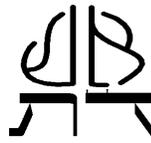


Toras



Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**S**peak to Aharon and to his sons, saying: 'this is how you shall bless the Children of Israel, saying to them:'" (Bamidbar 6:23). This is followed by the "Birchas Kohanim," the Priestly Blessing, which is still made everyday in Israel and on holidays outside of Israel (and hopefully soon- with G-d's full name- in the rebuilt Temple). One of the questions brought up by the commentators is about the inclusion of the words "saying to them." All that would seem to be needed is the command that "the following is the blessing." Why did the G-d add "saying to them?"

Rashi addresses this issue, explaining (based on the Sifrai and on Sotah 38a) that the Kohanim must raise their voices loud enough so that all can hear the words of the blessing. Being that the Kohanim know who they are blessing, the people know that they are being blessed, and G-d knows who is being blessed, the question then becomes why it was so important for everyone to hear the blessing coming out of the mouths of the Kohanim. What difference did it make if the people did or didn't hear the actual words of the blessing? (See Rashi on Berachos 47a, d"h "yesomah," where he explains that there is no problem saying "amein" to a beracha that you didn't actually hear, provided that you know what beracha you are saying "amein" to.)

Another question asked by the commentators is why the commandment regarding "Birchas Kohanim" comes immediately after the section that discussed the Nazir (an individual that takes upon himself certain additional prohibitions, i.e. drinking wine, coming in contact with a corpse, and cutting his hair until his period of Nazirus ends, when he shaves it all off). What connection is there between a Nazir and Birchas Kohanim?

Still another issue discussed by some is the change from the plural form ("saying to them") to the single ("G-d shall bless you," as well the rest of the blessing) and then back again to the plural ("and I will bless them"). Since the blessing is said to the entire nation (hence the plural), why are the actual blessings said in the single form?

The Kesav Sofer explains that different people need different things. If the blessings were directed at the nation as a whole, they would apply to each

individual the same way. Therefore, the blessings themselves were said in the single form, i.e. that each person should be blessed with what is best for him (even if it's not appropriate for someone else), and by the same token, he shouldn't be "blessed" with something that would be detrimental for him. For example, if someone would be able to focus on his spiritual growth (and that of his family) better if he didn't have to be concerned with, or spend his time and energy on, earning enough money to support their material needs, it would be a blessing for him to become wealthy. On the other hand, if becoming wealthy would lead to focusing more on material things, or would take even more of his time away in order to manage his newfound wealth, it would not be a blessing for him to become rich. By gearing the blessings towards each specific individual (indicated by the singular "you" rather than the plural one), only those things that suit that particular person are included in "his" blessing.

It's not always easy to recognize what would truly be a blessing and what might cause more of a problem. Sometimes, it's even more difficult to comprehend that what might be a blessing for one person, what might be a valid means for him to get closer to G-d, would not be as effective for another. Doing Kiruv work (outreach) might strengthen the commitment of one, while bringing down another. Being active in communal work is often spiritually rewarding, but can also become a distraction from personal growth. As important as it is to be able to recognize what will help himself, it is also very important to be able to recognize that a different approach might be better suited for someone else. Perhaps this is why the Birchas Kohanim, which is purposely geared towards different individual's needs, follows the Nazir, who took additional prohibitions upon himself. For some, it is a valid means of becoming holier, while for others it would be inappropriate. But even those that have not (and need not) become a Nazir must respect the choice made by the Nazir for his spiritual journey.

This can also explain why the Torah wanted to make sure that everybody heard the words of the blessings themselves- so that they can hear it said in the singular form; that different blessings are appropriate for different people. By accepting- and respecting- these kinds of differences (rather than being dismissive of another's approach because it is taken as an affront to one's own observance), we can also be

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more accepting of- and respectful to- others attempting a similar journey. And this will lead to the ultimate blessing: "and He will bestow upon you peace." © 2004 Rabbi D. Kramer

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

This week's parsha is a mixed bag of mitzvos. It starts with the responsibilities of the Tribe of Levi in the Mishkan. Among the other laws it covers are the laws of an impure individual, of the suspected wife and of the nazir, one who vows not to drink wine. We also find the law of a person who swears falsely in court denying a debt he owes to someone. The following verse tells us the law in such a case.

"Speak to the Children of Israel: when a man or a woman shall do any of these sins against man to act deceitfully against Hashem and that person incurred guilt (Hebrew: 'v'ashmah'). Then they shall confess their sin which they have done and he shall restore that wherein he is guilty together with the principal thereof, and add to it its fifth and give it to whom he is guilty (Hebrew: 'l'asher asham lo')." (Numbers 5:6-7)

"To whom he is guilty"—RASHI: To whom he owes the money." Rashi tells us that the words in the Torah "To whom he is guilty" refer to the one to whom he owes the money.

A Question: What has Rashi told us? Isn't he telling us exactly what the Torah verse says?

An Answer: The Gur Aryeh suggests that there is a likely misunderstanding here. Verse 6 says "the person who incurred guilt" (the word "ashma" is used) and this refers to being guilty to God, as the Torah says just before these words ("acting deceitfully against Hashem"). I might have thought that when the Torah says "he shall restore to whom he is guilty" refers to giving an offering to God as atonement. But Rashi clarifies that the word "asham" in this verse does not

mean "guilty"; it means "obligated to." So while the thief is guilty to God, he is obligated to make restitution to the man from whom he stole and swore falsely.

This may seem obvious, but Rashi is actually clarifying two matters, one linguistic and one moral. The linguistic lesson is that the Hebrew word "asham" can mean either "guilty" or "obligated"; they are not the same. The second matter is morally significant. A man should not feel he can atone for his theft by making "holy" use of the profits. The "Robinhood principle" (stealing from the rich and giving to the poor or to God) is not a Torah concept. © 2004 Dr. A. Bonchek and Aish Hatorah

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

And now, if you will hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all the peoples, for Mine is the entire world! (Shemos 19:5)

And now: If you will accept upon yourselves it will be sweet from here on. From here we learn that all beginnings are hard. (Rashi Á-Mechilta)

There's a phenomenon that openly defies this Rashi. If "all beginnings are hard", then why do we find at the beginning of a z'man (a semester) of learning there's an initial burst of energy but in a short few weeks the exuberance has all too often waned? What's happening here? I once heard a Kotzker-like answer from a Yeshiva Rebbe who claims that it is not a contradiction at all. The answer is that for so many who are sprinting in the first days it's not "the beginning" at all but actually "the end".

As a challenge I once promised a group of Hebrew Day School Students who were wavering about whether or not to continue on to Yeshiva High School that I could prove to them mathematically that there is such a thing as the Yetzer Hara- the negative inclination. The proof is quite simple. That same year I was also teaching in a Hebrew School for public school kids preparing for their Bar Mitzvah. I wondered aloud why even the best kid didn't come back to school the day after his Bar Mitzvah.

I think the answer is comparable to stepping out onto the court at Madison Square Garden before a basketball game and taking warm up shots. Everyone can do what he pleases shooting and missing from close and far range but once the clock is set, the game begins, and points begin to register it becomes woefully difficult to get the ball near the basket. Similarly till the age of 13, up until the age that Mitzvos begin to count we can shoot around and practice in whichever way we want. However the day after the celebration which was to propel one to a responsible Jewish living, an iron curtain magically descends and only a select few of determined individuals will even dare to approach the

goal. What is a day of beginning, a launching for some is the finale, the good-bye party for too many others.

A residual point that emanates from this illustration is that learning Torah and doing Mitzvos really count for something great. Why else would there be such strong opposition? The Talmud queries based on a verse from Habakuk "And he placed man like the fish of the sea" "Why are people compared to fish? In order to teach you that just as fish of the sea when they come onto dry land they immediately die so too when people separate from words of Torah and Mitzvos they immediately die." (Avoda Zora 3A)

Rabbi Dovid Ordman asked, "Just how precise is this analogy? Do people die when removed from Torah and Mitzvos?" Let us put on our scuba equipment and observe the quiet and subtle motions of the schools of fish going about their business in an almost surreal environment. Their world is so quiet, peaceful, and dream-like.

Now we turn our attention to a harvest of fresh fish being lowered by net onto the dock. Now, these fish look alive. Some are jumping 20 feet in the air performing all kinds of gymnastics and fancy dance moves. The others in the water seem dead in comparison. We understand though that nothing is further from the truth. The fish that appear to be so active and animated are behaving so because they are choking. Their brains are convulsing and so they flail about in desperation. This is not the dance of life but the throes of death.

This may help us understand that the loudest voices that seek attention and are making the biggest noise in our world are really dying movements organizing thunderous "good-bye parties". In the meanwhile we quietly prepare again and again just as we did 3315 years ago for a powerful new beginning.

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RABBI EFRAIM LEVINE

Hadrash Ve-Haiyun

Dor Revi'i

It is a widely accepted Jewish custom to eat milk products on the holiday of Shavuos. The commentators give many reasons for this custom. One reason is that the Torah is compared to milk as it says in the posuk "Honey and milk is under my tongue" (Shir Hashirim 4:11). Chazal interpret this posuk as a reference to Torah study. Being that Shavuos is the holiday in which we received the Torah, we eat milk products as a symbolic reminder as to what has occurred on this day.

Another reason we eat milk products is to draw attention to the prohibition of eating meat and milk together. The commentators tell us that every day of the year corresponds to one of the negative commandments. For example the commentators

devote much effort to show how tishah ba'av corresponds to the prohibition of eating from the gid hanashe, the sciatic nerve. Similarly, the holiday of Shavuos corresponds to the prohibition of eating meat and milk together. An allusion to this can be found in the posuk "The first of the fruits of your land you shall bring to the house of Hashem your G-d, you shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (Shemos 23:19). The holiday of Shavuos is the earliest time in the year that we may bring our first fruits to the Beis Hamikdash. The fact the Torah juxtaposes the law of the first fruits to the prohibition of eating meat and milk together, reveals a relationship between the two. What is the symbolic significance of this relationship?

If a drop of milk falls on a hot piece of meat, the meat is prohibited due to the fact that the meat now contains a flavor of milk. However, if the piece of meat is sixty times the volume of milk, the meat is permitted. In this instance we say that the flavor of milk has been nullified by meat. If the meat is less than sixty times the volume of milk, and the piece of meat subsequently falls into a pot of meat that contains less than sixty times the volume of the meat, all the pieces of meat in the pot are prohibited. The novelty of the law is that even if all the pieces of meat together contain more than sixty times the volume of the original drop of milk they are still prohibited. The reason here is because we need sixty times the volume of the prohibited meat, not the milk.

The above mentioned law illustrates the principle of chatichah atzmah naasais neveilah, the piece itself becomes like a piece of non-kosher meat. When the drop of milk falls on the original piece of meat we don't view the piece of meat as merely a mixture of meat and milk but rather as a new entity that is completely forbidden, similar to a piece of non-kosher meat. Even the meat flavor that exudes from this piece is forbidden.

The principle of chatichah atzmah naasais neveilah is unique to the laws of meat and milk. With regard to other prohibited mixtures the Torah law states that the prohibited flavor becomes nullified. For example, if a piece of non-kosher fat fell on a piece of meat which is less than sixty times its volume and the meat subsequently fell into a pot that has more than sixty times the volume of the non-kosher fat but less than sixty times the volume of meat, the pot of meat is permitted. We view the first piece of meat as merely a mixture of non-kosher fat and kosher meat. Thus, even if we only have enough volume to nullify the prohibited fat, the remaining pieces of meat are permitted. In practice we are stringent and follow the principle of chatichah atzmah naasais neveilah even with regard to prohibited mixtures other than meat and milk but only out of stringency not due to the letter of the law.

Throughout the Torah and Rabbinic literature we find man described as a "basar vada'am," meat and blood. We have mentioned that on Shavuos it is customary to eat milk products as a symbolic reminder

that the Torah was given on this day. We have also mentioned that we eat milk products to draw attention to the law that it is forbidden to eat meat and milk together. We may suggest that the purpose of eating milk products is to draw attention to the unique principle of *chatchah atzmah naasais neveilah* that applies only to law of meat and milk.

We would be tempted to believe that Torah study has little impact on our behavior and lifestyle. After studying Torah we are merely a mixture of meat and milk. We use the term meat here to refer to our physical bodies and the term milk as a reference to Torah. We would think that even when we devote time to Torah study we remain that same people as before only with an accumulation of Torah knowledge. The law *chatchah atzmah naasais neveilah* teaches us otherwise. Just as a combination of meat and milk is not viewed as merely a mixture of two dissimilar items but rather a new entity, likewise when we bring the milk of Torah into our bodies of meat we are transformed into a new people who live with the spirit of Torah. © 2004 Rabbi E. Levine

RABBI BENJAMIN HECHT

Insight

A few months ago, a student of mine questioned me about the following incident. A woman, who was recently divorced, was inquiring of a rabbi whether it would be possible for her to stop covering her hair.¹ He responded by challenging her: was she someone who follows Halacha or was she someone who finds heterim, leniencies? My student was perplexed. Aren't heterim implicit in Halacha? How can the following of a leniency be deemed to be in contrast with halachic observance? What was wrong with the very asking of a question, with the very request for a heter? I explained to my student that what was at issue was our fundamental understanding of the dynamics of Sinai.

When we study the giving of the Torah at Sinai, included in our investigation must be the nature of the recipient of Torah, the nation of Israel, both collectively and individually.² How we view Israel, both in the

¹ On the substantive issue of the need for a divorced woman to cover her hair, see Shulchan Aruch, Even HaEzer 21:2 which is generally understood as requiring a widow and a divorcee to continue to cover their hair. See, further, Chelkat Mechokek, Even HaEzer 21:2 and Beit Shmuel, Even HaEzer 21:5. (The variant distinctions in language may have certain technical halachic significance but this discussion is beyond the parameters of this Insight.) When there is great need, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Igrot Moshe, Even HaEzer 1:57 and 4:32 permits a widow and divorcee to uncover their hair in specific circumstances. The latter case is of particular interest for it concerned a young divorcee who was troubled that covering her hair may affect her ability to remarry.

² We have, in fact, discussed this issue previously although, in each presentation, the nature of the recipient of Torah is approached from a different perspective and context. See Nishma Insight 5758-13:

original context of Sinai and in the present embodiment of Sinai through individual halachic observance, has a great effect on our understanding of the dynamics, meaning and effects of this event. Simply, at Sinai, God spoke but the question is: to whom? How we answer this question and thereby define the nature of those who hear God's words, interestingly, affects the message. Our understanding of the nature of the recipient of Torah inherently affects our overall understanding of the nature of Torah itself.

The fundamental question can be framed in the following manner: is the recipient of Torah ideally one who hears God's words passively or actively? If the one who hears God's words is called upon to be passive, the demand made upon them is simply to listen. The perception is that the message is inherently intact; there is no need for contemplation, analysis, response and/or reaction. The recipient of Torah is simply to hear, obey and act. Proponents of this view describe the nature of Israel at Sinai in terms of a blank canvas or page. The recipient of Torah is to be subsumed entirely by the Divine word; the human nature and perception of the recipient only impedes the message. The Divine word that first confronts the individuals is to be the Divine word that emerges after the encounter. The prime task facing the recipient of Torah is to ensure that his/her being not affect the Divine word.

The very nature of Torah She'b'al Peh, the Oral Law, however, leads one to challenge this perspective. It would seem that the recipient of Torah actually must be active in hearing God's words. A good example of this is reflected in the Talmudic understanding of the precept of "an eye for an eye."³ Halacha has never presented this law as literal; T.B. Baba Kamma 83b, 84a presents this law as reflecting monetary compensation. What is significant is the reasoning of the Talmud. The original words of the Biblical text are subjected to contemplation and analysis with the result that these words were deemed impossible to be taken literally. The result is that the message is recognized to reflect monetary compensation and not the presentation of first impression. God had His reason for presenting the law in this fashion but He was able to present it in this fashion and still achieve His desired result because he knew the nature of the recipient. Israel was not to be a blank page. Israel was to be an active listener. The active nature of the recipient of a message, of words, inherently changes the nature of the message. This message is subject to contemplation and analysis. This message is subject to questioning. This is not done to evaluate the message but rather to clarify and ensure that it is properly understood. It is an active listener that is able to achieve the true meaning of the words. The

The Flow of Sinai and 5761-31: The Collective Recipient. See, also, Nishma Study Materials on Kabbalat HaTorah and Rabbi Benjamin Hecht, The Cloud of Revelation, Nishma Introspection 5763-1.

³ Shemot 21:24.

question is the extent to which Torah demands or wishes this active participation of the listener.

The above gemara shows that the intellectual qualities of the human being are to be involved in the process of Torah. But to what extent? Could the intellect not also sway us away from the Divine intent? And what about other aspects of human nature? Aside from a commitment to thought, it could be contended that the nation of Israel, as it camped at Sinai, also possessed a moral and Godly sense, and a tradition of ideas and teachings developed through the experiences of the Avot, our Forefathers, and the gravity of Egyptian exodus and slavery. This contention would maintain that it was to this nation that God spoke—a nation God knew would actively, applying its collective being and its individual beings, investigate His words to find their true meaning beyond the first impression. The result would be that the real Divine word is to be found in the result of the human interaction with the opening words of the Divine. The prime task facing the recipient of Torah, thus, is to ensure the achievement of the proper dialogue that ensures the uncovering of the true message of Torah.

It is upon this spectrum between these two points of passivity and activity that we can place one's understanding of the Halachic process. The rabbi mentioned above leans toward the view favouring passivity. Those that understand heterim to be an inherent and important part of the entire being of Torah lean toward the view of activity. The co-existence of both views actually ensures the necessary tension inherent in the process. The search for heterim, in variant situations, is a recognition that the human factor is part of the entire picture of Torah. This is, within my opinion, part of the intent of the dialogue of Halacha. This dialogue, however, can be hijacked. The Divine Voice and Authority cannot be minimized. Passivity in the face of Sinai ensures that we recognize this significance—we are encountering the word of God. Recognizing the active listener, though, ensures that we give the human being a voice—a voice necessary to fully hear the message of Sinai. © 2004 Rabbi B. Hecht & Nishma

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

The day that Moshe finished setting up the Tabernacle, the tribal leaders appeared with two different kinds of sacrifices. The first was a group donation, consisting of six covered wagons and twelve oxen. The second was a personal donation by each leader: a silver bowl, a silver basin, and a gold spoon, together with three sacrifices, an Olah, a Chatat, and a Shelamim. It can be seen that Moshe hesitated with respect to these donations, which were not given in response to a direct command. Moshe did not respond

about the wagons and the oxen, and the Almighty told him to accept the gift. "Accept it from them, it will be used for the labors of the Tent of Meeting. Give them to the Levites in accordance with their service." [Bamidbar 7:5]. Moshe also did not react to the personal donations and sacrifices, and once again the Almighty told him what to do. "And G-d said to Moshe, One leader per day, one leader per day, shall offer their sacrifice for dedicating the Altar" [7:11]. Why did Moshe hesitate? Why didn't he immediately accept the gifts by the leaders?

It would seem that there was an aspect of novelty with respect to these donations by the leaders of the tribes. Up to this point, Bnei Yisrael and the Tabernacle had been kept completely separate. This separation is emphasized again and again, from the beginning of the book of Bamidbar. Here are just two examples out of many. "The Levites will camp around the Tabernacle, and let there be no anger against the community of Bnei Yisrael. Let the Levites guard the Tabernacle of Testimony." [1:53]. "Command Aharon and his sons to guard their priesthood, and any stranger who approaches will die" [3:10].

This principle can also be seen in the separation of the tribe of Levi from the rest of the nation. Right after the census of Chapter 1, it is written, "However, do not count the tribe of Levi, and do not take a census of them among Bnei Yisrael" [1:49]. This is repeated later, "The Levites were not counted among Bnei Yisrael, as G-d had commanded Moshe" [2:33]. Thus, it can be assumed that as a result of such a clear boundary between Bnei Yisrael and the Tabernacle, Moshe wondered if the leaders of the tribes should participate in the dedication of the Tabernacle and even take part in the labors performed there by donating covered wagons.

The Almighty's response was unequivocal. "Accept it from them!" It is true that the holy rituals are the responsibility of the Levites and the Kohanim, and any stranger who approaches will die. However, it must be emphasized that the reason for this distance stems from the need to maintain the holy character of the Tabernacle and its utensils, and not from a spiritual distance between Bnei Yisrael and the Shechina, the holy Presence of G-d in the Tabernacle. While the tribe of Levi was indeed counted separately, the positions of the tribes clearly showed that the Tabernacle was intimately linked to the nation. Chapter 2 describes the banners and the way the nation camped. In the middle of the description of the camps, after the camps of Yehuda and Reuven but before the camps of Efraim and Dan, it is written: "And the Tent of Meeting will travel; the camp of the Levites will travel within the other camps, they will travel the same way that they camp" [2:17].

In summary, the relationship is complex. On one hand, the Tabernacle represents the ultimate heights of holiness, but on the other hand it sits together

with Bnei Yisrael, among all their impurities. Thus, it is necessary to express not only the distance to be maintained because of the sanctity of the Tabernacle but also the fact that Bnei Yisrael should remain close to the site of the Shechina.

Modern-Day Jealousy

by Mrs. Naama Etzion, Neve Channa, "Nishmat," Beit Midrash for Women (Efrat)

The root "kuf-nun-alef," jealousy, appears ten times in the passage of sottah (a wife accused by her husband of being unfaithful). The situation where a man puts the trustworthiness of his wife to a public test makes us quite uncomfortable in our modern times. It this feeling of discomfort justified?

An analysis of the details of the laws of sottah shows that it is not sufficient for a man to have a spontaneous outburst of jealousy to cause the complex rituals to be performed. There are a series of conditions that must be met first: the woman must ignore a specific warning by her husband in front of two witnesses, and then hold a private meeting for a given minimum of time, together with many other halachic details. Only in this case can the husband bring his wife to a Kohen, and even then the law is that "if her husband forgives her, she is forgiven" [Sifri]. It is expected that this formal process will begin only after previous attempts of reconciliation have failed. "It is not proper to hastily declare jealousy in front of witnesses as a first step. What should be attempted first is a calm discussion between the couple, with care." [Rambam, Hilchot Sottah 4:19].

The Talmud and the rabbis emphasize that it is not only the woman who must be faithful to the family. "And the man will be free of sin [Bamidbar 5:31] -- When the man is free of sin, the water tests the woman, but if the man is not free of sin, the water will not test the woman." [Yevamot 58a]. In addition, "If any man had forbidden relations after he became an adult, the bitter water will not test his wife" [Rambam, Hilchot Sottah 2:8]. As early as the time of the Second Temple, the sages of the Sanhedrin understood that the test of a sottah can be realistic only when family morality is a highly regarded religious and social standard, and only when society rejects the phenomena of shattering the framework of the family. "Therefore, when the number of adulterers openly increased in the Second Temple, the Sanhedrin cancelled the ritual of the bitter water." [Hilchot Sottah 3:19].

Even though the test of the bitter water has been abandoned, the principle of sottah is still valid and there are lessons to be learned from this law. It is not right to blame only one side for a crisis of faith that can lead to jealousy and the difficult process that follows. Such a crisis stems from mutual carelessness and a lack of sensitivity, the fault of both man and wife, from overstepping the proper bounds of relationship between men and women, and from not paying attention to the

feelings of the other side. All of these elements, even if they do not lead to an actual occurrence of sin, can lead to a crisis in any marriage. At the very last possible moment before a family falls apart, the "laws of jealousy" are an attempt to bring the couple back to the most fundamental level of mutual relationships— to mutual trust and faith.

We must make every effort to help restore the care and sensitivity that an unfaithful wife has lost. In the modern era, when there are so many opportunities for intimate contact between men and women from different families, it is vital for us to emphasize the lessons to be learned from the laws of the sottah.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Isn't it strange that the exact date of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai—certainly one of the most momentous and miraculous episodes in the entire Bible—isn't given? Are the holidays of Pesach and Sukkoth, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur more important than revelation? Why should we be told the exact date when Noah got into the ark, the 17th day of the second month, and that he emerged exactly 150 days later on the 17th day of the fifth month, when we don't have such precise information about the revelation which is much closer to our own historical memories? As a nation, what possibly could be more significant than the day in which G-d revealed Himself to us and gave us the Torah?

In fact, the Talmud in Tractate Sabbath (86b) even debates when the revelation took place, the Sages claiming it was the sixth of Sivan, while Rabbi Yossi argues it was the seventh.

But there is a further problem. Ask anyone who attends a day school what the festival of Shevuot signifies and the child will say that it celebrates the revelation on Mt. Sinai. Certainly this is true, except that when we turn to references where revelation is mentioned, nothing indicates it is destined to become an occasion for celebration and inclusion as one of the three major festivals in the year. References to Shevuot appear in each of the Five Books except Genesis, but if anything, it would be more accurate to describe the 50th day after Passover as a festival commemorating the offering of the first harvest—agriculture, a meal offering, counting,— but revelation is out of the picture.

One traditional explanation says that by consciously avoiding the exact date, the Torah reminds us that more important than receiving a gift is what one does with it. Is the expensively bound leather volume relegated to the attic, the basement, the coffee table—or the study table? Maybe this is why one's birthday was never played up in Jewish life. Even the bar mitzvah affair as we know it in America was a relatively simple day for European Jews; the day a boy reached 13 or a girl reached 12 wasn't accompanied with bands and a

quest list of 500. This being the day when responsibility begins, they were waiting to see how things would turn out before sounding the drums and pouring the champagne.

And if we look at the revelation itself, what happens after 40 days? When Moses's return is delayed, hysteria reigns as the Jews turn from G-d and start worshipping a golden calf. Since this is a sin which the Jewish people still have to repair, is it surprising that the date of revelation is clouded?

In addition, the exact date isn't given because in the consciousness of the Torah, Judaism is not a fixed set of laws whose interpretation lies beyond the involvement of the Jewish people. We not only possess a written Torah, but an oral Torah as well, the basis for which was revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai; and each generation's job is to interpret the Torah in accordance with the conditions and the exigencies of their respective generations—anything from organic transplants to the laws of modern warfare—partners with equal responsibility.

In Tractate Bava Metziah, (59b) we come across a legal argument as to whether an Aknai oven (an oven where sand separates each layer of tiles) is capable of ever becoming impure. Rabbi Eliezer brings forth every imaginable argument to convince the Sages, but they still rule against him versus a minority, the majority rules. Undaunted, he turns to nature to come to his aid. A spring flows backward, and the walls of a school are about to fall down when Rabbi Joshua stops it. Still, the sages refuse to bow to Rabbi Eliezer. Exasperated, he cries out that if he is right let it be proven in heaven. And a Heavenly Voice resounds, "Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer seeing that in all matters the heavens agree with him?" Finally Rabbi Joshua quotes a verse from Deuteronomy, "It is not in Heaven," meaning (as Rabbi Jeremiah explains) that since the Torah was already given on Mt. Sinai, we don't turn to heavenly voices to find the laws, we must interpret the Torah here on earth, working with our own intellectual understanding.

The lesson is clear. Despite Rabbi Eliezer's supernatural feats, he cannot change the Sages' majority ruling. The debate concludes with an amazing post-script. Apparently, Elijah the Prophet used to meet Rabbi Nathan, and during one visit the prophet was asked what the Holy One did when he was bested by the Sages who ignored the Heavenly Voice. Elijah answered that G-d laughed with joy and said, "My children have conquered me, my children have conquered me."

The popular perception is that those who believe that the Torah, along with an oral tradition, was given by G-d to Moses, are narrowminded and unyielding when it comes to the challenges of modern society. The opposite is true. Within the tradition (and what better reflects the tradition than a page of Talmud) there is a built-in system for exploration in confronting

the demands of each age. And the tradition is flexible precisely because of its oral components. What people often perceive of as being the strict, monolithic part of Judaism, rabbinic law, is really its most flexible part, resilient, allowing for adjustments and fine-tuning. Another interpretation of the words *banei nitzchuni* (my children have conquered me) is "my children have eternalized me," which becomes a fact since G-d and His Torah remain continually relevant—eternal—as a result of each generation's interpretations. Indeed, the Jewish people and our Sages are partners with G-d in the ageless revelation of the Torah as it touches us in every generation.

And that's why the date of the revelation is not given. The way in which the revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai functions in the world is always subject to the specifics of time and place as understood and interpreted by the garnered wisdom of the ruling sages. In effect, everything about the festival of Shevuot indicates that the Torah is an open book, a revelation whose power lies in its inclusion of the visible and the invisible, the Divine and the Jewish people, the written and the oral, the specific and the general, the obvious and the subtle. © 1988 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Shavuot is a celebration of that moment when we, the Jewish people, were wed to God. Note the parallel between that moment and the wedding of bride and groom.

At Sinai, God and the people of Israel stood at the base of the mountain, "be-tahit ha-har." (Exodus 19:17) Commenting on the word *be-tahit*, the Midrash concludes that we, the Jewish people, were literally standing beneath the mountain—much like bride and groom stand under the *chupa*, the bridal canopy during the wedding ceremony.

At Sinai, God pronounces the words "ve-atem tihiyu li...goy kadosh, and you will be to Me a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6) This formula is very similar to what the groom says to the bride when he places a ring on her finger—*harei at mekudeshet li, behold you are betrothed to me.*

At Sinai, God and the people of Israel signed a contract in the form of the ten declarations, *aseret ha-dibrot*. Bride and groom do the same - they enter into the marital agreement through the signing of a *ketuba*—a marital contract.

There are other traditions and rituals that point to a parallel between Sinai and a wedding ceremony. The Jews encircled Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:12) just as the bride circles the groom. There was lightning at Sinai. (Exodus 19:16) This is mirrored in the wedding ceremony as some have a tradition to carry lit candles

to the chupa. In the end, the tablets were broken at Sinai. (Exodus 32:19) Similarly, a glass is shattered at the end of the nuptials. The Jewish people ate and drank at Sinai. (Exodus 24:11) In the same way, we also partake of a festive meal at a wedding celebration.

Thus, the Torah states, that "Moshe (Moses) brought the people forth from the camp toward God." (Exodus 19:17) Commenting on this sentence, the Midrash compares this moment to a groom and bride coming toward each other.

There are emotional considerations that point to a connection between divine and human love. For example, feeling the presence of God means, no matter how lonely one is, God is near. Love, in the human realm, is also a response to loneliness. Moreover, when we connect to God, we connect to eternity, as God, of course, lives forever. Eternity is also a central component of marriage as we attempt to transcend our own lives by having children. Finally, loving God and loving a fellow human being can both give one a sense of deep fulfillment and meaning in life.

I believe that only through the experience of blissful marital love can one understand love of God. While each partner in the relationship maintains her or his own individuality, love is the uniting of two souls. This gives one a sense of the absolute oneness of God. Human love is also an emotion that is infinite in its scope, giving one a sense of the infinity of God. No wonder the Torah calls cleaving to one's spouse *ve-davak* (Genesis 2:24), just as cleaving to God is called *deveikut*.

In one word: love of God and love of spouse and family interface. On this Shavuot, may each one show us the way to the other. © 2002 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The parsha of Nasso opens with the details of the work assignments of the family of the Levites. They were assigned specific tasks in the Tabernacle of the desert and later in the Temple in Jerusalem. While these tasks are clearly described in detail in the Torah and the Levites were certainly able to accomplish their tasks without outside help, the Torah nevertheless mentions and indeed insists that the Levites be supervised in their work by the children of Aaron, the priests of Israel. There is an important lesson hidden in this seemingly simple description of work assignments in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. And that is that all public servants require supervision, accountability, and responsibility to others and not just to one's own self. The Levites are responsible to the priests. They are not free agents to do their work as they please but rather the work is to be approved and supervised by the sons of Aaron.

Too often people who are engaged in public service, especially religious public service, resent interference, suggestions and certainly supervision from others. People in public service suffer many times from a superiority complex regarding the unwashed masses that they serve. Having served in the rabbinate for many decades I have been witness to the downfall of many otherwise talented and dedicated spiritual leaders who failed because they refused to accept direction and supervision from others in all cases. Naturally, in order to be an effective leader, one requires autonomy of thought and action but that must always be balanced with the realization that one's work and behavior must always be subject to public scrutiny and judgment. "Do not judge alone, for only God can judge alone," was the admonition of the rabbis in *Pirkei Avot* to us. That rule applies in greater severity to those in public and professional religious positions.

Well, you may ask, who supervises the priests, the sons of Aaron in their supervision of the Levites? Do we create a never-ending chain of supervisors? Such a system will certainly produce paralysis in the public sector, with little accomplished and creativity and initiative stifled. I therefore think that the priests are supervised by their requirement to daily bless the people of Israel. And that blessing must be delivered in love. Love of people, of the public, is in itself the greatest form of supervision that a person may find in servicing others and in doing holy work. Hillel made it the cornerstone of his worldview - "love your fellow creatures!" For the priests, the sons of Aaron, love of the people was a basic requirement for their effective service in the Temple. This requirement of love provided them with the necessary sense of responsibility and supervision of their work that guaranteed the proper attitude towards their fellow Jews. And above all, Jews in all professions and services must constantly remember that they are responsible to the God and people of Israel for their behavior and accomplishments. © 2004 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

