Baz Ratner/Reuters from The Guardian

The Bayit Holiday Reader

Shavuot 5782

Divrei Torah written by members of the congregation sponsored by the Social Action Committee

The Highest Mitzvah in the Torah: Mending Wall

Elliott Rabin

> *Before I built a wall I'd ask to know*
> *What I was walling in or walling out,*
> *And to whom I was like to give offense.* - Robert Frost

What's the most important mitzvah in the Torah? Is there an "Ur-mitzvah," one mitzvah that stands above the others as more important, offering an overriding principle or framework from which the others derive?

Rabbis have provided different answers to this question. Rabbi Akiva declared that the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18) is a "great principle of the Torah,"

> *meaning that one should not say, "Since I am scorned, I should scorn my fellow as well; since I have been cursed, I will curse my fellow as well." Rabbi Tanchuma says, "If you do this, know that God made the person you put to shame in His own image." (Bereishit Rabba 24)*

Rabbi Akiva offers a profound interpretation of this familiar verse. To "love one's neighbor" is not always a simple matter. Human nature is such that often people project upon other people the pain that they have experienced in their own lives, whether that pain comes from the way that others have treated them or from some accident or misfortune of nature. Akiva warns us against harboring such resentments—the subject of the beginning of the verse ("You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people"). Loving others must be the default, an overriding approach to human interaction, regardless of the pain and challenges we've faced or had inflicted upon us. As such, this principle can be for many an extraordinarily difficult one to fulfill—and hence, Rabbi Akiva would argue, the discipline of Halakhah is intended to help us achieve it.

Hub Pages: Literary Analysis: Robert Frost's Mending A Wall

In his Sefer HaMitzvot, the book listing all of the Biblical commandments, Rambam begins with the commandment to have faith in God. He bases this mitzvah on the beginning of Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Utterances (commonly called Commandments): "I am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2). This verse is not phrased as a commandment, more as a fact, which is how other medieval thinkers understood it. For the Rambam, however, this verse is simultaneously a commandment and a meta-commandment, the

foundation for all of the other mitzvot. After all, how can there be a commandment without a Commander? Without acceptance of God's existence, the entire Torah loses its rationale. Belief in God is both the first precept and the first principle.

Sefer HaChinuch, the anonymous 13th century explanation of the commandments, works his way through all of the mitzvot of the Torah, beginning with procreation in Bereishit chapter 1 (1:28). He does not consider this commandment's priority as accidental, for he indeed views it as foundational:

> *God wants the world to be settled, as it says (Isaiah 45:18), "I did not create it for naught, but [rather] formed it for habitation." This is a great commandment, through which all the commandments are observed, as [the Torah] was given to people and not to the ministering angels (Berakhot 25b).*

According to the author, the world and the Torah were created for humans. Without the proliferation of people on the Earth, God would have no recipient for the gift of Torah. The commandment of procreation thus forms the basis upon which the entire edifice of Torah stands.

One more mitzvah that commentators understood as establishing an important principle or two for our approach to Torah as a whole is the seemingly minor mitzvah of shiluach ha-kan, sending away a mother bird before taking her eggs. They were particularly struck by the attribution of long life to someone who fulfills this mitzvah (Devarim 22:7), found elsewhere only in the commandment to honor one's parents. Rashi regards this reward as paradigmatic: If it is given for "an easy command which involves no monetary loss," how much more will people who fulfill commandments requiring greater sacrifice receive it. Others see this mitzvah as embodying sympathy for the bird, preserving the species even while taking food, and extending to concern for people as well, with such abundance of feeling for creatures naturally extending to fellow humans.

Quantumtorah.org

I would like to suggest one more verse in the Torah that might be seen as straddling the line between a mitzvah and "great principle": "And the Lord God placed the human in the garden of Eden, to work it and care for it" (*le'ovdah uleshomrah*, Bereishit 2:15). As with Rambam's first precept, this verse on the surface seems a statement of fact rather than command: God created us to be farmers (rather than hunter-gatherers, like Esau). Indeed, this verse is not reckoned in standard lists of the mitzvot.

However, in the age of environmental collapse and climate chaos, this assertion of human purpose takes on the aspect of an overriding injunction. As the most powerful, God-like creature on Earth, humans are endowed with twinned responsibilities. We need to care for ourselves, through agriculture, construction, education, and the whole gamut of institutions that comprise our culture. At the same time, we must balance our usage of natural resources, including the totality of non-human life, with our protection and preservation of them. Our use of the world has too often become abuse, with little regard for the indiscriminate damage that our building, our farming, our hunting has inflicted. We have reached the point where this observation of human purpose must instead become our great principle, our overarching mitzvah that guides how we see our place within the larger realm of God's creation, which we have driven to the precipice through wanton destruction.

In the prayers recited during the Torah service, we call upon God to "build the walls of Jerusalem." We ask for the restoration of our national homeland, and specifically for the Temple as the place where we felt God's presence most intimately. In light of this preceding principle, we might think of these walls differently, serving two purposes. They protect the precincts of the city inside, enabling people to survive and create their culture, free from harm. At the same time, they limit us, leaving space for other species to thrive within their own dedicated habitat. They impose restrictions on the human appropriation of nature's resources and topography.

Pinterest

The eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson wrote of the need for a "half-earth," of people to allow half of the land to remain wild, for the benefit of all species. When we sing of Jerusalem's walls, may we think of them in these two senses, as preservers of us and of the web of life that pulses with God's creative majesty.

Shmittah: The M*itzvah* of Critical Thinking

By Rabbi Dov Lerea

Parashat Behar opens with the words, *The Torah teaches us: Hashem spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai: Tell Bene Yisrael: "When you come into the land that I give you, make the land keep Shabbat! For six years you can farm the field, and for six years trim your crops, and gather in the produce. But the 7th year is a Shabbat for the land to rest.* The *mitzvah* of *Shmittah,* perhaps more than any other, directs our attention to our relationship to the earth, to the natural rhythms of growth, decay, nourishment, cultivation and the wild. It directs us to stop cultivating, to stop changing the environment, to cease constant, perpetual technological manipulation of land and soil and vegetation.

Green Prophet 2014

Interestingly, the rabbis add an additional layer to the wording of *Shmittah*. The rabbis see this text as a source for understanding the nature of revelation at Mt. Sinai, so appropriate for Shavuot. They also understand *Shmittah* as a paradigm for ethical behaviors directed not only towards the natural environment, but towards the social and political ones that humans construct for themselves. Rashi, quoting earlier sources, makes this hermeneutic direction explicit.

Rashi asked, "Why mention explicitly that the *mitzvah* of *Shmittah* was taught at Mt. Sinai, since *all* of the *mitzvot* were taught at Mt. Sinai!" Rashi is teaching that *Shmittah* becomes a paradigm for the revelatory nature of the Oral Torah. *Shmittah* was transmitted as both general, overarching principles and specific, concrete details. Rashi, referencing the *Sifra,* explained that Sinai lends authority not only to the general, underlying values of every *mitzvah* Moshe taught, but also to the myriad of concrete details taught by rabbis in every generation to actualize those values.

The Midrash Lekach Tov (25:1:2) also applied this fundamental idea about two *Torot,* the written Torah of underlying values and the orally transmitted Torah of concrete details, to the *mitzvah* of *Shmittah.* In particular, the midrash took this idea of *Shmittah* as a paradigm for two *Torot* characterized by an ever-emergent oral revelation of concrete details, and applied it to the religious value of critical thinking.

The midrash opens by describing King Solomon's realization that wisdom is God's most precious gift to humanity. King Solomon, the son of King David, saw that wisdom, being able to think critically, was good

for people. The midrash states that when King Solomon prayed to God, he only asked for wisdom, for the ability to tell the difference between what is right and what is wrong. That is the meaning of a *pasuk* in the Book of Kings that describes King Shlomo's heart as "weighty." It means that Shlomo took matters more seriously and thought more carefully and deeply than other people. Not everyone's heart is as weighty as everyone else's. Not everyone thinks as carefully and as deeply as everyone else. ``

Solomon, by Gustave Dore via Walmart.com

Not stopping to think and discern wisely about what one is doing and see a larger picture can have disastrous effects. The midrash gives the following example. *Hashem* gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people. However, God wanted the people always to be aware that the world belongs to God and not to people. Therefore, in the Torah God commanded: *"Plant seeds and harvest crops for 6 years, but in the 7th year allow the land to rest in a Shabbat for the earth."* That way, everyone will always know and never forget that the earth belongs to the Creator, that God allows people to settle, cultivate and care for it. The midrash then notes what happened after the conquest of the land.

Once the Jewish people conquered the land of Israel, they did not allow the land to rest in the 7th year. They kept working it and working it, to produce more and more. I understand these examples to mean that once people believe that they can do whatever they want to the earth, they forget that the earth belongs to God. Once they forgot that, they forgot that God has expectations of us as people. The people behaved without boundaries, serving only themselves. The classical prophets all document this process. Disloyalty to God took two forms: the worship of idols, and the worship of themselves for more wealth and power. The people did not feed the hungry. They did not provide homes for the homeless. They did not support the needy. They stole and extorted land from the disenfranchised.

From this perspective, *Shmittah* is a foundational *mitzvah.* There is nothing in life that is more foundational than the earth. The earth literally supports all of us. Modern people have become deeply alienated from the earth. We rarely sit or lie on the ground, or walk barefoot to feel it beneath our feet. The midrash is emphasizing that the deep, underlying value of living as God's servants, and living in an awareness of that servitude, is grounded, literally, in our relationship to the earth. The midrash then teaches that many concrete ethical commitments and actions emerge from that awareness. If people remember that the earth belongs to God, it would follow that people would feel responsible for what happens in the world and how we treat each other. *Shmittah* teaches us to think critically to distinguish between right and wrong. *Shmittah* teaches the big idea that the world belongs to *Hashem,* and people are God's servants and workers. By extension, keeping *Shmittah*, withdrawing from the seductive process of constantly taking, exploiting, using, defoliating, poisoning and violating the earth, humanity could pause and look at this earth with reverence, respect and awe. And then perhaps, maybe, people would look at each other the same way, to serve each other with respect, dignity and kindness. People could

shop in a grocery store without being murdered through the insane proliferation of weapons of mass destruction that Americans somehow revere, and they would be able to share a sacred land with others without murdering each other's children. If only, as Rashi and the midrash suggest, people would stop and think.

Matt Rourke/AP/REX

Shavuot, Ruth, and Non-Random Acts of Kindness

Marla Brown Fogelman

Compared to Pesach and Sukkot, the other two pilgrimage festivals, I sometimes think of Shavuot as having middle child status. It often garners little if any notice in the secular world and even among many Jews—perhaps because it doesn't revolve around such standout practices as a Seder or Sukkah. Or maybe because, as discussed in an OU article[1], it's not obvious that Shavuot, albeit "a very crucial anniversary" merits the same status as the other two Shalosh Regalim.

I have long had a particular fondness for Shavuot, though, especially after the labor-intensive Pesach. This is a holiday that features entrees of blintzes instead of brisket, takes place over two days instead of eight, and offers children's tunes about flowers and first fruits instead of frogs and Pharoahs. And then there's the story of Ruth, the Megillah read on the second day of Shavuot, which offers a deceptively simple tale jam-packed with themes such as transformation, redemption, commitment, and loving-kindness.

Ruth, 1852 Illustrated London News via Antiqua Print Gallery via Amazon.com

Looking back, I believe that my first introduction to this story occurred not at Hebrew school or even at the shul of my youth, but at the movie theater, when my grandparents took me to see *The Story of Ruth*. This ramped-up, Hollywoodized version of the biblical narrative featured made-up, scary parts like Moabite child sacrifice as well as a tender Boaz-Ruth romance. But I loved that it was a big, technicolor film with sonorous pronouncements by the lead characters and almost the same level of melodrama as Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*.

Yet leaving aside the fictionalized, heightened Hollywood depiction, I have found that this little story with big themes continues to resonate. So it's no surprise that unlike the Shavuot holiday, the Book of Ruth is well-known to both Jews and non-Jews alike. After all, who can resist a family story about loyalty and

[1] Orthodox Union. June 30, 2006. *Shavuot: Megillat Ruth*.

devotion that features protagonists who are decent and honorable and "do the right thing?" As Biblical scholar Robert Alter writes, in his introduction to the Book of Ruth, this narrative is "one of the few truly successful stories in any literature that concentrates almost exclusively on good people." [2]

In addition to Shavuot's place in the Shalosh Regalim, what also seems less obvious is how the story of Ruth connects easily to this holiday. Some say it has to do with Ruth's story taking place during the time of the wheat harvest. Others point primarily to how Ruth's conversion/embrace of Torah replicates the Jewish nation's acceptance of the Torah at Sinai, resulting in a type of transformation for both. Just as the Jews were forever changed by receiving the Torah and commandments, so was Ruth's life transformed when she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Naomi's people and Naomi's God.

But I find myself especially partial to the interpretation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l who writes that the main linkage between Shavuot and the Book of Ruth is that of loving-kindness or chessed. R' Sacks calls the Book of Ruth "the supreme story of kindness in the Tanach" and refers to many sources, beginning with Rambam, in positing that doing acts of loving-kindness for others is the "whole purpose of the Torah." At Sinai, he writes, we received a covenant, but most important, we received God's unconditional love. [3] Chessed is thus an embodiment of God's unconditional love, which Ruth and Naomi and Boaz demonstrated through their many acts of kindness toward each other. Thus, through chessed, or what I think of as performing non-random acts of kindness, the "good people" in the story of Ruth transformed each other's lives—and several generations later, the lives of the Jewish people.

The Gleaners, Jean-Francois Millet via joysofmuseums.com

Now, as I contemplate the themes and layers of meaning in Megillat Ruth, I am more than ever persuaded that Shavuot not only deserves first-tier status among the Shalosh Regalim but also much broader recognition. This holiday, which I have grown to appreciate on a richer and deeper level, underscores the power and importance of performing non-random acts of kindness—which also makes it an ideal time for thinking further about social action.

I hope to be able to continue to do my part.

[2] R. Alter. 2019. *The Hebrew Bible: Vol. 3: The Writings*, p. 622.
[3] J. Sacks. *The Redemptive Power of Chessed.* [Sefaria]

Early Signs of Hebrew

by Aaron E. Bulman

BAH BOH BEH

thus begun
the beginning

in

this noisy conspire
to un
change the old
ways of old
jews
in forgotten places

now disappeared

whole towns un
mapped for
saked
but named
for yeshivas
we miss pronounce

even G'd His Self

His holy Name
un
spoke
must doubt the noise

JewishToyStore.com

AH OH EH

Ahrelle oh Ahrelle
come forth
to saying
he sits for you

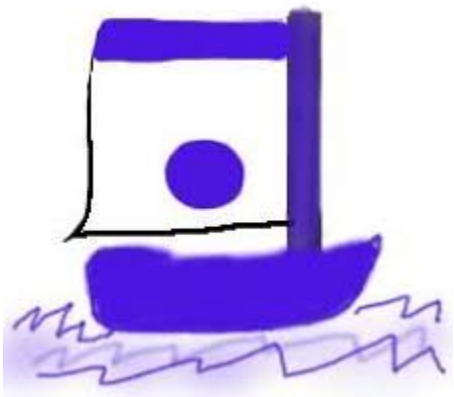
he waits
for you
for you to say
the forgotten parts
..of jew
memorizing
jew..

open the books and say he says

til words re form
to make names
after
whom I'm named

letter by letter

even as I re-name
the world
to go again by
Aharon
but do not yet
know myself by heart



cartoonhebrew.com

no. I memorize instead

run-on jews
each
sentenced
to long
worded
imitations of G'd

imp revising

the painful falldowns
the quick get-ups
of I'm ok
to say over
the books over
which we pore
tracing

whole families
treed in foreign tongues

I do not unnerstan
about families disappeared
I seen em in pictures
snapped
in blacks and whites
in beards and wigged
then disappeared w/o a trace

except the fire; G'd's fire memorized

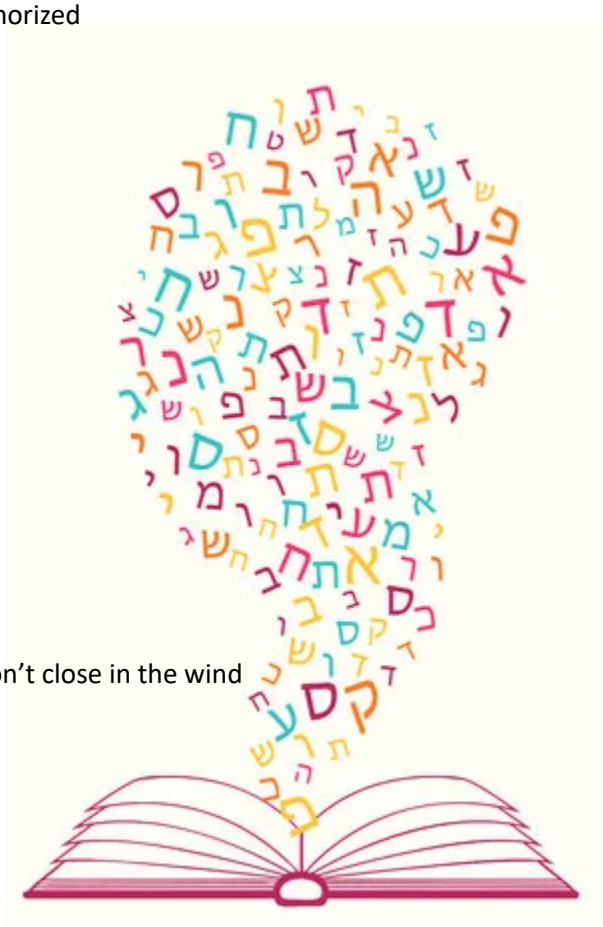
I've seen the light
the flame
the heat
so seen but
unshaped or
rather ever-changing

for better or worse

moment to moment
its shape
jags
memory to memory

like a book in hebrew that won't close in the wind

in places of longing
longing nights
by imagined
fires
hidden places
where families
re gather
gathering them
selves
to gether to cozy
themselves
poring
the longish lists of G'd



123RF.com

His burn His burnt His burners
even as armies overrun
the study-houses
filling books with burn

letter by letter

translators abandon the vernacular
to yowls
in yiddisher places
about the instability of words
or the silence of G'd;
the sharp burn of belief
that it comes that it goes
like passing armies
of unreading bookburners
in rooms of carelessly thrown books

each page open to an unspoke Name

praising the sun's shine
a bird's fly
a jew's tenacity
as if we are all children

as if all is shine or fly or tenacity

we face east
back
& forth
almost
lost
but rooted
in small rooms

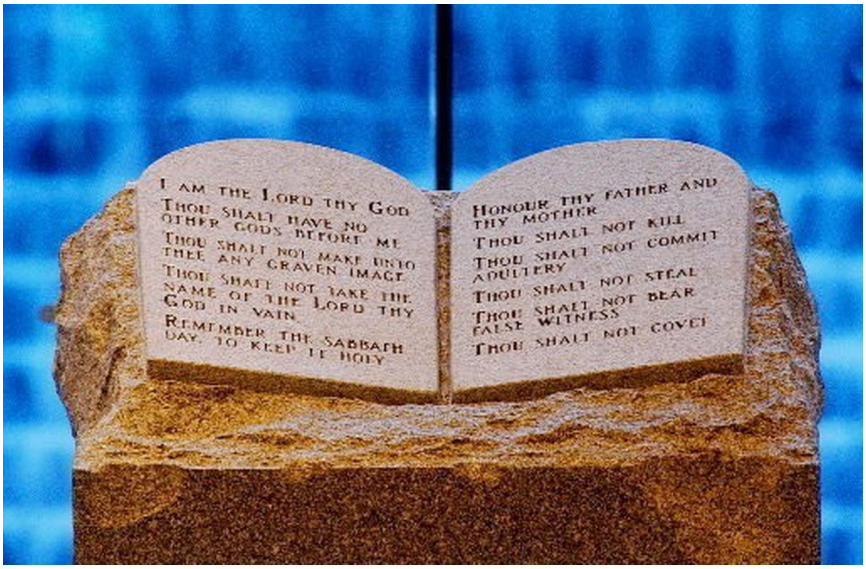
we gather in the forgot and we make sounds.

[originally published in *The Evansville Review*]

The Ten Commandments and the Relative Value of Mitzvot

By Michael Goldblum

Enshrined in a DeMille epic, flanked by open-pawed lions - I just saw it on a pro-lifer's hand-made poster, brandished into a pro-choicer's air space - on tefillin bags and chanukiyot, courthouse lawns and stained glass windows: the two stone tablets are memes, visual shortcuts for Torah, the Bible, G-d's revelation to Israel on Sinai. Sinai is the telos to the exodus, and the tablets are the tangible receipt. Even broken they were precious, stored under golden sculpted cherubs in the Holy of Holies: Uzzah was struck dead on the spot for touching their box. The Ten Commandments are thought to be the apex utterance of the Hebrew bible, its moral center and core message. Some of us stay up all night tonight, atoning for our forebears' lackadaisical lead-in to the true revelation: we can't wait to get those tablets.



AL.com

But if the Ten Commandments are so central, such an embodiment and representative of the Torah in total, why do they go missing the rest of the year? You'd think they would be central to our prayer, venerated in our worship, a daily touchstone to strengthen the bonds of connection by recalling this moment of face to face connection between us and our Creator. Compare the Ten Commandments with the Shema: there's no holiday devoted to the Shema, no revelatory fireworks surrounding its utterance, no movies, embroideries or carvings to celebrate it - yet we reprise it several times daily, we find it in the center of the laws of prayer, measuring the times when it can be said; we secure it to our doorposts, lash it onto our arms and foreheads; it is the last breath on the martyr's dying lips. Why don't the ten Hestonesque proclamations get equal or higher billing in our Jewish lives? Where did they go?

> *Berakhot 12a:3-7:*
>
> *The Gemara related that the priests in the Temple* ***read the Ten Commandments,*** *along with the sections of* ***Shema, VeHaya im Shamoa, VaYomer, True and Firm, Avoda, and the priestly benediction.***

Rav Yehuda said *that* ***Shmuel said: Even in the outlying areas,*** *outside the Temple,* ***they sought to recite*** *the Ten Commandments* ***in this manner*** *every day.* ***But they had already abolished*** *recitation of the Ten Commandments* ***due to the grievance of the heretics,*** *who argued that the entire Torah, with the exception of the Ten Commandments, did not emanate from G-d.*

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 1:5

It is good to recite the passage of the Binding (Genesis 22:1-19), the passage of the Manna (Exodus 16:4-36), the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-13), and the passages of the burnt-offering (Leviticus 1:1-17), tribute-offering (Leviticus 2:1-13), peace-offering (Leviticus 3:1-17), sin-offering (Vayikra 4:27-35), and guilt-offering. ***Rem"a:*** *But only in private is it permissible to recite the Ten Commandments each day: it is forbidden to recite them in congregation.*

The distinction that the Torah grants the Ten Commandments was, in the view of the sages, an invitation to heresy: these are the *best* commandments, it's all [literally] downhill from here. By actively diminishing them, omitting them from our rituals, specifically because of their biblical spotlight, maybe they won't outshine the other 603 mitzvot that didn't benefit from such a cinematic presentation. All mitzvot are supposed to be treated the same, none more important than the next: from shatnes to shabbos, from tzaraa't to talmud torah, all are equal in the eyes of G-d; any attempt to ascribe a hierarchy is human folly and doctrinal error. The rabbis in refashioning Judaism after the fall of the temple actively sought to level the mitzvah playing field, render all equal in the eyes of G-d:

IMDB.com

Pirkei Avot 2:1:

Rabbi [Yehudah haNasi] said: Be as scrupulous in observing a [seemingly] minor commandment as a [seemingly] major commandment, because you do not know the value of each commandment.

Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:1-2:

Only the Master of Opinions [that is, God] knows how the comparison between sins and merits is made.

It is hard for us to resist the urge to pick and choose, to favor the mitzvot that come easy over those that come hard. It is natural to ascribe an order to commandments based not only on the Torah's presentation as a story, but also because of our upbringing, our culture, and our own internal map of G-d's domain in our lives: can we compare the time we spend worrying about the accuracy of our scales

or the destruction of Moab, say, to the bone-crushing anguish we feel chasing chametz out of our homes before pessach? Isn't it second nature to think, from our years of classes and from the examples of elders, that the High Holidays are more important - more holy - than Shmini Atzeret, or [yes] even Shavuot?

Mishnah, Peah 1:1; see also Shabbat 127a:

These are the things that produce fruits for a person to enjoy in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring father and mother, acts of kindness [gemilut chassadim], and bringing peace between two people. But the study of Torah is equal to all of them (V'talmud Torah k'neged kulam).

BibleBeltBalabusta.com

The sages themselves fall prey to the urge to pick favorites: talmud torah is #1, first among [not too] equals. Elsewhere, other hierarchies prevail: only three mitzvot are called "chamurot" [strict, difficult], worth dying for: murder, idol worship, and sexual sins; any other transgression can be done on pain of death. Aren't these three then the most important to G-d? Whatever happened to R Yehuda HaNasi's mitzvah-neutrality?

So if the sages themselves picked winners and losers, why do they work so hard to squelch the Ten Commandments? Do we maintain a commitment to radical equality of mitzvot, or give in to the urge and pick favorites?

Maybe the sages felt that these ten specifically were in some way not worthy of being placed on that pedestal. That can explain why many scholars view the Ten Commandments as categories covering the rest of the Torah, that they were chapter headings heralding deeper dives into the areas of life that halacha sought to govern and shape.

I personally am drawn to the egalitarian leveling of mitzvot: there is something divine, for me, about resisting the urge to pick favorites, a hubris in our deciding what is most important to G-d. But maybe in leveling them I have to take some active, corrective measures: when flattening a curled page I have to counter-roll it first. My education and upbringing instilled in me a bias towards feeling that I truly know

which mitzvot are more important, more cherished, more worthy of my time and effort; so maybe to break this ingrained notion I have to actively reverse it to reset.

Religion, I feel on a gut level, is ritual. *Bein adam li-makom*: Shabbat, kashrut, tefillah, fasting and eating when demanded, mezuzot on our homes, mikva and sukkah. This stuff felt like Judaism to me. And I am not alone. The prophets consistently called our ancestors out for this tendency, urging us to not take the ritual-forward route:

> Isaiah 58:3-7:
>
> *Why, when we fasted, did You not see? When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed? Because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers! Because you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such as to make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when Adonai is favorable? No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin."*

Bradford County Courthouse, FL via Robbinsbecher.com

If it was hard to get the balance right in those days, it is harder now, here: we live in a democratic country founded on Enlightenment ideas about natural rights and with relatively strong institutions that aim to practice blind justice. Interpersonal ethics, values, are beyond or transcendent of any one particular religion: they are cultural, political. They are American.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, a Russian immigrant, recognized that the culture of American democracy was materially different, better, than the European world he came from, because of the legal system built moral values into every aspect of life here:

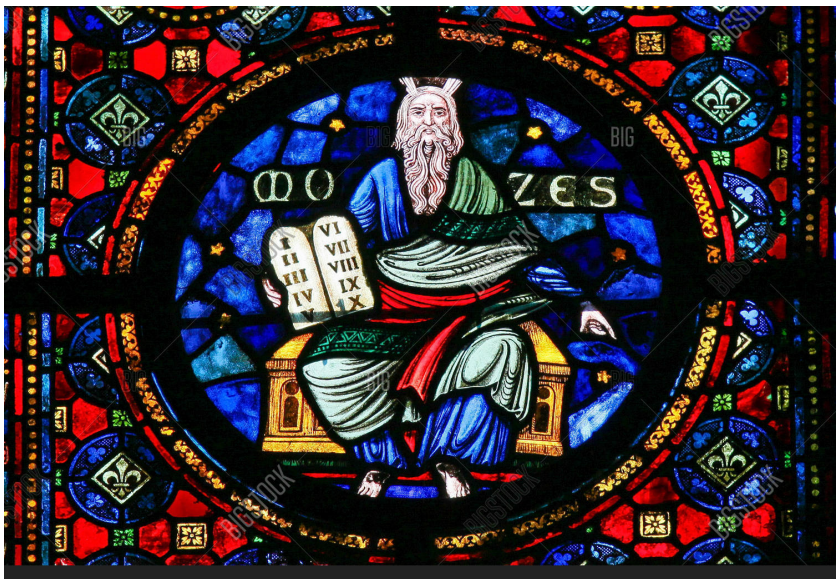
> *R. Moshe Feinstein, Letter, 1984:*
>
> *On reaching the shores of the United States, Jews found a safe haven. The rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights have allowed us the freedom to practice our religion without interference and to live in this republic in safety.*

But even here in the *Goldeneh Medineh*, as a religious minority we reflexively huddle together protectively, we create a separate space, a place where we can be Jewish in a sheltered environment away from the glare of outsiders. We feel our difference, we remember how others treated us as

different, as less, as outsiders. Even those of us who identify as modern Orthodox have kept relatively apart, managing and limiting our interactions with the Christian community: we work together, we shop together, we share in consumer benefits, entertainment and culture; but we live close to shul in neighborhoods where we can predominate, we go to school apart, we maintain separation as a form of self protection. We learn to bifurcate, to render unto Caesar as required but keep our Torah to ourselves.

This isolationist instinct, instilled by halacha and carried over from the old country, was part of my life growing up in the 1970's suburbs. Judaism inhabited a separate realm apart within America. My ethics felt inherited from culture and country, while Judaism gave me the stuff that was not shared, that was just ours: the ritual, the texts, the "Jewish" values as distinct from culture's, set me apart.

This is where correction is called for. It is this bias that needs to be reversed, uncurled. I must see *hilchot bein adam l'chaveiro* as equal to, as uniquely ours, as *bein adam limakom*. While the culture's and our *middot* may overlap, they are not the same. As observant Jews for whom halacha is important, our ethics should not be felt as individual choices, inspired by rational consideration and philosophies of the common good: they are commandments, delivered at Sinai amid thunder and trumpets. If the ethical, interpersonal values that we experience as Americans, as members of western society, can - in addition - be experienced as ours specially and solely as Jews, as mysterious and as beyond reason as tefillin or shatnes, then we can bring a freshness and zeal, the dogged commitment borne of millenia, to the values of charity, caring for the poor, protecting our environment.



bigstock.com

These mitzvot are ours, our inheritance, our Torah, our commandments. Balanced in Moshe's hands, the two stone plaques balance him out as he steps gingerly down the mountain: one side with *mitzvot bein adam lamakom,* and the other *bein adam lechaveiro.* Equal in weight.

Reflecting on the Pathway from the Ten Plagues to the Ten Words Through the Mystical Tradition of Counting the Omer

By Rick Feldman

I

I'd just like to say that these are the musings of a Jew with limited learning, but a desire to find a way to connect my inner thoughts within our traditions: I appreciate the patience and teachings of all of the readers. And I welcome their suggestions and insights.

> *Generally speaking, Judaism considers the need for constant alertness and mindfulness to avoid falling into slavery by behaving in reactive or addictive modes of functioning. This is actually the deeper way of looking at the Exodus. In the actual words of the Haggadah, 'In each generation, a person is obligated to see him/her self as if personally experiencing the release from Mitzrayim, literally meaning narrowness, or constraints.'*
>
> **The Ten Plagues as Guidelines to Character Development and Spiritual Growth Yehudis Fishman**

This year as Passover approached I thought about the journey we take each year at this time. It starts with ten plagues, and travels a path through seven weeks (connected to the ten sefirah) and concludes at the ten words that are delivered at Mount Sinai. Is it not interesting that we start this journey with ten acts of G-d and end with 10 Words of G-d, passing through 10 sefirah?

What does this journey teach us? How are we elevated by the Passover story? What are the lessons of the journey through 49 days of personal refinement (see Rabbi Simon Jacobson's; A Spiritual Guide to Counting the Omer?); And how are we empowered by the encounter of Mose with G-d and the sharing of The Commandments with us at Mount Sinai?

Omer Counter, via Wikipedia

II

To begin I had a thought about the ten plagues. First off, they are so strange! From year to year I can never remember them or the order in which they occur. And second they are all physical and external. They are from the seen world. They were directed at the Egyptians by G-d, presumably for character flaws of their king to show him that the G-d of the Hebrews was awesome and/or to punish him. And also to possibly draw a distinction for the Israelites that the journey that they were to embark on was to lead them to a more inner world – a world of hearing, a world of conscience rooted in understanding the past, prayer and bringing forth justice.

But how do we share these plagues with our family and draw some connection to ourselves in the context of human character? So to make the plagues more relevant and to encourage our guests to look inside themselves to recognize the 'false standards' that Pharaoh, messenger on earth of the divine, had instituted to keep his people under control and imprison the Jews I created a list of "personal flaws of human character and associated them with the traditional plagues reciting them together at the seder.

Here's what I came up with:
Blood: Senseless hatred, Jealousy:
Frogs: Conjuring, deception, false news;
Lice: spreading rumors, gossip, lashon hara, conspiring;
Beasts: bullying, threatening:
Cattle disease: meanness, imposing harsh living and working conditions;
Boils: prejudice, ignorance;
Hail: insensitivity, lack of feeling, cruelty;
Locust: devastation,
Darkness: imprisoning, paralysis, despair, hopelessness,
Death of the first born: no path of return, break with reality, psychosis, suicide.

III

Rabbi Simon Jacobson in the introduction to his book A Spiritual Guide to The Counting of the Omer, says “This book is a guide to personal refinement. It is designed to take the reader on a forty-nine step journey (over seven weeks) through the human personality, refining and perfecting areas of the emotions as the journey progresses.”

From Rabbi Scott Jacobson, the Art of the Ten Plagues

In essence as we came out of Egypt, which we all symbolically reenact at our seders, we were (and are) at the spiritually lowest rung. In order to repair our emotional lives we set upon a daily process of self-introspection, each week focusing on one of seven serifah and each day of the week connecting to each of the other six serifah.

For example the first week is Chesed: Lovingkindness; benevolence. So each day we associate Chesed with the six other sefirah one for each day eg: Chesed-She-be-Chesed; then Gevurah-SHe-be-Chesed; Tiferes-She-be-Chesed; Netzach-She-be-Chesed;Hod She-be-Chesed;Yesod She-be-Chesed; and Malchus She-be-Chesed.

As an additional task I set out to examine each of the 'flaws' that I associated with the plagues at the Seder with one of the Sefirah. As Rabbi Yehudis Fishman noted in
The Ten Plagues as Guidelines to Character Development and Spiritual Growth
"*It is in the more mystical and philosophical commentaries that we find the plagues representing universal and archetypal human failings. They are looked upon as fallen states from the higher potentials that human beings can achieve as reflections of conscious creations in the Divine Image.*"

Notice how these 'flaws' contrast with the traits that we want to bring forward as we move towards our liberation. How would you organize these flaws?

Through **Loving kindness** I can diminish Jealousy, rage and anger, cruelty
Through **Discipline** I can diminish spreading rumors, lashona hara, gossiping, false news
Through **Compassion** I can diminish prejudice, imposing harsh work conditions, meanness, lack of feeling
Through **Endurance** I can diminish devastation, darkness
Through **Humility** I can diminish hopelessness, threatening, bullying
Through **Bonding** I can diminish break with reality, psychosis, lies, denial, no path of return
Through **Nobility** I can diminish insensitivity, embarrassment, shame, ignorance

IV

Today (as I write this) is the fortieth day of the Omer, an auspicious day given the import of the number forty, as representing "righteous judgment" (משפט צדק; *mishpat tsedeq*; Deut 16:18). And I must share with you that last night, for the first time this Omer Count I forgot to count! Well I didn't exactly forget to count. I remembered, but then I fell asleep! Which might seem trivial to some, but to me it sends out a cautionary signal. And it might mean simply that I am a little uncertain how to proceed in this essay. Can one link the plagues and flaws of character to the Ten Words?

So here is my best effort.
If you have no other G-d, then you have learned not to feel despair or hopelessness
If you do not make physical images of G-d (idols), then you have learned not to conjure.
If you do not disrespect God's name, then you have learned not to create rumors or talk lashon hara.

If you Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, then you have learned not to be cruel or imposing harsh living and working conditions.
If you honor your father and mother, then you have learned not to feel there is no path of return.
If you do not commit murder, you have learned not to conspire or act jealous or rageful.
If you do not commit adultery, then you have learned not to be insensitive or deceptive.
If you do not steal, then you have learned not to create false news, rumors.
If you do not bear false witness, then you have learned not to create lies.
If you do not act envious of others, you have learned not to be jealous.

V

"Chesed of malchut: Lovingkindness in Nobility: "Healthy sovereignty is always kind and loving. An effective leader needs to be warm and considerate." Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Today is Yom Jerusalem, and I find today's thoughts on the Omer a fitting way to end this reflection. I have found this pathway constructive in my personal journey. It has elevated my search for meaning and helped me to find a constructive way to prepare for our encounter at Sinai. It is my hope that next year at your Seder you will embark on this journey of self discovery.

The Ten Plagues from the Szyk Haggadah

Tikkun Leil Shavuot

By Tao Moran

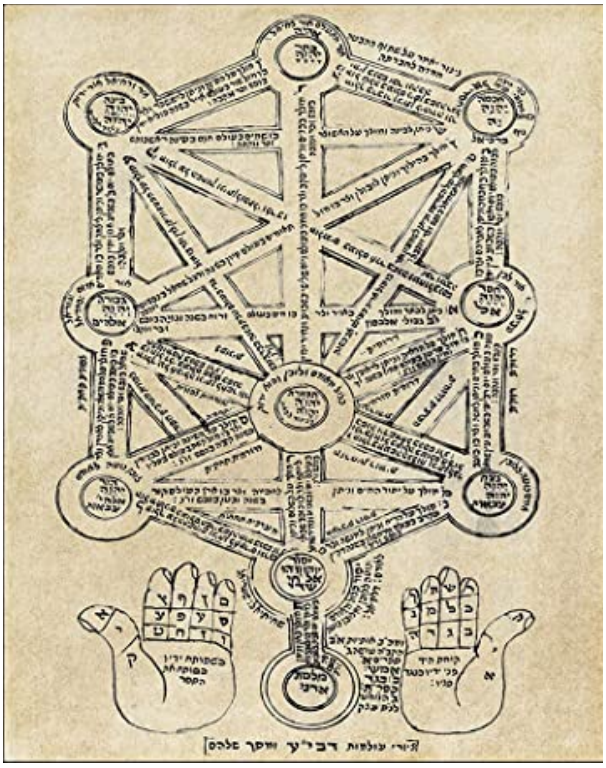
We count 49 days of the Omer from Pesach to Shavuot. Counting seven weeks from the end of our Exodus in Egypt to the Matan Torah on Sinai. Shavuot is mostly an agrarian festival celebrating the wheat harvest. In Shemot 34: 22 it says, “And thou shalt observe the feast of weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the feast of ingathering at the year's end.” In preparation of this ingathering we study.

Why stay up all night, or at least until 12:01? Why is it a Tikkun? There is a Midrash that recounts that at the time of the giving of the Torah the entire Jewish people were sleeping and Moses had to wake them with a shofar blast. The Ari wanted to repair this by creating a Tikkun of staying up to study in order to be prepared to receive the gift of Torah.

What are the Tikkun that we need to prepare in our lives, in our Olams? In the preparation from Pesach to Shavuot have we been able to repair or at least engage in reflection? In the Sefirot that accord with each week we go from wisdom to kingship.

As we come together in the ingathering of the weeks, may we find the kingship of the Torah. May we find the repair of our internal Olams and may we seek to continuously repair what and where we can through the Sefirot of learning.

- *Chochmah* - wisdom,
- *Binah* - understanding,
- *Daat* - knowledge,
- *Chessed* - kindness,
- *Gevurah* - strength,
- *Tiferet* - beauty,
- *Netzach* - victory,
- *Hod* - splendor,
- *Yesod* - foundation,
- and *Malchut* - kingship.



Yellow Bird Art and Design Store via Amazon

Shedding Light on Shavuot

By Rabbi Dr. Wendy Zierler

Judean Hills, Cityseeker.com

Amir Gilboa, "Light Twirling"

The light that rules –	**אור סובב**
It walks with us on all the paths	האור המולך -
And clutches the mountain ranges. And afterward continues	עמנו הולך הוא בכל הדרכים
to walk,	ונאחז ברכסים. אחר ימשיך וילך.
But like a mischievous boy it runs back	אך כנער שובב במרוצה עוד יחזור
To the mountain range. And smiles.	אל הרכס. יחייך.
And it, too, fills up with light.	וגם הוא ימלא אור.
Light. In all the paths. In the forgotten pits.	אור. בכל הדרכים. בבורות השכוחים.
Revealed light. Light of praise.	אור שגלוי הוא. אור של שבחים.
Light of life. Light of every fresh tree.	אור החיים. אור כל עץ רענן.
The light of continuity. The seed**.** The cloud patch.	אור ההמשך. הזרע. העננה.
Blood light that heats the stone.	אור הדמים המחיים את האבן.
Supernal light, father of every aspect and color.	אור העליון, אבי כל גון וכל צבע.
Light that twirls and whirls in its melody rounds	אור סובב וסובב במעגלי ניגוניו
And comes from its heavens	ובא משמיו
And newly kisses the land with wonderment	ונושק אל הארץ בפליאה מחדש
Like morning that comes sun-shone	כבוקר הבא זְרוח-השמש
After night that rises up from the threshold	אחר לילה שקם מן הסף
To walk	ללכת
Calmly. Slumbering. Like an old man in the Temple.	רגוע. רדום. כזקן במקדש.

Shavuot celebrates two distinct but related things: the harvest and the Torah; the giving of physical as well as spiritual sustenance. As such, it is an eloquent reminder to us of the inextricability in Judaism of the earthly and the heavenly.

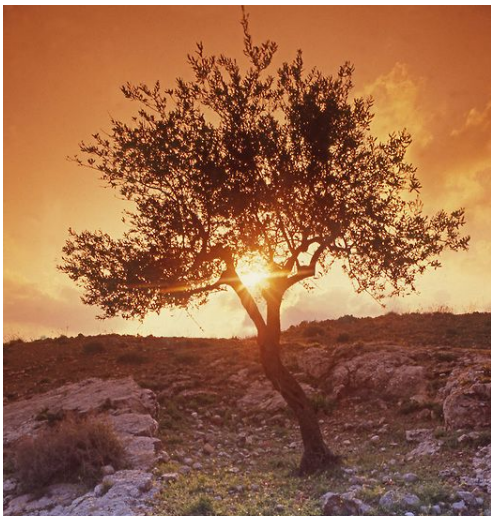
At the center of the biblical holiday of Shavuot is the giving of *bikkurim*, the first harvested fruits of the land, a ritual that is sacralized by the *vidui,* the recitation before the Cohen of a distilled version of Israelite history from the time of Abraham through the Exodus from Egypt. (Deut. 26). In addition to linking the land to the sweep of early biblical history, the joy of the harvest to the story of the Israelite enslavement and subsequent liberation, the *bikkurim* confession includes a declaration that the harvester has already set aside tithes for the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, adding several social-justice prerequisites to the harvest celebration. The *vidui* concludes with the harvester's plea that God look down from God's holy heavenly abode and bless the people and the land promised to us, a land flowing with milk and honey (Deut 26:15), completing the connection between physical and spiritual produce.

hebraic-roots.com

Amir Gilboa's "Or Sovev" (Light Twirling) enacts a similar merger of heaven and earth, via the metaphor of light. Proverbs 6:23 describes the Torah and its commandments as a form of illumination:

בג כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה, וְתוֹרָה אוֹר; וְדֶרֶךְ חַיִּים, תּוֹכְחוֹת מוּסָר. **23** For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah is light, and reproofs of instruction are the way of life.

Gilboa's poem, I would argue, builds on this metaphor of the Torah as light. More than that: the poem personifies the light as a giddy pilgrim on a path across the land to the Temple. Read in the context of Shavuot, the poem can be seen as bringing together the giving of the Torah and the *bikkurim* aspects of Shavuot in one united image.



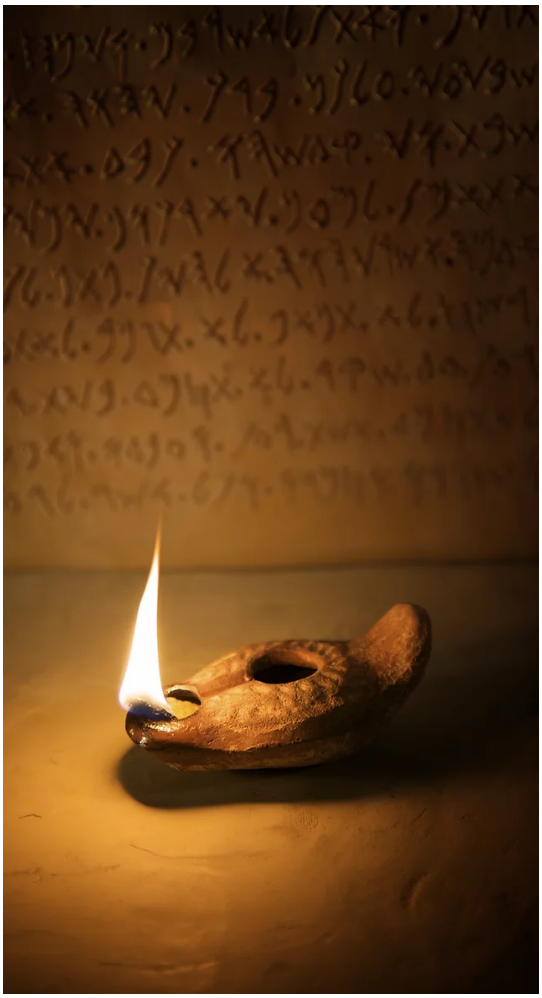
Nowitz Photography 2012

The light whirls and wends its way through the mountains; it fills the hills and the cisterns; it enlivens, refreshes, warms, and colors. It comes down from the heaven and kisses the land, bringing wonder to the world like a new fruit. The light twirls through the land, then calmly arrives and falls asleep, like an old {priest] in the Temple. The pilgrimage is complete.

Secular Israeli culture has traditionally reveled in Shavuot and its symbolism of agricultural bounty. One Shavuot song after another describes the carrying of baskets of first fruits from one end of the country to the other, clearly privileging the land-of-Israel-centered aspects of Shavuot over the acceptance and obligations of the Torah.

For those of us living in cities in the Diaspora, however, images of processions of farm workers carrying baskets of first fruits on their shoulders and on their heads seem remote and nostalgic. Not just in the Diaspora, but in Israel, too, where agriculturalism and collective farms have been replaced in the consciousness of the people by high tech innovation and Initial Public Offerings.

Gilboa's poem with its wide-eyed, exultant images of light going round and parading and across the land recalls the pilgrimage culture of Shavuot, but also the idea of revelation, spiritual illumination, and innovation. In the poem, light / Torah rules (molekh), but also moves and progresses (holekh), as implied by the use of the term "halakhah" to refer to the corpus of Jewish law. Torah as light is a force of new life and continuity, rather than stasis. It is radically pluralistic and multi-sensory; it includes young and old alike. It returns over and over again and is ever-renewed. A form of intellectual and spiritual *bikkurim*, like an idea, a poem, or a newly-written prayer.



LightofTorah.com

Through Grief To Action

By Yali Szulanski

Kladys Castellón prays during a vigil for the victims of a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, on Tuesday, May 24, 2022 Billy Calzada/AP

"What can we do?" This question reverberates across the landscape of our collective consciousness every time we encounter another tragedy. When we experience tragedy after tragedy, the echo of "what can we do?" becomes a cacophony, as we try to sort our own grief from that of entire communities, towns, and even entire countries.

For many months now, it has been impossible to check into current events without seeing images that tear out our hearts, bring acidic tears to our eyes, and the rising magma of rage in our cores. Between a war that has stretched on for months; shootings in grocery stores, subways, and schools; not to mention a still ongoing pandemic - we are living in a constant state of grief. It is grief that can never really move through the states into acceptance, because so much of what we see is impossible to accept. When we think of the lives of children and teachers lost while attending school - our blood boils. There is no getting over it, there is no accepting it. There is also no forgetting it, and just moving on.

In times of grief and sorrow, many of us will turn to text for answers - what has been done before? What can be done now? This week, when we first open Megillat Ruth, we enter a world of sorrow. A famine has devastated Bethlehem, and has forced Naomi, her husband, and her two sons to leave their home. They settle in Moab, where within just one line of text - her husband dies. Within a few more lines of text, her sons marry - and then also die. Naomie is left alone with her daughters in law. Mothers and wives today can relate to the shadows of sorrow now surrounding Naomie and her daughters in law, Ruth and Orpah. What was once a life of abundance, is now one of complete emptiness. With her heart broken, Naomie turns to her faith. She knows that Hashem has been faithful to the people of Israel, and she decides to return to her land. She carries her grief with her as she walks out from Moab, from a place of sorrow. She sets out - but tells her daughters in law to leave her.She cannot bear to carry her grief, and theirs too. Orpah does leave her- choosing the route of carrying her grief and moving on, creating life anew. Ruth, however, stays with Naomie - knowing full well that her action may not yield

any result, but nevertheless having faith that they can turn their sorrow into something else- something that, perhaps, will change their lives and those of others to come

In Ruth 1:16-17, Ruth tells Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." Ruth says - whatever you choose to do, I will do with you. However you choose to move through this inexplicable grief, I will do so with you.

Naomi and Her Daughters, George Dawe, Tate Gallery

So, what can we do? We make our voices heard in the ways that we can. We say "yes! I will go! I will do something about this!" We turn the cacophony into a rally cry, into organized efforts to make change, and we give that grief a powerful voice. Many of us will turn to immediate action - fundraising, calling elected leaders and council people, protesting, signing petitions. We will walk out, hand in hand, and turn our hopelessness into something glorious - into action that changes laws and saves lives.

A Streamlined System of Justice and the Possibility of Teshuvah as the Bedrock for Standing at Sinai: Reflections of a Correctional Chaplain for Shavuot

By Rabbi Gabe Kretzmer Seed

When we think of Matan Torah and the Revelation at Sinai, we might tend to focus on the Aseret Hadibrot/Ten Commandments and the spectacle of the thunder and Shofarot which accompanied them. For me, especially as a correctional chaplain, the two chapters which precede the Aseret Hadibrot themselves in Shemot Chapter 20 are prerequisites for God's words and commands at Sinai. These preludes contain invaluable lessons for how to implement the Torah's vision for individuals to be in relationship with God and for a larger community and society founded upon and committed to justice.

"Jethro Advising Moses" by Jan van Bronchorst (Google Art Project]

In Shemot 18, the beginning of Parashat Yitro, Moshe's father in law Yitro arrives with Moshe's wife and two sons after the Children of Israel left Egypt and crossed the Sea of Reeds. After being warmly greeted by Moshe, Aharon, and the leaders of the nation, Yitro is disturbed by what he sees the next day. Moshe was sitting from dawn to dusk answering every question and dispute from among the nation of over 2 million souls. Yitro wisely noticed that this status quo would wear down both Moshe and the People of Israel, and instead suggested a system of different levels of judges and courts who would tend to the needs of the people, with only the most difficult disputes being judged directly by Moshe. Yitro correctly

noted that a justice system which is inefficient and unresponsive will not only weigh down the judges but results in a miscarriage of justice for the accused and the victims.

One of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which was out of sight to most of us is the fact that the court system ground to a halt in March 2020,with most court appearances and almost all jury trials suspended for months or even years. Where I work as a chaplain in city jails, those who are incarcerated for pretrial detention whether because they can't pay bail or because they are remanded into custody by the judge have waited for months or years longer than they might have otherwise for their cases to be resolved. While generally not the fault of the jails or department of correction, many of my congregants will go to court once per month and either not see a judge at all, or just get their court date adjourned another month or more. I feel frustrated when I see so many other important aspects of our society reopening while the backlog in the courts seems to remain quite severe, at least from my perspective ministering to those waiting for trial. These factors also lead to increased pressure for those who are awaiting trial "from the inside '' to take plea bargains and be pressured into pleading guilty rather than going to trial before a jury of their peers. I think about what Yitro and Moshe would say about our system of justice where closure is so long in coming for both the accused and the victim. Although I do not know of a particular solution to fix this crisis, I would encourage our community to advocate to our elected and appointed officials for reforms which would allow our city, state and country to achieve the promise in the 8th Amendment of the Constitution to a "speedy and public trial by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed." As well, my work has given a new and deep appreciation for the sacred duty of jury duty promised in the same amendment. Each of us who are eligible have the opportunity when called to be like the minor judges appointed by Moshe and help ensure that juries can be filled when those in jail or out on bail are ready for trial.

Bob Jagendorf/Getty for the Atlantic

In Shemot 19, B'nai Yisrael arrived in the wilderness of Sinai to prepare themselves to receive the Torah and God's revelation. The early Midrash Mekhilta D'Rabi Yishmael picks up on a seeming redundancy in the text. We learned in Chapter 17 that B'nai Yisrael encamped at Rephidim at which point they complained and murmured against God and Moshe about the lack of water. Thus to the midrash it

seems redundant when we are told in 19:2, “Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain.” The midrash sees the mention of B’nai Yisrael leaving Rephidim after already describing their arrival at Sinai as superfluous, and thus it must come to teach us something. The midrash explains that just as B’nai Yisrael left Rephidim in a state of teshuvah/repentance, so too they arrived at Sinai in a state of teshuvah.

Gerard Hoet, 1728. Rijksmuseum.nl

In Berakhot 34b we are taught, “R. Abbahu said : The place which the penitent occupy, the perfectly righteous are unable to occupy ; as it is said, "Peace, peace to him that is far off and to him that is near" — "to him that is far off [from God]" first, and then "to him that is near."” These two teachings resonate deeply with me as two of many examples which prioritize the value and ability of people to do teshuvah over perfection. I think of teachings such as these often in my work as I teach and counsel individuals accused of serious crimes. I always come into my encounters, whether teaching a class or counseling one on one, I always enter with the kavvanot of every person being created B’tzelem Elohim/in God’s image and the centrality of teshuvah. While the carceral systems which are called departments of “corrections” don’t always provide enough opportunities for reflection and growth,as a rabbi and chaplain I see providing space for self-reflection and teshuvah to be one of the main purposes of my work. While I can’t personally grant God’s forgiveness as some might wish, I can reassure people that our tradition believes in second chances and offer an opportunity to listen to their thoughts, hopes and prayers. Here too I believe that there is room for the larger community to support the possibility of teshuvah for those leaving jail or prison. Many jurisdictions including New York City have “ban the box” laws which forbid employers and landlords to ask about past incarcerations when people seek employment or housing. With important caveats for safety in some cases, if we are serious about believing in teshuvah I feel that we must ensure that those returning to the community from incarceration must be able to find jobs and safe housing as well as spiritual communities.

We can better appreciate the significance of the experience of God’s revelation at Sinai when we think about it in the context of the two chapters which precede this groundbreaking event. God did not command a system of laws without ensuring that B’nai Yisrael were provided with two essential tools. Firstly, a justice system which had the capacity to address the needs of the people for legal interpretation

and resolutions of disputes as proposed by Yitro. As well, we are taught that B'nai Yisrael had already gone through a process of teshuvah before arriving at Sinai, and they received the Divine commandments knowing that there was a process for repair when they would err. May we be inspired to implement these tools in our community and society as well.

The Daily Signal

Rabbi Gabe Kretzmer Seed serves Jewish chaplain in the New York City jail system. He received semikha from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and lives in Riverdale with his wife Nina and daughter Aliza. The views expressed here are his alone.

Sinai: The Way Forward

By Rabbi Bob Kaplan

At one of the sadly many gatherings following the recent shootings and acts of hate and destruction I spoke at, I followed a faith leader who admitted that they were in deep despair and that they were at a loss of how to respond to this, yet another horrific act of violence and hate. This gave me pause to more deeply reflect on what was to be my message to this gathering of those so devastated by the onslaught and regularity of these unimaginable acts now becoming a norm. Simply being there was an act of solidarity and an expression of my own sadness and outrage and yes despair. The question raised by the previous speaker was now given to me as to what could in fact be done to meet this and the many other acts of violence and hate we as a society are encountering, so many of which never make it into the headlines or social media feeds that fuel our individual and collective consciousness, yet traumatize the communities in which they happen.

Meredith Kohut for the New York Times

As I stepped up to speak and the megaphone put in my hands a deep sense of responsibility came over me not to repeat the despair they had just heard. I began by acknowledging the pain of the moment and the many acts of hate and destruction we as individuals and a society were being buttressed by and then turned my words to how do we get out of this space.

When Avraham and Sarah began their journey out of Ur Kasdim to Canaan they not only set out a pathway for us of the acknowledgement of G-d, they defined the role that we were, as their descendants, physical and spiritual, obligated to play in this often broken world. They stood out in the world not only in their knowledge of one G-d, one Creator, one source, they were willing to put their lives on the line in order to bring this knowledge into the world and into their actions. It was not that others such as Malkitzedek, King of Salem, did not know of this G-d. The difference was that Avraham and Sarah were willing to share this knowledge to the world in word and deed. They stood up for Justice and for being a partner with the Creator in ensuring Justice was the ultimate pathway and tikkun for all creation. The bargaining with G-d over Sodom and its fate was such an act of the acknowledgement of the power of Justice and its essential role in confronting evil in all its manifestations.

Cities of the Plain by Edward Armitage, via Religious-Art.tumblr.com

The Journey to Sinai began with them. This journey resulted in the years of subjugation in and the liberation from Egypt, the land whose very name delineates constriction of Justice. This journey culminates in a nation that is now responsible or obligated as an Am Kadosh , a holy nation comprised of holy individuals , to pursue Justice and actualize Justice. One might think that such an extraordinary event as the revelation at Sinai where G-d interfaces with his creation in such a powerful and incomprehensible way would have immediately led to a world imbued with G-d consciousness and the actualization of divine Justice. In fact, there are many commentators that state this was the intention and potential of the moment yet the step back of the Golden Calf or the frailties of humanness laid out a longer incremental path of human existence filled with the competition between justice and injustice. The human battle between our obligation to pursue and actualize justice and our drive to destroy and embrace evil and injustice in all its various manifestations. Evil is a difficult word and concept to fully comprehend yet we see its destructiveness before us each day in the pain and suffering humans all too often inflict upon one another, all too often in the name of what they, we, have defined as good or right.

What the interface and revelation at Sinai did ultimately gift us was a pathway and benchmarks, to achieving this Justice and an admonition that we, we are responsible for its actualization, it will not ultimately just come from heaven, it will be actualized through our partnership with the Boreh Olam, with the Creator of the World we live in and are responsible for. Another message or gift was the understanding that while we stood as one at Sinai it is now as individuals, each one of us is ultimately responsible for making Justice a reality. This divine state of being is only truly possible when we as an Am, a people, a society, a collective, strive together. Behold how good it is when we as a humankind can dwell together in Peace and Justice.

As I stood before that gathering , so shaken by the events of the day and the days that preceded, knowing full well the challenge that stood before us, my message was not one only of comfort yet deeper. It was a message or reminder, to me and those gathered, of the obligation and responsibility to become the answer to hate, to become the lynchpin to Justice. To become a person who has taken the path of Avraham and Sarah of ensuring that we are partners with our common Creator. It was a reminder of the message of Sinai and the revelation that we are responsible, obligated, to pursue and actualize Justice and the need, as an Am, to connect to others on the path. This journey, though it may be long and on it we may encounter many obstacles and pain will ultimately be the completion of our pledge at Sinai and as descendants of our parents Avraham and Sarah, that “Let Justice well up like water and righteousness as a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24)

Matt Rourke/AP via The Guardian