

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • YU Center for the Jewish Future

# THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER TORAH TO-GO®

Established by Rabbi Hyman z"l and Ann Arbesfeld

MAY 2021 • SHAVUOT 5781

## K'ish Echad B'Lev Echad: Coming Back Together as a Community



ישיבת רבנו יצחק אלהאן  
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary  
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# Table of Contents **Shavuot 5781**

## Introduction

**4** **Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman:** Sustaining Change

## The Importance of Being Part of the Jewish Community



**5** **Mrs. Penina Bernstein:** The Unity of Shavuot as the Culmination of the Sefirat Ha'Omer Period

**8** **Mrs. Bracha Rutner:** The Resilience and Grit in Accepting the Torah

**11** **Rabbi Gershon Albert:** Bringing our Communities Back To Life

**14** **Rabbi Binyamin Blau:** Connecting to Community Locally and Globally

**15** **Rabbi Efreim Goldberg:** Joining a Sacred Community

**16** **Rabbi Shalom Rosner:** Our Home Away from Home

**19** **Rabbi Kalman Topp:** Collective Revelation and Responsibility

## The Kedusha of the Synagogue



**27** **Rabbi Josh Flug:** Study Guide: How Far Should We Go to Pray with a Minyan?

**31** **Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz:** Outdoor Minyanim

## Perspectives on Shavuot



**36** **Rabbi Kenneth Auman:** Veten Chelkenu Betoratecha – Give Us Our Share in Your Torah

**37** **Rabbi Reven Brand:** Celebrating Our Divine Connection

**38** **Rabbi Naphtali Lavenda:** What I Learned from Desk Plants and Shavuot Shul Decorations

**41** **Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner:** Ruth and Shoftim: Two Tales of One City

**42** **Ilana Turetsky Ed.D:** Rules that Set Us Free



## SUSTAINING CHANGE

**W**hat happens when you leave the foxhole? Priorities and values are often most clear during times of risk. But as the risk lessens, what happens to our values? We turn to our values when we are under pressure, but what happens when the urgency dissipates?

There is a famous saying from Rav Yisroel Salanter: First I wanted to change the world, but that was too hard. So, I tried to change my country, and that was too hard as well. So, I tried to change my community, but I was unable. So, instead I decided to change myself.

When I studied in Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rav Yehuda Amital, had a clever sarcastic twist to this saying. He would say, “first I tried to change myself, but that was too hard—so instead I tried to change my community. But that proved too difficult. So, I decided to change the world.”

Ultimately, both directions are not only correct but mutually fortifying. The larger changes in the world in turn effect our own personal development and our own individual development is the building block for changing the world. But what matters most is not the ability to change but the ability to sustain change.

And this is the message of Shavuot. The giving of the Torah at Sinai was a moment where we all saw our essential values with clarity. We all changed at Sinai. But that was just the beginning of the story. Every year since, we symbolically return to Sinai on this holiday to recommit ourselves to those values.

We have all been through a great deal over the past year. And during this time, our priorities have become even more clear. We have searched for meaning, we have recalibrated how we spend our time and we have

reconnected deeply to those who we love. Please God, we are now seeing the beginning of a return to more normalcy in our daily lives. This new reality presents us with a new challenge and opportunity. During times of crisis, change emerges naturally due to the circumstances that surround us. But once the crisis passes, we need to work to sustain the change.

And this Shavuot is the time to reflect on how we integrate into our future what we have learned during this past year. The world changed this year, now it is our turn to think about how we change our society, our communities, and ourselves for the better — adding more joy and greater purpose to our lives and to all those around us.

Chag Sameach.



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman at <https://www.yutorah.org/Rabbi-Dr-Ari-Berman>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Mrs. Penina Bernstein

Campus Rebbetzin Yeshiva University, Beren Campus  
Tanach Teacher, SKA High School for Girls



# THE UNITY OF SHAVUOT AS THE CULMINATION OF THE SEFIRAT HA'OMER PERIOD

**T**he holiday of Shavuot is the pinnacle of the counting of the Omer. For 49 days, we count up, marking the process that Bnei Yisrael went through, from their exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*,<sup>1</sup> the counting of the Omer was how Hashem showed us that the primary reason for our freedom from Egypt was to receive the Torah, not only for freedom itself. By creating a sign and a process, we recognize that the two are uniquely connected. The Rambam asserts that the reason that

we count is in anticipation of what is to come,<sup>2</sup> similar to the way someone might wait for a guest to arrive.

While we observe this mitzvah on a yearly basis to remind ourselves of these messages, there are other laws and customs that have come to be associated with this time as well, namely customs of mourning. *Yevamot* 62b, tells the story of Rabbi Akiva's 12,000 pairs of students who perished due to the fact that they did not treat each other with respect, and the Gemara clarifies that this took place between Pesach and Shavuot. This

loss lead to the institution of certain customs, such as the custom of not getting married or cutting one's hair due to the observance of mourning.<sup>3</sup>

When reflecting on the confluence of these two periods on the Jewish calendar, we must question whether there is a deeper connection between these periods beyond the calendar dates. Perhaps a single pasuk at the beginning of the story of matan Torah can provide insight into this question.

The opening verses of Sefer Shemot, Perek 19, detail the arrival of Bnei

Yisrael at the location where they received the Torah. The pasuk states:

וַיֵּסְעוּ מִרְפַּיִדִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַר סִינִי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבָּר  
וַיַּחֲנוּ שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֶגֶד הָהָר.

*They journeyed from Rephidim, and they came to the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.*

Examining the multiple verbs in this pasuk, namely *vayisu* (they journeyed), *vayavo'u* (they came), *vayachanu* (they encamped), and *vayichan* (Israel camped), *vayichan* stands out as the only singular verb. Rashi states that the reason this verb is singular is to reflect Bnei Yisrael's communal attitude upon their arrival at Har Sinai. "*K'ish echad b'lev echad*"<sup>4</sup> — Bnei Yisrael were united as one person, with one heart. As opposed to the encampments in the desert when the nation was enmeshed in arguments,<sup>5</sup> this arrival was significant due to their collective unity at the time of this encampment. Rav Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, an early 17<sup>th</sup>-century commentator from Prague known for his commentary on the Torah *Kli Yakar*, explains that this unity is emphasized in contrast to Bnei Yisrael's journey from Rephidim. Rephidim was the location where Bnei Yisrael wanted water and threatened Moshe Rabbeinu that they would stone him if he did not share water. Moshe renames Rephidim to Masah Umerivah<sup>6</sup> due to the arguments that took place there. *Kli Yakar* explains that Rephidim has the same letters as the word *pereidim*, separation, and that the message of Bnei Yisrael leaving Rephidim was not only that they left the physical location, but that they left the attitude of separation and arrived at Sinai united as a community.

Professor Nechama Leibowitz<sup>7</sup> notes that the language used by Rashi in his

understanding of the verb *vayichan* is very similar to the comment made by Rashi in another place in the Torah where a nation is referred to with a singular verb. When the Egyptians are chasing Bnei Yisrael out of Mitzrayim, the pasuk<sup>8</sup> states *Umitzrayim nosei'a achareihem* — Egypt was chasing after them. Commenting on the use of singular language in the verse, Rashi explains that the reason it is written this way is because Mitzrayim was acting *b'lev echad k'ish echad* — with one heart like one person.

Rav Yitzchok Hutner<sup>9</sup> notes that while there is a similarity between these two phrases, they are fundamentally different. According to Rav Hutner, the flip of the words of "*ish*" and "*lev*" signifies a significant difference between Bnei Yisrael and Mitzrayim. The Jewish people are fundamentally connected at their core, as part of the larger unit symbolized by the word *ish*. Even at times when they disagree with each other, there is a uniting thread that connects them. Mitzrayim, on the other hand, was only connected at the time of the Exodus from Egypt due to a common goal and pursuit, signified by the word *lev*. Through this common goal, they united to become one in their efforts to pursue Bnei Yisrael. At Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael were at their highest point of connection, where not only were they connected as a unit, their mindsets and goals were also unified in the common desire to accept the Torah.

What led to this feeling of unity at Har Sinai? *Kli Yakar* explains that when Bnei Yisrael arrived at Har Sinai, they realized that the mountain was the lowest of all of the mountains in the area, and it taught them that *anavah*, humility, is a prerequisite for *kabbalat HaTorah*. Humility allows us to make

space for others, since we do not view ourselves as the primary focus. It was only once they were standing next to the mountain, absorbing its message, did they become one heart — united and respectful of others.

Rav Simcha Bunim Kalish explains that the word *vayichan* does not only mean encamp, but rather comes from the root word "*chen*," meaning grace or favor. Bnei Yisrael found favor in the eyes of each other, and this is what merited them to receive the Torah.

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**It was only once they were standing next to the mountain, absorbing its message, did they become one heart — united and respectful of others.**

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*Midrash Tanchuma Yashan* tells a story that Hashem wanted to give the Torah to Bnei Yisrael immediately after they left Mitzrayim, but they were arguing with each other, saying "*Let us return to Mitzrayim.*" The Midrash explains that Hashem delayed giving the Torah until Bnei Yisrael were united, as "*deracheha darchei noam v'chol netivoteha shalom*" — "*her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.*"<sup>10</sup>

Looking at these sources together we might now understand the confluence of Sefirat Ha'Omer and the period of mourning for Rabbi Akiva's students. As we move from Pesach to Shavuot, we are meant to work on ourselves, to improve and to prepare for *kabbalat HaTorah*. Perhaps the story of Rabbi Akiva's students is meant to reinforce to us during this time how critical respect and peace are in the acceptance and learning of Torah. Perhaps it is meant to teach us about the danger of learning Torah without respect and love for each other.

The Ohr Hachaim, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar from Morocco, explains the description of Bnei Yisrael arriving at Har Sinai was meant to teach us about the three steps that were essential in preparation for receiving the Torah.<sup>11</sup> He explains that the third step was the step of unity, of the unifying of the hearts of Bnei Yisrael. Based on an understanding of a pasuk in Yirmiyahu (50:37), *cherev el habadim* — a sword on those alone, *Ohr HaChaim* explains that our learning of Torah should not be done alone or separate; coming together and growing from each other is necessary to receiving the Torah. This message is not limited to the generation in the desert, but rather is a goal for us, Bnei Yisrael, each and every year as we prepare for the holiday of the giving of the Torah.

The Abarbanel in his commentary on the mitzvah of *aliyah l'regel*,<sup>12</sup> visiting the Mikdash at the time of the *shalosh regalim* of Pesach, Shavuot

and Sukkot, explains that one of the reasons for the mitzvah was to create love and connection between Bnei Yisrael. As people came up to the Beit HaMikdash, they would share items with each other and this experience created peace between them. He explains that Yeravam did not permit people from Bnei Yisrael to go to the Mikdash on the holidays when he was trying to create division between Bnei Yisrael and Bnei Yehuda. This was due to the fact that Yeravam did not want to allow Bnei Yisrael the opportunity to create a connection and relationship with Bnei Yehuda, which he knew would happen when they visited together at the Mikdash. Perhaps *aliyah l'regel* is a critical component of Shavuot because it can potentially help Bnei Yisrael reach the mindset and the level of connection that is necessary for accepting the Torah.

In our generation, in which we are not yet *zoche* to be able to perform the mitzvah of *aliyah l'regel*, the experience of coming together in shul as a community is perhaps another avenue we can create a connection with each other. Our *batei knessiot* (shuls) are considered to be *mikdashai me'at*,<sup>13</sup> mini temples where we can connect with Hashem and each other. The experience of entering our shuls together, in advance and on the holiday of Shavuot, provides us with the incredible opportunity to experience in some way the feeling of *aliyah l'regel*, of developing our connections and love for each other.

As we learn from the students of Rabbi Akiva and the generation in the Midbar, peace and love for each other is fundamental to our engagement with Torah.

May we be *zoche* that as we continue to return to our shuls, our feelings of love for each other will grow and develop, and that through this, we will ultimately be *zoche* to experience the holiday of Shavuot at the Third Beit HaMikdash.

## Endnotes

1. Mitzvah 306.
2. *Moreh Nevuchim*, 3:43.
3. *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, 493.
4. Rashi on Shemot 19:2.
5. Rashi on Shemot 19:2 — “*aval she'ar kol hachaniyot b'ta'aromet uv'machloket*” — the rest of the encampments involved complaints and fighting.
6. Shemot 17:7.
7. Yitro 5715 — Bechirat Yisrael V'Kabbalat HaTorah.
8. Shemot 14:10.
9. Drashot on Pesach, Maamar 41.
10. Mishlei 3:17.
11. *Ohr HaChaim* on Exodus 19:2.
12. Commentary to Devarim 16:15.
13. *Megillah* 29b.



Find more shiurim and articles from Mrs. Penina Bernstein at <https://www.yutorah.org/Mrs-Penina-Bernstein>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

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## THE RESILIENCE AND GRIT IN ACCEPTING THE TORAH

In our era, we use the words “resilience” and “grit” to describe those who have persevered despite challenging circumstances, something that was especially true this past year. And if there is any nation that exemplifies these words, it’s Bnei Yisroel. From Avraham Avinu discovering Hashem, despite growing up in a house of idol worshippers, to Yaakov’s experience in Lavan’s house, we were born to deal with and persevere through challenging situations. But how have we as a nation managed to survive when so many other larger and more sophisticated nations have fallen by

the wayside of history? And more important, how have we as a people maintained our faith in God and commitment to Torah and mitzvot despite the incredibly challenging situations we have faced?

Our connection to Hashem and our ability to survive as a nation are intertwined. Initially, in the Midbar, we connected to Hashem in the most basic of ways, namely through Moshe Rabbeinu. We needed water, Moshe reached out to Hashem and asked Him for water. Every day, the manna came down to provide us with sustenance. We were in our adolescence, still developing as a

nation and while we made mistakes, rebelled, and at times defied God, Moshe was always there to bring us back to Him and to reconcile our relationship with Hashem. And after forty years in the Midbar, we reached a critical step in our relationship with God by entering the Land of Israel.

As we matured as a nation, we needed a different leader. Although we were a ragtag nation, we succeeded in defeating some of the strongest armies in the world, achieving our goal of *kivush haaretz*, conquering the land. While there were times that as a nation we made mistakes, we had a strong leader in Yehoshua, who

kept us unified and focused on our ultimate goal. We maintained a strong relationship with and commitment to Hashem.

But then, with Yehoshua's death, things changed. A new type of leader arose, the judge who reflected a new type of relationship we enjoyed with Hashem. When the people followed the shoftim, there was a spiritual awakening, a connection to Hashem, and Bnei Yisroel achieved military victories. However, Sefer Shoftim describes nearly 400 years of difficult history, with Bnei Yisroel turning away from Hashem's Torah, and falling prey to the cardinal sins of idolatry, murder, and sexual immorality. *Mida k'neged mida*, God often allowed Israel's enemies to oppress them, and Klal Yisroel suffered at the hands of Moabites, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites and Philistines. All too often throughout this period, though they were living in their own land, the children of Israel were not actually free people.

There was a need at the end of the shoftim period for new leadership to save the people. While we were surviving, our commitment to Hashem was flailing. With the ascent of Shaul and Dovid, a new leadership model arose, that of the monarchy. What did the monarchy do? It established separate and distinct roles of leaders — there were kings, prophets, kohanim, and army generals. There were challenges and Bnei Yisroel struggled first under the leadership of Shaul and then under the leadership of David. But when Shlomo was crowned king, Bnei Yisroel entered a golden era. David had recaptured the Aron, preparing the way for Shlomo to build the Beit Hamikdash. And as a nation we were at our pinnacle, with a strong sense

of avodas Hashem. We could connect to Hashem in the most intimate of fashions, in the place where His Shechina dwelled.

Once again, we see this symbiotic relationship between Bnei Yisroel's relationship with Hashem and the leadership of the generation. Our leadership once again had a tremendous influence on our connection to Hashem and commitment to Torah. Sefer Melachim Alef and Bet describe the constant cycle of corruption and sin and then repentance and salvation after Shlomo Hamelech dies. His sons fight over the kingdom and our nation splits into Malchut Yehuda and Malchut Yisroel, never to be unified again. There are periods during which both kingdoms show commitment to Hashem. But ultimately, both kingdoms fall prey to corruption. They are kicked out of Israel and the Beit Hamikdash is destroyed. This failure in leadership was all too reflective of Bnei Yisroel's own failures in their service to Hashem.

As a nation, we had fallen from the pinnacle to the nadir, with our nation torn in half. And how did we move forward? We continued as a mere shadow of our former selves, with the loss of the ten tribes. Yet, even with all these trials and tribulations, we persevered.

As we were sent into exile, we somehow persevered, enduring trials and tribulations as exemplified by the story of Haman and Achashverosh. We were a people lost, trying to reclaim our identity as a God-fearing and God-serving people. Yet, throughout all this, there was hope. We read in Yirmiyahu (Chapter 31 verse 16):

וַיִּשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרֵיתָךְ נְאֻם ה' וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים  
לְגִבּוֹלָם.

*And there is hope for your future —  
declares the Lord: Your children shall  
return to their country.*

Somehow, we maintained a connection to Hashem holding fast to our Jewish identity.

Eventually, a group returned to Israel with Ezra and Nechemia. The Beit Hamikdash was rebuilt and the Jewish nation reestablished its connection to Hashem and reclaimed its identity as God's people. With the Kohanim and Sanhedrin assuming an increased public role in Jewish life, there was a stronger commitment to Torah and mitzvot. Leadership was important, but it did not play the same vital role it did in previous times in history. We were committed to the Beit Hamikdash and the sacrifices and rituals. But we were not committed to each other. Judaism had splintered into different factions. And this ultimately severed our relationship with Hashem. Our precious Beit Hamikdash was destroyed, and we were once again exiled.

We were faced with a challenge — how would we regroup? How would we survive as a people and what would our connection be with Hashem? We would no longer have a king or a prophet who could communicate with Hashem on our behalf, nor would we have a central place for the dwelling of the Shechina where we could connect directly with Hashem. We needed to rebuild everything.

As a resilient people we found a way. We turned to a focus on scholarship and commitment to halacha. The relationship with Hashem would be less direct but it would still be strong, and we could unify as a

people around our communities and our commitment to Torah and Torah values. We began a period of “Rabbinic Judaism.” This was the time of the flourishing of the Talmud, the schools in Surah and Pumbeditah, between the 2nd and 6th centuries.

But our challenges as a people did not end there. We remained committed to Torah and to Hashem, but this commitment was constantly challenged throughout the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and pogroms in Europe. How did we maintain our faith? Strong community ties were built, and the Jews turned to prayer as a way to connect to Hashem. Most of the *slichot* and *kinnot* we say today originated in those eras. These lamentations were uttered by the great men of Israel, the few who survived.<sup>1</sup> There wasn’t one way of connecting to Hashem though, which allowed for flexibility and growth when faced with challenges. Some were committed to Hashem through their strong Jewish identity, others through Torah study, with others through prayer and others through communal service.

And then we experienced the most horrific episode in our history, the Holocaust. Once again, we were faced with the question: How do we recover? Our Torah centers were destroyed. The communities in Europe were in tatters. And many were left with questions of faith. This was the worst devastation of the modern era and some said we would never recover. Our faith and connection to Hashem seemed broken.<sup>2</sup> Yet, we once again found a way to reconnect to Hashem and recover as a nation — through the State of Israel<sup>3</sup> (for many) and through an unprecedented expansion of Jewish education<sup>4</sup>. We became a people steeped in

commitment to community and shul life in a different way than in the past. Today, Jewish life is physically situated near shuls, schools and kosher establishments, while many of us send our children to Jewish camps.<sup>5</sup>

This is the story of the Jewish people. We have faced numerous challenges — challenges to our commitment to Hashem and challenges to our very existence. Despite these challenges we have found ways to survive. And after each challenge, we have regrouped and reconnected to Hashem. In each period of history, our relationship and our connection to Hashem has looked different. We are a resilient people — we experience tragedy and yet we find a way each time to recover and reconnect to Hashem and remain committed to the Torah.

During the pandemic, we have seen the incredible ways in which we have, as a community, connected to Hashem — through *mikveh* practice, shuls and general communal support. Our community was led by Rav Hershel Schachter, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, through his *teshuvot*. Other rabbinic leaders, including Rav Asher Weiss, also answered many questions during this challenging time.<sup>6</sup> Our lives were disrupted and yet we persevered.

As we head toward Shavuot and the giving of the Torah, imagining life post-pandemic, it is our responsibility as a community to continue to find ways to connect to each other and to Hashem and the Torah. We need to re-engage our community. This can take shape in different ways. There may be people who felt very strongly about community support — for those people we need to empower them to get more involved. For those who were strongly committed to *minyan*,

we should help them get more engaged in shul life and find ways to make it more meaningful. For others, the Torah opportunities available because of COVID opened up a new world for them. We should continue to encourage and support this Torah learning. Our community has been battered and we have persevered, and now we can and must do it again.

## Endnotes

1. <https://yhb.org.il/S152/>.
2. Berkowitz, Eliezer, *Faith After the Holocaust*.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aftermath\\_of\\_the\\_Holocaust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aftermath_of_the_Holocaust).
4. <https://traditiononline.org/rupture-and-reconstruction/>.
5. [https://steinhardt.foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/contact\\_summer\\_2002.pdf](https://steinhardt.foundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/contact_summer_2002.pdf), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/summer-camps-as-super-glue-for-binding-jewish-identity-to-the-next-generation/>.
6. <https://forward.com/news/453573/jewish-law-for-the-coronavirus/>, and <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/speaking-with-rav-hershel-schachter/>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

## Congregational Rabbis Speak

Rabbi Gershon Albert  
Rabbi Binyamin Blau  
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# REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PART OF COMMUNITY

## Bringing our Communities Back To Life

### Rabbi Gershon Albert

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I vividly remember standing in our sanctuary on Friday afternoon, March 13, 2020, in shock and disbelief, less than an hour after sending an email canceling services. For 130 years, my predecessors and generations of congregants worked tirelessly to build and maintain Jewish

life in Oakland, California, and here we were, closing the doors to the building. I slowly walked to the light switches, turned off the chandeliers that hung from the A-frame structure, and looked back one last time before exiting the building. Feeling the weight of the words from Eicha (Lamentations 5:21) for the first time in my life, I davened:

*הַשִּׁבְנוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִשְׁוֹבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָה*  
*Bring us back to you, God, and we will come back; renew our days as of old!*  
More than a year later, that return has slowly begun. First with weekday minyanim, then Shabbat morning

services. The most challenging High Holy Days of my career were a chaotic success. We have celebrated *britot*, baby-namings, and bar mitzvahs and marked shivas — all outdoors, distanced, and masked. And finally, on March 14, 2021, a small group of us returned to the sanctuary for the first time to mark Rosh Chodesh Nissan davening, a month of renewal.

There have been many times in the last year when I found myself looking to Jewish leaders from two-thousand years ago to see how they navigated the crushing catastrophe of the

Churban Bayit Sheni (destruction of the Second Temple).

Dr. Bryna Yocheved Levi, in her article “Zecher LeMikdash — Zecher LeChurban,” points out that the rabbinic response to destruction took place in different stages. The initial experience was one of shock and sadness:

היה רבן יוחנן יושב ומצפה כנגד חומת ירושלים לדעת מה יעשה בה [כדרך שנאמר בעל, 'ועלי יושב על הכסא יד דרך מצפה']. כיון שראה רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שחרב ביהמ"ק ונשרף ההיכל עמד וקרע את בגדיו וחלץ את תפלו ויהי יושב ובוכה ותלמידיו עמו.

*Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was sitting and watching opposite the walls of Jerusalem, to know what would happen to it ... When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai saw that the Temple was destroyed and burned, he stood and tore his clothes and took off his Tefillin and sat and cried together with his students.*

**Avot D'Rabbi Natan, Nusach 2**

### Chapter 7

But after taking time to grieve, the first generation of Tannaim who survived destruction, led by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, busied themselves with creating new practices to ensure that Jewish life would continue to survive. These are the *gezeirot* (edicts) we call

*zecher LeMikdash* in memory of the Temple.

Most famous among these edicts is Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's decision that we should carry the lulav and etrog all seven days of Sukkot, even though the Torah only commands it to be held on the first day outside of the Temple (Mishnah, *Rosh Hashanah* 4:3). Unprecedented times required unbelievable religious creativity to ensure that our memories of the Beit Hamikdash, the center of Judaism, would not fade.

With fits and starts, our communities have followed in the ways of the first post-Churban generation. This past year has required unbelievable creativity and experimentation.

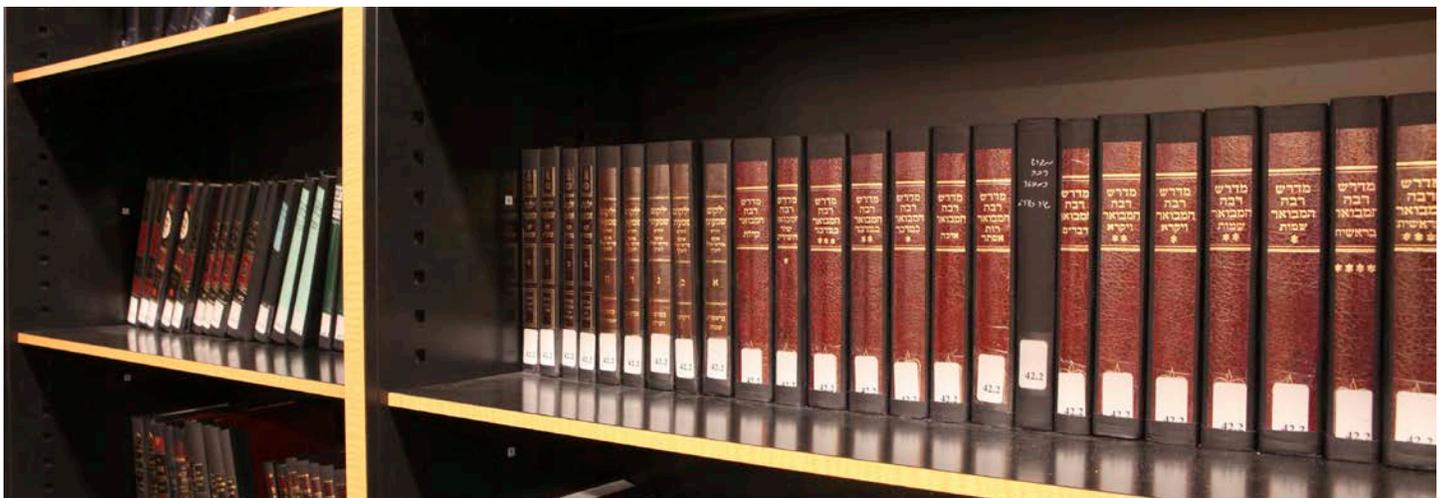
Within the bounds of halacha, we created virtual classes, tefilot, and social opportunities. We found ways to do chesed that were unimaginable before last Purim.

The second generation of Tannaim who led the community after the Churban faced a different set of challenges. Klal Yisrael's emotional scars did not disappear with the passage of time. We can understand this stage and its emotional drama in a story with Rabbi Yehoshua, the

leader of this second generation in the Talmud:

תנו רבנן כשחרב הבית בשניה רבו פרושין בישראל שלא לאכול בשר ושלא לשתות יין נטפל להן ר' יהושע אמר להן בני מפני מה אי אתם אוכלין בשר ואין אתם שותין יין אמרו לו נאכל בשר שממנו מקריבין על גבי מזבח ועכשיו בטל נשתה יין שמנסכין על גבי המזבח ועכשיו בטל אמר להם א"כ לחם לא נאכל שכבר בטלו מנחות אפשר בפירות פירות לא נאכל שכבר בטלו בכורים אפשר בפירות אחרים מים לא נשתה שכבר בטל ניסוך המים שתקו אמר להן בני בואו ואומר לכם שלא להתאבל כל עיקר אי אפשר שכבר נגזרה גזרה ולהתאבל יותר מדאי אי אפשר שאין גזרין גזירה על הצבור אא"כ רוב צבור יכולין לעמוד בה דכתיב (מלאכי ג, ט) במארה אתם נארים ואותי אתם קובעים הגוי כולו אלא כך אמרו חכמים סד אדם את ביתו בסיד ומשייר בו דבר מועט.

*The Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta, Sota 15:11): When the Temple was destroyed a second time, there was an increase in the number of ascetics among the Jews, whose practice was to not eat meat and to not drink wine. Rabbi Yehoshua joined them to discuss their practice. He said to them: My children, for what reason do you not eat meat and do you not drink wine? They said to him: Shall we eat meat, from which offerings are sacrificed upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist? Shall we drink*



wine, which is poured as a libation upon the altar, and now the altar has ceased to exist?

Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: If so, we will not eat bread either, since the meal-offerings that were offered upon the altar have ceased. They replied: You are correct. It is possible to subsist with produce. He said to them: We will not eat produce either, since the bringing of the first fruits have ceased. They replied: You are correct. We will no longer eat the produce of the seven species from which the first fruits were brought, as it is possible to subsist with other produce. He said to them: If so, we will not drink water, since the water libation has ceased. They were silent, as they realized that they could not survive without water.

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## Now is our moment to embody the faithful optimism of Rabbi Akiva, who declared, while looking at the ruins of the Bayit Sheni, that he had full *emunah* in the great rebuilding that was yet to come.

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Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: My children, come, and I will tell you how we should act. To not mourn at all is impossible, as the decree was already issued and the Temple has been

destroyed. But to mourn excessively as you are doing is also impossible, as the Sages do not issue a decree upon the public unless a majority of the public is able to abide by it, as it is written: “You are cursed with the curse, yet you rob Me, even this whole nation” (Malachi 3:9), indicating that the prophet rebukes the people for neglecting observances only if they were accepted by the whole nation. Rabbi Yehoshua continues: Rather, this is what the Sages said: A person may plaster his house with plaster, but he must leave over a small amount in it without plaster to remember the destruction of the Temple.

**Bava Batra 60b (translation from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud)**

Rabbi Yehoshua’s response to the ascetics of his day is often seen as a great display of Talmudic logic and *reductio ad absurdum*. But his response is also filled with deep validation and empathy for the pain of the community. He acknowledges their sadness, and their inability to move forward and live. This is the generation that codifies laws *zecher LeChurban*, acknowledging the losses and painful memories that deserve a place within our ritual lives.

During the first year of the pandemic, community leaders have worked unbelievably hard to recreate Jewish life in new ways. But some of our Zoom events are underattended. Our cautious minyanim have not always reached capacity. And while more and more members have been vaccinated, after a year of “doing Shabbos” differently and at home, not everyone is rushing back to abbreviated services that don’t (yet) include childcare or kiddush.

While religious leaders (myself included) might be frustrated with a sometimes lackluster response from our communities, we need to embody the empathy of Rabbi Yehoshua. And then we must slowly, kindly, pull our people back to life.

Now is our moment to embody the faithful optimism of the great Tanna Rabbi Akiva, who declared, while looking at the ruins of the Bayit Sheni, that he had full *emunah* in the great rebuilding that was yet to come. While as leaders, our emotional batteries are running close to empty, we need to find ways to replenish ourselves, and then bring this sense of optimism to our communities. We will rebuild and use the creative muscles we developed in the last year to build back with renewed vision and deeper empathy.

But I turn to our community members with a plea: Be our partners in bringing our communities back to life. We are waiting for you, and need your strength, your resolve, and your physical presence — we are waiting for you with open arms and can’t do this alone. With Hashem’s help, in the coming months we will turn again to the words of Eicha again as we bring back our sifrei Torah and ourselves to our sanctuaries, with the unique joy that comes from having walked through the valley of the shadow of death, and made it through to the other side:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו ה' אֱלֹהֵי וְנִשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקִדְמָם  
*Bring us back to you, God, and we will come back; renew our days as of old!*

May the communities we rebuild, congregants and leaders together, have the best of the old, but the openness for the creative good that is yet to come.

# Connecting to Community Locally and Globally

## Rabbi Binyamin Blau

Rabbi, Green Road Synagogue  
Beachwood, OH

As we are poised to celebrate Shavuot, it is poignant to note how different this yom tov will be from our experience of a year ago. Last year our shul, the Green Road Synagogue in Beachwood, Ohio, did not meet in person and our learning was in the privacy of our own homes with our families. There were numerous divrei Torah and shiurim sent out in advance, often culled from previous issues of *Torah To Go*, which helped unify the kehilla; but ultimately, the learning was experienced individually.

This year, we are davening in multiple minyanim over the chag, and there will be live shiurim both on the first night of yom tov and during the days. In short, we will be able to feel, more fully, what it means to truly be a community as we collectively engage in those activities that define not only our shul, but all of Am Yisrael.

It has been quite a journey to get to this point, and I am proud of both how far we have come and of our connection to the larger Yeshiva University world that has supported us in this process. From the outset, the painful decision to curtail all live activities in shul was guided by the psakim of our Roshei Yeshiva, Rav Schachter and Rav Willig, and it was on their broad shoulders that I relied when directing my congregation on how to prepare for that initial Pesach and beyond. At the same time, the

fact that so many of my chaverim — colleagues in the field — were going through the same experiences was empowering. The discussions we had via WhatsApp were both a source of chizuk and an excellent vehicle for disseminating the latest piskei halacha of Rabbis Schachter and Willig. I was never prouder to be part of a unified Modern Orthodoxy passionately committed to Torah and mitzvot and to the safety and health of the klal (in truth a mitzva in its own right).

Our shul quickly adapted that position as our guiding light, continuing as a source of tefilla, limud Torah, and chesed, never at the expense of the community's well-being. Each step we took was inspiring and inspirational. When we initially had just "outside" minyanim for Mincha/Maariv (meaning they met on the side of the shul), one at Plag and the second at the regular zman, seeing people's thirst to join minyanim was incredible. We had more attendees than our normal crowd, despite the requirement to sign up in advance, wear masks, use hand sanitizer, answer the health gabbai's questions and be physically distant.

Gradually, we were able to combine minyanim back in the sanctuary with some outside, and I was amazed by how many people attended the four minyanim that we had over Yomim Noraim — two in the building and two under tents in various locations. While our hakafot were radically different, they were powerful; just having everyone together, even if only person held a sefer Torah and the singing was muted, was deeply meaningful. When we brought all the children to a large parking lot on Simchat Torah afternoon to sing and receive candy it was rejuvenating, reminding us how vibrant our kehilla really is.

Once again, while I took responsibility for the decisions made for my kehilla, the knowledge that so many of my chaverim were making similar choices based on the halachic rulings of our shared rebbeim was a tremendous source of comfort. This was a different form of Klal Yisroel uniting, but it was no less emboldening.

Over time, always with the astute guidance of our medical team, our shul resumed more of our normal activities. The health guidelines remain in place, and there is now a balance between virtual and live classes — by way of example, for several months my "Shabbat afternoon" Gemara class met each Saturday night over Zoom — but the vitality of our kehilla is once again felt daily within our walls. Our new Beit Midrash is filled with the sound of Torah and perhaps my favorite time of the week occurs after Mincha each Shabbat. We no longer serve food for Seudat Shlishit (that does not align with our Kiddush-To-Go format), but there are two opportunities to learn each week. People can either join me for our spirited analysis of the parsha or they can go to the Beit Midrash to learn on their own. While I enjoy my group, I am excited that the combined number of parents learning with children and students learning with their rabbeim far exceeds my attendees. Despite the pandemic, our shul, and Am Yisrael as a whole, remain firmly committed to transmitting the mesorah to the next generation.

As we are about to embrace *zman Matan Torateinu*, I want to share a beautiful thought of my late grandfather, Rav Pinchas Teitz zt'l, which highlights the importance of our shuls and day schools/yeshivot. When it came time for Yaakov and his

family to go down to Egypt, the Torah tells us that he sent Yehuda to the land of Goshen before the rest of the family would join him. Rashi explains that the reason for this trip was so that Yehuda would establish a yeshiva before they arrived.

While this is a beautiful sentiment, it is quite puzzling. Yosef had just proven to his father that despite his extended time in Egypt he remained the same Yosef, committed to the family's ways. Moreover, Yosef had done such a wonderful job educating his two sons that Yaakov himself compares them to Reuven and Shimon and elevates them to the status of shvatim. Why then was it critical that a yeshiva be started before their arrival in Egypt?

My grandfather explained that Yosef was a unique personality, and indeed, in each generation there are special individuals who can raise children who are Yarei Shamyim without the benefit of a yeshiva education. However, as a community, we cannot survive spiritually without providing a source of chinuch for all, without providing shuls that will compliment that education and nurture the neshamot of the young and old alike.

Our experience during the COVID-19 crisis has reinforced my belief in the wisdom of my grandfather's poignant words. Our shuls and schools have been the lifeblood of our communities and they have been strengthened by their connection to the larger world of Yeshiva University's leaders and graduates. May we all continue this noble work.

## Joining a Sacred Community

### Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Senior Rabbi, Boca Raton Synagogue  
Boca Raton, FL

Ask almost anyone who celebrates Shavuos what he or she is celebrating, and you'll probably get the right answer: Shavuos marks and celebrates the decisive moment of *kabalas HaTorah*. But then follow up by asking what exactly we are seeking to recreate, and you'll probably get an inaccurate answer. Most would answer, Shavuos represents the time we received the Torah and became obligated in mitzvos. The problem is that most of the Torah and the overwhelming amount of mitzvos were given at different periods in the desert — in Arvos Moav, Marah, and each time Moshe came to the Ohel Mo'eid. In fact, at Sinai, at least according to Rebbe Yishmael, only ten commandments were given. Six hundred and three were given elsewhere and at other times. Why, then, is Shavuos special, what makes it exceptional and worth celebrating?

Almost forty years ago, a book was written that would turn out to be prophetic. In *A Nation of Strangers*, Vance Packard documented how, already then, America was rapidly becoming splintered, fragmented, and divided. Packard argued that increasing mobility was destined to have negative effects on society. His prediction came true and his work

did not even include any anticipation of the proliferation and impact of technology.

Long before this pandemic, we were already experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. Despite social networking that was designed to connect people and create bonds, in a 2018 survey conducted by Cigna, nearly half of Americans reported sometimes or always feeling alone. People clearly crave community, and no matter how many belong to various online communities or cultures, they are struggling to find authentic connection in ways that will take away the feeling of loneliness.

In his *Sifsei Chaim*, Rav Chaim Freidlander explains that when we were liberated from Egypt, we were a group of individuals, a conglomerate of people, but we were not yet a community. Only after gathering around Har Sinai with a shared purpose and a collective mission did we achieve peoplehood and did we become a sacred community.

When we stood at the base of that modest mountain as one entity, one person with one heart, we formed an eternal entity — *Knesses Yisroel*, the people of Israel. Yet before mitzvos defined us, independent of our obligation to perform hundreds of positive and negative commandments, we created a bond and a link that would transcend barriers and boundaries. We reveled in our shared history and pledged a common destiny.

When we recite Birchos HaTorah



Learn more about the laws of Birchot Hatorah at  
<https://www.yutorah.org/halacha/jewish-law/birchot-hatorah>

in the morning or when we get an aliyah, we say *asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim, v'nassan lanu es Toraso*. Before acknowledging having received the Torah, we recognize having been formed as a sacred nation with a divine mission — first, *asher bachar banu* (He chose us from all the nations), and only then, *v'nassan lanu es Toraso* (He gave us His Torah).

Shavuot is undoubtedly a time for renewed commitment to mitzvah observance. It is unquestionably an occasion for reinvigorated dedication to Torah study. But above all, it is a time to reflect on what it means to be a member of a sacred community. Shavuot mandates us to think and consider how the community empowers us and how we can empower the community. At the Pesach Seder we proclaimed that it would have been enough to arrive at Har Sinai even if we never received the Torah. Shavuot reminds us that *dayenu*, to be a member of a sacred society and purpose-driven people would have been enough to obligate an expression of gratitude.

Human beings are wired with a longing for belonging and a great desire to be connected. The antidote to loneliness is community. Each day in our Birchas HaTorah we express gratitude and praise for the gift and blessing of having a community and people to belong to.

Belonging to community is not about conformity, but commitment. We don't have to forfeit our individuality or our diverse needs. However, we do have to come together, to collaborate and complement, not compete with one another.

This past year, among other things, the pandemic helped us learn a lot

about ourselves. When locked down, many created a mini “community” in their own home, serving as president, gabbai, ba'al tefillah, rabbi or rebbetzin. As things began to open up, outdoor minyanim formed, creating small communities within the community, bringing neighbors together and creating new bonds. Some of these groups persevered through extreme cold, others extreme heat and still others, both. Talents, skills, and leadership abilities, which might otherwise have remained dormant, were discovered and harnessed.

As things slowly come back to normal, we must embrace the opportunity to come back together, to draw on those discoveries and recruit those talents in a way that collaborates and complements, never competes. We have learned that we can grow larger and smaller at the same time when we simultaneously empower individuality and diversity, always with a sense of unity and community.

This Shavuot, as we b'e'zras Hashem continue to emerge from a horrific pandemic that divided and isolated us, let's affirm our commitment to the central role community must have in our lives. Let's pledge our participation and promise to contribute our talents and gifts.

## Our Home Away from Home

### Rabbi Shalom Rosner

Rabbi, Kehillat Nofei HaShemesh  
Beit Shemesh, Israel  
Ram, Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh

As the world comes to terms with the new “normal,” we as Orthodox Jews must also adjust and acclimate to the new “rules of engagement” in fulfilling our spiritually driven lifestyle.

The past year has been both challenging and rewarding, filled with both deep tragedy and amazing human resilience and communal support. Our emotions have swung like a pendulum, from feelings of hopelessness to empowerment as we overcame the impossible. Through it all, though, we know that the Torah remains our guiding light and the beacon of sanity and stability that anchors our existence. Thus, as we crawl out of our Corona abyss, we return to the questions<sup>1</sup> in the Gemara, *Shabbos* 31a, the questions that we will be asked after our 120 years in this world. Rava's second question is, “*kavata itim LaTorah*” — did you set aside time for studying Torah? Besides the simple interpretation, I once heard a deeper meaning;<sup>2</sup> we are being asked whether we set, *kovea*, the “*itim*,” times in which we live, to the Torah, or *chas veshalom*, the Torah to the “*itim*,” fitting in only the parts of Torah that fit into our lives. We must constantly reassess and make sure that the Torah and the Torah way of life is constant and fixed in our lives. We need to then model and shape our behavior based on that given, that reality.

Rav Soloveitchik (*Shiurim L'Zecher Abba Mari*, Vol. I “*Kibud V'Oneg*”

*Shabbos*”) has taught us that though Yechezkel HaNavi (11:16) has called our shuls “*mikdishei me’at*” — miniature versions of the Beis HaMikdash, which is even the basis for numerous parallels between our shuls and the Beis HaMikdash — there is also a fundamental difference between the two. On the one hand, the Mishna, *Megillah* 28a, pronounces that even a desolate *beis knesses* retains its sanctity, based on a verse describing the desolate Mikdash:

ועוד אמר רבי יהודה: בית הכנסת שחרב אין מספידין בתוכו, ואין מפשילין בתוכו חבלים, ואין פורשין לתוכו מצודות, ואין שוטחין על גגו פירות, ואין עושין אותו קפנדריא, שנאמר והשמותי את מקדשיכם - קדושתן אף כשהן שוממין.

R. Yehuda further said: In a shul that is desolate, one cannot eulogize, spread ropes, nets, or fruits, or use it as a short cut, as the verse states, “I will make desolate your mikdash,” it is still the mikdash in its sanctity, though it is desolate.

Moreover, often the actual structure of our shuls is modelled after the Mikdash. *Chasam Sofer* (O.C. 28) strongly urges the bimah to be in the middle of the shul, since the *mizbeach hazahav*, the golden altar, was in the middle of the Heichal. Rav Soloveichik (cited in *Eretz Hatzvi* Siman 12) explains that the root sanctity of the shul flows from the sifrei Torah stored in the aron, just as the Luchos served as the source of sanctity for the Mikdash. We light our chanukiyot in shul on the southern wall (*Shulchan Aruch* 671:7),

emulating what was done in the Mikdash centuries ago.

On the other hand, we acknowledge fundamental differences in their essence, reflected in various halachic distinctions. The Mishna, *Berachos* 54a, teaches us:

ולא יכנס להר הבית במקלו, ובמנעלו, ובפונדתו, ובאבק שעל רגליו,

*We are not allowed to enter the Mikdash with a walking stick, shoes, or a money belt, items that we may wear and enter with into a shul.*

What is the reason for this distinction? If a shul is a *mikdash me’at*, then why are there any differences? Isn’t the difference just one of quantitative *kedusha*, not of a qualitatively different experience?

Rav Soloveichik explains that no, there is a major distinction between the Mikdash and shul experience, not more or less, but different. The secret is found in two words toward the end of *Maseches Berachos* 63a.

Rava is explaining to us why we are not allowed to shortcut through the Mikdash or a shul, while we can wear shoes (and spit) only in a shul and not in the Mikdash.

אלא אמר רבא: כי ביתו. מה ביתו, אקפנדריא - קפיד אינשו, ארקיקה ומנעל - לא קפיד אינשו, אף בית הכנסת: קפנדריא הוא דאסור, רקיקה ומנעל - שרי.

*Rava said: it is like one’s home. Just like one would mind if someone took a shortcut through one’s home, but one does not mind if guests spit [in those times] or wear shoes, so too in a synagogue, using it as a shortcut*

*is prohibited, shoes and spitting are permissible.*

This, then, is the secret of our discussion. In the words of the Rav:

נראה פשוט, כי רבא הציב כאן עקרון חדש ביחס להשראת השכינה. לפעמים הקב"ה מזמין את האדם לביתו, בית עולמים, והאדם הוא אורחו של הקב"ה. על פי ההלכה, האדם אז נמצא בבית הקב"ה. לפרקים, הקב"ה, ממלא כל עלמין והסובב כל עלמין, יורד משמי ערבות, נענה לתפילת האדם, והוא משרה שכינתו בביתו של האדם. יציר כפיו של הקב"ה, האדם, שהיום הוא כאן ומחר בקבר, שוכן בתי חומה, הוא בעל הבית, והקב"ה, כביכול, הוא אורחו. הוא נכנס לביתו של האדם ודר עמו ככפיפה אחת...

*It seems clear that Rava has established here a new principle regarding the revelation of the Divine. Sometimes God invites man to His home, a permanent home, and man is God’s guest. According to Halacha, man is then in the house of God. At times, God fills every world and surrounds every world, descends from the heavens, responds to man’s prayers, and reveals His presence in the house of man. The handiwork of God, man, who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, a mere mortal, is the master of the house, and God, so to speak, is his guest. He enters man’s house and lives with him in a single abode.*

Both a shul and the Mikdash represent places of intense connection and communication with God. The only difference is who is the host and who is the guest. In the Mikdash, we are God’s guests. We are invited at least three times a year to visit our Father’s house, and to spend time close to Him on His holy turf. But every single day



Learn more about the sanctity of the synagogue at <https://www.yutorah.org/halacha/jewish-law/beit-hakenesset>

we have the opposite opportunity, to invite God to our holy communal houses, to host Him in our religious centers, and to commune with Him on our home court. This distinction, then, explains both the parallels and the differences between our two institutions.

Over the past year, most of us have been communally misplaced. We have, BH, found many creative ways to come together to daven and function as a *tzibbur*. The surprising reality created a whole area of psak that became fertile ground for the *gedolei haposkim*. Mirpeset (porch) minyanim, Zoom connections, and backyard get-togethers have become part of our normal jargon. But we must all realize, individually and communally, that this is not the ideal or *lechatchila*. Our shuls have quietly been waiting for our return. The seforim and the chairs themselves have wept silently day after day, waiting for our words, our singing, and even our cholent, to return to them. Our *mikdash me'at*, our home court, our rendezvous spot with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, is just a walk away. We need to return as soon and as fast as we can.

Of course, we must adhere to all health guidelines and make sure that we follow all medical protocols. But we also must adhere to *kavata itim LaTorah* and not *Torah l'itim*. Yes, it might be more comfortable to daven right outside, to roll out of bed and have a minyan. I might even have more *kavana* in my backyard and in a smaller group. These are all excuses, and if I may be so bold as to draw a parallel, the Jews during the beginning of the Bayis Sheni said the same thing to Ezra HaSofer. "You can return and rebuild the Mikdash. We are comfortable here in Bavel. We are comfortable with our religious institutions. We feel spiritually fulfilled where we are. We don't need the Mikdash!" On a smaller scale, some communities are experiencing similar realities today. We must not forget where we belong. Our shuls are the places that we call home, the centers of our religious existence, the geographical sources of our Torah and tefillah. Let us make sure that we appreciate these gifts, these opportunities, and these experiences. Hashem is calling us back. "I'm ready for you to return. It's been a long, hard, year, I haven't seen all of you together for so long. Please let me hear

your communal voices in the ideal place possible." Here, in Eretz Yisrael, when our shuls were mandated to close, large banners appeared on many locked-up shul buildings, bearing the pasuk from Eicha: "*Hashiveinu Hashem eilecha v'nashuva*" — return us to you Hashem, and we will return. BH, the time has come. Let us all go home.

## Endnotes

1. To be honest, in the Gemara they are not labelled as questions; they are declarations, since the video of our life will speak for itself.
2. Heard originally from Rav J.J. Schacter. See *Menachem Tzion* Bamidbar, based on *Midrash Tehilim*, for a similar thought.

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# Collective Revelation and Responsibility

## Rabbi Kalman Topp

Senior Rabbi, Beth Jacob Congregation  
Beverly Hills, CA

This incredibly challenging year highlighted a remarkable element of our shul, and I am sure other shuls too. Beth Jacob Congregation has a diverse membership of several hundred families, and we initially thought that COVID had completely broken apart the community with members distanced, quarantined, and isolated. Over the course of the year, however, we realized that while it was unquestionably difficult to be unable to join together in regular fashion to daven, learn, do chesed, and support one another through our physical presence, the community was still going strong. It was truly special to see how people were going above and beyond to be there for each other in creative and new ways.

Davening, learning and personal growth continued, demonstrating the resilience and commitment of our members. An example of this inspiring commitment: a member of our shul walked 25 minutes to shul every Shabbat morning, even during the weeks the campus was closed, because Shabbat for him meant walking to shul!

With all its devastation, COVID taught us that our shul is not only a physical space but a spiritual home without walls that gives us a feeling of belonging, wherever we might be. It became more evident that the hallmark of a shul is the creation and nurturing of relationships — with Hashem and His Torah, with Israel,

with shul clergy and one another — and these connections are more valued than ever.

In a certain sense, then, COVID compelled us to rethink the notion of community and its place in our lives. As we emerge slowly from the pandemic and have the unique opportunity to rejuvenate our kehillot, perhaps it would be helpful to go back to the basics and reexamine why being part of a community is so central to being Jewish.

In tefillah and kiddush, we describe Shavuot as “*zman matan Torateinu*” — the time when the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Har Sinai. A fundamental principle of our tradition<sup>1</sup> is that Jews throughout the generations — including all of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century — are obligated to observe the mitzvot based on that original acceptance over 3,300 years ago.

We could wonder how it is that future generations are legally bound to a transaction they did not consent to. How can there be an execution of a covenant with people who haven't yet been born?

A well-known mystical tradition<sup>2</sup> suggests that all Jewish souls throughout the generations were present spiritually at Har Sinai, when we all committed ourselves to the Torah. Another answer offered by the commentaries is that our obligation today is based on the halachic principle of *zachin l'adam shelo b'fanav* — we can confer a benefit upon someone even in their absence. The Jews at Har Sinai accepted the Torah, the ultimate privilege, on our behalf.

The Maharal of Prague<sup>3</sup> develops a different answer by explaining the unique character of our covenant with

Hashem. Hashem says to Moshe at the burning bush that, “I have seen the affliction of the Jews because I have known their sufferings (*machovav*).” The Rabbis in the Medrash interpret “*machovav*” to be the suffering and pain the Jews will cause Hashem when we falter. “I am fully aware of the future rebellions of Israel and nevertheless, I will not refrain from saving them.”

What are the mechanics of this guarantee that Hashem will be there for us even if we are not worthy? The Maharal explains that Hashem entered into a covenant with Avraham not as an individual but rather in his capacity as founder of the nation. Indeed, several generations later, Hashem entered into a brit (covenant) with the Jews not as individuals but as a collective entity. This helps us understand, writes the Maharal, how the covenant made at Sinai can bind present and future generations. Since the brit is with Klal Yisrael as a nation, anyone born into the nation automatically becomes obligated in the covenant.

Moreover, because it is a covenant with the collective, if a group of Jews sins or even a generation is unworthy, this will not nullify the relationship. We weren't chosen because of our unique merits and we therefore cannot forfeit it through misdeeds. Of course, we're all obligated to observe the Torah to the best of our ability and the level of Divine providence we receive is a function of our behavior. But whatever our level of commitment, the covenant itself is eternal and the special relationship we have with Hashem endures. This is true because the brit was not made with individuals, which would have made it dependent upon individuals'

behavior, but with a nation, Am Yisrael, unconditionally.

This new understanding of the covenant teaches us that the core identity of every individual Jew, for each of us, is that we are part of the Jewish people. There is an indivisible entity, with a legal analog of a corporation, called the nation of Israel that spans all the generations, with a covenant that is unbreakable. Our nation's span is not only vertical, incorporating every single generation, but also horizontal, including every single Jew alive today.

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## **We are bound by a collective covenant that impacts the way we pray, how we do teshuva, and triggers a responsibility to identify with the needs of the Klal, the nation, the community.**

---

While we have individual responsibilities, we are bound by a collective covenant, with this dual commitment impacting the way we pray (in plural), how we do teshuva (“*aval anachnu v'avoteinu chatanu*” — “we and our forefathers have sinned”) and triggers a responsibility to identify with the needs of the Klal, the nation, the community.

The Rambam<sup>4</sup> writes that “*haporesh midarchei hatzibbur*” — “a person who separates himself from the ways of the community ... even though he has not committed any sins but merely disconnects himself from community members, who doesn't perform mitzvot together with them and doesn't identify with community challenges ... loses his portion in the world to come.” With striking language, the Rambam indicates that shorn of the framework of community, there is no concept of Torah and mitzvot! Even if you fastidiously fulfill all the mitzvot, if you don't identify with the tzibbur, if you don't share in the sorrow of the Jewish people, if you don't actively get involved to help others, if you are on your own, then your Jewish identity is dreadfully deficient.

Why is this so? Apparently, since the covenant was with the nation, a person who disregards the broader collective ignores our basic foundation. The Sages emphasize<sup>5</sup> the benefits of being part of something bigger than ourselves. This may be because individual revelation posits that one person can fathom the whole truth. Collective revelation and communal religious experience provide both humility as well as checks and balances. Being part of a kehilla provides a measure of moderation for what could otherwise become dangerously unrestrained religious fervor for God, which is what occurred with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son, Rabbi Eliezer, after their years of solitude in a cave.

In Judaism, our religious expression needs to be applied to the real world, in society and our human interactions. Judaism teaches us to transcend ourselves and stand with others. In a

related sense, Judaism teaches us to transcend ourselves and stand with others. When we become part of something bigger, with each person contributing his or her strengths and talents, it helps us achieve our potential and complete one another.

This past year, we hopefully gained a new appreciation of our blessings, our relationships, and our community. While our personal, communal, and professional lives radically changed, we discovered new strengths as individuals and new dimensions of communal bonds.

Shavuot, *zman matan Torateinu*, is a time to reflect on the covenant established at Sinai with the Jewish nation as a collective, and how this defines our identity as Jews today. As we emerge out of this pandemic, our ability to resume in-person shared religious and social experiences will enable us to only further strengthen our bonds and be there for each other with a renewed sense of purpose. During this season, when we celebrate the spirit of “*k'ish echad b'lev echad*,”<sup>6</sup> we must reaffirm our commitment to the community and the Jewish People. While uncertainty remains and challenges lie ahead, we are firm in our belief that the more we connect with Hashem and the more we attach ourselves to the community, the brighter our future will be.

### **Endnotes**

- 1 See Devarim 29:14 and Rashi there.
- 2 *Shmot Rabbah* 28:6, *Tanchuma Yitro* 11.
- 3 *Netzach Yisrael* perek 11.
- 4 *Hilchot Teshuva* 3:11.
- 5 For example, *Pirkei Avot* 1:14, 2:5.
- 6 Rashi Shemot 19:2, “*Vayichan*.”



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## STUDY GUIDE: HOW FAR SHOULD WE GO TO PRAY WITH A MINYAN?

Synagogue attendance is a central aspect of Jewish life. There are many reasons to attend synagogue, one of which is the ability to pray with a minyan. The idea of praying with a minyan, which is also known as *tefillah b'tzibbur*, has received a lot of attention since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning, minyan, for the most part, was not an option,

even while other events requiring ten men did take place such as weddings and funerals (albeit with minimal attendance). This may have led some to conclude that *tefillah b'tzibbur* is not “essential.” A few months later, we figured out ways to safely gather as a minyan, first outdoors and then indoors. Like the unofficial U.S. Postal Service motto, “neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night” deterred

people who were dedicated to praying with a minyan. Their commitment conveys a message that we should really go the extra mile to pray with a minyan. How important is *tefillah b'tzibbur*? How much effort should we expend to pray with a minyan? What should we do when it conflicts with something else? In this study guide, we will explore these issues.

### Introductory Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What are some examples in your own experience (non-COVID related) where you had to decide between attending minyan or something else? What factors went into the decision-making process?
- 2) Attending minyan sometimes requires an investment of extra time beyond the time of the actual prayer service. This may be due to travel time or because the minyan doesn't start at an ideal time. How much extra time should we expend to attend minyan?

## Source#1a: Pesachim 46a

א"ר אבהו אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש לגבל ולתפלה ולנטילת ידיים ארבעה מילין.

*R. Avahu said in the name of R. Shimon ben Lakish: for mixing dough (and how far one has to travel to immerse the utensils), for prayer and for washing one's hands, one must travel up to four mil (a mil is the distance that one can walk in approximately eighteen minutes).*

## Source #1b: Rashi, Pesachim 46a

לתפלה אם מהלך אדם בדרך ובא עת ללון ולהתפלל אם יש בית הכנסת לפניו ברחוק ארבע מילין הולך ומתפלל שם ולן שם.  
*For prayer — if an individual is travelling on the road and it*

*is time to pull over for the night, if there is a synagogue along the way in the next four mil, one should continue travelling and pray there.*

## Source #1c: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90:16

ההולך בדרך והגיע לעיר ורוצה ללון בה אם לפניו עד ד' מילין מקום שמתפללים בל' צריך לילך שם ולאחריו צריך לחזור עד מיל כדי להתפלל בל'.

*If one is travelling and reaches a city where he wants to sleep. If there is a place to pray with a minyan within the next four mil, one should continue travelling. If the minyan is in the opposite direction, one should travel up to one mil.*

### Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What are the differences between Rashi's formulation of this rule, and the formulation found in *Shulchan Aruch*?
- 2) If travelling many miles is the only way to purchase matzah for Pesach or hear the Megillah on Purim, we are obligated to do so. Why do you think there is only a requirement to travel one mil out of the way for prayer with a minyan?

## Source#2a: Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 8:1

תפלת הציבור נשמעת תמיד ואפילו היו בהן חוטאים אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מואס בתפלתן של רבים. לפיכך צריך אדם לשתף עצמו עם הציבור ולא יתפלל ביחיד כל זמן שיכול להתפלל עם הציבור.  
*Congregation prayer is always heard. Even if there are sinners in the congregation, the Holy One Blessed Be He does not despise public prayers. Therefore, one is required to join with the congregation, and one should not pray individually whenever one can pray with the congregation.*

## Source #2b: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90:16

ישתדל אדם להתפלל בבית הכנסת עם הצבור ואם הוא אנוס שאינו יכול לבוא לבית הכנסת יכוין להתפלל בשעה שהצבור מתפללים.  
*One should try to pray in the synagogue with the congregation. If circumstances don't allow one to attend synagogue, one should pray at the same time that the congregation is praying.*

### Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What are the differences between Rambam's formulation and *Shulchan Aruch*'s formulation?
- 2) Does the language of *Shulchan Aruch*, "one should try," conflict with the quantitative requirement he provides (Source #1c) regarding how far we should travel to attend minyan? Why or why not?

## Source #3a: R. Aryeh Pomeranchik, Emek Beracha, Hilchos Birchos Kerias Sh'ma

דתפלה בצבור מצד עצמה אינה מצוה ולפיכך אין שוב חיוב להתפלל עם הצבור אלא כיון שאין תפלת היחיד נשמעת בכל עת אלא בצבור ולפיכך צריך האדם להשתדל להתפלל עם הצבור כדי שתקובל תפלתו וזהו כל הענין של תפלה בצבור וכן מבואר הוא בלשון הרמב"ם רפ"ח

מתפלה ... ולשונו זה ולא יתפלל יחיד כ"ז שיכול להתפלל עם הצבור מורה להדיא שאינו חיוב כלל אלא השתדלות שתקובל תפלתו.  
*There is no inherent mitzvah to pray with a minyan. Therefore, there is no obligation to pray with a minyan. Rather, since individual prayer isn't always heard and congregation prayer is, one should try to pray with the congregation so that one's prayers are accepted. This is the whole idea behind*

congregational prayer. This is apparent from the formulation of Rambam in the eighth chapter of Hilchos Tefillah (Source #2a). His language, "one should not pray individually whenever one can pray with the congregation," indicates clearly that there is no obligation, but rather, we try [to pray with a minyan] so that our prayers are accepted.

### Source #3b: R. Moshe Feinstein, Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 2:27

אם ת"ח רשאי להתפלל ביחידות באשר שרוצה ללמוד בזמן מאוחר בלילה ויקשה לפניו לקום להתפלל בצבור ... הנה להתפלל בעשרה הוא חיוב מצוה על האדם ולא רק הדור ומעלה בעלמא דהא לפרש"י פסחים דף מ"ו וחולין דף קכ"ב מחוייב לילך עד ד' מילין כשהוא לפניו בהולך בדרך אף שטוב לפניו יותר ללון כאן ... כיון שחזינן שצריך לטרוח הרבה מוכרחין לומר שהוא חיוב מצוה על האדם להתפלל בעשרה, ומה שלא חייבו אף לטרוח טובא הוא משום דאף במ"ע דאורייתא איכא שיעורים ... דהא כשצריך להוציא הרבה ממון הוא אונס לפוטרו מהעשה, לכן גם טירחא היה שייך להחשיב אונס אך הוא אונס קטן לגבי מצות הרבה ... ואין לדייק מלשון ישתדל אדם להתפלל בביהכ"נ עם הצבור שבסעיף ט' לומר שהוא רק מעלה בעלמא, דגם על חיוב שייך לשון זה ... כיון דיצטרך בעצמו לדון זה שיש דבר שהוא טירחא לזה ולא לזה, לכן אמר לשון ישתדל אדם דהכוונה הוא שלא יקל לדמות כל טירחא לטירחא דיותר ממיל אלא יחמיר בהרבה פעמים שלא יהיה לו ברור שהוא טירחא גדולה דצריך שידון בכבוד ראש על זה.

*Is a Torah scholar — who wants to stay up late into the night studying Torah, and by doing so, won't be able to attend*

morning services — permitted to do so? ... Praying with a minyan is an obligation and not just an enhancement of prayer as we see from Rashi's comments in Pesachim 46 (Source #1b) and Chullin 122 that one must travel up to four mil further on one's trip (to find a minyan) even if one is ready to rest for the night ... we see that since there is an obligation to exert a lot of effort, we must say that it is an obligation upon each individual to pray with a minyan. The reason there is no requirement to travel an even greater distance is that even Biblical mitzvos have limitations ... for example, when performance of a mitzvah is going to cost an exorbitant amount of money, it is considered an extenuating circumstance and one is exempt. Similarly, the effort (to attend minyan when travelling a great distance) can be called an extenuating circumstance for this mitzvah, even though it would not be considered extenuating for other mitzvos ... One should not infer from the language in Shulchan Aruch (Source #2b), "One should try to pray in the synagogue with the congregation," that it is only an enhancement of prayer, because this language is relevant even if it is obligatory ... because one [who is in other circumstances where it is difficult to attend minyan] must try to evaluate whether the effort to attend minyan is similar to travelling a great distance. Therefore, Shulchan Aruch states "one should try," so that we don't automatically compare our own situation to travelling more than a mil (out of the way), but rather seriously consider whether this situation is indeed a comparable level of effort.

### Questions for Discussion:

- 1) R. Pomeranchik infers from Rambam that prayer with a minyan is not obligatory. Can this approach fit into the opinion of Rashi (Source #1b) and Shulchan Aruch (Source #1c)?
- 2) R. Feinstein considers prayer with a minyan to be obligatory, but the effort required to fulfill the obligation is not as great as other mitzvos. Besides time, what other factors might be legitimate reasons to exempt oneself from minyan?

### Source #4a: Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 52:1

ואם כבר התחילו הצבור יוצר ואין שהות לומר פסוקי דזמרה אפי' בדילוג יקרא ק"ש וברכותיה עם הציבור ויתפלל עמהם ואחר כך יקרא כל פסוקי דזמרה בלא ברכה שלפניהם ולא של אחריהם.

*If (one came late) and the congregation already began Yotzer (Birchos Kerias Sh'ma) and there is no time to recite Pesukei D'Zimra, even with skipping (and then still recite the Amidah together with the minyan), one should recite Kerias Sh'ma with its berachos together with the congregation and recite the Amidah with them and afterwards, recite Pesukei D'Zimra*

*without Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach.*

### Source #4b: Mishna Berurah 52:6

ובתשובת משכנות יעקב האריך בזה והוכיח דברכת ב"ש וישתבח תקנה קדומה היא מימי התנאים וע"כ מוטב להתפלל ביחיד משידלג לגמרי ברכת ב"ש וישתבח.

*There is a lengthy responsum in Mishkenos Yaakov about this topic and he proved that the berachos of Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach are an ancient institution from the time of the Mishna, and therefore, it is better to pray individually than to completely skip Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach.*

## Source #4c: Mishna Berurah 90:29

ואם הוא אונס ממון שמחמת השתדלותו להתפלל עם הצבור יבוא לידי הפסד יכול להתפלל בביתו ביחיד או בבהכ"נ בלא צבור אבל משום מניעת ריוח לא ימנע מלהתפלל עם הצבור דחילוק יש בין מניעת ריוח לבין הפסד מכיסו.

*If there are extenuating circumstances of a financial nature such that attending minyan will cause one to lose money, one may pray individually at home or in the synagogue. However, if it is simply a lost opportunity to profit, one should not miss minyan because there is a difference between actual loss of money and a lost opportunity to profit.*

### Questions for Discussion:

- 1) R. Pomeranchik explains that the reason *Mishkenos Yaakov* and *Mishna Berurah* don't allow skipping Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach to recite the Amidah with the minyan is that Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach are obligatory and *tefillah b'tzibbur* is optional. How do you think R. Feinstein would explain why we don't skip Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach?
- 2) How would you explain the difference between actual loss of money and a lost opportunity to profit according to R. Pomeranchik? According to R. Feinstein?

### Summary and Concluding Questions

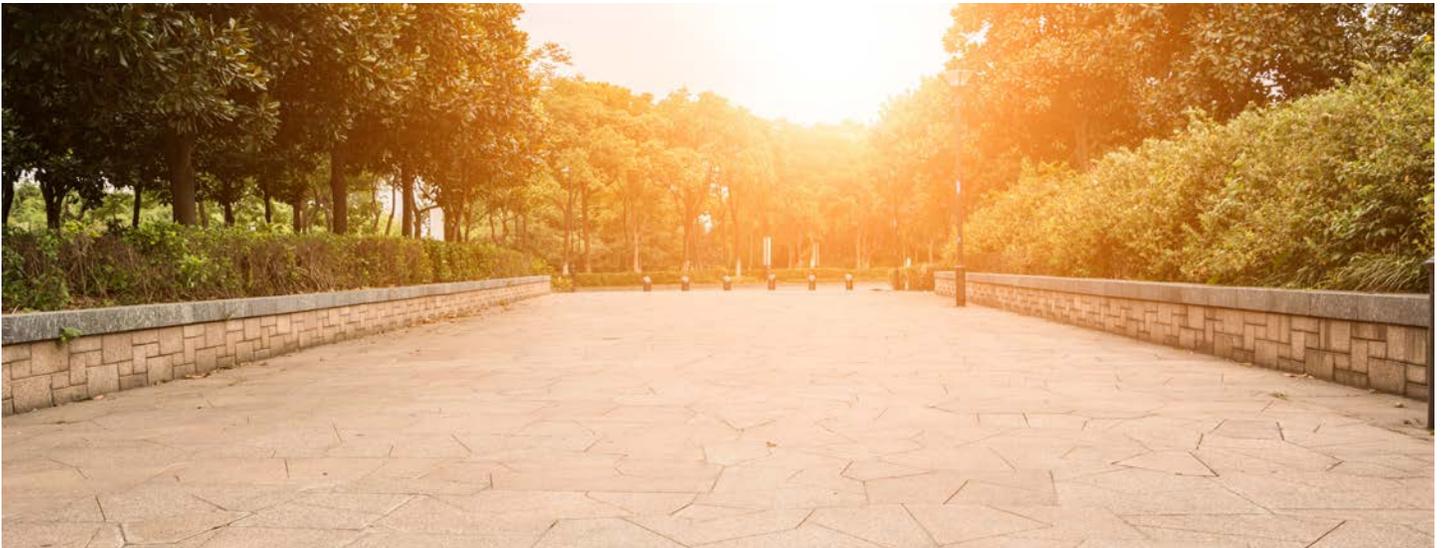
- The Gemara presents a minimum distance we should travel for prayer. Rashi states that this refers to prayer in a synagogue. *Shulchan Aruch* states that this refers to prayer with a minyan.
- *Shulchan Aruch* also states that we should try to pray with a minyan. We saw two approaches to understand this statement. First (R. Pomeranchik), prayer with a minyan is inherently optional and the reason to try to pray with a minyan is so that our prayers are heard. According to this approach, the measurements of how far we should travel to find a minyan are recommendations, not requirements. Second (R. Feinstein), prayer with a minyan is obligatory unless there are extenuating circumstances. *Shulchan Aruch* tells us to try to pray with a minyan so that when we are in a situation that we deem to be an extenuating circumstance, we should think twice before comparing it travelling a great distance. This idea may be highlighted by the fact that we should attend minyan even if doing so will lead to a lost opportunity to profit.
- While R. Feinstein maintains that attending minyan is obligatory, when there is a conflict between this obligation and other prayer obligations the other prayer obligations take precedence. This is why we cannot skip Baruch She'amar and Yishtabach to catch up to the congregation.

### Questions for Discussion:

- 1) Based on what you learned, how would you apply our discussion to the examples you gave in Introductory Question #1?
- 2) Do you think the pandemic will have a lasting impact on minyan attendance? How?



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## OUTDOOR MINYANIM

In the past year, many elements of religious life have been modified due to the pandemic. As we gradually return to our old routines and resume normal life, one element seems to be lagging behind in many Jewish communities — the return to shul. While there are medical, social and emotional reasons for this phenomenon, in this essay, we will focus on the halachic challenges of davening outside the context of a brick-and-mortar shul.

Before beginning our analysis, it is important to frame our discussion in three critical ways:

First, this essay will not discuss the permissibility of starting a new shul in a community that already has a functioning Orthodox shul. There is significant discussion among poskim

about the halachic advantages and pitfalls to starting a new shul.<sup>1</sup> We will limit our discussion to minyanim that function on an ad hoc basis or regularly meet, but in a manner that suggests a temporary setup.

Second, an “outdoor minyan” comes in many different names and forms (and some have even moved indoors). Some such minyanim are more permanent than others. There are minyanim that meet consistently, have an aron kodesh with a sefer Torah, and take place in a space that is never used for anything other than tefillah. More commonly, the minyanim meet in a location that serves as a backyard or other utilized space. We will raise several halachic issues, some of which apply to all minyanim held on a private property and some of which only apply to some minyanim held

outside the confines of a dedicated shul building.

Finally, the topic of this essay does not address formal prohibitions, but simply the ideal way to perform a mitzvah. There is no prohibition to daven in a backyard, just as there is no formal prohibition to daven without a minyan. Clearly, the halacha strongly prefers *tefillah b'tzibbur* and demands making certain sacrifices to daven with a *tzibbur*. The issues at hand are: the optimal way to perform a mitzvah; whether the halacha demands sacrificing convenience in order to daven in a *beis haknesses*; and whether hosting or supporting a backyard minyan, after the danger of the virus has passed, is tantamount to establishing a subpar standard for tefillah.

## The Halachic Issues

### **B’Rov Am Hadras Melech — In Multitudes the King is Glorified (Mishlei 14:28)**

The Gemara, citing a pasuk in Mishlei, teaches that when performing mitzvos, it is best to do so with a large group.<sup>2</sup> The glory of God is said to be enhanced when we serve Him with a large crowd. This concept is applied broadly by poskim to several different mitzvos. For example, the *Beiur Halacha* (155 d.h. *V’yikva*) suggests that we should ideally learn Torah among a large group of people, rather than privately. Due to this concern of *b’rov am hadras Melech*, the *Shulchan Aruch*, OC 90:9, writes that we should always try to daven in a shul with the *tzibbur*. The *Magen Avraham* (90:15) adds that even if we have a minyan in our home, we should still daven in shul because of the larger crowd present in shul.<sup>3</sup>

When davening in an outdoor minyan, we are very likely to be sacrificing the opportunity of davening with a larger crowd for the sake of the minor convenience of shaving a few minutes off of a walk to shul. Of course, the proliferation of minyanim, even within a shul, and the proliferation of shuls in a given neighborhood, also minimizes the size of the crowd in any given minyan. This is one reason that competent rabbinic authorities should be consulted before starting any new minyan or shul to determine that the need is great enough to warrant the sacrifice of *b’rov am hadras Melech*.

### **Shachen Ra — A Bad Neighbor**

The Gemara, *Berachos* 8a, relates that anyone who has a *beis hakneses* in his city<sup>4</sup> and doesn’t enter the shul to daven is considered a *shachen ra* — a bad neighbor. The *Shulchan Aruch*,

OC 90:11, codifies this statement. The *Chayei Adam* (*Tzava’as Beis Avraham* no. 7, cited in *Mishna Berura* 90:38) explains that good neighbors tend to visit each other. One who isolates himself in his home exhibits anti-social behavior, which is inexcusable in our relationship with God and man alike. The *Mishna Berura* there points out that the *P’ri Megadim* raises the possibility that we are even required to daven in a shul when the shul doesn’t have a minyan, in order to avoid the title of *shachen ra*. While this Gemara seems to indicate that we should not daven in an outdoor minyan, the *Mishna Berura* there and *Sha’arei Teshuva* (17) point out that if we have a minyan in our house, the Shechina is assumed to be present, and those who daven at the outdoor minyan, while it is certainly inappropriate to do so, have avoided the title of an “evil neighbor.”

It emerges from this discussion that davening in an outdoor minyan would not earn somebody the title of a “bad neighbor,” but would still be discouraged because it is always best to daven in an actual shul.

### **Kedushas Beis Hakneses — The Sanctity of the Shul**

In my opinion, the strongest argument against a more permanent utilization of outdoor minyanim is that they undermine the value of a *beis hakneses*. Considering the halachos governing the usage, structure and honor of a *beis hakneses*, it seems that Chazal were very interested in having Jews daven in a place that has *kedushas beis hakneses*. Indeed, the Gemara, *Berachos* 6, teaches that a person’s tefillos are only heard in shul.<sup>5</sup> The Meiri there explains that this is not only a function of the *kedusha* of a shul, but also because it is easier to

have proper *kavana* when davening in a shul.

Rishonim and Acharonim debate the exact parameters of this rule. Rav Yechezkel Landau (*Tz’lach* there) argues that the need to daven specifically in a shul only applies to somebody who will not be davening with a minyan. Given the choice of davening alone at home or davening alone in shul, we should choose to daven in shul where the benefit of the *kedushas kamakom* will impact the acceptance of our tefillah. If we were davening with a minyan, argues the *Tz’lach*, the tefillah would be equally accepted in shul or in a home.<sup>6</sup> At the other extreme, the *Tur* (90) argues that this rule applies only to a person davening with a *tzibbur*. The combined value of a minyan and *kedushas beis hakneses* serves to help tefillah gain acceptance. If, however, we were davening alone, there is no value to davening in shul rather than at home. The Rambam (*Hilchos Tefillah* 8:1) argues that this rule applies equally to davening with a minyan and davening alone. A tefillah is always enhanced when offered in a shul. The *Shulchan Aruch* (90:9) rules in accordance with the Rambam.

When we choose to daven in an outdoor minyan, we are sacrificing one of the greatest tools to affect the acceptance of our tefillah.<sup>7</sup> The *Shulchan Aruch* warns us that:

ישתדל אדם להתפלל בבית הכנסת עם הציבור  
*One should make an effort to daven in shul with a minyan.*

The extent of the effort required is not made clear in *Shulchan Aruch*, but the benefit of *kedushas beis hakneses* should certainly be a factor when deciding where to daven.

## Additional Issues

There are several other halachic issues that arise from outdoor minyanim. First, the Gemara, *Berachos* 6b, notes that anyone who sets a consistent place to daven is considered humble, pious and a student of Avraham Avinu.<sup>8</sup> The Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah limit the need for a set place to daven to one who davens in his home. When davening in shul, the entire room is holy and it therefore makes no difference where in the shul we sit. This itself speaks to the importance of davening in shul. The Rosh (no. 7 there), on the other hand, argues that the requirement to establish a consistent place for tefillah applies even within a shul. We should daven in the same shul as often as possible and be careful to sit in the same seat within that shul. This is more difficult to accomplish in an outdoor minyan setting.

Second, outdoor minyanim typically don't have an aron kodesh or a sefer Torah, since they typically will only bring the sefer Torah out in time for kerias haTorah. While we can certainly

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**People often think that their presence doesn't make a difference, but in reality, davening in a packed shul has an entirely different feel to it than davening in a half empty room.**

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fulfill the requirement of *tefillah b'tzibbur* without an aron kodesh, and a room without an aron kodesh may have the kedusha of a shul (according to some opinions),<sup>9</sup> the full sense of standing *lifnei Hashem* (in front of God) can only be achieved in a room with both an aron kodesh and sefer Torah. The Rama (131:2) writes that we do not put our head down for Tachanun in a place with no aron or sefer Torah. Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein (*Chashukei Chemed, Yoma* 68b) points out that the implication is that when there is a sefer Torah present, the place is considered to be *lifnei Hashem* to a greater degree than a place that does not have a sefer Torah.<sup>10</sup> Rav Zilberstein notes though that it is not clear to what extent we are obligated to trouble ourselves, or what distance we must travel in order to ensure this extra sense of *lifnei Hashem*.

Third, the *Shulchan Aruch* (90:23) prohibits davening across from cloth that is woven with images and may distract a person's attention from his *tefillah*. The *Mishna Berura* there adds that any decorations or pictures in a shul should be placed above eye level, so as not to distract people who are davening. Shuls are designed to minimize these types of distractions. Outdoor minyanim are subject to all types of distractions, whether people walking through, common insects and pests, cars driving by, children playing in the next yard and a whole host of other distractions.

## The Non-Halachic Issues

In addition to the halachic issues outlined above, davening in an outdoor minyan raises several non-halachic, but also critical, issues that are important to be aware of. First, the Gemara, *Berachos* 8a, tells us that

Rav Yochanan was surprised to learn that there were elderly people in Bavel. After all, the Torah (*Devarim* 11) tells us that we will have long days on our land, implying that a Jew cannot live a long life outside of Eretz Yisrael. When Rav Yochanan heard that these elderly people go to shul early and stay late, he realized that it was in this merit that they lived long lives. Rav Acha bar Chanina adds that one who frequents a shul has "found life."<sup>11</sup> Remarkably, the *Yalkut Shimoni* (Ekev 871) tells a story of a woman who was very old, and her quality of life had degenerated to the point that she wished to die. When she told Rav Yosi ben Chalafta that she was always careful to daven in a shul, he advised that she keep away from the shul for several days. After following his advice for three days she fell ill and died. The message of the *Yalkut Shimoni* is that a connection to a shul connects a person to life itself. So long as the woman remained connected to the shul she would not die.

Second, while shuls begin to reopen, they rely on having a crowd. If many people go to outdoor minyanim, the shuls suffer from subpar crowds. This has a debilitating effect on the entire atmosphere of the tefillah. A shul that should be alive with electricity on Shabbos is often left feeling dull and pathetic. Those who fail to come to shul, for whatever reason, are responsible for negatively affecting the environment for davening in shul. People often think that their presence doesn't make a difference, but in reality, davening in a packed shul has an entirely different feel to it than davening in a half empty room. In fact, the *Teshuvos Simchas Kohen* (OC no. 45) suggests that even when a community is ready to open a new shul, the consideration of smaller

crowds leading to a diminished sense of energy in the tefillah should be enough of a factor to prevent a second shul from opening.

Third, invariably, halachic questions and problems arise during davening. This is especially true in a place that doesn't have set minhagim and protocols. When davening in a private minyan, questions often come and nobody present is equipped to handle them.<sup>12</sup>

## Counter Considerations

To this point, we have demonstrated a clear preference for davening in a shul with a large minyan over davening in an outdoor minyan or in a private home. However, circumstances may arise that allow for, or even encourage, a small minyan outside of shul.

### Public Safety

Certainly, the advent of the outdoor minyan played a critical role in ensuring public safety, and in many instances may have saved lives. The value of human life is of supreme halachic importance, and there is no doubt that we were correct to break up into smaller and socially distanced groups when public safety called for it. It is more challenging to assess at precisely what date this consideration is no longer applicable, and each community should follow medical (and halachic) guidance in making those decisions.

### Helping a Person Make a Minyan

In the *Tefillah Kehilchasa* (ch. 2 note

29) the author cites Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l who ruled that if one is needed to help make a minyan in a house for people who are physically unable (either due to illness or age) to walk to shul, he may bypass the requirement to daven in shul in favor of doing the chesed of helping those who would otherwise not be able to daven *b'tzibbur*. It is common practice to help people who have suffered an immobilizing injury to make a minyan in their home until they recover.<sup>13</sup> Even so, if the need is ongoing, a competent rabbinic authority should be consulted before establishing a minyan with any permanence in a home.

## Comments from Leading Poskim

In the *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* (volume XLVI), Dr. Steven Oppenheimer records the responses of several leading contemporary poskim about Friday night minyanim in private homes.

Rav Ephraim Greenblatt zt"l said that "when the shul is far away and the walk to shul is too difficult a minyan may be made close by," but he cautions, "the issue of breakaway minyanim is one that is often motivated by personal agenda." Rav Greenblatt's response, while reasonable, is not very clearly defined. How great a distance is considered "far"? How would we define "too difficult"?

Rav Moshe Shternbuch shlit"a gave a more clearly defined way of gauging

whether it is worth making a house minyan. "If the minyan did not exist, and people would otherwise go to shul, they are not permitted to have a minyan in someone's house. Only if the choice is to pray at home without a minyan or have a minyan in someone's house, may one have a minyan in someone's house."

Similarly, Rav Hershel Schachter shlit"a said that "it is improper to have a minyan in someone's house. The Talmud Yerushalmi explains that *dirshu Hashem b'himatzo* (seek out Hashem where He is found) refers to the *beis hakneses*. The Talmud Bavli informs us that *ein tefillah shel adam nishma'as ela b'veis hakneses* (a person's prayers are only heard in the synagogue). The sanctity of the locale augments the efficacy of the prayers, so that even an individual praying by himself should preferably pray in a shul. The Talmud tells us that whoever has a shul in his neighborhood and does not attend services there is considered a *shachen ra*, an evil neighbor."

## Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this article is not to question the intentions of those who arrange for and attend outdoor minyanim, but to discuss the issues that may arise should these minyanim continue to function after the threat of COVID is gone. Many people who arrange and daven in such minyanim, and especially those who are willing to use their homes to host these minyanim, not only have the



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best of intentions but indeed have provided a necessary service to their communities. It is my hope that this article served to help clarify some of the halachic pitfalls of continuing these minyanim when the health concerns are long gone (G-d willing), and will motivate people to seek proper rabbinic guidance before deciding whether to participate in such minyanim, just as they seek guidance in other areas of halacha.

*This article was adapted from an article titled "House Minyanim" printed in Yadrim Vol. I (2017).*

## Endnotes

1. See, for example *Igros Moshe* OC 2:40 and 2:46 and *Teshuvos HaRe'em* 1:53. See also, *Hegyonai Haparsha, Terumah* pg. 320 for a detailed analysis of this question.
2. See, for example *Berachos* 53a, *Pesachim* 64b, *Rosh Hashanah* 32b, *Yoma* 26a, *Yoma* 70a, *Sukkah* 52b, *Megillah* 27b, *Zevachim* 14b and *Menachos* 62a. It is interesting to note that the notion of *b'rov am hadras Melech* is used by Chazal in three distinct ways. In certain instances, it is used to teach that several people, each of whom are performing the entire mitzvah on their own, should do the mitzvah together in a large group, such as the case of the Mishna (*Bikurim* 3:2) where the various people bringing their first fruits to Yerushalayim should first gather outside of the city, so that they can all bring their fruits together in a large parade. In other instances it is used to teach that it shows great respect to God when instead of having a single person perform a mitzvah, a group of people divide the parts of the mitzvah among themselves, such as the case of Kohanim handing the cups of blood from *korbanos Pesach* in a sort of assembly line rather than walking the blood to the mizbeach themselves (*Pesachim* 64). We even find that a large crowd observing somebody doing a mitzvah is preferable to the person doing the mitzvah alone, such as the case of a Kohen Gadol reading from the Torah on Yom Kippur, where the crowd assembled to watch him read is considered to be doing a mitzvah of glorifying God (*Yoma* 70).
3. See *Teshuvos V'hanhagos* 1:127 where Rav

Shternbuch shlit"א rejects the practice of making a separate minyan in shul for a person who has yahrtzeit, because having a person observing a yahrtzeit lead a tefillah is not sufficient grounds to sacrifice *b'rov am*.

4. See *Iyun Yaakov* there that this is only true if the closest shul is in the city. If the shul were outside of the city, even if within the four mil one is required to travel in order to daven with a minyan, failure to frequent the shul would not make a person a bad neighbor.

5. *Lechem Mishneh (Hilchos Tefillah 8:1)* notes that a person's tefillos can also occasionally be heard outside of the confines of a shul, but the guarantee that a tefillah will be heard "at all times" only applies to shuls.

6. The *Tz'lach* argues that the language employed by the Gemara of "אין תפילותיו של אדם נשמעת אלא בבית הכנסת" supports this contention. Only the tefillah "of a person," an individual, needs to be offered in shul in order to be heard.

7. This assumes that the space where the minyan is housed does not enjoy *kedushas beis hakneses*. This is normally a safe assumption. If the space is used for other purposes it clearly does not enjoy *kedushas beis hakneses*.

8. Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah note that Chazal offer a very similar praise for Shmuel Hakatan (*Sanhedrin* 11). It is somewhat odd that anybody who establishes a consistent place to daven merits that same praise that was used to describe a great tzadik like Shmuel Hakatan (see *Berachos* 29a, *Shabbos* 33a, *Taanis* 25b). Talmidei Rabbeinu Yonah suggest that the insistence on davening in this way is not a sufficient mitzvah to earn these accolades, but are indicative of an exceedingly humble personality who has already earned these accolades. Rav Yechezkel Landau (*Tz'lach* there) explains that only a humble person would assume that he needs the place to elevate his tefillah. An arrogant person would assume that he would have God's ear wherever he chooses to daven.

9. See *Eretz Hatzvi* (no. 12) where Rav Hershel Schachter shlit"א shows, based on the fact that the Aron of the Beis Hamikdash was hidden underground by Yoshiyahu, that the basis for *kedushas Beis Hamikdash*, and in turn *kedushas beis hakneses* is the Aron Kodesh. It was critical that throughout the period of the second Beis Hamikdash, which did not have the Aron, that the Aron at least be hidden on the premises of the Beis Hamikdash.

Rav Schachter argues that a shul without an Aron Kodesh is lacking in the *kedushas beis hakneses*. Rav Schachter writes that it is inappropriate to build an Aron Kodesh recessed into the wall of a shul because the Aron is then considered to be in a separate room, and this takes away from the *kedusha* of the shul.

10. See *Sefer Chasidim* (495) that even those tefillos offered from seats that are closer to the Aron Kodesh in shul, are more readily accepted than those offered from seats that are further away. See also *Teshuvos Yosef Ometz* (37).

11. See *Megillah* 29, where the Gemara says that the shuls in the Diaspora are going to be transported to Eretz Yisraell upon the coming of Mashiach. This highlights the role of the *beis hakneses* as a place that is not limited to the temporary nature of our stay in *galus*.

12. One of the more common questions relates to whether the group should recite the *beracha mei'ein sheva* after Shemoneh Esrei, considering that it isn't a steady minyan in a shul. See *Shulchan Aruch* 268:10 and *Igros Moshe*, OC 4:69.

13. When Rav Hershel Schachter shlit"א was suffering from back problems that prevented him from going to yeshiva, several boys from yeshiva would come to his house to help him make a minyan. He would tell them that they really should not be there as davening in a *beis medrash* is much more valuable than davening in a private home.



# 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 — *metzuev 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 *metzaveh 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

### Rabbi Naphtali Lavenda

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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

### Ilana Turetsky Ed.D

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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.

**THE CUSTOM TO EAT DAIRY • THE CONNECTION OF RUTH TO SHAVUOT  
WHERE DO THE RULES OF CONVERSION COME FROM?  
THE MESORAH FROM SINAI • THE LAWS OF YOM TOV  
BRACHOT AFTER STAYING UP ALL NIGHT • GETTING KIDS EXCITED ABOUT TORAH  
JEWISH UNITY AND TORAH • THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LUCHOT  
SHAVUOT AS THE CULMINATION OF SEFIRAH • THE TEFILLOT OF SHAVUOT  
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