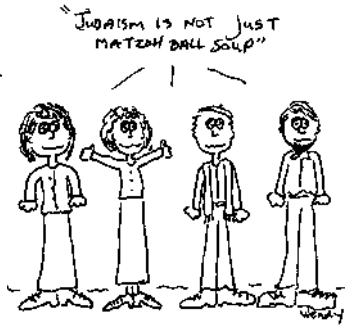


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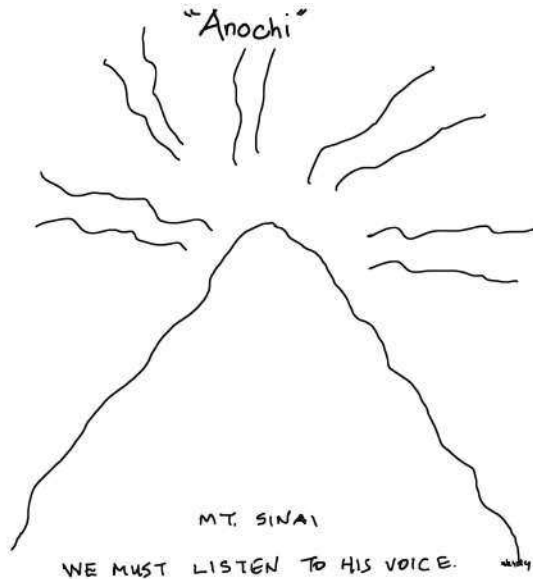
A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

בס"ד



SHAVUOT, THE NEGLECTED COUSIN

Gaviella Lerner

Sometimes, it feels like Shavuot is the neglected cousin to the other Jewish holidays. There isn't one definable ritual or symbol that screams, "Shavuot." Even if we had a Temple, the special sacrifice of the day, the *shte halechem* (two loaves) is just not as flashy or exciting as the special sacrifices for Pesach and Sukkot. Even the *bikkurim*, the tithes of first fruits, which is associated with the holiday (and even lend the holiday an alternate name, *Chag HaBikkurim*) do not actually need to be given on Shavuot itself. Shavuot is merely the start of the four month period during which *bikkurim* must be brought (Sukkot is the final deadline).

How can it be that the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah, the very foundation for our lives as Jews, has no stand-out ritual? As much as I love cheesecake, it sure seems like a strange way to commemorate such a momentous occasion!

Perhaps the answer can be found in the Midrash in *Bamidbar Rabbah*. The Midrash asks: "Why was the Torah given in the middle of the desert, as opposed to the land of Israel?" One of the answers given is that by giving the Torah

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WE MUST LISTEN TO HIS VOICE

Rabbi Ori Bergman

We are currently in the middle of the time period referred to as the "counting of the Omer." These 49 days, link the holiday of Passover, when we were freed from Egypt, and the holiday of Shavuot, the day that the Jewish people heard G-d speak the "ten utterances" (*T. Shabbat* 86b), famously known as the Ten Commandments.

Prior to this, G-d said to Moses: "Ascend the mountain to Me and be there. And I will give to you the tablets of stone, the Torah, and the commandments that I have written to teach them." (Exodus 24:12)

In his comments on this passage, *Rashi* (the foremost Biblical commentator) explains that all of the Torah's six hundred and thirteen – *taryag* – mitzvot can be subsumed within the ten statements of the Ten Commandments.

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FROM DANCING WITH THE ROCKETTES TO CELEBRATING WITH THE TORAH

Darlene Wendy Frank

I'm sure that many of you followed the story of the rocket launch and Israel's recent attempt to land a spacecraft on the moon. It was amazing, and even though it did not end perfectly, I'm sure everyone will agree that it was a spectacular accomplishment. My connection is with a different kind of rocket - THE ROCKETTES! My name is Darlene Wendy Frank, and I am a former Radio City Rockette. I'd like to share some thoughts with you about the wonderful upcoming holiday of Shavuot and how it relates to my being a Rockette. I hear you laughing already, but I'm really serious!

Although many dancers will tell you that the greatest show on Earth takes place at Radio City Music Hall, I have to admit that they're wrong! In fact, the greatest show on Earth was not a show at all: it was a real life spectacular event with thunder and lightning. Of course, I'm referring to the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the Torah on Shavuot, more than 3300 years ago, with sensurround thunder and simultaneous translation of the Ten Commandments into 70 languages for all the nations to hear and understand. Samuel

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FROM DANCING WITH THE ROCKETTES (cont. from p. 1)
...Lionel “Roxy” Rothafel, the Jewish impresario who opened Radio City Music Hall, would have loved it.

The Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, with an audience of two million plus people of Israel. *Rashi*, the famous commentator on the Torah (Exodus 19:2), describes the people of Israel at that exact moment as being, “as one person with one heart!” Similarly, that sense of unity was always a vital part of the special experience of dancing with the Rockettes--we all had to dance as if we were one person--and we actually became “one person.” If one Rockette is out of step, the show suffers. We must all dance and think as one. Therefore, each Rockette is responsible for all the Rockettes performing the same step at exactly the same time. It’s all or nothing. As Jews, we are one people, and we must recognize that we are responsible for each other and must take care of one another.

When G-d offered the Children of Israel the Torah, we accepted it and agreed, “to obey and to listen,” – to do first and understand later. There was no cherry picking. We started out being totally committed, and then worked hard to elevate our souls to aspire to be even better people--mentally, physically and spiritually. When one is offered the privilege of becoming a Rockette, one does not pick and choose how to do it. We have faith that the system will work – if we work together. We work our hardest to do what is asked of us, no questions asked, and, eventually, we come to understand why we are asked to do certain things in certain ways. We do, and then we understand. That’s the deal.

To the average person, becoming a Rockette may not seem to relate much to Shavuot or to Judaism. But, actually, it was the culmination of many wonderful Jewish values that my parents instilled in me throughout my childhood.

The Torah teaches:

- The importance of a strong work ethic (to train for years and years as a dancer, endure physical pain and learn mental discipline, despite the fact that only very few make it).
- The importance of finding joy and appreciating all the beauty in *Hashem’s* world (music, dancing).
- The importance of giving joy to others and valuing their happiness above your own.
- The importance of a strong Jewish identity, which allowed me to travel the world and retain that identity, even defying the rules and refusing to perform on Yom Kippur.

e. The importance of Jewish parents ensuring that their children have skills to provide for themselves no matter what the future brings. Sadly, my own parents passed away young, but the skills they gave me were critical to my future. To this day I bless them for their foresight. The Talmud teaches that parents must “teach their children to swim.” The Rabbis tell us that this means teaching children the skills to survive in this world.

f. The importance of making health, diet and exercise a priority. After all, our bodies were given to us by *Hashem* to house our Jewish soul and we need to respect our bodies and keep ourselves healthy – something that is so important when you are a professional athlete, such as a Rockette, and indeed is important for everyone.

g. The importance of community. Judaism depends on community, and underscores how important community is for Jews. The same is true for the community of creative artists that I came from. One day I walked into Rabbi Buchwald’s Beginners Service in New York City – a city of many millions of people – and sitting there was fellow performer Peter Howard, a famous musician and

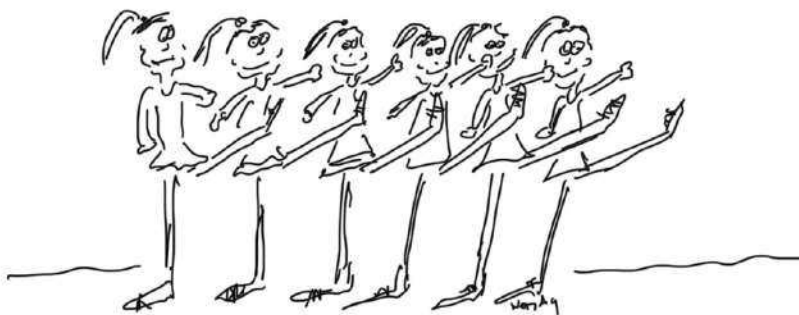
composer. The world can seem so very large, and it can be easy to get lost in it. However, when we act as a member of our community and contribute to it, the world can be very small indeed.

While each of us dance to our own tune as we make our way through life, we each need to play our part within the Jewish community. On Shavuot, when we come together as one to celebrate and reaffirm that momentous event at Mount Sinai, we must open our ears and hear *Hashem’s* voice calling to us as Jews. His voice and His laws reach deep down into each of us. In my case, it’s now deep down in my musical soul.

Wishing you a *Chag Samayach*.

Darlene Wendy Frank is a former Radio City Rockette and national spokesperson appearing on stage, TV and film. Currently living in NY, she works at American Guild of Variety Artists, is on the Board of Directors of the Rockette Alumnae Association and is a personal trainer and teaches exercise classes.

“LIKE ONE MAN WITH ONE HEART!”



WE ALL HAD TO DANCE AS IF WE WERE ONE PERSON

WE MUST LISTEN TO HIS VOICE (cont. from p. 1)

Interestingly, Rabbi Saadia Gaon composed an entire liturgical poem that organizes all 613 mitzvot into ten groups corresponding with the Ten Commandments.

One of the more fascinating insights on the commandments is that these ten can be further condensed into the first two: "I am the Lord your G-d" and "Have no gods before Me," from which all other "Thou shall" or "Thou shall not" commandments, respectively, are derived.

Going further, these two can be condensed into the first commandment itself: "I am the Lord," since the second commandment is a direct derivation of the first.

Furthermore, this first commandment may be further condensed into its opening word *Anochi*, "I am." So, in other words, all Ten Commandments and all the 613 mitzvot can be summarized by the word, *Anochi*, "I am."

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 105a), teaches that "*Anochi*" (first word of first commandment) is an acronym for: "*Ani, Nafschi, Ktaviti, yabavit*;" I (gave) My soul, I wrote it, I gave it.

So on this day, we didn't just receive laws and instructions, we received, deeper still, *Hashem* Himself.

Similarly, our sages illustrate this by stating: "There is a type of sale where the seller himself is [actually] sold together with the item. G-d said to the Jewish people: I sold you My Torah, I am sold with it, so to speak." (*Midrash Rabbah, Terumah* 33a)

In other words, the pinnacle of the Sinai experience happened when G-d gave Himself over to us and in so doing, He became ours, and we became His. The way the sages expressed this is that the Sinai experience was a marriage between the People of Israel and G-d, at which point we became united like a married couple.

Before we were able to unite in this fashion, we needed to be able to receive G-d. Yet, how do we establish this type of relationship today? Similarly, how do we truly receive another person and become one with them? This is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has to say on this subject in *The Spirituality of Listening* (*Eikev* 5776) :

There is a powerful story about this told in the first book of Samuel. Saul, Israel's first king, looked the part. He was tall. "From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people," (1 Sam. 9:2, 10:23). He was the image of a king. But morally, temperamentally, he was not a leader at all; he was a follower.

G-d then told Samuel to anoint another king in his place, and told him it would be one of the children of Yishai. Samuel went to Yishai and was struck by the appearance of one of his sons, Eliav. He thought he must be the one G-d meant. But G-d said to him, "Do not be impressed by his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. G-d does not see as people do. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Jews and Judaism taught that we cannot see G-d, but we can hear Him and He hears us. It is through the word – speaking and listening – that we can have an intimate relationship with G-d as our parent, our partner, our sovereign, the One who loves us and Whom we love. We cannot demonstrate G-d scientifically. We cannot prove G-d logically. These are Greek, not Jewish, modes of thought. I believe that

from a Jewish perspective, trying to prove the existence of G-d logically or scientifically is a mistaken enterprise. G-d is not an object but a subject. The Jewish mode is to relate to G-d in intimacy and love, as well as awe and reverence.

To listen, we need humility. I once heard a story of a teacher who wanted to teach an arrogant student a lesson. He once invited the student to eat at his home and proceeded to serve the student. At one point, the student asked for water, so the teacher started pouring water into the glass that the student was holding. But he kept on pouring until the water began to overflow and pour onto the table, the floor and the student. The student panicked, saying, "it's full, it's full," after which the teacher looked at him and said, "No, you're full, you're full. To be able to receive, to learn, to listen, one needs to be empty like a cup."

To listen truly, requires removing part of ourselves from the equation and fully absorbing the words of another person. What a gift it is to give to another human being. To be listened to, to be heard, is to know that someone else takes me seriously.

This is our goal for Shavuot. It is not only upon "people" that we bestow the gift of a non-judgmental open-minded listening ear, but it is upon G-d as well. So on Shavuot, we listen... to G-d, to the words of the Torah... in humility, thus allowing the words to penetrate our hearts. In so doing, we might just become better listeners in our interpersonal relationships too.

Rabbi Ori Bergman serves as the Rabbi of Kehillat Ohr Tzion in Buffalo, NY as well as the Jewish Studies Coordinator at Kadimah Academy. Rabbi Bergman also works as a Marriage Success Coach helping couples thrive in their marriage.

SHAVUOT, THE NEGLECTED COUSIN (cont. from p. 1)
...literally in the midst of nowhere, G-d sent the message that the Torah is accessible and applies to all Jews, no matter where they may be. The Torah is meant to be a constant presence, not just a special treat.

This same message is resonant throughout the Book of Ruth, which is read on the second day of Shavuot. Boaz is not intrigued by Ruth because of any grand gestures on her part. After all, Boaz wasn't there when Ruth heroically chose to give up a life of luxury in order to stand at the side of her impoverished mother-in-law, Naomi. Apparently, what most attracted Boaz to Ruth was her gentle and kind demeanor when she came to his field each day to gather crops with which to feed herself and her mother-in-law. She was, quite simply, a *mensch* for all seasons. So much so, that Boaz was impressed enough to want to marry her, for just that reason.

The humble celebration of Shavuot also reinforces the message of daily consistency. After all, Judaism is about much more than just a seder, one or two nights a year, or eating in a sukkah for a week. It's about living a Jewish life every day of the year.

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SHAVUOT, THE NEGLECTED COUSIN (cont. from p. 3)

The Torah, for certain, has something to say about even the most basic activities of daily living and interpersonal relationships. Regardless of one's affiliation, there are infinite possibilities for incorporating something Jewish into one's day. The big moments and exciting holidays certainly have important lessons and inspiration to offer, but it's in the day-to-day experience, where we really get the opportunity to live Jewishly.

I'm privileged to work for NJOP, where I spend every weekday working to help Jews across the country connect with their beautiful Jewish heritage. But one needn't work for a Jewish organization in order to live a full Jewish life. There are plenty of Jewish experiences to be found in the less impressive moments of my day: cooking kosher meals for my family and helping my kids say their blessings; reading them bedtime stories and saying Shema together; finding a few moments in a hectic day to pray, even if informally.

While the bigger things are important and often leave us with more detailed memories, it's the little daily things that leave the deeper and more lasting impressions. We will remember, say, a once-in-a-lifetime family vacation taken in

childhood in far more vivid detail than any of the thousands of times our parents read us stories or chased us around the park. But, while no one bedtime story or trip to the playground stands out, the memory of that daily devotion is what remains with us the most. So too, seders and sukkahs are easier to get excited about, but it is through the smaller, daily Jewish moments that we build the strongest connection.

Shavuot may not be the most glamorous holiday, but it reminds us to appreciate the Judaism inherent in our daily lives. After all, we all spend the vast majority of our time engaged in routine and commonplace matters. If we reserve "Jewish moments" only for special times, they will be very rare indeed. As the Torah is the cornerstone of our heritage, we are meant to draw inspiration from it every day.

So this Shavuot, after discussing the finer points of the relationship between cheesecake and the holiday of Shavuot, let's also think about how we can take with us the Jewish values set forth in the Torah, when we return to our normal daily routines.

Gaviella Lerner is a Regional Program Coordinator at NJOP. She lives in Teaneck, NJ with her husband and three children.



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