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FOCUS

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Focus is a forum for the rabbis of the Jewish Study Network to present the community with a sample of their teachings in writing. The JSN is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to raising the level of Jewish literacy in the greater San Francisco Bay Area.

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Focus

No. 8 - Spring 2008 - A Shavuot Reader

Preface

The festival of Shavuot occupies a peculiar place in the consciousness of many Jews today. Shavuot marks the defining moment in the history of our people—receiving the Ten Commandments and the Torah at Mount Sinai. Yet Shavuot is perhaps the least-known and least-celebrated holiday of the Jewish year. Not only are the other biblical holidays – Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover and Sukkot – more popular, even the rabbinic holidays of Chanukah and Purim leave Shavuot far behind. In fact, to judge from the size and number of events on our local Jewish community calendar, Shavuot is trumped by even such minor days as Lag BaOmer and Tu B'Shvat! This is an unfortunate state of affairs. Shavuot is a magnificent holiday that speaks on the most fundamental level to what it means to be a Jew. With this Shavuot reader, we hope to expose you to the beauty and relevance of this deeply inspirational holiday, explore its manifold themes, and help restore the celebration of Shavuot to its central position in the annual cycle of Jewish life.

This edition of Focus testifies to the growth and success of the Jewish Study Network; it is a veritable showcase for the fresh talent that the JSN has brought to the Bay Area in 2008. For the first time, we include an article in Russian, authored by the director of our new FSU Émigré Division, Rabbi Avraham Flaks. Also represented on these pages are voices from our new branch in San Francisco, opened in partnership with Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future. We are proud to publish an essay on the first commandment by Rabbi Yosef Richards, director of JSN San Francisco, as well as an essay on the Book of Ruth by Rabbi Motty Weinstock, a founding

member of our San Francisco team. These contributions come in addition to the regular set of thought-provoking and content-rich articles that you have come to expect from Focus.

Longtime readers will undoubtedly notice that Focus has an exciting new look. We owe thanks for the re-design to Temima Richards, a member of JSN San Francisco who is both a Jewish educator and a professional graphic artist. Her design for the cover captures the spirit of Focus perfectly.

Confident that this reader will bring to light the spiritual riches Shavuot has to offer, and hopeful that it will succeed in inspiring our community to embrace and celebrate this holiday with renewed vigor, we take this opportunity to wish you and yours a joyous and meaningful Shavuot.

Rabbi Joey Felsen
Executive Director, JSN

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon
Editor

Introduction

In order to understand Shavuot, we must first understand its place in the evolution of our people. The three festivals of the Jewish year mark the three stages of our national development: Passover marks the Exodus from Egypt, Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah at Sinai and Sukkot marks the journey across the desert to Israel. These are the formative events that created the Jewish nation.

This three-stage process has been compared to the development of a child. First, the nation is "born" with the Exodus. Then the nation reaches maturity and becomes "Bar Mitzvah" at Sinai. And finally, the nation "marries God" under the Chuppah of the Sukkah.

In addition to their relation to the formative events of our history, the festivals also mark the three stages of the agricultural cycle. Grain sprouts in the spring on Passover; it reaches maturity and is cut on "the Festival of the Harvest," Shavuot, and, after drying out over the summer, the grain is finally brought home on "the Festival of the Ingathering," Sukkot. As the Maharal of Prague (d. 1609) points out, the three agricultural stages parallel the stages of our national development perfectly. Like the grain, the Jews were "born" on Passover, like the grain, they reached maturity on Shavuot, and like the grain, the Jews were brought into "God's home," Israel, by way of Sukkot, the "Festival of the Ingathering."

It is a mistake to think of the holidays simply as a way of commemorating historical events. Sacred time transcends the bounds of linear time and unites the past with the present. On the holidays, we do not commemorate events; we are *there*. On Passover we experience the Exodus, on Shavuot we experience Sinai, and on Sukkot we experience the journey to Israel. Jewish time is a loop with an annual cycle.

This is what we mean when we call Passover "*the Time* of Our Freedom," Shavuot "*the Time* of the Giving of Our Torah," and Sukkot "*the Time* of Our Joy." It is the very same time. As we traverse through this annual cycle, the divine gifts of the holidays – freedom and birth, Torah and maturity, joy and consummation – are made available to the world. It should come, then, as no surprise that the blessings of each holiday are manifest in the fields. And if the fields can access these blessings, so can we.

* * * * *

We have described Shavuot as the time of the giving of the Torah. However, this is not accurate. On Shavuot the Jews heard the Ten Commandments. The Torah came later.

Here is a timeline. After the Exodus from Egypt and the drowning of the Egyptian Army at the Reed Sea, the Jews travel into the desert. Forty-six days later, they arrive at Mount Sinai and spend three days preparing themselves for revelation. On the morning of day fifty, the day of Shavuot, the Divine Presence descends onto the mountain and God speaks to His Chosen Nation. Every man, woman and child experiences revelation and hears the Ten Commandments. After the revelation, Moses ascends the mountain and God teaches him Torah for forty days. He descends on the seventeenth of Taamuz with two tablets upon which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments, only to find the Jews dancing around a golden calf. He shatters the Tablets, punishes the perpetrators and prays for the nation. God ultimately acquiesces to grant the Jews a second set of Tablets and Moses ascends Mount Sinai again on the first of Elul for another forty days. On the tenth of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, God forgives the sin of the Golden Calf and Moses returns to the nation with the new Tablets. Finally Moses can begin teaching the people about mitzvot. The Five

Books of Moses, however, will not be complete for another forty years. It is only at the very end of Moses's life, as the Jews stand on the banks of the Jordan ready to enter the Promised Land, that the Jews have the completed Torah scroll in hand.

This entire process is embedded into the Jewish calendar. The holiday of Passover marks the Exodus. The forty-nine days linking the Exodus to Sinai is immortalized through the mitzvah of *Sefirat HaOmer*, in which we count the days from Passover to Shavuot. On Shavuot we celebrate the revelation at Sinai. Forty days later, on the seventeen of Taamuz, we fast in mourning over the broken Tablets and the sin of the Golden Calf. On Rosh Chodesh Elul, the day Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive a second set of Tablets, we begin preparations for the High Holidays. And forty days later, the day God forgave His nation for their sin and Moses began teaching Torah, is Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement.

Clearly then, describing Shavuot as the time of the giving of the Torah is an oversimplification. Shavuot may have initiated that process, but on Shavuot we experienced revelation and heard the Ten Commandments. Torah learning did not actually begin until Yom Kippur, several months later. This fact will help us refine our understanding of what Shavuot is really about.

Shavuot is not so much about the body of Torah knowledge per se as it is about God's desire to give us His Torah. On Shavuot, we realize that God wants to be close to us; He wants to reveal Himself to us; He wants to speak to us; in short, He wants a *relationship*. On Shavuot, we appreciate the power of Torah and mitzvot to forge this God/man relationship. And on Shavuot, we reach maturity and enter a covenant with God.

Once a year, a window onto Sinai opens. A window called Shavuot.

Eternal Whisperings of the Decalogue

RABBI YISROEL GORDON

Despite the fact that most people cannot list them all,[1] the Ten Commandments continue to play a significant role in our national dialogue. From controversy about their place in the public sphere to new movies and books, the Ten Commandments have become a battleground for debate in the intensifying secular-religious culture war in this country.[2] One thing is certain: Americans have strong feelings about the Ten Commandments.

While they may generate much discussion and are even an important source of secular law and morality,[3] from the Bible's perspective, the Ten Commandments need not be observed by most Americans.[4] God gave the Ten Commandments to the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai after the Exodus. Never does God command gentiles to observe these ten laws.

This is not to say that the Torah permits non-Jews to engage in paganism or immoral behavior,[5] but the Ten Commandments qua Ten Commandments are undeniably Jewish. This requires an explanation. Jews have no monopoly on God and morality; on the

contrary, Jews are encouraged to be a "light unto the nations." If the Ten Commandments present basic, universal values, why did God restrict them to the Jews?

Before we can answer this question, we need to read the Ten Commandments in context. To be frank, a review of all of Genesis and Exodus up to chapter twenty is in order, but due to space constraints, we will attempt to run through all of it here in one short paragraph.

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. Adam and Eve in the Garden. Cain and Abel. Noah and the flood. Abraham arrives in Israel. The binding of Isaac. Jacob and Esau. Josef and his brothers. Egypt, Pharaoh, enslavement. Ten Plagues. The Exodus. The sea splits, the Jews escape, and the Egyptians are drowned. The freed slaves journey into the desert for several weeks, and then, at long last, the descendants of Adam arrive at their destination. Mount Sinai.

If we follow the flow of the narrative from the very beginning, it is clear that God has a plan for His universe. Human error and sin may cause setbacks along the way, but God bides His time. Gently and inexorably, the Divine Hand pushes the wheels of history towards a hill in the Sinai Desert.

It took over two millennia. Man has come a long way from Eden, and today a chosen nation stands at the foot of Mount Sinai, ready to experience a singularity – a divine revelation unlike anything that ever was or ever will be. God has long awaited this moment; He speaks now to His people.

"I am God.

"Do not have any other gods before Me.

"Do not take the name of God your Lord in vain.

"Remember the day of Shabbat to keep it holy.

"Honor your father and mother.

> "Do not commit murder.
> "Do not commit adultery.
> "Do not steal.
> "Do not testify as a false witness against your neighbor.
> "Do not be envious of your friend's house. Do not be envious of your friend's wife, his slave, his maid, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that belongs to your friend."
>
> Exodus 20:2-14[6]

It is easy to get carried away by the beauty of it all, but several items on this list seem painfully obvious. Do not commit murder? Adultery? Theft? For this God created the world? For this He took the Jews out of Egypt and brought them to Sinai? To announce laws that every human being already knows?! Every ancient society had laws prohibiting theft and murder. In fact, Moses himself had to flee Egypt because he was a prime suspect in a homicide (cf. Exodus 2:12-15).

The question runs deeper. Long before the Jews ever got to Sinai, God commanded several of these mitzvot as part of the basic moral code known as the "Seven Noahide Laws." Its name is misleading, for the majority of the "Noahide" code actually dates all the way back to Adam.

> The first man was given six commands: [Prohibitions against] idolatry, cursing God, murder, sexual immorality, theft, [and a mitzvah to] set up a court system… Noah was given an additional law: the prohibition against eating the limb of a live animal.
>
> Maimonides, Laws of Kings 9:1

These laws were well known in the ancient world and failure to observe them resulted in severe consequences. Cain was cursed and

exiled for killing his brother (Genesis 4:10-14). When corruption became commonplace, virtually all of humanity was obliterated in a flood (6:5-13). The evil societies of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed in a firestorm (18:20, 19:24) and Egypt suffered ten plagues for their atrocities against the Jews (15:14; Exodus 7:19-12:30). The Noahide Code is as old as the earth and God had been enforcing it from the very beginning. Why reiterate it at Sinai?

There is another problem with the Ten Commandments. Its very existence sets the stage for a basic misconception about Judaism. To the unlettered, the Ten Commandments give the impression that there are only ten mitzvot in the Torah when, in fact, there are six hundred and thirteen. Rabbis have been pushing back against this misconception for millennia.[7]

There is a good reason for this misconception. The Ten Commandments were announced at Sinai with a divine revelation, complete with lightening, thunder and a great Shofar blast (cf. Exodus 20:15), while the other six hundred and three biblical mitzvot were taught later by Moses, without fanfare. What is so special about these ten? Why were they singled out to be broadcast at Sinai?

Are the Ten Commandments more important than the other mitzvot of the Torah? Belief in God, observing Shabbat and honoring parents are fundamental to Judaism, but so is Yom Kippur, Kashrut, the Temple service and many other mitzvot which do not appear in the Ten Commandments. "Fundamental" is clearly not the criteria. Nor is severity. While some of the Ten Commandments are capital crimes, most are not, and elsewhere in the Torah we find other capital crimes that are not included in the Ten Commandments. In fact, Jewish law makes absolutely no distinction between the Ten Commandments and the other biblical mitzvot. Was Sinai nothing more than an arbitrary sampling of mitzvot? That seems unlikely. So what is it about these ten that makes them different?

II

When the Tabernacle was first erected, the princes of the tribes dedicated the new sanctuary with sacrificial offerings. All the princes brought the same set of offerings, including "one gold bowl weighing ten [shekels], filled with incense" (Numbers 7:14). The Midrash explains the symbolism.

> "One gold bowl weighing ten" – these [symbolize] the Ten Commandments that were inscribed on the Tablets.
>
> "Filled with incense" – for the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot are encompassed [by the Ten Commandments].[8] And so we find that from "I am God" [at the beginning of the Ten Commandments] until "that belongs to your fellow" [the last words] we have a total of six hundred and thirteen letters.
>
> The seven remaining Hebrew letters [of the last two words, "לרעך אשר"] allude to the seven days of creation. This teaches that the entire universe was created in the merit of the Torah.[9]
>
> Bamidbar Rabba 13:16

The sages couched their teaching in Midrashic symbolism and numerology, but the message is clear: The Decalogue is a vessel which holds all of the Torah's mitzvot. This can be taken to mean that the Ten Commandments serve as chapter headings for all Biblical law, and indeed, when listings of the six hundred and thirteen biblical mitzvot first appeared in the Middle Ages, rabbinic scholars classified them under these ten "categories."[10] But surely there is more to it. Are we to believe that the Ten Commandments are merely a convenient classification system?

The answer to our question lies between the lines of a well-known Midrash.

> "God came to them from Sinai, shone forth to them from Seir, and made an appearance from Mount Paran" (Deuteronomy 33:2).
> When God revealed Himself to give the Torah to the Jews, it was not to the Jews alone that He revealed [His presence], but to every nation. First, He went to the descendants of Esau.
> "Will you accept the Torah?"
> "What does it say?" they asked.
> "Do not murder" God replied.
> "Master of the World," they said, "the fundamental identity of our father was to be a murderer, as the verse states, "the hands are the hands of Esau" (Genesis 27:22). Moreover, our father was guaranteed this right, as he was told, "by your sword shall you live."
> God then went to the descendants of Ammon and Moab.
> "Will you accept the Torah?"
> "What does it say?" they asked.
> "Do not commit adultery" God replied.
> "Master of the World," they said, "our fundamental identity is our promiscuity, as it says, "The two daughters of Lot were impregnated by their father" (Genesis 19:36).
> God went and found the descendants of Yishmael.
> "Will you accept the Torah?"
> What does it say?" they asked.
> "Do not steal" God replied.
> "Master of the World," they said, "the fundamental identity of our father was to be a thief, as the verse states, "He will be a wild man" (Genesis 16:12).

> God approached every nation, without exception, speaking to them and knocking on their doors, to see if they would like to accept the Torah…
>
> Sifrei, Deuteronomy 33:2[11]

There is a problem with this story. Would any nation really reject these laws? Murder, adultery and theft could not possibly have been legal; they are obligatory under the basic social contract and they were already forbidden by the Noahide Code. So why did Esau, Ammon, Moab, Yishmael and every other nation react so negatively to the Ten Commandments?

The answer, says R. Isaac Scher (Slobodka, Bnei Brak, 1875-1952), is that the Ten Commandments actually contain a lot more than just ten commandments. God may use human language, but His words penetrate deep beneath the surface into the realm of subtext and nuance. Only one who is deaf to the revelation could make the mistake of limiting God's words to their simple, literal meaning. When God says, "Do not murder" He is not just prohibiting "murder;" He is distilling a host of crimes, from homicide to physical assault to emotional abuse, to their ugly, common essence: the destruction of the other.

Do not misunderstand. Legally, these crimes are obviously not the same. The Torah itself prosecutes them quite differently. But morally, there is a common denominator.

> Humiliating a person in public is akin to murdering him.
>
> Talmud, Baba Metzia 58b[12]

Humiliating someone in public is evil, but murder? No one died. The answer is that when God says, "Don't murder," He means a whole lot more.

III

The Torah takes the Ten Commandments and runs with it. We might have expected the Parasha to end with the story of the revelation at Sinai, but this is not the case. After the revelation is over, the Parasha continues for five more verses in which a few mitzvot are taught privately to Moses. On the face of things, it is difficult to understand what these mitzvot are doing here. These are the verses in question:

> God said to Moses: This is what you must tell the Israelites:
>
> You have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven. Do not make [a representation of anything that is] with Me. Do not make gods of silver or gods of gold for yourselves.
>
> Make an earthen alter for Me. You can sacrifice your burnt offerings, your peace offerings, your sheep and your cattle on it. Wherever I [allow] My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you. When you build a stone altar for Me, do not build it out of cut stone. Your sword will have been lifted against it; you will have profaned it.
>
> Do not climb up to My altar with steps, so that your nakedness not be revealed on it.
>
> Exodus 20:19-23

With these words, Parashat Yitro comes to an end, and we are left scratching our heads. We turn to Rashi for assistance.

- "[Do not make] gods of silver" – This comes as a prohibition concerning the Cherubim that you will be making to stand "with Me" (on the cover of the ark in the Tabernacle's Holy of Holies, cf. Exodus 25:17-21). They must not be made of

silver. If you alter them and make them of silver – I will consider them like idols.

- "or gods of gold" – This comes as a prohibition not to have more than two [Cherubim]. If you make four – I will consider them like golden idols.
- "[When you build a stone altar for Me, do not build it out of cut stone. Your sword will have been lifted against it;] you will have profaned it" – This teaches you that if you do lift iron onto it, you will have profaned it. This is because the altar was created to extend the life of man (through the atonement of offerings) and iron was created to shorten the life of man (when used in weaponry). It is inappropriate that the [life] shortener be lifted against the [life] extender.
- "Do not climb up to My altar with steps" – When you construct the ramp to the altar, don't make it into a staircase… rather it should be flat and inclined, "so that your nakedness not be revealed on it." [Climbing] a staircase requires you to take broader steps. This is not an actual uncovering of nakedness, for the Torah states, "Make for them linen breeches" (Exodus 28:42); however, taking broad strides is almost an uncovering of nakedness and [to do so] would therefore be disrespectful [of the altar].

Mechilta; Rashi ad loc.

To summarize, we have three new mitzvot here.

1. When you make the cherubs for the Holy Ark, do not deviate from God's orders. To do so would not only invalidate the cherubs, it would make them akin to "idols."

2. Do not hew stones for the altar. A metal chisel is akin to a "sword," and is therefore an inappropriate tool for use on the life-extending altar.

3. The altar should have a ramp, not a staircase. The longer strides of stair climbing are akin to "revealing nakedness."[13]

A common denominator is emerging; one first discovered by Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (Prague, 1550-1619). In his magnum opus, "*Kli Yakar*,"[14] Rabbi Luntschitz points out that each of these laws is described as being *akin* to one of the Ten Commandments! By following up the Ten Commandments with these three laws, the Torah is telling us that the idolatry, adultery and murder of the Ten Commandments are much broader than anyone could have ever imagined. You can be a loyal monotheist, hard at work designing cherubs for the sanctuary of the One God, but if you don't follow the rules, you create an idol and transgress, in the abstract, the second commandment! You can be a nonviolent, peace-loving man, hard at work building an altar for the Temple in Jerusalem, but if you use a chisel, you have raised a sword and transgress, in the abstract, the sixth commandment! You can be a holy, unassuming Kohen, on your way to perform the divine service, but if you climb a staircase to the altar, you are exposing yourself, and transgress, in the abstract, commandment number seven! The point is clear. The Ten Commandments are not about right and wrong. They are about hypersensitivity to right and wrong.

It turns out that the Ten Commandments are not obvious at all. They speak to every single Jew, from the worst criminal to the holiest Kohen, and prohibit not only sin itself, but even things similar to sin. Such a demanding moral standard strikes us as both radical and unattainable, if not bizarre, but maybe we should not be so quick to judge. We have been desensitized by the same American culture that

claims to embrace the Ten Commandments. Many Americans are guilty of observing the Ten Commandments religiously and missing the point entirely. God is not after observance here; what He wants is an absolute clarity about that all that is holy and right and an exalted sensitivity to all that is impure and wrong – or even *akin* to impure and wrong.

Do not misunderstand. This hypersensitivity is not some kind of extraordinary religious expression reserved for the devout. It is obligatory Torah law. What the Torah is saying is that in the end, every one of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot of the Torah, even the most obscure, ritualistic mitzvah, comes down to a basic principle of the Ten Commandments.

IV

The Torah is not yet finished with the Ten Commandments. The next Parasha, Parashat Mishpatim, begins with the law of the Hebrew "Slave."[15] When a Jewish thief is caught and is unable to repay his debt, the court raises the funds by putting him up on the block.

> If you purchase a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years, and on the seventh year, he is to be set free without liability… If the slave declares, "I am fond of my master, my wife and my children; I do not want to go free," his master must bring him to the courts. Bringing [the slave] next to the door or the doorpost, his master shall pierce his ear with an awl. [The slave] shall then serve [his master] forever.
>
> Exodus 21:2, 5-6

Why do we put a hole in the slave's ear?

> Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said, "An ear which heard at Mount Sinai "Do not steal" went and stole?! Pierce it!"
>
> *Mechilta*; Rashi ad loc.

Poetic justice indeed. However, this interpretation flies in the face of a different Talmudic teaching. Due to its position in the same verse as the capital crimes of murder and adultery, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 86a) argues that "Do not steal" cannot refer to ordinary theft; it must also be capital crime. Since there is a form of theft that gets the death penalty – the theft of a human being (cf. Exodus 21:16) – the Talmud concludes that the "Do not steal" of the Ten Commandments refers to kidnapping.

Now, our Hebrew slave may be a thief but he never kidnapped anyone. How can Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai claim that he has transgressed the "Do not steal" of the Ten Commandments?

In light of the above, the answer is clear. The "Do not steal" of the Ten Commandments indeed refers to the most egregious form of theft, the capital crime of kidnapping, but when God pronounced, "Do not kidnap" at Sinai, it meant more than do not kidnap. It included theft in all of its forms. This is why God's "Do not kidnap" was heard by man as "Do not steal." The good listeners at Sinai heard *principles*. Principles extend far beyond their most extreme expression.

This, explains Rabbi Reuven Leuchter of Jerusalem, allows us to understand why the ear of the Hebrew slave is pierced against a door. The image of an ear to a door connotes eavesdropping and intense listening, and this is precisely what our thief failed to do. He can hear ordinary sound, but he is shallow and has difficulty picking up the whispering subtleties of Torah. At Sinai, this man only heard "Do not kidnap." So we pierce his ear at the door to the courts.

V

A good listener might perceive that the Ten Commandments include all six hundred and thirteen mitzvot of the Torah, but even that will not explain this strange passage from the Talmud.

> They asked Rabbi Eliezer, "How far does the commandment of honoring parents go?"
> "Go out and see what one gentile did for his father in Ashkelon," he replied. "His name was Dama ben Nesinah and the sages offered him 60,000 [coins] for [the precious] stones needed for the Eiphod (one of the priestly garments, cf. Exodus 28:6-12)...
> "The key [to the safe] was under his [sleeping] father's head and he would not disturb him. God rewarded him the following year and a red heifer was born in his herd…"
>
> Talmud, Kiddushin 31a

The commandment goes even farther.

> Rabbi Tarfon had an [elderly] mother. Whenever she wanted to go to bed, he would bend over and she would climb [on him] into it, and whenever she got out [of bed], she stepped on him (i.e., she used him as a step stool).
> [Rabbi Tarfon] came to the study hall and commended himself. They said to him, "You have yet to achieve even one-half of the mitzvah of honoring [parents]! Did she ever, in your presence, throw your wallet into the sea and you did not shame her?
>
> Ibid, 31b

Now, this kind of pious behavior is all very nice and good, but is it really included in the commandment to honor parents? Certainly, no one claims that such subjugation is Halachically required! What exactly did the Talmud mean when it asked, 'How far does this commandment go?'

Before we can answer this question, we must first raise another.

If the Ten Commandments are indeed ten principles with six hundred and thirteen applications, why, when it came to the revelation at Sinai, were all the principles presented in their most extreme forms? "Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery" leave the opposite end of the spectrum very-much undefined. Instead of "Do not commit murder," God could have said, "Do not humiliate people in public" – and then the crime of murder would be a fortiori. Instead of "Do not commit adultery," God could have said, "Do not climb up to My altar with steps, so that your nakedness not be revealed on it" – and then the crime of adultery could go without saying. Stating up-front the full extent of God's command has the advantage of communicating the principle in its entirety, averting potential misconceptions about the true meaning of the Ten Commandments. Wouldn't that be best?

The answer to this question lies in a teaching of the legendary Jewish saint, the great Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman (1720-1797), as quoted by his brother, Rabbi Avraham.

> The Talmud states that the Jews were commanded [to observe] six hundred and thirteen mitzvot (Makkot 23b)… This is mentioned by the Talmud and the Midrash in several places.[16] Now, early commentators such as Maimonides, Nachmonides and the [author of] *Sefer Mitzvot HaGadol* (Rabbi Moshe of Coucy) investigated this count of mitzvot, and the later commentators worked up a storm – each deconstructs the

> listing of his colleague with contradictions and powerful questions. The truth is, every one of them has problems…
>
> I heard the explanation of this matter from my brother, the genius, may his memory be a blessing. Certainly, it is impossible to say that the rubric of mitzvot is limited to six hundred and thirteen and no more. If this were true, then from Genesis through Parashat Bo we would have only three mitzvot, and many Parshiot of the Torah have no mitzvot at all – this is just untenable!
>
> The truth is, every single statement of the Torah that was uttered by the mouth of the Almighty is an independent mitzvah. Truth be told, the mitzvot multiply and swell beyond number, to the point that one who has a perceptive mind and an understanding heart can guide all the details of his affairs and behavior, large and small, according to the Torah and mitzvot. Then he will have a mitzvah at all times, at every moment, until they are beyond number… About this King David, may peace be upon him, said, "To every goal I have seen an end, but your mitzvah is exceedingly broad" (Psalms 119:96).
>
> The six hundred and thirteen mitzvot mentioned [by the sages] are only roots, which spread out to many branches… This is why the Torah is compared to a tree, as the verse states, "It is a living tree for those who take hold of it" (Proverbs 3:18).
>
> *Ma'alot HaTorah*, intro.

The rabbis cannot agree on which mitzvot are included in the count because the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot are only the tip of the iceberg! The universe of Torah is an expanding one, including within its borders every possible circumstance of the ever-changing human condition. For those who can hear its message, the Torah

never fails to provide guidance – and this guidance is "mitzvah," even if it does not appear in the text and is not a bona fide Halachic obligation.

It is a romantic idea, but practically, how is it done? How can we receive guidance if the Torah does not address the issue at hand? How does "a perceptive mind and an understanding heart" help? Where exactly do these invisible, branching mitzvot come from? The answer to these questions can be found in the writings of the Vilna Gaon's mentor, the preeminent Kabbalist of modern times, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (Italy, 1707-1746).

> The concept of piety is found in this teaching of the sages: "Praised is the man that labors in Torah and gives pleasure to his Creator" (Talmud, Berachot 17a).
>
> The mitzvot that are incumbent upon all Jews are already known and the full extent of their obligations is also known. However, one who truly loves the Creator, may His name be blessed, won't strive and aim to exempt himself with the well-known obligations that are incumbent upon all Jewish people as a group. Rather, what will happen to him is what happens to a son who loves his father. If his father reveals his mind just a bit [and mentions] that he would like something, the son is already increasing that thing and that behavior as much as he can. Even though his father only said it once in half a sentence, that is enough for the son to understand the direction of his father's thoughts, and [start] doing for him even that which was not said explicitly, since [the son] can figure out for himself that this thing brings [his father] pleasure. [The son] won't wait for his father to instruct him more explicitly or a second time. We see with our own eyes this phenomenon

> occurring all the time between all lovers and friends, men and their wives, fathers and sons.
>
> The idea is that wherever there is an authentic, intense love between [two partners], no one says, 'I have not been instructed to do more,' or, 'What I have been explicitly told to do is sufficient.' Rather, from the instructions [it becomes possible] to infer the instructor's way of thinking, and an attempt will be made to do for him anything that can be assumed to give him pleasure.
>
> The same will also occur to anyone who really loves God, for this too is a loving relationship. The mitzvot that are revealed and well known will thus serve as discloser of [God's] mind, making known that God's will and desire leans in a particular direction. [God's lover] will then not say, 'What I have been explicitly told to do is sufficient,' or 'I will exempt myself with that which is required.' Rather he will say, 'Since I have found and seen that God leans toward this, I will use it as a guide to increase and broaden that thing in all directions that I can assume God would like.' This is the person who "gives pleasure to his Creator."
>
> Path of the Just, chap. 18

The Ten Commandments now make perfect sense. They only define the most extreme expression of each principle and leave the other end of the spectrum open-ended *because it is open-ended*! The Ten Commandments are not limited to ten commandments and the Ten Commandments are not even limited to the six hundred and thirteen mitzvah obligations. As we saw in the Talmud's stories about honoring parents, the Ten Commandments extend far beyond the letter of the law. How far we take them is a personal decision – one which depends on the depth of our relationship with God.

VI

We have seen that it is possible, indeed pious, to read between the lines of Torah and figure out the direction of God's Mind. Ironically, it was this very process that led Moses to smash the Ten Commandments when he saw the Jews dancing around a Golden Calf.

> Moses did three things on his own, and God agreed with him [on all three]. He decided to add one day [in preparation for Mount Sinai], he separated from his wife, and he broke the Tablets…
>
> How did Moses determine [to break the Tablets]? He said, "If, when it comes to the Paschal Lamb – which is just one of the six hundred and thirteen mitzvot – the Torah states, "No gentile may eat it" (Exodus 12:43), certainly when it comes to the entire Torah and the Jews are apostates [it is unacceptable for them to receive it]!

Talmud, Shabbat 87a

Moses was in a difficult position. He descended from Mount Sinai with the Two Tablets in his arms only to find the Jews worshipping a Golden Calf. What to do?

God is silent and Moses must decide on his own. Thinking fast, he creates a fortiori based on the Paschal Lamb and he casts the Tablets to the ground, smashing them. An unexpected, daring move. If Moses is wrong, he is in big trouble. But God approved.

> How do we know that God agreed with his decision? The verse states, "[the first tablets] that you broke (אשר שברת)" (Exodus

> 34:1). Reish Lakish [interpreted it and] said, "More power to you for breaking it! (יישר כחך ששיברת)."
>
> Ibid

Moses breaks the Tablets and God is proud of him! It seems that the breaking of the Tablets was not just a terrible tragedy; it was also Moses's finest hour.

> Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom God had known face to face … and for all the great awesomeness that Moses performed before the eyes of all of Israel.
>
> Deuteronomy 34:10,12

Those are the very last words of the Torah, but what does it mean? What awesome act did Moses perform "before the eyes of all of Israel"?

> "I grasped the two Tablets and threw them from my two hands, and I shattered them before your eyes."
>
> Ibid 9:17

Based on this verse, the Midrash (Sifrei 357) determines that the last words of the Torah are referring to the breaking of the Tablets!

Here, at the Torah's end, we recount the greatness of Moses. After a lifetime of exemplary leadership and self-sacrifice for the nation, what is selected as his greatest, most "awesome" deed? It is not saving the Jews, nor splitting the sea, nor teaching Torah. It is breaking the Tablets! Why? Because that was one thing that Moses did entirely by himself.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, God could easily have told Moses what to do, but God wanted Moses to come up with the answer on

his own – because this was the perfect opportunity to demonstrate how Torah operates in the real world. No matter how unique and unexpected the dilemma may be, the Torah is never silent. Even if the text does not appear to address the issue, it is always whispering, revealing the direction of God's Mind and providing guidance. All we need to do is listen. As the Vilna Gaon said, "one who has a perceptive mind and an understanding heart can guide all the details of his affairs and behavior, large and small, according to the Torah and mitzvot." This is the Torah's final point.

Now that we understand the process that led Moses to break the Tablets, we will also understand that breaking the Tablets did not destroy the Ten Commandments. On the contrary, it hammered home their true meaning.

> The Tablets broke, and the letters floated away.
>
> Talmud, Pesachim 87b

Breaking the Tablets was a teaching point. It demonstrated that the Ten Commandments are much bigger than ten laws etched onto a stone. The Ten Commandments are transcendent principles which encapsulate a system for living. In the end, the best way to deliver the Ten Commandments into the minds of the people was to break the Tablets before the eyes of the nation.

VII

It is a simple question. When the Jews heard the Ten Commandments, whose voice did they hear? Was it God? Or was it Moses? The Torah seems to be of two minds on this issue. To be fair, the Ten Commandments are introduced with these words: "God spoke all of these words saying…" (Exodus 20:1). However, the Torah also reports this:

> God said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you…"
> Mount Sinai was all in smoke because God had come down on it in fire. Its smoke went up like the smoke of a limekiln. The entire mountain trembled violently. There was a sound of a ram's horn, increasing in volume to a great degree. Moses would speak and God amplified[17] him with a voice.
>
> Exodus 19:9,18-19

Here we have Moses doing the talking! This stands in direct conflict with the introductory verse of the Ten Commandments. This contradiction is even more blatant in the Deuteronomic version.

> On the mountain, God spoke to you face to face out of the fire. I stood between you and God at that time to tell you God's words – since you were afraid of the fire, and did not go up on the mountain – saying:
> I am God your Lord…
>
> Deuteronomy 5:4-6

Here Moses states that God spoke to the people face to face but then, in the very next verse, he says that he stood between God and the people and delivered the message. So which is it? Whose voice did we hear?

Before we resolve this question, we will raise another. In the middle of the Ten Commandments, there is an apparently inexplicable grammatical shift. Here is an unabridged translation (numbering added).

1. I am God your Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, from the place of slavery.

2. You shall not have any other gods before Me. Do not represent [such Gods] by any carved statue or picture of anything in the heavens above, on the earth below, or in the water below the land. Do not bow down to [such gods] or worship them. I am God your Lord, a jealous God. Where My enemies are concerned, I keep in mind the sin of the fathers for [their] descendants, to the third and fourth [generation]. But for those who love Me and keep My commandments, I show love for thousands [of generations].
3. Do not take the name of God your Lord in vain. God will not allow the one who takes His name in vain to go unpunished.

Appropriately, the first two commandments are written in first person, e.g. "*I* am God," "*My* enemies," "those who love *Me*," etc. However, beginning with commandment number three, the language switches to third person, "one who takes *His* name in vain." Why the switch? This "minor" question will ultimately lead to new ways of thinking about the Ten Commandments. But first, we need to relearn the story.

From a safe distance of three millennia, it is easy for us to romanticize the Revelation at Sinai. What could be more beautiful than experiencing God? However, for the Jews who were there, there was nothing romantic about it. It was terrifying and traumatic, and they begged Moses to make it stop.

> "Now, why should we die? Why should this great fire consume us? If we hear the voice of God our Lord anymore, we will die!"
>
> Deuteronomy 5:21-22

The Jews desperately wanted the revelation to stop, but they were also interested in what God had to say. They came up with a plan and presented it to Moses.

> "*You* approach and listen to all God our Lord says. You can then tell us whatever God our Lord tells you, and when we hear it, we will do it."
>
> Ibid 5:24

Frightened that they would die, the Jews interrupted the revelation and asked that Moses serve as their ambassador. God was not upset by this proposal; on the contrary, He seconds the plan in this communication to Moses.

> "I have heard what this nation has said to you. They have spoken well. If only their hearts would always remain this way, where they are in such awe of Me…
> "Go tell them to return to their tents. You, however, must remain here with Me and I will tell you all the mitzvot, decrees and laws that you shall teach them…"
>
> Ibid 5:25-28

This explains the sudden grammatical shift from first to third person. After hearing the first two commandments from God, the Jews protested and Moses took over. When Moses says the third commandment, he obviously does not speak of taking "my name" in vain, he speaks of taking "*His* name" in vain. This also explains the biblical ambiguity on who actually delivered the Ten Commandments – it was both God and Moses! We heard the first two from God and the rest from Moses. Our textual problems are resolved.

Happily, the Talmud came to the exact same conclusion.

> Rabbi Simlai taught, "Six hundred and thirteen mitzvot were told to Moses. Three hundred and sixty five prohibitions like the number of days in a solar year and two hundred and forty eight positive mitzvot corresponding to the number of parts of the human body."
> Rav Hamnuna said, "What is the biblical source [for this]? 'Moses taught us Torah…' (Deuteronomy 33:4). The numerical value of [the Hebrew word] "Torah" is six hundred and eleven. [This is because the first two commandments,] "I [am God]" and "You shall not have [any other gods,]" were heard directly from God."
>
> Talmud, Makkot 23b-24a

In typical Talmudic style, this passage is cryptic, so we will hold the reader's hand. Rav Hamnuna is revealing a message encoded in an otherwise innocuous verse. The Hebrew letters that make up the word "Torah" – תורה – add up to six hundred and eleven.[18] The words "Moses taught us *Torah*" thus hint at the precise number of mitzvot taught by Moses – six hundred and eleven. However, the grand total of biblical mitzvot is not six hundred and eleven; it is six hundred and thirteen. This means that there are two mitzvot that come to us not from Moses, but from some other source. What are these two mysterious mitzvot? The answer, says Rav Hamnuna, is the first two mitzvot of the Ten Commandments: "I am God" and "You shall not have any other Gods." These two mitzvot were heard not from Moses, but from God Himself.

That explains the verses and the storyline, but now we are confronted with a new question. What is so special about these two mitzvot? Why are the Jews able to hear these two directly from God, when the other six hundred and eleven must be delivered through an intermediary? Is seems unlikely that these two got lucky just because

they happened to be first. Maimonides addresses our question and points out a unique common denominator shared by these two mitzvot.

> [The sages taught,] "I [am God]" and "You shall not have [any other gods,]" were heard directly from God" (Talmud, Makkot 24a). They mean that these words reached them just as they reached Moses our Master and that it was not Moses our Master who communicated them to them. For these two principles, I mean the existence of the deity and His being one, are knowable by human speculation alone. Now with regard to everything that can be known by demonstration, the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal; there is no superiority of one over the other. Thus these two principles are not known through prophecy alone… As for the other commandments, they belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition, not to the class of the intellecta.
>
> Guide of the Perplexed 2:33 (S. Pines, Trans.)

Maimonides is saying that the Jews heard these mitzvot directly from God not because they happened to be first but because they are the only mitzvot that "are knowable by human speculation alone." The truth of monotheism comes to man so naturally, "the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal." Thus, even though they were not prophets, the Jews could hear God proclaim the principles of monotheism – because hearing it from God had absolutely no affect on their appreciation of these principles! Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the other commandments.

When it comes to the other commandments, "they belong to the class of generally accepted opinions and those adopted in virtue of tradition." That is, even perfectly logical commandments such as

honoring parents or the prohibitions against murder and adultery are, in the end, matters of either opinion or tradition. People may believe strongly in the righteousness of these laws, and they would be right, but it cannot be said that knowledge of these principles comes naturally to man. Hearing them from God deepen appreciation of these truths, an impossibility for a non-prophet. They therefore had to be communicated through Moses.[19]

At Sinai, the Jews were unable to hear all Ten Commandments directly from God. However, God did not give up.

> God spoke these words to your entire assembly from the mountain, out of the fire, the cloud and the mist – ולא יסף .
>
> Deuteronomy 5:19

> What does "ולא יסף" mean? It [means the revelation] never ceased.
>
> Talmud, Sanhedrin 17a; *Onkelos* ad loc.

Sinai never ends. God continuously transmits the Ten Commandments, apparently in the hope that someone will hear them. But why does God bother? If the Jews couldn't hear it at Sinai, what makes God think they would hear it any better in the future?

VIII

God did not restrict the Ten Commandments to the Jews; He offered it to every nation on earth – and they rejected it. People can tolerate laws against theft and murder, but the "Do not steal" and the "Do not murder" of the Ten Commandments are another matter altogether. They are not mere commandments,[20] nor are they chapter headings for classifying mitzvot. They are a divine moral reductionism that cuts to the core of human behavior. Not only do

the Ten Commandments contain all six hundred and thirteen mitzvot of the Torah, they extend far beyond law and provide guidance on every aspect of life. It is understandable that humanity rejected such an uncompromising, all-encompassing code of ethics.

When the nations pointed to their ancestors' sins, when the descendants of Esau pointed to Esau's murderous tendencies and the descendants of Yishmael pointed to Yishmael's propensity for theft, they were not claiming a hereditary disposition for sin in an attempt to evade accountability. They were saying was that humans have natural drives and weaknesses that cannot be simply wished, or commanded, away. To their minds, the Ten Commandments set an unrealistic moral standard, but the Jews differed.

The Jews accepted the Torah because they knew the secret process[21] that makes the Ten Commandments attainable. This process, otherwise known as Judaism, can be summed up in a simple two-word formula, and with the roar of these two words, the Jewish nation embraced their newfound responsibilities.

"*Na'aseh V'Nishmah*!" "We will do and we will hear!"

Exodus 24:7

Do first and then hear? What does this formula mean?

It means that the full extent of the Ten Commandments cannot be understood from the text. It means that Judaism cannot be communicated in a classroom. It means that no Jewish studies program will ever succeed. It means that there is only one way to understand Torah. Only by experiencing the power of mitzvot in the real world of life, only by *doing*, will man be able to hear what God is saying and appreciate the wisdom that is Judaism.

"We will do and then we will hear!"

Do first and then hear, for it is the doing of mitzvot that makes the Ten Commandments audible. Not unlike the Hebrew slave, humanity suffers from an inability to "hear" all that the Ten Commandments contain. But there is a cure called mitzvot. The more mitzvot we do and the more central the Torah is in our lives, the more we sensitize ourselves to these principles and develop "a perceptive mind and an understanding heart." This transforms us into creatures that *naturally* understand the Ten Commandments. When that happens, we begin to perceive the eternal voice of Sinai and the distinction between ordinary mortals and prophets is blurred.

The practice of mitzvot thus functions as an awl, piercing our ears with the majestic potential of man and opening our hearts to the divine language of Torah. The seasoned practitioner of Judaism can then return to text, successfully discern the direction of God's Mind, and "guide all the details of his affairs and behavior, large and small, according to the Torah and mitzvot."

At Sinai, the Jews were well aware that they failed to hear the Ten Commandments. They did not understand how humiliation could be called "murder." They did not understand how climbing stairs could be adulterous. They did not understand how honoring parents could include suffering a financial loss in silence. They did not understand how the Torah could possibly provide guidance for every aspect of their lives. So they promised to do what was necessary to heighten their sensitivity. They promised to do mitzvot.

"We will do and then we will hear!"

The whisperings of the Decalogue never cease. The only question is how well we can hear them.

[1] In a survey of one thousand Americans taken by Kelton Research in September of 2007, only 14% of respondents could accurately name all Ten Commandments.

[2] The separation of church and state controversy climaxed in 2003, when Roy Moore was removed from his post as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama for his refusal to obey a federal judge's order to remove a Ten Commandments monument from the state courthouse. In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court both upheld a Ten Commandment display in Texas and ruled against one in Kentucky. This debate is not merely a question of constitutionality. In 2003, Slate published an outright attack on the Ten Commandments by Christopher Hitchens entitled, "Moore's Law: The Immorality of the Ten Commandments." And Alan Dershowitz questioned the morality of the Ten Commandments in January of 2008 in The Huffington Post.

Movies and books play a central role in America's conversation about the Ten Commandments. Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 epic film, "The Ten Commandments," is a Hollywood classic, which, adjusted for inflation, ranks as the fifth-highest grossing movie of all time. Krzysztof Kieślowski's "The Decalogue," a series consisting of ten one-hour films, was re-released in the US in 2003. Each of these award-winning films explores the meaning of one of the Ten Commandments within a fictional story. In 2006, Val Kilmer starred in "The Ten Commandments: The Musical," and in 2007, Ben Kingsley narrated a computer animated movie entitled "The Ten Commandments." Also in 2007, David Wain directed and co-wrote "The Ten," a comedy loosely based on the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments have produced an ever-growing library of books, from scholarly commentary to children's activity books. (A search on Amazon Books for "Ten Commandments" gives an astonishing 1,720 results; however, many of them are not actually about the biblical Ten Commandments!) Recent contributions include "Losing Moses on the Freeway: The Ten Commandments in America" (2006) by New York Times correspondent Chris Hedges, and "Shattered Tablets: Why We Ignore the Ten Commandments at Our Peril" (2007) by Discovery Institute's David Klinghoffer.

[3] In 2001, Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas recognized that "the (Ten) Commandments have secular significance as well, because they have made a substantial

contribution to our secular legal codes." (City of Elkhart v. Books, 532 U.S. 1058).

[4] In fact, the Halacha actually considers it a *crime* for a gentile to observe the fourth commandant, the mitzvah of Shabbat. This surprising law is derived from a Midrashic reading of Genesis 8:22 (cf. Talmud, Sanhedrin 58; Maimonides, Laws of Kings 10:9) and is supported by the plain meaning of Exodus 31:13 and Deuteronomy 5:11-14. A gentile who sincerely wishes to observe Shabbat must first convert to Judaism.

[5] These are covered by the Noahide Code. Cf. Maimonides, Laws of Kings, chap. 9.

[6] This translation of the Ten Commandments is abbreviated. The Torah elaborates on some of them, providing additional details (20:4-5,10), reasons (20:11), consequences (20:5,7) and rewards (20:6,12).

[7] The Mishnah in Tamid (1:1) reports that the Kohanim (Priests) recited the Ten Commandments as part of the daily service in the Temple. The sages wished to institute this practice for all Jews, but they thought better of it "because of the arguments of the heretics" (Talmud, Berachot 12a). The sages were concerned that heretics would misguide the ignorant, telling people that the Ten Commandments are recited because we heard them from God at Sinai, but the rest of Torah is false! (Rashi ad loc.). (It is possible that the "heretics" referred to here are Christians, see R. D. Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3, pg. 101, note #77.)

When Maimonides was asked if a congregation should rise when the Ten Commandments are read from the Torah, he responded, "That which the deceased rabbi instituted, that you should sit, is appropriate. His proofs are correct according to the logic of scholars. Nothing need be added to them. A proper action would be to do the following: In all places where there is a custom to stand, it is necessary to stop them, because this results in a loss of faith. [People begin to think] that there are different levels in Torah, that some parts are "higher" than other parts – this is exceedingly bad. It is appropriate to block all avenues that lead to such a wrong belief. That which one sage argued, that in Baghdad and some other cities they do it – this is meaningless as evidence. Just because we find some people that are sick, we do not make healthy people sick in order that everyone should be the same! Rather, we attempt to treat all the sick people that we can…" (*Teshuvot HaRambam* 263). Despite the harsh words of Maimonides, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein ruled that one must follow the local custom. If the congregation is sitting and you wish to stand, you have no option other than to stand for the entire reading, thereby showing no

special significance to the Ten Commandments (Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:22). R. J.B. Soloveichik suggested that Maimonides only had an issue when the reading was done with the regular cantillation. However, our custom is to read the Ten Commandments with a special cantillation that divides the verses into the Ten Commandments. Such a reading is clearly done as a commemoration of the revelation at Sinai. Standing is therefore permissible, for it does not indicate that the rest of the Torah is less significant; it just commemorates the standing of the Jews at Sinai (R. M. Shurkin, *Ha'rirei Kedem*, vol. 2, pg. 250).

Based on the same concern of the "arguments of the heretics," the Rashba (d. 1310) forbade the reciting of the Ten Commandments as part of the daily morning service in the synagogue (*Teshuvot HaRashba* 184 cited by Rama O.C. 1:5). Some have even questioned the permissibility of placing tablets with the Ten Commandments atop the Ark in the synagogue – a very common design feature! (see *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 2, pg. 111, note 63).

[8] The Hebrew word for incense is "קטרת." Using the At-Bash system of letter substitution (where an א is substituted for a ת, and vice versa, a ב for a ש, a ג for a ר, etc.), the ק of קטרת can be exchanged for a ד, giving a total numeric value of 613. ד=4, ט=9, ר=200, ת=400. 4+9+200+400=613 (Midrash Rabba ad loc.).

[9] There are alternative interpretations. In his commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah*, Sa'adiah Gaon writes that the the final two words of the Ten Commandments, לרעך אשר, "that which belongs to your friend," are not included in the count of 613 because "they contain the very essence of the Torah" (quoted by R. Aryeh Kaplan, "The Handbook of Jewish Thought," pg. 66, note 54). R. Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (b. 1361) writes that these final seven letters allude to the seven Noahide laws (*Zohar HaRakia*, intro.).

[10] Two prominent examples are Sa'adiah Gaon's (Babylon, 892-942) "*Azharos*" on the Ten Commandments (cf. R. Y.Y. Perlow, "*Sefer HaMitzvot* of the Rasag," intro., sec. 11, pg. 57) and Nachmonides' ("Ramban," Spain, 1194-1270) "The Six Hundred and Thirteen Mitzvot" (Chavel, *Kitvei HaRamban*, vol. II, pg. 521).

[11] See also Talmud, Avodah Zarah 2b. While not all such "Aggadic" stories are to be taken literally, Maimonides, in his "Epistle to Yemen," explains that God sent a prophet to every nation to offer them the Torah, and, with the exception of the Jews, every nation rejected the offer. The Sefas Emes, however, understood this Midrash allegorically. "Certainly,

it would be impossible to give the Torah to them in the same way it was given to the Jews. It is just that the Torah is infinite…" (*Sefas Emes* on Genesis 5636 s.v. B'Rashi).

[12] Literally, "Anyone who whitens the face of his fellow in public it is as if he has spilled blood." Humiliation causes the blood to drain from a person's face. This, the Talmud says, is the "spilling of blood," a euphemism for homicide.

[13] Judaism has nothing against staircases. In fact, there was a staircase leading up to the Temple Mount itself! It is only when a Kohen approaches the altar to perform the Temple service that the standards of modesty reach such extremes.

[14] First published in Lublin in 1602, the Kli Yakar is printed in all editions of the *Mikraot Gedolot*.

[15] More an indentured servant than a slave, the Torah legislates special protections preventing the abuses endemic to ordinary slavery.

[16] Cf. R. Y.Y. Perlow, "*Sefer HaMitzvot* of the Rasag," intro., sec. 1, pg. 5.

[17] "יענו." Our translation, "amplified," is based on Rashi to Deuteronomy 26:5 (citing Talmud, Sotah 32b) where ענה is defined as "a raised voice." This is supported by Genesis 31:36, Exodus 32:18 and Deuteronomy 27:14. Others have "replied."

[18] ת=400, ו=6, ר=200, ה=5. 400+6+200+5=611

[19] In his commentary to Exodus, Nachmonides disagrees with Maimonides. He writes that the Jews did in fact hear all ten commandments from God Himself, as evidenced by a straightforward reading of the text. However, the people were only able to understand the first two commandments. There other eight had to be explained to them by Moses later. Cf. Ramban, Exodus 20:7.

[20] In fact, nowhere does the Torah describe them as such. The Hebrew is "*asseret hadivarim*," which translates as "the ten statements" (cf. Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4). "Ten Commandments" is just another inaccuracy of the King James Version.

[21] "When the Jews said, 'we will do' before saying 'we will hear,' God said, 'Who revealed this secret to my children?!'" (Talmud, Shabbat 88a).

Customs of Shavuot: Origins and Meaning

RABBI AVROMI APT

Typically, it is the mitzvot of the day that define the Jewish holidays. Not surprisingly, holidays often take their biblical names from their unique mitzvot: Passover is called "Festival of Matzot" (Exodus 23:15), Sukkot is called "Festival of Booths" (Leviticus 23:34), and Rosh Hashanah is called "Day of [Shofar] Blowing" (Numbers 29:1). Shavuot is different, however, because other than the standard resting from work, it lacks any special mitzvot.

Shavuot may lack mitzvot, but it certainly does not lack names. It is alternatively called "Festival of Weeks" (Deuteronomy 16:10),[1] "Day of the First Fruits" (Numbers 28:26),[2] "Festival of the Harvest"

[1] The word "Shavuot" means "weeks." This refers to the fact that Shavuot is the day after the completion of *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of the days and weeks from the bringing of the Omer offering on the second day of Passover until the day before Shavuot. This period corresponds to the journey of the Jewish people from Egypt to Mount Sinai.

[2] This refers to the mitzvah of *Bikkurim*, "first fruits." During the Temple era, the Jews would gather their first fruits and offer them to the Kohen

(Exodus 23:16), "Time of the Giving of the Torah" (Siddur),[3] and "Atzeret" (Mishnah).[4] Not only is Shavuot blessed with many names, it is also blessed with many fascinating customs. We will turn to the customs of Shavuot to help us find the meaning of the day and its names. But first we need to understand what Jewish customs, or "Minhagim," are.

Jewish law can be divided into two categories, Halacha and Minhag. Halacha[5] includes all biblical and rabbinic practices that have been legislated as law. Minhagim are practices that Jews began doing on their own; some of them are indeed ancient, but they were never instituted as law.[6] However, the verse states, "Do not remove

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(priest) when they arrived in Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festival of Shavuot (cf. Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

[3] This name appears throughout the liturgy of the day.

[4] Shavuot is referred to throughout the Mishnah and Talmud as "Atzeret" (e.g. Shevi'it 1:1). Atzeret literally means "stop." According to the Ibn Ezra, this refers to the Halacha to abstain from working on the holiday (commentary to Leviticus 23:36). However, since resting on the holiday is not unique to Shavuot, we will present an alternative approach. The Torah also calls the eighth day of Sukkot, "Atzeret" (Leviticus 23:36). For the seven days of Sukkot, there is a mitzvah to dwell in a Sukka and wave the four species (cf. Leviticus 23:40-42). Shemini Atzeret, however, does not have these mitzvot. It is a day added to extend the overall holiday experience in a less formal way and serve as the culmination of the Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot holiday season (cf. Rashi to Numbers 29:35). Nachmanides (1194-1270) writes that the Exodus did not end with leaving Egypt on the first day of Passover or even with the splitting of the sea seven days later. The redemption process was only completed when the Jews received the Torah and experienced the revelation at Mount Sinai on Shavuot. This holiday is thus called "Atzeret," for it is the culmination of the Passover season, just as Shemini Atzeret served as the culmination of the fall holiday season.

[5] Literally, "going," the Halachah is the code of Jewish law by which Jews conduct their affairs.

[6] The oldest recorded custom is that of beating the willow branches on Hoshana Rabbah (the seventh day of Sukkot). This tradition dates back to

the ancient landmark which your fathers have set" (Proverbs 22:28), and this is understood to be an obligation to maintain customs (*Midrash Yalkut Shimoni* ad loc.).[7] Practically, Minhag is as binding as Halacha itself (Ramban to Talmud, Pesachim 7b).[8]

Shavuot is devoid of any unique Halachic obligations, but it is celebrated with a fascinating array of customs. Understanding and practicing these customs will bring about a deeper appreciation of the day itself.

Decorating the Synagogue

The Maharil[9] (1365-1427) records a custom to spread fragrant herbs and flowers on the floor of the synagogue (Laws of Shavuot

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the time of the Prophets (Sukkah 44a). Often, customs were born out of a desire to satisfy differing opinions on a Halachic requirement (cf. *Beit Yosef*, O.C. 167:1).

[7] The Talmud (Pesachim 50b) finds the source for this idea in this verse: "Listen, my son, to the instruction of your father and do not turn away from the Torah of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8).

[8] See also Ritva to Bava Batra 134a. Additionally, in situations where a custom forbids that which would otherwise be permitted, the custom gains the Halachic status of a vow (Talmud, Pesachim 50b-51a; Shulchan Aruch, Y.D. 214). There are even occasions when Minhag overrides Halacha, "*minhag mevatel halacha*" (e.g., Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 12:1; *Masechet Sofrim* 14:18). The limited parameters of "*minhag mevatel halacha*" are beyond the scope of this essay (cf. *Teshuvot Yachin Boaz* 1:118).

A custom which developed because people thought it was required by Halacha does not have the status of a Minhag (*Tosafot*, Pesachim 51a). However, a Minhag whose reason is unknown is assumed to have a valid reason (Rama, O.C. 690:17).

[9] Rabbi Yaacov HaLevi Moelin, Rabbi of Mainz, Germany. The leading Halachic authority of his time, Maharil is the earliest written source for many Ashkenazik customs.

2).[10] In later sources, this custom appears in different forms. Some brought flowering plants, branches or even full trees into the synagogue (*Magen Avraham* 494:5).[11] There was also a custom to adorn the Torah scroll itself with crowns made of roses or willows (*Sefer Hatoda'a*). Moroccan Jews have a custom to decorate the synagogue as if for a wedding and to escort the Torah scroll with candles as if it were a bride.[12]

It is not hard to understand the Minhag to bring trees, especially fruit bearing trees, into the synagogue on Shavuot. The Jewish holidays are linked to the agricultural cycle and Shavuot is described by the Torah as the "Festival of the Harvest" (Exodus 23:16). This refers to more than the agricultural reality in Israel at this time of year. The Mishnah teaches that every year on Shavuot, God "passes judgment" on the fruits of the trees (Rosh Hashanah 1:2), that is,

[10] According to *Targum Sheni*, Esther chap. 3 (which itself predates the Maharil by many centuries), this custom was already in practice during the Persian Era (circa 500 B.C.E.).

[11] The Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797) strongly opposed the custom of bringing trees into the synagogue. He felt that since the gentiles had incorporated trees into their holidays, it would seem that the Jews were imitating their ways (*Chayei Adam* 131:12; *Mishnah Berurah* 494:10). Others argued that when the gentiles do something logical, like decorating their sanctuary, it does not get the stigma of a "gentile practice" (*Orchot Chaim HaChadash* 494:8; *Maharsham*, *Daas Torah* 494).

[12] The covenant at Sinai is viewed by the Midrash as a "marriage" between God and the Jews (cf. Rashi to Exodus 19:17; Zohar, Emor 98). R. Israel ben Moses Najara (Gaza, 1555-1625) went as far as to compose "*Ketubat Yisrael*," a lyrical "marriage contract" between the Jewish nation and the Almighty that is recited in many Sephardic congregations on Shavuot. Ashkenazim have a similar custom to recite "*Akdamot*," a mystical, Aramaic poem composed by Rabbi Meir of Worms in the 11th century. This poem describes the greatness of God, Torah, and the Jewish people.

God decides whether to bless the upcoming year with a plentiful fruit harvest.[13] This alone would explain why trees are brought into the synagogue, but there are other reasons.

During the temple era, the Jews brought their first fruits to Jerusalem on Shavuot.[14] Moreover, on Shavuot, two loaves made from the new wheat crop were offered on the Temple's altar (cf. Leviticus 23:16-21), and wheat is occasionally referred to as a "tree."[15] These mitzvot were the focus of the holiday and helped facilitate the prayers for a successful and "fruitful" year. In modern times, tree branches in the sanctuary can serve as a reminder to do the same (*Magen Avraham* 494:5).

The tradition to place flowers or aromatic herbs seems to have an additional meaning. The Jews traveled from Egypt through the Sinai Desert for several weeks before getting to their destination. The landscape was barren. Then, they reached an oasis. Mount Sinai had

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[13] The Talmud writes that the two Torah portions which describe the punishments that God will inflict on the Jews if they sin are read in the weeks preceding the two judgment days, Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot in order that the year and all its deficiencies should end and the new year should begin with abundance (Megilah 31b). R. Eliezer Waldenberg (the "Tzitz Eliezer," 1915-2006) explains that it is appropriate that next year's productivity is determined on Shavuot, at the end of the season. It seems to this author that the judgment of the coming year is based on whether or not the previous year's crops were utilized properly.
In the year before *Shemita* (the sabbatical year), an orchard may be plowed only until Shavuot, for after that point the farmer appears to be preparing his field for a sabbatical year harvest (Mishnah, Shevi'it 1:1). We can infer that until Shavuot it is still possible to improve the fruits of the current year. This explains why God decides the fate of next year's harvest on Shavuot.

[14] See note #2.

[15] *Tosafot* to Shabbat 27b points to the opinion that the "Tree" of Knowledge was actually wheat (cf. Talmud, Berachot 40a).

miraculously come into full bloom for the occasion. Grass grew and the mountainside was covered with flowers.[16]

When it came time for the revelation, the Torah describes the event as a multimedia experience:

> There was thunder and lightning with a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an extremely loud blast of a shofar… Mount Sinai was all in smoke… its smoke ascended like the smoke of a limekiln… The sound of the Shofar was increasing in volume to a great degree.
>
> Exodus 19:16-19

The Talmud adds that with every statement of the Ten Commandments, God filled the world with a sweet aroma (Shabbat 88b). The lesson is that the Torah is able to engage all of our senses. Decorating the synagogue with fragrant flowers and grasses is thus a way to commemorate Sinai and convey the life-force, beauty, and pleasant atmosphere that Torah brings into the world.[17]

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[16] *Levush* to Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 494. Often quoted as a Midrash, it does not seem that any such Midrash exists. Support for this tradition can be found in this verse: "…sheep and cattle may not graze near the mountain" (Exodus 34:3).

[17] Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber suggests that each of the aforementioned customs, flowers, trees, fragrant herbs, etc., all developed independently for the different reasons cited above (*Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 1, pg. 119). To this author it seems unreasonable to assume that at one point in time, many different communities simultaneously began practicing similar customs for different reasons. More likely, a single original custom evolved over time as it spread to different communities. Later, in retrospect, various reasons were posited to explain the varying customs.

Eating Dairy

Holiday celebrations are associated with big meals and there is Halachic basis for celebrating with meat and wine.[18] Shavuot, however, is different! The central dish on Shavout is nothing other than the holy cheesecake.

> In all places, there is a custom to eat dairy on the first day of Shavuot.
>
> Rama, O.C. 494:3[19]

The basis for this custom is that upon receiving the Torah the Jews were faced with many new laws governing food, including the laws of not mixing milk and meat and those of kosher slaughter. It would have taken time to prepare their knives for proper slaughtering and to "Kasher" their vessels,[20] and it was therefore impossible for them to

[18] Cf. Talmud, Pesachim 109a. *Beit Yosef* (O.C. 529) points out that the Talmud seems to refer exclusively to the sacrificial meats of the holiday offerings in the Temple. Nevertheless, Maimonides includes eating meat as one of the ways of rejoicing on the holiday (Laws of Yom Tov 6:17-18). And R. Yosef Caro himself (author of *Beit Yosef*), in the laws of Purim (Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 696:7), mentions the obligation to have meat and wine. Holidays have a mitzvah of "*simcha*," to be happy, and the commentaries are debating whether any meat brings happiness or is it only the Temple offerings that bring the required joy. Some explain that as long as the Temple stood, the only way to experience real happiness was to eat sacrificial meat. When that was no longer available, one could find a lesser level of happiness in whatever foods they enjoy (R. Aryeh Pomeranchik (1908-1942), *Emek Beracha* pg. 108, quoting R. Chaim Soloveichik).

[19] "Rama" is an acronym for Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1520-1572), rabbi of Krakow, Poland and the leading authority on Ashkenazic custom. His Halachic rulings are printed in the Shulchan Aruch alongside those of his Sephardic contemporary, Rabbi Yosef Caro.

[20] That is, before using their pots to cook Kosher meat, they would first have to cleanse them of all non-Kosher residue (cf. Numbers 31:21-23;

eat meat on the first day of Shavuot.[21] This is especially true in light of the tradition that the Torah was given on Shabbat,[22] when slaughtering, Kashering and cooking is prohibited.

This event could be commemorated with a dairy snack (like cheesecake), but some have a custom to serve a dairy holiday meal. The bread that accompanies this meal becomes "dairy" and its leftovers cannot be used with a subsequent meat meal.[23] In order to eat a meat meal thereafter, one would be required to have a second loaf of bread.[24] The Rama (O.C. 494:3) writes that these two loaves commemorate the two loaves offered in the Temple on Shavuot (cf. Leviticus 23:16-21).[25]

Eating dairy also alludes to an unusual alternate name for Mount Sinai, the mountain upon which the Torah was given on Shavuot.[26] The Psalmist called this mountain "*Har Gavnunim*" (cf. Psalms 68:16-17), closely related to the word "*G'vinah*," meaning cheese (*Ta'amei HaMinhagim* 624).

It would seem that any cheese would satisfy the above cited reasons. Why cheesecake? Cheesecake hints at a connection between Torah and dairy. King Solomon wrote, "Honey and milk under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11) which the Midrash understands as a

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Shulchan Aruch, Y.D. 121). This process is called "Kashering." Milk, however, can be consumed without pasteurization.

[21] *Mishnah Berurah* 494:12

[22] Talmud, Shabbat 86b

[23] Shulchan Aruch, Y.D. 89:4

[24] According to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986), the prohibition to reuse this bread at a meat meal only applies to slices that may have come in contact with the dairy food. To have a different loaf is thus not obligatory, just praiseworthy (*Igros Moshe*, Y.D. 1:38).

[25] Although every Shabbat and holiday meal begins with two loaves (Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 274:1 and *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc.), ordinarily there is no need to eat from both loaves.

[26] Bamidbar Rabba 1:8 lists six different names for the mountain.

reference to the sweetness of Torah.[27] According to the 14th century Halachic compendium "*Kol Bo*," the custom to eat honey with cheese on Shavuot has its source in this Midrash (*Kol Bo* 52). Eating cheesecake is thus our way to express our delight in receiving the Torah.

Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira (Dinov, 1783-1841) finds a deeper connection between dairy and love. Meat is associated with death and finality. Milk, however, symbolizes kindness, life and love. It is the nursing mother's desire to give of herself that gives life to her children. And no less than an infant needs milk, Jews need Torah for their survival.[28] God's giving of Torah can thus be compared to a mother lovingly nursing her child (*Ta'amei HaMinhagim* 422).

Learning Torah All Night Long

The Midrash teaches that on the morning of the revelation at Sinai, the Jews overslept. God Himself had to come wake them up.[29] This was an embarrassing lack of excitement on the part of the Jews, but every year Shavuot affords us an opportunity to rectify this mistake. In Judaism, holidays aren't merely commemorative; we *relive* our history on the holidays.[30] Shavuot is thus an opportunity to accept the Torah all over again.[31] Learning through the night is a

[27] Shir HaShirim Rabba 1

[28] Rabbi Akiva compared Jews without Torah to fish trying to survive on dry land (Talmud, Berachot 61b).

[29] Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:56

[30] A teaching of the master Kabbalist, the "Arizal" (R. Yitzchak Luria, 1534-1572), quoted by *Meor Einayim*, Parashat Yitro.

[31] This level of excitement is expected to be maintained throughout the year. The Midrash says, "Every day the Torah should be dear to you as if you just received it today from Mount Sinai" (*Pesikta Zutreta*, Re'eh 18a).

powerful way to express our excitement for Torah and fix the mistake of our ancestors.[32]

There is another way to understand this Midrash, based on a teaching of Maimonides. According to Maimonides, prophecy is always received in a dream, while the prophet sleeps (with Moses being the sole exception to this rule).[33] Aware that God intended to teach them Torah directly, the Jews assumed that they should be sleeping in order to receive the prophecy in a dream. This interpretation helps us understand how the Jews could be sleeping on such a momentous occasion.

Based on Kabbalistic sources, some have the custom to spend the night reciting "*Tikkun Leil Shavuot*."[34] The *Tikkun*, litrally "fixing," is a Shavuot Reader of sorts – a sampling of all areas of Torah, from Scripture to Talmud to Zohar. It appeared around the 16th century

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[32] Zohar, Emor 49a, cited by *Magen Avraham* 494:1. The Zohar states that anyone who learns with joy on this night will be blessed in both this world and the next, and the blessing of Torah will be passed on to their children. The Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria, 1534-1572) advances other blessings for people involved in this learning, cf. *Shaar Hakavanot* 89a.

[33] Laws of Torah Fundamentals 7:6

[34] Arizal, *Sha'ar Hakavanot* pg. 89a. Rabbi Yeshayah Horowitz, the *Shelah HaKodosh* (1565-1630), quotes a letter from Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (1500-1580) in which he recounts an extraordinary event that occurred one Shavuot night in Turkey. He and some colleagues spent the night of Shavuot studying the "Tikkun" with their master Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575). In the middle of their studies, their teacher's voice changed. An angel of God spoke to them through R. Yosef Caro and congratulated them on their dedication to Torah and God.
Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef discusses whether it is permitted to study other texts on this night. On one hand, it has become a widespread custom to read the Tikkun. On the other hand, the Talmud teaches that Torah study will only be successful when one studies a topic that he is interested in (Avodah Zarah 19a). Reb Ovadiah rules that a person should follow the custom of his synagogue (*Teshuvot Yechave Daat* 3:32).

and the Minhag to recite it is upheld primarily by the Sephardic and Chassidic communities. Others feel that time is better spent focusing on one area of study. In recent years, some have rebuffed the custom of staying up at night altogether, arguing that it causes a net loss of Torah learning over the holiday. According to this view, it is preferable to get a good night's sleep and allocate extra time during the day for Torah study.

Reading Ruth

There is a Minhag to read the Book of Ruth in the synagogue on Shavuot.[35]

There are several possible reasons for this custom. Some point to the fact that the story of Ruth took place during the barley harvest, around the time of Shavuot. Others say that since King David was born and died on Shavuot,[36] we read the story of his ancestry.[37]

The book of Ruth is a story of loving kindness. From the beginning of the story when Avimelech abandons his people during the famine, until the marriage of Ruth and Boaz at the end, the story pivots on the principle of kindness. The Torah is also a book of kindness. "The Torah starts with kindness and ends with kindness" (Talmud, Sotah 14a). Judaism teaches man how to transcend the self and focus on others. When asked to summarize Judaism on one foot, Hillel famously responded, "That which you dislike, don't do to your friend" (Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

[35] R. Dovid Avudraham (Spain, 14th century) cited by Rama, O.C. 490:9. In the Diaspora where Shavuot is celebrated for two days, the custom is to read the Book of Ruth on the second day of the holiday.
[36] *Tosafot*, Chagigah 17a
[37] Cf. *Shaarei Teshuva* O.C. 494:7

Perhaps, the story of Ruth is an analogy for receiving the Torah at Sinai. Ruth[38] accepted the Torah and converted to Judaism after many years of poverty and hardship. Similarly, the Jews were only able to receive the Torah after enduring the hardships of slavery in Egypt (*Yalkut Shimoni*, ad loc.). This is in line with the Midrashic teaching that a person who focuses on the pleasures of life will never retain Torah.[39]

An unwritten tension in the Book of Ruth is the Torah prohibition for a Jew to marry a convert from the nation of Moab (cf. Deuteronomy 23:4). How was Boaz allowed to marry Ruth?[40] Boaz married Ruth based on an oral tradition that this prohibition only applies to Moabite men (Talmud, Yevamot 77a). Generations later, public opinion held that Boaz had made a mistake and that Ruth's descendant David was therefore unfit to marry a Jewess,[41] but history has proven Boaz right – Ruth mothered the Davidic dynasty. Reading Ruth on Shavuot thus reminds us of the critical role of the oral tradition – embodied today in the Talmud – in understanding and interpreting the text of the Torah.

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[38] The numerical value of the Hebrew word "Ruth" is 606. There are 613 biblical commandments (Talmud, Makkot 24a). Every convert, like the prototype Ruth and the Jews at Mt. Sinai, must accept upon themselves 606 commandments in addition to the seven Noahide laws incumbent upon every human being.

[39] Talmud, Berachot 63b and Shabbat 83b in the name of Reish Lakish. This quote appears in several Midrashic sources. The Mishnah expresses a similar idea in Avot 6:4.

[40] It seems that the other potential redeemer, "Ploni Almoni," was concerned about this problem. He relinquished his right to marry Ruth with the words, "lest I destroy my inheritance…" (Ruth 4:6; Rashi ad loc.).

[41] Cf. Talmud, Yevamot 76b-77a.

Temptation & Redemption in the Book of Ruth

RABBI MOTTY WEINSTOCK

There is an ancient tradition to read the Book of Ruth on the festival of Shavuot. It is a moving story of tragedy, loyalty, and redemption. However, like all stories associated with the Jewish holidays and festivals, there is more to this story than meets the eye.

Before we embark on our textual exploration to uncover the deeper meaning of Ruth, let us begin with a synopsis.

Famine plagues the Land of Israel. Elimelech, a distinguished and wealthy resident of the city of Bethlehem, sets off to Moab. He is accompanied by his wife Naomi and their two sons, Machlon and Kilyon. They wish to maintain their good life away from all the incessant beggars back home. But the honeymoon does not last long, as Elimelech soon passes away.

Somewhat acclimated to their Moabite environment, the boys marry locally. With their respectable background, they marry Moabite princesses[1] and are thus ensured elite social status. This too, unfortunately, is not to last. Machlon and Kilyon die suddenly, widowing their wives.

Recognizing that the family situation will not improve, and hearing of the famine's end, Naomi decides to head back home to Israel. Her two young widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, accompany her as she begins the journey.

It is at the crossroads between Moab and Judah, where an intense conversation takes place. Ruth and Orpah insist on remaining by Naomi's side. Naomi, for her part, cannot fathom why they wish to do so. "Have I more sons in my womb," she asks. Weeping, Orpah kisses her mother-in-law good-bye and departs, returning to her parents in Moab. Ruth, though, is not so easily dissuaded. "Where you go, I go... your people are my people; your God is my God," she tells her mother-in-law. Moved by Ruth's sincerity, Naomi eventually concedes and the two women continue together along the path to Bethlehem. Once a member of the elite, Naomi returns to Israel widowed and impoverished.

In Israel, it is harvest season. The local Jewish farmers, following a social-awareness mitzvah mandated by the Torah, leave part of their harvest out in the field for the poor.[2] Having minimal food at home, Naomi encourages the younger Ruth to walk through the neighboring farms and bring home whatever slim pickings she can find.

As it happens, Ruth wanders into the field of a man by the name of Boaz. Noontime arrives and Boaz comes to his field. Immediately, he takes note of this most refined young lady. Ruth's modesty of behavior and dress stand out.[3] Upon learning her identity, Boaz discreetly instructs his field hands to increase the amount of grain they leave behind. That bounty, plus a private lunch with the boss (Boaz), made for the best day Ruth had in a very long time.

Ruth returns home later that afternoon with full arms. Pleasantly surprised, Naomi inquires as to the name of the day's benefactor. "Boaz" Ruth tells her. "Boaz" repeats Naomi incredulously. Could it

be? The elderly, venerable sage, recently widowed, was a close relative of her deceased husband. Indeed, it was true. Naomi then utters an appreciative prayer to God for not having forsaken them in their time of need.

Several months later, Naomi develops a game plan to help Ruth start a family. Despite Boaz's advanced age, Naomi recommends that Ruth marry Boaz!

We pause now to explain a few details that will provide necessary context for the next part of the story. Jewish land ownership has traditionally been the subject of many laws and customs. When the Jewish nation first conquered the Land of Israel, it divided the land among the twelve tribes.[4] Each tribe's region was then further apportioned among various families. These family estates were considered a valuable inheritance to be passed down from generation to generation. In the event that a field was sold, it remained a priority for the original landowner or close relative to "redeem" the field, to purchase it back from the new owner.[5] Similarly, when a man dies without heirs, his property is to be "redeemed" by a next of kin. This is to maintain the family name on the field.

There is another, related mitzvah in the Torah called *Yibum*, Levirate marriage. When a man dies without children, his unmarried brother has a mitzvah to marry his widowed sister in law.[6] Here too, the idea is the preservation of the name of the deceased.

We return now to our story. The elements of Naomi's plan are as interesting as they are original. She instructs Ruth, under the cover of night, to slip into the silo where Boaz sleeps. Quietly, she should to take her place alongside the sleeping Boaz, and when he awakens, she should remind him that he is her husband's redeemer.

What is the idea behind this plan? Why doesn't Naomi just walk up to Boaz and recommend that he marry Ruth? We shall return to this question in due time.

That evening, the plan is executed. Some time in middle of the night, Boaz awakens with a start to find a woman sleeping at his feet. Astonished, he learns who this is and what she wants. Though he was certainly no youngster, to ignore her request out of hand did not sit well with him.

"Today," he replies, "Today we shall arrange it. You should be aware, however, that there *is* a closer relative to your late husband than I. We must consult him first. In the event that he declines to redeem you, I shall be on hand to continue immediately" (cf. Ruth 3:13).[7]

In the morning, Boaz assembles a group of notables to observe the proceedings. Ruth's closest relative (he is unnamed) is summoned and offered the deceased's property to redeem. "Certainly! I would be honored." "Realize," Boaz informs him, "that along with the land, you are to redeem the wife as well." This, however, is not as appealing to said relative. "I'm sorry. It just won't be possible for me at this time" (cf. Ruth 4:6). He refuses, whereupon Boaz proceeds with the formalities, himself redeeming the field and marrying Ruth. Ruth conceives and a son is born.

The story, technically speaking, would end here but for one last noteworthy detail: Ruth's son, named Oved, was the father of a man named Jesse who in turn became the father of David, King of Israel.

This is how Ruth became known as the "Mother of Moshiach" (the Messiah).[8] Moshiach, the prophesied future king of the Jews, will trace his lineage back to King David. Clearly, Ruth is the mother of Moshiach due to the genealogical fact that Ruth was David's great-grandmother and Moshiach is a descendant of David. That is all fine and well.

One of the beautiful qualities of the Torah is that its stories are not limited to their simple meaning; they possess a higher, spiritual meaning that parallels the literal meaning of the text. In this case, it is

natural for us to recognize that Ruth is, in the genealogical sense, the mother of the Moshiach. In what way, we might ask, is Ruth the "mother" of the Moshiach in the spiritual sense?

Let us proceed by delving into the essential Jewish concept of Moshiach.

According to tradition, one day a king will arise in Israel to lead the Jewish nation out of its exile and restore their erstwhile glory with the building of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. This process of redemption will usher in a new era of world peace, which will set the stage for a universal appreciation of God.

Here is the catch, though. Historically, Jews attributed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and exile from the Land of Israel to various shortcomings in their national development (one example being the inability of the Jew to live peacefully with his fellow Jew, cf. Talmud, Gittin 55b). According to tradition, we must earn our return to the Promised Land by correcting the flaws in our national character. It stands to reason, then, that the individual who will lead us back to Israel will also be the one to inspire us to correct our shortcomings.

With this in mind we can ask, "Who would be the right candidate to lead us all home again? What would the qualifications be?"

As we mentioned, the Jewish People need to take some crucial steps, not the least of which is a renewed dedication to God and Jewish national unity. Our Moshiach, then, finds himself with a tall order on his desk. Bring back the people. Bring back the Jewish People, wayward after so many centuries of wandering and exile, disenchanted, perhaps, with Judaism after so much brutal suffering. Simple, it is not.

Possibly the most essential character trait that any potential Moshiach would need is a profound understanding of people, an ability to relate to their state of being. Preferably, we are talking

about someone who has, in contemporary parlance, "been there." With such personal experience, he could empathize, relate to the people at their own level, and know what needs to be done to bring the Jewish People closer to God, Torah and each other.

Now let us discuss the qualities of our heroine, Ruth. She was of noble lineage, indeed a princess of a royal Moabite family. Who was this nation of Moab? Once again, examining origins is very revealing. Let us backtrack several hundred years to a most peculiar episode.

Abraham's nephew Lot and his daughters had just been saved from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Safe, but worriedly hidden away in a mountain cave, the two daughters contemplated their future. Not quite far enough from the smoldering ruins of their once-magnificent city to recognize the limits of the destruction, it appeared to them as if the entire world had suffered the same treacherous fate.

In an attempt to reinstate the human race, the girls launched a desperate and brazen scheme. For two consecutive nights, these daughters of Lot intoxicate their father with wine and proceed to initiate the next generation. After nine months and the birth of two healthy baby boys, one each, it is time for the naming. One was named "Ammon," lit. "From my Nation," and the other "Moab," lit. "From My Father."

Fast forward, now, several hundred years. The Jewish nation is advancing steadily towards the Promised Land. While this is very exciting for the Jews, the "promised neighbors" feel differently. The Moabites are understandably frightened of the approaching Jewish army. They attempt to curse the Jews, but that fails (cf. Numbers 24:10). Searching for a sure-fire tactic, they take the advice of Balaam, who recommends that they send out their daughters to entice the Jewish men (Numbers 25:1; cf. Talmud, Sanhedrin 106a). The plan was carried out and the Jewish people have their first exposure to a people steeped in promiscuity.

Ruth, as a Moabite princess, is a direct descendent of the product of Lot and his daughter, an unholy union. Her home culture reflected its origins, and was diametrically opposed to the values of Judaism. Ruth, as a fresh Moabite convert, is entering a very different culture. High standards of decency and propriety are the norm. For all her commitment, these standards were not inherent to her genetic makeup. Yet Ruth is able to transcend her genetic tendencies and escape her culture's influence, rising above it and manifesting outstanding commitment and unmitigated devotion to Jewish values, not the least among them modesty.

But now Ruth is confronted with a difficult mission. She has developed into a paragon of modesty, the very trait that so impressed Boaz. As such, going to Boaz at night entailed the greatest challenge. Could she lie alongside a powerful man to whom she was not married and abstain from promiscuity? This is what Naomi wanted to know. Had Ruth truly realigned her values?

At what point does one know when a character change has been ingrained? We freely use adages such as "turning over a new leaf," or "starting with a clean slate." Do we truly have faith in our own resolutions? How certain are we that it is not just a matter of time before we revert back to our comfortable habits of old? How do we really know when we have changed in a lasting way?

There is a way to determine that real change has occurred. When we arrive at similar circumstances to those of the past and encounter the opportunity to perform according to our new standards. When we succeed in such circumstances, we can be confident that it is for real.[9]

We can now appreciate how Ruth is put to the test. She is called upon to lay down next to a sleeping man to whom she is not married. In doing so, she demonstrates a most impressive act of self-restraint, proving the strength of her commitment to uphold Jewish values. She

encountered a situation which previously may have elicited another reaction within her entirely and she rose to the challenge. This was all the affirmation one could hope for as to the sincerity of her conversion from a Moabite to a Jew.

But how did she achieve it? Whatever the background, whatever the conviction, how could Ruth enter the lion's den of temptation and simply walk away unaffected? Upon closer examination, the text itself hints to the answer.

But first, a little background on the written Torah. The original Hebrew text of Scripture is extraordinarily precise, in fact, divinely so. There are times when words are spelled a given way, but the pronunciation differs slightly from what's expected due to an unusual use of vowels. More rare and unusual are words that are spelled one way, but tradition (the "Mesorah"[10]) teaches that they are to be pronounced differently, as if the word were spelled with different consonants. But how do we interpret these differences? The rule of thumb is as follows: The way the word is pronounced reflects the revealed meaning of the text, while the written word indicates an unspoken intent.

A fascinating application of this principle occurs in our story. In chapter three of the Book of Ruth, Naomi outlines her plan. If we pay close attention to the discrepancies between the actual text and the Masoretic reading of the verses we can uncover a hidden message encoded in Naomi's instructions. The following is a translation of how the verses are read according to the Mesorah:

> Naomi, [Ruth's] mother-in-law, said to her, "My daughter… bathe, apply oils... and go down to the threshing floor..."
>
> [Ruth] replied, "All that you say to me, I will do."
>
> Ruth 3:1-3

A very different story emerges if we translate the verses as they appear in the text. The Hebrew word for "go down," וירדת, is actually written וירדתי, as if to say, "*I* will go down." And the word for "lie down," ושכבת, appears in the text as ושכבתי, meaning "*I* will lie down." And the words "to me" in Ruth's response are read as such but do not appear in the text at all!

A subtle pattern emerges. Naomi instructs Ruth to hint to Boaz about his chance to redeem her by marriage. Although the plan contains elements which may potentially disturb Ruth's newly acquired concepts of modesty and decency, Naomi provides her with the antidote. In essence, Naomi tells Ruth to view it all as someone else's doing. Ruth is to imagine all the while that it is Naomi who is there in her place. It is Naomi who is bathing, Naomi who is applying oils and Naomi who is going down to the silo and taking her place at Boaz's feet. With this attitude in mind, Ruth will be able to overcome the personal challenges inherent in this plan.[11]

Ruth succeeded, with a modesty even the "natives" could admire. She carried herself with dignity throughout, demonstrating a strong respect for the sage advice of her mother-in-law, Naomi. Despite an upbringing in an indecent culture, Ruth transformed herself into a paragon of modesty, proving her commitment to Judaism and its exalted values.

The day will come when Ruth's anointed descendant, Moshiach, will arrive to lead the Jewish People and fix the world. But why a convert and why a descendent of Ruth? Because no one is more qualified than Ruth to be the Mother of Moshiach. As we wrote earlier, in order for Moshiach to do his job effectively, he must be able to relate to his brethren, whatever their spiritual state may be. Ruth, despite her less than exemplary background, nevertheless scaled the heights of character refinement and sanctity. Her descendant, the

inheritor of this legacy, would thus be the perfect man to inspire and lead the Jewish people back to God and Judaism.

Shavuot, the day we received the Torah at Sinai, was the day our nation "converted" to Judaism. Every year, Shavuot affords us an opportunity to "reconvert," and Ruth shows us how. No matter where we are coming from, no matter what our limitations may be, Torah has the power to transform our problems into our greatest assets and project us into a leadership role, for our people and for the world.

This is the message of the Book of Ruth and this is the message of the holiday of Shavuot.

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[1] Midrash Raba Ruth 9:2
[2] Leviticus 19:9, Deuteronomy 24:19
[3] Midrash ibid 4:9
[4] Book of Joshua
[5] Leviticus 25:25
[6] If they do not wish to marry, The Torah presents an alternative process called *Chalitza* (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). In modern times, *Chalizta* has become the prevailing custom (Talmud, Bechorot 13a).
[7] All "quotations" from Ruth in this summary are paraphrases.
[8] Literally, "Moshiach" means "the anointed one." In Biblical times, it was customary to anoint a king or leader at his inauguration. The placing of precious oils on his head indicated his rise to greatness from common stock.
[9] Cf. Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 2:1
[10] Masoretic readings appear on the margins of the earliest manuscripts of scripture. The Masorah affects the pronunciation of approximately 0.3% of words in the twenty-four books of the Biblical canon.
[11] Cf. *Michtav M'Eliyahu* vol. 5, pg. 181.

Shavuot: The Day Nothing Happened

RABBI GAVIN ENOCH

All Jewish holidays commemorate a formative event in the history of the Jews, and Shavuot is no exception. It recalls the giving of the Torah at Sinai. But while it is often assumed that the holiday marks the actual anniversary of the event, when it comes to Shavuot things are not so simple.

> The rabbis taught: "On the sixth of Sivan the Ten Commandments were given to Israel." Rabbi Yossi says: "On the seventh."
>
> Talmud, Shabbat 86b

How is it possible that we have a dispute about an event so central to the core of our religious faith? The revelation at Mount Sinai is the linchpin of Judaism; the historical validity of its occurrence forms the singular basis of the Torah's claim to truth. Jews are an argumentative people, and the Talmud is filled with disputes, but how could we have forgotten such an important date?

And that is not the only problem. It is one thing to deal with dispute over the correct day of Shavuot, quite another to realize that the day we celebrate is the wrong one. That is, Rabbi Yossi's position is the one which Jewish tradition has adopted as normative.[1] That means that all these years we have been celebrating Shavuot on the wrong day. The sixth of Sivan, the day we have been touting as "the Day of the Giving of Our Torah" was really nothing of the sort; the Torah was actually given on the seventh of Sivan. Shavuot then is quite literally the day that nothing happened!

II

A closer look at their dispute reveals that Rabbi Yossi and the Sages did not actually argue about which day the Torah was given. They agreed that this great event occurred precisely fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt. What they do argue about, though, is the exact calendar date of that day in that particular year.

Unlike most calendar systems which are based on mathematical calculation, the Hebrew calendar is in human hands to set. In ancient times, the new month would begin only upon the decree of the Jewish High Court, or Sanhedrin as it was known, once it had accepted testimony by two witnesses as to the sighting of the new moon.[2] Given that two such "new moons" would be witnessed between the Exodus and the giving of the Torah, there is some room for ambiguity in calculating the historical date of the giving of the Torah. Strange as it may seem, the date of Shavuot could potentially be either the fifth, the sixth or the seventh of the month of Sivan, depending upon which days between Passover and Shavuot had been determined to be Rosh Chodesh, or the start of the new month.[3] As such, the sages and Rabbi Yossi only disputed how the calendar

worked out in the first months after the Exodus from Egypt. Such a dispute, as academic as it sounds, is anything of the kind.

> [Rabbi Yossi and the Sages] agree that the Torah was given to Israel on the Sabbath… Regarding what do they disagree? Regarding the establishment of the new month: Rabbi Yossi maintains it was established on the Sunday beforehand… while the Sages maintain that it was on the Monday.
>
> Talmud, Shabbat 86b

The Talmud goes on to describes the sequence of events from the first of Sivan to the revelation at Mount Sinai, based on the verses in Exodus which tell the story.[4] The people arrived at Mount Sinai, they rested, they were informed about the revelation to come, and they prepared themselves for it. But since Rabbi Yossi maintains that the month started one day earlier, he must somehow account for an extra day of preparation before receiving the Torah. The biblical narrative as explained by the Talmud supports the position of the rabbis; how is Rabbi Yossi going to explain the presence of an extra day?

The answer to this question is based on a fascinating tradition: an extra day was added by none other than Moses himself.

> Moses did three things based on his own reasoning and the Holy One, Blessed be He, agreed to them: He added an extra day of preparation before the receiving of the Torah…
>
> Talmud, Shabbat 86b

God had told Moses to tell the Jewish people to prepare themselves for receiving the Torah with these words: "Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow" (Exodus 19:10). The implication of the verse is that God recommended a two-day primer. Moses

decided there should be another day as well, pushing off the date of the giving of the Torah until the seventh of Sivan.

How could Moses go against the direct will of God and how could God agree with something at variance with His own command? The Talmud goes on to show that, in fact, Moses was not in conflict with God's command; on the contrary, he was faithful to it. Moses interpreted God's command of "today and tomorrow" as follows: the period referred to as "today" must be equivalent to the period referred to as "tomorrow." Just as "tomorrow" refers to an entire day so too "today" refers to an entire day (ibid). Now, Moses had been given the command to sanctify the people during the daytime and as such, some of that day had already transpired. Therefore, Moses did not count that day as "today" but rather only started counting the two days of preparation from the beginning of the next day.[5] Moses therefore added an extra day in preparation of receiving the Torah, a day that has no explicit reference in the biblical narrative, invented as it was by Moses himself. And hence, Rabbi Yossi was able to account for his missing day.

Rabbi Yossi's opinion about the date of revelation might seem academic, but it actually has practical Halachic ramifications in matters pertaining to the laws of purity.[6] That is, his version of the account of the events leading up to the giving of the Torah, that there were three days of preparation rather than two, is accepted by tradition as the authentic course of events. And yet, the historical practice of the Jewish people has always been to celebrate Shavuot on the sixth of Sivan, in obvious breach of Rabbi Yossi's position. According to him, nothing happened on the sixth. God had perhaps intended to give the Torah on then, but after Moses's involvement, the event had been postponed to the seventh.

The plot has thickened, to be sure. Nevertheless, it still seems that Shavuot is the celebration of a day upon which nothing happened!

III

Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (Poland, 17th century), in his magnum opus "*Magen Avraham*," noticed this discrepancy in our loyalty to Rabbi Yossi and the subsequent problem that it creates for our observance of Shavuot. His answer, though, may leave us more confused than when we started.

> [Our observance of Shavuot on the six rather than the seventh of Sivan] is a portent of the second day of *Yom Tov*[7] observed in the Diaspora. And perhaps this is what is alluded to by the fact that Moses added a day by virtue to his own understanding.
>
> *Magen Avraham* to Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 494:1

This is quite an incredible statement! The extra day Moses added augurs to the institution of a second day of *Yom Tov*, a system that developed many years later?! What does one have to do with the other?

Let us start with a little background about Jewish festivals. Outside of Israel, in the Diaspora, the custom is to observe *Yom Tov* for an extra day. This is known as *Yom Tov Sheni shel Galuyot*, the second festival day of the Diaspora. It too has its origin in the system of calendar fixing mentioned above.

To understand the existence of *Yom Tov Sheni*, one must first understand a bit more about the Jewish calendar system. The calendar follows the lunar cycle; one month ends and another begins with the new moon. The high court in Jerusalem would determine the beginning of a new month based on eyewitnesses of the new crescent moon.[8] Since the lunar cycle is roughly 29 and 1/2 days long, a Jewish month will either be 29 or 30 days long, depending on

when witnesses arrive to report a moon sighting. On the day after the 29th of each month, the court would announce whether that day was the 30th day of the previous month or the 1st day of the next month.

After the first day of the new month, when "Rosh Chodesh," was determined, it became necessary to spread the word to distant Jewish communities in Egypt and Babylonia. Originally, beacon fires were lit on mountaintops. Watchers on faraway hills set their own fires as soon as they saw those of others, continuing in relay "until one could behold the whole of the Diaspora before him like a mass of fire" (Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 2:4).

Eventually relations with the neighboring Samaritan sect worsened to the point that they would deliberately harass the Jews by lighting beacon fires on the wrong day. As a result, the Sanhedrin was forced to dispatch messengers to alert the Diaspora communities, but they could take a long time to arrive from Jerusalem. Until the messengers turned up, Jews had no way of knowing the precise Hebrew date.

Since the only question was if the previous month was a twenty-nine day month or a thirty-day month, celebrating festivals for an extra day ensured that, regardless of whatever confusion reigned about the exact start of the new month, at least one day of their celebration would be correct. Hence began the practice of Diaspora communities observing festivals for two days rather than the one day mandated by the Torah; it was a way to cover their bases, as it were.

Fearing a loss of the kind of authority needed to sanctify the new moon, eventually a perpetual calendar was created by Hillel HaNasi in the 4th century C.E.[9] His calendar is the one still in use to this day. Using Hillel's calendar, any Jew anywhere can know the proper day to celebrate a festival. Even so, Jews outside Israel have continued to add an additional day of festival celebrations and the custom of *Yom Tov Sheni shel Galuyot* has prevailed to this day.[10]

IV

As fascinating as all this sounds, what does it have to do with our seemingly mistaken observance of Shavuot and the extra day added by Moses? Furthermore, of all the festivals, Shavuot seems the least likely candidate for a *Yom Tov Sheni*. Although Passover and Succot start on the fifteenth of the month, perhaps insufficiently removed from Rosh Chodesh to allow the news to reach far off lands in time, it would appear that Shavuot is free of this problem. After all, Shavuot is always fifty days after Passover (regardless of the intermediate new moons) and that would presumably be enough time for the news to reach just about anywhere. Once the day of Rosh Chodesh Nissan is known, you just add sixty-five days[11] and that gives you the date of Shavuot. How did *Yom Tov Sheni* ever develop for Shavuot when the need for it should never have arisen in the first place?

But let us ask an even broader question, an issue that looms over the entire institution of *Yom Tov Sheni*. The whole system of fixing the new month through a court procedure seems rather archaic and unnecessary. The system of calculation that we have in place today could easily have been adopted from the very dawn of Jewish history. Didn't God know we'd be dispersed? He must have; He even told us so Himself! Why then did He impart to us such an inconvenient system, one that breaks when stretched too far?

The truth is, the Torah was designed to be kept by Jews living in Israel. There are so many mitzvot that are only possible to observe in the Land, from the agriculture laws to the Temple offerings to the laws of ritual purity and impurity. Even mitzvot not tied directly to the Land are nevertheless dependent on it more than we are accustom to think. Observance of the festivals is no exception.

The 13th century Italian Kabbalist, Rabbi Menachem Recanati, echoed this sentiment when he laid the claim that it is impossible to get as inspired by a festival outside the land of Israel as when one lives in it.[12] This is so because the Land of Israel carries its own spirituality into the festival; thus in just one day one is able to accomplish great spiritual achievements. The quality of Jewish life in the Diaspora, despite all it has to offer, has certainly not been all that conducive to sanctity and spirituality. As such, outside Israel one needs extra time to achieve the same goal as can be achieved inside the Land in just one festive day. With *Yom Tov Sheni*, then, the Diaspora community is given an opportunity to compensate for its natural disadvantage (not too unlike the 'handicap' system developed in golf, one might add). By observing the festival for an extra day, the Diaspora is able to keep spiritual pace with the Land of Israel.

V

When we focus back on *Yom Tov Sheni* particularly as it relates to Shavuot we find that this idea of spiritual compensation lies at the very heart of the issue we have been grappling with all along. It turns out that *Magen Avraham*'s suggestion that observing an extra festival day in the Diaspora has its roots in Moses's extra day is actually well founded indeed. We can understand this connection all the better in light of a Halachic responsum authored by Rabbi Moshe Sofer (Hungary, 1762-1839).

> It must be [that *Yom Tov Sheni* is observed even on Shavuot] as a Rabbinic decree… and as such, it automatically takes on more weight (than other observances of *Yom Tov Sheni*) seeing as it was never adopted merely out of doubt. Perhaps [the Diaspora communities] simply need more fortification, Moses

> hinting as such specifically on Shavuot [by adding an extra day], as *Magen Avraham* has suggested.
>
> *Teshuvot Chatam Sofer*, vol. 1, #145

The practice of *Yom Tov Sheni* on Shavuot is fundamentally different than *Yom Tov Sheni* as practiced on Pesach and Succot. Since Shavuot always falls out fifty days after Passover, *Yom Tov Sheni* need never have developed out of a situation of doubt regarding the proper calendar date. On the contrary, Shavuot attained its *Yom Tov Sheni* by virtue of a deliberate rabbinic decree.

Seeing as there is no historical basis for *Yom Tov Sheni* on Shavuot, the fact that there is one at all speaks worlds as to the true purpose of *Yom Tov Sheni* in the first place. Rabbi Sofer offers the same fundamental rethinking of *Yom Tov Sheni* suggested by Recanati: this extra day was actually instituted by the sages for the sake of the Diaspora Jews, as a way of spiritually fortifying the communities of the exile.

VI

We can see both in Moses's teaching and in the rabbinic institution of *Yom Tov Sheni* an attempt to add days of holiness to our lives for the purpose of benefiting our spiritual standing. In preparing to receive the Torah, Moses noticed that his people needed an extra day to prepare themselves for their encounter with God. *Yom Tov Sheni* too is a system that developed and has been maintained because it attempts to compensate for spiritual deficiencies. By allowing for an extra day of festival activities it facilitates both personal and communal growth. Both in terms of form and content, what Moses did by adding an extra day was paralleled later in history by the rabbis' creation of *Yom Tov Sheni*.

At what point did the Jewish leadership acquire this ability to institute festive days, to create new opportunities for spiritual growth, to take the Torah into their own hands and apply it to real-time situations? Why, on Shavuot, of course.

The revelation at Sinai might have occurred historically on the seventh of the month, but the real giving of the Torah had already taken place on the sixth. The fact that nothing happened on the sixth of Sivan, despite the fact that that day had originally been designated by God for the revelation, was in actuality the greatest act of giving the Torah imaginable. This is so because, by postponing the actual revelation to the seventh, God conferred a stamp of approval upon Moses's methodology. Until it was observed that nothing happened on the sixth we might have assumed that Moses simply got it wrong; God had intended two days of preparation, not three. And indeed He had. But Moses, realizing that the people were not yet ready for the experience, took the initiative to stall God's revelation for an extra day on their behalf – through a creative interpretation of God's own command! When the actual revelation took place on the seventh, it became clear to all that God had left room for Moses's interpretation and, at the same time, as it were, God listened to Moses. It was on the sixth of Sivan that the nation realized that God had invested in Moses the authority of a spiritual leader, to help guide the relationship between Him and His people.

In so doing, God also transferred the corresponding power to future generations of Jewish leaders as well. The power of the rabbinic sages of the Talmud to legislate decrees and enactments for the sake of keeping the spirit of Torah alive has played a key role in elevating the Jewish people and protecting Judaism. *Yom Tov Sheni* should be seen as the epitome of this process. This is in fact what makes Judaism a thriving system for living, one that has endured through the millennia and thrives still to this day.

Shavuot as "the time of the giving of our Torah" could not deserve a more fitting epithet, for on this day *our* Torah was given—not just His.

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[1] See note #6.

[2] Nowadays when we no longer have a Sanhedrin, we use a perpetual calendar based on mathematical calculation. More on this below.

[3] In ancient times when the practice of determining Rosh Chodesh was based on the sighting of the new moon, Shavuot was indeed observed on any one of these three days. Nowadays, since our calendar is set by mathematical calculation, we always observe Shavuot on the sixth of the month. Our discussion here, the argument between the Rabbi Yossi and the Sages, concerns neither practice of observance but rather the historical date of the actual revelation at Mount Sinai.

[4] See Exodus 19:1-16

[5] That is, from nightfall of the "day" on which he received the instruction. The calendar day in Jewish tradition changes at nightfall, not midnight as is the custom of most of the world today.

[6] A Halachah in the laws in family purity is derived from the number of days the Jews needed to purify themselves in preparation for the revelation at Sinai. Cf. Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 196:11.

[7] The Hebrew term for a Festival is "*Yom Tov*," literally "good day." A *Yom Tov* is a religious holiday.

[8] Only a court of sages, whose chain of tradition reached straight back to Moses, had the authority to sanctify the new moon. This type of ordination did not exist outside of Israel. Cf. Talmud, Bava Kama 14b.

[9] Hillel preemptively sanctified all future new moons based on mathematical calculation.

[10] The Talmud (Beitza 4a) cites two reasons for the continued practice of *Yom Tov Sheni* despite the fact that these days we follow a fixed calendar: (1) perhaps the calendar system itself will be lost or forgotten; (2) it was the custom of our ancestors, so we maintain the practice. The elucidation of these reasons is beyond the scope of this essay, although we feel confident that the thesis put forward here falls safely within traditional understandings. For further reading, see R. M. Kasher, *Torah Sh'leima*, vol. 13, pp. 128-148.

[11] Fifteen days till Passover plus fifty days till Shavuot.

[12] Cited in "Thoughts to Ponder" (Urim Publications, 2002), pg. 154, by Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo.

The Paradox of the First Commandment

RABBI YOSEF RICHARDS

Journey back some 3,300 years to the Sinai Peninsula. A large crowd is gathered around a mountain of no apparent distinction. Not especially large, not especially beautiful, Mount Sinai seems somewhat humble for the great event that it is about to host. It is early in the morning and the sun is already shining brightly. The silence is total. Not a creature makes a sound. With thunder, lightning, and smoke abounding, an unprecedented and never since repeated event transpires. The "Voice" of God overwhelmingly thunders throughout the world. With indescribable power, the message leaves no room for doubt. An entire nation, some three million strong, hears God's clear and unmistakable declaration, "I am the Lord, your God." These are the first words of ten succinct messages which became established in the psyche of mankind as the Ten Commandments.

A powerful opener, to be sure, but do the words "I am the Lord, your God" actually constitute a commandment in their own right or are they just an introduction for what is to follow? If indeed this is a

commandment, where then is the instructive form? What exactly have we been commanded to do or refrain from doing?

On account of these questions, some have argued that the Ten Commandments actually begin with the subsequent line "Do not have any other gods before Me," while "I am the Lord, your God" is only an introduction. But Maimonides disagrees. He argues that this verse comes to teach us the first commandment, to believe in the existence of the God who redeemed the Jews from Egypt. "I am the Lord, your God," is not just a declaration of fact but a statement of directive as well.[1]

Upon closer examination, though, Maimonides' reading confuses more than it clarifies. How can one be commanded to believe? Either a person maintains this belief as true, in which case compliance is automatic, or one does not believe in the existence of a commander, in which case a commandment is meaningless! Moreover, submitting to any of God's commandments implicitly assumes a belief in Him; any further commandment to believe therefore seems superfluous.

When all is said and done, how can we make sense of the first commandment? If indeed we are commanded to believe, how will that command have any relevance to our current belief state?

II

The first commandment is no different from any other mitzvah in the sense that it becomes incumbent upon every Jew at the age of bat or bar mitzvah (twelve and thirteen, respectively). Unlike other mitzvot, though, the commandment to believe in God seems a bit of a stretch to expect of children of such a tender age. The Western philosophical tradition bares testimony to the great difficulty inherent in the notion of an Infinite Being. The greatest of philosophers have wrestled with this issue and, consequently, with

their own faith as well. How can the Torah expect young and unsophisticated children to come to terms with this most challenging of intellectual inquiries?

In true Jewish fashion, we will answer one question with another. The Torah warns us, "Do not stray after your hearts" (Numbers 16:39). What exactly does it mean to "stray" after one's heart? The Talmud (Berachot 12b) interprets this as an injunction against heresy. Heresy, defined as an opinion or belief that contradicts established religious teaching, is an intellectual deviance. The subject of this injunction, then, should be focused on the brain, the seat of intellectual decision-making. If the Torah wanted to warn us not to stray after false gods, it should have directed its injunction to a different organ altogether: do not stray after you mind! The heart, by contrast, is typically seen as a reference to emotions and desires. Why, then, is heresy described as a straying heart?

The answer to this question reveals something essential about the nature of faith. People have a tendency to complicate matters, but the idea of God is not an intellectual issue limited to the university lecture halls and ivory towers. It can be seen, rather, as a very simple thing indeed. But once emotion is thrown into the fray, things suddenly get more complicated. Do I want to believe in God? What are the implications of such belief for my lifestyle? How do I reconcile my doubts? Lacking such sophisticated concerns, it may very well be that an innocent youngster will be able to grasp truth more easily than an adult. Adults, no matter how intellectually gifted, will always have a harder time arriving at unbiased conclusions, since they struggle with such emotional complications. To such people, the first commandment may be directed as follows, "cut through the complexity of your own emotional biases and recognize with childlike simplicity the truth of God's existence."[2]

III

But as compelling as all this may sound, it cannot possible be the full story. The Torah was given to a people who could not possibly have harbored doubts as to God's existence, having directly experience His presence at the Exodus. Nevertheless, they too were commanded. What meaning did the first commandment have for them?

Let us go back in time to when the commandments were first given. Would a commandment to "know" God exists have added anything new to those who first received the commandments? The Jewish people had recently witnessed the ten plagues in Egypt. Every natural law had been torn to shreds before their very eyes. Even the Egyptian wise men had admitted that there was no being more powerful than the God of the Jews (cf. Exodus 8:14-15). And then came the splitting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptian army, a miracle that surpassed all others. As the Midrash says, at that moment by the sea the simplest maidservants had a clearer vision of God than any of the prophets after them.[3] When the Jews saw the sea split, they "trusted in God and in Moses, His servant" (Exodus 14:31). What purpose could there be in commanding the Jewish people to believe that "I am the Lord your God" when they were already well aware of this truth from their own experience?

Perhaps they were being commanded to do something more than just simply believe. In his Book of Mitzvot, Maimonides reorganizes the mitzvot of the Torah in order of their conceptual priority. The first of the mitzvot, and therefore the most basic, is "to know that there is a First Being who continuously causes all of existence to exist."[4] Maimonides' choice of the words "to know" rather than the more obvious "believe," is most curious. What exactly is the difference between the two?

To illustrate, let us imagine the following scenario: Two friends, Dick and Jane, are having a terrible fight. At the end, Dick storms away, angrily threatening, "Jane, you had better watch yourself; I will be back to get you." The next day, Jane is found dead and all evidence suggests Dick did it. The case goes to court and Dick is tried for murder. The defense attorney steps forward and says, "Your honor, I know it certainly seems as if my client killed Jane, but I can prove otherwise. In exactly thirty seconds Jane will walk through the rear door." The entire court turns to look at the door, but no one appears. The judge turns to Dick's lawyer and asks, "What game are you playing?" The lawyer then proceeds to tell the court that because they all turned around waiting for Jane to walk in, it proves that they must still have doubt as to whether or not Jane is alive. This is the difference between belief and knowledge: *belief* allows for doubt while *knowledge* is clear of any alternatives.

One could argue, then, that the Jews who witnessed the Exodus had belief; what they were commanded to have was knowledge (without any doubts). The problem with this hypothesis is that the Torah clearly states that after the Egyptians were drowned, the people pointed to the heavens and said, "This is our God" (Exodus 15:2).[5] It would seem that they already achieved *knowledge* of God's existence. What then could be the purpose of God commanding them to know that He exists?[6]

The Ten Plagues and the splitting of the sea demonstrated that pagan Egyptian beliefs were false. Everything the Jews and Egyptians experienced pointed to the existence of an infinite Creator who authored the laws of nature and continues to run the controls. The revelation at Mount Sinai, however, accomplished much more than just the repudiation of false gods. It was not merely a negation of polytheism. Rather, it was the appearance of God Himself. This event initiated a positive change in the faith of the Jewish people,

who had now experienced God as a first-hand Reality. As such, the first commandment demands that one come to *know* God, not through negation of false gods but by experiencing God Himself.

But now, we are left with an even bigger problem than when we started. How can we experience God? After all, when was the last time God revealed Himself to us?

IV

According to *Sefer HaChinuch*,[7] the answer is quite simple: we *do* experience God. Every time we do a mitzvah, we have an opportunity to encounter the Divine.[8] Take, for example, the mitzvah of giving Tzedakah, charity. There are many reasons for giving to charity. If I give because I feel sorry for the underprivileged I am doing something nice, but this is not the ultimate fulfillment of the mitzvah of Tzedakah. If, however, I give Tzedakah while focusing on the fact that what I am doing is a mitzvah that God has commanded me to perform because God wants me to develop into a more caring person, that is an altogether different experience. The more one gives charity because it is God's Will, the greater positive experience of God one will have. But until one actually gives to charity with the intent of fulfilling the word of God he will not have accessed the full spiritual potential of this mitzvah.[9]

According to Maimonides, true "knowledge" is when what you know influences how you live your life.[10] Human behavior is the ultimate barometer for knowledge: when we really know something to be true, we cannot help but follow the dictates necessitated by that knowledge. For example, when one knows that smoking is deadly, they simply will not smoke. Conversely, one who smokes is, on some level, not conscious of the dangers. When the understanding and conduct do not go hand in hand, it is a sure sign that the information

still lingers in the realm of the superficial. When knowledge is internalized, we act on what we know.

As such, action and knowledge fortify each other in a sort of snowball effect: action leads to knowledge which then prompts action, further verifying the knowledge, and so on. Seen in this light, our daily routines offer us the greatest opportunity for sharpening our spiritual sensitivities. When everyday decisions take God into account, we develop a positive experience and knowledge of God, driving us into more mitzvah acts. Being aware of the mitzvah opportunities that come our way, and rising to the challenge of fulfilling them because they represent the Will of God, increases our awareness of His presence in our midst and ultimately confirms for us the knowledge that God is real. Could there be a more beautiful fulfillment of the first commandment than that?

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[1] Maimonides, Foundations of Torah 1:6

[2] Cf. R. Elchonon Wasserman (Baranowicze, 1875-1941), *Kovetz Ma'amarim*, Essay on Faith.

[3] *Mechilta* to Exodus 15:2

[4] Maimonides, Book of Mitzvot #1

[5] Any time the Torah writes "this" it refers to a visceral experience of the object in question (Rashi to Exodus 15:2).

[6] There was a school of thought among medieval rabbinic theologians that one is obligated to demonstrate the existence of God with philosophical proofs (e.g., Rabbeinu Bachyah ibn Pakuda, *Chovot HaLevavot*, *Sha'ar HaYichud*). Others derived belief from the existence of the tradition which tells of the miracles of the Exodus and the revelation at Sinai (e.g., R. Yehuda HaLevi, Nachmonides). Here we are developing an interpretation of Maimonides' position on the mitzvah to "know" there is a God.

[7] An anonymous 12th century work on the mitzvot of the Torah.

[8] *Sefer HaChinuch*, mitzvah #25

[9] This explanation of Maimonides was heard from R. Yitzchok Berkowitz of Jerusalem.

[10] R. Meïr Leibush Weiser (1809-1879) derived this idea from Maimonides, Foundations of Torah 1:1 (cf. Malbim to Exodus 20:2).

Learning Torah: The Halachic Imperative

RABBI AVI LEBOWITZ

> Every Jew is obligated to study Torah, whether poor or rich, healthy or frail, young or old and weak... [he] is obligated to set aside time for Torah study every day and night, as the verse states, "Concentrate on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8).
> The greatest of Torah scholars worked as woodchoppers and water carriers, some were even blind, and nevertheless they were engrossed in Torah study day and night, [to the point that] they became major links in the transmission of Torah from Moses our Teacher.
>
> Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 1:8-9

Education is essential for any legal system to thrive and survive. A system without properly educated lawyers and judges is hardly a legal system at all, and even in the private sector, success hinges on well-educated and knowledgeable experts who can lead and develop new ideas. When it comes to the laws of Torah study, however, things are different. Unlike the lawyer or engineer whose education is relaxed

after earning their degrees, the Torah demands a lifelong pursuit of intense study.

The amount of material that every Jew is expected to learn is astounding. The Talmud (Sukkah 28a) testifies that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai mastered the entire written and oral Torah, including Talmud, Halachot, Aggadot, details derived from extra letters in the Torah, Rabbinic law, astronomy for calculating the lunar calendar, numerical values of words in the Torah, and even the chatting of the angels! But this extraordinary level of scholarship is not limited to gifted individuals. The Torah expects every Jew to achieve it. [1]

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[1] Aside from the mitzvah to study Torah codified by Maimonides (Laws of Torah Study 1:8), there is a separate obligation to be proficient in Torah. The Talmud derives from the verse "*v'shinantem l'vanecha*" – "you should make [the words of Torah] sharp in your child's mouth" (Deuteronomy 6:7), that when asked a question, the student of Torah must not hesitate, but rather be able to answer immediately (Kiddushin 30a). The Ran in Nedarim (8a) cites this passage as the source for one to delve into the Torah "day and night according to his ability." Clearly, one cannot achieve proficiency in Torah without constant study. The demand for proficiency thus obviously includes a demand on one's time.

R. Aharon Kotler (*Mishnas Reb Aharon* vol. 1, pg. 55) quotes R. Yisroel Salanter as saying that the mitzvah to know Torah takes precedence to the mitzvah of learning Torah. Therefore, if one would learn more Torah studying under the auspices of a renowned Torah scholar, he is encouraged to do so even at the expense of forfeiting learning during the time it will take to journey to this teacher. He supports this position with the Talmud's ruling that when one is in difficult financial circumstances and can only afford to support either their own learning or the learning of their child, the money should be spent on the one who will be more successful in acquiring Torah knowledge (Kiddushin 29b). We triage based on the individual's potential to succeed in learning.

Ordinarily, one must forgo the mitzvah of Torah study when presented with a mitzvah opportunity that cannot be done by others (Mo'ed Kattan 9b). However, the Shulchan Aruch HaGraz (*Kuntres Talmud Torah*) deduces from Maimonides (Laws of Torah study 3:4) that if a mitzvah will be so consuming that it will not only take time away from study, but will also have a negative effect on a person's ability to master Torah, then they should

> A person who completed two or three [of the six] orders of Mishnah will appear before God [on Judgment Day] and will be asked, "Why didn't you study the laws of Kohanim (priests)?" A person who studied the laws of Kohanim will appear before God and will be asked, "Why didn't you complete the five books of the Torah?" A person who completed the five books of the Torah will appear before God and will be asked, "Why didn't you study Aggadah?" A person who studied Aggadah will appear before God and will be asked, "Why didn't you study Talmud?" A person who studied Talmud will appear before God and will be asked, "Why didn't you study Kabbalistic works (*Ma'aseh Merkava*)?
>
> *Mishlei Rabsa* 10[2]

The enormity of the Torah may warrant perpetual study, but the question remains why any one person would be obligated to master it all. Doesn't the Torah believe in specializing? One cannot be a neurologist, psychologist, gastroenterologist, and electrician while working as a master chef on Sundays! Would it not be more efficient

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continue their learning and forgo the mitzvah. R. Moshe Feinstein (*Dibros Moshe*, Kiddushin 29a, 43:4) also maintains that there are two distinct aspects of the mitzvah to study Torah: A mitzvah to devote time and a mitzvah to acquire knowledge. R. Feinstein suggests that one may forgo the first aspect of this mitzvah and take time away from learning both for earning a living and for doing mitzvot. However, the second aspect is even more vital and essential than the first. Maimonides writes that one whose learning will suffer if they get married is allowed to implement the concept of "one who is busy with a mitzvah is exempt from a mitzvah" and delay the mitzvah of marriage (Laws of Women 15:2). Similarly, says R. Feinstein, although it is permitted to choose a profession that will take time away from Torah study, one is not allowed to choose a profession that will distract them from focusing on Torah during times set for learning.

[2] Cited by *Nefesh HaChaim* 4:2.

for different people to develop an expertise in different fields, without ever expecting one individual to study and master the entire Torah?

The Inestimatable Value of Torah Study

Not unlike a human body, the Torah is a single entity – a fully integrated system. Just as one cannot master the details of heart function without having a solid understanding as to how the lungs operate, so too with the Torah. From the stories of Genesis to Rabbinic law, from the rebukes of the prophets to the disputes of the Talmud, the Torah is one totality comprised of many components. The mastery of any particular section requires aptitude in all affiliated and tributary extensions. It is impossible to specialize in any one area of Torah in the absence of proficiency in all other sections.

There is another reason why it is necessary for the Jew to study the entire Torah. The study of Torah is equated with actually performing the mitzvah itself.[3] This idea is especially useful when it comes to mitzvot that are no longer in practice, such as the animal sacrifices of the Temple. At a time when we are not privileged to actually perform the Temple service, studying the laws is our only connection to these mitzvot.

[3] The Talmud states that one who studies the section of the burnt offering, it is as if they offered an actual burnt offering in the Temple, and one who studies the section of the sin offering, it is as if they offered a sin offering (Menachot 100a). One can question whether the Talmud meant this to be taken literally, but Rashi (Baba Metziah 114b) seems to think so. The Talmud records a conversation where one of the sages says that he is only proficient in four of the six orders of the Mishnah. Rashi explains that this sage only focused on the *practical* sections of the Mishnah, and Rashi includes the study of sacrifices as one of the practical sections! This is based on the Talmud's teaching that studying the laws of sacrifices is literally equivalent to bringing those sacrifices in the Temple.

Aside from achieving proficiency, there is also an independent requirement to invest time on the study of Torah.

> A businessman who is busy with work for three hours a day and has nine hours for the study of Torah, should divide those hours by devoting three hours to the Written Torah, three hours to the Oral Torah, and three hours delving deeper to infer one thing from another.
>
> Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 1:12

Maimonides' assumption that a businessman will have nine hours daily to devote to Torah study is almost comical. But this assumption in and of itself is indicative of the value that Maimonides has for devoting the bulk of one's time to Torah study. Even one who has mastered Torah and has become completely proficient cannot take a vacation.[4] There is always an obligation to study.

[4] Even people who are technically exempt from the obligation to study Torah daily (i.e., women, cf. Y.D. 246:6), are still required to study the sections of Torah that deal with the mitzvot that are incumbent upon them (*Beit Yosef* O.C. 47). The implication is obvious. Men who are not exempt are required to also study the sections that are *not* relevant to their daily lives. Clearly then, the mitzvah of Torah study does not merely function to educate us in how to perform mitzvot. This idea is indicated by the phrase that the Jewish people originally used to accept the Torah on Mt. Sinai, "We will do, and we will listen." First they accepted upon themselves an obligation to observe the mitzvot of the Torah, "we will do" and then they accepted upon themselves a mitzvah to study Torah, "we will listen." By definition, the acceptance to observe mitzvot includes an obligation to learn, for it is impossible to do without first learning what to do. So what is the meaning of the additional acceptance to "listen"? From this, the *Beis HaLevi* (Parashat Mishpatim) derives that the Jews accepted to learn even those areas of Torah that are not relevant to their daily practice. It is for this reason that R. Yishmael did not grant permission to his nephew who had already mastered the entire Torah to study "Greek wisdom," since there is a mitzvah to learn even after one has already mastered all the practical material (Talmud, Menachot 99a). Based on this understanding, the *Beis HaLevi* explains the

We have seen until now an obligation to learn Torah under all conditions, an obligation to gain proficiency and an obligation to invest the majority of our waking hours in Torah study. The rationale for these extraordinary demands is that Torah study is not merely a means to achieve a goal. The purpose is not limited to an ability to perform mitzvot properly, nor is it limited to simply knowing Torah. Torah study is an end in and of itself.

> These are the things that one "eats their fruits" in this world, but their principal reward is reserved for the World to Come: Honoring parents, bestowing kindness, and making peace between people. The study of Torah, however, is equal to all of them.
>
> Mishnah, Pe'ah 1:1

Torah study is not only a mitzvah; it is a mitzvah that trumps all other mitzvot.[5] Why is this so?

Talmud's contention that the Temple was destroyed because Jews failed to recite the blessing on the Torah (Nedarim 81a). A blessing is typically made only on an actual mitzvah, but not on preparatory activities. The Jews regarded Torah as merely a preparatory activity, as a means to learn how to act on a practical level, and were therefore not meticulous about making a blessing before Torah study. Their mistake was that Torah is not preparatory; it is a mitzvah in and of itself and thus deserves a blessing like any other mitzvah.

[5] The Talmud (Mo'ed Kattan 8a) encourages one to study Torah even when presented with the opportunity to perform a mitzvah, provided that there is someone else available to do the mitzvah (see note #1). However, if one is presented with a mitzvah that cannot be done by others, one is required to break from their learning to fulfill the mitzvah. The rationale for this exception is based on the Talmudic teaching that one who studies Torah as an academic pursuit and has no intention to use their knowledge to perform mitzvot does not retain any benefits from the Torah that was studied (Yevamot 109b; Rashi ad loc.). Hence, one who continues to study when they are presented with an obligation to perform a mitzvah (i.e., in a situation when the mitzvah cannot be done by anyone else), is in essence studying with

The answer is that Torah study is not merely a utilitarian or academic endeavor. Torah is the wisdom of God, so that the more one studies and understands Torah, the more one is able to comprehend God Himself.[6] Torah study thus connects man to God in the most intimate way possible. As the Mishnah indicated, it is the ultimate mitzvah.

On a more practical level, Torah study refines the character of man through the ethics of its teachings. The mitzvah to study Torah is thus of paramount significance, as it is responsible for developing our nation's heightened sensitivity to ethics and morality. (The wisdom of Torah also develops our analytical and scientific skills, giving Jews an intellectual edge.[7])

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intent to not observe mitzvot – and is thus stripping their Torah study of its significance as a mitzvah. In such a case, they would certainly be obligated to pause from their mundane study to fulfill any mitzvah that came their way.

The Talmud in both Rosh Hashanah 18a (regarding Abaya and Rava) and Avodah Zarah 17b (regarding R. Yossi ben Kisma and R. Chanina ben Tradyon) teach of the divine protection awarded to individuals who temporarily brake from their Torah study to perform mitzvot that could not be performed as effectively by others. From this we learn that the requirement to interrupt Torah study to perform a mitzvah that cannot be done by others even includes a situation where others are available to do the mitzvah, but they will not do it as well as the one who is studying (Chofetz Chaim, *Ahavat Chessed* 3:8).

[6] This concept is a central theme in R. Chaim Volozhiner's "*Nefesh HaChaim*," (Sha'ar 4) based on the Kabbalistic passage, "The Jews, God and the Torah are one" (Zohar, Parashat Acharei). This idea also appears in R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi's "*Tanya*." (chap. 9).

[7] Moses said, "I taught laws and statutes to you the way God has commanded me... you should safeguard them and perform them because it is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations... they will marvel by saying this great nation is surely wise and intelligent" (Deuteronomy 4:5). The Talmud (Shabbat 75a) sees this verse as referring to the sections of the Oral Torah that involve the calculations for the Jewish lunar calendar. This is something that the nations of the world can appreciate and it inspires respect for the wisdom of the Jews. Rashi explains that with the Oral Torah's calculations of the lunar orbit and the seasons, scholars have the ability to

The best way to understand the centrality of Torah study in Judaism is to define the parameters of the mitzvah. It is essential to explore the question of how much *time* need be invested in Torah study. What does the Halacha require?

Studying Torah Day and Night

> These are the [mitzvot] that have no set amount: *Pe'ah* (i.e., leaving the corner of one's field for the poor), *Bikkurim* (i.e., bringing first fruits to Jerusalem), *Chagigah* (i.e., the holiday offering), performing good deeds, and Torah study.
>
> Mishnah, Pe'ah 1:1

The Mishnah states that the mitzvah of Torah study has "no limit." We would ordinarily interpret "no limit" as referring to a lack of a maximum limit, such as in "no speed limit," or "no drinking limit," but in this context, "no limit" means there is neither a maximum nor a minimum limit.[8] That is, even the smallest amount of Torah study qualifies as a mitzvah.

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make predictions regarding weather that will undoubtedly impress the nations of the world. When the Romans came to arrest R. Chanina ben Tradyon for disobeying the Roman decree and publicly teaching Torah, he invoked the above-cited verse. R. Chanina ben Tradyon expected the gentiles to be impressed by the beauty and wisdom of the Torah (cf. Talmud, Avodah Zarah 17b).

[8] The Mishnah itself is somewhat ambiguous and does not inform us if it is referring to the absence of a maximum limit or the absence of a minimum limit. The Rash (ad loc.) cites a dispute from the Jerusalem Talmud if the absence of a limit for the mitzvah of Pe'ah is only referring to the maximum or even to the minimum. However, there is no debate about the other mitzvot listed in the Mishnah, and all agree that there is no minimum or maximum limit.

The absence of a maximum limit does not just mean that one is allowed to add; rather it means that there is in fact a mitzvah to add. The Rash (ibid)

Regarding the other mitzvot listed in this Mishnah, it is easier to understand that they lack both a minimum and a maximum limit. For example, the mitzvah of *Pe'ah* requires the Jewish farmer to leave a corner of his field for the poor. How large is a corner? There is no limit (at least according to biblical law), not a maximum limit and not a minimum limit. Similarly, the mitzvah of *Bikkurim* requires the Jewish farmer to bring his first fruits to Jerusalem and give them to the Kohen (priest). The Torah does not specify an amount of fruit that must be brought because there is no set amount; one can increase or decrease the size of his gift basket as he chooses. However, when speaking of Torah study, the principal "no minimum and no maximum" is different. The Mishnah cannot be referring to the material that must be studied, for then the claim of "no maximum" would be false. A finite core curriculum definitely exists.[9] The

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cites the Jerusalem Talmud that there are other mitzvot that lack a "limit" but were excluded from this Mishnah because there is no mitzvah to add to those mitzvot. We can deduce that the more time one invests in the pursuit of Torah study, the greater their mitzvah is.

[9] Shulchan Aruch HaGraz (*Kuntres Talmud Torah* 1:4) enumerates the texts that every Jew is required to study. One must study the entire Written Torah, i.e., the twenty-four books of Tanach (scripture), and the explanation of the 613 mitzvot, i.e. the Oral Torah, which includes the entire Mishnah and Gemara, both the Halachic sections and the Aggadic (non-legal) sections. He writes that in our times the Halachic rulings found in the four sections of the Shulchan Aruch are also included in this obligation (ibid 2:1). Although the Shulchan Aruch HaGraz acknowledges that the Oral Torah is open-ended (1:5), there is a finite amount of material that a Jew must learn. The Oral Torah is only open-ended in the sense that one can always delve into, extrapolate from and creatively interpret the Torah. In no way does this detract from the necessity to study all of the finite material of the Written and Oral Torah.

In a letter of encouragement to those who study the Daf Yomi (daily page of Talmud), R. Moshe Feinstein writes that the Daf Yomi is wonderful enterprise for it enables the participant to cover much of the material that they are obligated to cover in the course of their lifetime. He proves from the Talmud and Rashi (Kiddushin 30a), that one is obligated to study the entire

Mishnah is thus not making its claim regarding the texts or material, rather it is referring to the amount of *time* that one is required to invest in this mitzvah. The time has "no minimum or maximum." What exactly does this mean?

Before we get to that, we must first understand a verse in Joshua.

> This Torah shall not stray from your mouth; you should concentrate on it day and night.
>
> Joshua 1:8

This verse implies that Torah study should monopolize our entire lives! R. Yishmael dilutes the potency of this statement by insisting that one also spend time earning a living (Talmud, Berachot 35b), but aside from this dispensation, the verse apparently requires the constant study of Torah day and night. Such an intense schedule may be overwhelming for some, but they can take solace in knowing that the Talmud (Menachot 99b) provides alternative interpretations of this verse.

The Talmudic sage R. Ami understands the phrase "day and night" more liberally. He maintains that it does not mean that one must study Torah *all* day and *all* night. It just means that one fulfills the mitzvah by studying some Torah every day and every night. R. Yochanan applauds R. Ami's approach and extends it by claiming that one is not actually required to learn more than he would be

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Written Torah, Mishnah, Gemara, Halachot, and Aggadot. He further proves this point from the Talmud in Menachot 99b, "One who forgets even one thing from their learning violates a negative prohibition." How can there be a violation for forgetting, if there is no obligated to study the material to begin with?! Obviously, there is an obligation to learn the material, and it is rational to require review of the material to ensure retention (cf. *Igros Moshe*, Y.D. 2:110). See also R. Baruch Ber who writes that there is an *obligation* to become a master Torah scholar (*Birchas Shmuel*, Kiddushin 27).

doing anyway. The obligation to study Torah is fulfilled by the daily reciting of the Shema each morning and evening.[10]

The Talmud then introduces a dissenting opinion by means of a story.

[10] In the Talmud, R. Ami's position finds its precedent in an earlier teaching of R. Yossi. The Torah states that the showbread of the Temple should be placed "*l'fanai tamid*," "before me always" (Exodus 25:30). R. Yossi argues that as long as the bread is on the table for some time of the day and some time of the night, that also qualifies as "always." Basing himself on R. Yossi, R. Ami interprets the mitzvah of Torah study similarly, requiring only a brief period of study by day and by night. Now, Maimonides rejects R. Yossi's interpretation of "*tamid*" and rules that the showbread must be on the table literally at all times. Maimonides describes how the old showbread was removed at the same moment that the fresh breads were placed (cf. Laws of *Temidin* and *Musafin* 5:4). If R. Ami's liberal interpretation of the mitzvah of Torah study is truly based on the opinion of R. Yossi, then the Halacha should reject R. Ami just as it rejected R. Yossi. Indeed, the Ran in Nedarim (8a), as explained by the Vilna Gaon (Y.D. 246:6), believes that R. Yochanan (whose ruling is an extension of R. Ami's) is rejected along with R. Yossi. Nevertheless, the Rama (Y.D. 246:1) writes that if one is unable to devote serious time to Torah study, the obligation can be fulfilled through the reciting of the Shema. The Rama is ruling in accordance with R. Yochanan even though R. Yossi's opinion was rejected! The *Sefas Emes* (1847-1905) in his commentary on the Talmud is troubled by this question. He posits that R. Yochanan's position that the mitzvah of Torah study can be fulfilled by reciting the Shema is not necessarily based on the opinion of R. Yossi. This seems counterintuitive, as R. Yochanan's approach is even more liberal than that of R. Ami, and if R. Ami is rejected along with R. Yossi, how could R. Yochanan's position survive? In his commentary on Maimonides, *Lechem Mishnah* (Laws of Studying Torah 1:8) provides an answer. He explains that even the very same sages who debated R. Yossi and took the term "*tamid*" by the showbread literally, requiring the constant presence of the showbread on the table, would still be more lenient when it comes to the mitzvah of Torah study. His rationale is that the Mishnah states "Torah study is enhanced with work" (Avot 2:2) indicating that one is allowed, and perhaps even required, to interrupt their Torah study for the purpose of earning a living. Clearly, the mitzvah to study Torah day and night, although compared to the term "*tamid*" by the showbread, is not defined literally and allows for interruption for other activities. (See, however, *Lechem Mishnah's* own reading of the Talmud that seems to limit this leniency to R. Yossi and not the other sages).

> Ben Dama the nephew of R. Yishmael once asked his uncle, "I, who already studied Torah in its entirety, am I permitted to spend my time in pursuit of the wisdom of the Greeks?" R. Yishmael replied, "You are required to study Torah day and night, so if you find a time that is neither day nor night, that time can be devoted to alternate studies."
>
> Talmud, Menachot 99b

Clearly, R. Yishmael assumes that one is required to study Torah every moment of the day and every moment of the night. (Aside from the time required to deal with basic human needs such as eating and sleeping).

The Talmud cites a third reading of the verse. R. Shmuel bar Nachmeini contends that this verse is neither an obligation nor a mitzvah; it is rather a blessing. Upon seeing how much Joshua treasured the Torah, God blessed Joshua that the Torah should never leave him.[11]

In sum, there are three ways to read the verse, "This Torah shall not stray from your mouth; you should concentrate on it day and night." 1. One must engage in the study of Torah for some small period of time every day and every night. Even reciting the Shema suffices to fulfill this mitzvah. 2. The Torah must be studied every moment of the day and night, and the only dispensation is taking care of basic human needs. 3. This verse does not place any demands on us at all, it is merely a blessing that God gave Joshua. The Talmud itself is inconclusive as to which of these opinions is established as the Halacha, Jewish law. We will need to explore other sources and

[11] Despite the Talmud's slight ambiguity, the Maharsha (1555-1631) confirms this understanding of the text that there are three distinct opinions here.

commentaries before we can draw any conclusions. But first we will take the standard Jewish approach and complicate matters further.

There is a Talmudic principle that a vow made to support an already obligatory law is not a binding vow (Nedarim 8a). Yet the Talmud states that if a person took a vow to study a particular section of Torah, that vow is binding (ibid). The Talmud questions how such a vow can be binding since there is already a preexisting obligation to study Torah.[12] The Talmud responds that the mitzvah to study Torah can be fulfilled by reciting the Shema in the morning

[12] There seems to be a relatively simple answer to this question. The obligation to study Torah does not specify what one should study at any given moment. If one makes a vow promising to study a particular volume of Talmud on a given day, there is no preexisting obligation to study that particular volume and therefore the vow should be binding. This seems to be a major flaw in the logic of the Talmud's question! This question is raised by the Rashash (1794-1872), but he was preempted by the Ritvah (1250-1330). The Ritvah reads this distinction into the Talmud's answer. The Ritvah explains the Talmud's answer to mean that just as one can fulfill the obligation to study Torah by reciting the Shema, one can also fulfill the obligation by learning any area of Torah. There is no obligation to study any particular section. Therefore, a vow to study a particular section is binding. The situation here can be compared to one who had a preexisting obligation to eat bread and then swore to eat a specific loaf of bread. Such a vow would be binding. The problem is that the distinction seems so obvious. Why didn't the Talmud just say that a vow to study something specific is binding? R. Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986) in his *Dibros Moshe* (Nedarim, *He'ara* #43) resolves this problem with a radical redefinition of the mitzvah to study Torah. He suggests that one is actually obligated to learn the entire Torah every single moment of the day! Now, this is of course humanly impossible, but that would have no effect on the nature of the obligation. One who witnesses someone drowning is obligated to intervene and save the victim – the fact that they are chained to a fence and unable to help does not remove the obligation. It is just that it is impossible to fulfill the obligation. Similarly, one is obligated to study the entire Torah every moment of the day, but his hands are tied and he is unable to do so. Therefore, even if one were to make a vow to study a specific section of the Torah, the vow will not be binding since they are already technically obligated to study that section.

and evening, and does not obligate the study of any particular section of Torah. That is why a vow to study a particular section takes effect.

This passage of the Talmud appears to set the bar rather low, agreeing with the position of R. Yochanan in Menachot that Shema alone suffices. One can fulfill the biblical obligation to study Torah by simply reciting a few short paragraphs in the daily prayer service without ever having to focus their attention on the books of the Torah! This is a radical position, and a primary commentary on the Talmud is troubled by it. Rabbeinu Nissim (1320-1380) wonders how the Talmud can make such a statement when a Jew is required to study Torah all day and night! Clearly, Rabbeinu Nissim has an unshakable premise that Halacha cannot follow the liberal position of R. Yochanan.[13] Ruling in accordance with R. Yishmael, Rabbeinu

[13] In footnote #10, we cited the Vilna Gaon (Y.D. 246:6) who explained the Ran's unwillingness to interpret the Talmud as it sounds and accept R. Yochanan as Halacha to be based on the understanding that R. Yochanan's position is founded on that of R. Yossi, who was rejected. The Ran is therefore forced to interpret the Talmud's citing of R. Yochanan's position in Nedarim as applying specifically to the laws of vows, and not as a ruling on the nature of the mitzvah to study Torah. Rabbeinu Nissim redefines the rule that a vow is not binding on a preexisting obligation by stating that this concept holds true only when the obligation is not just biblical in nature, but is actually explicitly stated by the Torah. Since the mitzvah to study Torah "day and night" is not explicitly stated in the five books of Torah (it appears in a verse in Joshua), a vow concerning this obligation will be binding. To conclude, the Ran rules that the mitzvah of Torah study is literally day and night, but since according to the explicit text of the Torah reciting the Shema morning and evening suffices, a vow in support of or in violation of this mitzvah would be binding. R. Baruch Ber Lebowitz (Kaminetz, 1870-1940) points out that the Ritva (1250-1330) disagrees with the Ran and argues that the Talmud's citation of R. Yochanan indicates that we do in fact rule like R. Yossi (*Birchas Shmuel*, Kiddushin 27).
R. Moshe Feinstein presents a novel approach to reconciling the responsibility to learn day and night with the Talmud's statement that reciting the Shema suffices. He assumes that Shema would only be sufficient for one who has already mastered the entire Torah and is blessed

Nissim requires constant study at every moment of the day and night, since that is the only means that will lead to achieving true proficiency in Torah.

Let us review. The Mishnah (Pe'ah) said that Torah study has no limit and the sages of the Talmud debate whether one must study Torah at all times or if reciting the Shema is sufficient (Menachot). In Nedarim, the Talmud seems to concur with the lenient opinion that Shema alone suffices, but Rabbeinu Nissim manages to avoid that conclusion by interpreting the Talmud differently. A conclusive ruling on the obligation of Torah study is thus left for later authorities to determine.

The Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, 1720-1797) and Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk[14] (1843-1926) debate the basic definition of this mitzvah, and their debate comes down to how to understand what the Mishnah meant when it said that Torah study has "no limit." The practical distinction between their approaches may appear minor, but as we shall see, its impact on the fundamental nature of this mitzvah is profound.

Approach of the Vilna Gaon

The Vilna Gaon introduces the idea that the parameters of this mitzvah do not have to be purely objective, and may very well be determined based on the subjective circumstance of each individual. The fundamental rule is exactly as stated by the Mishnah quoted

with phenomenal memory so that there is no concern that he may forget something. However, people who have not yet completed the entire Written and Oral Torah, or even someone who has but is prone to forget, cannot fulfill their obligation with Shema alone and must learn constantly until they master the entire Torah to a point where there is no concern of forgetting any part of it (cf. *Igros Moshe*, Y.D. 2:110).

[14] An ancient city in Latvia, known today as Daugavpils.

above: Torah study has no minimum or maximum limit. This means that for some a bare minimum is sufficient and for others the obligation is vast.[15]

How much time is one required to spend learning Torah each day? The Vilna Gaon's approach is that it all depends on how much time one has available. People need to work, eat, sleep, relax and perform other mitzvot. During the times that they are involved in these other activities, they are exempt from the mitzvah of learning Torah.[16] This

[15] This approach is recorded in the Vilna Gaon's commentary to Mishnah, "*Sh'note Eliyahu*," Pe'ah 1:1.

[16] If one violates or fails to fulfill any mitzvah due to extenuating circumstances of duress and the like, they are not held accountable for violating the mitzvah. However, there is a fundamental difference between the dispensation found by all mitzvot and the exemption that we are suggesting for Torah study. The standard exemption is based on the principal of "*o'nes rachmana patrei*," i.e., in extenuating circumstances the violator is faultless and will not be prosecuted. This exemption does not limit or override the obligation nor does it define the parameters of the mitzvah. Rather, it is a clause that exempts the violator despite the fact that the mitzvah was, in fact, violated. Regarding Torah study, however, the Vilna Gaon is suggesting that the mitzvah itself is limited to the individual's ability to involve himself in Torah study. It is not a pardon; it is the very definition of the mitzvah. This approach allows room for one to allocate their time for other activities including work, spending time with family, and other activities that are part of a normal life. Had the dispensation been sourced in "*o'nes rachmana patrei*," one would be obligated to reduce the time spent on other activities to the bare minimum. The fact that the dispensation is built into the mitzvah allows for more flexibility when allocating one's time.
Maimonides supports the idea that one is allowed to spend time on less important activities without the requirement for an absolute *o'nes*. He writes that the king of the Jewish people is not allowed to get drunk or spend extensive amounts of time with his queen; rather he must study torah and involve himself with the needs of the nation day and night (Laws of Kings 3:5-6). R. Isser Zalman Meltzer (1870-1953) wonders why Maimonides considers this unique to the proper behavior of a king. Aren't all Jews obligated to study Torah all the time? He answers that a king is required to abstain from various activities which may take time away from Torah study. However, an ordinary Jew, although obligated to spend his available time

studying Torah, is permitted to involve himself in activities that he knows in advance will take time away from Torah study. The prohibition of "*bitul torah*," wasting time that could be spent studying Torah, is only transgressed when one refrains from learning for no reason (*Even Ha'azel*, ad loc.). Clearly, this approach is based on the assumption that the nature of the mitzvah to study Torah allows for one to live a normal life and allot time to other activities. This contradicts the approach of R. Moshe Feinstein. Reb Moshe (cited in note #13) writes that the dispensation to take out time from Torah study for the purpose of earning a living is in fact based on the concept of "*o'nes rachmana patrei*" (cf. *Igros Moshe*, Y.D. 2:110).

The Rama (Krakow, 1520-1572) seems to support the approach of the *Even Ha'azel*. The Rama writes, "A person should only learn the Written Torah, Mishnah, Gemara, and Halacha; through this he will acquire a portion in this world and the next. One should not study other fields of wisdom; however, one is permitted to study other fields of wisdom occasionally" (Y.D. 246:4). The Rama is not speaking of learning a trade. He is permitting one to study other forms of wisdom even for the sake of acquiring knowledge, so long as their primary focus is on Torah. Why would even the little time one takes from Torah and devotes to secular studies be permitted and not violate the precept of "*bitul torah*"? The answer is that the Rama is in agreement with the *Even Ha'azel*. The mitzvah to study Torah does not demand that one forsake all other activities. It is permitted to allocate time, albeit a limited amount of time, in pursuit of secular knowledge.

Regarding the Rama's allowance to study secular studies "occasionally" but forbidding one from making it a central focus, R. Elchonon Wasserman (Baranowicze, 1875-1941) writes that making secular studies one's focus would be a violation of *bitul torah* (*Kovetz Ma'marim* 11). He also suggests that there is a requirement to show the proper dignity to Torah by granting it supremacy over secular knowledge, and therefore focusing one's attention primarily on secular knowledge is to devalue and degrade the Torah. R. Baruch Ber Lebowitz expresses the same idea in even sharper terms and comes to a radical conclusion. Based on his reading of the Vilna Gaon (Y.D. 246:7), Reb Baruch Ber argues that *bitul torah* can be violated in one of two ways: either passively by not studying Torah, or actively by undermining the supremacy of Torah. One who indulges in excessive idle chatter or one who invests their primary energies in secular studies is in violation of active *bitul torah*. R. Baruch Ber argues that *bitul torah* is never actually permitted. Although all agree that it is permitted to do what is necessary to earn a living, R. Baruch Ber explains that this dispensation does not override the prohibition of *bitul torah*; it just isn't *bitul torah* at all. However, engaging in active *bitul torah*, dedicating the bulk of one's time and energy in the pursuit

is critical, since the mitzvah to study Torah is active all day and all night. If there were no dispensations, one would never be allowed to engage in any other activity! Those who need to invest the entire day taking care of their business can thus technically fulfill the mitzvah of learning Torah by the reciting the Shema (which they will be doing anyway every morning and evening, cf. Mishnah, Berachot 1:1), and those who have more time at their disposal are obligated to invest more time in Torah study.[17] The nature of the obligation varies according to the unique circumstances of each individual.[18]

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of secular knowledge, is never permitted – *even for the sake of earning a living*. According to R. Baruch Ber, a university education would be permissible only if Torah study remained the primary focus of the student's life (*Birchas Shmuel*, Kiddushin 27).

The notion that *bitul torah* refers not only to time taken away from Torah study, but also to devaluing the Torah by giving value to other activities, can be deduced from the Talmud itself. The Talmud writes that it is forbidden to routinely attend leisure activities such as games and circuses because they "lead to *bitul torah*" (Avodah Zarah 18b). If the issue would be the time taken away from Torah, the Talmud should say attending these events "*is bitul torah*," rather than merely *leading* to *bitul torah*. Apparently, the Talmud assumes that time spent on leisure activities does not qualify as *bitul torah* because people are entitled to take an occasional break for relaxation. Nevertheless, routinely attending these activities will lead to a different form of *bitul torah* – valuing entertainment over Torah study.

[17] R. Baruch Ber Lebowitz develops the Vilna Gaon's approach at length. He cites two verses which emphasize the necessity of constant study. One is the aforementioned "you should concentrate on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8), which implies that one should be studying all day and night and the second is, "you should make [the words of Torah] sharp in your child's mouth" (Deuteronomy 6:7) from which the Talmud derives that one must achieve proficiency in Torah (Kiddushin 30a). The combination of these two verses alone would forbid one to digress from Torah for even a moment, since this would cause losing both time and the ability to achieve proficiency. There is a third biblical injunction, however, which appears in the very same verse: "Speak about [Torah] when you arise and when you lie down" (Deuteronomy 6:7). As the Talmud understands it, this phrase redefines and dilutes the obligation, allowing just a few words of Torah spoken by day and a few by night to qualify as fulfillment of the mitzvah (Menachot 99b). Being that it is

There is another novel aspect to this approach. Here the Gaon introduces the idea that when studying Torah, every single word of Torah is considered an independent mitzvah. It follows that one who studies Torah for an hour will compound thousands of mitzvot. This

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no longer viewed as a mitzvah which makes constant demands on one's time, allotting time to other activities cannot be considered a nullification of the mitzvah. Therefore, an individual who must interrupt his Torah study for the purpose of earning a living is not nullifying the mitzvah of Torah study, so long as some Torah is read in the day and in the night. But one who does not need to break from Torah to earn a living or perform any other mitzvah, remains obligated in the constant study of Torah as derived the first two verses (*Birchas Shmuel*, Kiddushin 27).

[18] This concept of a custom-tailored obligation to learn expresses itself in a different mitzvah: the mitzvah to tell the story of the Exodus. In the Passover Haggadah, we find a most unusual statement. "Even if we were all wise, all of us understanding, and all proficient in Torah, we would still have a mitzvah to retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt." Now, if there is a mitzvah to tell the story of the Exodus at the Seder, why would anyone entertain the idea that this requirement was contingent on a lack of knowledge or understanding? Torah scholars have the same obligation to eat matzah on Passover, sit in a succah on Succot, and wear *tefillin* daily as every other Jew. Why would the mitzvah to retell the story of the Exodus be any different? The answer to this question lies in Maimonides' Laws of *Chometz* and Matzah (7:1,2) where he indicates that there are actually two aspects to this mitzvah. Aside from the Halacha to retell the story, there is also a Halacha to teach one's children the story according to their intellectual capability. Apparently, there is an element of the mitzvah of Torah study incorporated into this mitzvah of retelling the story of the Exodus. It is for this reason that the Haggadah provides a different answer for each of the four sons. Children must be answered at the Seder in a way that is appropriate for their intellectual maturity. Since this mitzvah varies depending on the intelligence of the individual, it is a legitimate supposition that a scholar who is already proficient in the nuances of the story might be exempt entirely from this mitzvah. The Haggadah therefore goes out of its way to clarify that although there is an element of Torah study incorporated into this mitzvah, and the mitzvah obligation does manifest itself differently based on one's intellectual abilities, nevertheless, scholars are still obligated to tell the story of the Exodus.

more than compensates the loss of the one or two other mitzvot that are forfeited by spending time on Torah study.

Both the imperative to invest hours in the study of Torah day and night and the fact that even a single word is crowned with mitzvah status testify to the paramount significance of Torah study. The absence of both a maximum and a minimum limit compliment each other in stressing the majestic nature of this mitzvah.

The Gaon helps us in another way. The Mishnah wrote, "Torah study corresponds to all other mitzvoth." This can now be easily understood based on the Gaon's principal that a mitzvah of studying Torah is achieved with each and every single word uttered (and even every thought).[19] When faced with the choice between investing one's time and energy in the pursuit of Torah or performing some other mitzvah, one should surely choose the option with the highest net gain. The fact that even a brief session of Torah study is not just one mitzvah, but hundreds and thousands of mitzvot, undoubtedly eclipses all other individual mitzvah opportunities.

Approach of R. Meir Simcha

In his masterwork "*Ohr Samayach*," R. Meir Simcha of Dvinsk develops a remarkable thesis. His premise is that the mitzvah obligations of the Torah must be identical for every single Jew.[20] He

[19] Although the Vilna Gaon seems to emphasize the "words" that are spoken, it seems clear that this would also include every word that is thought, for the mitzvah of Torah study is not limited to verbal articulation. Although the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 47:4) rules that one is not required to make a blessing on Torah thoughts, the Vilna Gaon himself disagrees and rules that Torah thoughts do qualify as a fulfillment of the mitzvah of Torah study – as is clearly indicated by our verse, "you should *concentrate* on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8). Cf. Biur Halacha ad loc., s.v. *Hameharher*.

[20] *Ohr Samayach* on Maimonides, Laws of Torah Study 1:2.

rejects the Vilna Gaon's contention that a mitzvah obligation can vary depending on the individual, and argues that mitzvot are commandments and as such, they cannot be flexible. Certain mitzvot may address a specific group of Jews, such as the sacrificial laws for the Kohanim who perform the service in the Temple or the laws of family purity for married couples. But when the Torah addresses all people, the obligation does not conform to individual capabilities. Of course, there is always room for people to express themselves and excel in their mitzvah performance;[21] however, all Jews are always equally responsible to fulfill the base obligation.

R. Meir Simcha is also uncomfortable with the Vilna Gaon's ruling that every Jew is obligated to devote all available time to the study of Torah. Can a Jew who lacks the necessary intellect, skills, diligence and passion for learning be expected to keep such a demanding schedule of study? On the other hand, the Torah does not want to accommodate the lowest common denominator and undermine its educational system. God therefore designed the mitzvah of studying Torah in such a way that would both challenge the gifted and allow fulfillment for the simplest Jew, without sacrificing the egalitarian principal that mitzvah obligations must be the same for everyone.

R. Meir Simcha's theory begins with the idea that all Jews share the same basic obligation to study at least a few words of Torah every morning and evening. The poor and the rich, the academic and the ignorant, the disciplined and the disorganized can all easily fulfill this mitzvah. It can even be achieved through the routine twice-daily recitation of the Shema. This accommodates the simple Jew, but now

[21] This self expression is through the concept of "*hiddur mitzvah*," beautifying mitzvot, and it is based on the personal abilities and tastes of the individual (cf. Talmud, Nazir 2b; Shabbat 133b). That is, by beautifying a mitzvah, one fulfills a *different* mitzvah called *hiddur*; the base mitzvah is always clearly defined and is the same for everyone.

the Torah needs to challenge those who are capable of accomplishing more, and to do so without dividing between the classes and forcing a mitzvah on some and not on others. How will the Torah do this? It will utilize the same system that it used to foster a high standard of ethics.

Everyone knows that Judaism places great emphasis on character development. But if asked to provide a source in the Torah obligating the Jew to control their anger, to be compassionate, considerate or humble, one would be hard pressed to find an answer – such commandments simply do not exist. How can we claim to have a religion of morality and refinement without a single mitzvah requiring it? R. Meir Simcha explains that it is impossible for the Torah to command such things. Mitzvot are egalitarian and must always be equally applicable to all members of the group to which they apply. Had the Torah required one to be humble, for example, the humility demanded by the Torah would have to be clearly defined and equally incumbent on all Jews. But the Torah could not do that, because not all people are the same. Some have a predisposition for arrogance whereas others have a predisposition for anger. We cannot possibly demand that everyone have absolute control of their personality and character from the age of Bar and Bat Mitzvah, mandating the Jews form an army of magnanimous robots. So if not by command, how does the Torah get people to develop their character?

God, in His infinite wisdom, knew what to do. The Torah is not limited to a list of laws; it has other methods of conveying messages. By way of inspirational stories about our patriarchs and matriarchs and through mitzvot which legislate compassionate, empathetic and charitable behavior in a host of specific circumstances, the Torah makes God's will and expectations known. "Go in [God's] ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9) is a general directive to emulate God's

goodness, but the obligation is not sharply defined. The Torah clearly wants us to develop our personality and refine our character, but it leaves room for individuals to work on their unique predispositions at their own level and pace.

When it came to the mitzvah of studying Torah, argues R. Meir Simcha, God followed the same approach. Rather than commanding everyone to study Torah constantly,[22] which would be an unreasonable demand for many, God opted for the same method that He used to emphasize the importance of character development. Many verses in the Torah stress the importance of Torah study and the central role it plays in Jewish life,[23] without creating a bona fide commandment any greater than the reciting of the Shema. Hence, for those who are capable of going beyond this minimum standard, the sky is the limit. This is what the Mishnah meant when it said Torah has "no limit." The obligation may be small, but the Torah makes it clear that Torah study is boundless; it is not limited to a particular amount of time, nor does it end with mastery of any specific material. One can always invest more time in study, there is always more material to learn, and there is always an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Torah already learned.

In light of R. Meir Simcha's explanation, integrating what were seemingly contradictory sources defining the nature of this mitzvah is remarkably now a trivial task. The mitzvah obligation is to learn something, no matter how simple, no matter how short, every single day and night. Even the routine recital of Shema suffices. However, despite the absence of any legislated law, the Torah expects each man, according to his abilities, to spend more time studying Torah.

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[22] The verse that requires study day and night is in Joshua and not in the five books of Moses.

[23] Cf. Leviticus 26:3; Deuteronomy chap. 4; 5:28; 6:7; 11:19.

Does the verse is Joshua translate as "concentrate on Torah every minute of the day and night," or does it translate as "concentrate on Torah for at least one minute day and night"? The answer, according to R. Meir Simcha, is yes and yes, for both are accurate descriptions of God's intention when He designed the mitzvah to study Torah.

Part-time vs. Full-time

The debate between the Vilna Gaon and R. Meir Simcha is fascinating, but on a practical level, their positions are indistinguishable. Regardless of how the nature of the obligation is defined, all agree that a Jew need not spend day and night engaged in Torah study, yet must excel according to his ability. This leads us to a new question.

What is the ideal? Given the choice, should a Jew spend all of their time studying Torah? Or does the Torah prefer that a Jew spend at least some time at work? For the orthodox community, this is a provocative question today, but it is far from new. The debate dates back to the Roman Period and, not surprisingly, everything depends on how you interpret the verses of the Torah.

On one hand, the Torah states, "You shall gather in your grain" (Deuteronomy 11:14). This would imply that a Jew should spend at least some of their time at work, "gathering grain." On the other hand, the Torah states, "The Torah shall not move from your mouth" (Joshua 1:8) implying that one should ideally devote all of their time to Torah study. How are these verses recoiled?

The answer to this question is debated by two of the greatest sages of the Mishnah, R. Yishmael and R' Shimon bar Yochai.[24] R. Yishmael takes a compromising approach and maintains that one

[24] Israel, circa 150 C.E.

should incorporate Torah study together with work, fulfilling both verses simultaneously.[25] R. Shimon bar Yochai vehemently disagrees:

> "Is it possible that one should plow during the plowing season, plant during the planting season, harvest during the harvest season, thresh during threshing season and winnow when the wind blows strong? What will be with Torah?!"
>
> Talmud, Berachot 35b

Based on this argument, R. Shimon bar Yochai concludes that ideally a Jew should invest all their time in the study of Torah – and one who does so will merit to have their work done for them by others! According to R. Shimon bar Yochai, when the Torah writes, "you shall gather in your wheat," indicating that one should devote time to work, it is not describing the ideal state of affairs.[26]

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[25] See note #31.

[26] The Talmud states that R. Shimon bar Yochai interprets this verse as referring to a time when the Jews are "not following the will of God." However, this is problematic. As the Maharsha (Krakow, 1555-1631) points out, the paragraph opened just one verse earlier with these words: "It will be when you follow my mitzvot... you will gather your grain" (Deuteronomy 11:13), which is obviously describing a time when the Jews are following the will of God. To resolve this problem, the Maharsha subscribes to the approach of the *Tosafot* who explain that the verse refers to a time when the Jews are observing mitzvot but are not completely devoted to the service of God. This is why they are blessed with a harvest but do not merit to have others gather the grain for them. The Maharsha brilliantly finds support for this approach in the text itself. In the first paragraph of the Shema, the Torah says to love God with "all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources" (Deuteronomy 6:5), but in the second paragraph of the Shema the Torah only says to love and serve God "with all your heart and all your soul" (ibid 11:13), leaving out resources. The Maharsha explains that this discrepancy fits perfectly with R. Shimon bar Yochai's position. Initially the Torah is describing the ideal, in which the Jews are prepared to give up all of their resources and money for God. In the second paragraph, however, the Torah is describing individuals who serve God with all their heart and soul, but are not devoted enough to give up their money – this is why, in the

As we explained, this discussion is not dependent on the parameters of the mitzvah to study Torah that we have developed. Whether we follow the approach of the Vilna Gaon that the mitzvah to study Torah manifests itself differently depending on the individual, or whether we follow the approach of R. Meir Simcha that there is a bare minimum requirement of Torah study, there is room for the dispute between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon bar Yochai. Both the Vilna Gaon and R. Meir Simcha agree that it is ideal to primarily devote oneself to delving into the study of Torah. The dispute between R. Yishmael and R. Shimon is to define the "ideal." R. Yishmael maintains that the ideal lifestyle for most Jews[27] includes working for a living, whereas R. Shimon bar Yochai believes that the ideal requires absolute devotion to nothing but the study of Torah.

When it comes to determining who is right, the Talmud deviates from its usual method of citing textual proofs and instead addresses the issue from a very practical angle.

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second paragraph, the monetary success of the Jews is limited and they will have to gather their grains themselves.

At first glance, it sounds surprising that people who are devoted to God with all their heart and all their soul (i.e., they are prepared to give their lives for God) are not prepared to part with their money for God. However, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 74a) affirms this truth and states that for some people, money is more precious to them than their own lives! What is the meaning of this? It would seem that this is actually a common phenomenon. Many Jews would rise to the occasion and give their lives for Judaism if circumstances demanded it (c"v). That would be, by definition, a one-time event. However, the challenge of being devoted to God with one's money is not a one-time event; on the contrary, it is regular and constant. Serving God with money means focusing on charity and helping others who are less fortunate, and this is a daily affair. Many Jews are deeply committed to the service of God and would give their lives for Judaism, but yet are not prepared to serve God regularly and consistently with their money.

[27] See note #28.

> Abaye said, "Many have followed R. Yishmael's approach and succeeded, and many have followed R. Shimon bar Yochai's approach and failed."
>
> Talmud, ibid

Apparently, studying and not working did not even bring success in Torah, not to mention that it led to poverty. R. Yishmael's position advocating work is further supported by this Mishnah: "Torah study is good when complimented with work (*derech eretz*)" (Avot 2:2).[28]

[28] Being that the Halacha follows the opinion of R. Yishmael, his position warrants a closer analysis. R. Yishmael is seemingly describing what is, in his opinion, the ideal: Torah coupled with *derech eretz* (work). Yet upon further examination of the commentaries, the gap between R. Yishmael and his dissenter R. Shimon bar Yochai narrows significantly. In explaining R. Yishmael's position, Rashi cites the Mishnah, "Any Torah that is not complimented with work, will not be lasting and will ultimately lead to sin" (Avot 2:2). According to Rashi, R. Yishmael does not intend to grant inherent value to working; it is purely a practical issue, Torah needs work for its own survival. Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1263) explains that without a healthy and stable income, one is likely to fall into unscrupulous business activities involving theft and other severe violations of the Torah. Again, according to this interpretation, R. Yishmael essentially agrees with R. Shimon bar Yochai in theory, just not in practice.
In light of the above, we can answer a question raised by the Maharatz Chiyus (1805-1855). In Menachot (99b), R. Yishmael says that the verse "Torah should not stray from your mouth" is to be taken literally, meaning that one should study Torah constantly. How then can R. Yishmael argue with R. Shimon bar Yochai and maintain that one must incorporate Torah with work? Based on the above analysis, the answer is self-evident. R' Yishmael agrees with R. Shimon bar Yochai in theory. In an ideal world, a Jew should study Torah all day. But the practical minded R. Yishmael will not advocate for that kind of life in practice. Perhaps for an individual who excels in Torah study and for whom the above cited concerns do not apply, R. Yishmael would concur that he should indeed dedicate all of his time exclusively to the study of Torah. This was the situation when R. Yishmael's nephew asked him whether he could spend time studying "the wisdom of the Greeks." R. Yishmael's nephew was not in need of income and his desire to

The fact that the Talmud's only objection to R. Shimon bar Yochai is a practical one would indicate that from a strictly theological perspective, the Talmud considers R. Shimon bar Yochai's position to be legitimate. There certainly are gifted individuals who could and should follow the advice of R. Shimon bar Yochai and study Torah full-time – the Talmud only submits that this is not an advisable approach for the masses.[29] Most people will only succeed in

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study secular knowledge was not for the purpose of earning a livelihood; he just wanted to pursue a liberal arts education. Under such circumstances, R. Yishmael agreed with R. Shimon bar Yochai, and he therefore rebuked his nephew for considering a digression from his Torah studies.

[29] The Maharsha points out that there are great Tzadikim who merit "to have their work done by others" and are thus able to devote their entire lives to Torah and the service of God. Such was the life of R. Shimon bar Yochai, himself, whom the Talmud describes as a man who's "Torah was his livelihood" (Shabbat 11a). When he was in hiding from the Romans, R. Shimon bar Yochai spent a total of twenty-four years in a cave with his son doing nothing else but studying Torah (Shabbat 33b). It is possible, however, that R. Shimon bar Yochai modified his approach while he was in hiding. Upon exiting the cave after twelve years of uninterrupted immersion in Torah, R. Shimon bar Yochai saw people working in their fields. He could not comprehend how people were "leaving the eternal world [of Torah] and involving themselves in the fleeting world [of commerce]." Any place he cast his judgmental eye was immediately consumed by fire (Talmud, ibid). Rashi points out that this conforms with R. Shimon bar Yochai's position that whenever Jews devote themselves exclusively to Torah, their work will be done for them by others. God then sent R. Shimon bar Yochai and his son R. Elezar back into the cave, claiming that they are destroying His world. After spending another twelve years in the cave, they came out again. R. Elazar's stare continued to destroy, but this time his father, R. Shimon bar Yochai, prevented the destruction. He said, "It is sufficient for the world to have just you and me." R. Shimon did not change his theological approach. He continued to believe that the world is sustained by those who are wholly devoted to Torah study. However, he now recognized that this approach is not for everyone. He expressed this idea in his statement to his son, the world will be sustained by just you and me; we cannot expect this approach to adapted by the masses. R. Shimon bar Yochai believed that the world needs Torah scholars who devote themselves entirely to the service of God through

life with R. Yishmael's formula of combining Torah with work. But it is important to remember that R. Yishmael does not disagree with R. Shimon bar Yochai in principle, he just denies the plausibility of his system on a practical level.[30] Furthermore, even R. Yishmael

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the study of Torah, but he realized that was not a pragmatic approach for the entire community. The Talmud records that R. Shimon bar Yochai said to his son, "the devout are few, but you and I are among them" (Succah 45b). R. Shimon bar Yochai maintained that individuals of the likes of R. Elazar and himself are necessary for preserving the world, but he ceased advocating this approach for the masses.

R. Chaim Volozhiner (1749-1821) develops this approach further (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:8). He points to a clear discrepancy between the first and second paragraph of Shema: the first paragraph is in the singular tense and the second is in the plural tense. This indicates that the first section, which describes complete and total devotion (see note #26), is for the rare individual who is capable of achieving that level, and the second paragraph, in which one is not devoted to God with his money and is therefore forced to gather his grain with his own hands, is for the public. R. Chaim Volozhiner explains that there were times in history when the Jews were expected to forgo all other pursuits and be completely devoted to Torah and God. When the Jews traveled through the desert en route to the land of Israel, their clothes stayed clean and new, Manna fell from the sky and the Clouds of Glory protected them (Exodus 13:22). All their needs were provided for and they were able to devote all their time to the Torah that Moses was teaching. But when the Jews finally entered the land of Israel, the picnic was over. They had to work as farmers in order to survive. This dramatic change in lifestyle was reflected by the two cherubs on the Holy Ark in the Tabernacle. Their original design had them facing one another, symbolizing the intimate relationship that existed between God and the Jews in the desert. But when King Solomon built the first Temple centuries later, he designed cherubs that did not face each other directly, but were at a slight angle (Baba Batra 99a). The cherubs were no longer staring intimately at one another, symbolizing that the Jews are no longer staring intimately into the "eyes" of God. At that time in history, the Jews had to work to earn a living and could not devote their entire day to Torah study, as they had in the desert. They did not focus on God at all times, but nor were they turned away from God. This was God's will at that time and the cherubs reflected this reality.

[30] R. Baruch Ber Lebowitz relates in the name of his illustrious mentor, R. Chaim Soloveitchik (Brisk, 1853-1918), that Maimonides rejects the opinion of R. Yishmael and rules in accordance with R. Shimon bar Yochai. Reb

agrees that the study of Torah must always be the central point of a Jew's life. R. Yishmael said that one should "compliment the Torah with work," and not the other way around. Regardless of how much time a Jew has available for Torah study, it is Torah, and not work, that should be their primary focus.[31]

Conclusion

The Torah is vast. Even a lifetime of study by the most brilliant and gifted scholar amounts to nothing more than a drop in the ocean of divine knowledge and wisdom that is the Torah. But we should not be intimidated. The Midrash contrasts the reaction of a wise man and a fool upon seeing a giant pile that needs to be removed.

Baruch Ber believes that Reb Chaim's source is Maimonides' famous statement that any human being who wishes to devote their lives to the service of God and the study of Torah is entitled to do so and is sanctified as holy of holies, even though this constitutes throwing off the yoke of earning a livelihood and they will need to be supported by the community (Laws of Shmita 13:13). Cf. *Birchas Shmuel*, Kiddushin 27. However, aside from the difficultly of reconciling such a position with the statement of Abaye recorded above which clearly indicates that the Talmud rules in accordance with R. Yishmael, the inference from Maimonides himself is far from compelling. In light of the fact that R. Yishmael agrees with R. Shimon bar Yochai in principal (see note #28), R. Yishmael himself could have easily authored the statement of Maimonides that allows individuals to devote their lives to God even though they will be throwing off the yoke of earning a living. This is clearly evident from the insight of the Radvaz (Safed, 1479-1573) in his commentary on Maimonides. The Radvaz points out that Maimonides does not condone Torah scholars being supported by their communities, rather Maimonides expresses confidence that God will ease the pressure of those willing to make this commitment and enable them to easily earn a living.

[31] R. Chaim Volozhiner infers from R. Yishmael's language that even during the time that a Jew is working, his mind should be concentrating on Torah (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:8).

> What does the fool say? "Who can remove such a large pile?!" What does the wise man say? "I will remove two pails today and two pails tomorrow until the entire pile is removed." Similarly, [upon seeing the vastness of Torah,] what does the fool say? "Who can study Torah? Thirty chapters on the laws of damages! Thirty chapters on the laws of impurity!" What does the wise man say? "I will study two laws today and two laws tomorrow until I complete the entire Torah."
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> Midrash Rabba 19:2

By climbing one hill today and another one tomorrow, eventually the mountain will be conquered. One thing is certain. The road to mastery of Torah is a toll road. There is no freeway, no expressway and no shortcut.[32] Success can be achieved only through commitment, diligence and relentless perseverance. But no matter how much or how little a Jew is able to learn, every word of Torah is a mitzvah that outweighs all others, a mitzvah that elevates the most important part of who we are – our minds.

[32] For millennia, scholars have approached the Torah in very different ways, each succeeding to uncover unique aspects of Torah. The Torah is the wisdom of God. Just as God manifests Himself in many different ways and can be approached from different angles, His wisdom is no different. The one common denominator of all approaches is that all require extensive training and endless hours of diligent study. It should be noted, however, that certain methods have been proven ineffective or inefficient. Not all methodologies lead to mastery of Torah, but there certainly are several excellent highways to choose from.

Шавуот – праздник освобождения из рабства?

РАВ АВРААМ ФЛАКС

Праздник Шавуот, который мы называем «праздник дарования Торы», никогда в Торе так не называется. В Торе говорится о двух аспектах этого дня: сельскохозяйственном, т.е. праздник жатвы, и второй аспект – 50-й день от праздника Песах т.е. Шавуот – завершение Песаха. И весь период «Счёта Омера», когда мы отсчитываем 50 дней от праздника до праздника, по сути, путь от Исхода из Египта до получения Торы на горе Синай, сам по себе период полупраздничный (в силу исторических обстоятельств ставший полутраурным). Таким образом, праздник Песах – праздник освобождения от внешней зависимости и прежде всего от внутренней несвободы – является только началом, отправной точкой, а завершение праздника – в Шавуот.

Период Счета Омера является тем периодом, когда мы постепенно, день за днем, шаг за шагом, ступень за ступенью осознаем, что Исход – лишь начало пути, осознаем, что выход из рабства (в том числе и «внутреннего») из под власти собственных заблуждений, зависимости от тех или иных взглядов, привычек, образа жизни и т.п. – необходимое , но никак не достаточное условие обретения истинной свободы. Поэтому Шавуот и не имеет своей «персональной» даты в Торе, а отсчитывается как 50-й день от Исхода. Нетрудно заранее отсчитать дату, нетрудно сопоставить с датой Синайского откровения и поэтому неслучайно Всевышний заповедует нам отсчитывать эти 50 дней. Песах-Омер-Шавуот – в действительности это один праздник. Но понимает ли это человек? От Исхода и вплоть до сегодняшнего дня, так же как и выходившие из Египта рабы, осознаем ли мы эту глубинную внутреннюю связь между событиями и невозможностью подлинной свободы без принятия Торы на Синае? Ответ мы находим в Пасхальной Агаде.

Всеми любимая (а в особенности детьми) песенка « И этого нам достаточно» (« דיינו »), которую поют на развеселый мотив, на самом деле – осмысление нашего отношения к процессу освобождения и нашего понимания Свободы. Мы поем ее после рассказа о «Казнях Египетских», необходимых не столько фараону и египтянам, чтобы выпустили рабов, сколько сынам Израиля, чтобы быть готовыми выйти на свободу, разрушить в глазах рабов незыблемость хозяев, доказать им, что хозяином является вовсе не фараон.

«Если бы вывел нас из Египта, но не наказал их – нам достаточно».

«Мы не злопамятны» – наша свобода не означает наше неприятие всей системы египетских идолов, мы можем

существовать вместе с ними, сочетая нашу независимость с системой египетского рабства и идолопоклонства.

«И если бы не рассек нам моря» - нам было бы достаточно».

«Нет, мы не ждем чудес», мы можем прожить с мыслью, что «добились освобождения», или что оно было нам «даровано» нашими поработителями. Укрепить веру сынов Израиля во Всевышнего и в Моисея, дать прочувствовать, что всё возможно, что и воды моря расступятся перед выходящим на свободу народом, – вот, что являлось истинной целью рассечения вод Красного моря.

«Если бы дал нам манну, но не дал субботу».

Мы готовы не вспоминать каждую неделю о том, кто сотворил для нас этот мир, о том, кто вывел нас из рабства на свободу, готовы жить без этой памяти, без этого святого дня, который не дает нам забыть в каком мире и как мы живем, если уже дарована манна, т.е. если наш голод утолен.

« Если бы дал нам субботу, но не привел к горе Синай».

У нас есть то, что свято, мы верим в Творца и не забыли, кому обязаны свободой. При этом мы не ждем, чтобы к нам персонально обращались с небес.

«Если бы привел нас к горе Синай, но не дал нам Тору».

Какова же тогда цель «стояния» у горы Синай если не получение Торы? Мы действительно верим в Творца Вселенной, трепещем при мысли о его величии и не представляем себе жизни без Великого Откровения, без того момента, когда весь народ «видит голос», но без сложнейшей системы заповедей и законов, регламентирующих все без исключения области жизни – мы как-нибудь проживем.

Но даже и на принятии Торы во всей ее полноте «нам достаточно» не заканчивается. Мы готовы остановиться на принятии законов Торы без осознания той внутренней цели и задачи, которую она ставит перед нами: жизнь народа на Земле, которую Всевышний дал праотцам и построение Храма, т.е. создание идеального гармоничного общества. Общества, которое живет на Святой Земле по Святому Закону Торы, символическое отражение которого мы находим в построении Храма и Храмовой службе.

Итак, каждый следующий шаг в нашем освобождении не очевиден. Сыны Израиля продвигались шаг за шагом вперед по тому пути, который Всевышний открыл им, шли вслед за «столпом облачным и столпом огненным». Да, в каждый момент мы готовы остановиться на достигнутом , сказав «нам достаточно». И лишь Всевышний не позволяет нам остановиться на полпути. На протяжении всей истории мы повторяем этот процесс. Освобождение не заканчивается прекращением рабства.

С другой стороны, дарование Торы или принятие Торы – не отдельное событие, вырванное из контекста истории. Знаменитая проблема, которая в течение многих лет волнует российских евреев «можно ли быть внутренне свободным в неволе» находит свое отражение в нашем празднике. Ответ очевиден – нет. Шавуот завершает Песах, физическое освобождение необходимое условие обретения подлинной внутренней свободы. Основой ее является жизнь по тому Закону, который позволяет сделать осознанный и свободный выбор в любой ситуации, тот выбор, который человек действительно делает свободно, а не подчиняясь кому бы то ни было или чему бы, то ни было. При этом, возможно ли

физическое освобождение без обретения духовной свободы, без открытого и явного бунта: «по вашим законам мы жить не будем». Ответ так же ясен – нет. И именно поэтому Господь требует до Исхода принести в жертву ягненка и помазать его кровью косяки, таким образом сломив раз и навсегда духовное подчинение идолопоклоннической системе Египта, их культуре и образу жизни.

Итак, без Песаха нет Шавуота, без Шавуота нет Песаха. Два этих праздника, составляющие единое целое являются друг для друга необходимым условием, а вовсе не дополнением. При этом мы не можем забыть и о тех 50 днях Омера, о тех 50 шагах, показывающих, что «прыжком», «рывком» можно вырваться из рабства, но невозможно обрести истинную свободу и гармонию, которую мы обретаем, принимая Тору. Это длинный и кропотливый труд, путь в котором нет «коротких путей» или «туннель-эффекта» и невозможно перескочить ни через одну ступень – все 50 нужно пройти,и ни один день нельзя ни сократить, ни вычеркнуть. Именно поэтому, тот, кто забыл сосчитать один день «счет Омера», дальше продолжает считать без благословения (в отличие от заповеди зажигания ханукальных свечей). Заповедь, которую не исполнил вчера, не мешает исполнять ее сегодня, а в отсчете дней Омера важна именно последовательность, непрерывность процесса.

Итак, Шавуот – день Синайского Откровения, день принятия Торы – это тот день, когда толпа вышедших из Египта племен сынов Израиля и присоединившегося к ним разноплеменного сброда рабов стали еврейским народом, народом, у которого есть свой Закон, своя культура и образ жизни, – не египетский и не хананейский.