



**BAIS ABRAHAM COMMUNITY  
SHAVUOT READER  
2020 / 5780**

Dear Bais Abe Family,

I cannot think of a more appropriate way to celebrate Shavuot in the spirit of Bais Abe during this time of social isolation than by producing this volume to share the Torah, the poetry, the personal insights and even recipes of some of the many members and friends of Bais Abe.

The fourth chapter of Pirkei Avot, the collection of ethical, philosophical and theological teachings of the Rabbis of the second century, opens with the statement of Ben Zoma:

אִיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם

Who is wise? One who learns from every person.

Is this really true or is it just rhetoric? After all, there are plenty of ignorant people in the world, who are unlearned, who know nothing of Torah and have not learned much of anything else. However, I don't think Ben Zoma is just indulging in a beautiful rhetorical gesture. I think he really means exactly what he says: the wisest among us do not set ourselves up as teachers, sages and gurus, but seek to learn at the feet of our fellow human beings. A wise person understands first of all, that they themselves do not know everything, and moreover, that every person, every human being has something to teach.

This is first of all because each person has a unique experience of the world. No one else knows what I have lived through, and I do not know what anyone else has lived through. It doesn't matter how many more years of schooling I have than they, it doesn't matter how little knowledge of Torah they have, they have an experience of the world that is absolutely unique, and therefore have something to teach me that I can't learn from anyone else.

Moreover, in the realm of Torah, we have a tradition that the Torah contains 600,000 letters, corresponding to the 600,000 Jews who stood at the foot of mount Sinai. This is not merely to tell us that the Torah belongs to the entire Jewish people. Indeed, the soul of every Jew who would ever live was present at Sinai). It's to tell us that each and every individual is in and of themselves a letter of Torah. We each have something unique to share and teach.

However, just as letters of the Torah only reveal their real meaning when they are combined into words and verses and books, we human beings do not reveal our inner Torah light on our own, we need to be combined into families, communities, a nation, does our true meaning and purpose reveal itself. Just as a Sefer Torah is invalid if it is missing a single letter, our nation in turn is incomplete without the contributions of each member.

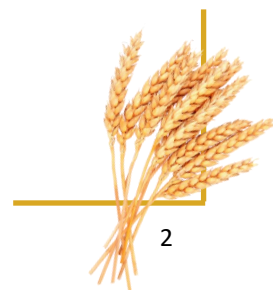
The Torah depends on the presence and participation of every Jew to reveal its fullest light. That's why we all had to be there at Sinai in some form—in order for the revelation to take place. The more we can all show up with the light of our own individual unique Torah, the closer we can come to the experience of revelation at Sinai. This Shavuot, if we can't be physically united in a room together, then we can still learn from one another's Torah. When each of us learns our fellow Jew's Torah through our own unique way of learning and thinking, we help bind our community and the Jewish people more tightly together, and by unifying our individual letters into words, we bring the revelation of Hashem's will more clearly into focus.

This modest reader then is nothing less than a tool for helping us experience divine revelation, and thereby hastening the coming of redemption.

May we all merit the humility to learn from one another, and thereby let our own inner Torah light shine through.

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom!

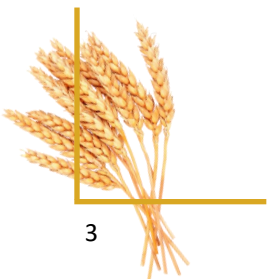
**Rabbi Garth Silberstein**







*Ruth and Boaz* by Janet Shafner, z"l









## **Evelyn Lemerman's Cheesecake**

**Submitted by Paula Lemerman**

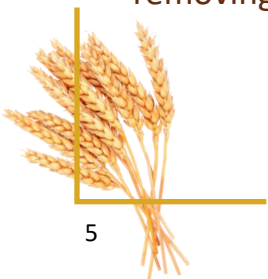
Let cream cheese come to room temp. or nuke gently. Preheat oven to 350 deg.

### **Crust:**

1. Mix 1 ¼ cups graham cracker crumbs, 2 Tbs. Sugar, 2 Tbs. melted butter.
2. Grease spring form pan (10") with butter. Roll 2 Tbs. of crumb mix around sides of pan. Press most of remaining crumbs on bottom of pan. (Reserve 2 Tbs. Crumbs to sprinkle on top of cake.)

### **Cake:**

1. Cream 1 lb. cream cheese (Philly Neufchatel will work), slowly adding 1 cup sugar, 3 eggs - one at a time, 1 tsp. vanilla, and grated rind of 1 lemon.
2. Fold in 1 pint sour cream.
3. Pour mix into prepared pan. Sprinkle remaining crumbs on top. Bake at 350 for 30 minutes. Turn off heat in oven. Do not open the oven door. Leave in oven for 1 hour.
4. Cool briefly on rack before removing rim. Run sharp knife around cake before removing rim. Put rim back on to refrigerate at least an hour before serving.



# Shavuot: Imagining Ourselves Connected to Am Yisrael Past, Present and Future

Rabbi Gabe Kretzmer- Seed  
Bais Abe Rabbinic Intern 2016-17



Among the Shalosh Regalim, the three pilgrimage festivals, Shavuot stands out in its lack of a distinct, tangible ritual. Pesach has the seder, abstaining from Hametz and eating Matzah (and maror and other foods), and Sukkot has the immersive Sukkah and the waving of the Arba Minim [four species]. Despite an inherent tangible ritual for Shavuot, a socially distanced Shavuot will be difficult for us when we are used to spending the holiday gathering for learning sessions, tefillah, friends and community. However, I believe that the lack of tangible symbols inherent to Shavuot lends itself particularly to using our imagination and place ourselves in three pivotal moments in Jewish history: the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the story of the book of Ruth and the ceremony of *Bikkurim*, *bringing of the first fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem*. *While Shavuot may be devoid of mandated immersive mitzvot, and this year we are unable to engage in the communal observances which have become central to the holiday like Tikkun Leil Shavuot and hearing the Aseret Hadibrot (Ten Commandments), we can still sit down over a special yom tov meal alone or with immediate family, close our eyes and bring ourselves back to pivotal moments of old in which our ancestors sanctified their relationship with God and the Jewish people.*

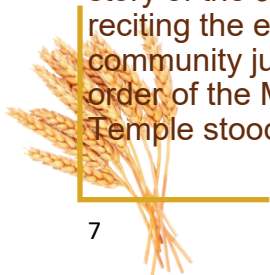
The Mishnah, the first written version of the Oral Torah, was redacted by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi c. 200 CE, 130 years after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Since Shavuot has no inherent rituals of its own, it does not get its own masekhet [tractate] in the mishnah; however, there is an entire short tractate about the laws Masekhet Bikkurim, which codifies the laws of and ceremony for bringing the first fruits to the Temple, is the final tractate in the first of the six orders of the Mishnah, Zeraim (seeds). It contains 3 chapters (an additional chapter 4 is likely a later addition imported from the Tosefta), and addresses the questions of who, what, and when the first fruits were brought to the Temple.

I would like to focus on Chapter 3 ([https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah\\_Bikkurim.3.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Bikkurim.3.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)), which details the actual process of bringing Bikkurim. It starts with the solitary but poignant moment when a farmer would tie a rope around the first fruits while they were still on the tree to mark their status, and continues until the basket of fruit is placed next to the *Mizbeah* (*altar*) for the *Kohanim* (*priests*). *The process of bringing Bikkurim begins in a very personal and private way in the farmer's field, and gradually growing in intensity until farmers from across the Land of Israel would reach Jerusalem. Out of both anticipation and a concern for contracting ritual impurity, the farmers would sleep in the town square of the city which was the "county*

*seat” of their Ma’amad [in the time of the Temple, Kohanim, Levi’im and Yisraelim were divided into 24 watches, each of which would perform duties in the Temple and/or offer special prayers for two weeks out of the year]. Each Ma’amad would then proceed towards Jerusalem in a joyous procession led by an ox whose horns were bedecked in gold and wearing a crown of reeds, accompanied by flute music. Each regional procession would be greeted by the nobles of Jerusalem and would then march towards the Temple with their baskets of fruits perched on their shoulders. Connecting themselves with the people of Israel throughout history and expressing gratitude to God, they would transfer the basket of fruit to one of the Kohanim while reciting the verses from Devarim 26 (<https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.26?lang=bi&aliyot=0>) which recall God’s delivering our ancestors from Egypt and bringing them to the Land of Israel. Through this procession and ritual, each Israelite farmer began the process as an individual farmer in their field to being part of a national event of gratitude in the Beit Hamikdash.*

The Mishnah, as the first code of the Oral Torah, is remarkable among other things for its organization and structure. It was formed in a manner which was intended for memorization. Even though the Mishnah does jump from topic to topic unlike later codes such as Rambam’s Mishneh Torah and R’ Yosef Karo’s Shulhan Arukh, it does so in a deliberate and thoughtful manner meant to group laws with similar or common principles. With that in mind, I think it is no accident that Seder Zeraim, begins with Masekhet Berakhot [Blessings] and specifically with the laws of reciting the Shema. As the Mishnah was written so soon after the destruction of the Second Temple, its absence and hope for rebuilding permeate the entire corpus. At the same time, our rabbis created a structure for Jewish life and observance which is vibrant and portable without the centrality and physicality of the Temple, especially through the scaffolding of Tefillah and Berakhot. The Shema is recited twice daily by Jews around the world, in private or in public worship. While the Torah instructs that it should be recited “when we lie down and when we wake up,” the rabbis teach the time of the evening Shema as “when the Kohanim go in to eat their Terumah [sacred food which must be eaten in purity]. And then Seder Zeraim ends with the vivid recollection described above of the bringing of Bikkurim by Jews across the Land of Israel to the Temple each year beginning on Shavuot. I believe that this trajectory of Seder Zeraim from the regular recitation of the Shema, even alone, in private and in the dark of night to a hopeful return to the public, communal bringing of first fruits in a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem encapsulates the entire project of rabbinic Judaism. In the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbis brilliantly created a structure for living a life imbued with meaning, mitzvot and connection with God and other Jews as much as possible in the present while always yearning for a better future, including restoration of the Temple, the ingathering exiles, and peace and safety in the world.

This Shavuot will look very different for all of us. Similar to the rabbis after the destruction of the Second Temple, it is healthy to mourn the loss of, and express our hope for a return to, our physical shul and communal celebrations, especially in such a special and sacred place like Bais Abe. But the fact that Shavuot has no required observances other than the joy and restrictions on work of Yom Tov gives us the opportunity to imagine how we want to spend our Yom Tov alone or with friends. What learning do we want to engage and immerse ourselves in, and which past events in the story of the Jewish people can we place ourselves in. Even if we feel like we are reciting the evening Shema in solitude, we can hope for restoration of physical community just as our ancient rabbis did when they concluded Seder Zeraim, the first order of the Mishnah, with a vivid account of how the Bikkurim were brought when the Temple stood, may it be rebuilt soon!



# Spiritual Check-in (Rabbi Scott Slarskey)

*Though this is a framework designed to foster deep engagement and connection between two people, it can also be an effective framework for personal contemplation and spiritual work.*

## **Ground Rules for the Spiritual Havruta:**

**Confidentiality.** Just as with a doctor, everything said between the two of you stays between the two of you.

**Total respect.** No judging or evaluating each other. No giving advice. We're not trying to fix anything. We're trying to create a "safe space" so that each of us can sincerely express our thoughts and feelings.

**Deep listening.** Focus on each other. When someone listens deeply to us, that helps us to listen to ourselves more deeply.

**Reflective Questions.** If you ask your partner a question, please make it is a reflective, open-ended question. Examples of reflective questions include: "How long have you felt like that?" "Can you tell me more about that?"

**Silence is okay.** We haven't seen this text or these questions in advance. Nobody has all the answers, some of us need more time to pull our thoughts together. Alternatively we may recognize that we do not have words that advance the conversation. There is no expectation to fill space with words.

## **Process**

1. **Begin** by singing a *niggun* or with a brief breath awareness exercise.
2. **Each reads** the provided text individually--then aloud to your study partner.
3. **Convene havrutot** (study pairs) within which we use the following text as a springboard for deeper, more personal reflections & conversations.





מה היה תחלתו של רבי עקיבא? אמרו בן ארבעים שנה היה ולא שנה כלום. פעם אחת היה עומד על פי הבאר. אמר, מי חקק אבן זו? אמרו לא המים שתדיר [נופלים] עליה בכל יום? אמרו [לו] עקיבא אי אתה קורא אבנים שחקו מים? מיד היה רבי עקיבא דן קל וחומר בעצמו מה רך פסל את הקשה דברי תורה שקשה כברזל על אחת כמה וכמה שיחקו את לבי שהוא בשר ודם. מיד חזר ללמוד תורה. הלך הוא ובנו וישבו אצל מלמדי תינוקות.

### **Avot D'Rabbi Natan 6:2**

What was the beginning of Rabbi Akiva? They said: He was forty years old and, had not yet studied a thing. One time, he stood at the mouth of a pit. He said, "Who hollowed out this stone?" They said to him, "Was it not the water that was regular [in falling] upon it every day? Akiva, don't you read, 'Water wears away stone' (Job 14:19)? - Immediately, Rabbi Akiva judged--so much the moreso for himself! As the soft carves out the hard, words of Torah--which are hard as iron--so much the moreso will they carve out my heart of flesh and blood. He immediately turned to study Torah. He went --he and his son--and sat with those who taught young children (babies).

### **Thought Questions:**

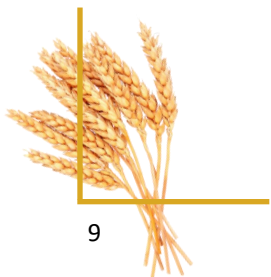
1) What / who is changed in this story and how does that change occur?

2) Do you see yourself more as water or as rock at this moment?

3) How does Rabbi Akiva's choice to learn either infantilize or empower / elevate him?

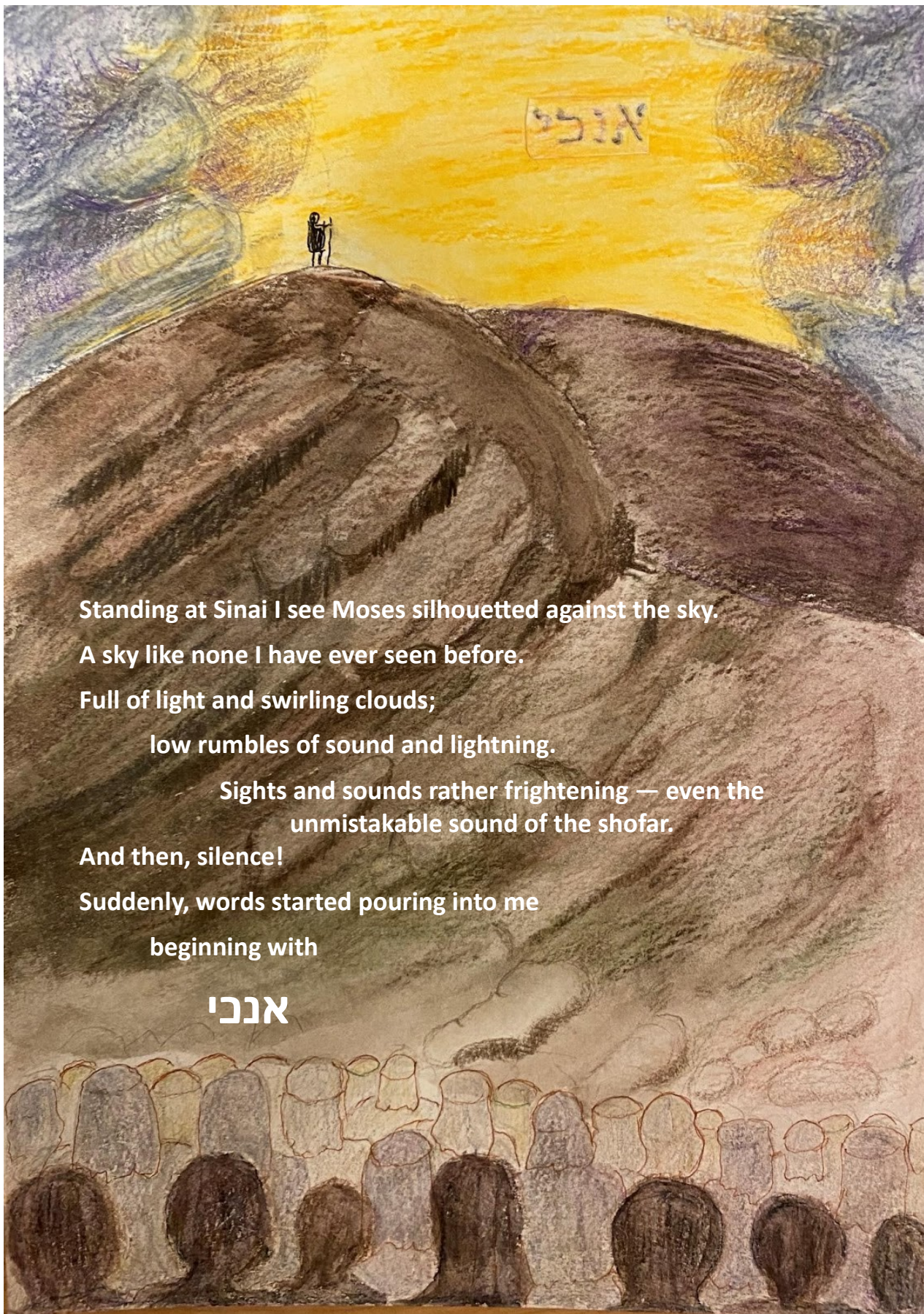
4) How do you understand Torah learning as similar to / different from other kinds of learning? What metaphors would you use for scientific / psychological / historical / artistic learning?

5) If you could study anything that you "know nothing about" what would it be?





*Standing at Sinai*  
By Bonnie Templeton



Standing at Sinai I see Moses silhouetted against the sky.

A sky like none I have ever seen before.

Full of light and swirling clouds;

low rumbles of sound and lightning.

Sights and sounds rather frightening — even the  
unmistakable sound of the shofar.

And then, silence!

Suddenly, words started pouring into me

beginning with

**אני**



## Explore Connections Between Ruth and Talmud on Sefaria

contributed by Russel Neiss

<https://www.sefaria.org/explore/Ruth>

### Serving God Rabbi Hyim Shafner

Shavuot, the day we received the Torah should prompt us to ask why we keep it. Some of us may keep it out of fear, fear of punishment or fear of losing our social standing. Some may keep the Torah because they believe God will reward them with a good life of health or prosperity. Others may keep the Torah because it is their tradition and they feel unmoored without it, as it brings meaning to an otherwise uncontrollable, sometimes absurd life.

In fact, all of these have legitimate sources in our tradition. Last week's Torah portion offered this worldly reward for keeping the Torah, our mystical books often promise reward in the next world, and the strong Jewish communities we have built through the ages often result in pressure to conform and keep the Torah. But is it good for us to feel compelled by these forces to keep the Torah?

In the Medrash there are two opposite traditions regarding the Jewish people's experience at Mount Sinai, -one, that God forced them to accept the Torah by "hanging the mountain over their head," and two, that God offered the Torah each nation and the first to accept it (or maybe the only one to accept it) was the Jewish people, of their free will and independent volition. So is it better to feel one is compelled, either by carrot or stick, to keep the Torah, or is it better to keep it entirely as a product of free will, with no threat of punishment and no promise of reward?

The Mishnah in Pirkey Avot (1:3) states: "Antigonus a man of Socho received [the oral tradition] from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you."

Rabbi Gedalia Silverstone, in his 1932 commentary on Pirkey Avot, "Lev Avot," asks why one should not serve God for reward, does the Torah itself not say that if we keep it we will receive reward? He explains this with a wonderful parable: There was a yeshiva in Europe and the very wealthy Jew, Baron Rothchild, came to visit the yeshiva to seek a groom for his daughter. After meeting the best boy in the yeshiva Baron Rothchild chose the young man as his son in law. Rabbi Silverstone comments that if the young man was completely naive he might ask for a dowry since he knows that the Baron is a wealthy man. But, observes Rabbi Silverstone, this would be absurd, since in actuality the boy would be heir to the fortune, and he would have everything he ever needed. A dowry is a drop in the bucket compared to the life of riches he will lead being a part of the Rothchild family, akin to the Baron's own son. It is the same with us and God. We are part of God's family, as it were, and have everything we need. To ask for reward would be myopic and entirely miss the point of all the spiritual, physical, and emotional riches that come with being a Jew every moment of our lives.

May we merit much health and inspiration from this Shavuot, and be together soon in person!

Chag Sameach to all of our friends at Bais Abe!



*Untitled* - Lisa Satanovsky





# The Past and Future History of Ruth's Line

## Moshe Cohen

### The Past History

The very beginning of the *Book of Ruth* places us—the readers—within the period of the Judges. The hallmark of this period is general lawlessness and anarchy. The refrain which occurs multiple times in *Judges* is “in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased” (21:25, among other places). *Judges* describes a time period which oscillates between occasional good times when there was peace and prosperity, and the more prevalent times of poverty, wickedness (societal breakdown and/or idol worship), and foreign domination. The way I understand this time period is that the Israelites were primarily a loose affiliation of clans/tribes, each with their own leadership. Once in a generation, or once in several generations, there was an outside threat which forced these tribes to band together under the leadership of a *shofet*, often translated as “judge” but probably better translated as “war-chieftain.” The nadir of this period occurs right at the end of *Judges* with the episode of *Pilegish BeGivah*, the Levite’s concubine in Gibeah (Chapter 19-21) in which the tribes descend from coexistence to civil war. This is the background against which the *Book of Ruth* is set.

### The Story

The author of *Ruth*,<sup>1</sup> or the storyteller to use Professor Campbell’s term, is very particular in his language. More specifically, one of his goals is to reference other stories from Tanach, mostly from the *Book of Genesis*. This technique, intertextuality, is very common in the books of the Prophets and Writing, one which assumes a knowledge of the canon of Biblical literature and is intended to invoke these stories in order to add extra layers of meaning to the story. Perhaps the first one in *Ruth* is the phrase “there was a famine in the land,” a phrase which is familiar to us from the stories of the forefathers in Genesis. This happened to Abraham in Genesis 12:10, and Abraham was forced to leave the Judean Mountains (the vicinity of Hebron, south of what is now Jerusalem) because of the severity of the famine and went down to Egypt for a short time. The man and family from Judea introduced at the beginning of *Ruth* start off in the same general part of Israel as Abraham but go in the opposite direction. The Plains of Moab<sup>2</sup> are not only physically in the opposite direction from Egypt for a person starting in Judea, but also represent a choice of immorality. Moab is the same direction as the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, and indeed the ancestor of Moab was born of Lot and his daughters who fled Sodom. The character traits ascribed to Moab as a nation mirror those of Sodom: a lack of even minimal hospitality and promiscuousness, as seen by their interactions with the Jewish People on their way from Egypt to Israel (Numbers 25:1 and Deuteronomy 23:5). The fact that the man at the center of our story chooses to follow the path of Lot and his descendants to Moab rather than the path of Abraham is, to my mind, an indication that he should be held up as an example of moral failure.



The greatness and moral goodness of the character of Ruth, however, is emphasized by linguistic parallels to Abraham. She leaves the comfort of her homeland to care for her mother-in-law, even though her mother-in-law does her best to dissuade her, perhaps most poignantly articulated by Boaz: “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before” (2:11). This articulation in particular echoes one of the most dramatic lines in Genesis: “Hashem said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you...’” (12:1). The parallel terms of “go forth/came,” “father’s house/father and mother,” “native land/land of your birth,” and “you had not known before/land I will show you” inescapably tie these stories together. Abraham and Ruth are also linked by ten years of not bearing children. Abraham takes Hagar as a concubine after 10 years of not having children with Sarah (Genesis 16:3 et seq.) and Ruth is widowed after being married to Machlon for 10 years in Moab (1:4).

### The Future History

The coda of the Book of Ruth is the birth of a son to Ruth and Boaz, who in turn is the ancestor of the future King David. This solidly cements *Ruth* as the segue between the period of the Judges and the period of the Monarchy. Although Saul was the first king, the dynastic monarchy is really established by his successor David.



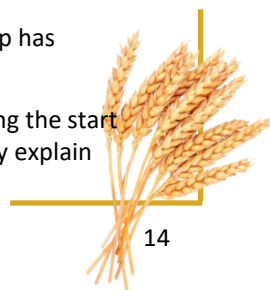
The author of *Ruth*, I believe, wanted to tie Ruth to Abraham. What did the storyteller see in Abraham that prompted him to link our first forefather with Ruth? The first part of the answer is that Abraham was the father of the nation in his role as the first Jew, but the vision of “Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him” (Genesis 18:18) had not been fulfilled yet. The state of the people, politically and socially/morally, indicates that it is time for central leadership which is necessary for becoming the nation promised to Abraham. It is not just about the timing, though. It is also about the character traits of the people and especially their leaders. It would take the contributions of the descendant of one who exemplified *chesed*, loving-kindness, in addition to the justice and righteousness (c.f. Genesis 18:17) inherited from Abraham, to lead to the establishment of the Nation of Israel.

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I would like to thank my friend Rabbi Avraham Wein for many enjoyable and productive evenings discussing the *Book of Ruth* and acknowledge Professor Campbell and his gentle and generous analysis of *Ruth* in the corresponding volume of the *Anchor Bible*.

<sup>1</sup>The Prophet Samuel, according to the tradition recorded in TB Bava Batra 14b. Later scholarship has questioned this tradition and assumed a later date.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout *Judges*, Moab is intermittently at war with the Israelites, including potentially during the start of our story and may even have caused the famine. This adds another layer to the story and may explain the cool reception Naomi receives when she returns from Moab with Ruth.







## Wordclouds of Megillat Ruth

by Phyllis Shapiro

Wordclouds are fun to use as a visual aid in understanding a text. A wordcloud is an image composed of words used in a particular text — the size of each word indicates its frequency and, hence, usually its importance. The image is fanciful yet informative and communicates much in a single glance.

In the following pages are four wordclouds, one for each chapter of Megillat Ruth that we read on Shavuot. As we glance at the wordcloud of Chapter 1, we see “Naomi” is the most prominent word. She, indeed, is the main character in the opening chapter, and some would say, in the whole Megillah. Two other words are noticeable – the names of places, “Beit Lechem” and Moav.” The story unfolds as a movement from one place to another, and back to the place of origin, the Land of Israel.

By looking at the wordcloud of Chapter 2, we know that Boaz has entered the picture. We also know this chapter has a lot of dialogue between women from the prominence of the word, “va’tomar,” and she said.

Our glance at the wordcloud of Chapter 3 tells us that this chapter is also filled with dialogue, this time between men and women. We have a visual depiction of “he said, she said” – “va’yomar,” va’tomar.” Also we see that something important is afoot about a man, “ha’ish,” and a threshing floor, “ha’goren”!

The clear emphasis of the word “holeed,” begat, in Chapter 4 tells us what this chapter is all about – the genealogy of King David, the great descendant of Ruth and Boaz.

Of course, your own perusal of the wordclouds will reveal other things to you about the Megillah. Enjoy the search!

(Thanks to *Sefaria* for the text of the Megillah, and for making it possible to change the references to God to forms that are not “sheimot,” so that we don’t have to worry discarding these pages.)









# "Milkshake Love" by Alan Nemes

(Click on title above or milkshake image below to play.)





## Recalling sinai

by: carol rose

(Exodus XIX:14 - 16 ) " And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their garments. And he said to the people; 'Be ready for the third day; **come not near a woman.**' And it came to pass on the third day, that there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of a horn exceeding loud; and all the people that were **{allowed}** in the camp trembled."



what do you remember about that night, daughter  
not the images carefully planted in your thoughts  
arranged in neat little rows like holes dug for beans

what did you see in moonlight, sister  
before flashes of lightning & rumble of thunder  
secreted away your vision  
curled it in on itself like a folded shawl

what did you hear blanketed in fog, mother  
what muffled voice called you, still calls you  
in mountain mists & waking dreams

leaves your skin glowing  
face radiant as mooses

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## creation

by: carol rose

maybe it happened like this  
*Shekinah* sighed  
a serpentine sound  
a plaintive moan that wrapped  
the firmament

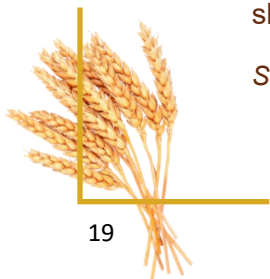
like a chrysalis  
(in shimmering shades  
of cinnamon & gold

like a maple leaf

from an earlier season  
dying)

maybe that sound  
is echoing still  
through galaxies  
through clusters of stars  
shaping our future

*Shekinah* - Hebrew for the Feminine face of the Divine



## **Questioning**

(for Reb Mimi)

by: carol rose

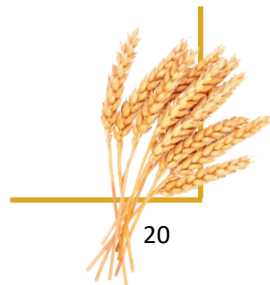
She's been trained to question ask inquire  
to wrestle answers from husks of complacency  
peeling away layers raw bloody  
never allowing protective scarring  
She lives in Jerusalem  
& riddle solving has a long history there  
developed over centuries  
by bearded rabbis searching for meaning  
in a single word in its location  
or in the number of times it appears  
on the page *People of the Book*  
seeking answers from ancient scrolls  
unravelling truths letter by letter  
from parchment punctuated  
by the blank spaces  
where her questions originate  
her own questions  
about what seems to be missing  
what appears by innuendo  
what is not yet written  
This exegetic process  
she has learned so well  
calls attention to the emptiness she feels  
inside each time the sacred lore is opened  
to the oft times nameless  
& frequently shapeless lives of women  
whose stories are recorded  
in only the faintest ink

---

## **fourmothers**

by: carol rose

we gather together  
to name them  
Sarah  
Rebekkah  
Rachel  
Leah  
to tell their tales  
as they were told  
to us deception  
jealousy  
rivalry  
shame  
the wrong testament  
carved in stone  
crumbles in nightair  
falls to dust  
waits for moonlight  
to resurrect  
a narrative reborn  
in the mouths of women  
sings of wisdom  
courage  
daring  
pain





# Megillat Ruth: Connection and Kindness in the Face of Tragedy

Rabbi Aaron Finkelstein  
WUSTL Class of '05 / YCT Class of '11

*(The original version of this drasha was delivered Shavuot 5775, in Nashville, TN. at Congregation Sherith Israel.)*

A close look at the beginning of the book of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot, reveals a situation of both national and personal tragedy:

**רות א:א-ה**  
(א) וַיְהִי בִימֵי שְׁפֹט הַשָּׁפֵטִים וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לְחֶם יְהוּדָה לְגוֹר בְּשֵׂדֵי מוֹאָב הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּשְׁנֵי בָנָיו: (ב) וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ אֱלִימֶלֶךְ וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ נַעֲמִי וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי-בָנָיו | מַחֲלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן אֶפְרַתִּים מִבֵּית לְחֶם יְהוּדָה וַיָּבֹאוּ שְׂדֵי-מוֹאָב וַיְהִי-שָׁם: (ג) וַנִּמַּת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נַעֲמִי וַתִּשְׁאַר הִיא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ: (ד) וַיִּשְׁאוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מְאֻבּוֹת שָׁם הָאִסַּחַת עֲרַפָּה וְשֵׁם הַשְּׂנִית רֹוּת וַיָּשִׁבוּ שָׁם כְּעֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים: (ה) וַנָּמִיתוּ גַם-שְׁנֵיהֶם מַחֲלֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וַתִּשְׁאַר הָאִשָּׁה מִשְׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמֵאִשָּׁה:

## **Ruth 1:1-5**

*1) AND IT came to pass in the days when the judges judged that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Beth-lehem in Judah went to sojourn in the field of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. (2) And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem in Judah. And they came into the field of Moab, and continued there. (3) And Elimelech Naomi's husband died; and she was left, and her two sons. (4) And they took them wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth; and they dwelt there about ten years. (5) And Mahlon and Chilion died both of them; and the woman was left of her two children and of her husband.*

The picture is pretty bleak. Famine leads to migration; death follows soon after as Elimelech's family is decimated, leaving Ruth, Naomi and Orpah.

Given this dire turn of events, it's no surprise that Chazal wonder why Elimelech died, and if indeed his death was actually a punishment of sorts.

## **Ruth Rabba 1:4**

*Why was Elimelekh punished?... Elimelekh was among the greatest [people] in the country and was one of the sustainers of his generation, and when the years of famine came, he said, now all of Israel will surround my doorway, this one with his alms box and this one with his alms box. He stood up and fled from them.*

## **Ruth Rabba 2:5**

*R. Meir would expound upon names. R. Yehoshua ben Karcha would expound upon names. And the name of the man was Elimelekh, because he would say, "To me shall come the kingship." And the names of his two sons were Machlon and Khilyon: Machlon, because they were erased (nimchu) from the world, and Chilyon, because they were destroyed (khalu) from the world.*

Rav Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion notes that there are a number of striking similarities between the book of Ruth and another tragic book in Tanach: the Book of Job. Rav Bazak notes



the following thematic and linguistic parallels in both books:

- Unparalleled tragedy in the beginning of the story
- Specific language of bitterness:
  - ◊ Job: "As God lives, Who has taken away my right, and the Almighty, Who has embittered my soul" (27:2)
  - ◊ Naomi mourns, "Call me 'Marah,' for The Almighty has embittered my soul greatly" (1:20)
- These two books are the only ones in Tanakh in which God is called by the name Shakkai (Almighty)
- In both stories, society reacts in astonishment at the tragedies
- There is a "happy ending" of sorts in both stories as the destroyed family rises to rebirth. Job has children and Naomi a grandson

In the Gemara in Bava Batra (15b), there is yet another revealing statement by Rabbi Elazar, linking these books.

גמרא בבא בתרא טז.  
תנניא רבי אלעזר אומר איוב בימי שפוט השופטים היה שנאמר (איוב כז, יב) הן אתם כולכם חזיתם ולמה זה הבל תהבלו איזה דור שכולו הבל הוי אומר זה דורו של שפוט השופטים

### **Gemara Bava Batra 15b**

*Rabbi Elazar says: Job lived in the days of the judging of the Judges, as it is stated in connection with Job: "Behold, all you yourselves have seen it; why then have you become altogether vain?" (Job 27:12). Which generation was completely vain? You must say it was the generation of the judging of the Judges.*

However, though there are many parallels between these two books, the differences between Job and Ruth are quite significant.

The book of Job thus considers human tragedy from God's viewpoint. "He is a faithful God, never unfair, righteous and moral is He" (Devarim 32:4). Man with his limited perspective and short life span cannot judge God. Man's actions will not always directly determine his destiny. Even when he does not understand, he must recognize his place.

In contrast to the book of Job, Megillat Ruth reveals another facet in the way the world runs: people through their actions can fix, build, establish, expand and redeem. "Olam chesed yibaneh" - the message of Ruth is that the world can be built (and rebuilt) through kindness. Let's reexamine the story through this lens:

### **The pattern in Ruth is one of kindness begetting kindness**

1) The first kindness we find is when Ruth and Orpa remain with lonely Naomi after her husband's and sons' deaths. For this, Naomi thanks her daughters-in-law: "May God do kindness with you as you have done with the dead and with me" (1:8).

2) Ruth, by leaving her nation and god in order to live with her mother-in-law Naomi in a strange land and strange surroundings, without any practical chance of building a family, does an amazing kindness.

3) Boaz gladly accepts Ruth into his field and allows her to glean with a generous hand.

4) Naomi's turn arrives to do kindness for her daughter-in-law: "Shall I not seek a home for





you that I may be good for you?" (3:1), and therefore she initiates the meeting between Boaz and Ruth, which brings about their marriage.

5) Ruth's agreement to marry Boaz, who was older than her by many years, is seen in the eyes of Boaz as a kindness: "For you have shown greater kindness in the end than at the beginning, that you did not follow after the young men whether poor or rich" (3:10). ("At the beginning" here is referring to Ruth going with Naomi - see number 2 above.)

6) There is no doubt as well that the readiness of Boaz to marry Ruth was an act of kindness. This is obvious, based on the refusal of her kinsman to marry her - "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I harm my own inheritance" (4:6).

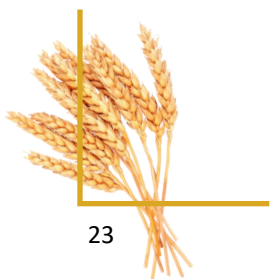
Seen from this vantage point, the book of Ruth is a story of kindness in the face of tragedy. Moreover, the story of Ruth and Naomi is a vivid reminder of the connections that can grow in the wake of trauma and loss. (Anyone who has ever reconnected with someone at a shiva or after a loss may have experienced this kind of surprising relationship.)

In 2015, the son of the Chief of Rabbi of Tunis was killed during the attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris. The Tunisian Chief Rabbi came to Paris after the attacks in January of 2015 and he asked to speak with the man who had done the Tahara (ritual purification). This man was an expert in purification, especially important in this case given the violent murder of the four Jewish men at the kosher supermarket in Paris.

After meeting this man, the chief rabbi thanked him for his holy work. "You know," he said, "we will always be brothers after this." "Why is that?" Said the French man. "I watched over my son in life and you watched over him in death. We are connected as brothers forever." Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, was credited with a unique response to the question of theodicy. When tragedy strikes Hartman taught, we don't ask why, but instead "what now?" That is the Jewish response.

The story of Ruth is a reminder of the power of connections that can grow amidst tragedy and struggle. During such a time, it is even more important to renew relationships, think beyond ourselves, and take an extra step to support someone else in our life. Above all, Ruth teaches us that kindness, fidelity and solidarity should not be underestimated; indeed, it is these values which save a family and will ultimately usher in the messianic age.

Chag Sameach and Gut Yuntif~



All,

Recently, my dear friend Larry Friedman suggested that I submit a Divar Torah to Bas Abe for their Shavuout virtual community Tikkun. That would be like carrying coals to Newcastle! I will try.

As a Surgical Resident I recognized my love of teaching. It soon became apparent to me the importance of the role of learning in teaching. If one is to be an effective teacher, he (she) must be an effective learner. There is an immense religious literature from which we can learn, from Rashi to Spinoza. If I might paraphrase Albert Einstein, a thousand times a day I am reminded that my ability to contribute has resulted the opportunity to stand on the shoulders of my predecessors.

From my learning what pearl would I offer today? We are G-d's partners in this world. Should I attribute all of the good and bad that has happened in my 87 years to G-d's will or should I attribute some of the credit and blame to mankind? The Covid-19 pandemic gives us the opportunity to answer that question. Should we follow the Herding Concept as G-d's way and let the disease take who she wishes or should we be G-ds's partners at all levels-the scientists attempting to produce vaccines and effective treatments, our legislators establishing guidelines or our personal behavior? I would hope that, at all levels, it would be remembered that man is created in G-d's image, all life is sacred and we are G-d's partners in this world.

Ralph Graff



# Cheesecake Bars

Fawn Chapel

*Serve with berries*  
*This dessert freezes nicely*

## Crumb layer(s)

2/3 cup packed brown sugar

2 cups flour

1 1/2 cup chopped nuts

2/3 cup melted butter

1. Mix first three ingredients in bowl
2. Add butter until light and crumbly
3. Remove and reserve two cups for topping
4. Press down firmly in 9 x 13 pan
5. Bake in 350° oven for 12-15 minutes until golden

## Filling

Two 8-ounce packages cream cheese

1/2 cup sugar

2 eggs

2 tablespoons lemon juice (a bit less)

2 teaspoons vanilla

4 tablespoons milk

Grated lemon rind

1. Beat cream cheese with sugar
2. Add the remaining ingredients
3. Pour onto baked crust
4. Top with reserved crumbs
5. Bake 25 minutes
6. Let cool thoroughly before cutting
7. Refrigerate





## Shavuot 5780

Pass the Torah with pride  
Know the Creator  
Know Hashem loved  
Know Hashem loved you  
All

See the tumultuous mountain  
Our eyes opened  
Feel the grip, the thrill  
Of becoming Jews  
-----Steven Puro

## Sinai

Exciting Absorbing  
Return to a place  
Memories  
Marks of faith and doubt

WE hear, see Hashem  
Irradiate the mind, heart, and spirit  
Center our beings  
YOU were here for us  
YOU are here for us  
We revisit the LIGHT of the Torah  
-----Steven Puro



## Cultivating Awe by Joanie Terrizzi

Teach us to count our days, that we may cultivate a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:12). We’ve just finished counting our days during the Omer.

In ancient times, Counting the Omer was an agricultural ritual during which, each night for 49 days, farmers would go out into the fields and wave a sheaf of barley (an Omer), to pray for a good harvest. Over time, that ritual was replaced by liturgy: Counting became the way to mark the Israelites’ journey from slavery in Egypt to revelation at Mount Sinai where they experienced, for a single moment, the mystery we call G-d.

**When was the last time something filled you with awe?** While young children seem to be wonderstruck on a regular basis, this experience tends to be more rare in adults; our attention is by necessity more focused on day-to-day responsibilities and mundane tasks. But awe is just as important for adults, according to a new and rapidly growing field of research.

**What is awe?** Researchers define awe as the feeling we get in the presence of something larger than ourselves that challenges our usual way of seeing the world. A great work of art, a breathtaking vista, a moving speech, the first flowers of spring — these can all evoke awe.

Central to the experience of awe is a sense of smallness, but not the kind associated with shame or self-doubt—rather, awe involves feeling interconnected with others and broadening our horizons, like a camera lens zooming out to reveal a more complex and inclusive picture. From this vantage point, everyday concerns tend to feel less overwhelming—as we get smaller, so do they.

Research suggests that awe has numerous psychological benefits, including increased life satisfaction, a sense of time slowing down or standing still, and a greater desire to help others. It may also have health benefits: a recent study found that people who experienced awe more frequently in their daily lives showed lower tissue levels of interleukin-6, a pro-inflammatory cytokine associated with heart disease risk. Remarkably, awe predicted lower levels of interleukin-6 than other positive emotions, including joy, contentment, and amusement. Awe may help people cope better with stress by promoting curiosity and exploration, rather than withdrawal and isolation.

It’s not necessary—or desirable—to feel awe all the time, but most of us could use a little more of it in our lives. Researchers have identified several effective strategies for increasing awe, many of which are collected on the Greater Good Science Center website: Greater Good in Action (GGIA), which features the top research-based activities for fostering happiness, kindness, connection, and resilience.

A recent study on emotions offers that “the feeling of awe we may experience during encounters with art, nature and spirituality has an anti-inflammatory effect, protecting the body from chronic disease.” Research results indicated a correlation between feelings of awe and lower levels of cytokines, which trigger the immune system into action and cause inflammation as a defensive reaction. Inflammation is essential in fighting off infections and diseases when the body encounters a specific threat, however, chronically elevated levels of cytokines may lead to heart disease, Alzheimer’s, depression, and autoimmune conditions.

Dacher Keltner, a researcher on this study, defines ‘awe’ as being “in the upper reaches of pleasure, on the border of fear.” He notes that awareness of “awe, wonder and beauty promote healthier levels of cytokines suggests that the things we do to experience these emotions — a walk in nature, losing oneself in music, beholding art — have a direct influence upon health and life expectancy.”



Other studies link awe and mindfulness, which are noted to be two of the core elements of many spiritual traditions. Here, awe is defined as a “feeling of fascination and amazement invoked by an encounter with something larger than ourselves that is beyond our ordinary frameworks of understanding.”

Psychologist Dr. Brian Ostafin, posits from this initial data that “you can’t digest [the object of awe] with your cognitive structures — it’s too big for you. So there’s a need for accommodation, to change your mental structures to understand what that is. This is the key element of the spiritual experience in a number of different religions... And mindfulness is a little bit about that too, because you’re paying attention and exercising non-conceptual awareness, so you should be more open to the immensity that’s there. You step out of the small frame that you have and this small idea of what the world is... You’re not stuck in your own story ... When we practice mindfulness (the cultivation of a focused, non-judgmental awareness on the present moment), we’re more able to open our mind to make sense of new experiences.”

**Shavuot** encourages us to deeply use our imagination, to cultivate awe. And it calls us to listen for the Ten Devarim (“10 utterances,” not “commandments,” as named in the Torah) and contemplate their meaning in our individual lives.

According to our tradition, at the end of the seven weeks – on the 49th day, the Israelites camped below Mt. Sinai – the most modest mountain in the region – and prepared to encounter God – the One (oneness in the face of horrors). In thunder, lightning, and in a deafening silence, the One Source of All revealed wisdom that would guide them in living in reverent relationship with each other and with the mysterious unfolding of all life.

On Shavuot, we listen to the story that our ancestors tell and ask that it inspire our imagination and courage (in the words of Rabbi Yael Levy):

It was before dawn.  
The air was cold and the sky deep blue  
When all of us awoke.  
Together we walked slowly toward the mountain.  
The ground trembled.

The mountain began to smoke.  
Lightning flashed. Thunder roared.  
A shofar called from the depths of the earth.  
Then all was still.

And into the core of our being  
Within our heart, our soul, on the lines of our faces  
The One spoke  
And everything vanished.  
There was no I, no you, no tree, no bird, no water, no fire.  
There was only One.  
One breath.

Nothing more.  
Only One.  
Forever. Eternal.

Then the shofar wailed again  
And the world in all its uniqueness rushed back  
Bird, wind, rock, sky

And we stood with the One breath still on our lips  
And we knew —  
We knew  
The One inside the many  
The One beyond anything that can be known  
And we trembled in awe.  
We stepped back from the mountain  
We turned from the fire  
And we listened to the One reverberate in our hearts  
And in the silence we heard the Mystery call:

1. I am the unfolding of all that is. I am the power of transformation calling you forward to be.
2. You cannot arrest me in motion. Do not strive for certainty. Do not seek permanence.
3. Do not use my name in the pursuit of violence, terror or destruction
4. Rest, Stop, Pause. Be. Honor creation. Declare your freedom. Rest and allow others to rest as well.





5. Honor your parents. Honor your ancestors. Honor those upon whose shoulders you stand.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not betray.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not use the power of words to hurt or destroy.
10. Feel the fullness of your life. Don't be led astray by comparing yourself to others. Don't get lost in desiring what others have. Be content, be fulfilled with what your life brings.  
-Shemot 20:1-14

On Shavuot, whether it is with thunder and lightning — or in a still, small voice — the Infinite breaks through and reveals something true, something we can live by.

After Shavuot, when we come down from the mountain and return to our lives, we are urged to continue these practices to help us stay mindful and awake, to help us keep returning to awareness and presence, to keep the fires burning. To allow the light of holiness, which is found within each and every one of us to become manifest in all aspects of our daily life.

Society is designed to distract us from ourselves. Mindfulness allows us to pay attention, on purpose, without judgment to what is in front of us at any given moment. I think of it as the ark of uni-tasking. One of my favorite mindfulness teachers offers that there is no such thing as “washing the dishes” - at any given moment we are simply “washing a dish.” This is mindfulness.

Our brains are doing way too much - especially these days - as we try to digest the world and the magnitude of our experiences. Can you feel your feet right now? Set this booklet aside for a moment and truly feel your feet for about 30 seconds. What do you notice?

Now bring to mind someone you love very much. Think about them being happy healthy, and doing something that they enjoy. Think about them being at peace. Set this booklet aside for another minute and feel your deep desire for every person on this planet to be healthy. How do you feel when your mind and heart are oriented like this?

Here is a lengthier guided heartfulness practice:

*Think of a time when you felt cared about, loved.*

*It may have been by a person, a pet, spiritual figure, or nature.*

*Hold the image of the person, or other entity in your mind.*

*If there is a name of that person, that helps you to connect with positive feeling, think of that.*

*Feel any pleasant sensations of being cared about, loved.*

*Then shift to an image of someone you have loved and hold that feeling.*

*By gently focusing back on the positive content, each time the mind is distracted we are developing concentration. By allowing distractions, including “negative” ones to arise and pass away, we are developing equanimity through heartfulness.*

## Ways to Cultivate Awe in our Daily Lives:

### 1. Write about a personal experience of awe

- ◆ Think about the experiences in your life that have offered the greatest inspiration, meaning, and wonder. Was it a grand vista while hiking? Gazing at a feat of human creation? Watching your child take his or her first steps? Holding the hand of someone you loved as they died peacefully?
- ◆ Writing about awe can deepen the experience of awe. If you are reading this on chag, you can reflect deeply on your experience, and write about it after chag. Reflecting now and writing later can allow you to call up.



- ◆ The simple act of writing about awe can be very powerful. The Awe Narrative practice involves reflecting on a personal experience of awe and then writing about it in as much detail as possible. Recalling the experience in vivid detail can conjure up the feelings you had at the time. A 2012 study led by Melanie Rudd, assistant professor at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business, found that people who completed this writing exercise felt even better than people who recalled and wrote about a happy experience. Afterward, they reported stronger feelings of awe, less sense of time pressure, and greater willingness to volunteer their time to help a charity.
- ◆ This practice may be especially useful when the daily grind is weighing you down. Even just a brief reminder of an awe-inducing experience from your past may help lift you out of the doldrums and remind you that the world can be a magical place.

## 2. Take an Awe Walk

- ◆ Travel can be a great source of awe, but awe can also be found closer to home. The Awe Walk practice involves taking a stroll somewhere that has the potential to inspire awe. This could be a natural setting, like a tree-lined trail; an urban setting, like the top of a skyscraper; or an indoor setting, like a museum.
- ◆ Whether you feel awe on your Awe Walk depends not just on where you go, but on your attitude. One way to create more opportunities for awe is to approach your surroundings with fresh eyes, as if you're seeing them for the first time. Otherwise ordinary features—a bird singing, the color of the sky—may be transformed into something more extraordinary.
- ◆ Your walk will also be enhanced if you leave your cell phone (and other potential distractions) at home so that you can be fully present, and if you seek out novel environments, where the sights and sounds are unexpected.
- ◆ But it's also possible to integrate an Awe Walk into your daily routine—even if a route is familiar to you, you can make an effort to notice new things. The same old sights you pass every day may turn out to be surprising sources of inspiration. As a case in point, Paula Hawkins, author of *The Girl on the Train*, got the idea for the bestselling novel during her morning commute, as she gazed curiously out the train window.
- ◆ Indirect evidence for the effectiveness of the Awe Walk comes from a 2015 study led by Paul Piff, then a researcher at the University of California, Berkeley. In this study, one group of participants stood in a grove of towering eucalyptus trees and gazed up for just one minute, while another looked at a building instead. Those who looked up at the trees reported greater feelings of awe, were less likely to feel superior to others, and were more likely to help someone in need, supporting the idea that awe fosters a sense of humility and concern for others.

## 3. Watch an awe-inducing video

- ◆ Even if you're stuck at home, awe can be found on your computer screen—the Internet provides an endless supply of goosebump-inducing images and videos. One of these videos is featured in the Awe Video practice—a reel of majestic shots from Yosemite National Park. *National Geographic* is another good source of awe-eliciting media, and YouTube hosts countless recordings of riveting speeches and performances.
- ◆ You could also draw from your own photo or video collection, if you've visited awe-inspiring locations, or make a point to capture your next adventure on film (provided that this doesn't interfere with the experience itself).



- ◆ Research suggests that the Awe Video practice is an effective way to boost awe in the moment. In a second 2012 study led by Melanie Rudd, participants watched a brief video displaying people in city streets and parks interacting with vast, mentally overwhelming images of waterfalls, whales, and astronauts. Compared to participants who watched a video designed to induce happiness, they reported greater feelings of awe and a sense of having more time.

#### 4. Read an awe-inspiring story

- ◆ Written words can also evoke awe. The Awe Story practice involves reading a detailed story about climbing up the Eiffel Tower and taking in the panoramic view. The story is told in the second person to make readers feel like they're experiencing it themselves.
- ◆ Awe-inspiring writing can also be found in literature and nonfiction, such as Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, and in your own writing (a reason to consider recording your experiences of awe as they occur, so that you can reflect back on them when you're in need of an awe boost).
- ◆ A third 2012 study led by Melanie Rudd illustrates some possible benefits of reading about awe. In this study, participants read either the Eiffel Tower story or a story about climbing an unnamed tower and seeing a plain landscape from above. Those who read the Eiffel Tower story reported greater awe, a greater preference for experiences over material objects, a sense of having more time, and greater life satisfaction (compared to those who read the neutral story). That sense of having more time was what made people more satisfied with their lives. Life can sometimes feel lackluster and dull, and inspiration can be hard to find. On those days, even a small dose of awe can go a long way in elevating your spirits and reviving your sense of purpose. Awe isn't always a comforting feeling—sometimes it can be downright frightening—but it's a powerful way to cut through the monotony and see things in a new light. We hope that the awe exercises on Greater Good in Action will be a useful starting point as you aspire to make your life more “awesome.”

