

CHAG SAMAI'ACH! Today is Shavuot, the 6th and 7th days of Sivan 5779. We chant Hallel, read from two Sifrei Torah, and duchen on both days. We introduce the first day of the Torah reading with the poem Akdamut, and the second day has an introductory poem to the Haftarah: Yatziv Pitgum. On the second day we also read Megillat Ruth, and we recite Yizkor.

1. AKDAMUT. There are two major themes of this poem and three subordinate themes as well. The major themes are: (1) The greatness of the Creator of the universe (verses 5-14); and (2) The virtuousness of the Jewish people in keeping their faith in God and in fulfilling the commandments of the Torah despite the oppression and ridicule of the nations around them (verses 31-52). The three subordinate themes are: (1) A description of the heavenly angels praising Hashem (verses 15-30); (2) The greatness of the Torah (a theme which pervades the entire poem); and (3) A description of the reward awaiting the righteous in Paradise for upholding the Torah (verses 62-88) (Tiyul B'gan). Since the poet is asking Hashem for permission to speak, he first offers prayers of praise to Hashem. The idea of putting this in the beginning of the Torah reading is because of the very special event of Mattan Torah, the revelation and acceptance of the Torah.

2. MEGILLAT RUTH. There are several themes within this Megillah which make it appropriate for the Shavuot holiday. Beside the standard ones I favor the fact that Ruth epitomizes the righteous convert, and all of us are considered converts to Judaism when we re-experience the acceptance of the Torah on this particular holiday. In the narrative itself, in the second chapter, Boaz asks his workmen about this one maiden, Ruth, who is collecting in the fields. The Midrash points out that Boaz was normally not looking at the maidens and asking for their identity. The Midrash points out that Ruth stood out among them all. She demonstrated tremendous modesty in what she did. In order to gather the wheat she would sit on the ground and gather sheaths and not bow down in a way that might display an immodest pose. Hearing that she was a convert, this probably piqued Boaz's curiosity even more. How did this Moabite woman learn about and demonstrate a greater sense of modesty than the Jewish women who were out there gathering wheat? We realize that all of us are a manifestation of our upbringing. The Midrash further states that the answer to the question is her mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi was her mentor and teacher and she learned modesty from her mother-in-law. This would prove to us that any person could rise in behavior and outlook in life by attaching oneself to proper influences in our lives which are available to each and every one of us.

3. The Ten Commandments are so important to our religion, not because they are ten important commandments, but it is a sense of revelation. The Jewish people, having just come out of Egypt, needed to see and hear from God directly. They did revere Moshe, but requested something greater. The Midrash tells us that when Hashem spoke on this occasion there was no sound on the entire earth. Not a bird chirping, not an angel ascended, the sea did not roll; no creature made a sound. And this was all very important in order that the Jewish people realize the difference between idolatry and this amazing, new reality of having a direct relationship with the Creator of the universe. And yet when the first sound was made and there was a voice of Hashem, Hashem did it in such a way that it was an incomprehensible event in human terms. Hashem uttered the entire Ten Commandments, all these statements, in a single utterance. It was to symbolize, according to the Gur Aryeh, that the entire Torah is a single, inseparable unit. You cannot pick and choose which mitzvah you like. It is the entire entity, a collection of separate commandments, but they are all one whole entity in reality. You cannot ignore any one of them. Hashem did it in such a way that it required Moshe to interpret it and transmit it to the Jewish people. Only Hashem could perform this miraculous utterance, and that, in truth, is a lesson unto itself. We are not on

Hashem's level, so even though they heard His voice they could not comprehend what Hashem was uttering.

4. When Hashem begins the Ten Commandments He identifies Himself as Hashem, Who took the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt. This is important. The Jewish people had fallen to the 49th level of spiritual contamination. Had it descended to the 50th and lowest level, Israel would have been beyond redemption. When Hashem liberated the Jewish people He also freed their souls from the corrupt influence of Egypt. He allowed them to shed the baseness of Egypt and to ascend 50 levels of purity and perception of truth. To record this spiritual ascent, we count the 49 days from the second day of Pesach to Shavuot. These 49 days between redemption and revelation correspond to the 49 levels of impurity. Each day God raised Israel from one level of defilement and allowed the people to gain a new level of sanctity. On the 50th day, on Shavuot, they attained the heights of purity and the Torah was given.

5. Hashem tells us that He remembers the sins of the fathers upon children, to the third and fourth generations.... Hashem does not punish sinners immediately. He does not forget the sins that merit punishment; He merely delays the punishment but does not forego it. The Ibn Ezra interprets this as an expression of mercy. Instead of punishing immediately, Hashem remembers what was done, but defers retribution in the interest of allowing the sinner or his children to repent. The second, third and fourth generations are subject to punishment if they in turn will maintain the level of sinfulness that their ancestors had. After the fourth generation it will virtually be impossible for them to rise out of the depths of the sinfulness which has permeated the family throughout generations. After the fourth generation the evil is too strongly entrenched to be uprooted and the punishment will come (Ohr HaChaim). There is a Jewish woman in our synagogue who I admire greatly because her parents and grandparents knew nothing of Judaism and she has discovered a strong Jewish way of life, a commitment to mitzvot that the parents and grandparents never saw before in their lives. At the same time she proves to some degree what these words in the Ten Commandments are all about. Another generation and all would have been lost for that family line to identify themselves as Jewish people.

6. After establishing Himself as the God of the universe, and specifically the Hashem of the Jewish people, the Ten Commandments focus on the Shabbat. The Ramban: other nations consider the weekdays to be unrelated to each other. Thus they gave each day a separate name after one of the heavenly forces [i.e. Sunday means "sun's day"; Monday means "moon's day," and so on.] Israel, however, counts all days in relationship to Shabbat: one day toward the Shabbat, the second day toward Shabbat, etc. In other words, what the Ramban is telling us is that we fulfill the commandment to remember the Shabbat every day of the week. Candles are lit before Shabbat so that their radiance will remind us to usher in this day with profound reverence. When Shabbat arrives, one should study its laws, customs, even philosophical concepts, thereby heightening our awareness of its sanctity. We should even guard the conversations that we have on Shabbat, not to talk about so many mundane subjects that would distract us from the sanctity of Shabbat. Refrain from discussing business, try to keep the mundane weekday world separate and concentrate on making the Shabbat a day that we can reflect upon our relationship with Hashem.

7. These Ten Commandments are supposed to make us unique. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch of Telz Yeshiva: Why was the prohibition against murder included in the Ten Commandments which were given only to Israel? Is not murder a universal crime for which even non-Jews are liable? Indeed, murder is one of the seven Noahide laws! We must understand that the Jewish concept of murder is far more subtle and comprehensive than the universal

definition. The Noahide prohibition is limited to the taking of life, but the Torah's prohibition alludes to many other things as well. It would even include publicly embarrassing another human being. It talks about assaulting a married woman as tantamount to murder. A person is responsible for a traveler and we must provide him with sufficient provisions and a proper escort lest he fall prey to hunger or attack. It also requires us to consider another person's livelihood. All of these factors overlap or are included in discussion of the prohibition of murder. This would further support a concept that Saadya Gaon had stated years before. He thought that the Ten Commandments were not specific commandments but were classifications of laws that would dominate and serve as instruction for the Jewish people creating a Torah society.

HAFTORAH

The haftorah for the first day of Shavuot is one of the more perplexing chapters of the Prophets. It is from the prophecy of Ezekiel where the first chapter of his book is referred to a Ma'aseh Merkavah, which literally means the "work" or the "account" of the chariot. Describing Hashem's presence in the fashion that Ezekiel does is very difficult for us to comprehend. Our Sages severely restricted the teaching of this chapter. Chagigah 14b: we may not teach the Ma'aseh Merkavah even to a single student (privately) unless he is wise and can understand from within himself. What this actually means is also very difficult, but sometimes considered God's presence and trying to describe God is more complicated and will only bring us to greater questions and less understanding. Yet it is included here as a haftorah but comes with a cautionary note. The simple translation and the commentary are filled with references to these terms as wings and feet, faces and animals, by no means can be taken as literal descriptions of the heavens or of the angels. We are using human terms to describe something which is non-human and very spiritual. Hence it is important to look at it as something that is reminding us that God revealed Himself at Sinai, and yet His revelation for us is defined within the concept of the mitzvah world. It should not be defined in more spirituality but as a means of instilling our material and physical world with the sense of God's presence. This is what it is all about and the chapter of the Ma'aseh Merkavah, the chariot, remains incomprehensible for most of us and we read it with a sense of awe and reverence, and yet we will be limited in understanding it in greater detail.

BIRKAT KOHANIM, the Priestly Benediction. Recently one of the congregants approached me to ask why it is that outside of Israel we do not have Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis as it is done in Israel. The Rama mentions that the brachah for Birkat Kohanim is B'Ahavah, with love. We have to have a joyous atmosphere and during the week we are preoccupied with earning a living. Even on Shabbat it is very difficult for us to totally concentrate on the sanctity of the day. On festivals when the Mussaf service precedes the festive meal, a joyous mood does prevail. There are many in our history who felt that there was no difference between the existence in the Exile and the existence in Israel in this regard, and they seek other reasons for the difference in the customs of Eretz Yisrael and Jews of the Exile. I do feel that the halachic dilemma is a challenge to us on how to create a Torah society outside of Eretz Yisrael that can be spiritually at a level to include Birkat Kohanim. The Vilna Gaon and his disciple, Chaim of Volozhin, attempted to introduce daily Birkat Kohanim in their region but natural events hampered their attempts and they took it as a divine sign to abandon their efforts. We have what we have, and it does give a greater sense of joy to our Chag when there is Birkat Kohanim on our festivals. (RED)

*Sponsored by Joan & David Kornbluth in memory of
Joan's father Dr. Aaron Pinta (z"l)*

QUESTIONS FOR SHAVUOT 5779

1. What are the four names for this holiday?
2. The Or HaChaim purposefully called this holiday "Shevuot" (oaths). What two oaths are there in this holiday?
3. Why do we wait until nightfall to daven Maariv on the first night of this Yom Tov (even when it falls on a weekday)?
4. When exactly is Akdamut read?
5. Fill in the blank: The author of Akdamut was Rav Meir ben Rav Yitzchak, a Chazzan who lived in Worms, Germany. He reportedly was one of ".....'s" teachers.
6. What Megillah is read on Shavuot? And why?
7. Why is there a custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot?
8. Why is there a custom to stay up all night on Shavuot to learn?
9. Why was the Torah given in the desert?
10. Why wasn't the Torah given to Bnei Yisrael as soon as they left Egypt?
11. Why was the Torah given at Mt. Sinai?
12. In Kedoshim, the Torah states Do Not Steal. What is the Do Not Steal in the Ten Commandments referring to?
13. How was Boaz permitted to marry Ruth? She is from Moav!!
14. Which fruits of Eretz Yisrael were the Bikkurim?
15. What did the farmer do with his Bikkurim.

Relationships

- a) Boaz - Nachshon
- b) Aharon - King David
- c) Yehudah - Moshe
- d) Ammon - Moav
- e) Ruth - Balak

ANSWERS FOR SHAVUOT 5779

1. Chag HaKatzir, Chag Shavuot, Chag HaBikkurim, Atzeret.
2. 1) That Hashem takes an oath that He will not exchange us for a different nation; and 2) We will not exchange Him for a different god.
3. Because we have to complete 7 complete weeks of Sefirah before the holiday begins.
4. Call up the Kohen for his Aliyah on the first day, and then begin Akdamut.
5. Rashi
6. Ruth. As Ruth observed the Mitzvot and became Jewish, so do we on this day.
7. Lots of reasons. One reason: there was no time to slaughter an animal and kasher it, for they just received those laws on this day.
8. One answer: Bnei Yisrael went to sleep that night and overslept on the morning they were to receive the Torah.
9. One reason: to show that anyone can come and learn it.
10. After severe oppressive slavery, Bnei Yisrael needed relaxation before learning Torah.
11. Other mountains were places of idolatry.
12. In the Ten Commandments, Do Not Steal refers to kidnapping (a capital crime).
13. The prohibition refers to male Moabites, not females.
14. The seven "fruits" of Eretz Yisrael: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, olives, pomegranates, and dates.
15. He brought them to Yerushalayim and gave them to a Kohen and made the proclamation in Hebrew.

Relationships

- a) Grandfather Nachshon
- b) Great, Great, ...Uncle Aharon
- c) Great, Great Uncle Yehudah
- d) Brothers
- e) Grandfather Balak (Balak - Eglon - Ruth)