

SHAVUOT : TORAH IS LIFE
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Eliezar Sukenik, until his death in 1953, was a professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His son, the late Yigael Yadin, the second Chief of Staff of the Israel Armed Forces, was Israel's most famous archaeologist, whose landmark excavations included Masada and Megido.

It was Eliezar Sukenik who brought to our attention perhaps the most significant textual archaeological find of all times, the Dead Sea Scrolls. The year was 1947. The Arab states were poised to attack the soon-to-be proclaimed Jewish state. In the midst of all the tension, Sukenik was contacted by an Armenian friend, an antiques dealer, who wanted him to examine a leather parchment. Sukenik studied the parchment and realized immediately the enormity of its value and importance, and that it was some two thousand years old. He asked the antiques dealer if other similar parchments existed. Sukenik was referred to an Arab merchant in Bethlehem.

On November 29, 1947, a doubly significant day in Jewish history, Eliezar Sukenik boarded a bus and travelled to Bethlehem, an enormously dangerous journey. He reached the merchant's home and was shown three scrolls. The merchant explained that they were found in a cave at Qumran near the Dead Sea by a Bedouin shepherd boy. Sukenik asked for, and was granted the privilege of taking the scrolls with him to study them in detail.

That evening, back in Jerusalem, Sukenik sat down with the scrolls. His son Mati was in the next room listening to the radio. For on that night, November 29, 1947, the United Nations was voting on the plan to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. Mati Sukenik was following the vote to create a Jewish homeland, and his father Eliezar was deciphering the Dead Sea Scrolls. The very moment that Mati entered his father's study, to tell him that a two-thirds majority had been reached, that there would be an internationally recognized Jewish state, the elder Sukenik was uncovering, two thousand years after it was written, a verse which read: "I was driven from my home like a bird from its nest... I was cast down, but raised up again... I give thanks to You, O Lord." Sukenik would later name that scroll מגילת ההודיה, the Scroll of Thanksgiving, reflective of both its content and the historical context of its rediscovery.¹

What an amazing moment! Text and land are simultaneously redeemed. Without the text, without the attachment to the richness of our spiritual tradition, the land could have been anywhere. Because of the text, from Patriarchs to Prophets, from commandments to Psalms, from Proverbs to Lamentations, because of the text, that land had to be Israel, the capital, Jerusalem. The text determined the land, the land revitalized the text.

¹ Lawrence Epstein, *A Treasury of Jewish Anecdotes*, p. 221

In the first-day Torah reading of Shavuot, the Ten Commandments (this year sadly inaccessible to most due to circumstance), God instructs Moses, in anticipation of the revelation of His Torah: “Let the people be prepared for the third day.” Moses follows God’s directive. The people are prepared. But a few verses later we read: “The third day arrived. There was thunder, lightning, dense fog, a very loud blast of the Shofar. **ויחרד כל העם אשר במחנה** – All the Israelites in the camp trembled.”

Why do they tremble? What do they fear? Didn’t Moses – didn’t God prepare them for all the excitement that they were facing? Weren’t they ready for what would happen?

The Midrash (Ex. R. 29) conveys the extent of the trauma experienced by Israel at this pivotal point in her history: “The moment that the people Israel, at Sinai, heard the word **אנכי**, ‘I’, directly from God, their souls flew away.” In other words, according to the Midrash, so terrified were they at hearing God speaking the word “I” – that they died on the spot, each and every one of them. Thank God, the story has a happy ending. “The Torah that God gave to Israel restored their souls to them.” The terror of the Sinai experience, the event that gave us the Torah, killed them. But the Torah itself brought them back to life.

It’s a profound, dramatic and accurate illustration of the Jewish experience. The focal point of our fear becomes the foundation of our survival. The Torah, the tradition bequeathed to every Jewish generation at Sinai, the Torah, which would separate us from the world’s other nations, and expose us to their enmity, their hostility – the Torah, which historically, would subject us to risk, and worse, in the end, would ensure us survival and eternity. For just as the Torah, the text of tradition, is the link to our land of Israel, it, simultaneously, is our link to life.

Surveys of Jewish religious practice consistently suggest Shavuot to be one of the least observed of Jewish holidays. A minority of Jews pay this *Yom Tov* any heed. Many are blissfully unaware of its existence. Pesah, the Festival of Freedom, and even Hanukkah, the minor Holiday of lights, far outrank Shavuot in popular acceptance.

But Shavuot may be our most important holiday. For it is our relationship to traditional text, to Torah, to Mishnah, to Midrash, to Talmud, to the codes of Jewish law, it is our relationship to traditional text that defines us, that protects us, that preserves us. When that text ceases to be part of our consciousness, when its words no longer form part of our vocabulary, when its concepts have nothing to do with our lives, our very identity stands on the verge of oblivion.

One of the leading rabbinic scholars in North America, was Toronto’s own Rabbi Gunther Plaut, of blessed memory, the editor of the Reform movement’s *Humash*. He was a man of tremendous intellectual and spiritual depth. In my early years in this community, I was part of a panel discussion with him and an Orthodox rabbi. Each of us was supposed to represent our respective movement within Judaism on the topic of “why be Jewish.” Not surprisingly, each of us focused on Jewish learning as the key to remaining Jewish. Rabbi Plaut surprised

all of us with his defense of Israeli Yeshivah students receiving deferment from military service, not an expected argument from a Reform rabbi.

I'm not sure that I agree with military deferments for Yeshivah students. Nor, I imagine, in truth, did Rabbi Plaut. We would prefer those Yeshivah students in a *Hesder* context, who combine learning with army service. But what was Rabbi Plaut's point? Learning, too, study of traditional text, is as central to Jewish survival as is military service. More than any other force in the Jewish arsenal throughout history, more than armaments, more than wealth, more than political astuteness, more than scientific and intellectual strength, it has been learning, knowledge and study of traditional text that has kept us on the pages of history.

As many if not most of our people wander further and further away from Jewish learning, we have to be very fearful of our future. Wealth, academic degrees, political status, Nobel prizes, are nice, to be sure. Parents pride themselves in the academic achievements of their children who have received degrees in fields they, the parents, can barely pronounce. But even ten Ph.D.'s in the most esoteric of arts and sciences can do little to mask a junior-kindergarten level of Jewish knowledge when it comes to meaningful, substantive Jewish spiritual continuity.

The Midrash (Eichah Rabbah 3.7) describes how the nations of the world would taunt Israel and say: "Your God has no need of you, He has deserted you.... In the future, when redemption comes, God will say to Israel: 'I am astonished that you waited for me all these years.' And they will say: 'Had it not been for the Torah which You gave us, the nations of the world would have won, and our unique national existence would have come to an end!'"

On November 29, 1947, there was the juxtaposition of a Dead Sea Scroll, The Scroll of Thanksgiving, and the United Nations vote to create a Jewish homeland. With text there is life. As long as the traditional word, lovingly handed from one generation to the next, remains within our reach, our understanding, our appreciation, little if anything need frighten us. As Jews, we are constantly strengthened, through traditional text, by the values and insights of a deeply rich past. And the enthusiastic response to online learning throughout these deeply challenging coronavirus days suggests how, even now, especially now, study of Torah energizes us, revives our spirits, and reinforces our determination to translate the tradition we have inherited into our roadmap to better days to come.

Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol once began to study a Tractate of the Talmud. A day later, his disciples noticed that he was still dwelling on the first page. They assumed that he must have encountered a difficult passage and was trying to solve it. But when a number of days passed and he was still on the first folio...one of them gathered up the courage to ask why. Rabbi Zusya replied: "I feel so good here, why should I go elsewhere?"²

² A. J. Heschel, *The Earth is the Lord's*, p. 50

When we can say about the world of traditional Jewish text that we feel so good here, that here, we find the maximum of comfort, of strength, of purpose, that we have no desire or need to go elsewhere, then we will know that we have preserved our link to those who preceded us, and in so doing, bequeathed something of real worth to those who come after us.