

Introduction

The chag of Shavuot is most closely associated with its identity as *zman matan Toraseinu* — a day commemorating the giving of the Torah. Its ritual expression is limited, since there are no formal objects of sanctity or commandments to engage in particular acts of religious observance. The primary mitzvah we engage in over the course of the holiday is *talmud Torah* (Torah learning). This is distinct from every other holiday throughout the Jewish calendar, which requires us to endow a particular object or act with a unique moment of sanctity in recognizing the particular message of that chag. A lulav and esrog are not objects we use for performance of mitzvos the rest of the year, nor do we fulfill a mitzvah by eating matzah, or blowing the shofar. Yet Shavuot embraces a mitzvah that is consistent throughout the year. The mitzvah most associated with Shavuot is essentially at the center of our religious life — the study of Torah. How does our *talmud Torah* experience on this holiday become an experience that is unique to Shavuot? Are we not simply engaged in a religious act that is required of us each and every day of the year?

The *kerias HaTorah* (Torah reading) of Shavuot appropriately features the reading of *matan Torah*, and included within this reading are the *Aseres HaDibros*. There are two potential formats for the cantillation of the *Aseres HaDibros*. One, the *taam tachton* (the lower cantillation), divides the verses based on the



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traditional Masoretic structure of the verses. The other, *taam elyon* (the upper cantillation), divides the verses without regard to their traditional structure, and instead organizes them with the goal of distinguishing each of the commandments. There is an extensive halachic discussion regarding which of these two cantillation methods should be employed when chanting the *Aseres HaDibros*. The *Magen Avraham* (494) quotes the *Masas Binyamin*, who distinguishes between the reading on Shavuot and the reading on an ordinary Shabbos. The *Masas Binyanim* argues that when reading *Parshas Yisro* and *Va'eschanan* during the regular cycle of the year, we should utilize the *taam tachton*, and when reading the *Aseres HaDibros* on Shavuot, we should employ the *taam elyon*.

Why should we make such a distinction? Surely we should be consistent and select one tradition as the authentic approach in reading this section of the Torah, regardless of the reason why we read it. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik explained that the nature of our obligation to read the Torah on Shavuot is different from the obligation to read the Torah on an ordinary Shabbos. Throughout the year, the purpose of reading the Torah each Shabbos is to ensure consistency

in our overall commitment to *talmud Torah*. Fundamentally, the liturgical experience is really intended to be one of study. Therefore, the cantillation used corresponds to the breakdown of verses. This is the most authentic way to engage in Torah study. The reading of the Torah on Shavuot has an entirely different purpose. The *Rokeach* no. 296 writes based on a midrash:

אמר הקב"ה ל"ישראל בני הווי קורין את הפרשה הזאת בכל שנה ושנה ואני מעלה עליכם כאלו אתם לומדים לפני הר סיני ומקבלים את התורה.

The Holy One Blessed Be He said to the Jewish people: Read this section (the Aseres HaDibros) each year and I will treat it as if you are studying it at Har Sinai and accepting the Torah.

The reading of the Torah on Shavuot is not simply an act of Torah study. Rather, it is intended to recreate the experience of Sinai itself. As a result, we follow the *taam elyon*, which echoes G-d's presentation of the *Aseres HaDibros*, rather than the technical manner in which they were recorded.

This is truly what Shavuot is about. It isn't only about the study of Torah. It is about the experience of Torah. We are not only focused on the substance and content of Torah — we embrace the opportunity to connect to the

larger transformative impact that Torah makes on our lives. We stay up learning all night, which is certainly not a productive tactic in the pursuit of Torah study, but the experience gives expression to an inner passion and love for Torah. That is what Shavuot is all about.

We live in a generation that enjoys greater access to the substance of Torah than any other in Jewish history. And yet for so many, our youth in particular, the passion and emotion of Torah seems out of reach. Shavuot is an opportunity for us to reconnect to more than data, but to the larger experience of *talmud Torah*, to the intergenerational conversations

that take place across our texts and traditions, and to the voice of G-d that calls out from each and every word that we study.

Our religious lives are animated by a *taam tachton* and a *taam elyon*. There are the day-to-day structured experiences of religious life, and there are the clarion calls for inspiration and revolution in how we relate to ourselves and the world. This issue of *Torah to Go* is dedicated to expressing our *hakaras hatov* (gratitude) to President Richard Joel for his 14 years of leadership at Yeshiva University. President Joel has made countless contributions to the *taam tachton* at YU. There are so many personalities,

programs, buildings, and centers that have been dreamt, built, and grown over the course of his tenure. Yet his contribution and imprint extends beyond the structures and programs of YU. There is the *taam elyon* that President Joel challenged our community to engage in. A larger purpose to our Yeshiva in being a source of not just Torah and education, but nobility and leadership. He instilled within our students and his colleagues a sense of mission that extends beyond the day-to-day, and reaches for higher purpose in all that we do.



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