

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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SHAVUOT: SEPARATING THE MILK AND THE MEAT

by Rabbi Yaakov Bienenfeld

Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates *Kabalat HaTorah*, receiving the Torah, at Mount Sinai, is quite an unusual holiday in that it is not associated with any religious object or ritual. In fact, on Shavuot we are commanded to do absolutely nothing! We need not sound the *shofar*, fast for 25 hours, take a *lulav* or *etrog*, eat in a *sukkah*, light a *menorah*, nor read a *megillah*. The only Shavuot ritual that comes to mind is the consumption of cheesecake and other dairy foods -- which, though enjoyable, hardly ranks with the religious rituals of other holidays. What is the origin and significance of eating dairy foods on Shavuot? And why doesn't the Torah give us a specific mitzvah to perform on Shavuot?

The reasons given for eating dairy on Shavuot don't seem to explain the widespread nature of this custom. One reason offered is that upon receiving the Torah, and learning the laws of keeping kosher, the Jews discovered that all of their cooking and eating utensils – pots, pans, dishes and cutlery – were *treif* (not kosher) and therefore unusable. As a result, they were forced to eat only those foods that required no preparation, such as milk and cheese. Another reason offered for eating dairy products is that Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving the Torah, and the numerical value of *chalav* (milk in Hebrew) is also 40. We therefore consume milk products to commemorate receiving the Torah. One need not be a great Torah scholar to wonder whether justifying holiday (cont. on p. 4)



MY TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY

by Roslyn Dickens

As many of you know, it's been twenty years since I first entered the Beginner's Service, since I came in and sat down squarely on the men's side of the room.

I came at the behest of a young man whom I had met by chance and whom I liked very much. "I could really care for you if you weren't part of this crazy cult." I said.

He smiled a patient, knowing smile and said I did not know enough to make such a judgement. Then he suggested I learn a little about my own heritage before dismissing it out of hand. After asking me to accompany him to Lincoln Square to sit in on a service conducted by Effie Buchwald, he added, rather off-handedly, "And, if possible, why don't you leave your purse at home."

Having an interest in the guy, if not the subject, I did as I was bid, although I had no idea who this "Effie" was, or what she had against handbags. The long and short of it is, the guy and I didn't make it. But as you can plainly see, through the warm and wise guidance of Effie (although I refuse to call him that), my connection to Yiddishkeit did.

My first impressions eventually faded, while the substantive connection grew and grew, which brings me to the Torah Portion of the week of my anniversary. The Shabbat of my twentieth anniversary, was *Parashat Parah*, on which we not only read the regular portion of the week (which was *Parashat Tzav*, Leviticus 6:1-8:36), but we read an ADDITIONAL reading from (cont. on p. 2)

HEAVENLY PAYBACK TIME

by Sam Seidman

For most Jews, Shavuot is the often neglected or unknown holiday commemorating the receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Many Jews, however, have their own personal story about their relationship to Judaism, and each of us has our own personal experience in "receiving" a new understanding of Torah. I myself have numerous stories concerning my own experiences of learning and growing in my Judaism. One story, however, stands out in my mind as a special tale of how I received the special gift of Sabbath within myself.

This story actually took place on the Shabbat of Chanukah. After *davening* in shul, I spent some time shmoozing and wishing "Good Shabbat" to my friends and neighbors before starting my walk home for Shabbat lunch. I have a basic Shabbat routine: I walk 20 minutes to shul to daven, and then walk 20 minute back home for Shabbat lunch. It is a walk I thoroughly enjoy, in every season and in all types of weather, as it takes me through the highlights of my neighborhood--through the busy streets, as well as through a secluded short cut in the woods.

On that particular Shabbat, the sky was exceptionally beautiful, like the "Montana Sky" seen on so many calendars. The temperature, however, was cold, very cold, in the teens if not colder. Bundled up in my coat, I strode home from shul humming Shabbat songs. Suddenly, from the corner of my eye, (cont. on p. 3)

ANNIVERSARY (cont. from p. 1)...Parshat Chukkat (Numbers 9:1-22).

In *Tzav* we learn the details of the gory, boring, seemingly irrelevant practices that took place in the Holy Temple concerning various animal sacrifices, each of which has a specified objective. In *Chukkat* we learn about the Red Heifer -- basically, we learn the details of the gory, boring, seemingly irrelevant practices that took place in the Holy Temple concerning the sacrifice of one particular animal and having NO specified objective.

What significance does all this detail have when there is no Temple today and, if and when that should change, only the *Kohanim* (priests) will be involved in performing these rituals?

That, however, is not entirely true. The *Kohanim* would have the responsibility of attending to the particulars, but they would just be facilitators because, as we see in so many ways, our relationship to G-d is as ONE-ON-ONE as we care to make it.

If we are smart and lucky, when G-d speaks we not only listen, but we follow (at whatever juncture in our life it occurs). As you will hear again on Shavuot, at the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the Jews said, "WE WILL DO AND WE WILL HEAR."

Yet no matter how the Jews of the Temple era related to these practices, expecting us to now apply the axiom "Ours is not to reason why," is contrary to modern people's approach to the world. Would following directions (or accepting the fact of them) without comprehension suggest that Jews are just mindless robots?

As the old adage goes, "Consider the source."

Imagine yourself at a chemical laboratory. A volatile formula is about to foul the ground water and contaminate the earth. Although you have no background in such matters, you are the only person there who can neutralize it. Who would you call for advice - your football coach? Or imagine that you are a passenger in a small plane when the pilot falls unconscious and it is up to you to land the plane safely or kill everyone aboard. Who would you radio to "talk you down" - your florist?

No. You'd want a chemist who understands the way elements interact. You'd want a flight instructor who knows how to guide you to safety. You'd want a knowledgeable expert on the phone, and you'd want him now!

A football coach can encourage you on the field, but he has no knowledge of chemistry. A florist can fill your home with aesthetic delights - but you cannot hang your life on a chrysanthemum.

Many of us do not understand the whys and wherefores of the basic forces that surround us daily. I, for instance, still don't understand how radio waves can cook my food in the kitchen, while bringing CNN into my living room. And, since I was a child I have always wondered how they get all those little people into the back of the radio!

Why, then, do we expect, even demand, to understand the whys and wherefores of Torah commands? Ask, probe, study all you want, Torah encourages that, but when all else fails, rely on the most knowledgeable expert of all, the original manufacturer. HE knows how it works.

In *Parshat Tzav*, Moshe is told "*tzav*" (command) Aharon and his sons regarding the laws of the various sacrificial offerings and the unique purpose of each one. *Tzav* is a very strong word. Why is it used in this case? Why do the priests have to be commanded concerning the sacrifices? Rashi (one of the greatest Biblical commentators) explains that this word is used to connote urgency, both for that time and for future generations. Accordingly, the word "*tzav*," coming from the same root as *mitzvah*, is a call to action, a reminder to act quickly and forcefully in the performance of *mitzvot*.

Searching the Internet, I found the following Torah thought by Rabbi Avi Geller of Aish HaTorah. He says that the Sages understood the wording of the term "This is the Torah (law or teaching) of the Burnt Offering" etc, to imply that even when we don't merit

the actual offerings (such as today when we don't have a Temple), we can still bring "offerings" in a metaphysical sense by studying the sacrificial laws. The point of the offerings is not the blood of the animal, rather it is the connection to G-d that comes from appreciating the meaning of the offering.

In another on-line *D'var Torah*, Rabbi Pinchas Winston concluded that; "Imbedded in the sacrifices are concepts that can always apply, even without a Temple." The sacrifices, like the *mitzvot*, are vehicles, conduits so-to-speak, to channel the spiritual energies of the Jews. Catalysts designed by G-d to inspire us to reach deep down into our very beings and tap hidden sources of energy.

In his book, *Jewish Literacy*, Joseph Telushkin notes that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai revolutionized Jewish thinking by proclaiming that after the destruction of the Temple, acts of "loving-kindness (and the studying of Torah) had succeeded sacrifices as the preferred way of achieving a relationship with G-d.

Think about the last *mitzvah* you performed; from saying a newly learned blessing over food, to helping a feeble person cross the



street, or running after someone to return the wallet they dropped. Remember your sense of pride, worthiness, the satisfaction that came from performing a *mitzvah*, even before you knew it was a *mitzvah*, or even what a *mitzvah* was.

Saying a newly learned blessing over food is *HaKarat Ha'tov*, recognizing the good, acknowledging G-d for our sustenance.

Helping a feeble person cross the street is *Gemilut Chasadim*, an act of loving kindness.

Running after someone to return the wallet they dropped is called *Hashavat Avaydah*, the return of a lost object...the idea that what isn't ours legally, will never redound to our benefit, no matter how we obtained it...and G-d is sanctified when we do as we are commanded and give it back.

Remember the last time you did something that really delighted the person that you love the most. Remember the feeling of contentment and connection. The sacrifices listed in *Tzav*, unlike the Red Heifer whose sacrifice is unexplained and inexplicable, function as different ways to create that similar connection with G-d. Understanding the specifics of how the sacrifices work, however, is not a question for a florist, but for the priests. We need only imagine the surety of that connection and how it must have been irresistible, despite the cost. Consider how it must have elevated the entire Jewish Nation to know that they were doing G-d's will in G-d's Holy Temple, with or without intellectual understanding.

Be grateful that you can make that connection to G-d every day in a hundred ways through so many *mitzvot*, and avail yourself of the opportunity whenever you can.

Roslyn Dickens is a photographer, filmmaker and turkey farmer who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She is a long time graduate of Lincoln Square Synagogue's Beginners Service.

HEAVENLY PAYBACK (cont. from p. 1)... my attention was captured by a fluttering paper on the ground. A crisp five dollar bill was staring up at me from the sidewalk. I stopped suddenly in my tracks. For a few seconds, I stood there just staring at the bill. As the cars sped by on the busy street, I looked to see if someone might have just dropped the money, but no one was around. No walkers, no joggers, no one to claim this abandoned five dollar bill. I remained standing there for a few more moments, staring now at that beautiful, but cold, sky.



'Dear Hashem,' I thought to myself, 'thank you so much for allowing me to understand that I should not even consider picking up this five dollar bill on Shabbat!' It was over in an instant, and I smiled broadly, overwhelmed by the feeling of deep appreciation for Shabbat. The five dollar bill remained on the ground, and I proceeded on my Shabbat walk home for lunch.

Of course, I immediately told the story to my family. They wondered whether the money would still be there after Shabbat, but that afternoon, on my walk back for *Mincha*, I walked along the same path and noticed that the money was gone. Perhaps the wind had swept the bill elsewhere, or perhaps someone else had found it and had the good fortune to discover the "treasure." I wasn't bothered in the least that the money was gone. In fact, I felt quite fortunate for not having acquired this small treasure. For me the real treasure was that I knew enough and understood enough not to acquire it. It was the special Shabbat feeling that made me feel so fortunate, and it was this particular incident that allowed me to concretize this feeling.

Now this would be a nice story in and of itself, but nothing to write home about in particular, if it weren't for what happened the very next week:

After enjoying the rest of my Shabbat, I don't recall thinking anything more of the incident. The very next day, my entire family flew to Florida for winter break. A day or two later, while out enjoying the warm sunshine, my wife and I took a stroll along the sea shore, while the waves continued to break gently, in and out. It is amazing to see how large the ocean is, how much water there is, and the infinite number of waves – and yet for all those waves, my wife and I saw, at the same moment, a wave meant especially for us. Right there, beneath our feet, rolling in on a wave--was a dollar bill! I quickly put my hand down and grabbed the money before it was swept back to the sea. Opening my hand, my wife and I just stared, not speaking for a moment, and wondered at the significance of our find. In my hand was not a dollar bill, but a ten dollar bill. I could not believe it.

Now perhaps you might be wondering what is so special about finding a ten dollar bill, after all, we all know how little ten dollars can buy nowadays. I was, however, deeply struck by the significance.

"Oh my gosh," I gasped. "Hashem has given me the five dollars I didn't pick up last Shabbat and five more for being good!" Having recognized that this ten dollars was a gift, I promised half for

tzedakah (charity). The other five I took for myself.

The next week, back home in Baltimore, I shared my story with some friends, who in turn told the story at their Shabbat table. My friend's wife loved the story and told us that it was actually a wonderful example of a phrase in a song that we sing every Shabbat, *Baruch Kel Elyon* (Bless Hashem on High). The song states: "Praiseworthy is the one [who observes Shabbat,] who awaits his double reward." I had truly received my double reward.

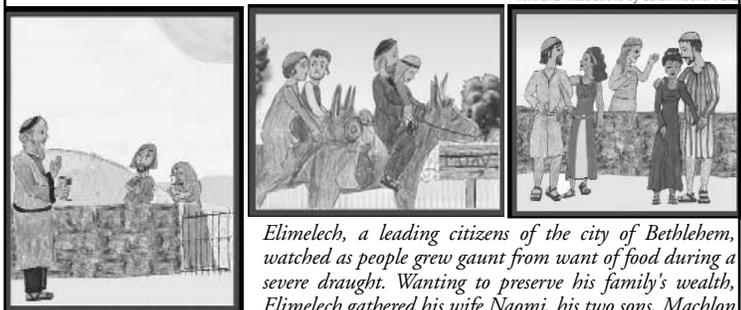
While I did give five dollars to *tzedakah*, the actual, original ten dollar bill remains in my wallet to this very day. I keep thinking that perhaps the story is not yet complete. This ten dollars may be for some other, greater purpose, and perhaps one day I will yet know the rest of the story of this "Heavenly Ten!"

Sam Seidman lives with his wife and 3 kids in Baltimore, MD, where he works for the Federal Government. He has been involved with numerous Beginner programs in the Baltimore area.

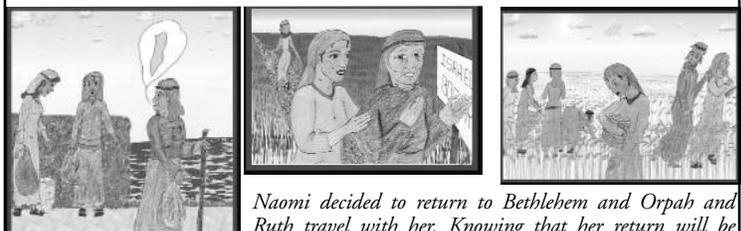
A former princess, left widowed with her mother-in-law, destined to abandon her royal past to join the Nation of G-D and become the mother of royalty...

RUTH!

Text and illustrations by Sarah Rochel Reid



Elimelech, a leading citizens of the city of Bethlehem, watched as people grew gaunt from want of food during a severe draught. Wanting to preserve his family's wealth, Elimelech gathered his wife Naomi, his two sons, Machlon and Khilyon, and all their transportable wealth, and moved to Moab, a not-so-friendly neighbor of Israel. Elimelech's sons brought home two nice, young Moabite ladies, Orpah and Ruth, daughters of the royal house of Moab! But Elimelech and both of his sons died, and Naomi was left in the land of Moab with two foreign daughters-in-law.



Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem and Orpah and Ruth travel with her. Knowing that her return will be shameful enough because of her flight (let alone for having Moabite daughter-in-laws) Naomi tells them to go to their father's home. Orpah left, but Ruth refused, saying: "Where you go, I shall go, your people will be my people, your land will be my land, and your G-d will be my G-d." Living in poverty, Ruth gathered the excess of the barley harvest in the field of the wealthy Boaz...a relative of Elimelech. Boaz insisted that Ruth continue to come to his field and he made certain that she would not be molested by those who held her Moabite heritage in contempt.



Knowing that Ruth's status as a true convert would never be accepted until she established her own home, Naomi directed her daughter-in-law to go to Boaz at the threshing ceremony and to present herself to him as a potential mate. In the darkness of the night, Ruth lay herself at the feet of Boaz, signaling to him her desire that he recognize their relationship. There was, however, a closer relative whose obligation to redeem the family land by marrying Ruth preceded Boaz's. Boaz told the relation that Naomi's land needed to be redeemed and that he, the nearest kinsman, had the first responsibility and opportunity to purchase it by marrying Ruth. The cousin declined and then Boaz and Ruth were married. Ruth bore a son named Oved, whose son, Jesse, was the father of David, the greatest King of Israel.

For more on Shavuot and the Book of Ruth, visit www.njop.org

SHAVUOT (cont. from p. 1)...menus with math or a Farberware shortage might be an halachic (legal) stretch.

However, there is one genuine *halachic* source for eating dairy on Shavuot which is cited by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (known as the Rama) in *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* (The Code of Jewish Law), Chapter 494. The Rama writes that in the Temple, on Shavuot, there was a special offering called the *Shtei Ha'lechem* – the two loaves of bread which were set out to be viewed by the Jewish people and were then distributed by the High Priest. In order to properly commemorate this special offering, we are required to eat two different meals on Shavuot, each one accompanied by its own loaf of bread. Since we are prohibited from having meat and dairy at the same meal, the custom developed of eating a dairy meal followed by a meat meal. Because the bread used for the dairy meal can not be reused at the meat meal, we are compelled to use two loaves of bread, corresponding to the *Shtei Ha'lechem*.

The Rama's explanation concerning the origin of eating dairy is supported by the Biblical text in Exodus 23:19, where the Torah states: "*Reishit bikurei admata tavee beit Hashem Elokecha, lo tivashel g'di b'chalev eemo,*" or "The first and best fruit of your land shall you bring to the house of Hashem your G-d; you shall not cook a kid (goat) in the milk of its mother."

What is the link between the first part of the verse in which we are commanded to bring the first fruits to the Temple, and the second part which speaks of the prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother's milk? The Torah is obviously connecting these two concepts. In addition to being the time when the two loaves were offered (commemorated by separating the meal in two), Shavuot is

also known as *Chag Ha'bikurim*, "the festival of the first fruits." The Torah verse shows us that the emphasis of Shavuot (when we eat the first fruits) is actually the very separation of milk and meat ("don't cook a kid in the milk of its mother"), rather than specifically on eating dairy.

What is so significant about separating meat and milk and why was this chosen as the only custom to be observed on Shavuot? I believe that the requirement to separate meat and milk is a primary example of a concept that is so central to Judaism that it became the defining custom of Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah. The essence of Torah is separateness; making distinctions. As Jews, we are called upon to make many distinctions: we must distinguish the seventh day of the week from the other weekdays, the land of Israel from all other lands, foods that are permissible from those that aren't, illicit relationships from those that are allowed. The rule of separating meat from milk is a perfect example of this concept. Each substance is kosher on its own, but to be fit for consumption, each must remain separate and distinct from one another.

Seen in this light, it emerges that there is really no ritual more fitting for the festival of Shavuot than the tradition of eating a dairy meal followed by a meat meal. If we focus on the fundamental concept of separateness and distinction, we will have laid the groundwork for all ritual observance found in the Torah. Keeping this in mind when having cheesecake will prepare us for the proper receiving of the Torah, as well as raise our level of spirituality...along with our cholesterol.

Rabbi Yaakov Bienenfeld is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Harrison, which offers numerous Beginner Programs.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org.

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DATED MATTER