev echad k'ish echad*", with one heart, as one person. That the Egyptians and the Jews were equally unified is in itself remarkable. But even more puzzling, why does Rashi feel the need to flip the two phrases, so that the Jewish people are *k'ish echad b'lev echad*, like one person with one heart, and the Egyptians are *b'lev echad k'ish echad*, with one heart like one person? What qualitative difference in the two nations' respective unity are Rashi and the Midrash attempting to highlight?

Perhaps the Midrash provides a prescription for what true Jewish unity is all about. While the Egyptians may have achieved unity to the same level as the Jews encamping around Har Sinai, their unity began with their *lev echad*, their unity of purpose, their singular objective. Only as a result of that were they able to be *k'ish echad*, unified as one. The Jews, on the other hand, possess an intrinsic unity which transcends a unity of purpose. They are, irrespective of any ideological differences, *k'ish echad*. At Har Sinai, the Jews also happen to have been *b'lev echad*, but Jewish unity is not contingent on ideological harmony or unity of purpose. Each and every Jew possesses an unbreakable bond with their fellow Jew, *k'ish echad*, regardless of how differently they think or feel.

It's interesting to note that Shavuot comes at the culmination of the period of Sefirat Haomer, where we mourn the tragic loss of the students of Rabbi Akiva, who perished because of a lack of respect and honor for one another. As staunch disciples of the great Rabbi Akiva, these were students who undoubtedly were *b'lev echad*, singularly committed to the mission of learning and spreading the teachings of their revered rebbe. What they perhaps lacked was the *k'ish echad*, the sense of brotherhood and togetherness which allows us to overcome what are, in the grand scheme of things, petty differences. A failure to acknowledge the significance and importance of Jewish unity results, unfortunately, in a deficiency in and a lack of appreciation of, true *kedushas Yisrael*.

In this light, Rav Kook noted the interesting formulation of our *birchos haTorah* which we recite each and every morning and upon being called to the Torah. We begin by saying *asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim*, which praises Hashem for choosing the Jewish nation as his chosen nation, and only then do we finish with *v'nasan lanu es Toraso*, thanking Hashem for giving us the Torah. At first glance, it should be reversed; doesn't our chosen status flow from the simple fact that we are the nation who accepted Hashem's Torah? Why not mention the Torah first and only then refer to the Jews' status as the chosen nation? Rav Kook answers that not only was national unity a pre-requisite for the giving of the Torah, but that that unity exists as an intrinsic quality of the Jewish nation, *k'ish echad*, separate and apart from their *b'lev echad*, their belief in and pursuit of a Torah way of life.

May this Shavuot serve as a catalyst to answer the call of *k'ish echad b'lev echad*, of not letting that which divides us trump that which unites us, so that we may accept the Torah anew in all its glory, the way the Jews did at Maamad har Sinai.

Connecting to the Message of the Torah

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The Gemara in *Menachot 28b* quotes a very curious *halakha* involving the *chatzotzrot*:

All the vessels that Moshe made were valid for him and valid for future generations. The trumpets [however] were valid for him and invalid for future generations.

כל הכלים שעשה משה כשרים לו וכשרים לדורות, חצוצרות - כשרות לו ופסולות לדורות.

At first glance, this *halakha* seems very strange. What is it about the trumpets that they alone must be made anew for every generation? Let us turn to two other texts to gain some insight.

On the first night of Pesach, we begin the *seder* with *הא לחמא עניא* *This is the bread of poverty*. Just after Pesach, we begin learning *Pirke Avot* on *Shabbat* afternoons. The very first chapter of *Pirke Avot* contains the following statement of Hillel's: *הוא היה אומר נגד שמא. אבד שמיה. ודלא מוסיף. ... יסיף.* *He used to say "One who pursues a reputation, his reputation shall be lost, and one who does not add [to his Torah learning] it will cease [that learning which he already has]..."* These two statements share a striking peculiarity. They are both in Aramaic, despite their being found in Hebrew texts. Why did the *Ba'al Haggadah* see fit to begin the *seder* in Aramaic? Similarly, why did Hillel, whose teachings are almost entirely in Hebrew, deem it necessary to express this particular idea in Aramaic? Our classic commentators offer insights into both of these apparent anomalies.

The *Ritva* offers two explanations as to why the *Haggadah* opens in Aramaic. While he does present one mystical approach, the explanation that he refers to as "correct" is a purely practical consideration: Babylonian Jews in the Talmudic period spoke Aramaic. In order that everyone should understand, we open the *seder* in the common language. The idea here seems to be that in order to facilitate the involvement of everyone at the *seder*, the *Ba'al Haggadah* composed the first part of the *Haggadah* in a way that would draw everyone in. After all, the *seder* is for all Jews, whether or not they have had the advantage of a strong Jewish education³¹.

And what of Hillel's statement? Here, R. Liphshutz in his *Tiferet Yisroel*, explains that Hillel's statement concerns modesty in one's behavior. Hillel discusses several ways in which the arrogant are liable to stumble as well as the consequences. It was for this reason that it was so critical that *everyone* understand, and so he taught this in Aramaic, which is the language that

³¹ It is striking that the רמ"א, in סימן תעג writes that *ויאמרו בלשון שמבינים הנשים והקטנים או יפרש להם הענין וכן עשה* (כל בו ומהרי"ל) *Here we see a sage not only saying the introductory part of the seder in the commonly spoken language, but the rest of the Haggadah as well! Obviously, on the seder night, we want everyone to participate.*

most Jews spoke at the time. The common denominator between these two explanations is that ideas that are necessary for the entire nation must be expressed in a language they can understand.³² How does this relate to the abovementioned *halakha* concerning the *chatzotzrot*?

Rabbi Baruch Simon שליט"א, in his *Imre Baruch (Parshat Toldot)*, cites a beautiful explanation as to why the trumpets must be remade for each generation. R. Avraham Weinfeld observes that the function of the trumpets is to gather and mobilize the people. They summon the people to gather around the leader, and therefore serve to mobilize the people, not only physically but also spiritually. Each generation speaks a somewhat different language, and while the message is eternal, it cannot be restated in exactly the same way from one generation to the next. Rather, it needs to be communicated in a manner appropriate for that generation. What spoke to the people some years ago may fall on deaf ears today. While the content is unchanging, the manner in which it is communicated not only may, but *must* change.

As we approach the festival of *Shavuot*, in which we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah once again, we should keep in mind that every individual “hears” differently than others. It is not merely worthwhile, but essential, that we search out those works which can speak to us. One person may understand the “language” of the *Rambam*, while another can better appreciate the thought of the *Ramchal* or the *Maharal*. Others may be more drawn to contemporary writings, such as Rav Kook’s or Rav Soloveitchik’s. May we each find an authentic voice of the Torah which we can comprehend and to which we can connect.

Eating Dairy – A Zecher to the Shte Halechem

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There isn’t really a typical Yom Tov meal. On Rosh Hashana, our tables are adorned with symbolic foods for a sweet sin-free year. On Succot, our meals are held under the shade of our Succot. On Pesach, we eat matzah and abstain from roasted meat so that our meal should not be mistaken as an actual attempt to recreate the Korban Pesach. And on Shavuot we eat dairy. What is the basis of this practice?

Most explanations assume that the significance of the practice is per se to eat dairy. The Mishna Brurah (594:12) writes that when the Jews returned from *Har Sinai* they found nothing to eat

³² In the 4th mishnah of the 8th chapter of עדיית we find yet another *tannaitic* source in Aramaic: העיד רבי יוסי בן יועזר ... מסתאב. ... משרקא בית מטבחיא. דאינון דכיין. ודיקרב במיתא. מסתאב. Yossi ben Yoezer is lenient regarding three different purity related laws. Why is this mishnah recorded in Aramaic? Perhaps the answer is exactly what we said above. The third item discussed by Yossi ben Yoezer concerns one who comes into contact with a human corpse. In such a case, the person becomes טמא or impure. Rabbi Pinchas Kehati, citing the *Gemara*, explains that Yossi ben Yoezer’s leniency is that the person only becomes טמא if we are certain—assuming the potential contamination was in a public area—that he came into contact with a corpse, but if there is a doubt, the person remains pure. While this was, in fact, always the *halakha*, it was never publicized. Now, however, Yossi ben Yoezer perceived the need to publicize this law. We might suggest that this mishna was taught/recorded in Aramaic for the same reason given by the *Ritva* and *Tiferet Yisroel* mentioned above. When a particular teaching or message needs to reach the widest possible audience, it is taught in the language that most people understand. Since his goal was to publicize this previously unknown law, it makes sense that he did so in Aramaic.

except for dairy foods, due to the extensive preparation that the Torah mandates for meat products. Hence, eating of dairy would seem to be a *zecher* to the actual giving of the Torah, so that we act as if we ourselves received the Torah. Alternatively, various explanations rooted in Kabalistic sources³³ explain that there is something spiritual about the day of Shavuot that is enhanced through the eating of dairy foods.

However, the Rema³⁴ presents an entirely different rationale for this practice. According to the Rema, one should eat both meat and dairy food on Shavuot³⁵. Doing so will require the proper separation of dairy and meat dishes and will require us to bring out an extra loaf of bread³⁶, which will serve as a *zecher* to the *Korban Shtei Halechem*.

³³ For example, see Magen Avraham (494:6) who writes that “the seven weeks of Sefirah are comparable to the seven clean days that a woman must wait in preparation for her husband, and that it is well known that blood congeals and becomes milk.” (See Niddah 9a). See also Noam Elimelech (to Shemot 23:19), who explains that Avraham Avinu specifically served *basar bichalav* to the Angels whom visited his tent (Bereishit 19:8) because the combination enables one to reach spiritual levels that are beyond what is attainable for mortal people. However, he notes that on the day of Shavuot, such levels are attainable, and for that reason “chazzal allowed forgoing the regular period of waiting between milk and meat on Shavuot.

³⁴ O.C. 494:3. “Just as on the Seder night we have two cooked foods as a *zecher* to the *Korban Pesach* and the *Korban Chagiga*, so too via eating both dairy and meat foods, we will have to bring two different loaves of bread to our table, that is like the *mizbeach*.”

³⁵ There is a considerable range of opinions as to how such is to be executed. **a)** The sefer *Piskei Teshuvos* (O.C. 494) writes that it is the practice in many communities to have a dairy meal in the evening and a meat meal during the day. However, he notes that many object via assuming that the requirements of *Simchas Yom Tov* mandate two official meat meals (See *Shaarei Teshuva* to O.C. 529, and *Shaagas Aryeh* #68.) **b)** The Noam Elimelech (*ibid*) writes that one does not have to wait on Shavuot between milk and meat, as normal. *Piskei Teshuvos* (*ibid*) explains that while he normally advocates the position of the *Ari Z”L* that one must wait an entire day after eating hard cheese before eating meat, on Shavuot one can eat meat after only 6 hours. *Pri Megadim* (*Eshel Avraham* O.C. 494:6) writes that one must wait on Shavuot as long as we normally wait after eating meat or hard cheese. *Be’er Heytev* (494:8) quotes from the *Kol Bo* that one can eat cheese in the afternoon, even if a full six hours have not passed. *Chok Yaakov* (494:11) implies that this is accepted as the *din*, although he advocates against it. *Piskei Teshuvos* understands the *Kol Bo* to mean that on Shavuot, assuming that waiting is for the purpose of digestion, afternoon sleep will speed up the clock. While it is noted from the diary of the *Chassam Sofer* that he seemed to have this practice, such is not a normally accepted practice. **c)** Magen Avraham (494:6) writes that one does not have to say *Birchat Hamazon* to formally make the meat and milk courses into separate meals. *Pri Megadim* (*Y.D. Mishpazos Zahav* 89:3) argues that such is required, but notes that although it would normally be a violation of the laws of unnecessary blessings to *bentch* so that one can switch over, that on Shavuot the standards of unnecessary blessings are relaxed. While all of the above issues vary in nature, such is presented to demonstrate that the *minhag* is acknowledged as being ensconced within the *halachik* system. However it is also presented with a degree of hesitance, as it is not my impression that any of these leniencies are accepted practice. Please note that this article is in no way intended to make any recommendations *halacha Limaaseh*.

³⁶ The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Y.D.* 89:4) writes that after eating dairy, one must remove the remaining bread from the table. While the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Pesachim* 6:4) and the *Ohr Zarua* (460) present this as an absolute *halachik* requirement, *Beit Yosef* (*Y.D.* 89) and *Hagaos Ashrei* (to *Rosh Chullin* 8:7) write that such is an act of extra stringency. *Rav Moshe Feinstein* (*Y.D.* 1:38) explains that as normative *halacha*, it is only forbidden to consume the remainder of an individual slice of bread with meat if one had eaten that slice while eating dairy. What emerges according to the Rema is that we eat both milk and meat in closer proximity than we probably usually would, but we specifically make a divide with a level of separation beyond what is normally required.

One might suggest that the entire practice of the Rema seems strange. Seemingly we go out of our way to create a technical problem, so that we have a need to create a technical solution. However, I believe that there are two subtle but important lessons that lie within this practice.

The Shte Halechem is unique in the world of korbanot in that it contains chametz. After leaving bondage, the natural assumption could have been non-constricted freedom. However, the Torah immediately channeled such an opportunity into a chametz-free environment, in which growth is appropriately limited and controlled. Conversely, the overpowering experience of God's revealed presence could have been entirely constricting of human expression and engagement. Yet, it is specifically on Shavuot that chametz is brought into the normally chametz-free Mikdash. In contrast to other holidays, where there is an opinion in the gemara (Pesachim 68b) that one's holiday routine could be entirely dedicated to Hashem, on Shavuot all agree that one must engage in physical pleasure, "because it is the day the Torah was given." On Shavuot we go out of our way to demonstrate our ability to properly navigate the halachik system. We demonstrate that we can properly use an extra stringency to compensate for a seeming leniency. Such is not a manipulation, nor is it a *haarama*. Rather it is a demonstration that we are spiritually empowered via our ability to carefully and confidently live our lives according to the Torah that Hashem gave us on this day. Spiritual initiative is guided via implementation of Halacha, and our spiritual growth could be limited if we were too timid to be confident in our navigation of Halacha.

Why is it important to make a zecher to the korban that was brought on Shavuot? This minhag is the climax of seven weeks where remnants of the mikdash permeate our daily practice in a manner that is unparalleled at any other point of the year. At the Seder, we wash for vegetables as was done in temple times, although such is not normally our practice³⁷. We refrain from roasted meat, lest one think that we are violating the prohibition of bringing a korban outside the mikdash³⁸. To quote the Netsiv³⁹, Chazal guided us to conduct the Seder as when the Temple stood. We count Sefiras Haomer, although we can not bring either the Omer or the Shte Halechem⁴⁰. And on Shavuot, we make a zecher to the Shte Halechem.

In truth, it is appropriate to mourn the Beis Hamikdash every day⁴¹. However, perhaps different times of the year call for different types of remembrance. During the summer, we mourn the mistakes and actions that lead towards the destruction of the mikdash, and our continued failure to rebuild the mikdash. However, during this period of the year, between two holidays that are bridged by their unique korbanot, which creates a period of time that has a distinct holiness⁴², it

³⁷ O.C. 483:6. See Taz #6.

³⁸ See O.C. 476. See also O.C. 469.

³⁹ Introduction to the Passover Haggada with the Commentary of the Netsiv, "Imrei Shefer."

⁴⁰ Such is particularly striking according to the position of the Rambam (Temidin uMusafim 7:22), for whom Sefirah bizman hazeh is a biblical obligation.

⁴¹ Orach Chaim 1:3.

⁴² See Vayikra 23:9-22. It is striking that amidst the listing of the moadim, the Chumash extensively details the halachot of the korban haOmer and of the Shte Halechem. Ramban (23:2) notes that such details would presumably be in Parshas Pinchas. While the Ramban accepts a technical answer, it is noteworthy that the Vilna Gaon (Biur HaGra to Yoreh Deah 399:9) suggests that Erev Pesach is a moed due to its inclusion in Vayikra 23. A parallel suggestion would lead to the conclusion that the period of Sefirah is a period of Kedushas Hazman.

is most appropriate to have a greater degree of sensitivity toward the larger corpus of Halacha that unfortunately can not be fully implemented in our day⁴³.

The Holiday of the Harvest and Har Sinai

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The Torah refers to *Shavuot* as the “holiday of the harvest of the first fruits of your labor” (Shmot 23:16). In almost every place the Torah mentions *Shavuot* it characterizes it with its agricultural timing. While *Shavuot* celebrates the anniversary of no less an event than *ma’amad Har Sinai*, the Torah stresses that it also coincides with the beginning of the harvest season. Similarly, *Shavuot* also marked the first day *B’nei Yisrael* would begin bringing the *bikurim*, the first fruits of the year, to the *Beit Hamikdash*. Why did *Hashem* give the Torah during the first days of the harvest season? Why do we celebrate *ma’amad har sinai* with the arrival of the first fruits of the year? How do these spiritual and physical themes blend together?

All winter the farmer toils in the soil. First, he plows the tough earth and carefully plants it. Over the next few months, he fertilizes, waters, and nurtures it. Finally, he guards his field from animals and hopes that diseases or parasites don’t destroy it. All of this time, he has nothing to show for it: no grain, no fruits, nothing to take home. He doesn’t even have time to think about the fruits he will later enjoy; he has to focus on the task at hand. Perhaps sometimes he is so lost in the daily drudgery of this period, so consumed by the draining sunrise to sunset days, that he even forgets why he’s doing it at all. However, with the glorious arrival of the first fruit, the farmer sees the product of his labor and remembers why he worked so hard all winter. Without the harvest, his efforts would have been pointless, his entire winter wasted. Now, with the grain standing tall and the fruits glistening on the trees, his time and effort have found their purpose.

In many ways, the world is *Hashem’s* field. From *Adam* to the *Avot* to *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the world was being plowed and planted, nurtured and protected. But for what? For the Torah. Rashi (*Breishit* 1:31) explains that the Torah refers to the sixth day of creation as “the sixth day” to imply that *Hashem* created the world for “the sixth day” of Sivan, the day of *matan Torah*. Without *ma’amad Har Sinai*, all of world history would have been for naught. The *mitzvot* of every *tzadik*, the efforts of the *avot*, even *yitziat Mitzrayim* would have been without purpose. A world without *matan Torah* would have resembled a field plowed, planted, but not harvested. *Hashem* gave the Torah specifically at this time of year, for the Torah is the truest harvest of the world. Like the precious first fruits of a planted field, *Har Sinai* imparted Torah to the world and brought *ma’aseh breishit* to its fruition.

⁴³ This may be consistent with the fact that it is commonly practiced to refrain from listening to music during the Omer. It may be forbidden to listen to music at anytime due to the churban (See Sotah 48a, Gittin 7a and Rambam Taanis 5:14.). Perhaps it is appropriate that we engage in practices *zecher lichurban* more than normal during this period of the year.

Although we are not farmers, our own lives are filled with similarly busy, consuming schedules, from daily chores to demanding careers. We too sometimes get caught up in the most immediate and obvious obligations of our lives. However, on *Shavuot* we pause and behold the Torah in its glory like a farmer spotting the first fruit of the year. We study it, praise it, and rejoice with it. Like a farmer at the harvest, on *Shavuot*, we suddenly so clearly see the purpose of our lives and all of our efforts. Indeed, we are celebrating the “harvest of the first fruits of our labor,” for it is the Torah and its *mitzvot* that redeem us, granting meaning to our toil and purpose to our creation.

Just as the first fruits of the harvest bring unbridled joy to the farmer, may this *Shavuot*, the *chag matan torateinu*, bring a sublime simcha to us, our families, and all of *k'lal yisrael*.

Preparing to receive the Torah

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Every year, the holiday of Shavuos helps us reflect on *Matan Torah* and what the giving of the Torah means to us. Naturally, the giving of the Torah was not meant for one day or one time. Rather, each and every day we thank Hashem for giving us His Torah and affording us the opportunity to learn from its wisdom. Nevertheless, Shavuos is indeed a special time of the year in that we commemorate the original giving of the Torah. If we carefully analyze the original story of *Matan Torah* as presented in *Parshas Yisro*, we may glean a unique insight as to how we can prepare ourselves to receive the Torah every day. What should we focus on to enable ourselves to have success in studying and internalizing the Torah and its wisdom?

Several commentators highlight various phrases and terms that are used when the Torah describes the events leading up to *Matan Torah*. The Ohr haChaim comments on the verse in which the Torah describes how the people came to Har Sinai: ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני, ויחנו. במדבר, ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר.⁴⁴ The Torah writes that they traveled from Refidim and came to Midbar Sinai, they camped in the wilderness, and B'nei Yisrael camped opposite the mountain. The Ohr haChaim points to three anomalies in this verse which he explains refers to three critical elements in B'nei Yisrael's preparation for receiving the Torah. The first element is the strong commitment to the study of Torah. Thus, the Torah lets us know that the people traveled from Refidim. It was unnecessary to tell us that, after already mentioning in the previous verse that they came to Midbar Sinai. The Ohr haChaim explains that Refidim is not merely the name of a place, but it reflects the “weak hands” (*rifyon yadayim*), or weakened commitment that the B'nei Yisrael had towards the *mitzvos* they had previously received. Thus, “they traveled from Refidim” hints to the notion that they distanced themselves from that state to a sense of greater commitment to serve Hashem. The second point the Torah emphasizes is the trait of humility and submissiveness which is necessary to accept the Torah. This lowliness is what the Torah alludes to when it repeats that they camped in the wilderness, a lowly place on which everyone tramples. Finally, for Torah to thrive there must be a collaboration of minds who work together

⁴⁴ Shemos 19:2.

to sharpen each other's understanding of Torah. This element of unity, is indicated by the singular use of the word *vayichan* (and **he** camped) to refer to the entire B'nei Yisrael camping at Har Sinai.⁴⁵

While all the aforementioned points are certainly appropriate values for us to improve on in order to make us worthy as a group to receive the Torah, perhaps we should also look towards the specific protocol that Hashem laid out for B'nei Yisrael to prepare themselves as individuals. What does Hashem tell Moshe to instruct the people?

And God said to Moshe, go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and wash their clothes. And they shall be ready for the third day, for on the third day Hashem will descend before the people onto Har Sinai.

Shemos 19:10-11

ויאמר ה' אל משה לך אל העם וקדשתם היום ומחר וכבסו שמלתם: והיו נכנים ליום השלישי כי ביום השלישי ירד ה' לעיני כל העם על הר סיני.
שמות יט:י-יא

Hashem mentions three things that the people should do: They should sanctify themselves, they should launder their clothes, and they should prepare themselves. While this program may have had one meaning for the Jews at that time, these three steps may also refer to fundamental principles that can apply to us even today.

The notion of sanctifying ourselves carries various meanings in different contexts. Ramban, on the verse *קדשים תהיו*, explains that we should transcend the mundane by holding ourselves back even from the permissible pleasures of this world.⁴⁶ To sanctify ourselves in that way means to focus on spiritual aspirations even at the expense of some of the physical aspects in our lives. Having this proper sense of priorities is surely necessary to succeed in Torah, as we are told in the sixth chapter of Pirkei Avos; the path to Torah is to study Torah even if we only have the bare minimum to live on.⁴⁷

The second step is to launder our clothes. When Kohelet says that we should make sure to keep our clothes white (and unsoiled), the commentaries explain that one should engage in good deeds and repent for any sins.⁴⁸ We may therefore understand the notion of cleaning our clothes as a reference to becoming more involved in *mitzvos* and avoiding any sin.

The last step is to prepare ourselves. The Ibn Ezra explains this as referring to the excited anticipation that a person should have to hear the voice of Hashem when he reveals the Torah and *mitzvos*.

In light of this interpretation, the path to our success in Torah is clear. It is important that we commit ourselves to make time to study Torah and make it a priority in our lives. This increase in Torah study needs to be complemented by an increase in *mitzvos* involvement. But of course,

⁴⁵ See also Kli Yakar who explains these phrases and terms to refer to the peace and harmony that was necessary for the people to receive the Torah.

⁴⁶ Vayikra 19:2.

⁴⁷ Avos 6:4.

⁴⁸ Koheles 9:8. Similarly, see Rashi to Eicha 1:9, who explains the soiled hem of a garment as a reference to sin.

both endeavors need to be performed with eagerness and enthusiasm. If we keep these lessons in mind we will hopefully all enjoy success in Torah.

Why is this Holiday not like the others?

Rabbi Yoni Levin

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The Festival of Shavuos is shockingly anticlimactic. We count Sefiras Haomer, with much excitement and enthusiasm, leading up to the celebration of Kabalas Hatorah. But the anticipation is met with a celebration well below expectations. In contrast to Pesach and Sukkos, Shavuos is a mere 24-hour celebration. In addition to its brevity, we perhaps would have expected the Torah to obligate the performance of mitzvos in order to enhance the commemoration of this epic event, Kabalas Hatorah –yet here too, Shavuos is lacking.

There is an intriguing comment by Chazal that may hold the key to understanding the anomaly of Shavuos. Based on a pasuk in Sefer Yeshaya (54:1), the Talmud (Taanis 7a) compares the Torah to three liquids: milk, water, and wine. This analogy needs clarification. Why do Chazal feel compelled to compare the Torah to liquids? And when doing so, why specifically these three?

Perhaps these three liquids symbolize the development and maturity of the human intellect, which is, of course, an integral part of Torah study. Milk, which is the life source of the newborn baby, represents the first stage of life. Water, which is the essential drink for all ages, signifies the middle stage of life. And wine, which is reserved for the mature and sophisticated, symbolizes the latter years of life. This progression can now be applied to Torah study. Milk represents the Written Law, the fundamentals of Torah; water signifies the Oral Law; and wine symbolizes the hidden dimension of the Torah.

These three liquids, these three levels of Torah study, correlate to the three regalim. Shavuos, when we customarily enjoy dairy foods, represents the Written Law. Sukkos, which embraces the theme of water⁴⁹, signifies the Oral Law, and Pesach (perhaps coupled with Purim), when we drink four cups of wine, symbolizes the hidden dimension of Torah.

This notion that Shavuos represents the Written Law, the fundamentals of Torah, justifies its brevity as well as its lack of an attached ritual. Shavuos is limited to one day, a simple day, an uneventful day to highlight its very essence: celebrating the receiving of the Torah, the beginning of the Torah, the basics of the Torah.

However, this interesting approach to the relationship between the three regalim leaves us in a quandary. Why do we count *up*, from Pesach to Shavuos, when it appears we're moving backwards? Keeping everything simple still doesn't make for an exciting climax. It seems backward to count from Pesach to Shavuos, regressing from the sophisticated to the primitive!

⁴⁹ On Sukkos we are judged on rain (Rosh Hashannah 16a), we begin reciting "mashiv haruach" (Taanis 2a), and we have a special water libation accompanying the korban tamid (Taanis 2b)

The Written Torah, although basic and fundamental, is unlike the ABC's of preschool. A preschool graduate never returns, but one who studies the Written Law must. He must return and review, revisit and reexamine. In fact, it is through the other areas of Torah, both the Oral Law and the hidden element, that one can reenter the world of the Written Law. It is only through these lenses that one appreciates new understandings of the Written Law. It is now clear why we count from Pesach to Shavuos – it is simplicity that is the greatest climax. Throughout the year we sustain ourselves on water, we dine with aged wine, but it is the milk we thirst. We strive to peer into the Torah, in its simplicity, yet see myriads of concepts and ideas.

Standing for the Aseres Hadibros

Rabbi Rafi Rosenblum

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On Shavuos, many communities have the custom to stand for the reading of the *Aseres Hadibros*, based on our desire to reenact the giving of the Torah, which was given to the Jewish people as they were standing at the foot of Har Sinai. However, by specifically standing up for the *Aseres Hadibros*, it appears that we are placing a greater emphasis on this portion of the Torah than on other sections. This seems to contradict the gemara in Meseches Brachos, daf 12a that tells us that the *chachamim* wanted to incorporate the *Aseres Hadibros* into the everyday *davening*, but decided against doing so because it could lead heretics to convince the people that only the *Aseres Hadibros* were part of the Torah and nothing else. Is there any way to reconcile our practice in light of this gemara?

Indeed, the Rambam (Teshuvos HaRambam #46) writes against the practice to stand for the *Aseres Hadibros*, based on the gemara in Brachos, and says that communities that have such a custom should be corrected. Rav Ovadya Yosef (Yechaveh Daas #29) quotes a number of *achronim* who were in support of maintaining the minhag, and who offer explanations why it does not contradict the gemara in Brachos. However, Rav Ovadya Yosef isn't willing to follow these *achronim* because he says that they did not see what the Rambam had written, for if they had, they would have agreed with him. Rav Moshe Shternbuch (Teshuvos V'hanhagos 1:144) recommends standing up *before* the baal koreh begins reading the *Aseres Hadibros* so no one will mistakenly think that the Torah is only comprised of the *Aseres Hadibros*.

Nevertheless, many communities maintain the practice, and a number of reasons are given. Rav Shlomo Zalman Aurbach (Halichos Shlomo Hilchos Tefillah, perek 12 footnote 30, and Hilchos Shavuos, perek 12 halacha 8) writes that we don't need to take the gemara's concern into account because there are other Torah readings we stand for, such as Shiras Hayam and at the end of each of the Chamisha Chumshai Torah, so no would be tricked into thinking that only the *Aseres Hadibros* are part of the Torah. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe OC 4:22) says that there is no reason to broaden the concern discussed in the gemara. In the time of the gemara they had a specific concern based on the fact that they *had* instituted saying the *Aseres Hadibros* during *davening*, and found that this caused people to falter, and so they abolished the practice. However, says Rav Moshe, if something hasn't been proven to be a problem, we don't need to be worried about it.

Is there any way to reconcile our minhag with what the Rambam writes? Rav Yosef Dov Soloveichik (Mesorah, vol. 1 page 17) offers an explanation. The Aseres Hadibros can be read as pesukim (tam tachton), or as dibros (taam elyon), with each commandment being read individually. Our practice is to read each dibrah by itself, thereby taking many pesukim and making them one long pasuk, or taking one pasuk and converting it into many small pesukim. However, there is a general prohibition to break up pesukim in the Torah reading up differently from the way they are arranged now because the weekly Torah reading is a public form of talmud Torah, accomplished by reading the pesukim as they are divided. However, the Torah reading on Shavuos is different. In addition to acting as a public form of talmud Torah, on Shavuos we read the Aseres Hadibros in the taam elyon, as separate commandments, as a remembrance and reenactment of kabalas haTorah. And just as we read the Aseres Hadibros as they were said on Har Sinai, we stand during their recitation because we initially received the Torah at Har Sinai while standing at the foot of the mountain. On Shavuos, we do as much as we can to commemorate that momentous occasion⁵⁰. However, the Rambam was opposed to the practice of standing because the Rambam doesn't mention the minhag of reading the Aseres Hadibros broken up into individual commandments. He felt that they should be read according to the existing pesukim, and that the only purpose of the kriyas haTorah is to allow public talmud Torah. Therefore, someone who would stand for this section of the Torah, and not for others, may be viewed as giving the Aseres Hadibros primary importance over the rest of the Torah, which could lead to a misconception.

The poskim (Chidah Tov Eiyin #11, Sharai Ephraim shar 7 #37, Igros Moshe ibid, Kaf Hachaim 146: 23) say that no matter what one's individual practice is, one must conform to the minhag hamakom. If one is in a place where the practice is to stand, he or she should stand, and if the communal custom is not to stand then he or she shouldn't stand (if doing so would be obviously going against the norm). By following the communal custom, and not separating oneself from the tzibbur, we build achdus in our communities. This is another opportunity to recreate kabalas haTorah, as Chazal tell us that Klal Yisrael were "k'ish echad b'lev echad", like one person with one heart when they stood at Har Sinai. May we be zocheh to reach that level once again, and see the Bais Hamikdash rebuilt b'meharah b'yamenu.

The First Night of Shavuos: What Should We Do?

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The first night of Shavuos is a very special and holy night. The Arizal writes that anyone who stays awake the entire night of Shavuos and spends all of his time engaged in learning Torah is guaranteed a peaceful, safe and healthy year to follow. The Magen Avraham (O.C. 494) writes that the minhag, quoted in the Zohar, to dedicate the night to learning Torah is an attempt to rectify a mistake made by Klal Yisrael at the time of matan Torah. When Hashem "arrived" to

⁵⁰ A colleague of mine, R' Daniel Turkel, showed me that Rav Hershel Schachter in Nefesh Harav, page 136 cites R' Soloveitchik who explains the Maharam Rittenberg's requirement to stand for every kriyas haTorah similarly. Every week during kriyas haTorah we recreate kabalas haTorah, which is why he maintains that one needs to stand.

give the Torah to the Jewish people, they were sleeping and had to be woken. Therefore, the custom developed to stay awake all night to show Hashem that we are preparing for and awaiting His “arrival” to give us the Torah.

The question is, which Torah subject is the most appropriate to study? How should the night best be spent?

Some communities have the minhag to recite and study the Tikkun Leil Shavuos, which according to most, contains the beginning and end of all of the parshiyos of the Torah and the books of Nach as well as various other texts. There is a difference of opinions regarding what other texts should be included in this Tikkun. Some recite the beginning and end of all of the tractates of Mishna, while others recite various midrashim and parts of the Zohar. The source for Tikkun Leil Shavuos is based on the Zohar and quoted by the Arizal.

Rav Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov (Derech Pikudecha, Introduction 3, paragraph 4) explains that the reason for this type of study is that when a person is unable to finish a sefer in its entirety, they should at least learn the beginning and end of it. By doing this, in the eyes of Hashem, it is as if you have finished the entire sefer. Therefore, since we do not have the ability to finish all of Tanach in one night, we recite the beginning and end of each section and it is as if we have learned all of the Torah. There are other reasons offered for reciting Tikkun Leil Shavuos which are based on kabbalah and are beyond the scope of this article (see Kaf Hachaim 494:7-8).

However, some communities do not have the custom of reciting Tikkun Leil Shavuos and spend the night involved in in-depth study of different areas of Torah. Why would one choose to pass on the reasons and merits of reciting the Tikkun Leil Shavuos and study other topics instead?

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (Mikraei Kodesh, Pesach Volume 3, 34) writes that the ideal way to spend the night of Shavuos is to study Torah in-depth with much effort and concentration. He states a number of reasons why this is the highest level of Torah learning and therefore the most appropriate way to spend the night. Through this type of study, writes Rav Frank, one acquires the Torah for himself (“nikreis al shemo,” Bamidbar Rabba 12:9), as we find that the Torah is referred to as “Moshe’s Torah” (Malachi 3:22) because of Moshe Rabbeinu’s exertion and self-sacrifice at the time of receiving the Torah. Rav Frank writes that staying up all night on its own is a form of mesiras nefesh and if the night is spent learning Torah with energy and dedication it is an even greater level of self-sacrifice for the Torah. He adds that another reason why in-depth Torah study is preferable is because it leads to great levels of loving Hashem by developing a deep relationship with Him through the Torah.

Both of these customs are admirable and commendable ways to spend the night of Shavuos. Regardless of which custom we follow, we should try to take advantage of the night and spend our time involved and engaged in Torah study. By doing this, we can prepare ourselves to receive the Torah anew and show Hashem our excitement and love for His Torah.

Achieving Unity Through Independence

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Shavuot is a celebration of God's revelation at Sinai. It is a time when we recall a defining moment in world history and a transitional juncture in Jewish history. It is, perhaps most critically, a unique and singular experience for mankind. God directly spoke to the world.

In the first of the Ten Commandments, God said clearly and unequivocally "אנכי ה' אלוקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים", "I am the Lord, your God, who took you out of Egypt, from the house of slavery" (Shemot 20:2). The paramount importance of this verse is clear; there is a God, and we must believe in him. Yet, a series of debates have ensued surrounding this statement. What may be most fascinating is the range of opinions found in the Jewish tradition about how one acquires faith in God, the truth clearly and explicitly stated in this verse.

Rambam and other medieval rationalists argue belief is acquired through philosophical inquiry. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and fellow mystics feel the study of kabbalah and various esoteric teachings are necessary for true understanding of God. Various chassidic thinkers are of the opinion that the greatest faith is simple faith, where questions needn't be asked and doctrine is simply accepted⁵¹. Indeed, many argue belief should be accepted as tradition, passed down from one generation to the next. R. Elchanan Wasserman (Kovetz Maamarim, ch. 1) even writes that belief is obvious, as an objective look at the world would lead anyone to believe in God. Clearly, what appears to be a simple and straightforward statement leads to many different approaches and perspectives in the Jewish tradition.⁵²

Yet, a basic question emerges. Why would God formulate such an important tenet of our faith without giving us insight into how to attain it? Why would something as fundamental as belief in God not come with a "how to guide" about how to reach it? It appears that the Torah wishes to convey the message that *what* we believe is more important than *how* we believe, that knowledge of God is primary and it can be acquired in varying ways. People are not all moved the same way or inspired in the same manner. God wants us to believe in him, but how we get there is up to us.

The recognition that people work and think differently, that there is no uniform and singular path towards belief in Hashem, is significant. It has led to divisiveness and arguments about which approach is most authentic. But, in truth, this recognition should have the opposite effect. It should encourage a more ambitious approach that is also more accepting. Knowledge that mankind is diverse should inspire us to find our unique role without rejecting the unique role of others, to maximize our own contributions without minimizing those of others. It should enable us to find allies instead of adversaries and engender empathy instead of enmity, all in the name of creating a more successful and integrated community.

⁵¹ See, for example, the formulation of R. Nachman of Breslov (Likutei Moharan (Tinyana), no. 78).

⁵² For a survey of various opinions on the way one acquires faith, see R. Moshe Tzuriel's Otzrot HaMussar (Vol. 1, pgs. 143-147, 149-209).

Prior to God's revelation at Sinai, the Jewish people were united, as one person with one heart (Rashi, Shemot 19:2). Yet, R. Shlomo Luria⁵³ notes that each person received the Torah from his own perspective and with his own unique background.⁵⁴ Apparently, independence does not undermine unity. A nation can be like "one person with one heart" with individuals that embrace their respective differences. Indeed, prior to receiving the Torah, the Jewish nation maintained their individuality with no cost to their unity.

Shavuot is a time when we remember that God told us to believe in him. We weren't given an exact path detailing the best way to have faith, and there is a range of ways to get there. Our job is to find the one best suited for us, and in the process, come to better understand not only ourselves but also the unique and special role of others.

⁵³ Yam Shel Shlomo, introduction to Bava Kama

⁵⁴ R. Luria uses this idea to explain the Talmud's statement (Eruvin 13a) that "these and those are the words of the living God." Individual differences are what allow multiple truths to exist.