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Remembering Har Sinai Every Day

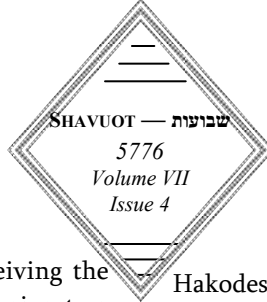
by Asher Willner (YULA '16)

In the Rambam's account of the 613 *mitzvos*, he includes the positive *mitzvah* of reminding ourselves each day of the experience of *Kabalas HaTorah*, receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. The Tur and Magen Avraham give two manners in which we may accomplish this seemingly simple *mitvah*. The first way to accomplish this *mitzvah* is by saying the *shesh zechiros* during davening each morning. The second is to have *Kabalas HaTorah* in mind when we say "*asher bachar banu mikol ha'amim*" in *birchas haTorah* each morning.

The holiday immediately preceding Shavuot is Pesach, in which the main theme is The Exodus from Egypt. We remember *Yetzias Mitzrayim* every day of our lives, as it is embedded in a multitude of *mitzvos* throughout the Torah. We remember it three times a day in the *shemah* and say it in *kiddush* every Shabbos and Yom Tov. On the other hand, the *mitzvah* of remembering the experience of Har Sinai is not something that we encounter often; in fact, it rarely comes to our attention at all. Why is remembering *Yetzias Mitzrayim* so heavily emphasized as part of the fabric of our religion, while the parallel *mitzvah* of remembering *Kabalas HaTorah* is much less emphasized.

The answer is simple, yet profound. Leaving Egypt was a one-time experience; it was an event that only the Jews at that time experienced and therefore, it must be instilled into our religion so that the following generations do not forget it. Har Sinai, however, must be viewed with a different perspective. Har Sinai may have been a one-time experience, but it is an event that must be rekindled each day of our lives. A famous question regarding Shavuot is why the Torah did not give an exact date to the holiday like all the other holidays, but rather gave the date in relation to Shavuot. The Or Hachayim Hakadosh answers that receiving the Torah cannot be defined as a historic date, but it is something that we are involved in every single day through the learning of Torah and the performance of *mitzvos*. Unlike The Exodus, the Har Sinai experience is ongoing. Rashi notes in Parshat Nasso that every day we have to approach our learning with the joy and enthusiasm of one who has just received a new gift.

The Gemara Menachos interprets the *pesukim* of *Kabalas HaTorah* as teaching us not to forget our learning. What does receiving the Torah have to do with not forgetting our learning? Just like receiving the Torah is a significant event



that we must remember, our learning each day must also be accompanied by that same freshness and excitement. It is for this reason that we should remember each day's learning like we remember Har Sinai.

A story is told about the Piazetzner Rebbe, the Aish Hakodesh, who asked in his journal a simple question: "Hashem, what can I give you?" The Rebbe went on to explain that he already learned as much as he could each day and *davened* with the utmost *kavanah* each *davening*. The one thing that he wished he could do was to have the opportunity to convert. A convert has the ability to step into the world of Torah and *mitzvos* with tremendous excitement and zest because it is a wonderful new gift. The Rebbe wanted the opportunity to reinvigorate his relationship with Hashem, Torah, and *mitzvos*, just like a person who had just received a gift.

During the month of Elul, we recite the passage of "*I'David Hashem ori*" after *davening*, in which David Hamelech writes, "*shivti b'veis Hashem...u'lvaker b'heichalo*" - [that] I may dwell in the House of Hashem... and visit His Temple. This phrase seems seemingly contradictory: how can David live in Hashem's house and yet remain a visitor? The Malbim writes that David wanted to have a deeply rooted connection to Judaism and Hashem, but he also wanted to feel like a visitor each day. Just like visitors gain excitement when encountering something new, David wanted that renewed excitement for Torah that comes from being a visitor to Hashem's house.

Ultimately, we do not require the Har Sinai experience to be emphasized as its own *mitzvah* because it is something that we must rekindle each and every day with our learning and *mitzvos*.

Rut's Conversion: True Dedication

by Nina Miller (Maayanot '16)

In Megillat Rut, after the death of Naomi's husband and two sons, Machlon and Kilyon, Naomi is ready to travel back to her home in the land of Yehudah. Her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Rut, accompany her as she leaves. Megillat Rut then writes that Naomi then tells Orpah and Rut to return to their mothers' houses three times. Rut 1:8 says: "*Va-tomer Naomi li-shteit kaloteha 'lechnah shovnah isha li-veit imah*" - Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: "Go, return, each of you to her mother's house." In 1:11, it is written: "*Va-tomer Naomi 'shovnah benotai lamah telechnah imi*" - Naomi said, "Turn back my daughters. Why should you come with me?" Naomi continues in 1:12, saying: "*shovnah, benotai lechnah* - Turn

back, my daughters, go along.” The Gemara (Yevamot 47b) learns from here many laws of *geirut*, conversion. Naomi says “*shovnah*,” or “return,” three times to teach that one must turn a potential convert away three times before accepting them. The implication here is that Rut and Orpah had not converted when they married Machlon and Kilyon. This approach is supported by Rabbi Meir (*Ruth Rabba* 1:4), who states that “they neither converted nor ritually immersed” before they married Machlon and Kilyon.

However, this approach seems problematic. Rabbi Nosson Scherman, quoting the Zohar Chadash, points out that if it is true that Rut and Orpah did not convert before marriage, then their marriages to Machlon and Kilyon were *halachically* invalid, as one cannot *halachically* get married to a non-Jew. This is perplexing, as these two women are called “*kaloteha*,” daughters-in-law of Naomi. According to Rabbi Meir, Naomi would not have been related to them at all. Furthermore, Rut marries Boaz, a relative of Machlon in keeping with the *mitzvah* of *yibum*. Under Jewish law however, Rut would have no right to Machlon’s property had she not been Jewish when they married because the concept of *yibum* only applies to a Jewish widow.

On the other hand, saying that Rut converted before the marriage is problematic because the *Gemara* assumes that the conversation between Rut and Naomi after the death of Machlon and Kilyon are part of Rut’s conversion process even going so far as to derive *halachot* of conversion based on that encounter. Also, had Rut and Orpah been Jewish this whole time, then Naomi would have no right to tell her two daughters-in-law to go back to their homelands and idolatrous ways.

The Zohar Chadash, as quoted by Rabbi Nosson Scherman, explains that when Rut and Orpah married their husbands, they converted, but under the influence of “*eimat ba’alah*,” fear of their husbands. Machlon and Kilyon came from an esteemed family and therefore the royal Moav family wanted two of its daughters to marry these Jewish brothers. In those days, the bride did not have much of a say in such an arrangement, and therefore if Machlon and Kilyon wanted them to convert, they would have had no choice but to comply. In such a case, if the marriage dissipates, and the woman declares her refusal to continue living as a Jew, then her conversion would have been proven invalid from the start. When Naomi decides to go back to Eretz Yisrael, she puts her daughters-in-law to the test. Was their first conversion sincere or did they just comply with the conversion just for the sake of the marriage? Orpah kisses her mother-in-law goodbye, demonstrating that her conversion had never been completely sincere. Rut on the other hand, shows her dedication to Naomi and the Jewish nation by remaining firm in her wishes to return to Eretz Yisrael. Her dedication demonstrates that her conversion had

been sincere from the beginning, and she was ready to continue her Jewish journey with Naomi into Eretz Yisrael. This loyalty makes Rut a perfect candidate to be the great-grandmother of Dovid HaMelech.

From Slavery to Aliyah

by Elisheva May (SAR ‘16)

The passage of *arami oved avi*, appearing at the very beginning of Parashat Ki Tavo, concisely tells the saga of the Jews descent into Egypt and their ultimate redemption by the hand of God, culminating in their entry into Eretz Yisrael. Appearing in the middle of the book of Devarim, the passage of *arami oved avi* is written between the commandment to remember that the nation of Amalek attacked the Jewish people immediately after The Exodus from Egypt, and Moshe’s commandments to Bnei Yisrael about what they should immediately do upon finally entering Eretz Yisrael. The placement of *arami oved avi*, in itself a summary of Bnei Yisrael’s journey from slavery to entry into Eretz Yisrael, suggests the importance of the conflation of The Exodus from Egypt with the entry into Eretz Yisrael. The connection between The Exodus and the re-entry into the promised land may be further seen through the liturgical uses of the passage of *arami oved avi*.

The text of *arami oved avi* is used as a liturgical text in two major events in Jewish life. Firstly, *arami oved avi* is a central passage during the *maggid* portion of the Pesach *seder*. A major portion of *maggid* consists of the quotation of each individual verse from the passage of *arami oved avi*, followed by a detailed explanation of each of the *pesukim*. During the *seder*, we do not recite the passage of *arami oved avi* until its completion. Instead, we end with the verse, “And God brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders” (Devarim 26:8).

The second event in which *arami oved avi* is a central text is when the farmers of Eretz Yisrael would bring their first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash. When each farmer would arrive with his produce, he would repeat the text of *arami oved avi* under the supervision of the presiding Kohen. This process is what the *pesukim* in Ki Tavo describe and what the text of *arami oved avi* was originally intended for. In this context, the final verse of the passage, which is omitted on Pesach, is pertinent. The final verse states: “And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Devarim 26:9). When the first fruits are brought to Jerusalem, the focus on Eretz Yisrael makes sense as the farmers are directly benefiting from the land that the Jewish people had yearned for during their travels in the desert.

The double usage of the passage of *arami oved avi* enforces an important lesson about the connection between Pesach and Shavuot. Shavuot, also known as Chag HaBichurim

was the first day that the farmers were permitted to bring their first fruits to the Beit HaMikdash. Though the farmers were allowed to bring their produce at a later date as well, most brought their produce on Shavuot as they were in Jerusalem for the *regel*. Therefore, even though we often think of *arami oved avi* as a Pesach text, it may be considered a Shavuot text as well. The usage of this text for both Pesach and Shavuot draws a link between the two holidays and highlights how together they serve as a microcosm of Bnei Yisrael's journey from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael.

At the Pesach seder, we assert in the song "*dayeinu*" that it would have been enough if God had taken us out of Egypt, but had not brought us to Eretz Yisrael. This idea is reinforced by the fact that when we recite the passage of *arami oved avi* at the seder we end with God taking us out of Egypt and not with God bringing us to Eretz Yisrael. On Shavuot, when the Bikkurim are brought, we reverse the statement that we make during *dayeinu*. By adding the last verse to *arami oved avi*, we acknowledge the significance of God not just taking us out of Egypt but bringing us to Eretz Yisrael as well. The story of The Exodus cannot end with our immediate removal from Egypt but instead extends through our entry into the promised land. In this way, Pesach and Shavuot are in fact inextricably linked. Though the lives of Bnei Yisrael were immediately saved by The Exodus, our peoples true purpose could not be accomplished without our entry into the land. Through the recitation of *arami oved avi* when the first fruits are brought, we assert that our removal from Egypt cannot stand alone but must be linked with our entry into the land. Only then can we recognize the ultimate purpose of the redemption and say: "And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which you, God, have given me."

To Stand or Not to Stand?

by Yair Caplan (MTA '17)

On the first day of Shavuot, many shuls will make a "*klop*" during *leining*, signaling all attendees to rise for the *aseres hadibros*. However, there seems to be a serious Halachik problem with this practice. In a *teshuva*, the Rambam states that standing for the *aseres hadibros* is an erroneous *minhag*, and it is proper to protest against the observance of this custom. The Rambam reasons that standing for this portion creates a "*hefsed emuna*"—"a loss of faith," by attributing more importance to one passage in the Torah than others. If this is true, how is it that the practice of standing during the *aseres hadibros* became so prevalent in our communities?

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, quoted in Harerei Kedem, believed that the answer lies in the special cantillation we use while reading this portion, namely the "*ta'am ha'elyon*." Unlike the "*ta'am ha'tachton*," the normal

cantillation given to the *aseres hadibros*, the *ta'am ha'elyon* breaks up the *pesukim* in such a way that each of the ten *dibros* is confined to one *passuk*. This reconfiguration of *pesukim* seems strange, as the Gemara Megilla states that we do not create any start or stop in the *Pesukim* that were not specified by Moshe Rabbeinu. The reason that the *ta'am ha'elyon* is an exception to this rule is that the *aseres hadibros* on Shavuot are read as a *zecher*, a commemoration, of the *dibros* that were said at Har Sinai, while the prohibition against re-punctuating *pesukim* only applies to the weekly *parsha* reading. This reason seems to indicate an important practical difference, between the *leining* of the *aseres hadibros* in Parshas Yisro and Va'eschanan and the *leining* on Shavuos. Since the *aseres hadibros* in Parshas Yisro and Va'eschanan are part of the regular order of *parshas hashavua*, the statement in the Gemara Megilla applies and the *pesukim* must stay as they are. However, on Shavuos, because the readings are for a different purpose, the division of the *pesukim* may change.

From here we see a fundamental difference between the reading of the *aseres hadibros* during the rest of the year, and the *leining* on Shavuot. In Yisro and Va'eschanan, the *aseres hadibros* are merely read as a part of the *parshas hashavua*, that week's Torah portion, while the reading on Shavuot serves a completely different purpose. The *leining* on Shavuot is read in a manner that is meant to resemble the giving of the Torah, in all of its glory.

With that in mind, Rav Soloveitchik maintained that the Rambam only stated that standing during the *aseres hadibros* constituted a "*hefsed emuna*" during the *leining* of Parshas Yisro or Va'eschanan because over there, no differentiation should be made between the different sections of *parshas hashavua*. However, on Shavuot, standing is a necessary component of reenacting the experience of Har Sinai. Similarly, splitting up the *pesukim* into *dibros* with the *ta'am ha'elyon* furthers the vivid portrayal of Matan Torah. Thus, standing for the *aseres hadibros* is meant to make us feel as though we are receiving the Torah with the excitement and grandeur of Ma'amad Har Sinai, causing us to appreciate the tremendous gift of Torah which God has given us.

Na'aseh VeNishmah

by Zev Jarashow (TABC '16)

The 1984 movie "The Karate Kid," directed by John G. Avildsen, tells the story of a young boy who has the dream of learning karate. Upon meeting his teacher, the boy is told that in order to learn karate, he must follow the lessons of his teacher. Initially, the boy is confused as to why he must learn how to wash a car in a certain way in order to learn karate. It is only later that the boy understands how this seemingly unrelated activity helped him to learn karate.

As the Jewish people were standing at the foot of Har Sinai, they accepted the Torah with arguably the two most famous words in the Torah: "*na'aseh veNishmah*," "We will do

and we will listen” (Shemot 24:7). The language of “*na’aseh veNishmah*” begs the following question: why does the “*na’aseh*,” the action, precede the passive “*veNishmah*,” the listening and comprehending? It should be the other way around. We don’t usually perform an action until we fully comprehend what we are doing. Can it be that Bnei Yisrael’s utterance of the words “*na’aseh veNishmah*” indicates that Judaism is to be considered a religion of blind faith? By examining the *sugya* of *ta’amei haMitzvot*, the reason behind *mitzvot*, we can gain a better understanding of why the Torah puts the “*na’aseh*” before the “*nishmah*.”

Rambam, in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, writes with regard to the *sugya* of *ta’amei haMitzvot* that all *mitzvot* have a reason. He explains that each *mitzvah* as a whole has a reason, but the details of every single *mitzvah* may not have reasons that are apparent to us. The Maharshah argues with Rambam and writes that even the small details of the *mitzvot* have reasons.

There is a Midrash quoted by Ramban which says that the only intention that one need have when fulfilling the *mitzvot* is that one is observing the word of Hashem. Although this opinion is not accepted by most *meforashim* (Ramban, Rambam, Maharshah, and the Sefer HaChinuch), the ideas behind this opinion shed light on our discussion. The Sefer HaChinuch explains that if one is looking to change his ways, he should start by performing *mitzvot*. The Chinuch writes in *halachah* 16, “*acharei haPe’ulot nimshachim haLevavot*,” performing *mitzvot* (or other positive actions) ignites a person’s inner spirit. It is not easy to perform *mitzvot* that we don’t understand, but, as the Gemara in Pesachim writes, “*sheLo liShma ba liShma*,” something that is not begun for the sake of heaven will ultimately be done with heavenly purpose and intent.

Another way of understanding why the Midrash states that the reason for *mitzvot* is to serve Hashem can be found in an answer to our original question as to why the “*na’aseh*” preceded the “*nishmah*.” The Torah is teaching us an important lesson, namely that the more we perform certain actions (“*na’aseh*”), the more we will be able to understand what it is that we are doing (“*nishmah*”). Performing the *mitzvot* brings us closer to understanding the ways of Hashem and the reasons for many of the *mitzvot*.

This focus on performing actions before we understand them brings us back to “The Karate Kid.” In order to master the necessary concentration and attention to perform karate, the kid needed to fully absorb and follow everything the teacher taught him, even things like how to wash a car which, to the boy, seemed unrelated to karate. However, it was only by absorbing all of the lessons of his teacher that the kid ultimately excelled at karate. We too must first do the “*na’aseh*” by following God’s words. In doing so, we will hopefully be led to the “*nishmah*,” an understanding of Hashem’s ways and the reasons for His *mitzvot*.

Transitioning from Pesach to Shavuot

by Kyra Fischer (DAT ‘17)

“Today is day one of the Omer- *Hayom yom achad la’omer*,” I say with my family as we begin the second Shavuot *seder*. From Pesach until Shavuot every person counts the Omer, adding another number every night. Why do we count up and not down? Why are Pesach and Shavuot linked? Sukkot doesn’t continue into Chanukah, and neither does Rosh Hashana from Shavuot, so why do we count from Pesach to Shavuot? From these questions we can infer that there has to be some sort of special connection between the two holidays.

During Pesach, Bnei Yisrael gained a new perspective on Hashem- that He is capable of controlling every aspect of the world, as seen through the ten plagues. Moreover, during *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and *Kriyat Yam Suf*, Hashem revealed Himself to Bnei Yisrael in an unparalleled fashion. However, at the time of this revelation, Bnei Yisrael were not on a high enough spiritual level to perceive His greatness and understand that Hashem had just revealed Himself. According to the Gemara, they were on the lowest level of *tumah*, impurity, and therefore did not have the ability to understand the enormity of Hashem’s miracles.

This is the reason that we have the Omer. The time period when we count the Omer parallels the time when Bnei Yisrael slowly ascended in holiness and began to more deeply perceive Hashem’s greatness.

Today, we count during the days of the Omer in order to mirror this idea in our own lives. We are counting up to Shavuot to ascend in our own holiness and come to realize the role that God plays in our lives. Beit Hillel understood this idea and therefore ruled that we count up during the Omer as it is a time of increasing our holiness and connection to Hashem.

Now that we understand the reason we count up from Pesach to Shavuot during the Omer period, it is imperative that we understand the true connection between these two holidays.

As time progresses over the period of the Omer, we learn more and more about the revelation of Hashem and our relationship with Him. It takes all forty-nine days to comprehend the complexity of Hashem’s revelation at the sea and the magnitude of the miracles He performed on Pesach. When Bnei Yisrael were on such a low level of purity, they were not ready to accept the Torah. Only after they went up both spiritually and physically could Hashem present the Torah to them. Pesach was simply the beginning of the process of understanding Hashem and receiving the biggest gift of all: the Torah. It is for this reason that we count between Pesach and Shavuot.

Every single year, Hashem reveals Himself to in some way, even if we cannot perceive it at the moment. Therefore, Hashem gives us forty-nine days before we re-accept His gift of Torah, to internalize His revelation and try to understand its

meaning. Hopefully, during this period of the Omer, we will all have the *zchut* to reach a higher spiritual level and a greater understanding of Hashem and His Torah.

The Arrival at Har Sinai

by Levi Antelis (RMTA '17)

In many ways, the climax of *Yetzias Mitzrayim* was Bnei Yisrael's experience at Har Sinai. It was here that they had to prove themselves worthy of being taken from Mitzrayim and becoming Hashem's nation.

Hashem shows Moshe how worthy Bnei Yisrael were to be redeemed by telling him that Bnei Yisrael will have success in proving themselves worthy at Har Sinai (3:12). Ultimately, Bnei Yisrael passed the test and became a truly great nation after Har Sinai.

R' Hirsch says that there were times before this when the B'nei Yisrael camped and complained to Hashem and Moshe. Har Sinai was different; not one complaint was heard from the entire nation. Bnei Yisrael knew this was their time to shine.

When Bnei Yisrael were camping in Rephidim, they suffered from lack of water and an attack from Amalek. Chzal tell us, that the word "Rephidim" is short for the phrase, "*rafu yidayhen min haTorah*," which means the B'nei Yisrael abated in their Torah study. Due to Bnei Yisrael lessening in their Torah study, they faced adversity in Rephidim. Therefore, when the Torah tells us in Parshas Yisro (19:2) that Bnei Yisrael left Rephidim, it is not only referring to Bnei Yisrael's physical departure from Rephidim, but it is also referring to the B'nei Yisrael's shift in attitude, upon their departure of Rephidim. They left the spiritual abyss of Rephidim and prepared themselves for the spiritual zenith of Har Sinai.

Shavuot takes place exactly seven weeks after Pesach. Hopefully the spiritual gains that we achieved on Pesach, will help us build to achieving an even greater level of spirituality and religious devotion on Shavuot.

An Analysis of Boaz and Shimshon

by Sarah Araten (Ramaz '16)

The narratives of Boaz, in Megillat Ruth, and Shimshon, in Sefer Shoftim, share many of the same textual elements in terms of both the plot and lexical fields used in the stories. On a plot level, both Boaz and Shimshon lived during the time of the Shoftim, and both married women who were not born Jewish. The apparent difference between the two stories though, is that in the case of Boaz, the relationship leads to the creation of the Kingdom of Israel, which would eventually solve many of the problems of the Shoftim era, while in the case of Shimshon, it leads to the main character's downfall. Despite this difference, the two stories share a common leitwort, a word that appears many times or has particular importance in a text, in this case, the *shoresh* .ג.ט.ש. In Shimshon's story, this *shoresh* is used to

mean "*seiar*," or hair, and it is the thing that embodies his strength, but eventually leads to his downfall. Surprisingly, the word "*seiar*" is rarely found in Shimshon's story, rather, the text mentions that "a razor never touched his hair" (Shoftim-6:17) when it describes his inability to cut his hair. The only time that it mentions the word "*seiar*," is when the text notes that despite the fact that Delilah cut off his hair, it had begun to grow back (Shoftim-16:22). This line comes at the beginning of his great heroic moment, so it is interesting that the text chose to use the word "*seiar*" here.

The story of Boaz in Megillat Ruth also makes use of this same *shoresh*, but it means two different things. In one instance, it is used to mean *se'or* or barley, when the verse mentions that Boaz gave Ruth six measures of barley (Ruth-3:15). In the second instance, it is used to mean "*sha'ar*," the gate, where the verse is describing how Boaz went to the gates, to resolve Ruth's *yebum* issue. Both of these words are closely related to Boaz's actions and his kindness towards Ruth. The former involves his kindness to her and his eagerness to help out Ruth and Naomi by providing them with food to eat. The latter use of the *shoresh* is the place at which Boaz meets Ploni Almoni and where Boaz is able to redeem Ruth himself. This scene, which consisted of a group of people gathered together is similar to the scene of Shimshon's death, where a group of people all came together and where Shimshon was able to demonstrate his last act of heroism.

The connection here between the *shoresh*, the gathered group, and the two heroes, acts as a way to compare the two characters. This *shoresh* is used to show all of the good that Boaz and Shimshon did throughout their respective stories. The gathered group becomes a place where both of the heroes are able to perform their last mentioned heroic acts, and by interacting with the community, they are able to exemplify heroism on a public stage.

The Purpose of the Mitzvot

by Josh Schoenberg (Maimonides '19)

Soon after God, in His glory, sent the plagues upon the Egyptians, the Israelites left Egypt. Shortly after that, on the sixth of Sivan—Shavuot—God gave the Israelites the *aseret hadibrot*. God then led them to a mountain, where they were presented with the choice whether or not to accept God's commandments, the Torah and allow it to govern the way that they and their descendants would live their lives. The Israelites immediately responded yes.

What led them to decide to accept these commandments so readily? In some ways, by accepting the commandments, they were thanking God for everything He had just done for them. He had sent the plagues, split the Yam Suf, and taken them out of slavery. By accepting His laws, the Israelites were showing their gratitude and devotion to Him.

However, it seems unlikely that the Jewish people would have made a choice that would alter their lives and the lives of

their descendants simply out of gratitude. So the question remains: Why were the Israelites so eager to accept such a large commitment?

One option is that Jewish people accepted the *mitzvot* because they included a punishment-reward system. The people who perform the *mitzvot* merit “the rain of the land in its seasons” (Devarim 11:14), and one who honors his parents is rewarded with long life (Shmot 20:12). So too, God will “repay to their face those who hate Him, to destroy them” (Deuteronomy 7:10). The reward-punishment system may itself be enough incentive for the Israelites who just came out of Egypt. Everything these slaves had experienced was punishment-based, so now they had an opportunity to receive rewards for doing the right thing. However, if this were the case, then the *mitzvot* we do now are solely based on a reward-punishment system that our ancestors signed us up for. Additionally, Pirkei Avot tells us that we should *not* serve God just for reward and therefore the reason we are performing the *mitzvot* cannot simply be to avoid punishment and receive reward;

One might also suggest that the Israelites accepted God’s commandments so quickly because they realized that God is holy, and they wanted to do what He wants. But even still, even if a person recognizes that something is holy, they are not always willing to do an unbelievably huge task and if they are, they might still be a little reluctant to proceed with it.

To fully answer our question, we must understand a little bit more of what the *mitzvot* are meant to accomplish.

Multiple theories have arisen over time as to the purpose of the *mitzvot*. One theory is that the Mitzvot are there because they are logical actions that cause us to be moral, ethical people. This would be a very good reason for the Israelites to so readily accept these laws, since they wanted themselves and their descendants to know how to be virtuous people. This theory does work for many of the *mitzvot*, however, as some of the *mitzvot* do not seem to directly improve us as people. *Mitzvot* such as the *para aduma*, *lulav* and *etrog*, and eating *matza* do not have a clear way to improve us as human beings.

Therefore, one must say that the *mitzvot* are in some way a guide for us to improve ourselves *and* to let God into our lives. In other words, many of the *mitzvot* that we do improve us as human beings, and in that way, we are able to accept God into our lives more, as well as improve ourselves. The *mitzvot* we may not understand are also a way for us to show God that we want him in our lives and that we want to live with a purpose.

We can now understand why the Israelites were so ready and willing to accept God’s commandments: they understood the power of the *mitzvot*. The Israelites accepted the task of keeping the *mitzvot* and it is our job to continue

performing this task for ourselves and our descendants. We should all strive to both improve ourselves and to let God into our lives, by the performing *mitzvot*.

The Importance of the Mesorah

by Shayna Kohanbash (Shulamith ‘18)

Pesach is the holiday when we celebrate being taken out of Egypt to become a free nation. After Pesach, we start counting the Omer for 49 days; this counting concludes with the holiday of Shavuot, a holiday where we celebrate receiving the Torah. Since Pesach and Shavuot are so closely related to one another, the period in between the two holidays must play an important role in transitioning between them.

Pesach is all about freedom and independence. But in order to have a functioning society, there needs to be rules to prevent anarchy. Shavuot is the holiday where we receive those rules. Even though we might not always understand how these rules are beneficial to us, we trust that Hashem only wants the best for us, the same way a parent only wants the best for its children.

During the 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot, the Jewish people worked hard to improve themselves so they will be deserving of receiving Hashem’s Torah. Thus, now is the time to improve ourselves in order to be ready to receive the Torah when Shavuot comes. One of the ways we try to improve ourselves is by reading Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of Our Fathers. Pirkei Avot deals with the development of positive character traits, and discusses how to be a good person and a good Jew.

The first *mishna* states "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai, and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets passed it on to the men of the Great Assembly." A common question asked about this *mishna* is- Why does every part of the chain of the *mesora* have a giver and a receiver, except for the first link? The *mishna* states Moshe passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua passed it on to the Elders, but the first line states Moshe received the Torah from Mt. Sinai. Shouldn't it say Moshe received the Torah from Hashem? Is the location where Moshe received the Torah more significant than who gave Moshe the Torah?

The Maharal suggests an answer to this question. He suggests that if the *mishna* had “and Moshe received the Torah from Hashem,” people might mistakenly believe that Hashem only gave Moshe the Torah and not the rest of us. However, we believe the exact opposite. We believe that every single Jew has the capacity and the ability to receive the Torah just like Moshe. We believe we can receive the traditions of the Torah and pass them down just like our ancestors passed down the Torah to us. In order to keep this tradition alive, we must first spend the period of the Omer acknowledging how important and crucial this responsibility is, only then can we spend the holiday of Shavuot passing down our Jewish values,

ideals, texts, and customs to future generations.

The Unique Nature of Matan Torah

by Ezra Cinamon (Rambam '16)

It is interesting to note the incongruity between the holiday of Shavuot and all other holidays mentioned biblically. Firstly, barring the general *issur melacha* that applies to all holidays, we find no form of additional restriction applying to Shavuot like the *issur chametz* we find by Pesach. Secondly, outside of the Beis Hamikdash, without all the *korbanos*, *shtei halechem* and the *kivsei atzeres*, not only are there no restrictions, there are no stipulations regarding the *mitzvos hayom* dictated. Ironically, the day designated to commemorate receiving the Torah is *mitzvah-less*. Why would the *Zman Matan Toraseinu*, paradoxically, be completely void of *mitzvos*?

In fact, because this this holiday has no *mitzvos*, for many people, it becomes a day to “celebrate dairy products.” What *is* the idea behind this *mitzvah-less* holiday?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin answers that there are two reasons why we find no indication of *mitzvos* on Shavuot. The first reason is a pragmatic one. *Shavuot* is void of any commandments so that man can focus all of his attention on the primary matter of the day and engage in *talmud Torah* in the most unfettered and purest fashion. The Beis HaLevi writes that when the Jews answered God with the two words, “*n’aseh v’nishma*,” the idea of learning Torah *lishma* was constructed. Those words mean that even in times like today, when the concepts enumerated in many tractates of the Talmud are no longer applicable to us, they are not obsolete. We will continue to learn for the sole purpose of pursuing *chuchmas Hashem*.

Without *mitzvos* on Shavuot, an individual has the freedom to fully engage in the real calling of the day, *talmud Torah lishma*.

The second reason is more philosophical in nature. The Torah prescribes no date for the holiday of Shavuot. We find cryptic allusions in Parshas Yisro that enable us to calculate the date, but no exact date of *Matan Torah* is documented. Why? The answer is that the Torah can command the commemoration of historical occurrences through the practice of *mitzvos*, but Shavuot cannot be mandated. Instead, Shavuot must be offered to us.

Every nation was given the opportunity embrace the Torah lifestyle, but only one faction of humanity, the Jews, subscribed to the Torah. For the redemptive nature of the Torah experience to come to fruition, human beings must willfully accept the will of God. For this reason, no date for Shavuot is given, there are no special commandments, and we symbolically countdown throughout the forty nine days preceding Shavuot. The parameters of such a holiday cannot be divinely legislated, but must be constructed on a human level.

Shavuot is not the day of the giving of the Torah, but instead, it is *zman matan Torah*, the day upon which the Torah was offered and accepted. We are left to infuse meaning into the day without direction and restriction. Shavuot is what we make of it.

Megillat Rut and Leadership

by Nechama Novick (Bruria '16)

At first glance, it appears that the first verse of Megillat Rut is teaching us the time period in which the story is taking place, as it says, “*Vayehi bimeiv shafot hashoftim*,” “And it was in the days that the judges judged.” Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that the words “*shafot hashoftim*” cannot be a reference to a specific time. After all, the time period of the Judges lasted nearly four centuries, making the phrase which begins the Megillah is exceptionally vague.

The Gemara in Bava Batra (15b) explains that the words “*shafot hashoftim*” should not be translated to mean literally “*when the judges judged*,” but, rather, should be understood as “*when the judges were judged*.” As the Gemara writes, “*dor sheshofet et shoftav*.” The Gemara is teaching us that the story of the Megillah took place during a time when the Jewish people were increasingly critical of their leadership.

The Ohr Yohel, by Rav Leib Chasman, further explains that the opening segment of the Megillah, which speaks about the famine in the Israel, highlights this idea that the Jewish People were critical of their leadership. When the Jewish People do not honor and hold their leaders, such as the Judges, in high regard, we become worthy of punishment. In this case, the Jewish people were hit with a terrible famine, which the Ohr Yohel directly connects with the nation’s critical treatment of the Judges.

The message of the Gemara and the Ohr Yohel are very much related to Shavuot. Shavuot is a holiday in which we celebrate the traditions that we received from Har Sinai. The most critical aspect of our tradition is the relationship between students and teachers – laymen and leaders. This relationship obviously demands respect towards the leader.

Seemingly in contrast to this point, we are also a nation that thrives on independent critical analysis of every area of life, including what we are taught. In every aspect of life, our critical examination of every stimulus we receive is how we maintain the purity of our religion and lifestyle. However, just as it is important to critically examine everything we are taught, it is equally important to remember to learn with an open mind and with respect for our teachers and leaders.



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