

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Shavuot

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**W**hen the Jewish people received the first set of Tablets, they were warned: “Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its border” (*Shemot* 19:12). Similarly, before G-d gave the second set of Tablets, He instructed Moshe: “No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain” (*Shemot* 34:3). This second warning was even more sweeping than the first. This time, the people were warned away from the entire mountain, even its base (where they had stood the first time). Furthermore, even cattle were prohibited from grazing. Finally, the first time the elders ascended part-way with Moshe, while the second time no one else joined him.

The first warning about the mountain continued: “No hand shall touch it” (*Shemot* 19:13). The *Mechilta* offers a homiletic reading: “No hand shall touch it” – this applies to the mountain only, but not to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, according to this view a person is allowed to touch the stones of the *Kotel*, which is the remnant of the retaining wall around the Temple. Even though it is possible that it is forbidden to enter the area behind the *Kotel* as we are all impure, touching is still allowed. Some, though, are so strict about not entering that they avoid getting too close to the *Kotel*. This is because then they might end up putting their fingers between the stones of the wall, which might count as forbidden entering.

It should be noted that some interpret the *Mechilta* as saying that the admonition “No hand shall touch it” comes to include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

### RABBI BEREL WEIN

## Wein Online

**F**ifty days pass quickly, especially if one counts them individually. It seems that it was just yesterday that we were preparing ourselves to sit down at the Pesach seder table and here it is Shavuot at the end of

the week. Though the holiday has a number of other names associated with it – the Festival of Bikurim/First Fruits, the festival of the granting of the Torah – the proper name assigned to it is Shavuot – the Festival of Weeks.

The emphasis that the name gives us is that of the passage and counting of time. In its description of the festival itself, the Torah repeats, a number of times, this passage of weeks from the holiday of Pesach to the celebration of the holiday of Shavuot. It is apparent that this passage of time is deemed to be an important part of the significance of the holiday itself.

In the Talmud, as well as in the Bible itself, the holiday of Shavuot is referred to as being atzeret - an adjunct and bookend, so to speak, to Pesach. Somehow it completes the process of redemption of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage. It illustrates for us the purpose of that redemption and the true goal that freedom points us to in our personal and national lives.

It is as though the revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah is the strategic goal of the entire story of the Jewish people in Egypt while the actual Exodus from Egypt is the necessary tactic to allow this strategic goal to be attained. Only by connecting Shavuot to Pesach with this seven-week counting does this message become clear and cogent to us.

The connection of Shavuot to the bounty and blessings of agricultural produce is also emphasized in the Torah and is the backdrop to the drama of the book of Ruth, which by custom is read publicly in the synagogue on Shavuot. Humans cannot live by bread alone but they cannot live without bread either. Therefore, we are reminded on Shavuot of the daily miracle of nature that provides food and sustenance for us all.

In our blessed current circumstances of plenty we often think that our food is from the supermarket and that we are somehow entitled to enjoy the quantities and varieties of food available to us. We always look for the hand of God, so to speak, in unusual and unforeseen circumstances. However, in the regular every day mundane activities that we are engaged in, we find it more difficult to sense the Divine Presence.

The agricultural nature of the holiday of Shavuot comes to remind us of the constant presence of God in our lives every time we sit down to eat the food produced by our earth. There was a time in the world when not only Jews said blessings of thanksgiving before and after

their meals. The modern world has swept that antiquated custom aside today. However in Jewish life it remains a vital part of our daily activity and a necessary reminder as to the blessings that God has bestowed upon the agricultural toils of man. Freedom without food is a calamity. Shavuot reminds us of this obvious but often neglected truth.

Finally, Shavuot comes to reinforce our belief in the primacy of Torah study and observance in our life, both individually and as a nation. Rav Saadyah Gaon's famous statement that "Our nation is a nation only by virtue of our Torah" has been proven true by the millennia of Jewish history and its events. Those who forsook any connection to Torah, they and/or their descendants eventually fell away from the Jewish people.

It is the Torah and the revelation at Sinai that binds all of Israel together – Ashkenazi and Sephardi, Yemenite and Lithuanian, and in all shades in between, politically liberal and conservative and old and young. It is the Torah that crosses all lines and groupings within Israel.

This is the idea that the Torah itself expresses, that at Sinai we were all "of one heart and one being." Shavuot is the holiday of Jewish unity, of the acceptance of our individual differences within the framework of the goal of becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. There was a seven-week process that led from the slavery of Egypt to the glory of Sinai. We are also in the midst of a process of rebuilding the Jewish people, strengthening the Jewish state, and revitalizing the actual Land of Israel. This process takes time and will not be accomplished in only seven weeks. But the example of the seven-week wait for Shavuot should stand us in good stead. ©2023 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 JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## **Migdal Ohr**

"**A**nd you shall be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," these are the things you shall speak to the Children of Israel." (Shmos 19:6)

On Rosh Chodesh Sivan, six weeks after leaving Egypt, the Jews arrived in the Sinai desert, where they would be given the Torah only days later. They traveled to the base of the mountain and camped there. In the morning, Moshe responded to Hashem's call and ascended the mountain. There, Hashem began His introduction to the giving of the Torah.

He gave Moshe a script for introducing the Torah to Klal Yisrael. First, Hashem pointed out how the Egyptians had sinned for so long, and were finally punished because of what they did to the Jews. He highlighted the fact that though we were scattered in

Egypt, in moments we were gathered together and ready to leave, as an eagle gathers in its young.

Then Hashem explained that if we listen to the Torah, we will be more special and elevated than any other nation on earth; close to Hashem. We will then be a nation of priests, each of us a Kohain Gadol in our own right. This, says Hashem, is what you, Moshe, should tell the Jewish People – no more, no less.

Is this all Moshe had to tell the people? What about the myriad laws and rules of the Torah? We need to understand what Hashem expects from us if we are to be able to fulfill it properly. Why then did Hashem not mention what we were to do? Indeed, the phrase of "Naaseh v'nishma," we will do and we will listen, was considered a Divine secret, some sort of password into Hashem's inner sanctum. Clearly, it doesn't make logical sense for anyone to agree to something they haven't been explained. And yet, we did.

Why? Because Hashem knew what we had to hear. It was the prerequisite understanding for not only accepting the Torah, but for doing so joyfully, with excitement and desire. The message Hashem wanted to convey to us all was that Torah isn't something we do for Hashem – it's something we do for ourselves.

Torah enables us to become the greatest versions of ourselves. It empowers us to lofty heights of supernatural capabilities. Following the Torah enhances who we are and helps us transcend the bonds of mortal men. It gives us power to do or not do things that might otherwise be impossible or impossible to resist.

This, said Hashem, is what the Jews need to know about the Torah. Don't ask "what's in it" - ask "what's in it for me?" The answer is: the fulfillment of your potential. Forget about, "I'm going to serve Hashem," or "I'm fulfilling the will of My Creator by doing His commandments." Those are important too, but not when you want the Jews to be happy about this amazing gift. For now, just tell them all they can gain from it, and they will jump at the chance. And Hashem, of course, was right. We accepted the Torah not knowing what it said, but what it could do. When we become our best selves, we fulfill Hashem's intention in creating the world, and that is our gift to Him.

*A group of young ruffians attacked a wagon traveling down the road. They intended to terrorize and rob the coachman and his passengers. A man stuck his head out the window. To the mischief-makers he was just another Jew. To the Jews, he was known as "The Shaagas Aryeh." He looked at the youths, then reached up and pulled back his talis, revealing his Tefillin. The boys were terrified and ran off, in fulfillment of the verse, "And all the nations shall see the Name of G-d upon you and fear you," which the Gemara (Brachos 6a) states refers to "Tefillin She'b'rosh," the Tefillin worn on the head.*

*One onlooker asked his friend. "They saw my Tefillin on my head; why weren't they afraid?" His friend*

replied, “The Gemara doesn’t say the Tefillin ON your head, but rather IN your head. The Shaagas Aryeh embodies everything that the Tefillin stand for, and that is why they feared him.” © 2023 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**O**ur calendar moves from the spring festivals of Passover and Shavuot to the fall festivals of universal redemption and plenty, a journey in time that parallels a journey in space, from the barren desert to the land of milk and honey –Israel.

In the spring, Passover is linked by the counting of the Omer to its concluding Festival of Shavuot, seven weeks later; the Talmudic Sages even refer to Shavuot as Atzeret, or “Closing Holiday” (paralleling Shemini Atzeret, the Eighth Day which concludes the fall festival of Succot). And while Passover celebrates the promise of freedom, our journey from slave-labor and suffering to liberation, it is, for the time being, liberation in a hostile and homeless desert.

When does this journey come to an end? Shavuot, celebrated on the 50th day after the Seder of Passover, gives expression to the paradigm of completion, coming full circle, for it celebrates the bounty of the land, the first fruits brought by the Israelites who have not only reached their promised homeland, but have also established their Holy Temple in Jerusalem!

Remarkably, the holidays of this spring period are sandwiched between the public readings of two of our five Biblical Scrolls (Megillot), each of which features a heroic woman as its central personality: Purim is marked by the reading of the Scroll of Esther; Shavuot by the reading of the Scroll of Ruth.

And both Ruth and Esther, two of the greatest heroines of the Bible, have come to symbolize both the internal – and eternal – heart and essence of these festivals. But even more so, their stories, their ‘scrolls’ (these two megillot) reflect each other in remarkable ways, each one a prism into the nature of the other.

First of all, we need to keep in mind that just as Passover moves from the reality of a nation still smarting from slavery and only tasting the beginnings of freedom in the more confining, treacherous landscape of the desert to the far more satisfying Shavuot realization of home and hearth, state and sanctuary, (coming home after being away for so long in Egypt), we find that the Esther-scroll of Purim (pre-Passover) describes the opposite phenomenon, focusing upon Jews in vulnerable galut (exile). In terms of our experience of the festive calendar, Shavuot always culminates the trajectory that starts with Purim, inexorably leading us toward the climactic moment when the Scroll of Ruth is read, ending with its majestic reach for messianic geulah (redemption), the final word recording the name of David, the future king and redeemer of Israel.

A study of the contrasts and comparisons between these two feminist–featuring Scrolls from galut to geulah should elucidate the march of our calenderical journey, which clearly points us in an eastward direction toward Zion.

First of all, the entire story of the Scroll of Esther takes place in Persia, opening with an exquisitely detailed description of the dining chambers of the Persian King in Shushan (Esther 1:6). The Scroll of Ruth, on the other hand, opens in Bethlehem, Israel – and although the rest of that chapter takes place in Moab, the succeeding three chapters all take place around the verdant hills of Bethlehem and Efrat.

It is important for us to realize that the ten years of Naomi’s life in Moab are described in that very first chapter, whereas it takes the next three chapters to detail the crucial events in Israel of only three months duration: from the beginning of the barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest. These three months prepare the stage for Jewish eternity!

Secondly, according to the Midrash (B.T. Megillah 11a), the Scroll of Esther describes Jews who have the opportunity to return to Judea but opt to remain in the “diaspora;” Ahasverosh was King of Persia immediately following Cyrus, who conquered Babylon and permitted the exiled Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild their Temple. Esther may have even changed her name from the Hebrew “Hadassah” to the more Persian “Esther” (probably from the Persian word for star, and the Persian goddess Astarte).

In the Scroll of Ruth, however, the text makes fairly short shrift of the sons of Elimelekh, who leave Bethlehem (Lit. “House of Bread”) for the falsely glittering fields of Moab (lit. “from father” – a reminder of a Biblical act of incest between Lot and his daughter); their names, Makhlon (illness) and Kilyon (destruction) succinctly sum up their galut experience of assimilation and intermarriage.

The remaining three quarters of the book tell of Naomi’s return to her homeland, and of the triumph she eventually experiences there as the “ancestor” of the Messiah David. In short, the Scroll of Ruth is the record of Jews who leave their exiled status and return to Israel.

Thirdly, the Scroll of Esther tells the story of a Jewess in exile who is forced to forsake the home of her relative Mordecai (cousin, uncle, nephew, husband?) and live with a Gentile King in order to save her people; moreover, the salvation she achieves is only temporary, with the Talmud ruling that we don’t even recite Hallel on Purim since we still remained slaves of Ahasverosh even after Haman’s demise (B.T. Megillah 14). The Scroll of Ruth, on the other hand, tells the story of a Gentile Moabite who becomes a Jewess-by-choice, how she journeys to Israel to live with her Jewish mother-in-law, and enters the royal family of Judah when she marries Boaz; moreover, she becomes the progenitrix of ultimate Jewish salvation through the eventual descendant of her

great-grandson, David.

Finally, the manner in which we celebrate Purim is by drinking until "we can no longer distinguish between praising Mordecai and cursing Haman, perhaps because it was the arch anti-Semite Amalekite Haman who forcibly reminded the assimilating Jews of Persia that they were, after all, Jews; nevertheless, such raucous celebration is certainly not identified with the way in which our Sages generally asked us to celebrate. Shavuot, however, is celebrated by our bringing first fruits to the Temple singing praises to God and staying up all night studying Torah. It seems that true Jewish piety, Jewish future and eternal Jewish salvation can only come out of Zion! Apparently, even a celebration of galut survival must depend upon the temporary "high" of inebriating beverages, whereas a Festival of Jerusalem brings us to the supernal "heights" of our eternal Torah – for even Torah has its first fruits, through which we glimpse our redemption. ©2023 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI AVI WEISS**

### **Shabbat Forshpeis**

**T**he fifty days between Passover and Shavuot are commonly known as Sefirat Ha'omer (Leviticus 23:15, 16). From a biblical perspective, these days relate to the barley offering brought on the second day of Passover and the wheat offering brought on the festival of Shavuot. These are days of hope that the produce from the ground grow fruitfully and plentifully.

Not coincidentally, the Hebrew for fifty is chamishim, which recalls the word chamsin, the hot, often destructive wind prevalent during that time of year. We pray that it not harm the successful reaping of the crop.

In addition, this period of time relates to the counting of time from Passover, the holiday marking our physical exodus from Egypt, to Shavuot, the holiday commemorating the giving of the Torah. For this reason, we count up and not down from Pesach to Shavuot, spiritually reaching higher and higher as we approach that moment in history when the Torah was given.

It is fitting that we count up to forty-nine. This is because the number seven in Judaism symbolizes completion, wholeness, and spirituality – the number of Shabbat. Forty-nine is seven sets of seven; therefore the omer period is the ultimate completion of the completion, the holiest of the holiest.

As Jewish history progressed, though, these joyous days became sad ones. Between Passover and Shavuot, the students of Rabbi Akiva died. According to tradition, this occurred because these learned men were involved in endless dispute (Yevamot 62b).

Too often, Torah scholars become so engrossed in their understanding of Torah that they begin to believe that their approach is the only correct one. They often cannot see the truth in any other opinion. It would be

beneficial for all of us to remember that different views are recorded in the Talmud to teach that, while one should continue to focus and deepen one's view of Torah, doing so should not lead to tunnel vision. People with different outlooks should listen to one another.

And so, the days of the omer, which were originally joyous, became days of mourning. In fact, the Aruch Hashulchan notes that the most intense attacks against the Jewish People during the Crusades occurred during Sefirat Ha'omer (Orach Chayim 493:1). Indeed, Dr. Yaffa Eliach implored children of survivors to be especially kind to their parents between Pesach and Shavuot, as the Nazis – aware of the importance of these holidays to Jews – were particularly brutal during this time of year.

Today, we see a slow reversal, as Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israel's Independence Day) and Yom Yerushalayim (commemorating the liberation of Jerusalem) are joyously celebrated during Sefirat Ha'omer. May the day soon come when God wipes away tears from all faces (Isaiah 25:8), and all days of "mourning turn into dancing" (Psalms 30:12). ©2023 *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 YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

### **Meor Einayim**

**“H**owever, you shall not count the tribe of Levi, and you shall not take a census of them among the Bnei Yisrael." (Bamidbar 1:49) Rashi sees this as a tribute to their importance. "The legion of the King is worthy to be counted separately." This seems counterintuitive, however. To be counted in any manner is nothing to be proud of! Weren't we promised that "The number of the Bnei Yisrael will be like the sand at the beach -- not measurable and innumerable?" (Hoshea 2:1. The gemara [Yoma 22b] catches the contradiction. The pasuk first speaks of the numbering of the Bnei Yisrael, only to later say that they cannot be numbered! The gemara explains that both are true. When the Bnei Yisrael follow the will of their Creator, they cannot be counted; when they don't, speaking of their number is appropriate. Since our parshah deals with numbering, it must reflect the fact that they were not entirely in the good graces of HKBH at that time. In that case, any counting -- regardless of how it was done -- was not an honorable distinction!)

Numbers are everywhere. Our world is populated by many, many items. All of them, in principle, can be counted. Even in the spiritual realm, there are many different worlds, each filled with countable items.

Only Hashem Himself is aloof from the very notion of counting. His Oneness is such that is not part of a set. It cannot be replicated in any manner. There is nothing that comes before or after, unlike all numbers

that we deal with. In their case, every "one" can be followed by a "two." Hashem stands entirely outside the system of numbering and counting.

Avraham was promised that his progeny, when following Hashem's will, would attach themselves to Him and thus transcend numbers. (Bereishis 28:14) But that is not where the Bnei Yisrael are in our pasuk. After the eigel, they no longer occupied such a madregah.

Not so shevet Levi. Free from the taint of that sin, they remained on a lofty level. They transcended numbers. They were uncountable. Thus, they were not included in the national census.

This describes where they were essentially. Practically, however, they were commanded to come down from their spiritual perch, in order to redeem the first-born of the rest of the nation. (Bamidbar 3:41) These first-born, like the rest of the nation outside of shevet Levi were very much countable. Each Levi redeemed a single bechor. Therefore, they too needed to be counted, in their role as redeemers.

The physical exodus from Egypt was followed by a spiritual one. The Bnei Yisrael needed to exit from the kelipah of Mitzrayim, and arrive at a destination of receiving the Torah from Hashem. They had to pass through many spiritual worlds, all of which were countable. The counting of the Omer channels that journey.

We count seven weeks, of 49 days. The commandment, however, is actually to count 50 days! The discussion above solves the riddle. The journey towards Hashem took 49 countable days/levels. After that, they were able to attach themselves to Hashem. He is One -- but not in a manner that is shared by what was counted during the seven weeks.

Sefiras HaOmer, therefore, includes both 49 and 50. More accurately, it is 49 plus One. (Based on *Meor Einayim* by Rav Menachem Nochum of Chernobyl)  
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#### RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

## Cross-Currents

**T**he average price paid to climb Mt. Everest -- for permits, equipment and guides -- is between \$35,000 and \$45,000. And hundreds have died in that exploit.

What impels people to undertake so expensive and dangerous a quest? A misguided search for meaning.

Philosophers argued about what ultimately motivates humans. Nietzsche said power; Freud, pleasure.

Both tapped into something real. The power to, through our choices, change our lives and history, is a manifestation of gevurah, "strength." In Jewish eyes, though, that doesn't mean subjugating others; rather, as Ben Zoma in Avos (4:1) defines it, "hakovesh es yitzro," one who, by force of will, overcomes his nature.

And Freud was on to something too; the Ramchal begins Mesilas Yesharim with the surprising statement that the goal of life is the pursuit of pleasure. Not physical, but rather ultimate, pleasure: "basking in the radiance of the Shechinah."

The Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard was insightful. He wrote of the human "will to meaning" -- the yearning to achieve something truly meaningful as life's ultimate goal.

Some imagine "meaning" in climbing Everest. Others envision meaningful accomplishment in meriting mention in the Guinness Book of World Records, for, say, the most slices of pizza eaten while riding a unicycle and simultaneously juggling balls.

For those who recognize our divine mandate, though, the ring for which to reach is a spiritual one, achieved through Torah and mitzvos.

All good fortune to the Everest climbers.

Come Shavuot, we look to a different mountain.

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#### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

**M**idrash Rabbah on this week's Parashah comments on the verse (Yirmiyahu 2:31), "O generation, contemplate the word of Hashem! Have I been a wilderness to Yisrael?" Says the Midrash: When a human king travels in the wilderness, does he find food and drink there as he has in his palace? [Until here from the Midrash.] R' Pinchas Menachem Elazar Justman z"l (1848-1920; Chassidic Rebbe in Pilica, Poland) explains what the Midrash is highlighting: If Hashem had provided Bnei Yisrael with food and drink in the desert through natural means, that would have been miraculous enough. But He did not do that; instead, he provided bread from heaven--the Mahn--and water from a rock!

Why did Hashem provide food and water in a supernatural way? R' Justman writes: He did this to demonstrate the importance of our holy Torah. In the merit of accepting the Torah, we merited to be sustained with Mahn--like the angels.

Why then, continues R' Justman, do our Sages say that the Mahn fell in Moshe Rabbeinu's merit? Indeed, after he died, the Mahn ceased (see Yehoshua 5:12). Likewise, our Sages say that the Clouds of Glory came in Aharon's merit, and the well of water in Miriam's merit. The answer is that every person could have merited these miracles himself, but, since they did not refine themselves adequately, they had to rely on the merit of the Tzaddikim Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. But only after each of those three died did Hashem reveal in whose merit each of these miracles occurred--because theoretically, every person could have merited these gifts. (Siftei Tzaddik)



"For Dan, Achiezer ben / son of Ammishaddai." (1:12) R' Chaim Yehuda Meir Hager z"l (the Vishever Rebbe in Tel Aviv; died 1968) writes: Hashem is our "Father," but he recognizes us as His "sons" only when we care about our brethren, his other "sons." The tribe of Dan traveled last, picking up all the objects that their brethren had lost and supporting any stragglers. Says our verse: For Dan, Achi-ezer / my brother is a helper, ben (from Binah) who reflects on my needs; therefore, Ami / my nation and Shakkai / G-d are united. (Zecher Chaim)



"Bnei Yisrael shall encamp, each man under his banner according to the insignias of their fathers' household..." (2:2) Midrash Rabbah comments on this verse: Thus it is written (Tehilim 20:6), "May we sing in joy at Your salvation, and raise our banner in the Name of our Elokim..." [Until here from the Midrash]

What is the connection between our verse and the quoted verse in Tehilim (other than the coincidence of the word "banner"), and what is the Midrash teaching? R' Eliezer David Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; Hungarian rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva; his Yahrzeit is 2 Sivan) answers: The Midrash Shocher Tov says, as if speaking to Hashem, "When the Temple stood, You used to answer our prayers. Now that there is only a mountain, You also should answer, as it is written (Tehilim 3:5), 'He answers me from His holy mountain'." This may be understood, R' Gruenwald explains, based on another Midrash. The Torah says, regarding the location of Akeidat Yitzchak (Bereishit 22:4), "He [Avraham] saw the place from afar." The verse does not say that Avraham saw the mountain from afar. In fact, the Midrash says, the future site of Akeidat Yitzchak and the Bet Ha'mikdash was not yet a mountain; the location was in a valley until Avraham prayed that it become a mountain as befits Hashem's glory. R' Gruenwald observes: Since the mountain was formed specifically to hold the Temple, we may interpret the fact that it still is a mountain long after the Temple was destroyed as a sign to us and to the world that the Shechinah still rests there. [If Hashem had wanted, He easily could have arranged for the Romans to "bulldoze" the entire mountain, as they did in other places.] In light of this, R' Gruenwald writes, we can understand the Midrash Shocher Tov quoted above: "When the Temple stood, You used to answer our prayers. Now that there is only a mountain"--since there is still a mountain, which tells us that You are still with us--"You also should answer."

Now, R' Gruenwald concludes, we can understand the Midrash on our verse: "May we sing in joy at Your salvation"--referring to the fact that Hashem makes His presence felt at the former location of the Bet Hamikdash, which brings honor to Him and is, so-to-speak, His salvation. "Raise our banner in the Name of our Elokim"--it is as if He is waving a banner to indicate

His presence. So, too, the Midrash is teaching, the banners that marked the encampment of the tribes in the desert brought glory to Hashem. (Keren L'David)



"Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying, 'Bnei Yisrael shall encamp, each man under his banner according to the insignias of their fathers' household...' (2:1-2) Midrash Rabbah teaches: Each Nasi / head of a tribe had a flag whose colors were the same as the colors of his tribe's gem in the breastplate that Aharon carried on his heart. It is from here that kings and nations learned to make flags, says the Midrash. The Midrash continues: Reuven's gem was the Odem / ruby, and its flag was red and had a picture of Duda'im (the flowers that Reuven brought to his mother--see Bereishit 30:14). [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Ovadiah Seforno z"l (1470-1550; Italy) writes that Reuven brought his mother Duda'im flowers because he saw she was upset at not having more children after the birth of Yehuda. Note that Reuven was all of four or five years old at the time! writes R' Seforno. Thus, by telling us what Reuven did at such a young age, the Torah is informing us of his wisdom and righteousness.

R' Uri Weisblum shlita (Mashgiach Ruchani of Yeshivat Nachalat Ha'levi'im in Haifa, Israel) elaborates: Reuven's trait of sharing the burden of others was passed down to his descendants. For example, says the Midrash, just as Reuven saved Yosef's life (Bereishit 37:21), so the first City of Refuge was established in Reuven's territory (Devarim 4:43). It was to remind Reuven's descendants of this special trait of theirs that Duda'im were emblazoned on the tribe's flag. (He'arat Ha'derech p.156) © 2023 S. Katz & torah.org

### RABBI YAAKOV BERNSTEIN

## Ha'aros

**O**n Shavuos, we read the story of Rus. There are different reasons for this custom. Rus was a geyores (convert); her story reminds us that the entire Jewish People accepted conversion at Mount Sinai. In addition, Rus is the ancestress of Dovid Hamelech, whose yahrzeit occurs on Shavuos.

Hashem loves the geir and commands us to love the geir, just as He commands us to love Himself. (Devorim 10:18-19, Rambam Hilchos Deos, 6:4, see Pachad Yitzchak, Pesach 29)

According to one opinion, the sons of Yaakov married their half-sisters. (Rashi, Bereishis 37:35) How were they permitted to marry a relation prohibited by Torah law?

The Maharal explained (Bereishis 46:10). A geir is considered to be like a new-born infant. According to halacha, siblings who convert are no longer considered related. Originally, these siblings were allowed to marry



one another. (The Rabbis would later prohibit this.)

The early generations had to go through a conversion process in order to be considered members of the covenant. Since the men and women -- children of Yaakov -- went through geirus (a conversion process), they didn't have the status of relatives any more, and could marry one another.

However, there seems to be a contradiction. After the receiving of the Torah, we find that the Jews were crying about their families. (B'midbar 11:10) They had married close relatives. Once the Torah was given, these marriages became prohibited; they were crying because they would now be forced to divorce their wives. (See Rashi, *ibid.*) The Maharal asked: Why should these marriages be forbidden? There was certainly a conversion process at the giving of the Torah; the laws of conversion are derived from Mount Sinai! Since, as we said, the convert is as if newly-born, the halacha dictates that he has no relatives. If so, the generation that received the Torah would be allowed to maintain their marriages (since they were considered converts)!

No, answered the Maharal. The conversion which took place at Har Sinai was completely different. Chazal tell us that (in some aspect) the giving of the Torah was through coercion.

The Maharal did not elaborate. What is the significance here that the Torah was given through coercion?

The Kli Chemda explained (Bereishis p. 59). The Medrash says that Hashem threatened the Jews with death. "He turned the mountain over them and said, 'If you accept the Torah -- fine. If not, there will be your graves!'" (Shabbos 88a) This analogy really means to say -- The entire life of Klal Yisrael is Torah. If you don't accept the Torah -- there you will be buried -- you have no life without Torah!

Usually, conversion entails the geir separating from his past family ties. In the case of the Jewish People at Mount Sinai -- they were returning to their ancient roots. They were told they must come back.

Only the geir who separates himself from the nations of the world -- becomes a newborn person -- because he has broken himself away from his parents and family -- from the natural pattern of the world. Klal Yisrael, however, were always destined for Torah -- because they are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, they had to go through the purification process of leaving Mitzrayim.

Rav Moshe Shternbuch (Mo'adim Uzmanim v. 8, 239) discusses a woman who undergoes conversion during pregnancy. The immersion of the mother works for the unborn child as well. However, Ramban is of the opinion that the child is a geir, and the conversion is not complete until he has bris mila.

This is very strange -- the Talmud states clearly (Yevamos 93b) that such a child is completely related to his siblings by Torah law. The implication is that he is not

regarded as a geir at all!

It must be that he is a Jew by birth, having been born to a Jewish mother. At the same time, he needs a small form of conversion -- the bris mila completes this process.

This is indeed comparable to the status of the Jews at Mount Sinai. By birth, they were Jewish, descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. At the same time, they were lacking a correction -- a form of the conversion process -- the receiving of the Torah at Har Sinai. However, for a Jew who still needs this correction process, we will not say that he is like a completely newborn person; rather, he is returning to his ancient roots. © 2020 Rabbi Y. Bernstein & torah.org

### RABBI NAFTALI REICH

## Legacy

One of the issues that always seems to pique the interest and curiosity of my students in the introductory level at Ohr Somayach is the subject of gilgulim, the transmigration of souls. Whenever the subject is broached, even on a peripheral level, it inevitably triggers an avalanche of queries. Why the need for gilgul? Is it true that some sinners are reincarnated into animals? How many times are our souls recycled? If one marries a second time, which soul is one destined to live with for eternity in the next world?

I immediately put out a disclaimer, telling my students that these esoteric matters are beyond our comprehension and it is preferable not to delve into them too deeply. Yet it is too difficult to steer the discussion away from such a thought-provoking subject.

In Megilas Rus however, we do get a faint glimpse of the sublime heavenly pathway that Hashem prepares for all souls, enabling them to realize their ultimate mission and destiny.

On its simplest level, Megilas Rus is a gripping and inspiring narrative. The nation's leader Elimelech, a grandson of Nachson and a scion of the kingly tribe of Judah, had abandoned his coreligionists in their hour of need. During a famine in the holy land, he moved with his wife, Naomi, and sons, Machlon and Kilyon, to neighboring Moav, to protect his wealth. He was punished severely for his grievous sin. The two daughters of Eglon, King of Moav, Rus and Orpah, were attracted to his sons' noble bearing and good character and in short order they married. Tragedy strikes the family, however, with the demise of Elimelech, the loss of his wealth and the tragic passing of both of his sons. It seems that Elimelech's illustrious family's lineage had been abruptly aborted, with the souls of Machlon and Kilyon unable to perpetuate their rich legacy for eternity.

The narrative continues with the Moabite women accompanying Naomi, their righteous mother-in-law, towards the border of Israel. When Naomi exhorts them to return, Rus cannot bring herself to part from her. Her unconditional brace of Naomi is in effect an

unconditional embrace of Torah and Mitzvos, and the nascent spark of spirituality that had lain dormant in her ancestor Lot was thus ignited.

We know that with every union between man and woman, a bonding of souls takes place. Machlon's neshama is embedded deep within Rus and it falls to Boaz, the redeemer, to perform the mitzvah of yibum and provide solace and tikun to Machlon's soul. Elimelech's legacy and that of his family, is thus redeemed. From the union of Boaz and Rus emerge the soul of King David and the ultimate redeemer, the Melech Hamoshiach.

Perhaps, the most inspiring part of the entire narrative is its underlying message: No Jew Shall be Left Behind. Even those who have wandered far away from their ancestral moorings will be redeemed by the Melech Hamoshiach, a scion of Judah who will unite us as one and re-bond us together to our Father in heaven.

The means Dovid Hamelech used to achieve were often cryptic and seemingly controversial. The Talmud tells us that we should not be deluded into reading the narrative of Dovid and his seemingly illicit encounter with Basheva on a superficial level. "Whoever says Dovid sinned," explains the Gemora "is in completely error." King David consorted with Basheva in order to teach future generations the power of Teshuva. Similarly, the Talmud in Sanhedrin teaches us that King David wished to serve idols, in order to go through the process of repentance and to redeem even those souls that have strayed from G-d, denying his existence and rebelling against His very being.

Like Elimelech and Machlon, we all trace our lineage back to our Patriarch Jacob; we all have royal blood flowing in our veins. It will only be a matter of time before our souls will also experience their elevation and reconnection at the end of time, to be suffused with the light of the Shechinah and bonded forever with our Divine source. © 2020 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

## **A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility**

**W**hat I wanted to do with this shiur is to talk about the Coronavirus. Because Torah gets very interesting when you relate them to the things that are constantly changing. Now, as the Chief Rabbi has already said, the Coronavirus pandemic has enforced a situation that seems to be exactly the opposite of the situation at Mount Sinai. We have three indications of that in the Torah, pretty explicitly. Number one, the famous line at the beginning of Chapter 19 of Shemot, just before the Giving of the Torah, where it says "vayichan-sham Yisrael negged hahar." (Ex. 19:2). The Torah uses the singular form: "and Israel encamped (in the singular) there opposite the mountain". The famous words of Chazal, echoed by Rashi "k'ish echad b'lev echad", explain that the singular form of the verb is

used because they encamped together as though they were "One person with one mind". That enormous sense of unity.

The second, a pretty explicit statement of this, is when Moshe Rabbeinu proposes to the people what God is proposing. "Vaya'anu chol-ha'am yachdav." (Ex. 19:8). "And all the people answered together and said, 'All that God has said we will do.'" The "yachad" (unity) there is explicitly in the verse, in verse eight of this chapter. And then after the revelation, in chapter 24, when Moshe Rabbeinu repeats the terms of the Torah, "vaya'anu kol-ha'amkol echad". (Ex. 24:3) "All the people answered with one voice." Now, these are pretty unique statements of unity, and all three of them are about the giving of the Torah. What we have here are three statements of people coming together. The question is, where do we find the opposite of isolation, of tragedy, of bad things happening, with people being left alone? And the answer is that we find this in Megillat Ruth, in the Megillah that we read on Shavuot, of the story of Ruth. Let's just remind ourselves at how that story begins.

It begins with five hammer blows of tragedy. First of all, the first verse tells us, Vayehi bimeis shofet hashoftim... (Ruth 1:1) And it came to pass, at the time when the Judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. Now, a famine in those days was pretty much as severe as an epidemic in our time. Because without freezers and fridges and supermarkets, a famine was a life-threatening condition. So, the first hammer blow there is a famine. Secondly, a man from Bet Lechem, together with his wife and two sons, went to live in the country of Moab. Now, here we have a double tragedy. There's a famine, specifically in Bet-Lechem in Israel. Bet-Lechem means the House of Bread. Of all places where you would not wish to have a famine, Bethlehem is that.

Then the man goes, but does not go the way Avraham went, to Egypt, or to Gerar, he goes to Moab. Moab was Israel's enemy. Here is a family forced out of their own land, out of their own home, to go to the country of their enemies. Then comes the next blow. Elimelech, this man himself, Naomi's husband, dies and she is left a widow. Then comes the fourth blow. Her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Moabite women were not exactly welcome in Israel, because the Moabites, as we have said, were Israel's enemies. (Of course, in the end, one of them turns out to be an exceptional human being.) That is the fourth tragedy. And then comes the fifth tragedy, that Machlon and Chilyon, Naomi's two sons, died also. Now you have Naomi left a childless widow and her two daughters-in-law also left as childless widows. Three childless widows, and you cannot get more vulnerable than that in biblical society because they had absolutely no one to support them.

We then read of how Naomi hears that there's again food available in her own land and she decides to



go back. Her two daughters-in-law initially accompany her. She says, "Please, don't. There's nothing for you here. I can't give you any more children. Go back and get married." Of course Orpah does go back. Ruth refuses and goes with her. She then returns to Israel. People of the town, the people she knew not that long ago, come and they look at her and they say, "Can this be Naomi? She has been so shattered by tragedy." The people hardly recognise her. And then she replies, "Don't call me Naomi (i.e. pleasant one), call me Mara, (i.e. bitter one), because God has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune on me." That is point number one. We now have a point of contact with a very tragic episode which left three women exceptionally vulnerable. And one in particular, Naomi, completely isolated, completely devastated.

Then we move to the end of the Megillah. At the end of the Megillah we know what has happened. Boaz, a kinsmen of Naomi, has taken Ruth as a wife, and repurchased the family properties. They now have a child, a son, and all the women of the town come and surround them and say, "Praise be to the Lord who has not left you without a guardian redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel." Everyone is rejoicing with Naomi, who now has a grandchild. Boaz has a wife and a child. Ruth has a husband and a child. The ultimate blessing, the final coup de theatre at the end of the Megillah, is that the child that they have called Oved is the grandfather of David Hamelech, the greatest King of Israel. We have a situation in which in the space of four chapters, our story has moved from isolation and devastation to one of rejoicing, and, indeed, a kind of renewal of life for all concerned.

The second question is: what brings about this change? The answer is very interesting. There is a Midrash Rabbah that says "Amar Rabbi Zeira", "Rabbi Zeira said", "Megillah Zu", "this scroll", "ein ba lo tuma velo taharah, velo issur velo heiter. "It contains no laws of any consequence. Not pure, impure, permitted, forbidden." "Velamar nichtavah?" "Why was it written?" "Lelamed echah kamah s'char tov legomli chassidim" "To teach how great is the reward of those who do acts of kindness." (Rut Rabbah 2:14)

The story of Ruth is the supreme story of kindness in Tanach. The word itself appears three times in the megillah. But most importantly, it is Ruth's kindness in staying with Naomi despite all of Naomi's protestations, and Boaz' kindness in really realising what it would take to redeem this family from tragedy. Those two acts of kindness are the reason why the story that begins in tragedy ends in joy. That is the power of chessed, to redeem tragedy and bring joy where there was sadness and hope where there was despair.

Obviously the question that we ask ourselves is why Ruth is read on Shavuot. There's no obvious connection between Ruth and Shavuot. The two

standard explanations are that, number one, it has to do with the time of the year. Ruth is set bimei k'tzir cheitim, at the time of the wheat harvest. And Shavuot takes place at the time of the wheat harvest. Or, number two, that Ruth became a convert. "Where you go, I go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people." And the Israelites, as it were, became converts at Mount Sinai because the essence of conversion is kabbalat hamitzvot, acceptance of the commands, and that's what the Israelites did at Sinai. Maybe it has to do with time of the year, or maybe it has to do with Ruth's conversion.

However, I want to suggest to a different answer. An answer put forward by none other than Moses Maimonides in *The Guide For the Perplexed*. *The Guide For the Perplexed* is the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, and it's a big work. It consists of three books, and it's a very lengthy work. Right at the end, (book three has 54 chapters, and right at the end in chapter 53 of book three) in the penultimate chapter, the Rambam devotes one third of that chapter to defining what is chessed, what is loving kindness? The Rambam says chessed means doing good for people in a way that they have no claim on you. It's not justice, it's not tzedakah, it's chessed. You have no claim, but nonetheless, we do good to somebody that is chessed, going beyond anything the law requires.

In chapter 54, we begin to understand why the Rambam has taken all this time to tell us the meaning of chessed. In book four, chapter 54, the closing chapter of the Guide, he quotes Jeremiah, who says, "Koh amar Hashem", Thus says God, "Al yithallel chacham bechochmato...", "Let the wise not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong hero of his strength, or the rich person of his wealth." "Ki im bezot yithallel hamithallel". But only boast of this, "haskel veyado'a oti." "Think hard, meditate hard, and know Me." "Ki Ani Hashem." "That I am God." (Jer. 9:22) This is a very Rambam sort of idea, that the highest thing in life is to develop an intellectual understanding of God.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He goes on and says, "Haskel veyado'a oti, ki Ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat utzedakah ba'aretz". "I" says God, "do loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth." "Ki v'eileh chafatzti n'oom Hashem". Because these are what I desire,' says God." The Rambam says, (to paraphrase), "I may have been giving you the impression that the most important thing in life is to intellectually understand what God is. But actually, the most important thing in life is to do acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness. "It is the kind of people we become and the kind of virtues we embody, that are what the Torah are all about. And since Ruth is the Book of chessed in Tanach, maybe that is why we read it on Shavuot. Because the Rambam tells us that the whole purpose of Torah culminates in this ability to do acts of loving-kindness to other people. Thus far, the Rambam.

However, I want to suggest something else as well and take it just a little bit further. We know what happened at Mount Sinai. The Israelites made a covenant with God. He would be their God and they would be His people. But at key moments in Tanach, critical moments, we find another phrase altogether. Listen very carefully. Here is Moshe Rabbeinu, here is Moses, speaking in the Book of Devarim. "Veyadata ki Hashem Elokecha hu haElokim Hakel hane'eman shomer habrit ve'hachessed", "You shall know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps" "Habrit ve'hachessed, " "the covenant and the loving-kindness" (Deut. 7:9). He says it again a few verses later. "Vehaya eikev tish'me'un et hamishpatim ha'eleh ushmartem ve'asitem otam v'shamar Hashem Elokecha lecha et habrit v'et hachessed". "God will keep the covenant and the loving kindness. "(Deut. 7:12). When King Solomon dedicated the Temple, he uttered the following prayer. "Hashem Elokei Yisrael, ein kemocha Elokim bashamayim mima'al ve'al ha'aretz mitachat... ", "There is no one like you, God, in the heavens above or the earth below. " "shomer habrit ve'hachessed", "keeping the covenant and the loving-kindness"(I Kings 8:23). And likewise, Nehemiah, when he renews the covenant as the people come back from Babylon. He says, "Hakel hagadol hagibor v'hanora", "The great, mighty, and awesome God, " "shomer habrit ve'hachessed". "He who keeps the covenant and the loving-kindness. "(Neh. 9:32)

That's a really puzzling phrase, "shomer habrit ve'hachessed", the covenant and the loving-kindness. If you look, for instance, at the Jewish Publication Society translation, they just translate 'covenant'. Because the chessed is included in the covenant. If you look at the New International version, which is a very good non-Jewish translation, habrit ve'hachessed is translated as, "The covenant of love. " But of course it doesn't mean that, it means "covenant and love. "Everyone had a problem in understanding what else God does for the Jewish people other than make a covenant with them on Shavuot, at Mount Sinai. But if you think about it, the answer's really quite simple. A covenant is what sociologists and anthropologists call reciprocal altruism. You do this for me. I will do this for you. "You serve Me, " says God, "and I will protect you. " Covenant is always reciprocal and neutral. But that is terribly vulnerable, because what happens if we don't keep the covenant? The covenant is then rendered null and void.

The covenant is not enough. And that's what Moses was saying, that's what King Solomon was saying, that is what Nehemiah was saying. God does not just make a covenant with us. He has a relationship of chessed with us. An unconditional love, which is translated into deeds of kindness to us. The covenant is conditional, but chessed is unconditional. That is exactly what the Rambam meant when it said chessed means doing something for somebody who has no claim on us.

There's nothing reciprocal.

And maybe ultimately that is what the Book of Ruth is there to show us. The Book of Ruth is the Book of chessed. We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what the book is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had for Naomi and Boaz had for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another.

Coming back to where we are in the Coronavirus crisis, the short answer is that just as in the Book of Ruth, tragedy and loneliness and isolation are healed by acts of loving-kindness, so have the isolation of so many of us been healed by acts of loving-kindness, acts of neighbourliness, people being in touch, helping us, getting things for us, phoning us up, connecting us by Zoom, showing that they care about us. Those acts of kindness have humanised and lightened our want. Chessed has a redemptive quality, that it transforms tragedy into some form of celebration and despair into some powerful form of hope. Let what Ruth did for Naomi and Boaz did for Ruth be with us in the months ahead, as we try and help those who have been so terribly isolated these last weeks and months. And may we remember that, as well as giving us a covenant at Mount Sinai, God gave us a bond of love that is unbreakable. He will never abandon us, let us never abandoned Him.  
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