

בראשית

WHY TORAH?

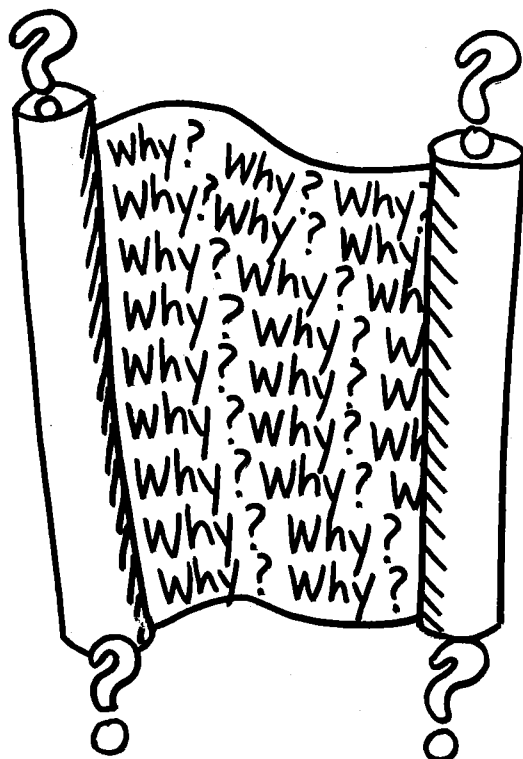
Harry Ballan

Shavuot is an appropriate time to ask — why Torah? One way of approaching this question is to look at the biblical and talmudic accounts of Jethro's conversion to Judaism. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was, prior to his conversion, the high priest of an idolatrous cult. Why did he choose Judaism — which is another way of asking, why should we?

The Talmud relates that three Sages gave three different answers to this question. One said that it was the miraculous victory of the Israelites over Amalek, another said it was the giving of the Torah, and a third said it was the parting of the Red Sea. What do these three explanations reveal?

Amalek represents evil in its purest form. When the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites, they, at least, had "reasons," although venal ones. Their motives were, at least in part, economic. Not so the Amalekites. Their attack on the Israelites, which targeted the weak and defenseless, was motivated by blind hatred, inexplicable and mysterious. Perhaps Jethro was overwhelmed by the spectacle of pure evil defeated.

(cont. p.2)



TORAH-PHOBIA

Arnold Mann

I have always suffered from Torah-phobia.

Every time I am called upon -- not to read, or to remove the Torah from the Ark, but just to touch it as it passes, to kiss it, like everyone else -- I freeze. It's absolutely pathological. Two years ago, when I first attended the Beginners Service at Beth Jacob Congregation, I nearly passed out when Rabbi Brian Thau brought the Torah around.

I have often wondered what it would be like to be trapped in an elevator with a Torah for days.

I have also often wondered where my Torah-phobia comes from. No doubt it's from some deep feeling of inadequacy, having never been Bar Mitzvah. Not being able to read -- or even lipsynch -- like most.

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IT'S WITHIN YOUR REACH!

Rabbi Shalom Baum

The day is coming! Every year the Jewish nation counts with excitement towards the great day. This mitzvah of Counting the Omer (Leviticus 23:16) begins on the second night of Passover and culminates with the holiday of Shavuot.

The Sefer Hachinuch teaches us that the purpose of counting these 49 days is to publicly display our deep, inner yearning for the great day of Shavuot, the day the Torah is given. Not given just to our ancestors, but to each of us, every year. And, just as one counts with anticipation towards a vacation, birthday, graduation, etc, we also count, yearning for the day of Shavuot.

Rabbenu Nissim (1290-1375), based on a midrash,

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WHY TORAH? (cont. from p. 1)

There stood Moses with his hands aloft, leading the troops and directing their attention heavenward to the source of inspiration and victory. This miraculous triumph may have taught Jethro the great truth that only with the help of the Israelite G-d is victory over evil possible.

But surely there is more to Judaism than the triumph over evil. As the Psalmist says, "avoid evil and do good." Unlike the Noahide laws, which are mostly negative, the Torah is much more than a set of prohibitions. Shabbat is more than the prohibition of *melachab*; it is also the sanctification of the day. Kashrut is more than the prohibition of certain foods and combinations; it is also the hallowing of the food we eat and the occasion of eating. Perhaps, then, it was Torah and the vision of a divine Lawgiver who stands above nature promulgating rules of conduct, the prescribed as well as the prohibited, that inspired Jethro to convert.

But this isn't a satisfactory answer either. Surely Jethro knew that the Israelite G-d is more than our ally against evil and more than the giver of Torah. He is also a G-d who intervenes in the natural order. He is thus both above and within nature. Hence the Talmud's third answer: Jethro converted because G-d parted the Red Sea.

This leaves us where we began. Which of the three explanations of why Jethro converted is the correct one? The answer is -- all three. Rashi reads the commandment, "I am the Lord thy G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt" as a statement of experience, in which G-d says: "I am the Lord thy G-d: in all my manifestations to you, I am the same G-d." Whether it be the ally against evil, the teacher of Torah, or the warrior-G-d at the Red Sea, it is one and the same G-d.

Shavuot is a good time to remind ourselves that, like Jethro, we are all beginners. And, like Jethro, whatever our initial motivation and however deep and longstanding our commitment becomes, we must resolve anew, every year, to experience for ourselves those events that initially inspired us. Every year at Shabbat Zachor we remember our miraculous triumph over Amalek. Every year at Passover we remember G-d's parting of the Red Sea. Every year at Shavuot we remember G-d's giving of the Torah. And every year we are beginners.

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IT'S WITHIN YOUR REACH (cont. from p.1)

teaches us that soon after the Jews were freed from Egypt, G-d told them that they would be given the Torah in seven weeks time. One might have expected a cynical, negative response from the nation. After 210 years of having laws imposed on them, they probably would have appreciated time-off from any legal system. But not this nation. They responded heroically, knowing that physical liberation alone was not enough to free man from the forces which seek to control him. They eagerly anticipated the Torah which would give them the means to control their own lives. Not only did the nation not protest the impending legal system, but they began to count down with excitement towards the awesome day.

Every Passover, we attempt to relive the experience of attaining physical freedom. In reality, this is difficult because many of us (thank G-d) have never seen the evil stare of a human oppressor. But spiritual freedom can readily be experienced. Every Shavuot we endeavor to emancipate ourselves spiritually in more than an abstract manner, and every Shavuot we receive the Torah, not as a rigid book of law, but rather as a book that challenges our intellect and stimulates our soul. True, the Torah is complex, sophisticated and non-approachable on a superficial level, but it is accessible.

The Torah (Deuteronomy 30:11-14), proclaims "For this mitzvah, which I give you this day, is not too difficult for you. It is not too far from you. It is not in heaven . . . Rather, it is close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart that you may do it." Rashi (1040-1105) interprets this as the mitzvah of studying Torah. The study of Torah, both written and oral, is not restricted to scholars and rabbis. It is a book for the masses. The Talmud, in Eruvin, based on the above verses, asks "When is it close to you? When you have the desire". It is within our grasp as long as the desire is there.

This year we once again count with excitement towards the great day, when we commit ourselves to the study of the Torah's contents. The Torah is accessible, and there are so many wonderful teachers to guide you and books to stimulate you!

Torah study will not only be a challenge to the mind, but will stir emotions never previously expressed.

KEEP COUNTING!!!



Rabbi Shalom Baum is Assistant Rabbi at The Hebrew Institute of White Plains, and leads its Beginners Service.

TORAH PHOBIA (cont. from p. 1)

And memories of being bullied out of Sunday school because I was the new kid in class. And then there's the feeling of extreme hypocrisy when I even think of kissing the Torah as it passes, an extreme sensitivity to a lack of something inside myself--the feeling that is just not there. The kiss becomes an empty gesture, and I have never been good at empty gestures.

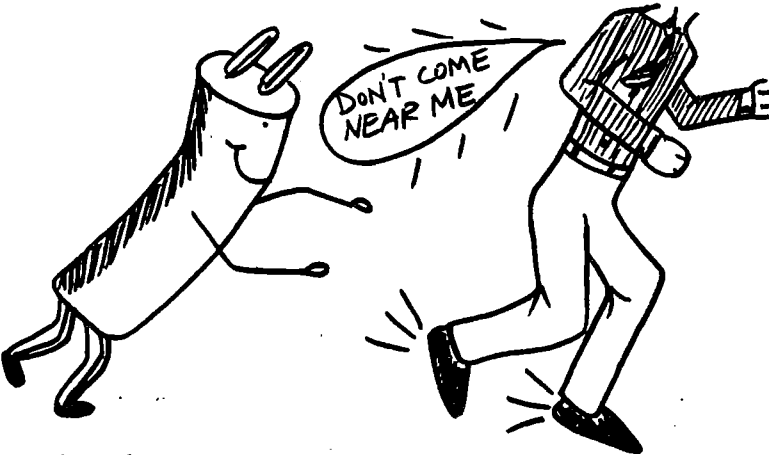
I used to think I was alone, until Rabbi Brian asked me to write something for the Beth Jacob newsletter and I replied, "How about something on Torah-phobia?" and he said, "Great." I had struck a chord. I know now that there are others.

Franz Kafka, the German writer, had a terrible case of Torah-phobia. He wrote about it in his Letter to His Father: ". . . when the Ark of the covenant was opened. . . it was also very frightening for me . . . because you once mentioned in passing that I too might be called to the Torah. That was something I dreaded for years."

His Bar Mitzvah was no relief -- "just a ritual that demanded no more than some ridiculous memorizing, in other words, it led to nothing more but some ridiculous passing of an examination."

Kafka later went on to write The Trial, in which the guilt-ridden Joseph K spends the last days of his surrealistic life trying to gain access to "The Law," to clear himself from the unknown crime he stands mysteriously accused of by the unknown forces, only to be told in the end that the gates to the Law will never be opened to him. Talk about Torah-phobia!

Meanwhile, there I was two years ago, the newcomer at Beth Jacob's Yom Kippur Beginners Service, with Rabbi Brian approaching with the Torah. The closer he got, the more I wanted to run.



People were stretching to touch, to kiss the Torah -- women with their prayer books, men with their tallitot -- and I stood back, my hands pressed behind me. My mouth went dry and my hands grew clammy. I started sweating bullets.

It got closer and closer, drawing everyone to it as it came. But I wasn't going to touch the thing. I wasn't going to kiss it. I hated it. I hated the Torah, like I've never hated anything. #%@\$!!#&# #!\$%&#!\$#! Torah! Leave me alone!

Then Rabbi Brian did something I didn't expect. Instead of pushing the Torah on me, he reached out his hand and said, "Welcome." And I reached out and took his hand.

I've been to the Ark a half-dozen times since then, and I'm getting used to it.

Arnold Mann is a member of the Beth Jacob Beginners Service in Beverly Hills, California, and is a Los Angeles based columnist for the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Emmy magazine.



ANSWERS TO SHAVUOT PUZZLE

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ACROSS

- 5 The Festival of Shavuot is the Festival of the _____
(2 words)
- 7 On Shavuot it is a custom to stay up all night and _____
- 10 The word Torah comes from horo'ah which means _____
- 12 Moses was given two _____
- 13 Shavuot commemorates the _____ time we received the Torah
- 16 The Talmud is made up of the _____
(3 words)
- 18 The Torah is of _____ origin

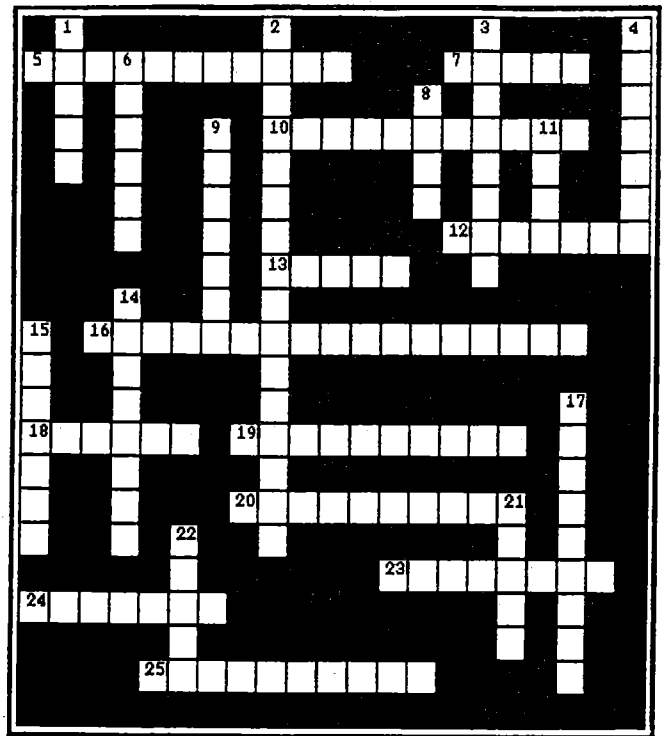
- 19 The Torah was given at _____
(2 words)
- 20 It is a mitzvah to eat _____ on Shavuot
(2 words)
- 23 Charity
- 24 Ruth was a _____
- 25 A perfect dessert

DOWN

- 1 The month in which Shavuot takes place
- 2 Shavuot celebrates the _____
(4 words)
- 3 Shavuot is considered a _____
- 4 It is a custom to fill your house with _____ on this holiday
- 6 A festival meal is called a _____

- 8 King David was a descendent of _____
- 9 Shabbos and first night candles are lit at _____
- 11 Hashem gave Moshe the _____ and written law
- 14 Shavuot begins on the _____ of the Omer
- 15 We recite _____ on both days
- 17 Shavuot is the anniversary of the passing of _____
(2 words)
- 21 All Jewish _____ were present at the giving of the Torah
- 22 The first Matriarch

SHAVUOT PUZZLE by Ellin Ronee Pollachek



*Illustrations by Lynne Doynow
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בראשית Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of 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 programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 212, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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