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# Rabbi Brahm Weinberg

## *The Wings We Need to Fly in Torah*

I have long been struck by a beautiful image about the interdependence of Torah and moral character taught by the Slonimer Rebbe, Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky,<sup>1</sup> in his Sefer Netivot Shalom:

Character traits are the wings of our service of Hashem. Just as winged creatures cannot rise and fly without their wings, so too humans who engage in Torah and mitzvot cannot rise without the purification of their character traits which are their spiritual wings. The more a person purifies and refines his character traits, the more his entire existence is elevated and the more his Torah and Divine service is elevated to a higher level as well.<sup>2</sup>

I love that image of the purity and sincerity of our characters acting as the wings that help us to fly and soar in Torah. The image is deeply empowering, highly optimistic, and one that underscores the connectedness of Torah to the lives we live and the people that we are. The Netivot Shalom is suggesting that we do not learn Torah as robots processing information, but as real human beings attempting to make the Torah part of our identity. For that kind of integration to occur, our souls and characters must be refined, attuned, and purified enough to absorb the Divine teachings and bring us closer to Hashem. If the Torah enters a being whose holiness of character is not on par with what is expected, then that Torah may well fall flat and lose the potency required to elevate the individual.

Rabbenu Yona<sup>3</sup> offers an interpretation of a well-known Mishna in Pirkei Avot that supports this teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe. The Mishna states:

Rebi Elazar ben Azarya says: If there is no Torah, there is no Derech Eretz and if there is no Derech Eretz, there is no Torah."<sup>4 5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000) was born in Belarus and was a descendant (on his mother's side) of the rebbes of the Slonimer Hasidic dynasty. He was educated in the Slonimer yeshiva in Baranovich which combined both Hasidic and Mitnagdic approaches to Torah study. Rav Shalom Noach came to the Land of Israel right before the Holocaust and, in 1941, established the Slonimer Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. After most of the dynasty was wiped out in the Holocaust, R. Shalom Noach was a big part of its revival and rejuvenation through his Torah teachings, his prolific writing, and his dynamic personality. His magnum opus, Netivot Shalom (on Chumash, Pirke Avot, Moadim, and Midot) has become wildly popular in many Hasidic and non-Hasidic circles.

<sup>2</sup> Netivot Shalom, *Netivei Taharat Hamidot – Kedoshim Tiheyu*

<sup>3</sup> Rabbenu Yonah Gerondi (d.1264) was from the city of Gerona in northern Spain and then later lived in Toledo in southern Spain. He was a cousin of Ramban. He published many works on a few of which have been preserved including his students' notes on certain sections of the Rif on Berachot, his famous work Shaare Teshuva, and his commentary to Pirke Avot. We know of more of his teaching since they are quoted by later scholars such as Rashba and Shita Mekubetzet.

<sup>4</sup> Pirkei Avot 3:17

<sup>5</sup> This teaching is similar to the famous rabbinic aphorism of "Derech Eretz Kadma L'Torah," "Derech Eretz" must precede Torah. There is no exact source in early rabbinic literature that mentions this phrase verbatim. There are similar phrases and the closest one is from Vayikra Rabba (9:3)

There are many interpretations of what “Derech Eretz” means in this context. However, Rabbenu Yona defines it as the moral imperative of character refinement. Rabbenu Yonah explains that Rebi Elazar ben Azarya believes there is a codependent relationship between Torah and character refinement: Torah is necessary to build character, but character is also necessary for the acquisition of Torah. While there must be a simultaneous and reciprocal process of Torah study *and* character refinement informing each other, Rabbenu Yona does suggest that having a certain basic level of moral character is a necessary prerequisite for the acquisition of Torah.

Based on this teaching, we can infer that one of the critical ways that we must prepare for the re-acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot is through the perfection of our character traits. We might want to work on general traits as the Rambam lays out for us in Hilchot Deot. We might want to work on specific traits that are associated with the acquisition of Torah such as the forty-eight pathways stated in Pirkei Avot 6:6 such as awe, fear, humility, joy, truth etc... While all of these are important, there is one trait that stands out above all the rest as a necessary preparation for the proper acquisition of Torah, one trait that will enable us to fly and soar with the Torah we acquire: The trait of chesed.

Chesed is a trait that seems to be linked to Torah in some unique way more than others. The Gemara says:

Rabbi Simlai taught: [With regard to the] Torah, its beginning is an act of kindness and its end is an act of kindness. Its beginning is an act of kindness, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” ([Genesis 3:21](#)). And its end is an act of kindness, as it is written: “And he was buried in the valley [in the land of Moab]” ([Deuteronomy 34:6](#)).<sup>6</sup>

The Torah is framed with stories of Hashem acting with chesed. The common denominator between the clothing of Adam and Chava and the burial of Moshe is that in both stories Hashem compassionately gives to another. That act of giving, of what Chazal call “gemilat chesed,” seems to be the framework for the entirety of Torah.

Furthermore, the motif of Megilat Rut<sup>7</sup> which is, ostensibly, the story of an *individual’s* acquisition of Torah, is also chesed. The Midrash says:

This scroll [of Ruth] tells nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, neither of prohibition nor permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness<sup>8</sup>

This theory is borne out by both the text and the overall storyline of the Megila. In terms of the text, the Megila’s very first story includes the word chesed: Naomi tries to convince her daughters-in-law to stay

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<sup>6</sup> Sotah 14a

<sup>7</sup> Megilat Rut is, of course, read on Shavuot. The practice of reading the megilot on the festivals is first recorded in Masechet Sofrim (one of the “minor tractates” from the eighth century in Israel included as an addendum to our printing of the Talmud Bavli) 14:16. There are numerous reasons given for the association of Rut with Shavuot: The story took place at the harvest time around Shavuot, the story ends with the lineage of David HaMelech whose *yahrzeit* is on Shavuot, and most significantly the story is one of conversion of Ruth to Judaism, which was – on a small, personal scale – a recreation of the grand acceptance of Torah at Sinai by the Jewish people on Shavuot.

<sup>8</sup> Midrash Ruth Rabbah 2:13

in Moav and hopes that Hashem will perform chesed for them.<sup>9</sup> At the high point of the story when Rut tells Naomi that she had been in Boaz's field gleaning, Naomi describes this occurrence as a chesed of Hashem.<sup>10</sup> Then, once more, as Rut confronts Boaz in the night on the threshing floor Boaz praises Rut as one who does chesed.<sup>11</sup> Chesed is also the light-motif of the story even when the particular word "chesed" is not mentioned at all: In the way Rut cares for Naomi and the way Boaz cares for those gleaning in his field and more...

Chesed is a major building block of our moral character development and a pre-requisite for the acquisition of Torah. One who is engaged in chesed not only perfects his general character, and not only fulfills the mandate of emulating Hashem who does chesed with the world,<sup>12</sup> but also trains himself to see the world through the lens of the other. This is an invaluable tool that can help a person to fully absorb the words and teaching of the Torah. One who is capable of seeing life and its circumstances through other people's eyes and perspectives is a person who can see the world through Hashem's eyes as well. Such a person can plumb the depths of the Torah which contains the wisdom of Hashem without being clouded by their own myopias. Such a person can fulfil the mandates of Torah even when they don't quite understand or see the big picture since they are trained to understand that their perception is limited.

It is no wonder that the paradigmatic baal chesed (man of chesed) of Jewish thought was also the first to discover Hashem and His Torah. Avraham Avinu saw the world through the eyes of others; he saw beyond his own tunnel vision and imagined worlds that no one else could yet see. This enabled him to both care for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of other human beings, and also to develop a belief in ethical monotheism and a true closeness to Hashem.

If we can prepare ourselves to be baalei chesed, if we can work on developing this trait possessed by Avraham Avinu and by Rut, we will sprout the wings that will allow us to not only absorb the Torah to its fullest, but also soar to the heights of spiritual accomplishment.

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<sup>9</sup> Rut 1:8 And Naomi said unto her two daughters-in-law: 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house; the LORD deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me

<sup>10</sup> Rut 2:20 And Naomi said unto her daughter-in-law: 'Blessed be he of the LORD, who hath not left off His kindness to the living and to the dead.' And Naomi said unto her: 'The man is nigh of kin unto us, one of our near kinsmen.'

<sup>11</sup> Rut 3:10 And he said: 'Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter; thou hast shown more kindness in the end than at the beginning, inasmuch as thou didst not follow the young men, whether poor or rich

<sup>12</sup> As the Pesikta in Re'eh says in its formulation of the mitzvah of imatatio dei "ma hu gomel hasadim, af ata gomel hasadim"

# Rabbi Yaakov Bieler

## “Na’aseh VeNishma” as a Defining Phrase for Jewish Observance

Shavuot 2020

One of the clarion cries attributed to the Jewish people confirming them as God’s “Chosen People” appears in one of the accounts<sup>13</sup> of the receiving of the Tora in the book of Exodus:

Shemot 24:7

Then he (*Moshe*) took the record of the Covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said: All that the LORD has Spoken “Na’aseh VeNishma” (we will do and we will hear)!”

Attention is paid by many commentators to this latter phrase, because typically, the opposite sequence pertains, i.e., first you are told what to do—you “hear”—and then, if you are compliant, you “do.” What is implied when the order that generally pertains to communication is reversed?

Furthermore, this is not the first time that the people have verbally articulated a commitment to fulfill the Commandments of the Tora. Twice before, once in *Ibid.* 19:8, and again in *Ibid.* 24:3, the Jewish people had said: “...All (*the Words*) that the LORD hath Spoken we will do...” Yet, the addition of the word “Nishma” in *Ibid.* 24:7 seems to have made a significant difference. Why might that be?

Beit HaLevi<sup>14</sup> attributes the dichotomy as well as the sequencing in *Ibid.* to on the one hand, the Mitzvot themselves (“Na’aseh”), and on the other, the study of Tora, that includes the Mitzvot (“Nishma.”) He

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<sup>13</sup> The “real-time” descriptions of the receiving of the Tora appear first in *Shemot* 19-20, and then in *Ibid.* 24. A recapping of the experience forty years after the fact is found in *Devarim* 4:10-4.

<sup>14</sup> R. Yosef Dov Baer HaLevi Soloveitchik was born in Lithuania in 1820. His father R. Yitzchak was rabbi of Kovna, and at an early age his talents were already prominent and he was sent to the Volozhyn Yeshiva to study with his uncle-grandfather, R. Yitzchak (*R. Itzele*), son of R. Chayim of Volozhyn, the founder of the Yeshiva. After a number of years, he began to teach in the yeshiva of Minsk. In 1854, after the death of R. Itzele and his great son-in-law, R. Eliezer Yitzchak Fried, he was called to serve as head of the Volozhyn Yeshiva together with R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (*the NeTzIV*), the young son-in-law of R. Itzele. R. Yosef Dov was known for his sharpness while the NeTzIV was known for his all-encompassing knowledge of the Talmud and commentaries. Due to their different methodologies and leadership qualities, controversy broke out between them resulting in R. Yosef Baer's leaving the Yeshiva in 1865 to become Rabbi of Slutsk. In 1878 he was appointed Rabbi of Brisk in Lithuania (Brest-Litovsk in Belarus). Considered one of the leading luminaries of his generation, he vehemently opposed the Haskala (*Jewish Enlightenment*). R. Yosef Baer is known also as the Beit HaLevi, after his books which include responsa entitled *Beit HaLevi*, a volume more of insights than responsa, and the *Beit HaLevi on the Tora*. He died in Brisk in 1892, and was succeeded by his son, R. Chayim, who had married the granddaughter of the NeTzIV and had served as a Rosh Yeshiva in the Volozhyn Yeshiva alongside the NeTzIV. By coincidence, he was in Brisk at the time of his father's demise due to the closing of the Yeshiva by the Russian authorities... *Bar Ilan CD ROM*.

argues that had the Tora said “Nishma VeNa’aseh,” it would have been assumed that the initial verb had to do with merely acquiring the information for how the Mitzva was to be performed, followed by a commitment to carry out the Mitzva. By writing “Na’aseh VeNishma,” something in addition to factual information regarding the parameters of the Mitzva is being imparted, i.e., that there were two commitments being made, the first regarding the performance of Mitzvot, and the second stating that study of the Tora would be undertaken. Consequently, one can well understand the Talmud’s contention in Shabbat 88a:

Rabbi Simai taught: When Israel accorded precedence to the declaration “We will do” over the declaration “We will hear,” 600,000 ministering angels came and tied two crowns to each and every member of the Jewish people, one corresponding to “We will do” and one corresponding to “We will hear.”

The justification for crowning each Jew with two crowns was due to the two separate commitments that each one made by stating “Na’aseh VeNishma.” It is certainly appropriate for a Rosh Yeshiva to view the declaration of the Jewish people as viewing Tora learning as a primary value.

A different approach is reflected in the writing of Panim Yafot,<sup>15</sup> who also interprets a passage appearing in Shabbat 88a,<sup>16</sup> but focused on another aspect of “Na’aseh VeNishma.”

Rabbi Elazar said: When the Jewish people accorded precedence to the declaration “We will do” over “We will hear,” a Divine Voice Emerged and Said to them: Who revealed to My Children this secret that the Ministering Angels use? As it is written: (Tehillimi 103:20) “Bless the Lord, you angels of His, you mighty in strength, that fulfill His Word, hearkening unto the voice of His Word.” At first, the angels fulfill His word, and then afterward they hearken.

The commentator states that “Nishma” represents the desire to understand the reasoning behind the Mitzvot. Since, according to him, the essence of serving God is carrying out the Commandments even when one does not understand why he is doing it, the people’s readiness to accept upon themselves that sort of religious attitude, made them stand out from others. Panim Yafot continues that, in fact, once they come closer to HaShem, the people will come to understand the reasons behind what they

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<sup>15</sup> R. Pinchas son of R. Tzvi Hirsh HaLevi Horowitz (or Ish Horowitz) was born in TchorTEKOV, Poland, in 1730, to a rabbinical family, studied Tora with his father, who was the Rav of TchorTEKOV, and with his big brothers, R. Nachum, later Rabbi of Preskov, and R. Shmuel Shmelke, later rabbi of Nicolsburg. Later, the two brothers, R. Pinchas and R. Shmuel, became close students of R. Dov Baer of Mezritch, the disciple of the Ba'al Shem Tov. R. Pinchas served as rabbi of various cities, and in 1772 was appointed to replace R. Avraham Abush (*d.* 1768) as rabbi of Frankfort-am-Main, serving as its rabbi for 33 years, until his death in 1805. During this period, he had close ties with R. Yechezkel Landa, author of the Noda BeYehuda and R. Nathan Adler of Frankfort-am-Main, and mentor of R. Moses Schreiber (*Sofer*), author of the Chatam Sofer, and other Chassidic leaders. At the end of his life, the enlightenment (*Haskala*) began to strike roots, and R. Pinchas fought it with all his might. He had many disciples including the Chatam Sofer. His most famous book is the Sefer Hafla'ah, in which there are three parts: Sefer Ketubbah on tractate Ketubot, Sefer HaMiknah on tractate Kiddushin with the Kuntros HaAcharon... and Panim Yafot, sermons on the Pentateuch and five Megillot... *Bar Ilan CD ROM*.

<sup>16</sup> Shabbat 88a-89b contains many insights into the process of the receiving of the Tora, and therefore is wonderful material of Shavuot study.

are doing, in effect, the experience of studying and performing the Commandments brings people to a proper understanding of them. Consequently, initially, in *Ibid.* 24:3, the people could only state “Na’aseh,” whereas “Na’aseh VeNishma” is asserted after Moshe reads to them the Sefer HaBrit and they began to perform the Commandments. Tora study is important to Panim Yafot, but as a means to come closer to HaShem, as opposed to viewing it as a pristine Mitzva in its own right.

“Shivim Panim LaTora” (lit. 70 faces to the Tora; fig. the Tora can be interpreted and understood from many perspectives.) The key phrase at the end of *Shemot* 24:7 not only is clearly a repository of many fundamental Jewish ideas, but it is also a rich source of Tora interpretation among the many commentators who have approached it.

## Rabbi Aaron Levitt

### *Shavuot Day 1 - A Link In The Chain*

It always bothered me why we celebrate Mattan Torah on Shavuot. Because if you think about it, the Luchot that Moshe began to transcribe on Shavuot are not the Luchot that we ended up with. Those tablets ended up getting smashed 30 days later on 17 Tammuz when Moshe came down the mountain and saw the Golden Calf! If anything, it would be more appropriate to celebrate Zman Mattan Torateinu, the time we received the Torah, on Yom Kippur, the day Moshe came down the mountain with the 2nd Luchot!

But if you think about it, Zman Mattan Torateinu, doesn’t mean the time we received the Torah. It means the time of the giving of the Torah! In other words, what we’re celebrating on Shavuot is Hashem’s decision to give us the Torah. And that took place on Shavuot. The fact that Hashem chose us to share His Torah with is something amazing. Indeed, every day we thank Hashem again for being “Noten HaTorah – the Giver of the Torah.” And every year on Shavuot we re-experience that amazing event in history when Hashem chose to give His Torah to us.

But the question then is, if the holiday of Shavuot is all about God and what a great giver He is, then what is our role on Shavuot? What are we meant to do? Indeed, unlike the other chagim, when we have mitzvot to perform such as lulav, sukkah, matzah, and marror, when it comes to Shavuot we have no specific mitzvot! It’s true that we have a custom to stay up all night learning Torah, but the truth is that the whole concept that we are celebrating the giving of the Torah is not explicit in the Torah. Even the date of the holiday is not spelled out. All it says is to count 50 days from Pesach! We have this holiday about which we don’t really know what we are supposed to be doing or what it’s all supposed to mean to us. And so again, the question is, what is our role on Shavuot?

Perhaps the answer is that if on Shavuot we recognize Hashem as the ultimate Notein, the ultimate Giver, then maybe our role on Shavuot is to turn ourselves into Mekablim, into receptacles for that gift. We have to make sure that, unlike our ancestors who built the Golden Calf, we are ready and willing to receive the Torah that He wants to give us.

And maybe that's why we stay up all night learning Torah, because if you think about it for a second, the whole custom is kind of strange. Who do we think we're trying to fool? We know we're not going to continue that level of learning throughout the year! But maybe the idea is that it's a night of such intensity that it turns us into Mekablim, vessels, that can receive the Torah the rest of the year as well. Do you know where we learn this from, to become Mekablim who are ready and willing to receive the Torah unconditionally? From Moshe Rabbeinu, who was the ultimate Mekabel, as it says in Pirkei Avot "Moshe Kibel Torah MiSinai." He taught us that the highest level of Avodat Hashem is to become vessels that can receive all of God's wisdom.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, this sounds a little selfish! You're telling me that the whole Avodah of Shavuot is just to be a taker? All we have to do is be Mekablim? We don't have to give anything in return? The truth is that we're not just Mekablim, we're not just takers. The Mishna goes on to say, "Moshe Kibel Torah MiSinai U'Mesarah L'Yehoshua – Moshe received the Torah at Sinai and he passed it on to Yehoshua." It's not enough to be a Mekabel; we have to then pass it on. We have to transmit it to the next generation. We have to be a part of the long Mesorah, the long chain of transmission that began all the way back at Har Sinai and has continued throughout every up and down of Jewish History. If Hashem is the ultimate Notein, the ultimate Giver, then we have to be Mosrim, we have to be transmitters, making sure that the tradition carries forward. And maybe that's really what Zman Matan Toratienu really means. It is the time for us to remember that our Torah, everything we have learned, has to be passed on as well. This is what we are really celebrating on Shavuot, being a part of an amazing Mesorah, an amazing tradition. And what Shavuot challenges us to do is to make sure that we do not take our responsibility lightly to be an essential link in the chain, to pass on that which we have received to those that follow.

## Rabbi Aaron Levitt

### *Shavuot Day 2 - Building Our Bayit Ne'eman B'Yisrael*

A number of years ago I was driving through a neighborhood and I noticed a lot of trucks and people. As I turned the corner I noticed that they were taping an episode of the show Extreme Makeover Home Edition. Now, if you've seen the show, everything about it really is extreme. Each week they choose a different worthy family, send them away for a week, and in just 7 days knock down their house and build them a gorgeous new home. Every room is themed to fit the interests of each child. They supply them with state of the art appliances. And often they also give them a very large check at the end of the show to help them with their challenges. If you worry about what your kids are watching on tv, this show will not only catch their interest but will also teach them all about chesed.

And you know, Megillat Ruth, which we read on Shavuot, is all about building houses as well. It's about Ruth, a woman who exemplifies the middah of chesed, a woman who goes through her own extreme makeover, being rewarded with a Bayit of her own, with the Malchut Beit David (Ruth 4:11).

It reminds me of the bracha we often give to a new Chattan and Kallah – may you build a Bayit Ne'eman B'Yisrael. What does that mean, a Bayit Ne'eman B'Yisrael? I would like to suggest that a Bayit is not just a physical home; it is a Legacy, a system of values. And we pray that this Bayit, this legacy, be Ne'eman. That it should be a legacy that will endure. That they can trust will be followed by the next generation as well.

At the beginning of Sefer Shemot, the midwives, Shifra and Puah, who refuse to murder Jewish babies, are rewarded with houses of their own: “VaYehi Ki Yar'u HaMeyaldot Et HaElokim VaYaas Lahem Batim (Shemot 1:21). Rashi explains that this doesn't mean that God called Extreme Makeover Home Edition to nominate Shifra and Puah for the show. It means that He built them Legacies. He gave them the houses of Leviyah, Kehunah, and Malchut.

Many people translate Bayit as a house. I would translate it as a home. A home is different than a house. The house may hold the family together physically. But a home, a Bayit, holds us together spiritually. It represents the values that we stand for and that we hold dear.

On Shavuot we recite Yizkor and when we approach Yizkor, it can sometimes feel a little overwhelming, thinking about all the people who have had an impact on us and who are no longer with us. So this Shavuot, as we recite Yizkor from our homes, I'd like to suggest that maybe what we are supposed to be reflecting on during Yizkor are the Homes, the Batim, the Legacies that they stood for and that they left for us. What were the values they held dear? If they could sit with us for 20 minutes and share with us a few more pieces of wisdom, what would they share? And if they could look into our homes, into our Batim, would they feel assured that we are continuing in the path that they paved for us? Would they feel that their homes were truly Ne'eman?

These are some of the thoughts that I think about during Yizkor. And I want to say that Yizkor is not just for those who have sat shiva. Each of us has been influenced by people, whether family, friends, or teachers, who are no longer with us. Take a few moments to think about the Batim, the Legacies, that they represented, and that they tried to pass on. Then take a few moments to reflect on the Batim, the legacies, that we are passing on to our loved ones.

We all look forward to being able to leave our houses to reunite in our communal Bayit of KMS. But in the meantime, let us take advantage of this time in our houses to reflect on, appreciate, and build our homes, our Batim. If we do, then we will be able to truly celebrate our Bayit Ne'eman B'Yisrael.

# Shmuel Shafner

## *A Halachic Exoneration of Rainbows*

*In Memory of Janet Shafner, Yehudis bat Chaim Yisroel*

Note: This is a written summary of a talk I once gave about rainbows. I also have available the referenced Hebrew-language (and Aramaic) source materials. At the end of this talk is a homemade time line showing when each of the referenced sources lived, and what world events were going on then.

**Executive Summary:** For those of us who attended Yeshivas in our youth, we were often told that a rainbow in the sky is an ominous sign, that Hashem sees fit to visit destruction upon the world, but is held back from doing so only by his promise to Noah, millennia ago. This is derived mainly from two Gemaras, discussed below. Yet it doesn't make sense that something so beautiful, so natural, and so easily re-created in one's backyard, could be a divine sign of trouble. And we say a bracha on it, so how can it really be bad? Below is my analysis – and exoneration – of rainbows.

### **A. Negative Sources About Rainbows:**

1. Masechet Kesuvos 77b: Aggada about R. Yeshua ben Levi, who persuades an angel to show him, before he dies, his place in Heaven. He is taken to Heaven, which of course is in the form of a large Beis Medrash (we're Jews, after all – what did you expect, the feasting halls of Valhalla?). He is shown his seat, next to none other than the illustrious R. Shimon Bar Yochai, the hero of Lag B'Omer. R. Shimon asks him, basically, "Who do you think you are? Was a rainbow ever seen in your days?" R. Yeshua ben Levi answers in the affirmative. "Well, then," responds R. Shimon, "you can't be such a tzaddik." [I'm paraphrasing for clarity and brevity.] Actually, the Gemara says that no rainbow was in fact sighted in R. Yeshua ben Levi's time; but he was being modest, and so lied about it. Rashi on this Gemara explains that a rainbow is a sign that the world is fit to be destroyed, and it is only the influence of the tzaddik which holds it at bay.
2. Masechet Chagigah 16a: R. Abba says that whoever stares at a rainbow is not being adequately considerate of Hashem's honor. And R. Yehuda b. Nachmeni lists three things that, if one stares at them, one's eyes become weak, one of which is a rainbow (another of which are the kohanim when they duchan, which is why we don't look at them then). This Gemara doesn't really say that rainbows are bad, just that we should not stare at them. But that is also a negative, since one naturally is inclined to stare at something beautiful, like a rainbow.

### **B. Three Issues involved in analyzing the Halachic status of rainbows:**

1. Rainbow's Origin: Hashem created clouds and rain, and sunshine, in the 6 days of creation. These are all the ingredients required to make a rainbow. Was there no rainbow before the Noah treaty? If not, did the laws of optical physics not operate then? If yes, then what is the point of Hashem saying that the rainbow is a new sign of a treaty, if it has pre-existed the event?

2. What Message and To Whom: Treaties go both ways. What is the message of the rainbow, and to whom is it directed? Is it (a) a warning that we are doing wrong; or (b) a reassurance to us that Hashem loves us, even in times of hardship; (c) a reminder to Hashem not to ever again destroy the world; or (d) a reminder to us that Hashem will never again destroy the world?
3. Are All Rainbows Bad Signs? We can easily create a rainbow whenever the sun is shining, just with a garden hose. Is Hashem sending us a message when we do so? That would seem absurd. So if the rainbow is some kind of message from Hashem, as Parshat Noach certainly implies, what kind of rainbow is it talking about – assuming it can't mean the normal, garden-hose-variety rainbow?

**C. Views of Certain Chumash Commentaries:**

1. Rashi: **Negative Sign**. Rainbow is a sign of Hashem's anger. Quotes a Midrash that when the "middat ha'din" – strict justice – wants to condemn us, the rainbow serves as a reminder in the Heavenly court that Hashem has promised not to destroy the world. (He doesn't address the other issues set forth above.)
2. Ibn Ezra: **Positive Sign**. The rainbow was always there, it was not a new creation, but Hashem strengthened the power of the sun after the flood. Until then, the light was not sufficiently strong for those on Earth to see rainbows. He does not address the "good-bad" question, but by saying that the rainbow was always there, implies that it is not per se a bad sign.
3. Ramban: **Positive Sign**. The rainbow always was there, but now, for the first time, it has a new meaning: a sign of the "bris shalom" - the covenant of peace. Analogy to a reversed bow, which is a sign of peace. It is as though Hashem had a bow, shot down rain, and now is presenting the bow to us string-first, as a gesture of peace. The Ramban says this is an assurance to us that Hashem remembers his promise, always, and will never again destroy the world. The rainbow is thus not a sign of trouble or warning; rather a constant reminder. So the Ramban appears not to see anything negative about rainbows.
4. Klei Yakar: **Positive Sign**. He says that the rainbow was always present, but the mist that rose from the Earth, as is stated at the beginning of Bereishit, remained and in fact compounded, so that the skies were full of moisture, always cloudy, and no rainbows were visible because of the mist. Then, says the Klei Yakar (citing the view of the Mahari Katz, a major Rav of his time), Hashem caused the flood to consolidate all the mists, so that after the flood, for the first time rainbows were visible. As to the Gemara in Kesuvos, he said that rainbows in fact were technically visible during the time of those two tzaddikim, but nobody really noticed them much, because things were going so well for the Jews that nobody looked up nervously for a sign that Hashem was still there, watching over them. Nobody was worried, so they didn't tend to see many rainbows.
5. Sforno: **Neutral Sign**. The Sforno is one of the commentaries who says that a "normal" rainbow is not at all what Hashem showed Noah, and thus, not a sign of Heavenly displeasure. How could

it be, when one can so easily re-create a rainbow in one's own backyard? Instead, the Sforno says that a much rarer phenomenon – a double rainbow – is the bad sign. A regular rainbow is not a sign of anything, just a natural phenomenon. The Sforno adds that the reason that a double rainbow is a malignant sign is that in the second rainbow, the colors are reversed (you can google double rainbows and see this yourself). Reversing the normal order is often, in many cultures, viewed as bad (e.g., an upside-down cross is a Satanic sign in Catholic lore).

**D. Views of Midrashic Commentaries and Achronim:**

1. Maharsha (and Rashi) on Gemara Chagigah: The Gemara states that, in addition to a rainbow, one's eyes grow weak from staring at the Kohanim when they duchan. But surely that doesn't mean the Kohanim are bad, or that there is anything wrong with them! Rashi says it is because the "shechina" – Hashem's presence – is literally on their fingers while they are duchaning. The Maharsha elaborates that we don't stare at kohanim, or at rainbows, because they are holy, and just as we cannot see Hashem and survive (as he tells Moshe in Parshat Ki Sisa), so too we must be careful in how we stare at the King and at those things which are holy manifestations of him.
2. Rabbeinu Asher (the "Rosh"): This important Rishon, which I saw quoted in a secondary source, holds that we may look at a rainbow without harm, but we shouldn't stare too much at them. Applying the Maharsha to this p'sak, it appears that the problem is treating the manifestation of the Schechina with reverence.
3. Rav Shmuel Yaffe Ashkenazi (16<sup>th</sup> century Constantinople): **Very Positive Sign**. Commentary on Midrash, but he entirely flips it: the rainbow is a device that is always "on," not created now and then. It's always there to deflect Divine wrath, which is always an issue because we always sin to some extent. The word "appear" in Parshat Noach is merely a rhetorical device, since the rainbow never disappears. The only variable is whether we perceive its comforting presence. The rainbow reminds us that, even if we feel small, and Hashem is great and remote, he thinks about us, cares about us and won't forget us. What would happen if there were no rainbows, all of a sudden? That would be a very bad sign indeed, implying that Hashem has reneged on his covenant, Chas v'Sholom!

Of course, there are a few generations, says R. Ashkenazi, who are so spiritually powerful that they don't need the rainbow's reassurance; they are fully confident of their spiritual prowess. That explains the Gemara in Kesuvos. As for the Gemara in Chagigah, he says that if you are insecure, and need the constant reassurance of the rainbow, your eyes will weaken, because you shouldn't need that help. He invests the normal rainbow with supernatural powers, pointing out that all the other of the ten items created in the eve of Bereishit (according to Pirkei Avot) had supernatural powers.

4. Shla (Shnei Luchos HaBris) in name of the Ramah (Rav Moshe Issrelish): **Neutral Sign**. The rainbow referred to in Gemara Kesuvos is a normal rainbow, but if you see it, that obviously means that rain fell during the day, when it is inconvenient! The rainbow is not a good sign or a bad sign, it's just a natural consequence of light refraction. In that Gemara, R. Shimon Bar

Yochai is challenging R. Yehoshua ben Levi, that if he was a top-level tzaddik, then in his age rain would only have fallen at night, when it is most convenient for people! He says that the Gemara was not referring back to Parshat Noach at all. It was just pointing out an obvious corollary of daytime rain, nothing ominous at all.

5. Rav Yonason Eibeshutz (18<sup>th</sup> Century Germany; Yaarot Devash 1:16): **Neutral Sign.** He says that the natural rainbow is no sign of anything, just a pretty element of nature. But he says that there is such a thing, which occasionally appears, as a rainbow that has just one color: blue. (The “techelet” rainbow.) He derives from the Zohar that such an all-blue rainbow is indeed a sinister omen, and it was that rainbow to which Parshat Noach and the Gemara in Kesuvos were referring.

- E. **My Conclusion:** Virtually all commentators give a “pass” to the normal, everyday rainbow: either (a) it’s a “neutral sign,” neither good nor bad, but rather just a case of mistaken identity, with some other phenomenon being the “bad” rainbow (e.g., a double rainbow or an all-blue one), or (b) that it’s a “positive sign” constantly reassuring us at all times of Hashem’s presence, not an evil omen sent here just when things are bad. And apparently it isn’t overly dangerous to look at them, as long as we act respectfully and don’t stare, because, far from being symbols of trouble, rainbows may be reflections of the Shechina itself, for all we know.

But even according to those who say that a rainbow is “neutral,” merely a natural phenomenon without deeper spiritual ramifications, nevertheless they still have a positive element – don’t we say a blessing on other beautiful artifacts of nature? Therefore, we say a blessing on rainbows, and it is a positive one, referring to the covenant and how Hashem watches over us and protects us. Thus, those authorities whom I have seen appear overwhelmingly to support a positive reaction to rainbows, not the negative one too many of us have heard based upon a very superficial reading of the two Gemaras cited above.

## Rabbi Dr. Sanford H. Shudnow

### *Shavuot Second Day*

Deuteronomy 14:22 - 16:17

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The second day Torah reading for the Festival of Shavuot, does not talk of the awesome might of God through the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which is the theme of the first day’s reading in Exodus. Rather, the second day is dedicated to the centrality of Jerusalem (although the name

'Jerusalem' is never mentioned in the Torah), the special sabbatical rules observed in the promised land, the holiday cycle and the responsibility of making a pilgrimage three times a year.

But perhaps the most pervasive and powerful message in our reading in the Book of Deuteronomy is the emphasis on *gemilut hasadim* – doing deeds of loving kindness. Acts of loving kindness are not left to chance in the Torah. One might assume incorrectly, that when I am moved to compassion or when I feel the urge I will give. In our tradition, it's God who mandates correct action. No matter our inclination, we are bidden to be compassionate.

Tithing is an all encompassing mitzvah, sort of a self taxation of one's agricultural produce. There was, additionally, a special tithe that was to be enjoyed by each pilgrim in Jerusalem, that ensured the joy of the experience of the *aliyah la-regel* – the pilgrimage. One was to celebrate during the festival, and no one was to be overlooked. The Torah specifies, "you, your household. Nor shall you neglect the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no share or heritage with you."

Next the Torah specifies "the stranger, the orphan and the widow . . . may come and eat and be satisfied; so that God your Lord may bless you in all that you do." I might think that I have covered all the possible responsibilities that the Torah would place upon me by tithing and celebrating the festival and providing for the others, but we are far from finished with our responsibilities for others.

By following the mitzvot, God assures us of blessing and plenty in our land, never to be in need of any good thing. But reality being what it is, there are always those in need.

I remember so many years ago while studying in yeshiva in Israel, one of our teachers from a religious kibbutz was explaining an early controversy within the various religious streams, as to whether or not it would be permitted by Torah to form a religious kibbutz. The very question was somewhat perplexing, "why not?" It seems that the concept of a kibbutz - a commune village - is to provide for all, so that no one would be poor. Yet the Torah speaks of the needy as ever present in the land. Further, how could a person be religious and not have anyone to give *tzedakah* – charity to?

Religious leaders resolved these issues permitting the formation of religious kibbutzim by reasoning that it's not a mitzvah upon us, to ensure that there will always be poor people. Rather, poverty is a sad fact of life, and we are charged by God to rectify this situation to the best of our abilities. Perhaps within the kibbutz there would be no one in need, but certainly somewhere else in society, there would be someone requiring our assistance.

One might think that giving a little something is good enough, sitting back self satisfied thinking "how righteous am I!" This idea is certainly foreign to Torah thinking. Two verses in our festival reading have been interpreted to demonstrate the necessity of giving in accordance with the actual need of a specific individual.

"If one of your brethren is in need . . . you must not harden your heart nor close your hand against your needy brother. Instead, you shall open your hand to him and freely lend him enough to meet his needs." The hand itself became a symbol of giving in accordance with actual need. As explained to me, closing one's hand into a fist makes all fingers appear equal in size, yet, upon opening the hand we

discover the true length of each finger. Some are short, others long. So it is that no two individuals have identical needs.

Our challenge, especially at a time of celebration, is to tailor our giving in accordance with the real needs of others.

*\*Rabbi Dr. Sanford H. Shudnow served 22 years as a Navy Chaplain. His last duty station was the National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Maryland (now known as Walter Reed National Military Medical Center).*

## Evan Albert

Interestingly, we did not actually receive the Torah on Shavuot. Bnei Yisrael sinned with the egel hazahav (golden calf) and we did not get the Torah until the following Yom Kippur. So what are we commemorating on Shavuot? The answer requires one last question. When Moshe warns Bnei Yisrael not to forget Sinai (Devarim 4), he reminds them not to forget the spectacle of the lightning, thunder, and awe-striking ceremony they saw. Why does Moshe not tell them not to forget the giving of the ten commandments themselves? The answer is that standing at Har Sinai was to instill in us yirat HaShem - fear of G-d (as the pasuk Shemos 20:17 says), and that comes before Torah, for it dictates our ability to receive and forge a connection with the Torah and its Giver. This is what Moshe is warning the people not to forget, for it is the key to Torah. So though we did not get the Torah until yom kippur, on 6th Sivan we became worthy to receive yirat HaShem – and this is what we relive on Shavuot.

## Yitz Kasdan

### *Recitation of Y'kum Purkan at Home Or Not: An Explanation of the Two Different Approaches*

In his weekly Friday instructions on Shabbos *davening* from the start of the COVID-19 lockdown of KMS and the rest of our community shuls, Rabbi Weinberg has held that *Y'kum Purkan* be omitted completely. On the other hand, many *siddurim*, including the Artscroll *Siddur Kol Yaakov*, state that the first, but not the second, *Y'kum Purkan* paragraph is recited by individuals not davening with a *minyán*, such as we are during this pandemic. This brief Torah essay presents one way to understand the dispute between these approaches.

#### **The Origin of Y'kum Purkan**

*Y'kum Purkan* was instituted in Babylonia after the close of the Talmud. See the commentary “*Tikun haT'filah*” in *Siddur Otzar Hat'filos, chelek aleph* at 704 (noting that *Y'kum Purkan* is mentioned by the *Mordechai* in the first *perek* of *Maseches Shabbos* to be recited every *Shabbos*). Its purpose was to “bless” (“*l'varech*”) philanthropists (“*parnesei hador*”) who faithfully tend to the needs of the community (“*tzibbur*”), the *yeshivas*, the [ir] Rabbis and students and all others who toil in *Torah*. It was

written in Aramaic because that was the spoken language of the people at the time. The idea was that people would understand and be positively influenced by *Y'kum Purkan* ("y'chavnu es libam") – presumably to emulate the above subjects of the affirmative *b'rachos* contained therein. *Id.*

### **The Issue Surrounding Aramaic Prayers**

The *gemarrah* in *Shabbos* 12b and *Sotah* 33a, both state, "A person should never request his needs in Aramaic" and expound: "If anyone requests his needs in Aramaic the ministering angels do not pay attention to him because the administering angels do not know Aramaic."<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, both *gemarahs* set out exceptions to the rule. [1] In *Shabbos*: for a sick person, *i.e.*, prayers for a sick person may be recited in Aramaic because the Divine Presence is with the sick person and thus G-d will protect him even if the angels do not pay attention, and [2] In *Sotah*: with respect to a congregation, a "*tzibbur*," as opposed to an individual, a "*yachid*" – *i.e.*, the ban on praying in Aramaic applies to a *yachid*, whereas the allowance to pray in any language (as brought down in the *Mishnah* there in *Sotah*) does not apply to a *tzibbur*. As Artscroll notes in *Sotah*: "Only an individual requires the assistance of the ministering angels. A congregation has no need for them . . . Rather, G-d accepts communal prayer directly without the intercession of angels." (*Id.*, note 6).

In codifying the teachings of two *gemarahs*, the *Shulchan Aruch* in *O'C* 101:4 cites the following three *shitos* (approaches): [1] prayer in any language is allowed with respect to a *tzibbur* but not a *yachid* who should daven only "*b'lashon haKodesh*" (in Hebrew); [2] "*v'yesh omrim*" – "and others say" – that Aramaic prayer is not allowed for an individual when the person is asking for his personal needs ("*shoel tz'rachav*") or for a sick person<sup>18</sup> or for a distressful situation in his home. However, as to a prayer that is standard for a *tzibbur* ("*kavua l'tzibbur*") an individual may pray in any language; and [3] a second "*v'yesh omrim*" – "and others say" – even an individual may ask for his personal needs ("*shoel tz'rachav*") in any language except for Aramaic.

### **Recitation of Y'kum Purkan at Home in Light of the Shulchan Aruch's Codifications**

How we hold (*paskin l'halacha*) among the three *shitos* brought down by the *Shulchan Aruch* will have a bearing as to whether an individual *davening* at home may recite *Y'kum Purkan*. If we hold like the first "*yesh omrim*," *prima facie* even an individual should be able to recite *Y'kum Purkan* because *Y'kum Purkan* is part of the standard *davening*. However, if we hold like the second "*yesh omrim*" an individual would not recite *Y'kum Purkan* because, in the end, it is composed in Aramaic. Indeed, the *Mishnah B'rurah* holds like the second *yesh omrim* and states on the spot in *siman katan* 19 that an individual *davening* at home cannot recite any part of *Y'kum Purkan* ("*im mispallel b'vaiso, ein yachol lomar shum Y'kum Purkan*").

That, however, is not the end of the story. As noted above, many *siddurim* state that only the second paragraph of *Y'kum Purkan* and the (*misheberach* paragraph that follows) should be omitted when *davening* without a *minyan*, *i.e.*, they permit the first paragraph to be recited. The Artscroll *Siddur Kol Yaakov* (note at p. 448) explains: ". . . The first *Y'kum Purkan* is a general prayer for all such people [who uphold the Torah . . .] wherever they may be; consequently, it is recited even by people praying alone at home. The second *Y'kum Purkan* and the *misheberach* are prayers for the congregation with which one is praying; consequently, someone praying alone does not recite those to prayers."

At first blush it would appear that Artscroll and the other *siddurim* hold like the first *yesh omrim* in the *Shulchan Aruch* and would allow recitation of the *Y'kum Purkan* communal prayer. They (as

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<sup>17</sup> Space limitations neither allow for an elucidation of the role angels may play in interceding on behalf of a person's prayer to G-d, nor on the issues angels may have with the Aramaic language. For elaboration, see Artscroll note 6 to *Shabbos* 12b, and note 5 to *Sotah* 33a.

<sup>18</sup> As qualified by the *Mishnah B'rurah* in *siman katan* 16, if the sick person is present when the prayer for him is said, even a prayer in Aramaic is allowed.

Artsroll does) would simply distinguish between recitation of the first and second paragraphs of *Y'kum Purkan* based on whom they respectively are addressing: in the first paragraph, as is stated, to “them” – “*yazhun*” – people not present with the person *davening* alone at home, versus in the second paragraph, as stated, to “you -- “*yazchon* – congregants who are present in *shul* along with person *davening* (which a person who is at home is not). However, this approach is challenged by some.

Specifically, those opposing recitation of even the first *Y'kum Purkan* in the absence of a congregation in *shul*, point to the following generally accepted rule of *p'sak halacha*: When the *Shulchan Aruch* recites successive varying opinions, as above in *O'C* 101:4, the final *halacha* is in accordance with the last *yesh omrim*.<sup>19</sup> Applying that rule here, the *halacha* follows the second *yesh omrim* which, unlike the first *yesh omrim*, prohibits even a communal Aramaic prayer, presumably like *Y'kum Purkan*, when recited at home without a *minyan*. See, e.g., *R'v'vos Ephrayim, chelek vav, siman 455* (where R. Greenblatt ztl, the well-known modern day *posek* and author of *R'v'vos Ephrayim*, reprints a long letter/essay from a colleague who makes this and numerous other points in a broad rebuttal of the position that an individual may recite even the first *Y'kum Purkan* at home). How then can Artsroll and other *siddurim* seemingly hold like the first *yesh omrim* against the rule that it is not followed as the *halacha*? One answer is as follows.

#### **Y'kum Purkan as a Bakasha or as a B'racha**

In his *sefer Shaarei Ephrayim*, R. Ephrayim Zalman Margulies, a contemporary of the *Chasam Sofer* in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century, held that an individual at home should recite the first *Y'kum Purkan*. See *Shaarei Ephrayim, shaar yud, os 26*. Indeed, the *Shaarei Ephrayim* is cited as a source for the position brought down in *siddurim* upholding this practice. See, e.g., *Siddur Otzar Hat'filos, chelek aleph* at 703. At the same time, however, it is difficult to believe that R. Margulies held like the first *yesh omrim* that permits an individual to recite a communal Aramaic prayer even when home alone. That is because in his other *sefer, Mateh Ephrayim (siman 581, s'if 21)*, R. Margulies holds that an individual *davening* outside of a *minyan* should not recite the Aramaic *bakashos*, (requests) in the *S'lichos* service, namely, “*machei u'masei*” and “*maran d'vishmayah*,” even though they are communal prayers and should otherwise be allowed to be recited by an individual per the first *yesh omrim*. Why then would R. Margolis distinguish between the communal Aramaic *Y'kum Purkan* that he allows to be recited at home, and the communal Aramaic paragraphs in *S'lichos* that he does not?

The answer could lie in the nature of *Y'kum Purkan*: Is it a *bakasha* or a *b'racha*?<sup>20</sup>

As noted at the outset, *Y'kum Purkan* was established as an affirmative blessing, a *b'racha* -- not a prayerful request, a *bakasha*. Thus, the rationale for the *minhag* to recite the first *Y'kum Purkan* at home as brought down by *siddurim* is that the *Y'kum Purkan* is not an Aramaic ***bakasha prayer*** at all,<sup>21</sup> but rather is a ***b'racha*** that we are dispensing. See *R'v'vos Ephrayim, chelek aleph siman 216 :1* (which makes this probable distinction and reports it in the name of R. Yitzchak Y. Weiss ztl, author of the contemporary *Sh'ut MInchas Yitzchak*). Accordingly, it does not fall under the ban against Aramaic prayers codified in the *Shulchan Aruch* in *O'C siman 101:4* regardless of any of the three *shitos* there that only apply to *bakashos* prayers, not a *b'racha* that one gives to others. Indeed, this accords with the opinion of the *Rema* who expressly states (*O'C* 294:7) that there is no problem with reciting *Y'kum Purkan* on *Shabbos* notwithstanding the general rule that *t'chinus*, i.e., prayers of *bakashos* for personal

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., *Sh'ut Y'chave Daas, chelek aleph k'lalei haShulchan Aruch k'lal 25*.

<sup>20</sup> R. Aharon Kahn, a Rosh Yeshiva at Y.U., discusses a similar dichotomy with respect to *Birkas Kohanim* in his *sefer Shevet Avicha, chelek aleph* at 28 (“*N'sias Kapayim; B'racha O T'filah*”).

<sup>21</sup> According to this understanding, the Artsroll *Siddur's* characterization of *Y'kum Purkan* as a “prayer,” as quoted above, would be imprecise.

needs, should not be said on *Shabbos*.<sup>22</sup> As the *Rema* writes: “We have the custom to recite *Y’kum Purkan* and there is no prohibition (in doing so) respecting *t’chinah* on *Shabbos*.” (“*V’nohagim lomar Y’kum Purkan v’ein b’ze issur t’chinah b’Shabbos*.”). See generally *R’v’vos Ephrayim, chelek aleph siman 216:2*.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, those who recite the first *Y’kum Purkan* at home without a *minyan* may view it as an affirmative blessing, a *b’racha*, that is not implicated by the rule against prayers in Aramaic, while those who ban its recitation characterize it as a prayerful request, a *bakasha*, that falls prey to the prohibition of reciting prayers in Aramaic.<sup>23</sup>

## Jonathan Rosenberg

### *Dvar Torah for Shavuot 5780*

The Torah refers to Shavuot (in Numbers 28:16) as “**Yom Habikkurim**” or “the day of the first fruits.” This designation is connected to the mitzvah of the “**Shtei Halechem**,” the two loaves of (Chametz) bread which are brought to the Temple on that day, which are referred to in the Torah (Lev. 23:20) as “**Lechem Habikkurim**” or “the bread of the first fruits.” However, the loaves of bread brought in the Temple bear little resemblance to our usual image of “**Bikkurim**,” when we usually think of the happy farmer (I always think of the famous Schumann piano piece with that name) bringing his basket of produce to Jerusalem, as is described in the Mishnaic tractate of Bikkurim. In fact, the connection between the “**Shtei Halechem**” and the usual concept of “**Bikkurim**” is a bit obscure. The connection is mentioned in a Mishnah which actually appears twice, once in the last chapter of Challah and once in the first chapter of Bikkurim. It reads as follows: “The people of Har Tzevoim once brought their Bikkurim [to the Temple] before Shavuot, and [the priests] didn’t accept them, because of the verse in the Torah that reads “and the *harvest festival of the first fruits* of your work, that which you plant in the field” (Ex. 23:16).” This harvest festival is none other than Shavuot. Why then would the people of Har Tzevoim have brought their first fruits before Shavuot? The answer, if one looks into the geography, is clear; this settlement was located northeast of Jerusalem on the eastern side of the Judean hills on the way down to the Jordan valley. The climate there is hot and fruits ripen early. So it would have been natural for the people there to bring their fruits to Jerusalem as soon as they ripened. The commentary on the Mishnah of **RaSh**, Rabbi Samson of Sens (one of the Tosafists, born 1150 and died 1230) discusses this Mishnah and points out that it seems to contradict a statement in Masechet Menachot (68b): “One does not bring grain offerings, or first fruits, or the grain offerings brought with libations accompanying animal offerings, from the new crop prior to the sacrifice of the *Omer* [on the second day of Passover], and if one brought them [before the *Omer*] from the new crop they are not kosher. After the *Omer* but

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<sup>22</sup> See *Y’T Shabbos, perek 15, halacha 3*.

<sup>23</sup> A similar analysis possibly could be made with regard to the Aramaic *Akdamus*. While its totality is a poem, towards its end does the paragraph “*zakain*” reflect a *b’racha*, and thus fit for recital without a *minyan*, or a *bakasha* that should be skipped at home? *V’ein kan makam l’haarich*.

prior to the two loaves one may not bring these offerings from the new crop, *but if one brought them from the new crop, they are kosher.*"

So if the offering of the people from Har Tzevoim was kosher, why would the priests in the Temple not accept it? The answer of RaSh is quite ingenious but also very sensible. He says that the people of Har Tzevoim were prominent and respected. The Kohanim in the Temple were afraid of setting a precedent. If they accepted the offering of the people of Har Tzevoim, then everyone else would want to imitate them and bring their first fruits early. While an offering of first fruits brought before Shavuot is technically kosher, they didn't want lots of people doing it. One reason for this is mentioned in the Mishnah; Shavuot is supposed to be associated with the first fruits. But one can imagine another reason. The true spirit of the Torah is incompatible with the idea of one-upmanship. We do not want a system where everyone is rushing to be first in line. Farmers in a chillier climate would feel less adequate because their fruits ripen later. One thing this year's pandemic has definitely taught us is that the actions of any of us have an impact on everyone else. Let's celebrate this Yom Tov in that spirit, with a feeling of togetherness and solidarity, even if we are davening and studying in our individual homes.

## Yosef Lindell

### *Why Do We Say Two Difficult Aramaic Poems On Shavuot?*

If there's a part of the Shavuot liturgy that begs for an explanation, it's the widespread Ashkenazic custom to recite two cryptic Aramaic poems, or *piyyutim*, as part of the Torah service. The first, *Akdamut*, is chanted on the first day right before Torah reading, and the second, *Yatziv Pitgam*, is inserted toward the beginning of the *haftarah* on the second day. Where did they come from? And why do we say them?

It turns out that these poems are rather remarkable. They are the last remaining vestiges of live *targum* or oral *targum*, a practice that died out nigh on a millennia ago in most Jewish communities. And even though we won't be saying the *piyyutim* in shul this year, perhaps they can provide us with a perspective on prayer during these challenging times.

A long time ago, before there were any *Chumashim* one could use to follow along with the Torah reading, synagogue attendees were provided with a live translation of the Torah portion into the common language of Aramaic verse by verse. The Mishnah (Megillah 4:4) recounts that after the *ba'al korei* completed one verse, a designated individual would recite the Aramaic *targum*, or translation, aloud. The Talmud (Megillah 3a) traces this practice all the way back to Ezra's public reading of the Torah, where there's indication that his reading was translated (Nehemiah 8:8). The famous Targum Onkelos likely began as live *targum* before being written down. There was oral *targum* for the *haftarah* as well; Targum Yonatan ben Uziel for example, which is less literal than Onkelos and contains many midrashic additions, probably came into being as a *haftarah targum*.

Live *targum* flourished when Aramaic was widely spoken by Jews, but died out as the language declined. Although today, it's practiced only in some Yemenite communities, it didn't disappear all at once. As late as the fourteenth century, *Kol Bo* (52) and other *Rishonim* from Ashkenazi Europe attest to the fact that live *targum* remained part of the Torah and *haftarah* service two times a year: on the seventh day of Pesach, which features *Shirat ha-Yam*, the Song at the Sea, and on Shavuot, when we read the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* on the first day.

We don't know exactly why live *targum* continued to be part of these two holidays in particular, but even nowadays, their Torah readings are unique. We stand for both *Shirat ha-Yam* and the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, but not for other parts of the Torah. And we read each portion a special way: *Shirat ha-Yam* has a triumphal tune, and for the public reading of the *Aseret ha-Dibrot*, the *ba'al korei* uses *ta'am elyon*, the more dramatic musical notation, or *trop*, which is written above the letters.

Both *Akdamut* and *Yatziv Pitgam* date from this medieval period when live *targum* had been largely discontinued but was still part of the Torah and *haftarah* reading for Shavuot. They were written as introductions to the *targum*, and are part of a larger genre of *piyyutim* that ask God for permission to translate the Torah or the Navi.

*Akdamut*, which discusses many topics, including the glory of God, the special nature of the Jewish people, and the greatness of the Torah, was written by Meir ben Isaac Nehorai in the eleventh century. It was originally recited after the first verse of the Torah portion on the first day, right before the *targum*, as an introduction. Nowadays, however, most say it before the *leyning* begins in deference to Taz (Orah Hayyim 494:1) and other *Aharonim* who felt that the Torah reading should not be interrupted in the middle.

*Akdamut* was held in particularly high regard, not least because its origin was literally the stuff of legend. According to a well-known story, although Rabbi Meir wrote *Akdamut*, he did not teach it to the Jewish community. Rather, when the community was threatened by an evil Christian sorcerer who challenged them to a magical contest, Rabbi Meir sought help from the ten lost tribes who lived across the Sambatyon River. The river threw rocks during the week and was only navigable on Shabbat, so once Rabbi Meir crossed it in an attempt to find a champion save his people, he was not permitted to return. Instead, he taught *Akdamut* to the champion he procured from the tribe of Dan, and it was this Danite who, after defeating the sorcerer, conveyed it to the Jewish community.

*Yatziv Pitgam* doesn't have nearly as interesting a story associated with it, but it was probably written in the twelfth century by Rabbeinu Tam, one of the most famous Tosafists, who signed his name in the first letters of each line. Unlike *Akdamut*, the poem explicitly notes that it's an introduction to live *targum*; the penultimate line of the *piyyut*, omitted from the ArtScroll *Siddur* but retained in the Koren, reads, "*ke-ka'aimna ve-targaimna, bemilui debahir safrin,*" — "As I stand and translate with the words the scribes chose." Further, the final line, which begins, "*yehonatan gevar invatan*" could be translated as "Yonatan the humble one," an allusion to the Mishnaic Sage Yonatan ben Uziel to whom Targum Yonatan, the most famous *targum* on Navi, is attributed.

So that's where *Akdamut* and *Yatziv Pitgam* come from. But we don't do oral *targum* of any kind anymore. So how come on Shavuot, and on Shavuot alone, two *piyyutim* introducing the *targum* have stuck around to this day? (The question only becomes stronger when one considers that in the United States and Israel, many communities have eliminated nearly all of the *piyyutim* that were once part of

the *Yom Tov tefillah* in Ashkenazi communities such as the *ma'araviyot* recited during *Ma'ariv* and the *yotzrot* said during *Shaharit*.)

Unfortunately, no one really knows for sure. It's not really the type of question that's amenable to cut-and-dry answers. Some have suggested that people found the language of these poems particularly beautiful and meaningful. But while that may have been true once, most people can't understand the *piyyutim* anymore, and many other beautiful compositions have faded away. Others have speculated that people kept saying them because each has a distinctive tune. (An interesting aside: the tune for *Akdamut* commonly used in the United States is nearly identical to the one used for *Yom Tov Kiddush*.) But the tunes we use now are not universal, and they have changed over time. One scholar has suggested that the extraordinary legend associated with *Akdamut's* authorship made an indelible impression on Ashkenazi Jews and ensured that it remained part of the liturgy. This approach, however, does not explain *Yatziv Pitgam*. One might more promisingly argue that because the *Aseret ha-Dibrot* is among the most dramatic and religiously significant Torah readings, we recite *Akdamut* to retain some of the pomp and drama that surrounded the reading in earlier times, and we even carry over that spirit to the next day by saying *Yatziv Pitgam* in the *haftarah*. I also wonder whether the longevity of these two poems is related to the fact that their propriety is debated in the halakhic literature. As I noted above, some prohibited interrupting the Torah reading with *Akdamut*. The same authorities, however, permitted interrupting the *haftarah* with *Yatziv Pitgam* because of the *haftarah's* lesser status. Ironically then, the very debates over how the *piyyutim* should be incorporated into the synagogue service could have helped enshrine them in perpetuity.

But I want to close with a different suggestion. It may not be *peshat*, yet it recognizes a connection between the two poems and what Shavuot is all about.

At first glance, *Mattan Torah* seems like a top-down experience. There's a Torah up in heaven, and God brings it down to Earth. This Torah is perfect, immutable, and demands our obedience. The Talmud (Shabbat 88a), for example, speaks about Mount Sinai being suspended over the heads of the Children of Israel. And yet there's another side to Revelation that's bottom-up, for the *Torah she-Ba'al Peh*, the Oral Law, is in large part ours to create. Perhaps this is why Rabbi Elazar declares in Pesachim (68b) "*hakol modim ba-atzeret de-ba'inan nami lahem*" – on Shavuot, more so than on any other festival, we must spend a portion of the day focused on our own needs; the day cannot be entirely about God. On Shavuot, we must acknowledge the human role in the continual unfolding of the Oral Torah.

Devarim 5:19, when describing the Revelation at Sinai, speaks of a "*kol gadol velo yasaf*." While commentators debate what this means, one translation renders the phrase as "a great sound that did not stop." The nineteenth century commentator Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg homiletically suggests in his work *ha-Ketav ve-Hakabbalah* that this "great sound" refers to the Oral Torah, which is always growing and developing through our interpretive efforts. In this sense, revelation is a resonance yet reverberating and a voice still vocalizing. God speaks through our efforts to interpret the Torah.

Live *targum* is a very daring kind of *Torah she-Ba'al Peh*. By interrupting the public reading of the Torah with translation and interpretation, we proclaim, in no uncertain terms, that the Torah is not high up in heaven, but here on earth, and that it's our to learn. So perhaps it is fitting that on Shavuot in particular, when we celebrate both the Written and Oral Torah, acknowledging that we shape the Torah just as it shapes us, a vestige of oral *targum* remains. The *piyyutim* of *Akdamut* and *Yatziv Pitgam* are our words, inserted smack in the middle of God's words, which is exactly where they are supposed to be.

We live in extraordinary times. Communal prayer, which was once our anchor, is gone. Each of us is cautiously experimenting with what it means to pray in solitude and to be alone with God. More than ever, many of us want to find new words to express this moment. Perhaps *Akdamut* and *Yatziv Pitgam*, which request permission to translate, can inspire us to carve out space to speak to God in our own language and on our own terms. Indeed, the genre of *piyyut* itself emerged in the third and fourth centuries in the Land of Israel when prayer was more dynamic; each week, virtuosic *hazzanim* would lead the congregation in their own compositions. May our prayers both old and new find favor so that we can be together once more, *ke-ish ehad be-leiv ehad*.

## Richard Dine

### *Love in a Time of COVID-19: Online Dvar Torah for Shavuot at KMS 5780 / 2020*

So why are we here? Why do we come to shul? What's the ultimate point / the goal?" Those are the questions with which I began my Dvar Torah for Shabbat Erev Shavuot in 2015. While noting there were many possible answers, I said I thought the simplest answer was love. We are here because we love God, or are supposed to love God. Consider: in the Shema we are commanded to love God, the Rambam at the end of Hilchot Teshuva emphasizes the importance of love, and Chovot Halvevot makes love the highest rung of his "Duties of the Heart".

The lead up to Shavuot helps us focus on love. Parashat Bamidbar always comes just before Shavuot. In the Haftarah, Hoshea emphasizes that our relationship with God is like a marriage, and when we sin we do not simply violate God's law but we are in effect committing adultery. And yet God loves us and will in the end take us back. And so the Haftarah ends with the lines we say when putting on tefillin each weekday: "I will betroth you to Me forever; I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in acts of loving kindness (*chesed*) and compassion. I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know God."

Also on the Shabbat before Shavuot we complete Pirkei Avot with the famous 48 rewards (*Ma'alot*) for Torah study, six of which involve love: "being loved, loving God, loving people, loving righteousness, loving justice, loving correction."

In the lead up to Shavuot this year, Rabbi Weinberg has been teaching the laws of Kriyat Shema in his noon learning session. My favorite interpretation for the word "V'ahavta" in Shema is from Yoma 86a "Abaye said: As it was taught in a baraita that it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 6:5), which means that you shall make the name of Heaven beloved. How should one do so? One should do so in that he [or she!] should read Torah, and learn Mishna, and serve Torah scholars, and he should be pleasant with people in his business transactions. What do people say about such a person? Fortunate is his father [and mother] who taught him Torah, fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah, woe to the people who have not studied Torah. So-and-so, who taught him Torah, see how pleasant are his ways, how proper are his deeds."

As for how Shavuot itself brings us to love, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks in his Pesah Mahzor has a nice essay on how Shir Hashirim / Rut / Kohelet show us three dimensions of love, with Shir Hashirim on love as passion, Rut on love as loyalty, and Kohelet on love as simchah, love as existential joy -- the joy of being with the one you love. And as Rabbi Sacks says, we need all three, and we need these in our relationships not only here on earth but also in our loving relationship with God. Turning back to Megilat Rut, Rabbi Sacks emphasizes this is love as chesed -- the very term Hoshea invokes in the Haftarah. In his Dvar Torah to Chayei Sarah, Rabbi Sacks adds "It is the theme, also, of the book of Ruth. It is Ruth's kindness to Naomi, and Boaz's to Ruth that Tanakh seeks to emphasize in sketching the background to David, their great-grandson, who would become Israel's greatest king. Indeed the sages said that the three characteristics most important to Jewish character are modesty, compassion and kindness. Chesed, what I have defined elsewhere as "love as deed," is central to the Jewish value system."

As I write this Dvar Torah, many KMS members (and indeed many people throughout society) are engaged in incredible chesed as we work to battle COVID-19. But KMS is not holding minyanim. This year we won't have our usual packed shul with hundreds learning overnight, not to mention ice cream, coffee, and the gala kiddush. So while chesed is a vital part of our love for God, and our love for those created in God's image, what does it mean to really love God when God is keeping us distant from the community we built to serve Him?

Rabbi Shai Held (and probably many others) notes that Psalms 42-43 (usually considered to be really one Psalm) expresses most poignantly our longing for Hashem even as Hashem has pushed us away, using expressions familiar to us in our tefilot and Shabbat zemirot. I encourage you to read the two Psalms in full, but here I will just highlight a couple of lines:

"My soul thirsts\* for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God!" Here the Psalmist misses his ability to go to the Temple. Why can the Psalmist not go there? COVID-19? Some other illness or fear of attack?

"When I think of this,\*\* I pour out my soul: how I walked with the crowd, moved with them, the festive throng, to the House of God with joyous shouts of praise." Much like the way I imagine many of us feel, not only does the Psalmist miss the feeling close to God in the Temple, but the Psalmist misses being there with friends and fellow Jews. How much of our longing for KMS is for the Tefilah and Torah learning, and how much is also because we miss the interactions with our friends and neighbors? I personally very much miss the energy that comes from being with so many enthusiastic people, young and old, in the KMS building on a Shabbat or Yom Tov morning (and yes, Kiddush).

The Psalm continues: "Have hope in God; I will yet praise Him for His saving presence." Like the Psalmist, we should have hope that we will get back to shul soon and in good health, God willing.

Right now the threat of COVID-19 has separated many of us from loved ones, including our beloved KMS community. Many of us may feel like the Psalmist separated from Hashem. But as we look towards Shavuot, let's remember what binds us to each other, and to Hashem, is love. A love we are trying to express with the chesed we show to those hurt or threatened by the virus. A love for what we cannot have right now: that feeling of closeness that comes when we do not need to social distance; that feeling of closeness to Hashem that for some may be easiest to experience when we are physically surrounded by a community that seeks it. A love hard to see over Zoom or as we daven alone.

Let us use some of our time over Shavuot to think how we can find this love in our challenging times. Chag Sameach & Shabbat Shalom.

\*Note the Hebrew is Tzama Nafshi Laylohim layl chai, the same phrase used in a Shabbat Zemer.

\*\*Note the Hebrew is Ayleh Ezkerah, the phrase used at the start of the tefilah of the 10 martyrs we say on Yom Kippur.

\*\*\*Pesukim not quoted here include the phrase from Mah Tishtochechi... umah Tehemi from Lechah Dodi.

## Mark Warshawsky

### *Musaf on Shavuot*

Q: Why do we only include mention of the karbonos of Shavuot that are listed in Sefer Bamidbar and not those listed in Sefer Vayikra, in particular those unique to Shavuot-- the two leavened breads (shteihalechem) and the two lamb peace offerings (the only communal shelamin that are holy holies)?

A. As explained by Sfas Emes in comments on Menachos around the Mishnah 4:3, the karbonos mentioned in Sefer Bamidbar were brought in the desert in the Mishkan and in the Temple in Eretz Israel but those mentioned in Sefer Vayikra were only brought in Eretz Israel and indeed may be regarded as mitzvos tied to the land. As further proof, the wheat flour for shteihalechem must be from Eretz Israel but other menachos can be made from foreign wheat. Our musaf prayer, which may be thought to be more associated with the destruction of the Temple and our exile from Israel therefore only mentions the offerings that were also brought in the desert, outside of Israel. May we merit to experience the bringing of the shteihalechem next year in Jerusalem!

## Mark Warshawsky

### *A (Serious) Aspect of Shavuot*

The Mishnah in Rosh Hashana 1:1 lists Shavuot as a Day of Judgement, regarding fruits of tree, for the coming season. In an agricultural society, this was serious -- dates, grapes, olives, etc. were cash crops. Where else do we see this aspect of Shavuot? I claim it is in the central symbol of the holiday in Temple times -- the shteihalechem -- the two leavened breads that were brought with other offerings. The Mishnah in Menachos 5:3 lists the Shteihalechem along with the minchas (flour offerings) brought by a sinner and by a sotah as having neither oil nor frankincense. The gemara in Sotah 15a explains in the latter cases this lack is because the Torah did not want to impart elegance to these offerings. Perhaps that is true for the shteihalechem as well. On a judgement day, simplicity and seriousness are appropriate. But also joy. Yom Kippur when the two goats were brought in the Temple, and our sins were forgiven, was the happiest day of the year. Or when the metzorah brought two birds and ended his quarantine, he no doubt felt relief and joy. So too on Shavuot we should feel great

happiness at the receiving of the Torah, the two Tablets, the written and oral Law, and serving Hashem with both our instincts. Chag Sameach.

## Ilana Bauman

I am a huge fan of TedTalks. I truly think they are a great addition to our generation, an incredible forum to share wisdom and inspiration, and an awesome way engage others' experiences and be inspired. A man named Drew Dudley gave a talk called "Leading with Lollipops." He begins by asking the audience members to raise their hands if they consider themselves leaders. Some raise their hands, but not everyone, and this is what he addresses. Dudley talks about redefining leadership as actions, big or small, that have a positive impact on another person. He talks about how he passed out lollipops at a college orientation, and how one new student, standing with her parents, who felt as though she was not ready or able to enter this new environment, decided she would give it a chance when she was greeted with a smile and a lollipop by this nice upperclassman. At the time he didn't know the impact he had on this new student. But before he graduated, he was approached one day by a young woman holding a lollipop. She told him that it was because of him that she stayed at college and did not go home with her parents that first day of orientation, and she wanted to thank him for the profound impact he had on her life. (There is a bit more to the story, and I highly recommend searching it on YouTube and watching it after Yom Tov.) This phenomenon of a small action with a big impact is what Dudley calls a "Lollipop Moment."

A Midrash on Megillat Rut (Rut Rabbah 5:6) connects three seemingly unrelated psukim, three verses, one from megillat Rut, one from parshat Shmot, and one from parshat VaYeshev. The Midrash introduces these psukim with the lesson that if you are going to do a mitzvah, do it wholeheartedly.

In parshat VaYeshev, we hear of the brothers plan to kill Yosef, and Reuven's plan to stop it. Reuven suggests that instead of killing Yosef in cold blood, they should throw Yosef into a pit. Reuven saves Yosef's life. The Midrash says that had Reuven known it would be written in the Torah that his plan all along was to save Yosef, he would not have suggested throwing him into a pit, but would have instead taken Yosef back to his father Yaakov and returned him home.

In parshat Shmot, Moshe is standing by the burning bush and turns down G-d's command to take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, suggesting that G-d ask Aharon, his brother, instead. Hashem then tells Moshe that he is the right man for the job, and that when Aharon greets him, he will be happy to see him. Only then does Moshe agree to take on this Divine mission. The Midrash says that had Aharon known it would be written in the Torah that he would greet Moshe happily, he would have welcomed him with more than just a smile and a hug, but with drums and music.

And in Megillat Rut, which we read over Shavuot, Rut is in Boaz's field collecting wheat left for those in need, so she can feed herself and her mother-in-law Naomi. Boaz goes out to his field to meet Rut, tells her that she need not go to another field for he will support her, and gives her an extra portion of wheat to feed herself and Naomi. The Midrash says that had Boaz known it would be written in the Megillah that he gave Rut extra wheat to sustain herself and Naomi, he would have given her more than just grains of wheat; he would have given her fattened cows.

There are many questions we could ask and many lessons we could learn from this midrash, and I encourage you to look at it with your own eyes, mind, and heart and see what you find. For now, I would like us to explore the explanation offered by Rav Elimayer Bloch. In parshat VaYeshev, Reuven saved his brother's life, but did not realize that saving Yosef actually saved so many more people. Had Yosef not been in alive to organize the food storage and rations in Egypt, many more people, including Bnei Yisrael, would have died from the famine. In parshat Shmot, Moshe only agreed to take on the mission of saving Bnei Yisrael once Hashem reassured him that Aharon will be happy to see him. Aharon greeted his brother happily, but he did not realize that then entire future of the geula, the redemption from Egypt, would rest upon his greeting Moshe with joy. In megillat Rut, Boaz offered to support Rut and gave her extra wheat to eat, but he did not realize that this one offer would lead to his marriage to Rut, forging the lineage including King David, and later on (and hopefully soon, please G-d) Mashiach ben David.

Reuven, Aharon, and Boaz did not realize the true impact their actions would have. Had they realized the extent of their actions, they would have done even more. Had Reuven realized saving Yosef would save so many people, he would have done even more to save Yosef. Had Aharon realized his greeting Moshe with joy was the driving force behind Moshe's acceptance to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt, he would have done even more to show his joy and reassure his brother. Had Boaz realized his meeting Rut and keeping her alive would lead to their marriage and the birth of Mashiach, he would have done even more to support her. But they didn't realize the extent of their actions. They didn't realize that each of these moments was a Lollipop Moment. And had they known the true potential of their actions, had they been able to envision the true impacts they would have, had they recognized these Lollipop Moments of small actions with great impacts, they would have done even more. And that is why the Midrash frames these psukim under the same umbrella message: when you do a mitzvah, when you do something, when you do anything, do it with your whole heart, do it fully, and do it to the greatest and the best of your ability.

Dudley says: "It can be frightening to think that we can matter so much to other people." And as long as we continue to view leadership as something that is beyond our ability, as long as we do not recognize and believe in the impact each of us can have on another person, "we give ourselves an excuse not to expect leadership every day from ourselves and from each other."

So be like that new student, who later told Dudley the impact he had on her life. Don't wait for hindsight to tell you how important your actions are, as Reuven, Aharon, and Boaz did. Do great things yourself, and you will make great impacts, greater than you may ever know. And tell great people that they have done great things. Acknowledge the great things you do, and acknowledge the great things other people do. Recognize the impact you have on other people's lives, and recognize the impact they have on yours. As Dudley says, "we need to get over our fear of how extraordinarily powerful we can be in each other's lives." And if we can do that, we will all recognize our true leadership potentials and do everything we do as a leader would – with a full heart, with intention, and to the best of our abilities.

# Dov S. Zakheim

## *Studying Torah on Shavuot Night—and the Rest of the Year*

A brilliant but somewhat eccentric fellow student at Oxford would stay up studying all Shavuot night, but didn't seem to engage in Torah study during much of the rest of the year. Someone once asked him, "what's the point of staying up to 'learn' all night on Shavuot if you don't do anything the rest of the time?" My friend did not really have an answer. Perhaps there is one. First, however, it might be useful to review the background to what we call *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.

There is a consensus among leading halakhists that the *Zohar* is the source for the *minhag* to study all night on Shavuot.<sup>24</sup> The *Zohar* states that:

The Torah that is required on this night [Shavuot] is Oral Torah [[*Torah she'beal peh*], so that they [*B'nai Yisrael*] may be purified as one by the spring of the deep stream. Afterward, on this day, Written Torah [*Torah she'bikhtav*] will come and join Her...Therefore the ancient Hasidim did not sleep on this night and would delve into Torah, saying 'Let us come to obtain a holy inheritance for ourselves and our children in two worlds!' [i.e. this world and the next].<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere the *Zohar* records that "Rabbi Shimon was sitting engaged in Torah on the night when the Bride is joined with her Husband."<sup>26</sup> The night is Shavuot, the Bride represents the Oral Torah and the Husband the Written Torah. "Together they convey revelation."<sup>27</sup>

Prior to the *Zohar's* appearance in the thirteenth century, there was no record of a tradition to spend the night of Shavuot studying Torah. On the other hand, both earlier and later *midrashim* did speak of studying Torah, notably the Oral Torah, at night. Among the earliest of these *midrashim* was *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, which may have been compiled as early as 600 CE, or about a century after the Babylonian Talmud was completed.

*Pirkei D'rabbi Eliezer* provides an aggadic basis for this practice. It quotes the *Tanna* R. Yehosua bin Korḥa who stated: "During the forty days that Moses spent on the mountain, he studied *mikra* [that is, *Tanakh*] during the day and Mishna at night."<sup>28</sup> R. David Luria explains that in engaging in this bifurcated

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<sup>24</sup> *Mishna Berura*, *Orah Hayyim* 494:1; *Arukh Hashulhan*, *Orah Hayyim* 494:3; R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Ha'moadim Ba'Halakha*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tel Aviv, 1959), 310-11.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel C. Matt, trans. *The Zohar* vol. 8 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 128. The original Aramaic can be found in *Sefer HaZohar al Hamisha Humshei Torah* vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1999), 98a.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 1:8a; Matt, *The Zohar* vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>27</sup> *Ad. loc.*, f.n. 365.

<sup>28</sup> *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* (Jerusalem: 5730/1970), chap. 46, 109b. Other *midrashim* that make a similar observation, though not necessarily quoting R. Yehoshua bin Korḥa include *Seder Eliyahu Rabba*, 2; *Midrash Tanḥuma: Ki Tisa*, 36; and *Midrash Sohar Tov*, 19.

form of Torah study, Moses was able to distinguish between night and day; for this reason, the Torah repeats the word “forty” when it describes his stay on Mount Sinai as “forty days and forty nights.”<sup>29</sup>

Although this might beg the question as to how Moses knew when to switch from one mode of Torah study to another, *Midrash Tanhuma*, which appeared sometime after *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer*, states that it was Hashem who was teaching both the Written and the Oral Law to Moses, and therefore, when Hashem switched from one to the other, Moses knew that the day or night had come to an end.<sup>30</sup> *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer* does not mention anything about Moses specifically studying on Shavuot night, however, nor does R. David Luria, nor, for that matter, does *Midrash Tanhuma*.

It would appear that the *Zohar* adopted the *midrash’s* recounting of Moses’ nocturnal studies and then applied it to the notion of studying all Shavuot night. Interestingly, however, just as there is no reference to the *Zohar* until after it emerged in the thirteenth century, there is likewise no reference to the *minhag* it records prior to the volume’s appearance, nor indeed, for nearly three centuries thereafter. Two eminent sixteenth century kabbalists, R. Shlomo Alkabetz, author of *Lekha Dodi*, and R. Yosef Karo, of *Shulhan Arukh* fame, formalized the idea of a special set of readings for Shavuot night.

In 1671 Rabbi Abraham Gombiner mentioned the *minhag* in his classic commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, entitled *Magen Avraham*. He pointed out that it was now a common practice “among the majority of students” [*rov halomdim*] to spend Shavuot night immersed in Torah study.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, despite citing the *Zohar*, R. Gombiner did not quote its basis for the tradition. Nor did he cite *Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer*. Instead he wrote, “perhaps one could provide a simple rationale [*latet ta’am lefi peshuto*], namely, because the Jews were sleeping all night [of Shavuot] and the Holy One blessed be He had to wake them to receive the Torah, as it is written in the *Midrash*, we need to ‘repair’ [*letaken*] this shortcoming.”

The *midrash* to which R. Gombiner was referring was *Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, sometimes called *Midrash Hazit* or *Iggeret Hazit*. The *midrash* records<sup>32</sup> an interpretation by R. Pinhas in the name of R. Hoshia of the verse: While the king was still at his table [*ad sheh’hamelekh bi’msibo*]:<sup>33</sup>

Israel slept all that night, because the sleep of Pentecost is pleasant and the night is short. R. Judan said, “not a flea worried them. God came and found them sleeping, so he began to rouse them with percussion instruments, as it says, ‘And it came to pass on the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings [*vayehi baym ha’shelishi b’heyot haboker va’yehi kolot u’verakim*]<sup>34</sup> and Moses roused Israel and brought them out to meet the supreme King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, as it says, And Moses brought out the people to meet the Lord [*va’yotzei Moshe et ha’am likrat Ha’Elohim*].<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> R. David Luria, *Bi’ur HaRaD”L*, ad. loc. s.v. *koreh*.

<sup>30</sup> *Midrah Tanhuma: Ki Tisa*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> R. Abraham Gombiner, *Magen Avraham: Orah Hayyim* 494, s.v. *Ita baZohar*.

<sup>32</sup> *Midrash Shir Hashirim Rabba*, 1:56.

<sup>33</sup> Cant. 1:12.

<sup>34</sup> Ex. 19:16.

<sup>35</sup> Ex. 19:17.

Like the other midrashic sources, however, this passage says nothing about studying Torah the entire night of Shavuot. Nevertheless, it would not have been a stretch for R. Gombiner to infer that the midrash provided the rationale for designating all-night Torah study as *tikkun leil Shavuot*.

Some twenty-five years after the completion of *Magen Avraham*, R. Yaakov Reischer, author of the highly influential *Shvut Yaakov*, referred to this practice in his volume on *halakha* entitled *Hok Yaakov*.<sup>36</sup> Later in the eighteenth century, R. Yaakov Emden published a text of the *tikkun* in his famous *siddur*.<sup>37</sup> By 1800, when the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, included the *minhag* in his *Shulhan Arukh Harav*,<sup>38</sup> the practice had taken on a life of its own, as had R. Gombiner's rationale.<sup>39</sup>

#### HALAKHOT RELATING TO ALL NIGHT STUDY ON SHAVUOT

Though studying all night on Shavuot is a *minhag*, several questions did arise in connection with all-night, or at least late night study. Since those engaging in Torah study at night tended to drink multiple cups of coffee (or tea), the question arose as to whether they would have to make a *brakha* [blessing] on each cup that they drank, or whether the *brakha* that they made before drinking the initial cup sufficed to cover all subsequent drinks. After conducting a typically exhaustive review of all the sources, some of which argued for a single *brakha* and others for multiple *brakhot*, R. Ovadia Yosef concluded that one need only make a *brakha* on the first cup, but should have in mind that the *brakha* should cover all subsequent cups that a person might drink in order to remain alert.<sup>40</sup>

Not everyone could stay alert, however, even if fortified by coffee. Should someone who could not concentrate nevertheless fight to stay awake? Doing so, however, could actually result in wasting precious study time (*bittul Torah*), since inevitably the person would doze off. Perhaps it was better to take a cat nap and then continue to study. The question was put to R. Hayyim Kanievsky, who reportedly gave one of his famous one-word replies *kirtzono* ("as he wishes)," i.e. whatever works best.<sup>41</sup>

A second set of questions related to the application of regular morning blessings when those studying all night commenced the *Shaharit* (morning) prayer. R. Eliyahu Falk, of Gateshead, England, dealt with appropriateness of reciting the blessing for washing one's hands after a night of study. He ruled that if one were to relieve oneself, then it would be proper to recite the blessing. Otherwise, one washed one's hands without a *brakha*. If one then went to sleep, upon awakening, one should again wash one's hands, again without the *brakha*.<sup>42</sup> R. Falk also ruled that one who planned to sleep after *shaharit* on Shavuot morning should recite the passage *elohai neshama* and the other birkhot hashahar after waking, unless

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<sup>36</sup> R. Yaakov Reischer, *Hok Yaakov: Oraḥ Hayyim* 494 (Dessau, 1696).

<sup>37</sup> R. Yaakov Emden, *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, vol. 1 (New York: Otzar Hasefarim, n.d.), 275a ff.

<sup>38</sup> R. Shneur Zalman, *Shulhan Arukh Harav*: vol .3, *Oraḥ Hayyim* 494:3 (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot, 2003), 447.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, R. Abraham Isaac Shperling, *Ta'amei Ha'minhagim U'mekorei Hadinim: Inyanei Hag ha'Shavuot*, 618 (Jerusalem: Eshkol, n.d.), 279-80, and J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Dinim U Minhagim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1938), 393.

<sup>40</sup> R. Ovadia Yosef, *Sh'eilot U'teshuvot Yabia Omer*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: n.p., 5746/1986), no. 27.

<sup>41</sup> R. Hayyim Kanievsky, *Mayim Hayyim* (n.p., n.d.), 132. In a disclaimer preceding the text of his response, R. Kanievsky made it clear that he was not ruling for practical purposes (*l'maaseh*), however.

<sup>42</sup> R. Pesah Eliyahu Falk, *Sh'eilot U'teshuvot Mahaze Eliyahu* (B'nai Beraq: n.p., 5739/1979), no. 4:18.

one expected to sleep past midday, in which case it would be preferable to recite these blessings as soon as the morning star had risen.<sup>43</sup>

## WHAT TO STUDY

Although by the seventeenth century the *minhag* of studying Shavuot night had spread throughout Jewry, it appears that for some time there was no uniform study plan for Shavuot night. The *Zohar*, borrowing *Vayikra Rabba's* report of Ben Azzai's study regimen, had spoken of "finding in the Pentateuch parallels to expressions in the Prophets, and in the Prophets parallels to expressions in the Hagiographa."<sup>44</sup>

As noted, R. Yaakov Emden published his version of the *tikkun* in his siddur. He introduced the *tikkun* with a lengthy prayer and included readings from the opening verses of each *parsha* of the Torah (he included especially lengthy passages from *Beshalakh* and *Yitro*). He then moved on to the opening verses of each book of *Nakh*, excluding, however, the opening verses of 2 Samuel, 2 Kings and of ten of the twelve later prophets. He included the entire Book of Ruth; Psalms 1, 19, 65, and the lengthy 119; the opening passages of Job, Proverbs, Daniel, the other four *megillot*, 1 Chronicles and Ezra, but not Nehemiah. He moved on to the opening *mishna* of every Tractate, followed by the Book of Creation (*Sefer Hayetzira*) and sections of the *Zohar*, and concluded with the list of 613 *mitzvot* as outlined by Maimonides as well as another passage from the *Zohar*.<sup>45</sup> It probably required a genius like Emden, or a speed-reader, to cover all that sacred territory in what was inevitably a short night.

R. Emden's younger contemporary, R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi, followed the original lead of the *Zohar*, and emphasized the study of the Oral Law.<sup>46</sup> It became Chabad practice, however, to recite the *tikkun*, although without the additional prayers.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, in the Lithuanian yeshivot it was not the universal practice to recite the *tikkun*; rather the focus was exclusively on Talmud study.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, even in the yeshiva world, it became a custom for many to recite the *tikkun*. R. Eliyahu Henkin, one of the leading halakhists of the late twentieth century, not only mentioned the custom of studying all night, but specifically identified the practice of both reciting the *tikkun* and of reading the 613 *mitzvot*.<sup>49</sup>

Let us now return to the question that was posed to my friend. Clearly, studying all night on Shavuot is but a *minhag* that not everyone has kept, and is one that is of relatively recent vintage. Does it make sense to stay awake for study on but a single night and forego Torah study much of the rest of the year?

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1:10.

<sup>44</sup> *Midrash Vayikra Rabba*, 16:4. For a variant translation see Matt, *The Zohar* vol. 1, 52, f.n. 367.

<sup>45</sup> Emden, *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, 275b-305a.

<sup>46</sup> R. Shneur Zalman, *Shulhan Arukh Harav*: vol .3, *Orah Hayyim* 494:3, 447.

<sup>47</sup> *Ad. loc.*, f.n. 24.

<sup>48</sup> Zevin, *Ha'moadim Ba'Halakha*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 311.

<sup>49</sup> R. Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, *Sh'eilot U'teshuvot Gevurot Eliyahu* (Lakewood, NJ: Makhon Harav Henkin, 5773/2013), 260.

Perhaps the answer is that by studying that night, one will develop a taste for “learning” that would last throughout the year. Even if one has not previously devoted oneself to a regimen of Torah study, *Leil Shavuot* could represent a new start. Moreover, even if one does not remain awake the entire night, that still does not preclude undertaking a more ambitious course of Torah study commencing the following day, and continuing the day after that, and those that follow.

Surely one can find some aspect of Torah that will appeal and excite. *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* is certainly a stimulant for Torah study, but it is not a necessary condition for undertaking a structured Torah curriculum. There is so much Torah to choose from on any day, or night: *Tanakh, Mishna, Talmud Bavli* (notably but not exclusively, *Daf Yomi*) and *Yerushalmi; midrash; halakha; aggada; mussar; dei’ot, hashkafa...*the list is endless, and there is something for everyone. As Ben Bag Bag teaches us at the end of the fifth chapter of *Avot: hafokh ba, va’hafokh ba...*study it [the Torah] again and again, for everything is in it.<sup>50</sup>

HAG SAMEACH

## Evonne Marzouk

### *Goats, Grapes and Greenbelts: Sustainability and Settling the Land*

#### Source Sheet and Discussion Guide

*Submitted by Evonne Marzouk, former director of Canfei Nesharim. Torah-based core teachings on the environment, including materials for every parsha and holiday, are available at <http://canfeinesharim.org/>.*

*In 2019, Canfei Nesharim merged with the related organization GrowTorah. Learn more at <https://www.growtorah.org/>.*

#### **I. The Omer and Shavuot**

שמות כג:טז.

וְחַג הַקִּצִּיר בְּכוּרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בַּשָּׂדֶה וְחַג הָאֶסֶף בְּצֵאת הַשָּׂנָה בְּאֶסְפָּךָ אֶת מַעֲשֵׂיֶיךָ מִן הַשָּׂדֶה:

Exodus 23:16, translation from Judaica Press

And the festival of the harvest, the first fruits of your labors, which you will sow in the field, and the festival of the ingathering at the departure of the year, when you gather in [the products of] your labors from the field.

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<sup>50</sup> *Avot*, 5:25.

רש"י לשמות כג:טז: וחג הקציר: הוא חג שבועות

Rashi to Exodus 23:16, translation from Judaica Press

And the festival of the harvest: That is the feast of Shavuoth.

רש"י לשמות כג:טז: בכורי מעשיך: שהוא זמן הבאת בכורים, ששתי הלחם הבאים בעצרת היו מתירין החדש למנחות ולהביא בכורים למקדש, שנאמר (במדבר כח כו) וביום הבכורים וגו':

משנה מסכת מנחות פרק ח משנה א

כל קרבנות הצבור והיחיד באים מן הארץ ומחוצה לארץ מן החדש ומן הישן חוץ מן העומר ושתי הלחם שאינן באים אלא מן החדש ומן הארץ וכולן אינן באים אלא מן המובחר ואיזהו מובחר מכמס ומזוניחה אלפא לסולת שנייה להם חפריים בבקעה כל הארצות היו כשרות אלא מכאן היו מביאים

Mishna Menachot, 8:1, translation by Rafael Fisch<sup>51</sup>

All offerings of the congregation or of the individual may be brought from the Land or from outside the Land, from the new or from the old, except the omer and the Two Loaves, which may be brought only from the new and from the Land. And all may come only from the choicest.

Rashi to Exodus 23:16, translation from Judaica Press

The first fruits of your labors: which is the time of the bringing of the first fruits for the two breads, which are brought on Shavuoth [and serve to] permit the new grain [to be used] for meal offerings and [also] to bring the first fruits to the Sanctuary, as it is said: "And on the day of the first fruits, etc." (Num. 28:26).

Deuteronomy 26:5-10

ונצַעַק אֶל- ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קִלְנוּ... אֲרָמִי אֲבָד אָבִי וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּגְרַשׁ שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מֵעַט וַיְהִי-שָׁם לְגוֹי גָדוֹל עֲצוּם וְרָב: וַיִּרְא אֶת-עַנְיֵנוּ וְאֶת-עֲמָלְנוּ וְאֶת-לַחְצָנוּ: וַיּוֹצֵאֵנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֶרַע נְטוּיָה וּבְמַרְא גָדֹל וּבְאִתּוֹת וּבְמִפְתִּימִם: וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֵּן-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֲרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ: וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה הֵבֵאתִי אֶת-רֵאשִׁית פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתָּה לִּי ה' וַהֲנַחְתּוּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

An Armanean tried to destroy my forefather. He descended to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation – great, strong and numerous...Then we cried out to HaShem, the G-d of our forefathers, and HaShem heard our voice and saw our affliction, our trevail and our oppression. HaShem took us out of Egypt with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm, with great awesomeness, and with signs and with wonders. He brought us to this place, and he gave us this Land, a Land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold! I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me, O HaShem! (translation by Artscroll Mesorah)

Discussion:

1. What strikes you about the offerings brought on Shavuot? How are they different from other offerings?
2. What does the Torah mean by "fruit" in this context?

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51 ,p. 82 Eliner Library version, Maor Wallach Press, Jerusalem, 1994

3. What kind of emotion is evoked by the statement which was recited when the first fruits were brought? What can this teach us about our relationship to our land and our food?

## II. Goats, Sheep, and Farmers' Fields

### Devarim 31:20

...כי-אביאנו אל-ה'אדמה אשר-נשבעתה לאבותינו, זבת חלב ודבש, ואכל ושבוע, וד'שן

### Deuteronomy 31:20

When I bring them to the land which I have sworn to their forefathers [to give them], a land flowing with milk and honey, they will eat and be satisfied, and live on the fat [of the land].

### Ketubot 111b

רמי בר יחזקאל איקלע לבני ברק חזנהו להנהו עיזי דקאכלן תותי תאיני וקנטיף דובשא מתאיני וחלבא טייף מנייהו ומיערב בהדי הדדי אמר היינו זבת חלב ודבש

### Babylonian Talmud Tractate Ketubot 111b, translation from Soncino

Rami b. Ezekiel once paid a visit to Bene-berak where he saw goats grazing under fig-trees while honey was flowing from the figs, and milk ran from them, and these mingled with each other. 'This is indeed', he remarked, '[a land] flowing with milk and honey'.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ביצה דף מ עמוד א  
תנו רבנן: אלו הן מדבריות ואלו הן בייתות? מדבריות - כל שיוצאות בפסח, ורועות באפר, ונכנסות ברביעה ראשונה.  
ואלו הן בייתות - כל שיוצאות ורועות חוץ לתחום, ובאות ולנות בתוך התחום. רבי אומר: אלו ואלו בייתות הן, אלא אלו הן מדבריות: כל שיוצאות ורועות באפר, ואין נכנסות לישוב לא בימות החמה ולא בימות הגשמים.

### Babylonian Talmud Tractate Beitza 40a, translation from Judaic Classics Library

Our Rabbis taught: The following are pasture animals and the following are household animals. Pasture animals are such as are led out about [the time of] Passover and graze in [more distant] meadows, and who are led in at the time of the first rainfall. The following are household animals: Such as are led out and graze outside the city-border but return and spend the night inside the city-border. Rabbi says: Both of these are household animals; but pasture animals are such as are led out and graze in [more distant] meadows and who do not return to the habitation of men either in summer or in winter.

### Bava Batra 36a

הנהו עיזי דאכלו חושלא בנהרדעא אתא מרי חושלא תפסינהו והוה קא טעין טובא

### Babylonian Talmud Tractate Bava Batra 36a

Some goats [went into a field] in Nehardea [and] ate some peeled barley [which they found there]. The owner of the barley went and seized them, and made a heavy claim on the owner of the goats.

משנה מסכת בבא קמא פרק ז משנה ז  
אין מגדלין בהמה דקה בארץ ישראל אבל מגדלין בסוריא ובמדברות שבארץ ישראל

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Bava Kama 79b, translation by Soncino Press

Mishna: It is not right to breed small cattle in the land of Israel. They may however be bred in Syria or in the deserts of the land of Israel.

רמב"ם על משנה מסכת בבא קמא פרק ז משנה ז  
[ז] אין מגדלין בהמה דקה בארץ ישראל מפני שפושטין לשדות.

Rambam, explanation to the Mishna, translation by Y. Neril:

It is not right to breed small cattle [goats and sheep] in the land of Israel: because they spread out to the fields.

ר' עובדיה מברטנורא מסכת בבא קמא פרק ז משנה ז  
אין מגדלין בהמה דקה בארץ ישראל - משום ישוב ארץ ישראל, שמפסידין את הזרעים:

Rav Ovadia Bartenura, commentary to the Mishna, translation by Y. Neril:

It is not right to breed small cattle in the land of Israel: because of settlement of the land of Israel, since they destroy the seeds.

רש"י מסכת בבא קמא דף עט עמוד ב  
אין מגדלין בהמה דקה בארץ ישראל - משום ישוב א"י שמבעיר את השדות וכל שדות א"י סתמן דישראל.

Rashi, commentary to the Mishna, translation by Y. Neril:

It is not right to breed small cattle in the land of Israel: because of settlement of the land of Israel, since they devour the fields, and in general all fields in the land of Israel belong to Jews.

**Discussion:**

1. How important were small cattle (sheep and goats) to the food supply and economy of ancient Israel?
2. Why was breeding "small cattle" prohibited? What can we learn from the different commentaries on the reason?
3. In the context of Israel as a "land flowing with milk and honey," do you think that this prohibition is surprising?

**III. Grapevines and Olive Trees**

משנה מסכת תמיד פרק ב משנה ג

החלו מעלין בגיזרין לסדר אש המערכה וכי כל העצים כשרים למערכה הין כל העצים כשרין למערכה חוץ משל זית ושל גפן אבל באלו רגילין במרביות של תאנה ושל אגוז ושל עץ שמן:

Mishna Tamid, 2:3, translation from Judaic Classics Library:

They [the priests] then began to take up the logs to lay the fire. Were all kinds of wood suitable for the fire? All kinds of wood were suitable for the fire except vine and olive wood. What they mostly used, however, were boughs of fig trees and of nut trees and of oil trees.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת תמיד דף כט עמוד ב

חוץ משל זית ומשל גפן [וכו']. הני מ"ט? רב פפא אמר: משום דקטרי, רב אחא בר יעקב אמר: משום ישוב דארץ ישראל... רבי אליעזר מוסיף: אף של מייש, ושל אלון, ושל דקל, ושל חרוב, ושל שקמה. בשלמא למאן דאמר משום דקטרי בהא קמיפלגי: דמר סבר אף על גב דלא קטרי מגואי כיון דקטרי מבראי - לא מיייתנן, ומר סבר כיון דלא קטרי מגואי אע"ג דמבראי קטרי - מיייתנן. אלא למאן דאמר משום ישוב דארץ ישראל, דקל מי לית ביה משום ישוב דארץ ישראל? אמר לך: וליטעמין, תאנה לית בה משום

ישוב דארץ ישראל? אלא מאי אית לך למימר - בתאנה דלא עבידא פירא, דקל נמי - בדלא עביד פירא. ומי איכא תאנה דלא עבדא פירא? אין, כדרהבה .

Talmud, Tamid 29b, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library translation.

*Aside from of olive tree and grapevine [quote of the Mishna]. Why were these excepted? — Rav Papa said: Because they have knots. Rav Aha bar Ya'akov said: Because of the settlement of the Land of Israel... Rabbi Eleazar adds [as not suitable]: also wood from the matish<sup>52</sup> and the oak and the date tree and the carob and sycamore. ... But to the one who says, 'it is because of the settlement of the Land of Israel,' we can object, does not the date tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? — He can reply to you: By the same reasoning does not the fig tree contribute to the amenities of the Land of Israel? But what do you answer to this? That we speak of a fig tree which does not produce fruit. Similarly we speak of a date tree which does not produce fruit. But are there fig trees which do not produce fruit? Yes, as stated by Rahabah...*

מפרש מסכת תמיד דף כט עמוד ב

רב אחא בר יעקב אמר משום ישוב ארץ ישראל - ...ודאי טעמא קאמר דמשום קשרים הם פסולים אלא אפי' בלא טעם קשרים בשביל דבר אחר היו מניחין ואיזהו משום ישוב ארץ ישראל שאם ישרפו הזיתים והגפנים לא ימצאו יין לשתות ושמן לסוך ותחבר ארץ ישראל...

Mefarsh, an unidentified Rishon (writing between 1000 and 1400 C.E.) which appears in place of Rashi, to Tractate Tamid, 29b, translation by Yonatan Neril

Certainly the reason is as is stated because of knots [these woods] are invalid, but even without the reason of knots, for a different reason they would desist [from using them.] What is it? Because of 'the settlement of the land of Israel.' Since if they would burn the olive trees and grapevines, there would not be found wine to drink or oil to anoint with, and the land of Israel would be destroyed...

רמב"ם הלכות איסורי מזבח פרק ז הלכה ג

כל העצים החדשים כשרים למערכה, ולא היו מביאין משל זית ולא משל גפן משום ישוב

ארץ ישראל

Rambam, Hilchot Isurei Mizbe'ach, 7:3

All new wood is fit for the arranged pile [of wood on the altar in the Temple] and they would not bring from olive trees or grapevines because of settlement of the land of Israel.

#### Discussion:

1. According to these texts, why were certain trees prohibited from the sacrifices?
2. How does this teaching relate to other ways that the Torah balances our resource use?

#### IV. Greenbelts, Fields, and Cities

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52 An unknown kind of hardwood tree.

Bamidbar 35:2-3

ב צו, אַת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְנָתַנּוּ לְלוּיִם מִנְחַלַּת אֲחֵזְתֶּם, עָרִים לְשִׁבְת; וּמִגְרָשׁ, לְעָרִים סְבִיבֹתֵיהֶם, תִּתְּנוּ, לְלוּיִם. ג וְהָיוּ הָעָרִים לָהֶם, לְשִׁבְת; וּמִגְרָשֵׁיהֶם, יִהְיוּ לְבִהֲמֹתָם וְלְרֹכָשָׁם, וְלִכְלָל, חַיְתָּם.

Numbers 35:2-3

Command the children of Israel that they shall give to the Levites from their hereditary possession cities in which to dwell, and you shall give the the Levites open spaces around the cities.

These cities shall be theirs for dwelling, and their open spaces shall be for their cattle, their property, and for all their needs.

Arachin 33b

אין עושין שדה מגרש ולא מגרש שדה ולא מגרש עיר ולא עיר מגרש

Talmud Tractate Arachin 33b, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library translation.

One may not turn a field into a greenbelt, nor a greenbelt into a field, nor a greenbelt into a city, nor a city into a greenbelt.

Rambam, Zeraim, Hilchos Shmittah V'Yovel 13:5

וכן בשאר ערי ישראל--אין עושין שדה מגרש, ולא מגרש שדה, ולא מגרש עיר, ולא עיר מגרש

Rambam Mishne Torah Laws of Smitta and Yovel 13:5, translation by Gideon Aronovich

And so with the rest of Israel's cities – we do not make a cultivated field into an open space nor an open space into a cultivated field, nor an open space into a city nor a city into open space.

*\*See also <http://canfeinesharim.org/community/shevat.php?page=11533> for additional insights on migrash in Torah thought.*

**Discussion:**

1. How does this ruling protect farmland and agriculture?
2. How is this more sustainable than common practices today?

**V. Farmland of a Captive Farmer**

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף לה עמוד ב-- לט עמוד א

אתמר, שבוי שנשבה. רב אמר: אין מורידין קרוב לנכסיו, שמואל אמר: מורידין קרוב לנכסיו. בשמעו בו שמת - כולי עלמא לא פליגי דמורידין, כי פליגי - בשלא שמעו בו שמת. רב אמר: אין מורידין, דלמא מפסיד להו. ושמואל אמר: מורידין, כיון דאמר מר שיימינן להו כאריס - לא מפסיד להו. ...תקינן ליה רבנן, כי היכי דלא לפסדינהו.

Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 39a, translation adapted from Judaic Classics Library translation.

It has been stated: If a man is taken captive, Rab said: His next of kin is not authorised to enter upon his estate [i.e. to plant and farm his land]; Samuel said: His next of kin is authorised to enter into his estate. Now, if it was heard that he was dead, all agree that he is authorised to enter. They differ where it was not heard that he had died: Rab said: We do not authorise him to enter, lest he cause them [the fields] to deteriorate; but Samuel said: We authorise him to take possession, for since a Master said, 'We value it for them as for an aris' [a tenant farmer], he will not permit deterioration.

...the Rabbis enacted a measure on his behalf [of the captive], so that he [the tenant] might not cause them [the abandoned land of the estate] to deteriorate.

רש"י מסכת בבא מציעא דף לח עמוד ב  
מפסיד להו - ולא יזבל הקרעות, ויזרעם תמיד ויכחישים.

Rashi to Bava Metzia 38b:

'[lest] he cause them [the estates] to deteriorate': and he will not fertilize the land with manure and he will plant incessantly and cause the land to deteriorate.

רש"י מסכת בבא מציעא דף לט עמוד א

כי היכי דלא ניפסדינהו - שלא יקלקל הקרקעות לזורען תמיד, ולא יעבוד ולא יעדור כרמים.

Rashi to Bava Metzia 39a [the following page of Talmud, commenting on the Rabbinic decree]: 'the Rabbis enacted a measure on his behalf [of the captive], so that he [the tenant] might not cause them [the abandoned estates] to deteriorate'—so that he will not degrade the land by planting it incessantly, and not tend it and hoe the vineyards [to aerate them].

בראשית פרק ב פסוק טו

ויקח יקנוק אלהים את האדם וינחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה:

Genesis 2:15

Now the Lord God took the man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.

### **Discussion:**

1. Why was the next of kin given a share in the farm?
2. Can you think of examples where we have something for only a short time and thus lose the incentive to protect it?
3. Can you think of any modern circumstances which could be addressed in a similar way?
4. What can all of these different teachings help us understand about rabbinic perspectives on settling and sustaining the land?

*Canfei Nesharim expresses its gratitude to Yonatan Neril who prepared this source sheet.*

# Shoshi Trombka

## *Making the Cut: Why we Celebrate both Shavuot and Simchat Torah*

My recent decision about which pair sneakers to buy involved many considerations. I knew the make, model, and size that I wanted, but when it came to the color, my mind went back and forth measuring up each possibility against another in this undoubtedly trivial decision. If these sneakers would be worn exclusively for exercising, I would buy the loud pink sneakers; if they would double as shoes that I'd wear to work, I'd buy the grey pair. For those of you still interested, in the end, I decided to compromise and settle on blue. This way, my sneakers would be exciting enough to get me excited to exercise, while being respectable enough to wear to work if needed.

As human beings, we feel the desire to find multiple purposes in the things we own and the actions we do. If that is the case, it is hard to imagine that throughout all the years of the Torah being "*lo b'Shamayim*," or in the hands of mankind, we still observe both *Simchat Torah and Shavuot*, two holidays dedicated to celebrating the Torah. Shouldn't we expect that these holidays could be combined? Think about it - cheese cake and bags of candy all on one day! In this *dvar Torah*, I hope to analyze, compare, and contrast the similar and unique qualities each of these holidays possess and why they each deserve to make the cut into the Jewish calendar.

In the Torah, we are introduced to *Shavuot* as being the conclusion of the fifty-day count from the *omer* offering being brought on *Pesach*. On this fiftieth day, another offering would be brought. While in our day and age, associating *Pesach* with *Shavuot* may be natural, these two holidays contrast quite significantly.

In *Devarim perek 16*, *Bnei Yisrael* are instructed to observe *Pesach*. They are told to sacrifice the *Pesach* offering and are prohibited to eat leavened bread (*chametz*), or even to have it in their possession. On the second day of *Pesach*, they are commanded to bring another sacrifice: the *omer* offering. In *Vayikra perek 26*, The Jewish nation is instructed to bring yet another offering in honor of the conclusion of the fifty-day count, known as *Shavuot*. This offering, however, is required to contain *chametz*, or leavened bread - a stark contrast from the prohibition of the very holiday (*Pesach*) used to introduce *Shavuot*.

More fundamentally, the difference in characters of the two *chagim* makes *Pesach* an even more unusual platform to introduce *Shavuot*. On *Pesach* night, *Bnei Yisrael* is granted a "*leil shimurim*," or, "guarded night," (*Shmot 12:42*), referring to the night G-d took *Bnei Yisrael* out of Egypt and promised that this night will be a night of security for the Jewish people for generations to come. This concept is commemorated by the practice of omitting certain sections of the bedtime *shema* or by leaving the house unlocked on the night of the *Pesach seder*. These rituals serve as a demonstration of our total reliance on G-d throughout the night. This such practice, however, is not seen in our *Shavuot* ritual. On *Shavuot* night, we spend the entire night engaged in Torah study, perhaps as a method of meriting protection from G-d that night. Such an analysis suggests that *Shavuot* serves as a time for the Jewish people to celebrate their ability to stand on their own two feet as a free nation who has the capacity to care for themselves and take responsibility for their growth in Torah.

While the Torah's introduction to *Shavuot* through *Pesach* seems convoluted, it serves as a model to understand the essence of *Simchat Torah*, our other Torah-centered holiday. *Simchat Torah* (biblically known as "*Shemini Atzeret*") is introduced in reference to the holiday of *Sukkot* (*Bamidbar* 29). This arrangement mirrors the introduction to *Shavuot*, which is only mentioned in reference to *Pesach*. Rashi notes that the purpose of *Shemini Atzeret* is for G-d to "hold back" or keep *Bnei Yisrael* for an extra holiday following the jam-packed holiday season of *Tishrei* (*Vayikra* 23:36). Rav Hirsch, commenting on the same verse, notes that this day of *Shemini Atzeret* is to afford *Bnei Yisrael* the opportunity to "gather up" all that they have been inspired by and resolved to do during the high holiday season before returning to the norm of everyday life. According to the Tur, this day (or in the next day, as observed in the diaspora) is called *Simchat Torah* because we rejoice in the conclusion and restart of the entire Torah (Tur, Laws of Lulav). This analysis proposes that *Simchat Torah* is celebrated to remind *Bnei Yisrael* of the growth that they have already accomplished throughout their *teshuva* season and Torah learning all year.

While a simple reading would suggest the difference between *Shavuot* and *Simchat Torah* lies in what step of the process of receiving the Torah we are celebrating, our analysis of their purposes and practices has suggested something greater. On *Shavuot* we celebrate accepting the Torah, so our natural response is to stay up and learn what it's all about. By the time *Simchat Torah* rolls around, we have learned what's inside, and for that, we dance. As the *Eglei Tal* notes in his introduction, one might become concerned that rejoicing in Torah would distract from the Torah learning itself, however, the very essence of Torah study is to rejoice in its process. It is with this attitude that we must enter the night of learning that *Shavuot* affords us. During this holiday, we set the groundwork for our accomplishments in Torah learning that we hope to celebrate next *Simchat Torah*. May we approach this opportunity with the appropriate fervor and merit to dance with one another, in person, soon.

## Jennifer Raskas

### *John Locke, COVID-19 and the Second Luchot*

My first thought was John Locke and that the contract was broken. This isn't how it was supposed to be. Locke, Rousseau... if government is a social contract, didn't I hold up my side of it? What happened to the other side?

That thought punctured, swirled and reverberated as I grasped a crying infant in one hand and tried to entertain (educate?) a vulnerable four year old and seven year old with the other, as their father provided healthcare and COVID testing to so many. There were contracts I had with society, I kept thinking. They were impenetrable, I had thought. And now they are broken. If I had kids there was supposed to be school. If I worked hard, professionally there was supposed to be daycare. These were my assumptions. Sickness, death, health workers in danger, other essential workers in danger, not enough masks, or respirators, or time...what was going on?

As the days slowly turned into weeks, and we began to count towards *Shavuot*, the celebration of the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the image of my internal dialogue with John Locke slowly peeled away to reveal a new image. Through the incredulity and disbelief, I began to see a different vision, that

of the second *luchot*, the second tablets - a second contract made when the first one did not hold. Could this become a second *luchot* moment? Could this be a chance to fix what was always broken? To right the injustices that before were harder to see?

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag in his commentary, [points out](#) that there are vast differences in the way God presents his covenantal/contractual relationship with the Jewish people in the giving of the first set of tablets versus in the giving of the second. In the first, God refers to Himself as “a jealous God” who will punish the third and fourth generations of those who sin, and will not forgive those who swear falsely by His name. He bestows kindness, but only to those who keep His laws (Exodus 20:2-6). It is a covenant that offers immediate reward for good deeds, but also immediate punishment, with no mention of a possibility for repentance from sin.

It is with this background that he offers a reinterpretation of one of the most striking scenes in Tanakh - Moses breaking the original tablets. Perhaps, when Moses saw the people sinning through worshipping the golden calf, Moses realized that according to the covenantal contract of the first tablets, if there was massive sin there was to be immediate massive punishment, with no possibility of repentance. Perhaps, through this realization, Moses, in an attempt to save the Jewish people from more destruction, threw the *luchot* down, in essence breaking the covenantal contract, so that its dire consequences would not come true.

After breaking the contract Moses returns to God to ask forgiveness for the people, and he asks Him to show him His full glory. This glory includes not just the attribute of judgment, but also of mercy. God passes before Moses and proclaims His thirteen attributes of mercy, each of which directly counters the harsher language God previously used to describe a relationship of inescapable retribution for sin. God no longer describes himself as a jealous God, but a merciful one. He no longer shows kindness only to those who keep His laws, but He is filled with abounding kindness for all (34:5-8). It is in the presence of these words that a new *brit*, a new covenant, through the second *luchot* are formed. In this way the traumatic breaking of the original tablets, propelled the creation of a new covenant/contract, one that was filled with an abundance of kindness, compassion, and mercy upon which the Jewish future was built.

We have all experienced the breaking of contracts over the past few months. For some it was broken expectations around school or work, for others around health, the economy, or care giving. Some of us momentarily lost our grounding, others experienced a prolonged sense of lost hope and still others permanently lost loved ones. As our individual contracts shattered, many of us saw inequities and inequalities in society that stunned us, or reinforced what we always thought we couldn't see. For many of us, at some point during the last few months the very tablets that held our expectations of the society in which we lived, were broken.

As we look around now at the broken shards of stone at our own feet, and honor those things we tragically can never rebuild, can we also begin to imagine how we may forge a new social contract for society? Can we, as we take on this monumental task seek to emulate God and rebuild with abundance of kindness, compassion, and mercy? What will we choose to mark in our stones? What will we choose to hold onto from the past, and what new and more just attributes can we build into our new covenant with one another? How can we make this a true second *luchot* moment?

*A version of this Dvar Torah was featured on The Blogs of the Times of Israel*

# Marnin Lebovits

## *A Burning Desire for the Treasure that is our Shuls*

Shavuot 5780

Chazal refer to the Yom Tov of Shavuot as Atzeres<sup>53</sup>. Because unlike the other Yomim Tovim where each has its own Mitzvah – Rosh Hashana has the Shofar, Yom Kippur has fasting and Teshuvah, Succos has the Lulav and Succah and Pesach has the Matzah and Marror – there is no specific Mitzva that is required of us on Shavuot. The only Mitzvah associated with Shavuot is the commandment not to perform any melachah – the cessation of creative work. Therefore, the name Atzeres – stopping or holding back - is very apropos for this Yom Tov<sup>54</sup>. This is similar in nature to Shmini Atzeres – where the last day of the Chag of Succos is a separate Yom Tov that is also called Atzeres<sup>55,56</sup>. The common name, Atzeres, seems to imply a connection between Shavuot and Shemini Atzeres. Just as Shmini Atzeres is the “culmination” of Succos<sup>57</sup>, perhaps Shavuot is in some way the “culmination” of Pesach.

The Yalkut Shimoni<sup>58</sup> compares the relationship of Succos and Shmini Atzeres to the relationship of Pesach and Shavuot. Just like Shavuot is 50 days from the start of Pesach, so too Shmini Atzeres should have been 50 days from the start of Succos. This implies that Shavuot is the culmination of Pesach just as Shmini Atzeres is the culmination of Succos. The Ramban<sup>59</sup> also notes that the Yimei Sefirah are considered to be the “Chol HaMoed” that intervenes between the Yom Tov of Pesach and the Yom Tov of Shavuot. Pesach would be what we colloquially call the “first days” and Shavuot would be the “last days” of the same extended Yom Tov. (I am aware of one Chasidic Dynasty that refrains from saying Tachanun throughout the days of Sefira – perhaps based on this Ramban.) This Ramban once again demonstrates the strong connection between Pesach and Shavuot. Additionally, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch<sup>60</sup> explains the word Atzeres in a different way. Based on the concept that Aleph and Ayin are sometimes interchanged<sup>61</sup>, he notes that Atzeres is similar to an Otzar, a storage house. The days of Atzeres, applied both to Shemini Atzeres and Shavuot, are days that fall at the end of a holiday season, times that are apropos for reflection on the whole Chag and the internalization of all its lessons in our stored memory.

The Torah connection between Pesach and Shavuot is obvious based upon the Pesukim in Shemos and Va'era. In both Parshiyos, Hashem tells Moshe to go to Paroh and demand that he release the Bnei Yisrael from servitude. The language Moshe is commanded to use is “Shalach Es Ami

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<sup>53</sup> Mishna Shviis 1, 1

<sup>54</sup> Sefer Ta'amei Haminhagim 615

<sup>55</sup> Parshas Emor 23,36

<sup>56</sup> Sefer Ta'amei Haminhagim – 822 Kuntres Acharon (1)

<sup>57</sup> Rashi ibid, 36

<sup>58</sup> Parshas Pinchos #29

<sup>59</sup> Parshas Emor 23, 36

<sup>60</sup> Vayikra 23, 26

<sup>61</sup> Yevamos 22 B

Vayavduni<sup>62</sup>– Send my nation out so they shall serve Me. The Torah refers to a two-stage process. The first stage was the release from the bondage of Mitzrayim. But that is not an end in and of itself. The purpose of the redemption was to serve Hashem – to go to Har Sinai to bring Korbanos to Hashem and to receive the Torah. This two-stage process is symbolized at the Pesach seder. Many have a custom to eat an egg at the seder. While there are many reasons given for this Minhag, the Ishbitzer<sup>63</sup> notes that an egg really has two births. First, the egg is laid. However, that is not the end of the process. Once the shell is cracked, there is a “second birth” – when the chick is born. We use the egg at the seder to symbolize right then and there, that while it is wonderful that we became a free nation with our redemption from Mitzrayim – it does not end there. Part two of our redemption, and in fact the purpose of our redemption, was only going to be achieved when we reached Har Sinai to bring our Korbanos to Hashem and accept His Torah.

Which brings me to the second part of this Torah thought. Those who say Korbanos know that in the Pesukim of the Korban Tamid that are recited daily there is a reference to the Korbanos we brought at Har Sinai. The Pasuk says<sup>64</sup> “Olas Tamid Ha’asuya Behar Sinai...” – seemingly comparing the daily Korban Tamid offering (which was a Korban Olah – fully burnt on the Mizbaech (Altar)) to the Korban Olah that was brought at Har Sinai<sup>65</sup>. The Pasuk<sup>66</sup> says about the Korbanos brought at Har Sinai, “Vayishlach Es Na’arei B’nei Yisrael Vaya’alu Olos...” - He (Moshe) sent the youths of the Children of Israel and they brought-up elevation offerings....”. Mah Inyun Korban Tamid Eitzel Har Sinai – one can ask, what is the connection between the Korban Tamid (Olah) that is brought twice a day on every day of the year and the Korban Olah that was brought just one time at Har Sinai. True, they are both a Korban Olah – a burnt offering, but it seems strange that the commandment to bring this twice daily Korban each and every day would have to reference another like-Korban. We brought other types of Korbanos at Har Sinai (i.e. Shelamim) as well and we do not find any other Korbanos referencing the Korban Shelamim that was brought at Har Sinai.

The Be’er Yosef<sup>67</sup> asks this question and he gives a powerful answer which I believe may be a life lesson in our Avodas Hashem, our service of Hashem. The challenge with the twice daily Korban Tamid is the fact that it is brought daily. When one performs the same action day after day after day, the uniqueness can be lost after a while and a person can become inclined to perform that action more and more by rote, in an almost robotic fashion. While that is a great challenge, we all know that this is not the optimum way to serve Hashem. When the Bnei Yisrael brought their first Korbanos to Hashem at Har Sinai, they brought them with tremendous zeal, enthusiasm, and a desire to use these Korbanos as a means to draw close to Hashem. Their burning desire was palpable. However, the nature of man is such that strong emotions and desires wane over time. Says Rav Salant, the Torah is teaching us that Hashem wants us to take the emotions from Har Sinai and apply that same zeal, enthusiasm and burning desire to all our Avoda in serving Hashem. Our service to Hashem is clearly more potent if it is performed with deep emotion and feeling rather than just being done mechanically by rote.

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<sup>62</sup> Va’era 7, 16

<sup>63</sup> Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, Poland

<sup>64</sup> Pinchos 28,6

<sup>65</sup> Sifre ibid and see Chagiga 6B

<sup>66</sup> Mishpatim 24, 5

<sup>67</sup> Rav Yosef Salant, Parshas Pinchos

We find that one of the six daily Mitzvos of remembrance (found in most Siddurim at the end of the daily Shacharis) is to remember our Ma'amad Har Sinai<sup>68</sup>, when all of Israel stood at Har Sinai and accepted the Torah. It is interesting to note that the Posuk adds a few extra words, and describes the Sinai experience very graphically with its burning fire and heavy dark clouds etc. The Ramban<sup>69</sup> and others note that part of the Mitzvah of our remembrance includes remembering the burning fire of the mountain. Perhaps one can say homiletically that part of this Mitzva of daily remembrance is a charge for us to remember the burning desire of Klal Yisrael at that time. That aspect of "Aish" should serve as a directive to us to serve Hashem with emotion and feeling even in our daily service to Hashem. We should act now in a manner similar to the way we acted at Har Sinai.

It is rare that we have an opportunity for a "fresh start" in our Avodas Hashem. Every day is truly a new day, but old habits die hard. Hopefully soon, we will be presented with this opportunity for renewal and rejuvenation in our Avodas Hashem. We currently possess a strong desire to return to our beloved Shuls and Batei Medrashim. When we will merit to enter the Shul for the first time - after being away for so long - we will surely be overcome with emotion and a burning desire to reconnect with Hashem through our Tefillos BiTzibbur that we have missed so much these last few months. The adage, "distance makes the heart grow fonder" seems very fitting. While we have had opportunities to daven from our homes at the same time as others, and learn together via Zoom and other digital platforms, we all know that it is just not the same. There is a spiritual connection that a Shul and a Beis Medrash provide that cannot be replicated. We have all been yearning for this day of re-entry to arrive. When we finally can return to physically daven together as one minyan, we will cherish that experience. Let us endeavor to try to retain those strong feelings and the burning desire within us to reconnect with Hashem in the best way available to us, through the Shuls of our dear community. Let us try to hold on to that emotional connection to help upgrade our Avodas Hashem for as long as we can!

One final thought to keep in mind while we are still distanced from one another. We should recognize that the davening and learning done in our homes, the extra acts of chesed performed for others and most importantly caring for our families are all merits that help fortify our homes. The Sefer Sifsei Chachamim<sup>70</sup> on Shas notes that the Gemara mentions that the Batei Kenesiyos and Batei Medrashim of Bavel, and all of the diaspora, will be transplanted in Eretz Yisrael in the future. The Maharsha<sup>71</sup> suggests that they will become part of the third Bais Hamikdosh. The Sefer Sifsei Chachamim posits that not just our Shuls and Batei Medrashim will be transplanted, but even our individual homes that we use for Torah and Tefilla will be transplanted as well. We have unfortunately not had the merit of being in Shul, but this experience has helped us to continue to elevate our homes as well! Let us remember this important accomplishment as we look back on this long holiday season of Pesach, Sefirah and Shavuot. And let us take the lesson from the fire of Sinai with us as we continue to elevate our Avodas Hashem wherever we may find ourselves.

Let us hope and pray that we will have the opportunity to return to our wonderful Shul as it connects to the Bais Hamikdosh in Yerushalayim Ir Hakodesh Bimehara Viyamanu – speedily in our days - Amen!

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<sup>68</sup> Vaeschanan 4, 9-12

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Reb Avrohom Abba Hertz, Megillah 29 a

<sup>71</sup> Reb Shmuel Eidels

# Deborah Kotz

## *Shavuot: A More Intimate Wedding Than Usual This Year*

Shavuot marks the official start of the Jewish wedding season, and my heart goes out to all of those who are trying to plan upcoming weddings during this Covid-19 crisis. Zoom-only ceremonies with just the bride, groom and immediate family in attendance are joyous and intimate -- but just not the same. Will we ever join hands and dance in a circle again?

What will we make of Shavuot itself this year? It, too, is a wedding of sorts, representing the symbolic marriage between God and the Jewish people. "The revelation at Sinai is seen as the marriage between God and Israel, and many marriage laws and customs are derived from the Sinai experience," wrote Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan in *Made in Heaven*. "It is taught that before giving the Torah to the Israelites, God held the mountain over their heads. The mountain over their heads was like the chuppah under which the bridal couple stands."

In Sephardic synagogues, the chazan reads a ketubah le-Shavuot (marriage certificate for Shavuot) on the first day of Ch'ag before the Torah reading. It contains a series of religious poems similar in vein to Shir HaShirim, a metaphorical love song describing the passionate relationship, akin to a romance, that we have with Hashem.

Ashenazim read the Akdamut which, if not intended as a love song, describes the depth of our feelings for God.

"Even if all the heavens were parchment, and all the reeds pens, and all the oceans ink, and all people were scribes, it would be impossible to record the Greatness of the Creator."

It sounds almost like a wedding toast.

No doubt, Shavout of 2020 will proffer a somewhat disappointing "wedding". It will be celebrated within the confines of our home as we eat cheesecake and blintzes with no guests in attendance. How can we be expected to party (i.e. learn) all night until dawn without our gourmet coffee and breakfast bar? As we have for many weeks, we will once again be challenged to conjure a spiritual experience out of our routine family davenings and meals with the same faces. We could be forgiven for feeling like an old married couple instead of the young brides and grooms that we're supposed to be. Some of us eating alone, once again, may feel more like widows or widowers.

How can we connect on a deeper level to Hashem in all of this monotony, fear, and sadness?

Perhaps we should take our cues from Ruth. In the midst of her profound grief after her husband died leaving her with no children, Ruth chose not to go back to her people like her sister-in-law Orpah. Instead, she cleaved to Naomi and declared that she would join the Jewish people.

While Ruth sounds like an implausible character with an unnatural mother-in-law obsession, Tanakh scholar Yael Ziegler offers an alternative explanation. She cites a Midrash in Zohar Chaddash in which

the son of R. Yosi argues that Ruth actually converted when she first married Machlon but remained Jewish out of fear of her husband. When Machlon died, Ruth “cleaved to the Torah of her own volition.”

Ziegler focuses on the Hebrew verb *davak* or cleave and points out seven other instances where it is used in Tanakh (in Devarim, Yehoshua, and Yirimiyahu) all to describe the Jewish people’s relationship with God. “While the verb *davak* nowhere else appears to describe the relationship between two named individuals, it is employed to portray the relationship between a man and his wife,” Ziegler writes in a commentary on Ruth. “Taken together, these examples suggest that this rare verb connotes an all-encompassing connection, a relationship in which one party embraces the totality of the other, utterly and completely.”

While the verb *davak* is used to describe Ruth’s consuming love for Naomi, Ziegler points to numerous midrashim that propose another approach: Ruth is motivated not so much by her passion for Naomi but by her passion for God. That is why she chose to leave her people to forever become a stranger in a strange land.

During these social distancing times when we are separated from our own community of people, we are left with a stark realization. If we are to become fully self-actualized Jews, we need to nurture a relationship with Hashem that goes beyond the boundaries of our synagogue and social circles. When all of the soaring voices in the sanctuary, the inspirational shiurim, and Shabbat hugs from friends are stripped away, what are we left with?

We are left with spiritual moments that may elude us in the normally frenetic lives we lead. We have the time and opportunity now to feel this increased intimacy. What is standing between us and Hashem in this period of isolation? I’ve heard from several people that their quarantine davening has become more meaningful and spiritual during the Covid-19 crisis. We are praying for the health of the Jewish people, for the world. We feel a sense of awe over the microscopic virus that has paralyzed and unified the entire planet and the Creator who has set it in motion. I recently saw a man davening mincha in Brookside Gardens. I’ve been running there for 20 years and have never seen a person davening there. I’ve taken to davening outside on my deck to gaze at the sun rising through the tops of the trees and have felt the occasional shiver running through me that, to me, indicates the fleeting attainment of a deeper connection. Time occasionally stands still during this time, even as the days fly by.

We have been gifted once again with a quiet *ch’ag*. It is not the wedding we would choose to plan, and it is not the wedding we hope to have in future years. But it is a gift if we take the opportunity to see it as one. We can use it as a time to be truly mindful, experiencing the silence or, for young parents, the chaos of our children around us with an open heart. We can reflect on our relationship with God and why we choose to “*na’aseh v’nishma*.” When all the ceremony and communal celebration is stripped away, what are we left with, and how will we take that intimacy back into shul with us when KMS reopens its doors?

# Erica Brown

## *Ruth and the Perfume of a Good Name*

“A good name is better than fine perfume...” states *Kohelet* 7:1 A good name is easy to compare to perfume because perfume leaves its residue in the form of a smell. Many people wear a signature perfume that identifies them even before they walk into a room. Sometimes it’s a great smell, and sometimes it’s overbearing. Remember the old commercial; everyone in the office smelled the boss coming before he entered the room because of his terrible cologne, so they immediately started working to give the appearance of busy-ness. Your reputation - your name - is a lot like perfume. It announces your presence, introducing you, accompanying you and even leaving a little after-effect for impact. And just like perfume, you hope that the impact is positive and maybe even beautiful.

We are about to read the story of Ruth, a book filled with names that invite interpretation. Some believe Ruth’s name is related to the word for friendship, a grammatical stretch but true to her character. She was totally committed to her mother-in-law and her mother-in-law’s people, God, homeland and future. She had the opportunity to stay and rebuild her life at home but wanted instead the spiritual adventure of a lifetime. Her devotion ends in the true redemption of her life and the life of the people she adopts through the legacy of leadership that follows.

There is Naomi who does not want to be called “sweet” because her life was deeply embittered by loss. When the women of Bethlehem come to the city gate to greet her and ask, “Is this Naomi?” she quickly disabuses them of that notion. I have suffered so much loss that I cannot be called by the same name. I am no longer that person. As she says this, it is a chastisement to these women who dismiss her with their question. God has punished me enough, she reminds them. I do not need you to punish me further. Perhaps if you call me a different name, you will treat me differently. You will find compassion that you do not have now.

Orpah’s name in the midrash means “neck” because in leaving Naomi, she turned her neck from the life she had. There is *ploni-almoni*, a name associated with anonymity because this redeemer failed to redeem Ruth and was not considered worthy. And then there are Naomi’s sons: *Machlon* and *Hilyon*, loosely translated as “sickness and destruction.” Lovely. Glad I wasn’t at that baby-naming.

Scholars believe that these names were transposed on the text to reflect the feelings that readers should have upon reading this story. Maimonides helps fill in the gap by suggesting that Naomi’s sons were leaders of the generation who, during a time of famine and political unrest, turned away from those in need. They moved to Moab to seek their fortunes and evade the cries of petitioners. We appreciate their predicament. It is hard to have and be surrounded by have-nots. But that is where the work of leadership must take place. Those are the times when instead of moving away, we need leaders to lean in.

*Ethics of the Fathers* identifies four crowns, three of which appear in the book of Ruth: “Rabbi Shimon would say: ‘There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. But the crown of a good name transcends them all’” [4:13]. The book of Ruth contains the

crown of kingship in presenting the ancestry of King David. It contains the crown of Torah because, in addition to its special narrative qualities, it demonstrates the Jewish values of charity and the importance of the levirate marriage in protecting women and the family name. And it contains the crown of a good name because Naomi returned to her state of sweetness by the book's end and Ruth showed us the power of transformation through friendship.

The Book of Ruth bears out the truth of *Kohelet's* wise words that a reputation is never fragrance-free. A name is the perfume we wear out in the world

## Yael (Lilienthal) Nitzanim

One of the most wowing intersections between technological developments and Jewish education, in my opinion, is the radical democratization of Torah learning through the internet. With many of our most central texts not only accessible, but translated, the doors of the Beit Midrash have been flung open and, continuing the metaphor from Brachot 28a, the new benches are filled with students that never saw the Torah as their personal treasure.

That said, many of us still struggle to define our place vis a vis interpreting the Torah. We gape in awe at the vast cannon of multigenerational contributions to an age-old tradition and marvel at the numerous pearls of ingenuity; but even as we refine the skills needed to piece through the labyrinth of arguments, advice, and axioms, we feel unqualified to contribute our own interpretations. Creativity, we convince ourselves, is reserved for the great minds who have proven their mastery.

Yet Reb Chaim of Brisk in his *Nefesh Hachayim* (chapter 4) writes that every word of a *chiddush*, of a new reading, creates new heavens, and God “kisses the learner for his/her creation”. Reb Chaim references a Zoharic interpretation of the following verse from Isaiah 51:

I [God] will place My words in your mouth and shelter you with My hand; I, who planted the skies and made firm the earth, said to Zion: You are My people! (Isaiah 51:16)

[*Va'asim devarai b'ficha uv'tzel yadi kisiticha lintoa shamayim v'lisod aretz v'l'emor l'tzion ami ata*]

The Zohar understands the beginning of the verse, “I will place My words in your mouth”, as encouragement for us to perceive Torah as being ours to speak. They are God's words, yes, but God has put them in *our* mouths. No doubt my articulation as a human will be some distortion, some contraction, of God's infinite communication, but that is what God wants from me. Thus, God's words are in *my* mouth.

The Zohar then suggests reading the end of the verse as “*l'emor l'tzion imi ata*” as if to say to Zion not “you are My people, *ami*” rather “you are with Me, *imi*”. You are My partners in this creative process. I planted the skies and made firm the earth, but you too create worlds when you discover *chiddushim* hidden in My words, in the Torah. Unearthing the novelties embedded in our textual history is tantamount to building a universe.

Reb Chaim is setting up a parallel between God's creative powers, apparent in the creation of the world, and our creative powers, expressed through our Torah learning. The implications of this

analogy are ironic when compared to our cosmological intuitions. We are more likely to prioritize a teleology in which God continually invests in the world and renews it over the “watchmaker theory” in which the world, once created, operates independently. When it comes to Torah, however, we tend to perceive the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai to have been a one-time grand gifting of the Torah; once in our hands, we need only faithfully preserve it and pass it on. Yet, as Reb Chaim indicates, revelation is a form of creation and should similarly be understood as ongoing.

In much of Chassidic thought, the revelation at Sinai as a recurring theophany is fundamental to the movement’s ideology, especially as it supports the innovative modes of exegesis promoted by Chassidic thinkers. In his book *Meor Einayim*, Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twersky from Chernobyl writes that God constantly reveals the Torah anew, even today, and it is *our* commitment to exegetical discoveries which unearths the novelties God gifts us with each day. In his commentary on Parashat Shemot, the Meor Einayim suggests that Moshe’s role in “receiving” the Torah was not only serving as a conduit between God and the Israelites; rather, he was the translator who gave linguistic form to what was primordial unarticulated divine wisdom. Moses took the mass of God’s wisdom which comprised the Torah and formulated it into the words and verses we have today. This radical interpretation elevates Moshe from mere recipient of the Torah to its original wordsmith! In a similar vein, in a homily on Parashat Vayetze, the Meor Einayim writes that when any individual studies Torah with reverence and dedication, his or her words similarly draw down *chochma elyona*, divine wisdom. This imagery is reminiscent of his description of Moshe at Sinai molding divine wisdom into words. Evidently, the Meor Einayim believes that even an ordinary person can reenact the role Moses played for the entire nation by simply committing to genuine Torah-study. Finding our own discoveries in Torah is thus not audacious; it is the natural consequence of engaging with God’s wisdom, an entity so unlimited that we ought not be surprised at its ability to churn out new angles of interpretation after centuries of being examined by the greatest of minds.

This year more than ever, it is imperative that we see ourselves as Moshe. Those of us accustomed to waiting at the foot of the mountain for someone wiser to bring us our Shavuot learning are often hindered by the notion that we could never dare climb the mountain ourselves. But while God may have restricted touching the mountain at Matan Torah to Moshe alone, we know that the Torah is a treasure for all those who are “*machazikim ba*”, who clutch it, own it, and see it as theirs to explore and create.

## Phil Lehman

Everyone’s life worldwide has been affected by the Corona Virus. The State of Maryland, Montgomery County, Kemp Mill, and our Jewish community are part of this tragedy. This Dvar Torah is dedicated to all the medical personnel and first responders who are out there trying their best to protect all of us.

In the 1980s there was a music album of songs produced called JOURNEYS. The songs were written by Abie Rotenberg, and were Jewish folk songs. One of them was called THE PLACE WHERE I BELONG. It is about a little torah, and the lyrics of the song are the words spoken by the torah himself. It starts off saying the torah was build way back in 1842, “By a humble man, a real G-d fearing Jew. Who did his work with honesty, feeling and with pride.”

“With loving care, his hands so sure and still, he formed me with some parchment, ink, and quill.”

“Each day he’d slowly add to me just a few more lines, with words to last until the end of time.”

“And on the day that I was finally complete. The whole town came and filled the narrow street. They sang and danced and held me high and carried me away, to the little wooden Shul where I would stay.”

“And then the Rabbi held me close against his chest. He spoke out loud and clear to all the rest. He said, “No matter if you are very young, or even very old, live by the words you’ll find inside this scroll.”

The story goes on to describe how the little torah was read from three times a week. The song goes on to say, “But never in a century, did I miss my turn once, For the fathers, they had left me with their sons.”

But then the hatred started coming from the West, and all the Jews were rounded up. “But Moshele the Shamash, he was brave and he was bold. He hid me in his cellar dark and cold.”

The song goes on to describe the years that the torah waited all alone in that basement for the people of the town to take him home again to his little wooden Shul when he could stay.

But years later, it was someone else who found the torah. The torah was sent to America in a crate and put on display in a museum. Visitors said “how very nice, how beautiful, a stunning work of art. But they knew not what was inside my heart.”

What was inside the little torah’s heart was to be carried outside by the Rabbi who would hold him close against his chest and take him to the little shul where he would stay.

The song ends: “No matter if you are very young, or even very old, live by the words you find inside this scroll. Live by the words you find inside my soul.”

When reading these beautiful lyrics, I feel the soul of KMS. We have a vibrant Orthodox community which has been ripped apart by this virus. Our davening, learning, socializing, and youth used to be like the song says, “the whole town came and filled the narrow street and they sang and danced and held me high and carried me away to the little wooden Shul where I would stay.”

But now I feel as if we are “in the cellar, dark and cold” waiting for Hasham to end all of this.

I feel confident, however, that Rabbi Weinberg will “hear my voice and come along” at the right time, “take me out of the cellar,” and “take me to the place where I belong.” He will hold the congregation “close against his chest” and restore the beauty of KMS to us all.

Chag Samaach to all.

If you are interested in hearing the song, THE PLACE WHERE I BELONG, it is available on YouTube.

## Tamar Epstein

It was our third date in Manhattan, our third “walking” date. As we walked along 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue near Columbus Circle, my date suddenly bellowed at the top of his lungs: “I love this city!!! Look at all the skyscrapers!!!” His voice bounced off the skyscrapers and echoed for what seemed like a mile in

every direction. I looked around. People were staring at us. I turned to him and asked him to lower his voice a bit. He responded by roaring up at the skyscrapers with every ounce of his strength: “why should I stop yelling? Are you embarrassed or something?” I looked around desperately for any large rocks I could crawl under or alleys I could hide in before admitting that I found his yelling embarrassing. His reply? “You’re just *choosing* to be embarrassed. Embarrassment isn’t a real thing.”

Fast forward to May of 2020. While studying Daf Yomi, Masechet Shabbat, Chapter Six, “Ba’meh Isha,” which describes what a woman is permitted to wear on Shabbat outside of her private domain, I encountered the following scenario repeatedly: “a woman may not wear X item out on Shabbat because she is likely to remove X item to show it off to her friends, and may then accidentally walk four cubits (amot) in the public domain while carrying Item X.” (At this writing, we are quickly approaching Yom Yerushalayim, and I am reminded that one of the items some say a woman may not wear out is an “ir shel zahav” – a gold ornament (possibly a tiara) engraved with the likeness of the city of Jerusalem.) The exception to this rule is when showing the item to others or removing the item from one’s body is likely to prove embarrassing to the woman. One example is a “spice pendant” that one wears to mask offensive body odor; a woman would be unlikely to remove it since it might call attention to her offensive odor. In reading one passage after another of this nature, I was reminded of the Christmas M&M commercials, when the M&Ms encounter Santa. “So, embarrassment DOES exist.”

We need look no further than Megillat Rut to confirm Judaism’s vehement opposition to the embarrassment of others, particularly in public. When Rut comes to glean in Boaz’s field, Boaz approaches her to reassure her that she will not be harassed, compliments her and then instructs the young men who worked for him: “Let her glean even among the sheaves. Do not embarrass her. And even deliberately pull out some for her from the heaps and leave them for her to glean; don’t rebuke her.” (Megillat Rut 2:15-16) Boaz does not merely ask his workers to abide by the governing laws of leket, pe’ah and shichecha; he urges them to go above and beyond the requirements to prevent embarrassing Rut.

This concept is further elucidated in Bava Metzia 58b, which states:

A disciple taught before Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak: “Anyone who publicly mortifies his companion is comparable to a shedder of blood.”

In his series of shiurim, titled *Bein Adam Le-chavero: Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct – Embarrassing Others*, Rav Binyamin Zimmerman points to two sources that explain this phenomenon.

Rav Ovadya Bartenura ([Avot 3:15](#)) explains the physical property of embarrassment that resemble bloodshed:

Initially, “the red color of the face disappears, and it becomes white.” The reason for this is that a person’s soul has two types of movements, one outer and one inner. When embarrassed, one first experiences rage at what has occurred, and his feelings move outward, expressing themselves with the reddening of the face. However, once he fails to provide a satisfactory response for how to remove this embarrassment, his concern turns inward, towards an internal sense of worry, and the blood leaves his face, resulting in the whitening of the face.

The Midrash Shmuel ([Avot 3:15](#)) quotes in the name of Rav Menachem of the House of Meir a description that aptly describes the process an embarrassed person experiences.

One who is humiliated, his face first turns red, and then turns white, because due to the magnitude of the shame, his soul flies away, as if it wanted to leave the body... Once the blood returns to its source, the face turns white, like someone who has died...

It turns out that science bears this out. In a 2016 article dedicated to the subject of embarrassment, Andrea Ayres discusses why we blush with embarrassment:

Our minds see embarrassment as a threat, as do our bodies. A unique feature of the veins in your face and neck is that they are equipped to respond to social threats. When we do something embarrassing, these veins dilate thanks to the chemical transmitter adenlyl cyclase. This transmitter allows adrenaline to pump fresh blood and oxygen through the body (including your face and neck). Though embarrassment isn't the only cause for our face turning red (guilt, shyness, or shame can also trigger this) it is a big part of it.

Given Judaism's clear tenets regarding the harm that embarrassment and shaming cause, what I found most troubling is that Masechet Shabbat and Megillat Rut seem to view the tendency to ridicule others as natural and inevitable, absent specific instructions and concerted efforts to avoid it. If nothing else, the Talmud reflects the stark reality the generations at that time faced. Our reality is no different and, quite possibly, far worse. Click on your Google newsfeed, and you will be hard-pressed to find a single article that is not exposing the perceived mistakes or intimate secrets of public figures for our judgment and/or ridicule. And if you think that the adults are the only guilty parties, I have been informed that teens who cannot take ridicule lightly will have fewer friends because those teens are "too sensitive" and consequently "not fun to hang out with."

The current era has forced us to go against our normal human nature. Who thought "elbow bumps" and face masks and gloves during summer would become "a thing?" So many and so much have been lost. Perhaps this Shavuot and beyond, we can take a lesson from Boaz and resolve to battle the human tendency to ridicule others, both publicly and privately. You see, whether on a street in Manhattan or in the fields of Beit Lechem, embarrassment really is "a thing."

## Leah Cypess

### *Mixed Altars*

After Matan Torah, there was a dramatic change in the way the Jewish people were allowed to bring karbanot. Before Matan Torah, karbanot were generally offered on a type of altar called "matzeivot;" but after the Torah was given, the Jewish people were only allowed to erect "mizbachot," and were expressly forbidden from erecting matzeivot!

What is the difference between the two types of altars -- and why did the Torah feel it necessary to institute such a dramatic change? Why should the matzeivah, for so long a perfectly acceptable form of altar, suddenly become forbidden?

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch addresses this question by focusing on the one place in Tanach where we see the two types of altars combined in one phrase. In Parshat Vayishlach, when Yaakov first arrives in

the land of Canaan, the verse tells us: "And he erected ("was yitzav") an altar ("mizbeach") there, and he proclaimed for himself: God is the God of Israel." (Bereishit 33:20).

This is an unusual phrasing. Elsewhere, when someone put up a mizbeach, the Torah uses the word "made" or "built." But here, the Torah uses "yitzav," thus combining these two forms of altar -- which elsewhere are treated as entirely distinct from each other. Why?

Rav Hirsch explains that the difference between a matzeivah and a mizbeach is in their building materials. A matzeivah consists of a single stone, while a mizbeach is an elevation built up of many stones. This reflects the underlying symbolism of each type of structure. A matzeivah, a single unworked stone, symbolizes the power of nature raised up to serve God. It is a memorial of what God has done for us through His rule of nature and of human affairs. A mizbeach, in contrast, is manifestly a man-made structure. As such, it represents the dedication of man's efforts to the service of God.

Before Matan Torah, God's rule was evident primarily in what He gave to man, in the working of nature and of miracles. Therefore, a matzeivah was an appropriate way to give thanks to God for these things. But after Matan Torah the relationship between God and mankind changed. God gave mankind laws, and now wishes to be glorified not merely by the acknowledgment of His gifts, but more importantly, by man's acting in compliance with those laws.

Once God has made His will known to us, it is meaningless to thank God without simultaneously determining to further His Will. Not merely gratitude, but action, is now required. That is why the matzeivah, which had been perfectly acceptable before Matan Torah, was not only inappropriate but forbidden afterward, and was replaced completely by the mizbeach.

Yaakov's entry into the land of Israel, the land where the fulfillment of Torah would come to full fruition, inspired him to mark this turning point by "Vayitzav sham mizbeach" – by erecting a mizbeach as a matzeivah; erecting a mizbeach, which shows the dedication of his actions to God, but as a matzeivah, as a monument to the fact that it was God Himself who revealed this way of serving Him. The commandments themselves are gifts from God! By building a mizbeach, Yaakov proclaimed that God was to be recognized through deeds – but by declaring it a matzeivah, he made this mizbeach a symbol of gratitude for that revelation, for the Torah through which Israel was to know what God wanted from them.

With this explanation, we can also better understand the end of the verse. After building this mizbeach, Yaakov "called Him kel Elokei Yisroel," proclaimed that God is "the God of Israel," "Israel's Lawgiver." (Bereishit 33:20) This is the primary heritage of the family of Yaakov and of the Jewish people. Other religions offer belief in God, which gives comfort and strength. The Jewish people, in addition, proclaim that the purpose of life is not merely to react to what one receives from God, either by submitting to it or by being thankful for it. Rather, we must also use what we have received to serve God, by taking everything He has given us and utilizing it for a higher purpose.

## Calanit Epstein

If someone offered you a million dollars, would you refuse it?

That is exactly what Avram does in this week's parsha, when the King of Sodom offers him great riches for helping Sodom win the war of the kings.

Hashem promises Avraham a gift because he didn't take anything from Melech Sdom, but Avraham challenges Hashem: "what's money to me if I don't have any kids to inherit it?" Hashem then tells Avraham to look up at the sky and try to count the stars, promising he will have numerous descendants.

Bereishit, Perek Tet Vav, Pasuk Vav, then says,

"Vehe'emin B' Hashem Vayachsveha lo tzedaka"

And he believed in Hashem and he thought of it as a tzedaka to him.

Rashi and the Ramban argue about who the "Vayachsveha" is in this pasuk.

Rashi believes Hashem thinks of Avraham's faith in him as tzedaka, because Avraham is believing in Hashem to go against nature and give him a child at his and Sarah's old age.

Ramban asks, "What do you mean? Why would Avraham not believe in Hashem? If he believed in Hashem enough to follow Him to Canaan, why wouldn't he believe in the good news? If Hashem is going to do this crazy thing against nature, that's a tzedaka to Avraham.

In Iturei Torah, HaRav Yaakov of Rakovsky asks, "what is Avraham's tzedaka?"

He explains, Avraham gave the world the gift of the principle of faith in Hashem. The pasuk says, "veTzadik beEmunato yichye.." Avraham gave a reason and an essence to life. A man who lives without faith doesn't have a principle or a goal guiding him, and when he is down in the dumps, he asks himself why he's living, and can't think of a reason. Avraham saved the world by showing that there is something to live for, and therefore, life is precious. He gave faith and great wealth to the world, and that was his tzedaka.

Afterwards, Hashem tells Avraham that he will inherit the land, and Avraham again challenges, "Prove it!"

Hashem then tells Avraham in the Brit Bein HaBetarim that his descendants will go down to Egypt and be slaves for a long time, but will come up with great wealth and inherit Canaan.

Hashem is teaching Avraham through this that even though He promised Avraham great things, Avraham and his descendants will still have to work for their ultimate geula.

He also teaches Avraham that with every descent, even a literal descent to Mitzrayim, a place so low in spirituality that it is called naked, there will be an even greater ascent, which will eventually bring the Mashiach.

Avraham's story shows us that even if we are down in the dumps, and life seems hopeless, we must not waver in our faith in Hashem, and understand that miracles don't just happen without hard work, and that sometimes we need to take a step down in order to take two steps up on the ladder of life.

Faith isn't about not questioning things around us. We don't believe in pre-determination. There are other places in the Torah where people challenge Hashem and are praised for it. Avraham is the first

person who actively challenges Hashem, and he is rewarded, though the reward only comes through suffering.

Hashem wants us to question Him. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that despite the destruction and tragedies in our world today, the world is Hashem's garden, his most special creation and the place where He chose to dwell. When things go badly, we can try to understand why, while dwelling on the positive and keeping in mind that bad things are just an obstacle in the road to geula.

Faith is what gives us a reason to live, and steady faith is what will ultimately clear the path to geula and the coming of the Mashiach.

## Eliot Fishman

Tehillim 90, Tefillah LeMoshe Ish HaElokim (Prayer of Moshe, Man of G-d) is a powerful meditation on mortality, divinity and the meaning of life that we say every shabbat and yom tov morning. Almost all of the mepharshim consider it to have been authored by Moshe himself and to be closely tied to the experience of matan torah. But the psalm contains some key textual difficulties.

Most of Tefillah LeMoshe is about the contrast between our mortality and Hashem's immortality. It includes the very direct and famous verse "Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong; Most of them are toil and sorrow; they pass quickly, and we are gone." The end of the tehillah, beginning in pasuk yud bet, then pivots to a more positive vision of human life as sacred and joyful.

The connection between the tehillah and matan torah seems like it should be clear: we gain meaning and joy through following the mitzvot, accepting the yoke of divine kingship, and living a holy life. And indeed this is how Shimshon Raphael Hirsch understands the whole tehillah--emphasizing spiritual goals over material ones and essentially as a kind of mussar.

But the tehillah actually does not anything explicit about keeping mitzvot or about prioritizing the spiritual over the physical. This is especially in contrast to the other tehillim in the set we say in the special shabbat/yom tov part of pesukei dezimra. Here are the last six verses in translation:

12: So teach the number of our days, so that we shall acquire a heart of wisdom.

13: Return, O Lord, how long? And repent about Your servants.

14: Sate us in the morning with Your loving-kindness, and let us sing praises and rejoice with all our days.

15: Cause us to rejoice according to the days that You afflicted us, the years that we saw evil.

16: May Your works appear to Your servants, and Your beauty to their sons.

17: And may the pleasantness of the Lord our God be upon us, and the work of our hands establish for us, and the work of our hands establish it.

The affirmations of life in the last part of the tehillah don't seem to fit Hirsch's interpretation that the tehillah is telling us to focus on spiritual attainment. Rather than mussar for us, they are all phrased as bakashot for hashem. And none of the bakashot are for Hashem to help us to follow the mitzvot per se. Instead, the bakashot are as follows:

1. A request for Hashem to forgive our sins as a nation and return to us that recurs three times: "Who knows the might of Your wrath, and according to Your fear is Your anger....Return, O Lord, how long? And repent about Your servants.....Cause us to rejoice according to the days that You afflicted us, the years that we saw evil". Also strangely, these three verses praying for national forgiveness and redemption are not consecutive but rather alternating.

2. A request for Hashem to teach us how to draw meaning and wisdom from our short term on earth: "So teach the number of our days, so that we shall acquire a heart of wisdom." This is the hinge of the whole tehillah.

3. A request for Hashem to show us his Chesed ( verse 14), his works and his hadar (verse 16), and his Noam (verse 17)

4. A concluding, doubled request to "establish" the work of our hands.

Hirsch tries to tie all of these back in to (following his broader Shita) sanctification of earthly life through mitzvot. But his interpretation grows strained in the climactic final verse. He interprets Noam as the object of human desire and makes "Hashem Elokeinu" as that object rather than a modifier of Noam, so that the verse reads as "May Hashem Elokeinu be our desire"--a construction that is I think nearly the opposite of the pshat of the pasuk. The pshat of psukim 14, 16 and 17 is rather that they refer to G-d's works IN THIS WORLD, and the pshat of verses of 11, 13 and 15 that they refer to a this-worldly redemption.

When we celebrate Hashem's kindness, works, beauty and pleasantness throughout tehillim they generally refer to the beauty of nature and of day to day life. Barchi Nafshi is a great example--the first verse reverse to Hashem's Hadar just like Psalm 90. Or Psalm 147, also in pesukei dezimra, which opens with the same root of Na'im as Psalm 90 and is filled with Hashem's this worldly acts of national redemption, kindness to the broken hearted and especially sustaining of the natural world.

So Tehillim 90 does not seem to be Moshe telling us to follow the Torah to bring meaning to our limited days. It is actually something a lot more surprising, especially coming from Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe is praying with us, first, for Hashem to restore the safety of the Jewish people, and second, for Hashem to give us the wisdom to appreciate and find joy the beauty of earthly life and of creation all around us, every day. If we are able to do this, we will have achieved a wise heart, a levav chochma, and placed our lives' work--Maasei Yadeinu--on a firm and enduring basis.

At this time of social distancing, it is my hope that we are all able to get some perspective on what is really important and how much joy we can find in simple acts like being outside and sharing joyful moments over Zoom and--eventually--in person. I hope the Noam of Hashem is given to all of us this Shavuot.