

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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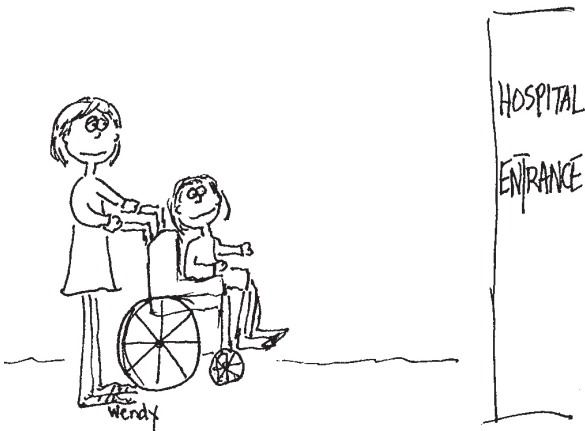


# בראשית

## UNIQUELY UNITED

Lori Issenberg

"SHAVUOT MAKES US FEEL UNIQUELY UNITED"



Five years ago, on the first night of Passover, I was in pain. It was not the spiritual type of pain one might think is caused when recalling how we, the Jews, barely escaped complete assimilation into Egyptian society had G-d not saved us. It was physical pain! And it wasn't the normal discomfort from eating matzah and drinking the four cups of wine/grape juice. Long story short, it turns out that I had appendicitis and required emergency surgery.

It quickly became apparent to me that I had zero control over any of this. However, had I not personally experienced the pain, which at times caused me to double over, my appendix could have burst, a potentially life-threatening event. There was absolutely nothing I could do. It was clear that G-d was running the show with this one. Really, it is nothing short of mind-blowing to realize that by removing an organ from your body, your body can soon heal.

In fact, it was nothing short of miraculous that any of the Jews left Egypt after hundreds of years of enslavement. With the slave (cont. on p. 2)

## TORAH AND THE WILDERNESS

Chaim Peck

This year, the holiday of Shavuot is preceded by the Shabbat of *Parashat Bamidbar* (Numbers). In fact, Shavuot is almost always preceded by *Parashat Bamidbar*, which tells us that there must be a close relationship between *Parashat Bamidbar* and the holiday of Shavuot.

In the opening verse of *Parashat Bamidbar* (Numbers 1:1) we are told that, "G-d spoke to Moses in the *midbar* (wilderness) of Sinai..." and in the final verse of the preceding week's *parasha*, *Bechukotai* (Leviticus 27:34) the Torah states, "These are the mitzvot..." The Ba'al HaTurim (Jacob ben Asher, c.1269 - c.1343) notes that this juxtaposition comes to teach that "if a person does not make himself like a *midbar* (wilderness), he will not be able to know Torah and mitzvot."

Since the major theme of the holiday of Shavuot is accepting the Torah, there is a strong connection between this comment by the Ba'al HaTurim and the holiday of Shavuot. What does it mean to be "like a *midbar*" as described by the Ba'al HaTurim?

First of all, the Ba'al HaTurim's statement appears to be based on the *Midrash Bamidbar Rabba* 1:7 where it is written: "One who does not make himself ownerless like the *midbar* is unable to acquire wisdom and Torah." (cont. on p. 3)

## ENDURING HEIGHTS

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan

We have been anticipating the upcoming holiday of Shavuot for weeks. With each passing day of the Omer, the excitement mounts and the energy builds. We are preparing ourselves for the culmination to the Passover Exodus. Yet, despite the eager anticipation and the extraordinary significance of Shavuot, the flurry of pre-holiday activities is noticeably absent. There is no Sukkah to build, no Mishloach Manot to prepare or Passover cleaning to be done. In fact, there are virtually *no* Shavuot-specific pre-holiday preparations! Even once the holiday begins, there are no specifically prescribed Shavuot rituals to fill the holiday. Truthfully, outside the altered service in the times of the Temple, there is not even one special biblical commandment to be done on Shavuot. One is forced to ask: Why the glaring absence of specific ritual and what can this reveal about the message of Shavuot?

Insight can be gleaned from appreciating a nuance of the Torah reading experience that occurs on the holiday. On Shavuot, appropriately, we read a portion from *Parashat Yitro* that recounts the story of what transpired at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given to the Jewish people. Some congregations have a custom to rise, and remain standing throughout the reading of this climactic portion--as a (cont. on p. 4)

**UNIQUELY UNITED (cont. from p. 1)**...mentality fully entrenched in the Israelites' lives, they had lost their ability to choose another way of life, and yet there was no way out...until G-d provided them with a gift beyond their control - the gift of freedom.

After my appendicitis, the days between Passover and Shavuot were a time of healing for me. Initially, I walked very slowly, having difficulty believing that my body would or could be the same as it was before. Each day, however, I experienced my body taking baby steps toward recuperating.

Post-surgery, the blessing of *Asher Yatzar*, which is recited after using the bathroom, became incredibly meaningful to me. I originally learned (from Rabbi David Aaron of Isralight in Israel) that when a Hebrew word is repeated twice it means "a lot." Rabbi Aaron described the blessing as "we have many, many holes [holes in English] and many, many tubies [tubes in English]" and how if one of them were blocked, even for a moment, it would be impossible to stand before G-d. The blessing ends with "Blessed are you G-d who heals flesh and acts wondrously." This is the same G-d who took the ancient Israelites out of Egypt after years of back-breaking slavery, split the Red Sea and allowed them to cross safely, drowning their oppressors who were in pursuit.

My body was healing. The Jews were taken out of a situation that was otherwise doomed.

One might encounter an unanticipated detail, like I did when a blood clot in my arm landed me back in the hospital again. Yet with prayer and the support of family, good friends, and community members, I learned to navigate around the bumps. I was astounded to observe how each person contributed their own unique strengths while aiding in my recovery. The community rallied to my side, making certain that I had food and didn't over-exert myself. Another friend was a strong medical advocate and stayed overnight with me in the hospital. Another friend brought delicious baked goods, which I then shared with friends who visited and kept me company once I made it back home. There wasn't a moment that I felt alone...except for when I anticipated whether my body would fully recover. And that, I knew, was completely up to G-d. After

observing the miracles of the healing process and each of the actors playing their parts, I knew that G-d was running the show.

This is one of the important messages of Shavuot. It is the time when we realize that we are not alone on our journey. Each of us has been granted our own unique G-d-given talents. Yet, at the same time, it is undeniable that we are part of a much larger picture. Each day, we can choose to take steps toward improving ourselves, knowing that we are part of a greater community, the Jewish people. G-d brought us out of Egypt, healing our bodies and spirits, and then gave us the Torah, the "ultimate instruction book for life" at Mount Sinai. This event is unique to the Jewish people. No other religion claims that a "national revelation" took place during their history, only Judaism. Our ancestors were privileged to witness G-d speaking to a large group of people at the same time. It was us to whom G-d spoke. The same G-d who spoke directly to us, charged us with the mission of leading the world with the Torah values of justice and morality. Yes, we are human and stumble, yet G-d has faith in us that we will rise to the top and be a "light unto the nations." Have you seen the disproportionate number of Nobel Prize winners who are Jewish, considering we are such a small people?

Thank G-d, just as my body healed from the surgery, leaving only a few small scars, the Jewish people continue to make significant contributions to the world, even though we share our collective scars. Ultimately, this is what makes life worthwhile. Having faith that healing occurs at just the right time and that G-d comes through for us, even though things may not go as we planned.

In the end, through the ups and downs of life, the Jewish people are uniquely united. G-d and the Torah are the glue. May this Shavuot signal the renewal of a beautiful relationship full of connection to G-d and the Jewish people and filled with the clarity and ability to contribute our individual gifts to the world.

*Lori Issenberg lives in Passaic, NJ and enjoys working with older adults as a Program Coordinator. She posts inspiring messages on Facebook and can be reached at [beyourwonderfulself@gmail.com](mailto:beyourwonderfulself@gmail.com).*



Have you ever heard of Two-Gun Cohen? Did you know that the artist Man Ray was Jewish? And what happened to Elisha ben Abuya that the other Talmudic sages began to refer to him as "Acher," which means "Other"? *Jewish Treats: 99 Fascinating Jewish Personalities* is an enlightening and enjoyable anthology of mini-essays about Jews from all walks of life. From the familiar figures of the Bible to little-known war heroes and even modern day novelists, these biographies have been culled from the popular Jewish Treats blog that presents "Juicy bits of Judaism, daily."

*Jewish Treats: 99 Fascinating Jewish Personalities* can be purchased via Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes and Kobo.

## TORAH AND THE WILDERNESS (cont. from p. 1)...

While the wording of the Ba'al HaTurim is only slightly different from that of the *midrash*, we know that there are no accidents. So, let's enumerate the differences:

- 1) The Ba'al HaTurim leaves out the word "ownerless."
- 2) The Ba'al HaTurim changes the word "acquire" to "know."
- 3) The Ba'al HaTurim changes the phrase "wisdom and Torah" to "Torah and mitzvot."

Let's consider what a "*midbar*" is. It is often translated as either "wilderness" or "desert" and refers to uninhabited, inhospitable regions. As the sages said, one quality of the wilderness is that it is ownerless. The wilderness is often considered a harsh place, generally too barren or dangerous to sustain human life.

Essentially, the wilderness represents the complete opposite of a nice, inviting home with fluffy pillows and warm food. For this reason, we can understand why the *midrash* said that a Jew must make himself specifically "ownerless" like the wilderness. It seems that the sages were relaying the message that emulating this one particular trait of the *midbar* - that of being ownerless - is a key to gaining wisdom and Torah.

Being "ownerless" can be understood to mean that a person has a modest willingness to learn from anybody and to teach anybody. Essentially, it is to free oneself of any constraints and/or ego that would keep one from the wisdom of Torah, whether in learning or teaching Torah.

Why did the Ba'al HaTurim leave out the word "ownerless" in his version of the quote? The Ba'al HaTurim notes that one is to make oneself "like a desert"--inhospitable, uninviting, harsh, and dangerous--yet we know that hospitality is a very important mitzvah. In fact, the sages tell us, in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 127a), that welcoming guests is greater than receiving the Divine Presence! It therefore cannot be that the Ba'al HaTurim is suggesting that one must have a harsh, unapproachable personality in order to acquire Torah.

Furthermore, the Ba'al HaTurim uses the word "know" in place of the Midrashic term "acquire." "Knowing" is a more powerful expression than "acquiring." You can acquire a book, but to really know the contents of the book you need to delve into it. Knowing implies a real connection. The Ba'al HaTurim is suggesting that those who make themselves like a *midbar* will have a deep connection with Torah, going beyond its acquisition.

Finally, the Ba'al HaTurim notes that one who makes oneself like a *midbar* will not only come to know Torah, but also mitzvot, meaning that one's Torah learning will lead to action and the performance of mitzvot. It says in the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 40b) that "study is greater than action because it leads to action," which implies that the ultimate goal of Torah study is action (i.e. the mitzvot).

While the sages were clear that the trait of being "ownerless" (like a *midbar*) is a prerequisite to acquiring wisdom and Torah, how do we understand the Ba'al HaTurim's commentary that one should just be like a *midbar* in general?

The word "*midbar*" is spelled with the same letters as the Hebrew word "*medaber*" which literally means "speaking" and refers to humans who have the incredible power of speech. While it is true that animals communicate with one-another, humans have the unique ability to actually be constructive or destructive with the way we use speech. Speech is the defining quality that makes us human.

Rabbi Simlai, a Talmudic sage, notes the reason why all the animals were created before the human being was created was "So that if man behaves improperly, he is told: 'Even a gnat, even a worm, preceded you.'" To be a *medaber* (speaker) is something that every human has to live up to. And through using our speech constructively and avoiding *lashon harah* (evil gossip) and speaking nicely, a person can potentially attain the title of "*medaber*."

The *midrash* states that making oneself "ownerless like the wilderness" is a prerequisite to acquiring wisdom and Torah, and this means that people must humble themselves and free themselves of constraints in order to acquire the Torah. But by reading *medaber* in place of *midbar*, one can understand that perhaps the Ba'al HaTurim was hinting to us that if one wants to do more than simply acquire Torah, if one really wants to know Torah and really connect with Torah and the mitzvot, one must be a "*medaber*"! The incredible power of speech must be used properly. One cannot speak *lashon harah* and expect to know Torah and mitzvot.

So, may we all be blessed to go on a path of acquiring Torah by making ourselves free of any constraints (physical or egotistic) to learn Torah and to teach others. And may we further live up to the title of "*medabar*" where we use our words constructively to perform many good deeds in the world, and ultimately come to know Torah and mitzvot.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Samaech!

*Chaim Peck is a software engineer. He lives with his wife and three children in Connecticut.*

"THERE MUST BE A REASON WHY THE TORAH WAS GIVEN IN THE WILDERNESS!"



## ENDURING HEIGHTS (cont. from p. 1)...

re-enactment of the Sinai experience and as a tribute to the important story that is being relayed. Other communities reject this custom and treat this Torah reading no differently than the Torah reading of any other Shabbat or holiday. These communities maintain that every letter and word of Torah is endowed with intrinsic value and holiness and, although the Jews did stand while receiving the Torah, it is critical to avoid the mistaken impression that some sections of the Torah are more important or holy than the rest. Treating the reading of this esteemed section no differently than any other Torah reading reaffirms the valuable nature of *every other* section of the Torah, thereby teaching an important lesson.

This difference of opinion sheds light on the original question regarding the lack of Shavuot ritual. True, there is a special energy and excitement that permeates this important day but, perhaps, the lack of *Shavuot-specific* ritual intimates that the energy and excitement of the day should also not be Shavuot specific. The momentum that has been building for weeks and the focused efforts of preparation and self-perfection should not

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE SHAVUOT?



"NO SUKKAH TO BUILD! NO MISHLOACH MANDOT TO PREPARE!  
NO CHAMETZ TO CLEAN! BECAUSE EVERY DAY IS SHAVUOT!"

be contained to the holiday, and released upon its conclusion, but rather they should set the new standard in defining the status of the remaining days of the year. As Rashi (Biblical commentator Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) clarifies in his commentary on the words from Deuteronomy 6:6, which are recited daily as part of the Shema, "And these matters that I commanded to you *today*..." - The words of the Torah should always be experienced as new, fresh and exciting, as if the Torah was given *today*."

Perhaps a flurry of Shavuot related activity would lead to the mistaken impression that the concentration of energy surrounding the receiving of the Torah is unique to these special days. In order to emphasize the intensity of emotion about Torah that needs to exist on a daily basis, there is an absence of special Shavuot ritual, imploring us all to heed the words of Rashi and live in the heights of the Shavuot experience throughout the entire year.

*Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan works at the OU's Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

### Rabbi Buchwald's

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JUICY BITS OF JUDAISM, DAILY

### בראשית

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