

Shavuot Lessons for Families

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The Ten Commandments: I am Your God

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One of the most significant and moving moments over Shavuot is the reading of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, the Ten Commandments. We are re-experiencing one of the biggest moments in Jewish history, namely the giving of the Torah. When we imagine the scene at Har Sinai, we are struck with awe and reverence. When we incorporate Chazal's description of the scene we are left speechless and bewildered.

The main event at Matan Torah seems to be the giving of the *Aseret Hadibrot*, and there is something unique about the first two *dibrot*. Chazal, *Makkot* 24a, teach us that the first two *dibrot* were told to us directly by Hashem.

The first and second commandments are the foundation for our belief system and are worth analyzing.

I am the Lord Your G-d who took you out of Egypt from a house of slaves. There shall be no other gods before Me.

Shemot 20:2-3

אנכי ה' אלקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים
מבית עבדים. לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני.
שמות כ:ב-ג

Discussion Questions:

Why begin with these commandments? Is Hashem trying to simply set a serious tone?

What is the first commandment commanding us to do? Believe? Can we really be commanded to "believe" in something?

Why does Hashem stress that He took us out of Mitzrayim and not that He created the world? Surely, on a scale of G-d's accomplishments, stage-managing the Exodus doesn't even approach His role as designer and creator of the universe!

Use the following two comments of Ramban to help answer these questions:

And this commandment is called in the words of our Rabbis acceptance of the kingdom of heaven, because these mitzvot that I mentioned are (between) a king and his nation. And this is what it says in the Mechilta: "There shall be no other gods before me, why is it stated if it already stated I am the Lord your G-d? A parable is said about a new king who entered his country. His servants told him to institute some decrees. He said, no, only after you accept me as king will I institute decrees, because if you do not accept me as king, why would

וזו המצוה תקרא בדברי רבותינו (ברכות יג:) קבלת מלכות שמים, כי המצוות האלה אשר הזכרתי הם במלך כנגד העם. וכך אמרו במכילתא (בפסוק הבא) לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני למה נאמר, לפי שהוא אומר אנכי ה' אלהיך, משל למלך שנכנס למדינה, אמרו לו עבדיו גזור עלינו גזירות, אמר להם לאו, כשתקבלו מלכותי אגזור עליכם גזירות, שאם מלכותי אינכם

you keep my decrees? So too Hashem told the Jews, I am the Lord your G-d and you shall not serve the gods of others, Am I the one that you accepted as your king in Egypt? The Jews replied, yes. [Hashem said] When you accepted my kingship you accepted my decrees as well, in other words, just as you accepted and recognize that I am the Lord and I am your G-d from the land of Egypt, accept all of my commandments.

Ramban, Shemot 20:2

And it states "that I took you out of the land of Egypt" because taking them (out of Egypt) teaches the existence (of G-d) and the desire (of G-d to take them out), because we left there with (G-d's) knowledge and intervention. Additionally, it teaches the (ability of G-d to orchestrate) change, because with the original state of the world, nothing changes from its nature. Additionally, it teaches about Hashem's ability and His ability teaches His uniqueness (oneness) as the verse states "so that you will know that there is no one like me in all of the land."

Ramban, Shemot 20:2

מקבלים גזירותי האיך אתם מקיימין.
 כך אמר המקום לישראל אנכי ה' אלהיך
 לא יהיה לך, אני הוא שקבלתם מלכותי
 עליכם במצרים, אמרו לו הן,
 כשקבלתם מלכותי קבלו גזרותי, כלומר
 אחר שאתם מקבלים עליכם ומודים
 שאני ה' ואני אלהיכם מארץ מצרים
 קבלו כל מצותי.
רמב"ן שמות כ:ב

ואמר אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים,
 כי הוצאתם משם תורה על המציאות
 ועל החפץ, כי בידיעה ובהשגחה
 ממנו יצאנו משם, וגם תורה על
 החדוש, כי עם קדמות העולם לא
 ישתנה דבר מטבעו, ותורה על
 היכולת, והיכולת תורה על הייחוד,
 כמו שאמר (לעיל ט יד) בעבור תדע
 כי אין כמוני בכל הארץ.
רמב"ן שמות כ:ב

A Stranger Among Us: Understanding the Torah's Perspective on Converts

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On Shavuot, we read Megillat Rut, which tells the story of a princess from Moav who converted to Judaism and eventually married a judge of Israel, Boaz.

Question: Why do we read Megillat Rut on Shavuot?

R. David Abudraham explains that Shavuot commemorates our acceptance of the Torah. It is when we converted as a nation. Similarly, we read the story of Rut and her conversion to Judaism.

The Torah teaches us that there is a special commandment to love a *ger* (convert). The Gemara, *Bava Metzia* 59b, points out that this mitzvah appears no less than 36 times throughout the Torah, making it the most repeated mitzvah in the Torah. In *Parashat Kedoshim*, we are taught the following about how we are to treat converts:

When a stranger (convert) dwells among you in your land, do not taunt him. The stranger (convert) who dwells with you should be like a native among you, and you shall love him like yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt—I am Hashem your God.

Vayikra 19:33-34

וכי-יגור אִתְּךָ גֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם לֹא
 תונו אותו. בְּאַזְרַח מִכֶּם יִהְיֶה לְכֶם
 הַגֵּר הַגֵּר אִתְּכֶם וְאַהֲבַתְּ לוֹ כְּמוֹד
 כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאַרְץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי
 ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
ויקרא יט:לג-לד

Questions:

The word תּוֹנוּ means taunt. What are some examples of ways one might taunt a convert?
Why do you think someone would taunt a convert?

Rashi helps us answer these questions:

Do not taunt—(This refers to) verbal harassment. Do not say to him, “in the past you worshiped idols and now you come to learn Torah that was given from the mouth of the Almighty?”

לא תּוֹנוּ- אונאת דברים. לא תאמר לו
אמש היית עובד עבודה זרה ועכשיו אתה
בא ללמוד תורה שנתנה מפי הגבורה:

Questions:

Why does the Torah suddenly mention that the Jewish people were like strangers in Egypt?
What does that have to do with taunting a convert?

Rashi explains:

An imperfection that exists in you, don't say to your friend. [Don't taunt another with a flaw you share in common. “People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.”]

כי גרים הייתם-מום
שבך אל תאמר
לחברך:

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch teaches an additional insight: that you must show a stranger kindness in both your feelings and your actions.

Questions:

How can you have positive feelings without positive actions?
How can you be kind in your actions but not in your feelings?
Give an example from your life where you can see kindness in both actions and feelings.

Conclusion

Ibn Ezra teaches us why we must be extra sensitive toward the convert:

...similarly, I (Hashem) warn you about the stranger—as your strength is greater than his, or since he has no strength at all. He is able to live in your land only with your permission.

...כך אזהירך על הגר שכחך גדול
מכחו, או בעבור שאין לו כח, שהוא
בארצך ברשותך

Questions:

What characteristics does Ibn Ezra attribute to a “ger”?
Based on these defining characteristics, who are other people in your life today who can be considered “gerim”?

As we saw from R. Abudraham, Shavuot commemorates our connection to converts. Let us use this opportunity to understand why the Torah strongly emphasizes caring for converts and open our hearts to all those around us who may be in need of extra care and concern. As vulnerable as others may be, we must also remember how powerful we are, and how our words, our actions and our feelings can change the lives of those around us.

Har Sinai: A Study in Humility

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Introduction:

Humility is among the greatest of virtues, as its opposite, pride, is among the greatest of vices. Avraham says in Bereishit 18:27 “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to Hashem, who am I but dust and ashes.” The king, in Devarim 17:20, is told to review the Torah regularly so that “his heart be not lifted above his brethren.”

King David and Moshe both display examples of being humble before Hashem. Moshe describes himself as nothing (Shemot 16:8), and King David describes himself as a worm (Tehillim 22:7). The character traits of a religious person addressing Hashem must give us pause to contemplate what humility truly is.

The humble person is one who believes every gift they have comes from Hashem; short of that a person is not humble. R. Sol Roth notes that according to the Rambam, a full characterization of the humble person must take into account man’s relation to Hashem.

We find many examples of true humility in the texts and personalities of Judaism—Moshe, Hillel, and Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. It is said when Rabbi Yehuda died so did true humility. (*Sotah* 49a)

We will discuss what humility really means when we see it in the Tanach and when we see it in our daily lives.

Activities:

Younger children may have learned the song about why Har Sinai was chosen above all other mountains. Have them sing it, or go over the words below and discuss which mountains are humble and which are not. This is the springboard into the humility and Shavuot discussion.

I am a mountain so very high, I can reach right up to the sky. The Torah should be given on me, because I am as tall as can be you see. Oh no,

I am a mountain so very wide, I can reach from side to side. The Torah should be given on me, because I am as wide as can be you see.

But little Har Sinai just stood there and sighed, I know I’m not tall and I’m not wide. The Torah won’t be given on me, because I am as small as can be you see.

But of all of the mountains, Hashem chose Sinai, because he did not hold himself high. He had such simple and humble ways.

Questions:

What do we learn from the song? What does humble mean?

People in the Tanach and Talmud are also shown to be humble.

King Shaul appeared to be humble, at least in the beginning of his reign. We can learn from his act of apparent humility (Shmuel I ch. 10).

When Shaul is appointed king it is in front of all of B’nei Yisrael. Shmuel uses a lottery to show

the nation that Hashem has chosen Shaul. When Shaul's name is picked he is nowhere to be found. Eventually he is found hiding in the luggage.

Questions:

Why do you think Shaul is hiding? Is this an act of being humble? Explain.

We learn that a conscious attempt to be humble is not humility at all but a self-aggrandizing attempt to lift oneself up. [For children: We know that if we purposely try to make ourselves humble this is just trying to make ourselves more important.]

Questions:

How can we be humble if not on purpose? Can you give an example of the last time you were humble?

Use the scenarios below and discuss if the people in the situations are humble or not and why. There are no correct answers, this is meant to spur discussion.

- Yehuda gets an A on his test. He does not tell anyone about his grade and when asked what he got, he answers that that is between him and the teacher. Most students assume he got a bad grade but he sticks to it and does not share his grade. Is he humble?
- Molly is on the playground doing cartwheels. Her friends tell her how amazing she is. She replies that she takes gymnastic once a week. Is this a humble answer? Why or why not?
- Moshe, at the burning bush, says, "Who am I that You (Hashem) are speaking to me." Is that humility or fear? Moshe, at the burning bush, reminds Hashem that he has a speech impediment. Is this humility or just stating the facts?
- Yosef comes into class talking about how much fun he had working in a soup kitchen. He is very proud of the mitzvah he performed. Is he humble?

Closing Questions:

Why is it important to know that Har Sinai was humble?

What does this teach us about how we should act? Explain.

Did Har Sinai demonstrate humility for the sake of bringing itself higher or was it true humility?

How do you know?

How is being humble the opposite of pride?

Bibliography:

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- "Towards a Definition of Humility," Rabbi Sol Roth. *Tradition*, volume 13, 1973.

What Does Shabbat Commemorate?

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The mitzvah of Shabbat is described in the Torah and in our davening as being both in remembrance of Hashem's creation of the world and in remembrance of *Yetziat Mitzrayim* (the Exodus from Egypt). This discussion guide will allow you to explore what it means to

“remember” something that happened before you were born, what exactly one is supposed to remember, and how these memories relate to specific aspects of Shabbat.

Questions to consider before you begin:

- 1) What other events that took place before you were born do you “remember”?
- 2) What have your parents and teachers done to help you “remember” these events?
- 3) You “remember” your last birthday party and you “remember” that Hashem created the universe. How are these kinds of “remembering” similar? How are they different?

The Texts:

Who has made us holy with His commandments and was pleased with us, And gave us His holy Shabbat with love and pleasure, A memorial to Creation. Because it is the first day of the holidays, In memory of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Because you chose us and dedicated us out of all the nations And you gave us your holy Shabbat with love and pleasure.

Friday Night Kiddush

אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְרָצָה בָּנוּ, וְשָׁבַת
קִדְּשׁוּ בְּאַהֲבָה וּבְרָצוֹן הַנְּחִילָנוּ, זְכָרוֹן
לְמַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית. כִּי הוּא יוֹם תְּחִלָּה
לְמִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ זֵכֶר לְיִצְיַאת מִצְרָיִם.
כִּי בָנוּ בְּחַרְתָּ וְאוֹתָנוּ קִדְּשָׁתָּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים
וְשָׁבַת קִדְּשָׁתָּ בְּאַהֲבָה וּבְרָצוֹן הַנְּחִילָתָנוּ.
קִידוּשׁ לַיִל שַׁבַּת

1. This Kiddush describes Shabbat in two different ways. What is the difference between “He gave us His holy Shabbat with love and pleasure” and “Because it is the first day of the holidays”?
2. Why is the first connected to creation, while the second is connected to Yetziat Mitzrayim?

Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy. Work for six days and do all of your work. But on the seventh day is Shabbat for Hashem your G-d: don't do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your slave or your animal or the convert who lives in your gates. Because in six days Hashem made the Heavens and the Earth, the sea and all that are in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore Hashem blessed the Shabbat day and made it holy.

Shemot 20:7-10

זְכוֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת, לְקַדְּשׁוֹ. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים
תַּעֲבֹד, וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ. וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי-
שַׁבָּת, לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: לֹא-תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלֶאכֶת
אֹתָהּ וּבִנְיָהּ וּבְהֵמָהּ, עֶבֶדְךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ,
וְגֵרְךָ, אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ. כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת-יָמִים עָשָׂה
ה' אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ, אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-
כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-בָּם, וַיִּנַּח, בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי; עַל-כֵּן
בֵּרַךְ ה' אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת—וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ
שְׁמוֹת כ:ז-י

How, according to this mitzvah, should one “remember” (זכור) Shabbat? Why?

Keep the day of Shabbat to make it holy, like Hashem your G-d commanded you. Work for six days and do all of your work. And the seventh day is Shabbat for Hashem your G-d: Do not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your slave or your ox or your donkey or any of your animals or the convert who lives in your gates, so that your slave may rest like you. And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem your G-d brought you out of there, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore Hashem your G-d commanded you to observe the Shabbat day.

Devarim 5:11-14

שָׁמֹר אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר
צִוָּה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד, וְעָשִׂיתָ
כָּל-מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ. וַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ: לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כָל-מְלֶאכֶת אֹתָהּ וּבִנְיָהּ
וּבְהֵמָהּ וְעֶבֶדְךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וְשׂוֹרְךָ וְחֲמֹרְךָ וְכָל-
בְּהֵמָתְךָ, וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יָנוּחַ
עֶבֶדְךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ כָּמוֹךָ. וַזְכֹּרְתָּ כִּי עֶבֶד הָיִיתָ
בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם, וַיִּצְאָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִשָּׁם,
בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְרֹעַ נְטוּיָה; עַל-כֵּן צִוָּה ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ, לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת.
דְּבָרִים ה:יא-יד

1. What are we supposed to remember in this mitzvah of Shabbat? How are we supposed to remember it?
2. In this mitzvah, it seems that remembering happens because we keep Shabbat. How is remembering different when it happens because of something we do (rather than because we are trying to remember)?
3. How are the last two verses here different from the last two verses in the previous source? Be specific!

Questions to consider after reading all sources:

1. The Torah told you to make sure that the people who work for you get to rest also. How does this change your experience of resting?
2. Letting your slaves rest on Shabbat reminds you of Yetziat Mitzrayim. Is there a similar reminder for creation?
3. What can you do on your Shabbat to make it more of a reminder of creation and Yetziat Mitzrayim for you personally? Will you do the same thing to remember the two different events? Why or why not?

A Lifelong Learner

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Pirkei Avot is often learned between Pesach and Shavuot. The steps from slavery to acceptance of the Torah requires personal reflection and growth, which is the basis of the *Pirkei Avot* text.

Every Mishna is infused with wisdom and insight into personal growth and self-actualization. Some are better known than others. However, all of the messages are crucial to teach our children, since they hold the secrets to happiness, meaning and growth.

It is for that reason that I have chosen to focus on a detail of a well-known Mishna to teach children of various ages. My hope is that through this exercise, children of various ages and intellectual and maturity levels will be engaged in learning.

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as the verse suggests: "From all my teachers have I acquired wisdom."

Pirkei Avot 4:1

בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם, הלומד
מכל אדם, שנאמר: מכל מלמדי
השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי.
פרקי אבות ד:א

For younger children:

Who is wise? One who learns from every person.

What does it really mean for a person to be smart?

Do they get high scores on tests or know tons of facts by heart?

Or maybe it is more than that—perhaps you will need to see

That every person is unique and is a model for you and me

So let's start a game together, a story I will provide

And you will tell me the message hidden deep inside

What can you learn from these people? What is it you can see?
Because remember every person can be your teacher if you let them be.

Scenario:

Shira loves ice cream! Shira couldn't believe she already had enough stickers on her job chart to get some delicious ice cream. On her way to the ice cream store with her big brother, Moshe, they passed a man who lived on their block named Mr. Friedman. Mr. Friedman told Shira and Moshe that he bought flowers for his garden that morning and accidentally left them somewhere. He could not find them. After Shira and Moshe helped Mr. Friedman, and they still could not find the flowers, Mr. Friedman smiled and said, "Baruch Hashem, it's just flowers. It is not a big deal!" Finally, Shira was on her way again with her brother to the ice cream store. She could not decide if she would get vanilla or chocolate... or both! Finally after buying her chocolate ice cream with sprinkles, she and Moshe walked to the closest bench outside to enjoy their delicious ice cream. While they were walking, suddenly Shira tripped and some of her ice cream fell all over the floor! As she was about to cry, she took a deep breath and said, "Baruch Hashem it's only ice cream. It's not a big deal!" and Shira and Moshe laughed as they headed home.

Questions to consider:

1. Why wasn't Shira upset anymore about her ice cream that fell on the floor?
2. Where did Shira learn to react in a positive way?
3. Was there ever a time you learned something from someone else?

Questions for older children:

1. Why do you think the verse quoted in the Mishna says, "I have learned from all of my teachers," when the Mishna stresses learning from every person? What message might the verse be teaching about our perception of those around us?
2. If we are supposed to learn from every person, what about the people in the world who are not so nice? Are we supposed to learn how to behave from them? Explain.

Even though studying and high test scores make a person look bright
It is really learning from other people what is wrong and what is right
A *chacham* knows that from every person he can learn
Imagine if you learn from everyone how much wisdom you will earn!

Sources for Pre-teens and Teens:

Rebbi said, I have learned a lot of Torah from my teachers. I learned even more from my friends. I learned the most from my students.

Makkot 10a

Which is greater, talmud (learning/studying) or ma'ase (action)? Rabbi Akiva answered and said, "learning is greater." They all responded, learning is greater because learning leads [a person] to action.

Kiddushin 40b

אמר רבי הרבה תורה למדתי
מרבתי ומחבירי יותר מהם
ומתלמידי יותר מכולן.
מכות י.

תלמוד גדול או מעשה גדול..נענה
רבי עקיבא ואמר תלמוד גדול נעננו
כולם ואמרו תלמוד גדול שהתלמוד
מביא לידי מעשה.
קדושין מ:

Questions to consider:

1. In what way could a teacher learn more from his students than from peers or even teachers?
2. Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm in an essay titled “Knowing vs. Learning: Which takes precedence,” (in *Wisdom From All My Teachers* pg. 18) writes, “If knowledge is a state of being, studying is an act of becoming.” Explain Rabbi Lamm’s quote. In what way is it consistent with Rabbi Akiva’s view of learning?
3. By working to become a *chacham*, how might he simultaneously be working to attain another quality listed in the same Mishna: “Who is honorable? One who honors his fellow men”?
4. If *Pirkei Avot* is a book about attaining morals and self-actualization, what *middah* is a person really working on when striving to be a *chacham*?

Conclusion:

Learning on the night of Shavuot is not merely a rectification of the past; it symbolizes our eagerness for constant growth. Jews are not complacent with that which they already know but are looking to what still needs to be learned. The learning is not limited to the walls of the beit midrash. Every encounter with another person is an opportunity to learn from their knowledge and personality, and can most certainly be a learning experience about yourself.