

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**B**amidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamidbar means, "In the desert." What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and G-d's word?

The sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mekhilta the Torah was given publicly, openly and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.<sup>1</sup>

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that before G-d gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.<sup>2</sup>

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is G-d's gift to us.<sup>3</sup>

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightening and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered G-d not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence."<sup>4</sup> I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the midbar, the desert, you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker, and the medubar, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of G-d you need a listening silence in the soul.

Many years ago British television produced a

documentary series, The Long Search, on the world's great religions.<sup>5</sup> When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the Bet Midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but we don't talk about them."

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, G-d created the universe: "And G-d said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanakh often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "Then they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of G-d, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion.

The sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom."<sup>6</sup> If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two.<sup>7</sup> R. Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my days I



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<sup>1</sup> Mekhilta, Yitro, Bachodesh, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 19:9-12.

<sup>5</sup> BBC television, first shown 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Avot 3:13.

<sup>7</sup> Megillah 18a.

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have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence.”<sup>8</sup>

The service of the priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions — neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar<sup>9</sup> has accordingly spoken of “the silence of the sanctuary.” The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise taanit dibbur, a “fast of words.” Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called tefillah be-lachash, the “silent prayer.” It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child. “She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard” (1 Sam. 1:13).

G-d hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet G-d heard “the voice of the child” (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by G-d (Gen. 18:12-13). G-d hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb sh-m-a in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, “All that G-d says, we will do,” then said, “All that G-d says, we will do and we will hear [ve-nishma]” (Ex. 24:7). It is the nishma – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-

<sup>8</sup> Avot 1:17.

<sup>9</sup> Israel Knohl.

and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

The heavens declare the glory of G-d  
The skies proclaim the work of His hands.  
Day to day they pour forth speech,  
Night to night they communicate knowledge.  
There is no speech, there are no words,  
Their voice is not heard.  
Yet their music carries throughout the earth.

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai, that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of “Torah from heaven” problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the “speaking cure”, but it is in fact a listening cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of G-d if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, ‘In memory of W B Yeats,’ W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of G-d, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by G-d’s everlasting arms, we are not alone. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**T**he Scroll of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of “autumnal love” between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora intermarriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the

celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuot is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly-freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grandmother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Passover) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuot). I would wish to ask three questions on the Scroll of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Scroll on Shavuot, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moab, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the midrash (Ruth Rabbah) tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz's wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Scroll (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Jesse. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood? And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Scroll what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Scroll of Ruth must deal with the eternal rather than the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelekh) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek “greener pastures” in the idolatrous Moab. As happened with Father Abraham, Diaspora proved far

more dangerous (Genesis 12:10-20), the two sons, Mahlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelekh and Naomi – seems to have ended! The father and his sons all die in Moab – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-law Naomi, converts to Judaism (“Where you will go” – to Israel – “there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge,” – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – “Your people shall be my people, your G-d my G-d” – Ruth 1:16), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The midrash tells us that Boaz's wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz's field – and Boaz was a Kinsman of Elimelekh. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte – stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is (Ruth 3:3,4). In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz's forbear Judah generations earlier – and at least enter Jewish history by bearing his child (see Genesis, chapter 38).

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere “one night stand.” She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he “redeem” her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelekh's previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth's commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity. Indeed, there is no book more fitting for the Festival of The First Fruits, Torah and Redemption than the Scroll of Ruth. ©2016 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**A**lthough there is no really accurate way to measure the relative importance of the holidays of the Jewish calendar year, I think that we can all agree that the holiday of Shavuot appears to be the least dramatic of them all. The Torah describes it as an agricultural feast day commemorating the grain harvest and the greening of the first fruits of the season as an offering in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Jewish tradition and rabbinic sanction has emphasized and label the holiday as the anniversary of the granting of the Torah to the Jewish people by G-d at the revelation at Mount Sinai. With the absence of the Temple, the holiday has taken on this commemoration as the center point of its observance.

Secular Zionism attempted to restore the primacy of its agricultural component in commemorating the holiday but was singularly unsuccessful. So, even today in the Land of Israel, once again fruitful and bountiful, this agricultural aspect of the holiday is still very secondary to its historical commemoration of the revelation at Sinai. And in this there is an important lesson that repeats itself throughout Jewish history.

The great Gaon, Saadya, succinctly summed up this message when he stated: "Our nation – the Jewish people – is a nation only by virtue of its Torah." All of the other facets of our nationhood exist only because of this central historical moment – the granting of the Torah to the Jewish people by G-d through Moshe at the mountain of Sinai. This was and is the pivotal moment in all of Jewish history. Everything else that has occurred to us over these three and a half millennia has direct bearing and stems from that moment in Jewish and human history.

Therefore it should be no wonder as to why the holiday of Shavuot is the day of commemoration of the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Looking back over the long centuries of our existence, we can truly appreciate how we have been preserved, strengthened and enhanced in every way by our studied application of Torah in every facet of our personal and communal lives.

Those who forsook the values and denied the divinity of Torah fell by the wayside of history and are, in the main, no longer part of our people. Unlike Pesach and Succot, Shavuot carries with it no special ritual or commandments. It certainly is the least dramatic of all the holidays of the Jewish calendar. But, rather, it represents the every day in Jewish life – dominated by study and observance of Torah and its eternal values.

The name of the holiday means "weeks" – units of time that measure our progress on this earth. It is not only the seven weeks from Pesach to Shavuot that is being referred to, but rather we are reminded of all of the weeks of our lives that compose our stay in this

world. Time has importance to us when we deem it to be meaningful and well spent. The purpose of Torah, so to speak, was and is to accomplish just that. And therefore the day of commemoration of the granting of the Torah to Israel is very aptly named for it is the Torah that gives meaning to our days and weeks.

The customs of the holiday also reference the scene at Mount Sinai on the day of revelation. Eating dairy foods, decorating the synagogue and the home with flowers and greens, and all night Torah study sessions have all become part of the commemoration of the holiday itself. They all relate to Sinai and the revelation. The Jewish people, through long experience and centuries of analysis have transformed this seemingly physical agricultural holiday into the realm of spirituality and eternal history.

On this day of festivity we are granted an insight into the past and the future at one and the same time. We are able to unlock the secrets of our survival and eternity as a nation, and as the prime force in human civilization for these many millennia. So it is the holiday of Shavuot that grants true meaning and necessary legitimacy to all of the other holidays of the Jewish calendar year.

Shavuot is the cornerstone of the entire year, for without it all the days of celebration and commemoration remain devoid of spirituality and eternity. It does not require for itself any special commandments or observances because it is the foundation of all commemorations throughout Jewish life and time. ©2016 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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he Torah, in this week's portion, alludes to the redemption of the first born son. (Numbers 3:40-51) Originally, the eldest son in each family was designated to serve in the Temple. After the eldest in the family faltered by participating in the sin of the golden calf, the Temple work was transferred to the tribe of Levi, which was not involved in the sin. The Torah required the redeeming of each first born at that time for five coins. One wonders why, if the redemption already took place, it is repeated for every first born son to this day.

In Egypt, the first born functioned as priests. In this way, every Egyptian family was connected to the Egyptian religion. Appropriately, it was the Egyptian first born who was killed in Egypt as they were the religious visionaries and therefore most responsible for enslaving the Jews. Once they were killed, and the Jewish first born were saved, they, too, were designated to dedicate their lives to religious service.

(Exodus 13:15) This was done, not only in recognition of having miraculously escaped the slaying of the Egyptian first born, but also as a means of binding each Jewish family to the Holy Temple.

From this perspective, it can be suggested that the ceremony that we have today of redeeming the first born (pidyon haben) is meant as an educational tool-to remind families that there was a time when one of their own was connected directly to the Temple service. Such a reminder, it is hoped, would result in a commitment by the entire family, to a life of spirituality and religious commitment.

During the pidyon haben ceremony, the Kohen (Jewish Priest) asks the parents of the child if they prefer to keep the child or to pay for the redemption, with the assumption that the parents will pay for the redemption. As a Kohen, I always wondered what would occur if the father decided to keep the money rather than take his child. Interestingly, Jewish Law insists that regardless of the response, the child remains with his family. If the end result is the same, why is this question asked in the first place?

When the Kohen asks, "What do you prefer, the money or the child?" what he is really asking is, "what is your value system? Is it solely based on money, or does it have at its core, the essence, the soul of the child?" The Kohen has the responsibility to challenge the parent with such a question. With the response to this rhetorical question, the family reaffirms that spiritual values are the highest priority in raising a child.

Note that if one of the child's grandfathers is a Kohen or Levi, he is not redeemed. This is because, even in contemporary times, the pidyon haben reminder is not necessary for there are roles unique to his family's religious life which serve as an aid in remembering the priorities of a spiritual quest.

So, the next time we go to a pidyon haben, we should not rush through it. We should realize what is happening. We should recognize that through their words, a family is making a commitment to live the Torah and walk with G-d throughout their days. ©2016 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.

### RAV SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

## Bais Hamussar

**E**ach morning in the bircas haTorah we ask Hashem, "Please make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths." One would think that it would be more accurate to petition Hashem to give us the ability to understand the Torah or to gain greater clarity into the profoundness of the Torah. Why is it that the emphasis is placed on the pleasure that we wish to experience when learning Torah?

Rav Wolbe (Da'as Shlomo Geulah p. 207) explains that the word "v'haarev (make sweet)" shares the same root as the word l'areiv which means "to mix." When a person partakes of something pleasurable, it blends into his very essence thereby becoming part of his physical or spiritual makeup. We daven to Hashem that we should find the study of Torah sweet and pleasurable so that all Torah learned should mix into the very fiber of our bodies and souls.

One who experiences the pleasure of Torah will undoubtedly achieve the levels mentioned at the end of this bracha, "May we... know Your Name and study Torah for its sake." Since he feels the pleasure involved with learning Torah he will seek to study its words without any ulterior motives, simply for the sake of learning Torah and getting to know He Who gave us the Torah. Additionally, the enjoyment will in turn endow us with a large dose of love for Hashem Who gave us this most pleasurable present.

It has been said that human beings are pleasure seekers from day one. Even the movements of a little baby can be attributed to the desire to feel pleasure. Not only that, but the actions of adults, even those which are performed with a heavy heart and amid much difficulty, can also be traced back to some sort of pleasure that they seek to attain. The question is only where a person looks for pleasure: Does he search for it in our materialistic world, or does he turn to spirituality to fulfill this desire?

We are all looking for happiness, and feelings of contentment and satisfaction. Physical and material pleasures might make us feel good, but they generally do not bring lasting happiness and satisfaction. If we are looking to live a truly pleasurable life, then we should set our focus on the Torah. One's daily daf yomi or learning session should not merely be a way of assuaging his conscience which tells him to learn something each day. If given proper priority it can be the most enjoyable part of the day and a way of literally fusing your body with the Torah.

Shavuos is the day that we receive the Torah anew each year. It is worthwhile to put in a heartfelt prayer that the Torah we learn should be sweet and pleasurable. This is an endeavor which has the ability to change us and every single day of our lives for the better! ©2016 Rav S. Wolbe z"l and AishDas Foundation

### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Family Genealogy

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit  
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

**"A**nd they Established Their Genealogy according to their Families" (*Bamidbar 1;18*) In this week's portion the Torah states: "They brought the documents of their pedigrees and witnesses of their birth claims, each and every one, to declare their pedigrees after their tribes" (*Rashi*

*Bamidbar* 1:18). No doubt there remained questions in certain instances such as a divorcee or a widow that married within the three month waiting period after her divorce or the death of their husband and then became pregnant (according to Jewish law one must wait at least three months to establish parenthood). There are various ways in these cases that we can verify parenthood.

The Talmud in Tractate *Yoma* states that when the *Maan* (the special food provided for the Jews by G-d when they were in the dessert for forty years) fell and was later gathered, if there was anyone in that family that should not be counted as a member, that portion of the *Maan* would spoil thus establishing the exact parenthood of any child. Though we have learned that we do not depend on signs from Heaven, *Tosafot* explains that in essence the courts were able; using the halachic principals, to establish the exact parenthood, and the *Maan* only corroborated what they already established.

Today we are able to discern who the father is by simply taking the DNA of the father and the offspring and establishing parentage. Though some Rabbis still believe that one can only rely on this once the findings of the courts have been established, there are nevertheless Rabbis who say that relying on DNA is so corroborating that even if witnesses came forth and stated the opposite of the DNA findings, we abide by the results of the DNA and the witnesses are not believed. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

**RABBI ELIAKIM KOENIGSBERG**

## TorahWeb

In Parshas Bamidbar the Jewish people are counted by toldosam, l'mishpechosam, l'veis avosam, b'mispar sheimos -- each shevet, each family, each individual. After the Torah enumerates each of the shevatim, it then gives the sum total of all of them. Why does the Torah have to be so lengthy, to repeat the same formula for each shevet over and over again? And why does it have to give the sum total at the end?

Rashi writes at the beginning of Parshas Shemos that Klal Yisrael is compared to the stars, about which the possuk says, "Hamotzi b'mispar tze'va'am, l'chulam b'shem yikra -- He brings forth their hosts by number; He calls each of them by name" (Yeshaya 40, 25.) There are billions of stars in the universe, but Hashem calls each one by its own name because each one has a specific purpose. The same is true with Klal Yisrael. While Hashem counts the entire Jewish people as one large group, He also counts each individual because He cares about each and every Jew. He values each one; He cherishes each one. No one is just a number. Every Jew has a special name because each one has a unique role to play in this world.

"Do not belittle any person...because there is no one who does not have his time" (Avos 4:3.) The mishna teaches that we should treat every person with respect because everyone has something to contribute to the world; every person has his moment to shine (Tiferes Yisrael). But at the same time, it is important for each individual to realize that standing alone diminishes one's effectiveness to accomplish. This could be what Hillel meant when he said, "If I will not care for myself, then who will care for me; but by myself, what am I worth?" (Avos 1:14.) While every individual certainly has value, when he is part of a tzibbur his value increases exponentially because together with others, he can achieve so much more.

In Parshas Bamidbar the Torah counts the Jewish people b'mispar sheimos. It counts each shevet one by one to show how much Hashem cares about the sheim -- the special name -- of each and every individual. But then it gives the sum total, the mispar, of all the Bnei Yisrael, to demonstrate that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts because when all the individuals of Klal Yisrael join together, they can accomplish so much more as a community.

This perhaps is one reason why Parshas Bamidbar is always read before Shavuos, to highlight the idea that talmud Torah is for every individual, not just for a select few. But in order for each individual to accomplish the most in his Torah learning, he should not study alone. Rather, he should learn together with others (Berachos 63b).

We say at the end of the shemoneh esrei, "V'sein chelkainu b'sorasecha." We ask that we be given our own special portion in Torah. But only by learning together with others will we maximize our accomplishments in Torah and achieve our full potential. ©2016 Rabbi E. Koenigsberg and *The TorahWeb Foundation*

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

"One male goat, to atone for you" (Bamidbar 28:30). Whereas the male goat brought for atonement on the other holidays is referred to as a "sin offering" (28:15, 28:22, 29:5, 29:11, 29:16, 29:19, 29:22, 29:25, 29:28, 29:31, 29:34 and 29:38), the one brought on Shavuos is not. The Y'rushalmi (Rosh HaShana 4:8) explains why: "G-d said to Israel, 'since you accepted upon yourselves the yoke of the Torah, I will consider it as if you never sinned in all your days.'" In other words, the reason the Torah doesn't explicitly call this offering a sin offering is because it is brought on the day we renew our commitment to keep the Torah (the very act of celebrating getting the Torah confirms our willingness to maintain this commitment), and because of our renewed commitment, G-d forgives/overlooks our sins, thereby negating the need for a sin offering.

There are several questions that can be asked on this idea. First of all, if we don't need forgiveness, why are we told that the offering is brought "to atone for you"? Granted, the word "for a sin offering" is conspicuously missing, but if the reason it was omitted is because we have no sins, why do we need atonement? Secondly (and this question is discussed by several commentators), even though this offering is not described as a "sin offering" in Bamidbar, it is referred to as a "sin offering" in Vayikra (23:19). How could it be referred to as a "sin offering" anywhere if we have no sins?

As far as the first issue is concerned, it can easily be suggested that needing atonement to erase the stain left from sin is separate from being held accountable for the sin. This is especially true when it comes to the sin offering brought on Yomim Tovim (holidays), since they atone for unknown ritual impurity in the Temple and its offerings (see Sh'vuos 1:4-5); the offering serves to cleanse the ritual impurity, something that is needed even if the inappropriate actions that led to such ritual impurity are erased/overlooked because of our acceptance of the yoke of the Torah. [Panayach Raza, one of the later Tosafists, says that the words "to atone for you" actually refer to the "atonement" obtained by accepting the Torah. The verse would then read, "one male goat, but not as a sin offering, since you have already been forgiven."] I will therefore focus on the second issue, why it is called a "sin offering" in Vayikra if it is considered as if we have not sinned.

It should be noted that the sin offering mentioned in Vayikra is not necessarily the same one as in Bamidbar (see M'nachos 45b). Although according to Rabbi Tarfon they are one and the same, according to Rabbi Akiva they refer to two separate offerings, and Rambam (Hilchos T'midim u'Musafim 8:1) follows Rabbi Akiva's opinion. Which means that one of the two is referred to a "sin offering" while the other is not. Nevertheless, since both are brought on Shavuos, if we had no sins when one was brought, the same should be true for the other.

Tal Torah (quoted in the back of some editions of the Y'rushalmi) strings together a few possibilities to create a difference between these two offerings. First, he references the Talmud (Z'vachim 6b) that says two offerings that atone for the same thing are brought on the same day to atone for any ritual impurity that occurred between the time he first was brought and when the second was brought. He then asks how this works if the moment of "cleansing" occurs when the animals are set aside before Yom Tov started, explaining that one of the animals was aside conditionally, so that it will not accomplish its cleansing until shortly before it is offered. He then suggests that G-d overlooks our sins when Yom Tov starts (which is when we start celebrating getting the Torah, and thereby recommitting to it). He frames it as our being

considered "converts," whose sins done prior to the conversion are forgiven, but not the sins done afterwards. Therefore, any sin committed after Yom Tov starts needs atonement. The last piece of the puzzle is which of these two offerings was brought first; if the one mentioned in Bamidbar was brought first, and is therefore meant to atone for the ritually impurity that occurred before Shavuos, since G-d overlooked that, it is not referred to as a "sin offering." The one mentioned in Vayikra, on the other hand, if brought afterwards, atones for any ritual impurity that occurred after Shavuos started, and is therefore referred to as a "sin offering."

Four answers are suggested in "M'rafsin Igri" (on the Moadim), with the first being the exact opposite of Tal Torah's. Instead of the sins committed before Yom Tov being wiped clean, HaRav Avraham Landau suggests that any ritual impurity that occurs on Shavuos itself, after we have recommitted to the Torah, is overlooked, while any ritual impurity that occurred before the commitment was made needs atonement, and is therefore referred to as a "sin offering." Personally, I am uncomfortable with both approaches. Besides having to string together a series of "ifs" (such as which offering is brought first), since we are celebrating getting the Torah the entire Yom Tov, if G-d is going to overlook our misdeeds based on our recommitment to the Torah, it should apply not only to anything we did before Yom Tov, but to anything done on Yom Tov as well. (Additionally, neither explains things according to Rabbi Tarfon.)

The third answer quoted, based on the Meshech Chochmeh (on 28:15), has the sin offering mentioned in Vayikra atoning for G-d, rather than for us, as an extension of the "sin offering for G-d" brought on Rosh Chodesh to atone for His having made the moon smaller (see Rashi). This creates a need for "atonement" because had the moon been as large as the sun (read: given off as much light), the sun wouldn't have seemed so special, and people wouldn't have worshipped it, making G-d's diminishing of the moon a causal factor in the sun being worshipped. Since the he-goat in Vayikra is the one brought with the offering of two loaves, which is connected to having a bountiful fruit harvest (see Rosh HaShana 16a), which, from a natural perspective, relies heavily on sunshine, G-d needs (as it were) additional atonement for leading people to rely on the sun. Once the atonement is for G-d, not for us, being called a "sin offering" does not contradict our sins having been overlooked. However, it is clear from the Talmud that this offering is meant to atone for ritual impurity, and therefore reflects our need for atonement rather than G-d's.

The fourth answer (suggested by HaRav Shimon Nemet) is that the he-goat mentioned in Bamidbar is more closely connected with the Yom Tov itself, and therefore with our accepting the Torah,



whereas the one in Vayikra is connected to the offering of the two loaves, and by extension to a successful fruit harvest. It is therefore only the one in Bamidbar that has no mention of it being a "sin offering." Even though this works better if the one in Vayikra is brought first, with the nation's recommitment to the Torah first occurring when the one in Bamidbar is brought, he adds that it works even if the order is reversed, since the one in Bamidbar is the one that represents our accepting the Torah. [This fits well with Panayach Raza's explanation of "to atone for you," as the acceptance of the Torah is associated specifically with this offering.] However, since our sins being considered as if they didn't exist is based on our accepting the Torah (not a ritual symbolic of that acceptance), it wouldn't seem to be connected to when a particular offering was brought.

Rabbeinu Chaim Paltiel (another of the later Tosafists) simply states that calling it a "sin offering" in Vayikra isn't problematic since it doesn't add "to atone for you." However, by that logic, mentioning "to atone for you" in Bamidbar would undermine not calling it a "sin offering" there. Unless he means something similar to the second answer quoted in M'rafsin Igri (suggested by HaRav Moshe Eichenstein), which is the one that resonates most with me.

The term "sin offering" has two connotations, one referring to why the offering is brought (to atone for sin), and one that is "borrowed" from the first, describing the type of offering it is and the process through which it is brought (based on how "sin offerings" that atone for sin are brought). Each type of offering (e.g. burnt offering, peace offering, sin offering) has specific details attached to it; a burnt offering is completely burned on the altar, a peace offering has some parts put on the altar to burn, some parts eaten by Kohanim, and some parts eaten by non-Kohanim too, and a sin offering has some parts put on the altar and some parts eaten by Kohanim. Other details are unique to each type as well (such as where in the Temple it is slaughtered). In Bamidbar, it is obvious from the context (between the term "sin offering" in otherwise parallel verses and the expression "to atone for you" used) that the procedure to be followed is the same as for a sin offering, allowing the term to be omitted to teach us that G-d considers it as if we have no sins. In Vayikra, though, where other types of offerings are mentioned in the same set of verses, if this offering wasn't called a "sin offering," meaning that it is offered in the same way a sin offering, we wouldn't know what kind of offering to treat it as.

Even though the expression "to atone for you" in Bamidbar doesn't negate the idea that G-d overlooks our sins on Shavuot (since it does remove the stain left by ritual impurity, and/or could refer to this very "atonement"), because this expression is not included in Vayikra, the term "sin offering" there can refer to the

type of offering it is, and how to bring it, rather than implying that there are still sins we need to atone for.

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**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

**O**n Shavuot we received the Torah, where the Rabbis recount the Jews' proclamation that "we will do and we will hear" the laws of the Torah. The Rabbis explain that the other nations of the world were offered the Torah, and rejected it because they claimed that it was in their nature to steal and kill. But we know that both social and Noachide Laws both prohibit killing and stealing, so what was the reason for them to reject a law that they must already follow?

As Rabbi Zweig explains, to answer this question we must ask another: On the third day of creation, the earth was commanded to produce all trees, and that the branches should all taste like the fruits of that tree (1:11). The earth did create the trees, but not all branches tasted like the fruits. How is this possible? If G-d commanded the earth to produce something, how can it not? The answer is that G-d also created the ability to disconnect from G-d and nature, and that's what the earth did in that instance. By extension, anything that came from the earth, such as man, also contains the ability to disconnect from G-d (this was essential to give Man free choice).

With this perspective, it makes sense that when presenting the Torah, G-d was telling the nations that their true nature was not to want to kill or steal, but the nations were blinded by their disconnect, rejected this notion, and therefore couldn't accept the Torah (they still had to abide by the laws, but they rejected the notion that it was their nature to adhere to them). On the other hand, the Jews embraced this connection to G-d, and understood that doing G-d's will reinforces the connection that they already have, which is why they committed to doing before even hearing of all the laws. That's why doing good things makes us feel good, why we feel guilty when we act improperly, and that's why Shavuot is so important to reconnect to the source of our being, and the purpose of our being here. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

