



# PERSPECTIVES ON SHAVUOT

## Veten Chelkenu Betoratecha – Give Us Our Share in Your Torah

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### A Tale of Two Days

On all our holidays, the second day of Yom Tov is an “artificial” holiday, observed solely by Diaspora Jewry, to maintain our ancient tradition from times when it was unclear what the actual day of the holiday was.

In a sense, however, the second day of Shavuot is the “real” holiday, because while there is a debate in the Talmud regarding the actual date on which

the Torah was given, the accepted view is that the Torah was given on the seventh day of Sivan, the second day of Shavuot. This anomaly was famously pointed out in the 17th century by R. Avraham Gombiner in his commentary to *Shulchan Aruch, Magen Avraham*. He wonders why we refer to Shavuot as *zman mattan Toratenu* if the Torah was actually given the day after Shavuot (i.e., the second day of Shavuot).

In fact, according to the Talmud, it had originally been G-d’s intention to give the Torah on the 6th of Sivan. Moshe, however, for certain technical reasons, made an “executive decision” to postpone the event for one day. As the Gemara in *Shabbat* 87a puts it, “*Hosif Moshe yom echad midato,*” Moshe added one day on his own.

We therefore are commemorating *mattan Torah* on the anniversary of the

intended day rather than the actual day. Why?

We refer to Shavuot as *zman mattan Toratenu*, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, rather than *zman kabbalat Toratenu*, the anniversary of our receiving the Torah. Had the Torah indeed been given on the 6th of Sivan, it would have indeed been purely a “given” Torah, one that brooked no human input. However, there was human input — Moshe arranged for it to be given a day later. This was no longer *mattan Torah*, but rather *kabbalat Hatorah!*

From the very beginning, essential to the giving of the Torah, there have been those human beings who actively receive the Torah, who derive insights from the Torah, and who can apply the principles of the Torah to our world. Moshe Rabenu began that process even before the Torah was

given, and it has continued until this very day. Indeed, *Moshe kibel Torah miSinai*, Moshe received the Torah; he was not merely a passive recipient but an active part of the process, as are the Sages in every generation.

## Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgement

The first Mishna in *Massechet Rosh Hashanah* tells us that on Shavuot the world is judged regarding the output of trees, “*Baatzeret al perot ha’ilan.*”

This appears to be connected to the agricultural aspect of Shavuot, referring to its Biblical name of *Yom Habikurim*, the “Holiday of the First Fruit.” Is there any connection between fruit trees and the fact that it is *zman mattan Toratenu*?

*Sfat Emet* wonders why our Sages in *Pirkei Avot* (2:12) exhort us to “expend effort in the study of Torah for it is not an inheritance.” After all, the Torah does describe itself as being the inheritance of the Jewish nation — *Torah tziva lanu Moshe morasha kehillat Yaakov.*

*Sfat Emet* explains that both are true. Torah is compared to a tree — a tree of life. A tree has a trunk and branches. The trunk was given to us at Sinai and was inherited by subsequent generations. Thus, we speak of *mattan Torah.*

But each and every Jew has his or her own branch. We and only we can develop that branch and make it bear fruit. This is not an inheritance — this needs to be cultivated by us.

This interpretation gives us new insight into the meaning of the fruit of the trees being judged on Shavuot. The simple meaning of course refers to the actual output of the trees —

e.g., the number of almonds that will grow in California. [Did you know that California produces over 90% of the world’s almonds? And that they import truckloads of bees every season to pollinate the trees?]

But the deeper meaning is that we are judged on our own branch. Did we develop our own individual branches to their greatest potential? Did we produce all the fruit that we are capable of producing? And how much do we intend to produce for the coming year?

Every single one of us can contribute to Torah learning and Torah output in the world. We all have our own branch, our own share of Torah.

## Celebrating Our Accomplishments

The Gemara in *Pesachim* 88b tells us that R. Yosef, the celebrated *amora* and *rosh yeshiva*, took special care to have an elaborate feast on Shavuot, remarking that “if not for the Torah, I would be no different than all the other Yosefs in the world.”

Some commentators struggle to understand R. Yosef’s statement, for it is highly unlikely to imagine that he was bragging about how great he was, or about how much honor he received.

R. Yosef was teaching a very important lesson. We must not only celebrate the giving and receiving of the Torah on Shavuot, we must also celebrate our own individual accomplishments in the study and observance of the Torah. Not only should we celebrate *mattan Torah* in general, we should also be proud of our individual accomplishments — much as we celebrate a *siyum.*

R. Yosef was not boasting at all. He was thanking G-d for giving us a Torah that we can all study and use to achieve personal greatness. Everyone achieves something unique, all because of *mattan Torah.*

## Celebrating Our Divine Connection

### Rabbi Reven Brand

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Shavuot is a time of commandments and of celebration.

Our tefillah emphasizes the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, and we reenact Hashem’s presentation of the Aseret Hadibrot during the Torah reading. Over centuries, many communities recited liturgical poems known as *azharot*, which summarize all 613 commandments.

Shavuot is also a time for celebratory feasting. While on other chagim, opinions differ regarding how elaborate our meals must be, with respect to Shavuot, all opinions agree that we must enjoy festive meals. The Gemara (*Pesachim* 68b) provides the rationale: Shavuot is the day of the giving of the Torah.

Still we may wonder, why does the giving of the commandments generate such a celebration? We know that our Avot already fulfilled all the mitzvot (*Yoma* 28b) even before the Torah was formally given, so what dimension is added at Har Sinai?

The answer is that through our experience at Har Sinai we entered a new category of being formally commanded — *metzaveh v’oseh*

(literally, commanded and performs). The Talmud (*Kiddushin* 31a) relates a story that conveys this sentiment:

אמר רב יוסף מריש ה"א מאן דהוה אמר לי הלכה כר"י דאמר סומא פטור מן המצות עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן דהא לא מיפקידנא והא עבידנא השתא דשמעיתא להא דא"ר חנינא גדול מצווה ועושה יותר ממי שאינו מצווה ועושה אדרבה מאן דאמר לי דאין הלכה כרבי יהודה עבידנא יומא טבא לרבנן  
*Rav Yosef, who was blind, said: At first I would say: If someone would tell me that the Halacha is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, who says, A blind person is exempt from fulfilling the mitzvot, I would make a festive day for the rabbis, as I am not commanded and yet I perform the mitzvot. This means my reward is very great. Now that I have heard that which Rabbi Hanina says, Greater is one who is commanded to do a mitzva and performs it than one who is not commanded to do a mitzva and performs it, on the contrary: If someone would tell me that the Halacha is not in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, and a blind person is obligated in mitzvot, I would make a festive day for the rabbis.*

Being commanded is what Rav Yosef celebrated personally and what we celebrate collectively on Shavuot, *zman matan Torateinu*.

And still, we may wonder, why is this a source of such celebration? What is the significance of being formally commanded? Rishonim offer various answers to this question.

Tosafot (*Avoda Zara* 3b) suggests that the reason for the lofty status of the *metzuveh v'oseh* is that this individual overcomes their inner instinct to resist instruction (our Yetzer Hara), not a challenge for us when we decide to do a mitzvah voluntarily.

Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona (*Derashot*

*HaRan, Drush* 7) adds further explanation. He notes that Hashem receives no benefit from the mitzvot we perform; the mitzvot are entirely given for our merit. Therefore, he reasons that only when we personally fulfill what Hashem commanded are we receiving what Hashem has offered as a merit. Those who volunteer to do something for Hashem has not given Him anything nor received what He has chosen to give.

We can understand this on a deeper level in light of a comment of the Rosh (Tosafot Rosh, *Kiddushin* 31a), who adds:

ועוד שאין הקדוש ברוך הוא צריך כלום לכל המצוות אלא שאומר ונעשה רצונו הילכך המצווה ועושה הוא עושה רצון קונו אבל מי שאינו מצווה ועושה לא שייך לומר ביה עושה רצון קונו שהרי לא צוה לו כלום ומ"מ שכתב י"ש.

*And further, that Hakadosh Baruch Hu needs nothing from all the mitzvot, rather that He says and His will is done. Therefore, the one who is commanded and does is doing the will of his Maker. However, the one who isn't commanded and does, it cannot be said of him that he is doing the will of his Creator since He didn't command him anything; yet, he receives merit.*

The Rosh is teaching that, with the introduction of formal obligations, Hashem is gifting us a new dimension of mitzvot — the aspect of connecting with Hashem's will. This is the most profound gift of all. Our connection with Hashem is a relationship; connecting with each other on a deep level of meaning is far more valuable than simply providing a service.

By sharing His will with us, Hashem is giving each of us — every Jew for eternity, whose soul stood at Sinai — an opportunity to connect with Him on an inner level. Now, the actions

we do to further our relationship with Hashem are connected on the level of *ratzon* — Divine will.

The word mitzvah shares a root with the word *tzavta*, which means team. By creating an expression of His will through a mitzvah, Hashem has given us an opportunity to team up with Him (*k'viyachol*). This is why, before we perform a mitzvah, we emphasize the fact that He commanded us by including the word *v'tzivanu* in the syntax of every bracha on a mitzvah.

Each commandment is thus an expectation and an invitation — an opportunity for us to connect with Hashem's will and to literally tap into infinity in our physical world. Could we imagine a greater gift than being invited by the Creator of the universe to be His partner? This is truly a reason to celebrate.\*

\* Thank you to *Avi Mori*, Mr. Etzion Brand; my dear friend, Rabbi Elie Mischel; and my teacher, Professor Leslie Newman for their helpful comments.

## What I Learned from Desk Plants and Shavuot Shul Decorations

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Last year, the American Society for Horticultural Science published an interesting study.<sup>1</sup> Many employers world-wide are interested in reducing the stress of their employees and creating healthier, more productive workers. This particular study tested the impact of having a small indoor plant on a worker's desk. First,

researchers measured the stress levels of 63 office workers when feeling worn out at work. Later, they gave employees a plant for their desk and told them to take three-minute “nature breaks” when feeling fatigued, and then measured their stress levels afterward. What they found was that workers had a significant decrease in stress levels after looking at their plant! In their conclusions, Dr. Masahiro Toyoda, lead author of the study and professor at the University of Hyogo, postulated that this result is based on Attention Restoration Theory — that people can concentrate better after spending time in, or looking at, nature — and a desk plant offers that opportunity. Toyoda said, “This state is similar to that of mindfulness, which pays attention to the present moment. To get good effects of stress reduction brought by a small plant, let’s enjoy the time of three-minute gazing at the plant without thinking or words.”<sup>2</sup>

The holiday of Shavuot is filled with its own unique minhagim. We eat dairy food products, stay up all night learning Torah, and decorate the shul with plants, flowers and other foliage. While the Rama (OC 494:3) describes this last custom as “spreading grass on the floor,” others mention the spreading or giving out of roses,<sup>3</sup> and the *Magen Avraham*, 494:5, introduces the custom of decorating the shul with trees.<sup>4</sup>

What is the significance or purpose of this minhag? Some attribute it to increasing the simchat yom tov through the fragrant scent and beautiful flowers.<sup>5</sup> Others point to Shavuot as a time when we are judged regarding our fruits,<sup>6</sup> and decorations of trees remind us to daven on their behalf. Most well-known, though,

is the reason you may have learned as a child: to recreate the Har Sinai experience when the mountain, or base of the mountain, was covered in greenery (*Levush* 494:1).<sup>7</sup> But why do these all specifically require foliage or flowers? If we wanted a pleasant smell, we could spray Febreze. If we are davening about our fruit, we could have a basket of fruit at the front of shul. And we already recreate the Har Sinai experience through the reading of the *Aseret HaDibrot*.<sup>8</sup> So why such stress on grass, plants and trees?

In Parshat Chayei Sara,<sup>9</sup> Yitzchak goes out “*lasuach basadeh*.” The commentators differ in understanding exactly what it was that Yitzchak did in the field, ranging from praying,<sup>10</sup> planting a tree,<sup>11</sup> or going for an evening stroll amongst the bushes.<sup>12</sup> The Malbim appears to follow the first explanation, that Yitzchak went to daven, but then clarifies that it was not just prayer, but “*speech thoughts that shoot out from one’s imagination while thinking*”; more of a meditation.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Yitzchak specifically went out to the field because seeing the greenery of nature, be it a desk plant or grass and trees in the fields, helps us be more mindful of Hashem through His creations.

Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov stressed the importance of doing *hitbodedut* (solitary meditation), especially impactful in nature. His talmid, Rebbe Natan, recorded a prayer of Rebbe Nachman’s that expresses the effect of prayer amongst greenery outdoors.

“...*Master of the Universe, grant me the ability to be alone; may it be my custom to go outdoors each day among the trees and grass — among all growing things and there may I be alone, and enter into hitbodedut prayer, to talk with the One to whom I belong. May I express there*

*everything in my heart, and may all the foliage of the field — all grasses, trees, and plants — awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source...*”<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps this can also explain the minhag of decorating the shul on Shavuot. Not only does it bring simchat yom tov, recreate the Sinai experience, and remind us to daven for our fruits. Also inherent within the greenery is the ability to induce a state of mindfulness, allowing for subconscious recognition that all of our joys or supplication are owed to a Higher Being. Once a year, on Shavuot, we reexperience that sublime and supreme mindfulness of Hashem as Creator, responsible for the majesty of nature and all that is good in our lives, spurred on by surrounding ourselves with plants of nature.

However, the truth is that we have daily opportunities for mindfulness. The Gemara<sup>15</sup> tells us how the *chasidim rishonim*, the pious Jews, prepared for an hour before davening to achieve proper *kavanah*. The Rambam,<sup>16</sup> who seemingly foresaw our future smartphone generation with short attention spans, notes that even a brief amount of thoughtfulness time before prayer is enough. The whole point of this requirement is to clear our minds so we can be mindful and focus on Hashem, and not go through all the words of davening without even stopping to think — “what am I even saying?!”

The other way to achieve mindfulness during prayer is by having quiet around us, removing the distractions, limiting the talking in shul (or if you

might find yourself in quarantine, in your home *makom tefillah*). I remember growing up in Cincinnati, it was so silent in shul during davening I could hear a pin drop, and that was when the shul was full of several hundred people Shabbat morning! Only years later did I retroactively appreciate that quiet as a conducive medium for *kavanah*, after spending time in numerous other shuls whose decorum was not yet at that level of silence. That is mindfulness, recognizing that in shul and during *tefillah*, we are not just rushing through another item on our itinerary, but rather recalibrating our minds for the day's challenges through connecting to Hashem.

Let me end with a personal anecdote:

*A few years ago, I installed a camera over our front door (Israel's version of the Ring doorbell camera). All my kids knew it was connected to an app on my phone that sent me a message when it sensed motion; they would therefore look up at the camera, wave and say "Hi Abba!" when coming into the house. Very cute. Shortly after installing it, I was traveling to the U.S. for work and received a message from the camera. Once again, even from 6,000 miles away, the kids were looking up at the camera and sending me greetings — "Hi Abba!" — knowing I would get it.*

*Fast forward half a year later, and my kids mostly forgot about the camera, sometimes saying "Hi" but mostly not. One day, I happened to be at a meeting in Yerushalayim, which is unusual because I mostly work from home. As I got back to the car after my meeting, I saw alerts from the camera. I watched the video and I saw each of the four older kids come up toward the front door, totally focused on getting into the house, or yelling that their sibling was bothering*

*them. Nobody was saying hello to me anymore. I was about to shut it off, but then I saw, in the last few seconds, our then 2-year-old Simcha. He went toward the door and at the last second looked up, said "Hello Abba!" and went inside.*

*Shiviti Hashem linegdi tamid* — Hashem is constantly before me. The greenery on Shavuot helps us to proactively be mindful of Hashem. The *chasidim rishonim*, those pious men in the Gemara, were mindful every day, clearing their minds and connecting with Hashem before *tefillah*. Even the Japanese workers were mindful periodically throughout the day when looking at their plant. *Shiviti Hashem linegdi tamid* — we have the ability and the command (as noted in the very first halacha of the Rama) to *constantly* be mindful of Hashem in our lives, every single day, every single hour, every single moment. All the other kids were distracted, they weren't focused on what was around them, weren't living in that moment of entering the house. But my son Simcha reminded me to be mindful — *Shiviti Hashem linegdi tamid* — that our Father in Heaven is always there with us and watching over us.

As the vaccine allows (*b'ezrat Hashem*) more and more of us to return safely to our shuls, let us stop and smell (or in this case look at) the figurative roses. Let us be mindful of why we are there and who we are talking to (hopefully Hashem, and not our shul neighbor catching up on last night's sports game — that's what the kiddush is for!), and how invigorating the silence is in allowing us to focus on our *tefillot*. And this Shavuot, let the plant and flower decorations in our shuls not only enhance our *simchat chag*, recreate *kabbalat*

*haTorah* and spur *tefillot* for our fruits, but also remind us to be mindful that Hashem is there with us, celebrating Shavuot, celebrating our *tefillot* and celebrating our return to His home.

## Endnotes

1. "Potential of a Small Indoor Plant on the Desk for Reducing Office Workers' Stress" *HortTechnology*, Volume 30: Issue 1, Feb. 2020, p. 55-63 <https://journals.ashs.org/horttech/view/journals/horttech/30/1/article-p55.xml>
2. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/07/health/plants-reduce-stress-in-workplace-study-wellness/index.html>
3. The Maharil, *Hilchot Shavuot*, introduces this custom as "spreading spices of grass and roses on the floor of the Beit Kneset" while others (for example, the minhag of Vermaisa) describe it as also decorating above and the sides of the Aron in addition to distributing a rose to every person in shul. See Rabbi Gedalia Oberlander's article in *Ohr Yisrael*, volume 20 (5760) page 136-138.
4. In *Ma'asei Rav*, the Vilna Gaon is noted as nullifying this custom due to the prevalence of religious significance now associated with trees among non-Jews, and therefore potentially violating *chukat akum*. See *Ohr Yisrael* (ibid, p. 145-148) for further discussion of this.
5. Maharil, *Hilchot Shavuot*.
6. See *Rosh Hashana* 16a.
7. Rabbi Oberlander (ibid.) provides a collection of a number of additional novel explanations for this minhag.
8. See *Harrerei Kedem* (vol. 2, siman 117) where Rav Soloveitchik expands on this idea, highlighted by the need for reading the Aseret Hadibrot while standing, done with *ta'am elyon* and broken up by commandment as opposed to by *pasuk*, all as a recreation of the Sinai experience.
9. Bereshit 24:63.
10. See Rashi (ibid) and *Brachot* 26b, which learns from this *pasuk* that Yitzchak created the *tefillah* of Mincha.
11. Rashbam (Bereshit 24:63).
12. Radak (ibid.)

13. Malbim (ibid.) as translated by Professor Aaron Demsky. See Professor Demsky's post <https://www.thetorah.com/article/what-is-isaac-doing-in-the-field-when-he-encounters-rebecca>, where he notes the Malbim "unknowingly echoed the Classical Arabic *saha* 'to take a spiritual journey' that included meditation."

14. *Likutei Tefillot* 2:11. English translation is from [www.opensiddur.org](http://www.opensiddur.org).

15. *Brachot* 30b.

16. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah* 4:16.

## Ruth and Shoftim: Two Tales of One City

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Ruth, Naomi and Boaz lived in Beit Lechem during the centuries-long era between Yehoshua's death and Shaul's ascendancy as king.<sup>1</sup> Shemuel documented that period — including events that occurred in Beit Lechem — in the book of Shoftim. And yet, when Shemuel recorded the story of Ruth he chose not to include it with stories from the same time and place in Shoftim, but instead to create a separate book: Megillat Ruth.<sup>2</sup> Why did he assign this story its own space?<sup>3</sup>

Don Isaac Abarbanel<sup>4</sup> suggested two problematic answers. First, Shoftim tells a national story, and Ruth tells a private story. This is difficult, though; some of the stories recorded in Shoftim are personal, and Ruth's story establishes the lineage of the royal Davidic dynasty.

Second, Shoftim was concluded before Shemuel recorded the story of Ruth. But this only pushes the question further — why did Shemuel

fail to include Ruth's story in Shoftim before completing the book?

Reviewing three central messages of Megillat Ruth may help us understand why Shemuel isolated Ruth, Naomi and Boaz from their contemporaries, and to appreciate the value of this book.

### 1: Supporting King David

According to Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra,<sup>5</sup> the goal of Megillat Ruth is to record the lineage of King David. Indeed, it has been argued that Shemuel wrote Megillat Ruth in an attempt to protect King David from challenges to his Moabite heritage.<sup>6</sup> Lest people reject King David as a scion of inappropriate lineage, Megillat Ruth testifies to Ruth's legitimacy as Boaz's wife.

Taking the megillah's support of King David in a more positive direction, Dr. Yael Ziegler contends that the book legitimizes King David's monarchy by demonstrating that King David emerged from people of heroically selfless generosity. A king's self-interest can lead to corruption and abuse; Tanach is littered with examples. Hashem envisioned a monarch who would be truly selfless, and Megillat Ruth demonstrated that David's ancestors embodied this characteristic.<sup>7</sup>

### 2: Demonstrating Divine Reward

Rabbi Zeira taught, "This megillah does not contain impurity and purity, prohibition and permission, and it is written only to teach you the great reward for those who practice chesed."<sup>8</sup> There are halachic elements in the text, but Rabbi Zeira contended

that the focus of the book is to demonstrate the Divine benevolent response to people who benefit others.

Megillat Ruth also portrays Divine reward for emunah. Our two heroines, Naomi and Ruth, are presented not only as paragons of chesed, but also as paragons of emunah in Hashem. Naomi proclaims that her suffering is a product of Divine justice. When Naomi learns that Ruth's gleaning has led her to Boaz, Naomi blesses G-d "who has not abandoned His generosity to the living and the dead." Ruth demonstrates her emunah right at the start of the story, with the declaration of loyalty to G-d that has served as the model for conversion for millennia. Boaz and Ruth are rewarded for this chesed, and Naomi and Ruth are rewarded for emunah as well.

### 3: Teaching Loyalty

The story begins with Elimelech's wealthy family abandoning the Jews during a famine,<sup>9</sup> continues with Machlon and Kilyon choosing to marry Moabites rather than Jews,<sup>10</sup> and concludes with Ploni Almoni refusing to aid Ruth. The first two betrayals result in death; the name of the perpetrator of the third betrayal is entirely omitted, suggesting that his name has been cut off.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, the megillah describes a series of actions in which our heroes support those who rely on them. Hashem is loyal to "His nation" and ending the famine. Ruth is loyal to Naomi, remaining with her after Machlon's death, accompanying her back to Israel, and gleaning to support both of them. Boaz is loyal to Ruth and Naomi, supporting them

with grain, redeeming the name of Machlon and the family field, and marrying Ruth. Megillat Ruth offers a lesson in loyalty, as well as its rewards.

These three themes demonstrate why Ruth's story cannot be included in the book of Shoftim. Shoftim depicts a depressing spiral, a rudderless nation forgetting its roots and becoming increasingly, unrelievedly, barbarically Canaanite over the centuries. The events that involve Beit Lechem are the creation of an apparently idolatrous house of worship led by a Levi from Beit Lechem, and the rape and murder of a concubine from Beit Lechem by Jews. To quote Rabbi Yosef Gavriel Bechhofer, "No book in Tanach expresses failure like the book of Shoftim."<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Ruth's messages are aspirational. Here we find the selflessly generous roots of the Davidic dynasty in Beit Lechem. Here we learn about chesed and emunah, and their rewards. Here we see loyalty change lives, catalyze hope and enable blessing. Shoftim and Ruth may occur in the same period and place, but they depict dramatically different philosophical planets. The world of Shoftim is irredeemable; the world of Ruth is redemption itself.

As we read Megillat Ruth this year, may we absorb not only its specific messages, but also its broad promise that chesed, emunah in Hashem and loyalty to each other will bring about geulah.

## Endnotes

1. For a more precise date, see *Ruth Rabbah* 1, *Bava Batra* 91a, Malbim to Ruth 1:1, and Prof. Feivel Meltzer, *Daat Mikra* Ruth pp. 16.

2. *Bava Batra* 14b, credits Shemuel with the authorship of both books, as well as parts of the book of Shemuel.

3. We may also ask why Shoftim is in the Prophets, while Ruth is in the Writings, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

4. Introduction to the Book of Yehoshua.

5. Introduction to the Book of Ruth.

6. See Rabbi Yehoshua Bachrach, *Imah shel Malchut* pp. 11-12.

7. Dr. Yael Ziegler, *Madua Nichtivah Megillah Zu*. And see *Shemot Rabbah* 2:2-3 regarding the selection of Moshe and King David.

8. *Ruth Rabbah* 2:14, and see *Daat Mikra* Ruth pp. 4-11 for examples of how this theme emerges in the text.

9. See *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4, *Bava Batra* 91b.

10. Malachi 2:11 brands intermarriage as betrayal; indeed, the punishment predicted in Malachi 2:12 befalls Machlon and Kilyon.

11. See Rashi to Ruth 4:1.

12. *Bigdei Shesh*, Introduction to Shoftim.

## Rules That Set Us Free

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Recently, in a conversation with a friend in which we were lamenting the challenges of consistently eating healthfully, my friend shared the following observation: "I wish I related to unhealthy food the same way I relate to non-kosher food. With non-kosher food, it's not an option. There's no struggle for me. It's completely off limits and I don't even relate to it as a possibility."

This observation points to the role that structure plays in our lives. Though some may be able to superimpose structure where it doesn't organically exist, there is something about built-in structure that, for many, provides a sense of

containment and security. Ironically, clearly delineated systems can have a liberating effect on our life. Along these lines, our rabbis teach, "*Ein lecha ben chorin ela mi she'osek b'Torah*,"<sup>1</sup> roughly translated as, "the truly free person is one who engages in Torah." In a somewhat counterintuitive manner, living in accordance with the Torah's statutes can be liberating, giving us the opportunity for self-actualization and even self-transcendence through the systematic pursuit of meaningful goals.

I once heard a psychologist share an insightful analogy relating to this idea. Imagine there is a great party on a rooftop. Fine wine, excellent food, tasteful music, lively dancing. Under which circumstance will people enjoy themselves more: when there is a fence surrounding the perimeter of the roof or when there is no fence around the edge of the roof, leaving it totally open? Clearly, the presence of the fence enhances people's experience. Rather than having to constantly be worried that they are getting too close to the edge and might fall off, they can relax and enjoy themselves. Structure provides security, predictability, and safety. Ironically, the containment offered by the fence is very liberating, opening up a form of enjoyment and opportunity that wouldn't exist without this boundary.

In exploring the Jewish nation's choice to accept the Torah, Chazal<sup>2</sup> highlight a contradiction between the biblical and rabbinic account of the experience at Sinai. According to the text of the Torah, Hashem presented the Torah to the Jewish nation, who willingly and unequivocally accepted "*na'aseh v'nishma*."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the rabbinic account paints quite a

different portrait. In the midrashic texts,<sup>4</sup> a serious degree of coercion was involved — “*Kafah aleihem har k’gigit*” — Hashem raised the mountain over their heads and said that if they chose not to accept the Torah, there (i.e. under the mountain) will be their grave. How do we reconcile these two diverging accounts of the giving of the Torah?

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt”l<sup>5</sup> points to the word “*cherut*” to help explain this discrepancy. While the concept of freedom is referenced in the Torah, the Hebrew word commonly associated with freedom, “*cherut*,” is nowhere to be found in the biblical text. Rather, in the context of emancipating slaves, the term “*chofshi*”<sup>6</sup> is used. The word “*chofshi*,” explains Rabbi Sacks, relates to freedom from responsibilities and the flexibility to do what you want when you want. This form of privilege reflects freedom of the individual, but does not, on its own, constitute a liberated society. A liberated society is not characterized by an environment in which everyone does as he or she pleases. On the contrary, this would lead to pandemonium, disarray, and individualistic pursuits. In the Torah’s view of freedom, a liberated society is given structure through rules and boundaries, and through the vehicle of these boundaries, members of the society gain the freedom to engage, connect, and pursue lofty goals that elevate both the individual and the collective.<sup>7</sup>

Building on the value of the structure that the Torah provides, Rabbi Sacks takes this idea one step further. The pasuk in Shemot 32:16 states that the words of G-d were “*charut al haLuchot*”— engraved on the Luchot. There are two ways to make

an inscription. One is through ink inscribed on a material such as paper or parchment. The second is through etching an inscription into a material, such as stone. There is a critical difference between the two. In the former, a foreign body is superimposed on a different material, such as ink on paper. In contrast, when etching a message into stone, there is no foreign body. The inscription becomes one with the material. The rabbis expound on the verse “*charut al haLuchot*” and teach, “*al tikreh charut ela cherut*”<sup>8</sup> — don’t read “engraved,” rather “free...” True freedom is where there exists a deep oneness between the principles and the people.

The Torah isn’t a body of arbitrary rules that have been designed to keep us in line. Rather, it is a set of laws that is aligned with our deepest essence, that reflects our collective history as a nation, is a response to our experiences in Egypt, and is designed to help us bring out our best selves as individuals and as a nation. This set of laws is not external and foreign to our essence but is deeply bound with our deepest selves and our greatest innate potential.

Some *ba’alei mussar* suggest that Shavuot is a time to reflect on the positive impact that the Torah has on our lives. On a personal note, over time, I have come to appreciate not just the compelling rationale behind individual elements of the Torah’s ordinances, but also the form — the structured system of clear guidelines, which provide a sense of clarity, purpose, and containment. Giving charity is certainly a value that I cherish, but the concept of *ma’aser* (giving one tenth of our income to charity) helps me structure my good intentions. I believe in the virtue of

speaking positively about others, but absent the rules of *lashon hara*, I’m not convinced I would have the self-discipline to refrain from negative speech. I love the idea of family time embedded in a technology-free zone, but without the *halachot* of Shabbos and *yom tov*, I am highly skeptical that my family and I would have the strength to create this space. This Shavuot, I will be appreciative of the defined system of religious precepts and moral guidelines that the Torah gives me to help me grow into my best self.

## Endnotes

1. *Pirkei Avot*, 6:2. There are slight variations in the formulation of this statement. See *Masechet Kallah Rabati*, 5:3; *P’sikta Zutrata*, Ki Tisa, 32:16.
2. *Medrash Tanchuma*, Parshat Noach; Tosfot on *Shabbat* 88a.
3. *Shemot*, 24, 7.
4. *Shabbat* 88a.
5. See <https://rabbisacks.org/new-concept-freedom/>.
6. *Shemot*, 21,2.
7. For a related idea, see Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael*, perek 11.
8. *Pirkei Avot*, 6,2; *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer*, perek 46.