

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### The (Purposely) Forgotten Holiday

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**A**s Shavuos draws near, it is traditional to think about the importance and impact of this shortest of the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar year. Unfortunately, in the Diaspora, with the exception of the devotedly observant community, Shavuos is a forgotten holiday.

I remember that as a lawyer in Chicago over thirty-five years ago, I attempted to obtain a new date for a trial in which I was representing my client and the Jewish judge, a scion of a great Eastern European rabbinic family, asked me the reason for my request.

I told him that the original trial date was to fall on the holiday of Shavuos and as such I would not be able to attend court that day. He sneered at me: "Counselor, there is no such Jewish holiday!" So great is the alienation and assimilation of much of Diasporan Jewry, that his ignorant opinion will find many echoes in the secular Jewish society.

Yet, it is the Shavuos holiday that is the backbone of all Jewish life and vitality.

According to Jewish tradition and the Talmud, Shavuos marks the anniversary date of the revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah to the people of Israel. The Torah itself phrases it thusly: "Today you have become a nation!" The nationality of the Jews is founded upon its shared experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai thirty three hundred and nineteen years ago. This is the import of Saadya Gaon's famous statement that our "our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah."

Shavuos is the uniquely Jewish holiday. It does not represent the universal ideal of freedom as does Passover, nor is it a harbinger of all human happiness, prosperity and bountiful harvest, all of which characterize the Succos holiday. It stands in splendid isolation as a uniquely Jewish event that attests to our role in society and civilization, as the people who accepted the Torah when others refused.

It is therefore difficult to be assimilated and celebrate Shavuos. Shavuos prevents assimilation by reminding us of the event that is baked deep into the DNA of the Jewish people - the revelation at Sinai.

Shavuos is therefore not just a commemoration of an historical date but rather it poses the challenge of defining Jewish nationhood and of its relation to each and every one of us. Because of this challenging aspect of the holiday, it is easy (though painful) to understand why Shavuos just does not exist for so many Jews. It is much easier on one's mind and conscience to simply ignore and then even deny its existence.

There are certain questions that have remained constant in Jewish life over the millennia. "Who is a Jew?" "Why be Jewish?" "Why marry Jewish?" and "Why all of the fuss, anger, hatred and jealousy in the world over the Jews?" are some of these basic age-old questions. Ignoring Shavuos and what it represents allows for seemingly easy answers and evasions of these questions. But all of those answers have never yet been able to stand the test of time and circumstance.

Forgetting Shavuos has always led to spiritually dire personal and national consequences. The great Rabbi Yosef of the times of the Babylonian Talmud celebrated Shavuos with great enthusiasm, saying "if it were not for this day of Shavuos, I would not feel chosen and unique, for many Yosefs can be found in the market square."

This is certainly true of the Jewish people generally. If it were not for Shavuos we would not be a special people, let alone "a light unto the nations of the world." Shavuos therefore becomes our reason for existence, the justification of our intense role in the development of a better and more civilized world. Shavuos therefore demands some sort of mental and spiritual preparation to be truly appreciated.

Shavuos begins tomorrow night. Now would be a good time to start thinking about it and its personal relevance to one's life and family. © 2006 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

### Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he story of Ruth is one of a family in dissolution. Naomi's husband and two sons die leaving her with her two daughters in law, Orpah and Ruth. By

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the end of the book, family is found once again. Ruth marries Boaz and they have a child Obed, who is raised by Naomi. (Ruth 4: 17)

From this perspective, the book of Ruth parallels the story of Judah and Tamar in the book of Bereishit. There, too, the family of Judah was in disarray. Two of his sons, Er and Onan, had died. Judah was reluctant to have his third son, Sheilah marry Tamar, the widow of his older two sons.

At the conclusion of the story, Judah's family also comes together after he has relations with Tamar from whom twins were born.

Interestingly, the mechanism used to reunite the fragmented family in both stories is yibum-the Levirate marriage. In the yibum process, a man is directed to marry the widow of his brother who had been childless. In the case of Ruth, she marries Boaz; Judah does the same when he marries Tamar.

Rabbi David Silber points out similarities in the yibum of the two stories. In both, a double yibum is performed. Judah marries Tamar since both of his deceased sons to whom Tamar had been married, had no children. Boaz marries Ruth, but through Ruth, the line of Naomi, was perpetuated.

In both stories, the man performing the redemption is reluctant to perform the good deed. Judah hesitates to allow Tamar to marry into his family; Boaz also seems reluctant to marry Ruth.

Another common feature in each of these stories is that a woman teaches the reluctant man his responsibility to bring the family together. Tamar does this by reminding Judah of his responsibility to marry her and Ruth does the same, reminding Boaz of his responsibility.

Finally, it can be suggested that both stories are segues to our nationhood. Soon after Judah's family is reunited, we become a nation, and the book of Exodus begins. Soon after, Ruth and Boaz marry they have a child, from whom ultimately the Messiah will come-marking the redemption of the Jewish people.

Both of these stories remind us all of the confluence between family and nation. In this time of great challenge and struggle in Israel, may we feel the pain of what is happening not merely as fellow members of the Jewish nation, but in the deepest way, as members of our own family. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of

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**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

**O**ur Sages tell us that before G-d offered the Torah to us, He offered it to all the other nations (Avodah Zarah 2b). However, the offer (described in numerous Midrashim, including the Sifray on Devarim 33:2) seems to have been made in a way that would dissuade them from accepting it.

When He offered it to Eisav, and they asked what was written in it, they were told that the Torah prohibits murder. "Living by the sword" (Beraishis 27:40) was so much part of their culture, and included in the blessing given to Eisav from Yitzchok, that they said that they had no choice but to refuse. Similarly, when Yishmael asked what was written in the Torah, they were told that it prohibited taking things that didn't belong to them. Since they were blessed with the ability to take what they wanted/needed from others (Beraishis 16:12, see Mechilta Yisro 5), and it had become part of their very essence, they too turned down G-d's offer. When told that illicit relations was forbidden, Amon and Moav, who came from the relations between Lot and his daughters, also refused to accept the Torah. The other nations, told that worshipping other deities was off limits (see Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 41), declined the offer as well.

If G-d was really offering the Torah to others, this seems like a pretty bad job of salesmanship. Why start with the very items that will scare them off? Although many commentators point out that G-d knew that they would refuse, and only offered them the Torah so that they couldn't complain that they were never given a chance to accept it, doesn't the way it was presented still allow them to complain that it wasn't a real offer, that G-d purposely presented it in a way that they wouldn't even consider accepting it?

Additionally, all four of the "examples" of what is written in the Torah are included in the seven Noachide laws, and forbidden for all of humanity. If Eisav wasn't allowed to murder anyway, its inclusion in the Torah's prohibitions shouldn't be a factor in their unwillingness to accept it. If it was one of the other 606 commandments were particularly problematic for them, we can understand why they would stick with the seven they already had, and not take on any others. The same is true with stealing/kidnapping, adultery and idol worship. They were already off limits, so should not have affected whether or not to accept the additional commandments contained in the Torah.

Many of the Midrashim (and the Talmud) add that the nations, even before G-d offered them the Torah, had stopped keeping the Noachide laws. As a

result, G-d removed the mandatory nature of these laws. They would no longer be punished for violating them, and would receive less reward for keeping them. G-d's offer to them could be seen as a second chance, an opportunity to recommit to the laws that they had abandoned while accepting additional ones. When He told them that accepting the Torah meant no more worshipping idols (et al), it meant that it would once again be punishable. Therefore, because (some of) the prohibitions in the Torah went directly against their nature, they refused. Nevertheless, if they had already dropped their divine requirements when there were only seven of them, why would G-d think that they would consider accepting 613? And why specifically choose the aspect that goes against their very nature as the example of what the Torah contains?

Another question that could be asked is why G-d went to each nation individually, rather than making it a global offer. G-d could have announced to the whole world that He is about to offer His most precious item, the Torah, to whoever wants it. This way, any individuals that recognized the benefits of the connection to G-d achieved through keeping it could come forward, without needing an entire nation to accept it. Even after being offered to entire nations, individuals could have stepped forward to accept it (and still can) through conversion (just as we converted before accepting it- see Rambam, Hilchos Issuray Biya 13:1-4). What was the purpose of offering it to each nation separately?

The Ramchal (Derech Hashem 2:2) describes the formation of the nations, comparing each nation to a branch in the tree of humanity. Until the nations were separated (after the "Tower of Babel"), only the roots had grown. After their dispersal, each branch developed its own personality, all but one straying from its roots. G-d's offer of the Torah to each of the branches was their final opportunity (as a nation) to reconnect to their roots, by becoming part of the branch that was still connected- the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov. Accepting the Torah was not merely committing to a series of laws, but changing the very nature of who they had become. Yes, individuals could convert. But here was a chance for an entire nation to grow past the limitations they had made for themselves.

Was murder part of Eisav's very essence? Yes. But they weren't just being given the opportunity to try (again) to overcome their weaknesses and keep G-d's commandments anyway. They were offered the opportunity to correct (or eliminate) their weaknesses completely. Individuals have to remove themselves from their heritage to convert, but if an entire nation accepted the Torah, it would have already been part of their culture. However, instead of embracing the opportunity to move past their flaws, each nation

embraced the flaws themselves, refusing to give up what had become so much a part of them.

This may be why it was specifically the hardest commandment for each nation that was chosen as the "example" of what the Torah contains. Had Eisav accepted the Torah, they would no longer be a nation so dependent on murder. Yishmael would begin to respect the rights and property of others, and Amon and Moav could move past their inauspicious beginnings. The Torah provides a way to move beyond our personal flaws, if we resolve to follow it, and live it. The other nations couldn't bring themselves to accept it; coming from the branch of humanity that was still attached to its roots, and recognizing its benefits, we readily accepted it. And on Shevuos we celebrate our daily commitment to living it. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

#### RABBI LEVI COOPER

## Passionate Encounters

The Jewish community in Istanbul, Turkey maintains a captivating custom: moments before beginning the Amida prayer, worshipers apologetically wave to each other, silently asking for forgiveness for any wrongs committed. Prior to standing in solemn prayer before the Almighty - the prime act *ben adam lamakom* (between a person and G-d) - the *ben adam lehavero* (between one person and another) realm must be repaired. This appealing custom reflects the desire to bridge the *ben adam lamakom* - *ben adam lehavero* divide, ensuring that our relationship with G-d is not at the expense of our relationship with fellow humans.

The practice in Turkey echoes a Temple ritual described by our sages. After the morning Temple service began, the kohanim would enter the Chamber of Hewn Stone for an abbreviated prayer service that included the reading of Shema with certain blessings. Once a week, on Shabbat, an extra blessing was recited by the kohanim who were completing their tour of duty in the Temple (M. Tamid 5:1).

The Kohanim, as well as the Levites, were divided into 24 *mishmarot* or watches, whereby each *mishmeret* would serve in the Temple for one week twice a year (I Chronicles 24-25). On festivals when the entire nation came to Jerusalem, there was no specific *mishmeret*. During the second temple period this system was also employed - however, a new division into *mishmarot* was used.

Each *mishmeret* was divided into six families and each family was responsible for one day during the week. On Shabbat the entire *mishmeret* served together offering the morning sacrifices, after which the incumbent *mishmeret* would pass the baton over to the next week's *mishmeret* who would complete the Shabbat Temple service. At the completion of the *mishmeret*'s service, a special blessing for the changing of the guard was recited (B. Succah 56b).

The Talmud relates the content of this additional Shabbat blessing (B. Berachot 12a). The outgoing mishmeret would turn to the incoming mishmeret and say: "May the One who has caused His name to dwell in this House, cause to dwell among you - love and brotherhood and peace and friendship."

This is indeed a beautiful benediction to receive: Before entering the ultimate ben adam lamakom realm and embarking on G-d-centered Temple service, the new mishmeret is blessed with favorable interpersonal relationships.

This blessing, however, may not have been introduced in a vacuum; it is entirely possible that awful events surround this institution. Each morning at dawn, a shovel of burning ashes was taken from the Temple altar and deposited on the floor (Leviticus 6:3). This act, known as *terumat hadeshen*, was initially done by whichever priest rose sufficiently early. Later, many priests wished to perform this service and a daily footrace up the ramp of the altar was conducted. The winner of this race was accorded the honor of *terumat hadeshen*.

This practice, however, was terminated following a wretched episode. One morning, two kohanim sped up the altar ramp, each vying for the honor of *terumat hadeshen*. Neck-and-neck they raced until one kohen, desperate for the privilege to remove the smoldering ashes, pushed his fellow, who fell and broke his leg. When the court saw the danger involved in the race they canceled the competition and instead enacted a lottery - as was the custom for other Temple tasks - for the right to perform the *terumat hadeshen* (M. Yoma 2:1-2).

A more tragic calamity that occurred during one of these races is also related: Two kohanim - in one version of the account they were actually brothers - were racing up the ramp. At the finish line, one kohen pipped his colleague, winning the contest and the right to do the *terumat hadeshen*. At this point, the loser took a knife and drove it into his peer's heart. This base display of zeal was matched by the father of the dying boy, who, running to the scene, found his child writhing with his last breaths on the floor of the Temple. Indifferently, the father declared: "My son is still writhing and therefore the knife has not become impure!" implying that the knife should quickly be removed before the young kohen dies and renders it impure (T. Yoma 1:12; T. Shavuot 1:4).

The Talmud queries the chronology of these two appalling episodes and concludes that the murder occurred first. However, it was presumed - perhaps in a further show of apathy - that this was a random occurrence that would not repeat itself. Following the second episode where a kohen sustained a comparatively mild injury, the trend towards violent zeal - even if the intent was not to maim - could not be ignored and the lottery was legislated (B. Yoma 23a).

In light of these accounts, the benediction of the outgoing mishmeret to the incoming mishmeret may have been a charge and a caution more than a blessing, as if to say: "Beware that your eagerness for Divine service not be at the expense of peace and friendship between you." One commentator opines that the blessing indeed comes from the pre-lottery period and reflects the deplorable but acute and life-threatening bickering that was commonplace in the Temple (Maharsha, 16th-17th centuries, Poland).

Perhaps there is an inherent danger when our focus turns intently to the ben adam lamakom sphere. With our eyes keenly directed to G-d, we are liable to forget our fellow human who may be running next to us or standing beside us. The quest for a relationship with the Divine should not be at the expense of our relationship with other humans. Rising before dawn and eagerly racing to perform the Temple service is certainly laudable, but when it entails pushing another aside, the fervor is misdirected. Our tradition indicates that a tame, insipid lottery is preferable to passionate competition, if that competition exacts a price on the ben adam lehavero front.

As we prepare to commune with the Almighty through the Amida or in any setting, we would do well to follow the custom of Turkish Jews, restoring our ben adam lehavero relationships before a ben adam lamakom encounter. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

Over the past number of weeks, we have written about Shavuot as the culmination of Pesach, the zenith and ultimate expression of our redemption. And from this perspective, the various additions which come with Shavuot, the aspects of Judaism which the festival ordains and proclaims, become indubitably clear as indelibly linked to redemption. First and foremost, the gift of our Torah (Bible), the 613 Divine Commandments which-as Rav Saadiah Gaon so wisely expresses it-all fit under the general rubric of the Ten Commandments revealed at Sinai. It was this revelation which took place-at least according to the Pharisaic Sages-on the sixth day of the month of Sivan, precisely seven weeks after our exodus from Egypt; hence Shavuot is defined by our liturgy as the Festival of the Giving of the Torah. And there can be no redemption without repentance, without the return of the people of Israel to the Torah of Israel. (Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 7,5, based on Deuteronomy 30:1-10)

The second necessary prerequisite for redemption is the return-or ingathering-of the exiles, of

those who forcibly or voluntarily left their national homeland. The prophets (for example, Isaiah 11:11) and our daily liturgy ("Blessed art thou, O Lord, who gathers the scattered of Israel") see the return of expatriate Jews to their ancestral country as a sign of oncoming redemption, and Maimonides even sees it as the sign par excellence (Laws of Kings 11,1). Hence it should come as no surprise that the Scroll of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot, begins with the return of Naomi and Ruth to Israel after Naomi had left Bethlehem with her husband and 2 sons during a period of famine for what had appeared to be the more fruitful and lush fields of Moab more than a decade earlier.

The third factor in redemption is the return of each individual to his familial homestead, the Israelites' acquisition of a portion of land in Israel which he received from his ancestors and which he will bequeath to his descendants. During the Sabbaths prior to the Festival of Shavuot we always read the last Torah portions of the book of Leviticus, including the portion of Behar, which describes the redemption adumbrated by the fiftieth Jubilee year (paralleling the 50th day after the Passover, Exodus, coming after the count of the seven Sabbatical years which parallel the sefirah count of seven weeks): "and you shall count for yourself seven Sabbaths of years, seven years seven times... forty-nine years... And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year... It shall be Jubilee for you. And every individual shall return to his homestead and every person shall return to his family..." (Lev 25:8-10).

The Bible also calls for the kinsman of an individual who had been forced by poverty to sell off his lands to redeem those lands for his impoverished relative-to make it possible for the Jubilee year to truly proclaim freedom and redemption for all. (Lev. 25:26,27)

The Festival of Shavuot (Deut. 16:10) is also called by the Bible the Festival of the first fruits (Numbers 28:26); and it is this harvest period-from the barley to the wheat harvest-which is majestically depicted during the three months which are the time-span for the developing autumnal relationship between the widower Boaz and the widowed Ruth (2-4). The verses cited in the portion of Behar are brought to vivid life in the Scroll of Ruth, as we see how the impoverished Naomi and her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth divested of their familial homestead-gather the produce so vital for their daily subsistence at the corner (peak) of the field of their Kinsman Boaz.

Naomi inspired and spurred on by the family story of Judah and Tamar, is anxious that her faithful daughter in law be impregnated by Boaz so that she bear seed of an Israelite since Naomi is a Moabite and her son died, leaving her childless; in such a way, Naomi will find comfort in the thought that at least the fruits of her womb would find their continuity as future

progeny of Israel. Ruth, however, is not satisfied with entering into Jewish history bearing Jewish seed; she wishes to have a real share in the land of Israel as well. And so she visits Boaz in the silence of the night while he is sleeping on the threshing floor during the busiest period of the harvest- in accordance with her mother-in-law Naomi's advice-but not merely to become impregnated by him and to conceive his child; she requests that he become her redeemer, that he restore to her and Naomi their ancestral land, thereby suggesting that he marry her and that their son will rightfully inherit the land of her deceased husband. Ruth realizes that her entry into Jewish eternity requires not only her journey to live in Israel ("where you will go, I will go"), not only her acceptance of Torah (your nation is my nation, your G-d is my G-d), not only her bearing the seed of an Israelite, but also her acquisition of a portion of the land of Israel that she can bequeath to her future generations. Jewish redemption is bound up in the Torah of Israel, the seed of Israel, and the land of Israel!

But there is yet one more crucial aspect of redemption: the Gentile must be welcomed back into the fold of Israel. When G-d first elected Abraham as the paterfamilias of the family-nation of G-ds covenant, G-d said to the "Father of a multitude of nations" that "through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth." (Genesis 12:3). All of the prophets then prophesied that at the end of the days "the Torah will come forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" to teach the seeking nations "to turn their swords into ploughshares, their spears into pruninghooks" (Isaiah 2, Micah 4). Despite all of this, however, Abraham's charge concerning the "families of earth" seemed empty and even sarcastic, after all, Abraham didn't even succeed with his nephew and adopted son Lot, who forsook the patriarch as soon as his shepard's clashed with Abraham: And where did Lot run off too? Sodom, a den of inequity and immorality!

But G-d has cosmic patience, and Lot's great great grand-daughter is none other than the Moabite Ruth who returns to Abraham's bosom as a Jew-by-choice (Ruth 1:16,17). Boaz is profoundly impressed by this virtuous and modest woman who industriously garners grain at the corner of his field, but when he inquires after her, he is told (despite her sincere conversion) that "she is a Moabite maiden" (Ruth 2:6). Even Ruth herself internalizes the Israelite assessment, crying out to Boaz, "why do I find favor in your eyes, seeing that I am a stranger?" (2:10). To which Boaz responds, "It has been told, yes told to me all that you have done for your mother-in-law..., and that you left your father and your mother, the land of your birth, and have gone to a nation you did not know yesterday and the day before. May G-d reward your deeds..." (2:11,12). You, Ruth, are an Abrahamic figure, who

discovered G-d and Torah traditions by yourself, and with great commitment and sacrifice!

Redemption must include the other, the Gentile world, joining Israel in accepting a G-d of peace, justice and morality. G-d cares about every one of his children, not only Abrahamic seed, and in a global village, each of us is dependent upon the other for freedom and life. The Festival of Shavuot reminds us that true redemption must incorporate the Torah, the ingathering of errant and wandering Jews, a share in the land of Israel for every Jew, and the acceptance of the other, the Gentile, under the protective wings of the Divine Presence of Peace. © 2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

#### YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

## Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL SHLIT" A

*Summarized by Shaul Barth/Translated by Kaeren Fish*

**T**he Gemara (Shabbat 88b) teaches: "R. Yehoshua ben Levi also said: What is meant by, 'His cheeks are as a bed of spices' (Shir Ha-shirim 5:13)? With every single word that went forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, the whole world was filled with fragrance. But since it was filled [with fragrance] from the first word, whither did the [fragrance of the] second word go? The Holy One, blessed be He, brought forth the ruach (wind or spirit) from His store-chambers and caused each [fragrance] to pass on [thereby making room for the next]."

The problem that the Gemara describes is a real one: at the time of the giving of the Torah, Bnei Yisrael heard the Commandments from G-d, and perceived the profundity and significance of each one. The commandments are indeed so profound and so comprehensive that one single commandment-when a person truly plumbs its depths-is sufficient to fill him up completely. Thus, after Bnei Yisrael understood the full significance of "I am the Lord your G-d," uttered by the Holy One Himself, and were filled to the brim, as it were, with the positive energy of that commandment, how did they have the capacity to absorb any more? G-d granted them "spirit" from His treasury- i.e., a special Divine influence-in order that they would be able to receive and absorb the rest, too.

Following the intensity of Shavuot, how can we approach Shabbat? With all the uniqueness and importance of Shabbat, how can we speak about Shabbat and understand it when we are still bursting with the experience of receiving the Torah on Shavuot? This being our situation this year, let us talk about Shavuot.

We know that at Sinai, Bnei Yisrael committed themselves with the words, "We shall do and we shall hear." Opinions are divided as to when exactly they said this: according to Ramban, it was after G-d's

revelation at Sinai and after receiving the Book of the Covenant, which was what they referred to in their declaration. According to Rashi, on the other hand, their declaration preceded the revelation and the giving of the Torah.

Tosafot (Shabbat 88b) question why G-d had to coerce the nation by holding the mountain over them like a cask, when they had already declared, "We shall do and we shall hear." The answer given there is that "Even though they had already declared 'We shall do' before 'We shall hear,' [G-d held the mountain over them] lest they retract their commitment when they see the great fire." According to the Ramban's view, the question is irrelevant, since Bnei Yisrael made their declaration only after they had already seen the great fire. But we need to examine this answer in light of Rashi's interpretation.

What lies behind Tosafot's answer is a great and important principle. Bnei Yisrael were obligated, prior to the giving of the Torah, to observe only the seven Noachide laws. Despite the difficulties that these laws may sometimes create and the exertion that they may require, the demands that they make are not too great. The concern was that Bnei Yisrael, after promising "We shall do and we shall hear," would see the great fire and become afraid: "If the Torah that we are about to receive is so great and so powerful-perhaps it is better not to receive it." Perhaps, after the awesome experience of Revelation, Bnei Yisrael would have second thoughts when they realized the extent of the commitment that they were about to take upon themselves. For this reason, after they declared their initial readiness to accept the Torah, G-d had to hold the mountain over them as a threat, so that they would not backtrack when they perceived the power of the Torah.

Often, people want to learn Torah and live a religious life, but they don't want to do it with full commitment. People fear that getting into Torah too deeply will change them into something that they want to stay away from. However, we learn from Tosafot that there can be no observance of commandments without real engagement and in-depth commitment and study. If a person will backtrack when seeing the "great fire," then he cannot receive the Torah. A person who wants to receive Torah needs not only the aspect of "We shall do and we shall hear," but also the ability to confront and connect with the great fire that accompanies the acceptance.

The Magen Avraham questions why we celebrate Shavuot on the fiftieth day of the Omer, while in fact the Torah was given on Shabbat-which was the 51<sup>st</sup> day. The Maharal answers that what we are in fact celebrating is G-d's desire to give us the Torah, and to obligate us to receive it, even though perhaps Bnei Yisrael may have hesitated and faltered a little when they saw the great fire. When Bnei Yisrael were

exposed to the great power of the Torah, it frightened them and caused them to have second thoughts about their commitment. Yet G-d nevertheless desired to give them the Torah, and even to force it upon them. It is G-d's readiness to give, and not Bnei Yisrael's readiness to receive, that we celebrate on Shavuot. *(This sicha was delivered on motzai Shavuot leil Shabbat, 5762 [2002].)*

**RABBI HERSHEL SCHACHTER**

## Is G-d Still Talking to Us?

One Shabbos morning the students came to the beis medrash for Shacharis and there was a strange looking fellow, obviously not a student, and obviously missing some of his marbles, putting on tefillin. It didn't seem that he simply had not realized that it was Shabbos, so we all stayed away from him. When Rav Dovid Lifshitz arrived, he walked over to the young man and spoke to him softly in Hebrew. He pointed out that today is Shabbos and tefillin are not worn. The young man responded that he knows that, but he had received a nevuah (a prophecy) that he should wear tefillin today, despite the fact that it was Shabbos! Reb Dovid was not phased by his reply. He simply continued the conversation and asked, "in what language was this nevuah"? The young man replied in English. Whereupon Reb Dovid told him softly, "you must be mistaken. Nevuas are only given in Hebrew." Whereupon the young man thanked him for his clarification and he proceeded to remove his tefillin.

We were stunned watching all of this! You have to master abnormal psychology to be able to convince a meshugena that he's wrong. The possuk in Sefer Melochim (1:5:11) says that King Shlomo was blessed with wisdom, and was "wiser than any other person". The rabbis understand this to imply afilu min hashotim—that he was even wiser than the meshugaim!!

G-d gave His Torah and promised that he would supply us with prophets from time to time (Devorim 18:15) to guide us. When Maamad Har Sinai is described, the chumash says (Devorim 5:22) that Hashem spoke to the Jewish people in a loud booming voice, ("kol gadol") and He did not stop ("velo yasaf"). The rabbis (Shemos Rabba 28) understand this to refer to the fact that G-d continues to communicate to us both through the prophets as well as through the talmedei chachamim.

But not any old crackpot who sets himself up as a "novi" is to be listened to. Our tradition (see Rambam Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah chap. 7) has prerequisites that must be met before one qualifies to be recognized as a novi. Likewise our tradition has guidelines regarding the substance of the prophecy (ibid chap. 8-10). If one tells us that he has received a prophecy to permanently do away with any one of the mitzvos, or to worship avoda zarah even if only temporarily, we know that he is a false prophet.

Similarly there are guidelines regarding a rabbi rendering a halachic view. There is room for chiddush, but no room for shinui. One of the thirteen principles of our faith is that the Torah laws can not change. But at the same time the medrash tells us (see Yalkut Shimoni to Sefer Shoftim 5:8) that Hakadosh Baruch Hu cherishes chidushei Torah, and it is for that reason that the talmedei chachamim engage in milchamta shel (the battle of) Torah, in order to come up with such chidushim. It is a fine line that distinguishes between chiddush and shinui (see Rav Soloveitchik's essay "The Halachic Mind", footnote 98).

If a learned G-d fearing individual comes up with original insights by applying the middos (rules and regulations) shehaTorah nidreshes bohem which were transmitted by the Torah shebeal pe (oral Torah), then we have the right to assume G-s is still communicating with us via the psak of the rabbi. And the psak of the rabbi is binding because we believe that "G-d will reveal His secrets to those who fear him" (Tehillim 2:14, see Sotah 4b.)

When the Torah (Shemos 20:1) describes the proclamation of the ten commandments, the expression used is that "G-d spoke all of these words (kohl hadevorim)" and our tradition has it that the word kohl is referring to the fact that everything intelligent any future talmid chacham will come up with was implicitly included in the Torah that G-d gave us at Har Sinai.

When Rambam formulates what he considers to be the thirteen principles of our faith (commentary to Mishna, Sanhedrin Perek Chelek) he writes that not only do we believe that at one time (maamad har Sinai) G-d revealed Himself to us, and gave us His Torah, but also that the Torah as we observe it today is min hashomayim. There are individuals who consider themselves Orthodox who believe that at one time the Jewish people did have a Divine Torah, but the amoraim misunderstood the tannaim, the rishonim misunderstood the Talmud, and the achronim misunderstood the rishonim. "But don't get me wrong," they would say "-I'm Orthodox! And therefore I feel that the laws of the Shulchan Aruch are all binding, even though I think everything is in error." This is not the Orthodox position. If one is really convinced that a certain psak is really in error, he is not permitted to follow it. To err is human, and a Shulchan Aruch which is full of mistakes is a man-made Torah as opposed to a Divine one. Rav Chaim of Volozhin was fond of signing off his teshuvos, "the G-d of truth gave us a Torah of truth, and our eyes are only focused on the truth."

(It goes without saying that when evaluating a psak, one must factor in any discrepancy between his own knowledge and qualifications vs. those of the posek espousing the psak in question, and what such a discrepancy may indicate regarding which person is the one who is in error.)

We believe that G-d protects His Torah from errors. Any mistakes made over the years by poskim, will ultimately be corrected. The psak of the rabbis is binding because we have the right to assume that G-d has behind the scenes "revealed His secrets to those who fear him."

The story is told of the Rav Yechezkel Landau, author of the Sheilos uTeshuvos Nodah Beyehuda, that on one occasion he was presented with a "shaila" in hilchos treifos. After thinking for a few moments he insisted that the shaila was not real, that the organ of the animal must have been tampered with after the shechita. When the guilty baal habayis finally admitted to the charge, Rabbi Landau explained how he knew: for many years whenever he would pasken a shaila, he would have a very comfortable and confident feeling that from heaven they had assisted him to pasken correctly. On this occasion, even though he had formulated a clear-cut halachic opinion, he did not feel comfortable issuing his psak. He felt that on this occasion he was not receiving any Heavenly assistance, and he wondered why. He quickly came to the conclusion that Divine assistance not to err in psak is a miracle of sorts, and G-d is not in the practice of performing miracles unnecessarily. Obviously in this instance there was no need for any Heavenly assistance; the shaila was a fake!

I recently read a fascinating article encouraging the Conservative movement to adopt as its new slogan the slogan of some Christian group: "G-d is still speaking." The writer states that she is a Conservative Jew because she believes this to be true, that G-d is still speaking. And she concludes her essay with the complaint, "why do so many Conservative leaders seem too often to be listening only to what G-d said to generations past (Jewish Week, May 12, 2006, pg. 27).

This has always been the position of the Orthodox. That's where all of the chiddush always is. G-d is still speaking to us through the rabbis' further development of the Torah shebeal peh. But just as we only follow the instructions of a prophet if who he is and what he has to say are within certain bounds; so too the rabbis are entitled, and indeed encouraged, to be "mechadesh" if what they have to say is within the bounds of the middos of the Torah shebeal peh.

The mishna in Avos tells us that G-d created the entire world with ten pronouncements. The Chafetz Chaim pointed out (Sefer Chomas Hados, chap. 11) that rabbis of the Talmud felt that whatever was initially created directly by the word of G-d was stronger, healthier, and better than the offspring of that initial creation. Tradition has it (see Rashi to Breishis 1:21) that after mashiach will come, there will be a seudah for the tzadikim, and the levyyasan will be served. This refers to the original fish created by G-d's words. Although that fish will be preserved for over five thousand years it is assumed that it will be either tastier

or healthier than any of its offspring, even though they will be fresher.

Similarly, the rabbis say (Berachos 34b) that at that meal for the tzadikim, special wine will be served, made from the original grapes created (during the six days of creation) directly by the word of G-d. Wouldn't it make more sense to make some wine from freshly grown grapes? Obviously the rabbis' tradition was that those original grapes, created directly by the word of G-d, were clearly superior to any others.

The Talmud (Avoda Zarah 8a) transmits a tradition that Adam Harishon brought as a sacrifice that original ox created by the word of G-d. That animal was obviously considered "the choice", to be preferred over any of its offspring.

With respect to Torah, however, this is not the case. We do not consider those laws of the Torah directly dictated by G-d to Moshe Rebbeinu as more important than the laws developed by the rabbis of the later generations. King David says in Tehillim (119:72) that the Torah from G-d's mouth (tov li Toras picha) is to be preferred over thousands of gold or silver pieces. Does the Torah "from G-d's mouth" refer only to the text of the chumash dictated word for word and letter for letter by G-d? Rav Chaim of Volozhin pointed to the story related in Gittin (6b) that two amoraim expressed differing views regarding the Biblical story of the pilegsh begivah. Soon after, Rav Avyasar met Eliyahu Hanavi who told him that just then Hakadosh Baruch Hu was also learning that parsha in Sefer Shoftim, and He Himself said over the two suggestions of the two amoraim. Apparently, any honest intelligent chiddush which a later talmid chacham comes up with will also become "Toras picha" by virtue of the fact that Hakadosh Baruch Hu will say that over also. © 2006 Rabbi M. Willig & TtorahWeb.org

## *Chag Samayach!*



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