

# Shomrei's Torah

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*Too Excited to Sleep*

*By Gabe Cohen (8<sup>th</sup> Grade)*

There are two aspects of Shavuot that I want to talk about. The first one is Megillat Rut. You're probably familiar with the story and know that it's read each Shavuot, but have you ever thought about the reason it's read on Shavuot? What does Shavuot have to do with Rut's story?

The most known reason for reading Megillat Rut on Shavuot is because the time when she came to Israel was around the time of Shavuot, and because she accepted the Torah just like we did at Har Sinai. This reason seems to make sense, but couldn't there be a deeper reason as to why we specifically chose Rut? In order to figure this out, we have to look at the story of Matan Torah at Har Sinai.

It says in the story of Matan Torah, "ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה ויטיצבו" **בַּתַּחֲתֵית הָהָר**, Moshe led the people out of the camp and they took their spot **below the mountain**". The פשט explanation of the bolded words would be, at the foot of the mountain, but Rashi interprets it differently. He says that below the mountain literally means under the mountain. Hashem held the mountain over the Jews and told them, "I am giving you a choice: accept the Torah or I will drop the mountain". Of course, this wasn't really a choice and Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah.

Without this Rashi, it seems like Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah excitedly, but as Rashi tells us, we never really accepted the Torah willingly. In Megillat Rut, Rut accepts the Torah even as she sees her husband die, and her sister part from her. Rut is teaching us the very important lesson that we need to follow Hashem's guidance willingly and excitedly. Every year on Shavuot we try to show Hashem that even though we didn't really accept the Torah at Har Sinai willingly, we accept it every year on Shavuot excitedly by studying the whole night.

The other reason why we study is because of what happened the day of Matan Torah. In our generation, we stay up the whole night in preparation for the day of Matan Torah, but Bnei Yisrael did something shocking. They overslept. How could the holiest generation that had

witnessed so many great miracles, and were about to get the Torah, oversleep? Usually, when we have an important event coming up the next day, we don't oversleep. Rather, we toss and turn in bed, and barely sleep at all. All we can think about the whole night is the exciting event coming up. Through this it seems that Bnei Yisrael were not at all excited to receive the Torah. But how could this be true? Matan Torah was the most important event in history.

If we look back a little in the pesukim, we can see that the Jews actually were excited for the giving of the Torah. They counted down the days and each day they worked on their characteristics and study to become completely pure for Matan Torah. So if we just proved that they were actually excited about Matan Torah, then how could they have overslept?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that the Jews didn't go to sleep out of lack of excitement. Rather, they actually went to bed thinking it would help them. They had spent all this time preparing their physical bodies for Matan Torah, and they thought that the final step to become completely spiritual would be to get a lot of sleep before Matan Torah and purify their souls as they temporarily leave their bodies at night. He explains though that this was their mistake. They thought that in order to receive the Torah, you have to be completely spiritual. In truth, you don't have to be spiritual to receive the Torah, but the Torah makes you spiritual. This explains why oversleeping was considered a sin, and is why we stay up all night to rectify it.

The other topic I would like to talk about is the tradition to eat dairy on Shavuot. Many of you probably have at least one dairy meal or snack on Shavuot. You might know the main reason. When the Jews were at Har Sinai, they knew that there was something called kosher, but they didn't know the rules. They could have said, "I don't know how to keep kosher so I guess I can eat non-kosher." The Jews didn't do that. They only ate dairy to make sure they didn't shecht an animal incorrectly.

The other reason comes from Shir Hashirim 4:11, "דבש וחלב תחלת לשונך", milk and honey flowing from your mouth". The Torah is compared to milk which is why we eat dairy on Shavuot. Many people eat sweet dairy products like cheesecake to also represent the honey.

When you look at the stories of the Jews in the desert, it seems like they messed up a lot of times. As you read these stories, you might be thinking, "how could the Jews sin so much

after they've been warned and punished so many times?" You can see from the stories we learned about, that the Jews had many good moments in the midbar, and even when they did something wrong, they usually had good intentions. We can learn from this, that even when it can be hard to see the good, we should always try to judge people favorably. Have a good and sweet Yuntif!

*The Centrality of Torah Study and how it shapes who we are*

*By Elie Jarashow (Shana Aleph, Orayta)*

On Shavuot, we celebrate God giving us the greatest gift one could ever ask for: the Torah. Thus begins the Jewish people's journey as the "People of the Book." The centrality of Torah study to Judaism is axiomatic. The Torah teaches us not only how to act, but how to think. The Torah prescribes not only how to serve God, but how to relate to Him as well. Seemingly, then, understanding the importance of *Talmud Torah* would be a worthwhile endeavor. Let us discuss two main virtues of Torah study: learning as both a means and an end.

Intuitively, we know that in order to fulfill any commandment, we must first know what the task requires of us. However, we also know that the process of Torah learning is precious in and of itself. The Beis Halevi famously understands the perplexing verse of "Naaseh V'nishma" as coming to teach us the inherent value of Torah Study. Had we said Nishma first, notes the Beis Halevi, we might think we learn strictly so that we can abide by the *halachos*. However, the *chiddush* of V'Nishma is that Torah study is a value in and of itself. The obvious question is, why?

Rav Yehuda Amital zt"l formulates a simple yet profound answer to this question. "The brain, the seat of the intellect, is man's most important organ. Should we content ourselves with serving God with our hands and other organs – taking the *shofar* in our hands and blowing it with our mouths, donning *tefillin* and eating *matzah* on Pesach – and let our brains lie idle, uninvolved in His service? A person who does not occupy himself in Torah study lacks something very basic in his service of God. Should we leave our brains and intellect for our careers, for acquiring academic degrees, and serve God only with our other organs?"

Fundamentally, we believe that God revealed His blueprint for the Jewish people and humanity on Har Sinai through the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. Therefore, learning Torah is our way of serving God through our intellect, our *tzelem elokim*. Many commentaries understand *tzelem elokim* as that which makes us most distinct from animals.

Nehama Leibowitz, in her analysis of Bereishit, expounds upon the asymmetry between the nature of man and animal. When God created fish he blessed them to be “fruitful and multiply.” (1:22) However, when creating man, G-d adjudicates that man “be fruitful and multiply. And fill the earth and subdue it.” (1:28) The word “subdue”, which bears somewhat of a bellicose connotation, presents us with a challenging dialectic. On the one hand, we are to be loving and peaceful creatures. Yet, we are supposed to “subdue” the world!? The Ramban in his commentary on this verse suggests that man was given free will (*bechira chofshis*) to do as he wishes with the world. He or she can subdue the world with Torah and Mitzvos or -sadly- not. In the words of the prophet Isaiah (14,19), “the world was not created to be wasted, but to be inhabited.” So too, we were not created for naught. We were created with a purpose; to uphold and transmit the values of Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

The first *Medrash* in the Torah asserts that God “looked at the Torah and created the world.” It is well understood that when God is referred to in the Torah in anthropomorphic terms, it is so that we, finite human beings, can relate to and emulate His ways. Following this paradigm, we too should look *into the Torah and shape our world* based upon its timeless wisdom. My Rosh Hayeshiva, Rav Binny Freedman, often encourages his *talmidim* to ask themselves three questions when faced with a decision: what do you want, why do you want it, does *Hashem* want you to want it? These deeply penetrating questions give us the framework to better align our will with the will of the Torah. Let us never forget that the Torah is not merely a book- it is a pedagogical gem. It is our GPS for life. We must ask ourselves, is the Torah something we study, or is it a lens through which we see the world? Chag Sameach!

*Focusing more on our Family than on the Food**By Avi Eisenstadter (Yeshiva University)*

On Shavuot, there is a very well-known custom to eat dairy foods. When you think about it, this seems like a very strange custom. Shouldn't it be the total opposite? Shouldn't we **only** eat meat on Shavuot? Firstly, isn't there a mitzvah of *Simchas yom tov*, of having extra happiness on yuntif by eating meat and drinking wine? Secondly, what could be a better way to celebrate the receiving of the *torah*, then to enjoy a nice meat meal?

I would like to suggest a number of answers. The answer that we are most familiar with, is because we want to commemorate Hashems promise to us upon receiving the torah that the Jews will receive a "land flowing with **milk** and honey" (Deuteronomy 6:3). We therefore eat dairy (milk) to remember this promise. Another famous answer is because the *Torah* was given on *Shabbos*. The *Torah* consists of a variety of *kashrus* laws which the Jews weren't yet observing, and many of these laws couldn't be done on *Shabbos*. Since they were given the *Torah* on *Shabbos*, they weren't able to go and *kasher* all of their dishes, and they weren't able to go ahead and cook meat. It was for this reason that the Jews only ate dairy for the remainder of that *Shabbos*, which is why we eat dairy on *Shavuot*.

Additionally, Rav Avigdor Nebentzhal writes in his *sefer* on *Shavuot*, that the reason behind the custom to eat dairy is the following: When people are babies, all they eat/drink is milk. Their lives revolve around milk, and if not for this milk they could not survive. The same is true for us by *Torah*. Our precious lives rely and revolve around *Torah*, and if not for *Torah* we could not survive. Similarly, the *Gemara* says, "Water refers only to the study of Torah" (*Bava Kamma* 17a). To us, *Torah* is like water—we can't survive without it. Rav Nebentzhal says that we eat dairy to remind ourselves of this, during the time where we recount the receiving of the *Torah*.

However, I would like to take a different approach to this question. Yes, we are supposed to fulfil the *Mitzvah* of enjoying *yuntif*, and yes, eating meat does appear to be a great way of celebrating the accepting of the *Torah*. However, when it comes to *Shavuot* we celebrate and fulfil our *mitzvah* in a totally different way. Unlike the rest of the year where we

celebrate by indulging in meat and eating expensive foods, *Shavuot* is a time to step away from all of the physicalities that we typically enjoy, and to simply focus on the more important things; what *Hashem* gave us. Of course the *Torah*, but also all of the other *brachot* that we were given in our lives. This is why we specifically eat dairy on *Shavuot*. Instead of spending our time eating meat, we spend our time focusing on things that matter to us; *torah*, family, and friends.

I think we can take this idea one step further and extend it to not only focusing on our individual things that matter to us, but also to focusing on the community as a whole. The *Torah* often refers to the day that the Jewish people accepted the *Torah* as “the day of assembly” (Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). Why is this? Because the day the Jews accepted the *Torah* was the day that we became a real nation. We all assembled together, as one nation. This is also shown in the way that the Jewish people were referred. In the time period before the accepting of the *Torah*, the Jews were broken up into 12 tribes, and that’s the way they were referenced. However, after *Har Sinai* we became *Klal Yisroel*, with complete unity.

This idea of unity when it comes to *Torah* is explained beautifully in a *Mishna* in *Avot*. In listing the ‘48 ways in which *Torah* is acquired,’ the *Mishna* includes “learning in order to teach” (*Avot* 6:6). As *Klal Yisroel*, we don’t learn for ourselves—rather we learn in order to teach others. Furthermore, in certain cases the *Gemara* permits learning about certain types of idolatry—not to learn it for yourself, but rather to learn it for yourself in order to teach others (*Avodah Zarah* 43b). Even some of the worst acts a Jew can involve themselves in, idolatry, is allowed for the sake of teaching others *Torah*--to unite *Klal Yisroel*.

During the difficult times that we are currently in, and specifically on *Shavuot*, the time of the accepting of the *Torah*, we need to take ourselves out of the physical world full of meat and luxuries in order to simply focus on what matters most to us, and to unite ourselves with our family and community. As much as we love meat and to take care of ourselves, now is a time to focus on the greater community. We are all going through tough times, but we need to always remember that at the end of the day, we are *Klal Yisroel*. We are all together as one people,

going through one problem, as one community. May we all be *zocheh* to accept the *torah* as one nation, and to *iy"h* see the redemption soon.

*Choosing to go under the Mountain*

By Shalom Zharnest

For those learning Daf Yomi, you will soon see a world famous Agadic Gemara that has caused much ink to be spilled on its behalf. This gemara is difficult to understand and truly can serve as a difficulty for aspects of our theology. The gemara I am referring to can be found on שבת דף

The gemara expounds upon שמות יט:יז פה ע"א which states

"ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלהים מן ההמחנה ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר" – what does it mean that Bnei Yisroel stood "under the mountain?"

"א"ר אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם"

"Rav Avdimi the son of Chama the son of Chasa said that it is to teach us that Hashem flipped over the mountain like a barrel and said to Bnei Yisroel- if you accept the torah, great! But if not, there will be your graves."

The gemara continues in an even more challenging fashion:

"א"ר אחא בר יעקב מבאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר"

"Rav Acha the son of Yaakov says that it is from here that there is a strong caveat to fulfilling the Torah" - since we were coerced.

However, "Rava says that Bnei Yisroel accepted the Torah again in the days of Achashveirosh, as it says (אסתר ט:כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים, that Bnei Yisroel took upon themselves that which they had accepted earlier- meaning the Torah."

This gemara is challenging for several reasons. On a basic level, we know from שמות כד:יז that Bnei Yisroel uttered the famous words נעשה ונשמע – we will do then we will listen. Bnei

Yisroel were so ready to accept the Torah that they did not even want to hear what was in it!  
We teach this to our youngest of children which leads us to ask how could the gemara say that we were coerced!

Not only that, the very same gemara continues and says (this gemara can also be found in עבודה (זרה

דאמר ריש לקיש מאי דכתיב ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי ה' יתירה למה לי מלמד שהתנה הקב"ה עם מעשה " בראשית ואמר להם אם ישראל מקבלים התורה אתם מתקיימין ואם לאו אני מחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו"

Reish Lakish says, why does the posuk says and it was evening and day the 6<sup>th</sup> day- why do I have the extra letter ה? This teaches us that Hashem made a condition with the world and said if Bnei Yisroel accept the Torah then the world will continue and if not, then the world will return to pre-creation status.

How does this condition make any sense if Bnei Yisroel were coerced to accept the Torah?! Obviously, we were going to say yes!

Furthermore, the gemara in ע"א דף ב ע"א says

"אלא כך אומרים לפניו רבש"ע כלום בפית עלינו הר כגיגית ולא קבלנוה כמו שעשית לישראל"

The other nations of the world will say to Hashem "did you overturn the mountain on us like You did for Bnei Yisroel?"

The Gemara here is dealing with how the other nations feel that they were given the "short straw" in this world and they claim that they never were coerced into getting the Torah like Bnei Yisroel was- implying that they were not given a fair chance. The gemara there goes through why these claims are unfounded but for our purposes, the question stands- how could it be that we were coerced into accepting the Torah!



Finally, one of the fundamentals in Judaism is the concept of בחירה חפשית - Free Will. The fact that we as humans have free will is at the core of our beliefs, literally placed within us during the creation of humankind as many explain in בראשית פרק א. If human beings have free will, how could it be that the most seminal moment in our history, literally the moment that made us Jews happened against our will!

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank Z"l answers these questions in מקראי קודש. It could not be that we were coerced into accepting the Torah, however, this is what occurred; the mountain was flipped over us. He explains as follow:

At the end of Torah, Moshe blesses Bnei Yisroel, the פסוק 3<sup>rd</sup> in וזאת הברכה reads as

"אף חבב עמים כל יקדשיו בידך והם תכו לרגלך ישא מדברתיך"

"Lover, indeed, the people are holy in Your hand, they followed You and accepted Your Words"

Rashi on וזהם תכו לרגלך explains that Bnei Yisroel are deserving of all blessing this b/c we took it upon ourselves to stand underneath the mountain. Meaning that Bnei Yisroel requested to have the mountain flipped over them like a barrel. The question is why, why did we request to put ourselves in a life and death situation if we had already said נעשה ונשמע?

on our gemara "כפה עליהן הר כגיגית" explains that we requested for Hashem to flip the mountain over us b/c we were afraid of saying no. Perhaps after we now said נעשה ונשמע we would regret our decision and want to back out. Why would we back out? The Torah speaks of the awesome event that was מתן תורה in שמות כ:טו-יז

"וכל העם ראים את הקולת ואת הלפידים ואת קול השפיר ואת ההר עשן וירא העם וינעו ויעמדו מרחק: ויאמרו אל משה דבר אתה עמנו ונשמעה ואל ידבר עמנו אלהים פן נמות"

All the people saw the sounds, the flames, the blasts of the shofar, the mountain in smoke, they trembled, and they stood at distance. They said to Moshe- you should speak to us and we will listen, and Hashem should not speak with us anymore for we will die.

Bnei Yisroel was afraid that once all the flames started to appear that there would be buyer's remorse and we would want to return the Torah out of fear. That is why we asked of Hashem to hold the mountain overhead. With free will we chose to accept the Torah and with free will we asked to be put into a situation in which we could not revoke our choice. It is in this way that we accepted the Torah. Fearful of what was to come, we asked to be placed in a situation in which we could not say no.

Often in life, we are put into situations that may not seem like the best for us or situations that make us nervous/fearful. However, it is precisely these types of situations with which we rise. During these last few months, there are few words that can accurately describe what the world has been going through. People losing loved ones, occupations, literal lives torn apart by this virus, and yet our faith has remained. Our schools and shuls have closed and yet people continue to daven and learn. The lengths in which people have gone to adapt to the situation cannot be matched. Zoom bar/bat mitzvahs, shiurim, weddings, shivas, bris's- every aspect of Jewish life has continued. Quarantine has been one of the most challenging periods of all our lives and yet as we emerge from it, we are better parents, better siblings, better children, better co-workers, and just better people.

Unlike Matan Torah, no one asked for this, no one would ever want to be stuck inside for months on end along with all the incredible loss that our community has endured. Yet, for some of us, this exactly what we needed to reconnect to our families and our faith. As we approach Matan Torah, we must remember that life may not always go on exactly as we want it to. There are always bumps in the road and challenges that lay ahead. However, like our ancestors we must accept these challenges and do whatever we can do push through them. The power displayed at Matan Torah prompted us to say do not let our fear get the better of

us, make us stay with it and accept the Torah. Now it is our mission to do the same, we may be apart, but we will always be together.

### *The Ideal Definition of a Dvar Torah*

*By Aharon Schrieber*

There is a 2002 dramedy film called *Adaptation*, which chronicles the story of anxiety ridden screenwriter Charlie Kauffman desperately trying to adapt the nonfiction book “*The Orchid Thief*” into a screenplay. It is based on the real life struggles of the actual screenwriter, of the same name, struggling to adapt that very same book into a film script. The real life Kauffman had been hired to adapt the book, but, after suffering from writer’s block, decided to use that story for his script instead of actually adapting the book. What resulted was a bold meta story about the anxiety of being a writer.

I share this not because I’m advocating for you to watch the movie, which by the way is very good, but because it reminds of me of the anxieties I feel whenever being asked to write a *D’var Torah*. So this holiday, which celebrates the giving of the Torah, is, I think, an appropriate opportunity to reflect on what it means to write a *D’var Torah*.

To write a *D’var Torah* is like walking a balance beam. On the one hand, you want to come up with something interesting, something that, despite what the *Megillah* of a different holiday would say, your readers have never heard before. Something that will excite them and spark conversation. But you also want to it be liked by the audience, which means limiting yourself sometimes in order to tailor your ideas to the particular readership.

Which, for our community, also demands remaining tethered to our tradition. While my own reading of the *Torah*’s text might speak to me in one way, there are quite literally thousands of pages of interpretation written over thousands of years by scholars far wiser and more learned than I ever will be, that have already interpreted and reinterpreted the text many times over. A *D’var Torah* can’t intentionally deviate from that, too much at least, without alienating the very people it is trying to speak to.

And then there's a more philosophical problem. The *Torah* was written, word for word, by none other than G-d. So it takes a certain hubris to "come up" with some new interpretation of a *Torah* passage. Is that what really G-d intended with those words?

You can start to see why writing a *D'var Torah* can produce a lot of anxiety for me. I dare not bore readers with something they've already heard, which I'm sure by now you're wishing I had, but I also don't want to get too bold and stray away with some outlandish idea. The safe route is to find some obscure *D'var Torah* that has likely not been heard by the readership, but was constructed by an individual of reputable status. It would satisfy both demands of a *D'var Torah* for our community. The problem for me though is that *Shavuot* celebrates the giving of the Torah. To whom though? To me individually? Our community? To Rabbinic leadership to interpret for me? What is the Torah anyway? A lawbook? A chronology?

I know what you're thinking. These questions have all been answered already, and if you just opened up a *sefer* every once in a while, Aharon, instead of watching *Adaptation* you'd know this already. You're right.

Only intellectually though. Because none of that is going to answer the nagging feeling that the Torah was given to *me* in some way. Personally. After all, if we're supposed to see ourselves on *Pesach* as if each one of us, personally, left Egypt, then on *Shavuot* do we see ourselves as if each one of us, personally, were given the *Torah*?

I'm not deconstructing what a *D'var Torah* is purely for the intellectual amusement of doing so. I do it because Judaism is a religion that is deeply ritualized and structured. Structured by an immediate community, a worldwide network of Rabbinic authority, and thousands years of tradition.

But if all that's stripped away, and you're left alone in your home for weeks on end, what's left? A Book and a G-d. What a gift that is. Chag Sameach.