

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The festival of Shavuot is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Here is how Shavuot is described and defined in parsha Emor: "From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord... On that same day you are to proclaim a sacred assembly and do no regular work. This is to be a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live." (Leviticus 23:15-21)

These are the difficulties. In the first place, Shavuot, "the feast of weeks", is given no calendrical date: all the other festivals are. Pesach, for example is "on the fifteenth day" of the "first month". Shavuot has no such date. It is calculated on the basis of counting "seven full weeks" from a particular starting time, not by noting a date in the year.

Secondly, as long as the New Moon was determined on the basis of eyewitness testimony (i.e. until the fourth century of the Common Era), Shavuot could have no fixed date. In the Jewish calendar a month can be long (30 days) or short (29). If Nisan and Iyar were both long months, Shavuot would fall on 5 Sivan. If both were short, it would fall on 7 Sivan. And if one were long and the other short, it would fall on 6 Sivan. Unlike other festivals, Shavuot is (or was) a moveable feast.

Thirdly, the point at which the counting of days and weeks begins is signaled in a profoundly ambiguous phrase: "From the day after the Sabbath". But which Sabbath? And what is the reference to a Sabbath doing here at all? The previous passage has talked about Pesach, not the Sabbath. This led to one of the great controversies in Second Temple Judaism. The Pharisees, who believed in the Oral Law as well as the Written one understood "the Sabbath" to mean, here, the first day of Pesach (15 Nisan). The Sadducees, who believed in the Written Law only, took the text literally. The day after the Sabbath is Sunday. Thus the count always begins on a Sunday, and Shavuot, fifty days later, also always falls on a Sunday.

The fourth mystery, though, is the deepest: what is Shavuot about? What does it commemorate? About Pesach and Sukkot, we have no doubt. Pesach

is a commemoration of the exodus. Sukkot is a reminder of the forty years in the wilderness. As our sedra says: "Live in booths for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in booths so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the Lord your G-d."

In the case of Shavuot, all the Torah says is that it is the "Feast of the Harvest", and the "Day of Firstfruits". These are agricultural descriptions, not historical ones. Pesach and Sukkot have both: an agricultural aspect (spring/autumn) and a historical one (exodus/wilderness). This is not a marginal phenomenon, but of the essence. Other religions of the ancient world celebrated seasons. They recognised cyclical time. Only Israel observed historical time -- time as a journey, a story, an evolving narrative. The historical dimension of the Jewish festivals was unique. All the more, then, is it strange that Shavuot is not biblically linked to a historical event.

Jewish tradition identified Shavuot as "the time of the giving of the Torah", the anniversary of the Divine revelation at Sinai when the Israelites heard the voice of G-d and made a covenant with Him. But that connection is not made in the Torah itself. To be sure, the Torah says that "In the third month after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai" (Ex. 19:1), and Shavuot is the only festival in the third month. So the connection is implicit; but it is not explicit. For this, as for the festival's date, we need the Oral tradition.

What then was the view of the Sadducees? It is unlikely that they linked Shavuot with the giving of the Torah. For that event had a date, and for the Sadducees Shavuot did not have a date. They kept it on a Sunday -- they observed it on a specific day of the week, not on a specific date in the year. How did the Sadducees view Shavuot?

There is a fascinating episode recorded in the rabbinic literature (Menachot 65a) in which a Sadducee explains to R. Yochanan ben Zakkai why, according to them, Shavuot is always on a Sunday: "Moses our teacher was a great lover of Israel. Knowing that Shavuot lasted only one day, he therefore fixed it on the day after the Sabbath so that Israel might enjoy themselves for two successive days." Shavuot gave the Israelites a long weekend!

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From this starting point we can begin to speculate what Shavuot might have meant for the Sadducees. The late Louis Finkelstein argued that they were landowners and farmers. In general, they were wealthier than the Pharisees, and more closely attached to the State and its institutions: the Temple and the political elite. They were as near as Judaism came to a governing class.

For farmers the agricultural significance of Shavuot would have been clear and primary. It was "the festival of the harvest, of the firstfruits of your work, of what you sow in the field" (Ex. 23:16). It came at the end of a seven-week process that began with the bringing of the Omer -- "a sheaf of the first grain of your harvest" (Lev. 23:10), i.e. the first of the barley crop. This was the busy time of gathering in the grain (this is the setting of the Book of Ruth, and one of the reasons why we read it on Shavuot). Farmers would have a specific reason to give thanks to G-d who "brings forth bread from the ground". They would also, by the end of harvesting, be exhausted. Hence the Sadducee's remark about needing a long weekend.

We can now see the outline of a possible Sadducean argument. Pesach represents the beginning of the Israelites' journey to freedom. Sukkot recalls the forty years of wandering in the desert. But where in the Jewish year do we recall and celebrate the end of the journey: the entry into the promised land? When, in fact, did it take place? The Book of Joshua (5:10-12) states: "On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate of the produce of Canaan."

It is this text that Maimonides takes as proof that "the day after the Sabbath" in fact means, as the text states here, "the day after the Passover". Seen through Sadducean eyes, however, this text might have held a quite different significance. The Omer recalls the day the Israelites first ate the produce of the promised land. It was the end of the wilderness years -- the day

they stopped eating manna ("bread from heaven" -- Exodus 16:4) and started eating bread from the land to which they had been traveling for forty years.

The reason Shavuot is given only agricultural, not historical, content in the Torah is that in this case agriculture was history. The fifty day count from the first time they ate food grown in Israel to the end of the grain harvest represents the end of the journey of which Pesach was the beginning and Sukkot the middle. Shavuot is a festival of the land and its produce because it commemorates the entry into the land in the days of Joshua. So the Sadducees may have argued. It was Israel's first Yom ha-Atzma'ut, Independence Day. It was the festival of entry into the promised land.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sadducees rapidly disappeared. How do you celebrate a festival of the land when you have lost the land? How do you predicate your religious identity on the State and its institutions (Temple, priests, kings) when you have lost those institutions? Only a movement (the Pharisees) and a festival (Shavuot) based on the giving of the Torah, could survive. For the Torah was not completely dependent on the land. It had been given "in the wilderness". It applied anywhere and everywhere.

To be sure, the Pharisees, no less than the Sadducees, loved the land. They knew the Torah in its entirety could only be kept there. They longed for it, prayed for it, lived there whenever they could. But even in exile, they still had the Torah and the promise it contained that one day Jews would return, and recover their sovereignty, and rebuild what they had lost.

The argument about Shavuot turned out to be fateful for Jewish history. Those who celebrated it as "the time of the giving of the Torah" ensured Jewish survival through nearly 20 centuries of exile and dispersion. And we, who live in the era of the return, can rejoice in a double celebration: of the Torah and of the land. ©2014 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"The Lord said to Moses, 'Speak to Aaron and say to him, 'When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand.'" (Num. 8:1-2) This week's Biblical portion of Behaalotcha contains an important insight into the necessary qualities and major functions of our rabbis. Our Torah reading of last week, Naso, concluded with the various offerings of the Princes of the tribes at the dedication of the desert Sanctuary, forerunner of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

This week's reading begins with the kindling of the menorah, the seven candlestick branches made of pure gold, each culminating in a golden flower with three branches emanating from either side of the central tree-like branch, and seven flames spreading

warmth and enlightenment within the most sacred area and beyond. The operative verse which describes this magnificent accouterments is “the candle is commandment, and Torah is light” (Prov. 6:23).

Rashi, the classical Biblical commentary, is apparently disturbed by the placement of the Menorah in our portion; it seems to have belonged in the Book of Exodus which describes the inner furnishings of the Sanctuary, including the Menorah (Ex 25:31-40). Rashi therefore opens his interpretation of our portion with the words of the Midrash (Tanhuma 5):

Why this juxtaposition of the description of the lighting of the Menorah with the offerings of the Princes of the tribes? It is because when Aaron saw the dedication of the Sanctuary, he became upset that he had not been included in the dedication offerings and ceremonies; neither he nor his tribe of Kohanim. The Holy One Blessed be He said to him, “By your life, your contribution is greater than theirs; you will kindle and clean the candlesticks.”

What was so special about kindling the Menorah? It happened early in the morning, without audience or fanfare, and seemed like an almost janitorial duty of turning on the lights?

I would suggest that there were two central furnishings in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of our Sanctuary: the sacred ark, which housed the Tablets of Stone, and the Menorah. The former, with the Torah in splendid seclusion behind the curtains, was meant for Israel alone, to form a “holy nation”; the latter, with its warmth and light spreading round-about was the Torah meant for the world, the Torah which would go forth from Zion, the word of the Lord which would emanate from Jerusalem to the nations.

The Midrash (Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael, Parshat Yitro, Parsha Aleph) teaches that the Revelation at Sinai was given in a desert, a parousia, rather than on the Temple Mount in order to teach us that the Torah was not meant for the Jews alone, but rather for all of humanity. Just prior to the Revelation, Israel is charged by G-d to be a “Kingdom of Kohanim,” teachers to all of humanity (Seforno, ad loc Ex 19:6), purveyors of a G-d of love, compassion, morality and peace. This universal charge is given to the Jews to become a sacred nation (otherwise they would hardly be an example to emulate), and to the Kohanim to convey our teaching to the world (Isaiah 2, Micah 4, Zechariah 7,8,9). This is the true significance of the Kohen’s kindling of the Menorah and spreading the message of Torah beyond the Sanctuary to the world.

It is our duty to demonstrate to the world that we have righteous decrees and ordinances (Deut. 4:8); and it is our laws, our unique life-style, which will elevate us above all other nations, granting us renown and glory worldwide (Deut. 26:18-19). It is the Kohen Gadol, or the rabbis today, who must convey these righteous laws which will inspire the rest of the nations

to accept our G-d of compassion and peace. The rabbis are our ambassadors to the world, those who must bring the light and the warmth of Torah to the world. They must kindle the Menorah.

It is not by accident that the Menorah is shaped like a tree, which grows and produces fruit, it is the “personification” of halakhah, a progressing and moving teacher of morality and sensitivity. How we treat the stranger and would-be convert, how we deal with the hapless woman chained to a recalcitrant husband who won’t let her go, is the test of the righteousness of our laws and the fitness of our Rabbis. ©2014 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is a moment of tension and crisis in the lives of all humans when one switches from dependence on others – parents, teachers, mentors, etc. – to self-reliance and independence. This transition is not usually accomplished easily or painlessly. And, truth be said, there are many who never accomplish this transition at all and remain in a stage of abject dependency all of their lives.

This moment of transition usually begins in one’s adolescent years, with the tug of war between parents and authority figures on one hand and the young trying to find their own way of life and achievements. It is very difficult for parents and teachers to witness their children or students making mistakes that these authority figures could have prevented.

But making mistakes is an integral part of life’s developmental process. I have always felt that one learns much more from one’s mistakes than one does from one’s apparent successes and triumphs. How to bear up under frustration and disappointment, how to be resilient in the face of failure and tragedy – this is the stuff of Jewish life and history. And all of this is the subtle message that we are taught at the beginning of this week’s parsha.

Rashi explains to us that the priest that lit the lights of the great candelabra in the Tabernacle/Temple held the lit taper to the wick of the lamp “until the new flame rose by itself.” The message here is clear. When the flame is able to rise by itself, the taper used to light it should be removed. The new flame has to burn by itself. The next generation has to be able to make its own way on its own.

Jewish history records many different eras in our long story. All of the generations faced similar challenges and difficulties – the constant problem of being a moral voice and a small demographic minority. Yet they all also faced difficulties and challenges that were particular and peculiar to their times and locales.

Though the general strategies of Jewish survival – Torah and observance, moral behavior and

optimistic attitude and resilience – remained the same, the tactics of survival and Jewish success changed and adapted. The flame had to rise by itself or the taper of the previous generation's presence and help would inexorably disappear.

Part of the challenge of our current society is its over-reliance on past generations – financially, morally, intellectually, tactically and socially. Recreating a fantasy laden past and justifying current policies that have already been proven to be less than constructive only compounds the problems that we truly face. The new flame is not allowed to rise and be able to burn on its own. The task of the past is to instruct, strengthen and ignite the new flame and not to stifle it by its overbearing presence.

Where this line is to be drawn is the stuff of wisdom and foresight, responsibility and probity. The great High Priest Aharon was entrusted with this task. His love of others was the guarantee that he would light the future lamps correctly while using the older taper he held in his hands. ©2014 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

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

The parsha contains the pasuk: "The people complained, speaking evil in the ears of Hashem, and Hashem heard and His wrath flared, and a fire of Hashem burned against them, and it consumed at the edge of the camp." [Bamidbar 11:1]. This Parsha contains the beginning of the unfortunate decline of the Jewish people during their sojourn in the Wilderness.

Rashi describes the "disconnect" between the people and the Almighty. They complained: "How much we have struggled on this journey! It has been three days that we have not rested from the suffering of the way!" G-d was angry at them: "I had intended it for your benefit, so that you would enter the Land immediately."

The Ramban takes note of a peculiar expression in the pasuk describing the complaints: "And the nation was 'k-misonenim' [they were LIKE complainers]". Strangely, the Torah does not state that the people complained. It states that they were "like complainers". What does that mean?

The Ramban explains that the people spoke out of hurt and pain. In other words, there was a certain degree of legitimacy to their whining. When people are in pain, it is natural for them to complain. If someone is in the hospital, he is laid up, he is in pain, and he sometimes utters things that he really should not be saying: "Why is G-d doing this to me? I do not deserve the suffering I am experiencing!" People get upset and when they are in pain, they complain. This is somewhat

of a mitigating factor. They are only "LIKE" complainers. We cannot really throw the book at them. They were doing what comes naturally for those who are in pain.

If that's the case, asks the Ramban, why does Hashem get upset with them? The Ramban answers that they should have followed Him with a good spirit and attitude based on all the multitude of goodness and kindness He provided to them. When things are going so well and one has so much good fortune, it is simply inappropriate to complain!

This is one of the great challenges of life. Most of us are extremely fortunate. We merit the uncontested bounty of the Almighty. Most of us have good health and families. We have so much good! But when things are not 100% right, we complain.

The Ramban is saying that this is not right. We should be looking at the "big picture" before we start complaining. The big picture is that there is a bounty of blessing we are enjoying despite the bumps in the road or the pot holes in the road or the ditch in the road that we occasionally get stuck in. We still should not complain because the sum total of our life is still overwhelmingly tilted towards the side of joy, gladness, and abundance of that which is good.

This is another example of a theme that is repeated so often in the Torah -- the theme of "Hakaras haTov" [recognizing favors; showing gratitude].

The Apter Rav used to say that in every single parsha in the Torah, there is a hint (Remez) to the importance of Ahavas Yisrael [the mitzvah to love a fellow Jew]. The Apter Rav was once asked to point out the 'Remez' for Ahavas Yisrael in Parshas Balak. He quipped "That's simple. The name of the parsha -- Balak -- is an acronym for the words V'Ahavta L'Reacha Kamocha [You should love your neighbor as yourself]". The Chassidim questioned their master. "Rebbe, V'Ahavta begins with a Vov, while Balak begins with a Bais. Furthermore, Kamocha begins with a Kaf not a Kuf, which is the last letter of Balak!" The Apter Rav answered, "If you are so particular about the individual letters, you will never find Ahavas Yisrael!"

I use this story by way of introduction to note that in almost every parsha in the Torah, we may find some type of hint to the concept of Hakaras HaTov. We just mentioned one such 'remez'. However, there is a very novel interpretation given by the Moshav Zekeinim to an incident at the end of the parsha, which also highlights this concept of appreciating favors.

"Miriam and Aaron spoke (ill) about Moshe regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman." [Bamidbar 12:1] The Torah does not tell us explicitly what their problem was with this Cushite woman.

Rashi and most of the commentaries say that their problem was the fact that their brother Moshe neglected his wife. Because of his unique status of always being "on call" to speak to the Almighty, he

could not live a normal life of husband and wife and had to physically separate from his wife, thereby neglecting her. Miriam and Aaron complained about Moshe, "Was it only with Moshe that Hashem spoke? Did He not speak with us as well?"

This is the classic, standard, interpretation of their complaint. The Moshav Zekeinim has a different interpretation. The Moshav Zekeinim says that their complaint was, on the contrary, that Moshe Rabbeinu should divorce this woman. Maybe, they reasoned, it was okay for Moshe to have married such a woman when he was a simple shepherd. However, now that he was the leader of the Jewish people, he was due for an "upgrade". He deserved a wife more fitting of his station in life.

According to this approach, Moshe's response to his sibling was that to divorce this wife now would be a violation of the principle of "Hakaras HaTov". "This woman married me when I was a poor shepherd. I was a fugitive of justice, running away from the sword of Pharaoh and this woman married me and stuck with me. For me to dump her now that I have found a bit of success in my life would be a gross violation of the attribute of having appropriate gratitude (Hakaras haTov). Where is the loyalty toward the woman and the wife who was with me all these years?"

This interpretation, claims the Moshav Zekeinim, fits in well with the rebuke of the Almighty to the words of Miriam and Aaron: "B'chol Beisi Ne'eman Hu" [In all My House he is the most loyal one]. The trustworthiness of Moshe, his loyalty and faithfulness, extended not only to Hashem, it extended to his wife as well! He does not abandon the people around him. ©2014 Rabbi Y. Frand & torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's parsha, G-d tells Moshe (Moses) that a person (ish) who is impure because of contact with a dead body (tameh lanefesh) or too far away from Jerusalem (derekh rehoka) is given a second chance to eat the paschal lamb. (Numbers 9:10-11)

The phrase tameh lanefesh speaks about a spiritual deficiency - when one has contact with a dead body, emotional and religious turbulence sets in.

The phrase vederekh rehoka, speaks of a physical impediment - one who is simply too far away to partake of the paschal lamb on time.

Indeed, throughout Jewish history we have faced both spiritual and physical challenges. What is most interesting is that in the Torah the spiritual challenge is mentioned first. This is because it is often the case that the Jewish community is more threatened spiritually than physically.

Despite its rise, anti-semitism is not our key challenge. The threat today is a spiritual one. The spiraling intermarriage rate among American Jews

proves this point. In America we are so free that non-Jews are marrying us in droves. The late Prof. Eliezer Berkovits was correct when he said that from a sociological perspective, a Jew is one whose grandchildren are Jewish. The painful reality is that large numbers of the grandchildren of today's American Jews will not be Jewish.

And while we are facing grave danger in Israel, thank G-d, we have a strong army which can take care of its citizens physically. Yet, in Israel, it is also the case that it is the Jewish soul, rather than the Jewish body, that is most at risk.

Most interesting is that even the phrase vederekh rehoka, which, on the surface, is translated as a physical stumbling block, can be understood as a spiritual crisis. On top of the last letter of rehoka (the heh), is a dot. Many commentators understand this mark to denote that, in order to understand this phrase, the heh should be ignored. As a consequence, the term rahok, which is masculine, cannot refer to derekh

which is feminine. It rather refers to the word ish, found earlier in the sentence. (Jerusalem Talmud Psakim 9:2) The phrase therefore may refer to Jews who are physically close to Jerusalem yet spiritually far, far away.

The message is clear. What is needed is a strong and passionate focusing on spiritual salvation. The Torah teaches that the Jewish community must continue to confront anti-Semitism everywhere. But while combating anti-Semitism is an important objective in and of itself, the effort must be part of a far larger goal - the stirring and reawakening of Jewish consciousness throughout the world. ©2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI ZVI SOBOLOFSKY

Do Not Forget

The receiving of the Torah was the most significant event in the history of the Jewish people. Not only does the Yom Tov of Shavuot revolve around the experience of Har Sinai, but we are also commanded to never forget the events that occurred on that first Shavuot. We are given a two-fold commandment, "Do not forget what you have seen... and transmit them to your children and grandchildren" (Devarim 4:9) What precisely must we be careful not to forget? What exactly are we to impart to the next generations?

We are taught (Pirkei Avos 3:10) that one must be exceedingly careful not to forget what one has learned, and one who forgets even one word of what he has learned is in violation of the prohibition mentioned above. Although one who tries to retain the information studied and doesn't succeed does not violate this prohibition, the essence of this halacha is to emphasize

the significance of remembering as much Torah knowledge as possible. The corollary of this prohibition is the positive commandment to transmit all of our knowledge to our children.

There is a dispute between Rabbeinu Yona, the Rambam, and the Ramban as to the precise nature of this dual commandment. Rabbeinu Yona in his commentary to Pirkei Avos explains why the Torah insists that we not forget what we have learned. One who forgets will inevitably commit errors in his mitzvah observance. According to Rabbeinu Yona the Torah is highlighting the role of talmud Torah as the prerequisite for the proper observance of the mitzvos. We are required to do everything in our ability to maintain proper observance for ourselves and our children, and his begins with a thorough knowledge of the Torah.

The Rambam (Hilchos Talmud Torah 1:10) emphasizes a different aspect of talmud Torah concerning the prohibition of forgetting. The Rambam cites the prohibition against forgetting one's learning as the source that one must learn until the end of one's life. Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that the Rambam is addressing the dimension of talmud Torah as an end in it and of itself. How much must one learn to fulfill this mitzvah properly? One must learn the entire Torah. One who forgets any Torah must continue to learn because otherwise this mitzvah is not fulfilled in its entirety. Thus, the Rambam saw in this passuk the source for an independent, never ending obligation to study Torah, not just as a way to fulfill other mitzvos. Only if we dedicate ourselves to maintaining a complete mastery of Torah as a goal in it of itself can we impart this knowledge properly to our children.

The Ramban in his Sefer Hamitzvos (prohibition two not mentioned by the Rambam) interprets this dual obligation as focusing on the general experience of Har Sinai rather than addressing forgetting a specific part of the Torah as the Rabbeinu Yona and the Rambam did. The Ramban elaborates as to why the nature of the Har Sinai experience must be constantly remembered. It was only this experience which enables the Torah to remain eternal in our eyes. If we would have only received the Torah from Moshe without seeing Hashem's presence revealed on Har Sinai, we could potentially be led to believe by a subsequent navi that a new Torah had been given. We who saw with our own eyes that Hashem gave us this Torah are certain that this Torah will remain eternal. We must constantly strengthen our own faith in this principle and transmit it to our children.

As we celebrate that monumental day at Har Sinai, we have to once again commit ourselves to all aspects of kabalas haTorah. We must constantly strive to reach greater heights in talmud Torah enabling ourselves and our children to properly observe the mitzvos. Talmud Torah must also be an independent goal; mastering as much Torah as we can must be an

absolute priority for ourselves and our children. An absolute commitment to the eternal truth of the Torah must be maintained. This cornerstone of Jewish belief must be guarded and transmitted properly to the next generation. ©2014 Rabbi Z. Sobolofsky & The TorahWeb Foundation, Inc.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd they (plural) traveled from Refidim, and they (plural) came to the Desert of Sinai, and they (plural) camped in the desert, and Israel camped (singular) opposite the mountain" (Sh'mos 19:2). The contrast between how the nation is described before they got to Mt. Sinai, using plural terms to indicate that there were separate individuals when they traveled from Refidim, when they entered the desert and when they camped in the desert, with how they were described when they camped at Mt. Sinai, as one unit ("like one man with one heart," see Rashi) is blatant. The advantage of being one unit is included in the Pesach Hagadah when we sing "it would have been enough [of a reason for us to praise G-d] had He just brought us to Mt. Sinai without giving us the Torah," as other than receiving the Torah there, what purpose would being brought to Mt. Sinai serve if not for bringing the unity that came along with it? The positive attributes of unity would seem to be universally recognized, yet after we left Mt. Sinai, it has been rather elusive. Why has unity been so difficult to re-attain, and how can it be achieved?

In order to try to understand why we still suffer from a lack of unity despite craving it, it is important to first try to define what unity means, and what it can't (or shouldn't) mean. We are all individuals; being united does not mean losing our individuality, but using our individual strengths to achieve a common purpose. The question therefore becomes what common purpose do we share that can possibly unify us. Included in this question is who the "we" are. Are we hoping to unite all of humanity, or to just set an example for them? While having a world without any conflicts would be nice, I don't think anyone realistically thinks this can be accomplished, at least not as a starting point. Perhaps if we, as a people, can become united and thereby demonstrate how advantageous it would be if the whole world was united, it can be attempted. Until then, though, it can't be what we are trying (initially) to achieve.

Throughout history, anti-Semitism has often served as a unifier of sorts. However, it is now often couched as anti-Zionism (making it a much less effective unifier), and (for better or worse) we have integrated into secular society well enough not be intimidated by its specter. Without a widely-held acute sense of vulnerability, being hated or threatened by others cannot bring us together as a means of self-

preservation.

Looking back at the first (and only?) instance of our nation being united, as we camped at Mt. Sinai to get the Torah, it would be easy to suggest that it should be the Torah that once again unites us. However, determining what messages the Torah is trying to teach us is (unfortunately) often a source of division rather than a means of unification. Additionally, and quite unfortunately, not everyone shares the same perspective on whether keeping the Torah is a goal worth striving for, making it nearly impossible for it to motivate everyone to become united. Although a candidate for our “common goal” cannot be discounted just because it might not bring about a wide enough unity to encompass everyone who shares in the Jewish culture (or we would be searching for the sake of a pre-determined notion of “unity” as opposed to uniting in order to accomplish a pre-determined common goal), keeping the Torah (or at least the brand each of us thinks is worth keeping) is not a goal held widely enough to qualify as a goal of “the Jewish community at large.” Rather, each version what it means to “keep the Torah” is the goal of each particular “community within the community.” Although it is important to promote unity within each of these communities, we are discussing the possibility of achieving unity on a larger scale.

Was the shared goal when we were one unit camped at Mt. Sinai that we would soon be getting the Torah, or was it that we would soon be cementing our relationship with the G-d Who took us out of Egypt? The ceremony that took place at Sinai was a covenant ceremony (see Sh'mos 24:7-8), designating us as G-d's chosen people. Keeping the Torah is how we fulfill our end of deal, and how we strengthen our connection to G-d, but the shared goal that brought about our unity was connecting to G-d. (For this reason, we insisted on hearing G-d ourselves rather than having Moshe tell us what G-d said, see Rashi on Sh'mos 19:9.) I would therefore suggest that the common goal still shared by the Jewish community at large is creating/enhancing a community whereby the individuals within it can connect to G-d, and constantly improve that connection. The question, though, is even if that was what united us then, can it unite us once again. Is it still a common goal? Is it shared by the community at large?

Expressions such as “connecting to G-d,” becoming more spiritual,” and others like it, are ambiguous enough to include (or, more precisely, not to exclude) the smaller “communities within the community” despite their very pronounced differences. (We will discuss how to work together despite these differences later.) Having a larger community that promotes the ability to get closer to G-d, whether it be by fighting anti-Semitism, promoting religious freedom, having increased political clout, providing the services

needed by a Torah-based religious community (kosher food, mikveh, religious educational systems, etc.), et al, allows each member of the community to pursue their spiritual growth in their own way, even if that “way” differs from others in the community. And since this goal is shared by communities all over the world, it allows individuals from other communities to continue to connect with G-d (and improve that connection) even when leaving the local community.

At first glance, this “common goal” of promoting an enhanced connection to G-d may seem to exclude the non-religious, or those who live within a religious community without being interested in “connecting with G-d.” However, it would be impossible to call it a “Jewish community” without including G-d and our relationship with Him in the communal goal (at least not without opening the door to accusations of bigotry). Choosing to be part of that community means promoting (or at least working within) the goals of that community, even if they are not personal goals. It's one thing to come to synagogue to spend time with your friends even if you have no interest in praying to G-d; it's quite another to insist that they shorten the services because you want to make Kiddush sooner even though others want to connect with the Creator. There are many ways to contribute to the community in a non-spiritual way while helping others in their spiritual pursuits, whether it be in the kosher food-service industry, health services (it's much easier to focus on spiritual growth when healthy), philanthropy, helping the needy (which is a way of “emulating G-d,” but need not be done for that reason) or a myriad of other things; even though the community-wide goal is creating an environment that fosters individual spiritual growth, an individual need not share that personal goal in order to be part of the community and help it achieve its goal.

We still have to deal with the fact that there are deep and profound differences between the “communities within the community,” thereby causing dissention and preventing unity. This is not the place to dissect each of these differences and suggest ways to deal with them. I will share one overall suggestion, though, that applies to just about every one of them. One of our biggest problems (if not the biggest) is our inability to allow others to be wrong. I don't mean we shouldn't argue vehemently why our position is right, I am referring to walking away after presenting the case for our position and letting the other person walk away too, despite being convinced that they are wrong (even very wrong).

There are several reasons why it is absolutely necessary to allow others to be wrong. First of all, no one, not one single human being, no matter how smart or how holy, is never wrong. We have to be able to accept that no matter how wrong-minded a position seems, an otherwise smart and rational person may take that position. (And there are times when we might

be the ones taking that wrong position, but accepting that possibility will not usually be enough to walk away; allowing the other person to be wrong is.) Secondly, we are all a work in progress, and being wrong today doesn't mean staying wrong tomorrow. Allowing someone to move on despite being wrong gives them the opportunity to reconsider their position down the line, while maintaining the disagreement doesn't allow them to move past the issue and possibly reconsider it in the future. And the harder (and longer) we fight, the more entrenched we get in that position, making it harder to ever reconsider. Thirdly, often times whatever advantage the correct position provides is more than compensated for (in the other direction) by fighting for that advantage, resulting in a net loss. In the long run, we would all be better off being right, but are still better off allowing others to be wrong than keeping the argument going.

The Chizkuni (Sh'mos 23:2) explains the Biblical commandment not to go against the majority as meaning that even when you're convinced that you're smarter than they are, and they don't understand the issue at hand as well as you do, not to keep arguing the case, but allow the majority to overrule you. Although this refers specifically to judges deciding a court case, if a smarter judge is told to let others be wrong even if means letting a wrong decision stand, how much more so does it apply to situations outside the courtroom.

The Nesivos (Nachalas Ya'akov, Parashas T'rumah) quotes the Talmud (see Midrash B'reishis 38:6) that peace is so important that if we all get along He will not punish us for any sin, even idol worship, explaining that when we are at peace with each other, and are therefore willing to share our thoughts with others and willing to hear what others have to say, eventually the truth will win out, and we will stop sinning. By allowing others to be wrong, no matter how wrong we think they are, instead of focusing on the few things we disagree about, we will consider the many things we actually agree upon, including our common goals. And because of those shared goals, we can attain real unity. [A longer version of this piece can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/mqzouec>] ©2014 Rabbi D. Kramer

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (13:9), "The light of the righteous will rejoice, but the lamp of the wicked will flicker out." Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher z"l (Spain; 14th century) explains: King Shlomo compares the soul of a tzaddik to light because the soul, like the concept "light," is eternal and is independent of the life-span of the tzaddik's body. In contrast, the soul of a rasha is like the light of a lamp; when the candle or wick is snuffed out, the light is gone. So, too, when the rasha's body dies, nothing

remains of him.

In reality, R' Bachya continues, a soul never dies. But, the soul of the wicked will suffer eternal punishment, which is a fate worse than death. This comes about because the rasha did not pursue "light" during his lifetime. Therefore, King Shlomo says that the lamp will "flicker out." A faint memory of the light that could have been will remain, but it will not give light.

In contrast, "the light of the righteous will rejoice." This rejoicing is the tzaddik's reward, and it refers to attaining levels of understanding of G-d that one could not attain in his lifetime. [See below.] Because tzaddikim serve Hashem with joy, they to rejoicing in the World-to-Come, for the trait of happiness causes the soul to draw sustenance and exist forever.

R' Bachya continues: Another reason the soul is compared to light is that they both were created on the first day of Creation. Unlike man, who lights a candle from an existing flame, Hashem created light out of nothing. Nevertheless, though He is "light" and doesn't need our light, He commanded us to light a menorah in His Temple for the honor of the Shechinah, as described in our parashah. (Beur Al Ha'Torah) ©2014 S. Katz & torah.org

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