
SHAVUOT II

The Ten Commandments, Preparing for Shavuot, Megillat Ruth & Shavuot Customs

This second class on Shavuot focuses on the Ten Commandments, preparing for receiving the Torah on Shavuot, Megillat Ruth, and the Shavuot customs of all-night Torah study and eating dairy meals.

In this class we will examine the following questions:

- Why were the Ten Commandments given at Har Sinai?
- Why is preparation pivotal in maximizing the Shavuot experience and how is this accomplished?
- What was outstanding about Ruth that we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot?
- Why do we stay up learning Torah on the night of Shavuot, eat dairy foods, and decorate the synagogue with flowers?

Class Outline:

Introduction.	Legacy of the Jewish People
Section I.	The Ten Commandments Part A. What are the Ten Commandments? Part B. Why Did God Give the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai? Part C. The Ten Commandments Contain All the Mitzvot
Section II.	Preparing to Receive the Torah on Shavuot Part A. The Framework of Sefirat Ha'Omer and Matan Torah Part B. Strengthening Torah Study Part C. Refining our Character Part D. Creating Jewish Unity
Section III.	Megillat Ruth Part A. Why Do We Read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot? Part B. Ruth is the Paradigm of a Person Who Embraces Judaism Part C. Legitimizing King David's Lineage
Section IV.	Shavuot Customs Part A. Studying on the Night of Shavuot Part B. Eating Dairy Foods Part C. Decorating the Synagogue with Flowers and Trees

INTRODUCTION. LEGACY OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

What makes the Jewish people unique? One defining feature is that God communicated His Will through the Ten Commandments to the entire Jewish nation of approximately 2.5 million people in a national revelation at Mount Sinai over 3,300 years ago. God then taught the entire Torah to Moshe (Moses) and instructed him to teach it to the rest of the nation, to be practiced and transmitted from generation to generation.

A rabbinical organization was once looking for a hotel in which to hold a seminar. They came across an establishment that was reasonably priced and suited their needs and were prepared to reserve it for the date of their event. At the last moment, though, a conflict arose with the hotel's kitchen staff. The rabbis needed to have exclusive control over the kitchen in order to ensure that all the food at the event would be kosher. Even if one of the hotel's utensils were to become mingled with the kosher ones, it could compromise the integrity of the event. The hotel's kitchen staff took offense. A rabbi explained, "It's not ours to negotiate. We have been doing it this way for 3,300 years."

"3,300 years?!" exclaimed the resident chef. "I wouldn't want to be the one to break that chain!" (From I Wouldn't Want to Be the One to Break That Chain! by Rabbi Label Lam, Torah.org)

The Torah is an awesome gift, and it is far from simple to be the bearers of that legacy. Observing the Torah's commandments is richly rewarding, but it also calls for dedication. Receiving the Torah is not something to be taken lightly; it calls for preparation, and an understanding of the mission it entails. On Shavuot, we have an opportunity to get a glimpse of the immensity of the Torah and gain a greater appreciation for our role as the nation upon which it was bestowed.

SECTION I. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are the focus of the Torah reading on the first day of Shavuot. At the Revelation at Sinai, the entire Jewish nation of approximately 2.5 million people heard God "speak" the ten specific commandments. God also engraved the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets and Moshe brought them down from Mount Sinai on the 17th of Tammuz, but broke them upon seeing the Golden Calf. Moshe was later commanded to engrave the Ten Commandments on a new set of tablets and brought them to the Jewish people on Yom Kippur.

PART A. WHAT ARE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS?

1. Shemot (Exodus) 20:2-14 –The Ten Commandments.

1. I am the Lord your God who took you out from the land of Egypt.
2. You shall not recognize the gods of others.
3. You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Shabbat day to make it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.

(א) אֲנִכִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
מִבְּיַת עֲבָדִים:
(ב) לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עָלַי:
(ג) לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן:
(ד) זָכוֹר אֶת יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ:
(ה) כְּבֹד אֶת אָבִיךָ וְאֶת אִמְךָ
(ו) לֹא תִרְצַח
(ז) לֹא תִנָּאֵף
(ח) לֹא תִגְנוֹב

9. You shall not commit perjury.
10. You shall not covet.

ט) לא תענה ברעך עד שקר:
י) לא תחמד

While many of these commandments are self-explanatory (at least on the surface), it is worthwhile to clarify a few points so that we can have a basic understanding of all of them.

The first commandment, in particular, requires some explanation. On the surface, it appears to be a statement of fact and not a commandment at all. Nevertheless, our Sages explain that this statement is, in fact, a mitzvah: the mitzvah to believe in God.

2. Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah #25 – The first of the Ten Commandments requires us to believe in God's existence and His role in the Exodus from Egypt.

[The first commandment is] to believe that there is One God in the world Who created everything that exists, and that whatever is, was, or will be for all eternity is a result of His power and desire; and that He took us out of the land of Egypt and gave us the Torah. As it says in the beginning of the Giving of the Torah, "I am the Lord your God Who took you out of Egypt, etc.," which is as if He said "You should know and believe that there is a God in the world," for the phrase "I am" indicates His existence. And when He said "Who took you out of Egypt," it means that you should not be enticed to interpret your redemption from Egypt and the plagues that struck the Egyptians as mere happenstance; rather, you should know that "I am the One Who took you out," intentionally and with providence, just as He promised our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

להאמין שיש לעולם אלוה אחד שהמציא כל הנמצא, ומכחו וחפצו היה כל מה שהוא ושהיה ושיהיה לעדי עד, וכי הוא הוציאנו מארץ מצרים ונתן לנו את התורה. שנאמר בתחילת נתינת התורה "אנכי ה' אלקיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים" וכו' ופירושו כאילו אמר תדעו ותאמינו שיש לעולם אלוה כי מלת אנכי תורה על המציאות. ואשר אמר "אשר הוצאתיך" וכו' לומר שלא יפתה לבבכם לקחת ענין צאתכם מעבדות מצרים ומכות המצרים דרך מקרה אלא דעו אנכי הוא שהוצאתי אתכם בחפ. ובהשגחה כמו שהבטיח לאבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב.

3. Based on Rabbi Yissocher Frand, Listen to Your Messages, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 60-61 – The importance of the Ten Commandments.

The first commandment – I am God, your Lord. Faith in the Almighty is the basis of our religion. The second commandment, You shall not have other gods. Of course idol worship is out. Third – Don't mention God's Name in vain – reverence is critical. Fourth is the Sabbath. By observing and sanctifying Shabbat we bear witness that God created the world in six days. Very important. Honoring Parents – the fifth commandment conditions us to be grateful to the source of our benefits, feelings ultimately channelled into our relationship with God.

Murder. Adultery. Stealing [kidnapping – see below]. Bearing False Witness. All these are antithetical to faith in a benevolent Creator Who seeks a just moral social order.

The tenth – Don't covet. Jealousy. Don't covet your neighbor's wife or his donkey or any of his possessions. This is a fundamental tenet of Judaism. [See below for explanation.]

According to Rabbinic tradition, the eighth commandment, "You shall not steal," is not to be understood

literally. Our Sages teach that the eighth commandment itself relates to the prohibition of kidnapping. The Torah does prohibit theft, of course, but that prohibition appears elsewhere.

4. Rashi, Shemot (Exodus) 20:13 – The verse in the Ten Commandments which prohibits theft is actually a reference to kidnapping.

“You shall not steal” – the verse is referring to kidnapping. “You [plural] shall not steal” [a verse that appears later, in Leviticus] refers to monetary theft.

לא תגנוב – בגונב נפשות הכתוב מדבר. לא תגנובו – בגונב ממון.

The tenth commandment forbidding jealousy also requires examination. We can understand why the prohibitions of murder, adultery, and the like, all of which are grievous offenses, merited inclusion in the Ten Commandments. But how does envy fit into the picture? Many Torah precepts were not included in the Ten Commandments; why was this one singled out?

5. Avi Ezer, Shemot 20:14 – The precept “You shall not covet” appears at the end of the Ten Commandments because coveting is the root of many sins.

In my opinion, the precept “You shall not covet” (and the related mitzvah of “You shall not desire”) appears at the end of the Ten Commandments for the same reason that a wise man who is giving rebuke to an audience first admonishes them about specific actions and then concludes with an admonition about a general behavior that includes all the specifics, so that anyone who desists from the general behavior will automatically be protected from the specifics. Similarly, most sins result from a lust for wealth or immorality, and any sin a person commits is preceded by the desire for the monetary benefit that he expects from it – such as perjury, taking false or vain oaths, performing forbidden labor on Shabbat, and murder. Similarly, the lust for money sometimes brings a person to act dishonorably toward his parents, and sometimes a person worships idolatry in order to ingratiate himself with its worshippers so that they will provide him with sustenance ...

ולדעתי נראה בציווי לא תחמוד וכן לא תתאוה שהמה באים בסוף הדברות כמו מוכיח חכם על אוזן שומעת מזהיר תחלה הפרטים ואחר כך כולל בסוף ענין אחד הכולל כל הפרטים וכשנשמר מהכלל אשא מזהיר בסוף נשמר מכל הפרטים. כי ידוע דעיקר רוב עבירות באים מחמוד ממון או חמוד זנות וטרם עובר עבירה חומד בלבו תכלית ממון המגיע ממנה כמו עדות שוא ושקר ושבועת שקר ועשות מלאכה בשבת ורצוח, וכן מחמת חמדת ממון פוגע בכבוד יולדיו, ולפעמים עובד עבודה זרה למצוא חן בעיני העובדים לפרנס אותו. ...

There is an additional, central reason why not coveting is included in the Ten Commandments.

6. Rabbi Yissocher Frand, An Offer You Can't Refuse, ArtScroll Publications, pp. 54-55 – The root of jealousy is a lack of faith in God.

The Vilna Gaon points out in *Even Sheleimah* that *lo sachmod* encompasses all the other commandments as well. It is the root of all evil. Rav Chaim Vital writes that for this reason it appears last among the Commandments, because it is comparable to all of them put together ...

Why are we so susceptible to *lo sachmod*? Why do we want that which we do not have? The answer

lies in a fundamental lack of *emunah*, an insufficient faith in the providence and guidance of the Creator. If we truly believed to the very depths of our being that we have what we have because that is the way the Almighty wants it, and that others have what they have because that is the way the Almighty wants it, we would have no problem with it – even if we could not fully understand the Divine plan. But the problem is that on some level of our consciousness or subconscious we still believe that we are in control, that if we try a little harder we will get the things we desire. We simply cannot accept that we are not the masters of our own destiny.

The tenth commandment, then, is the foundation of all the other commandments. Jealousy is an outcome of lack of faith in God; lack of faith can lead to the most serious transgressions. A person who understands that everything emanates from God's Will and is ultimately for his best will not fall into the trap of jealousy, and the transgressions it brings in its wake. Thus the prohibition against coveting can be seen as a key to keeping the whole Torah.

PART B. WHY DID GOD GIVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS ON MOUNT SINAI?

Considering the fact that God selected the Ten Commandments to transmit publicly to the Jewish people at Sinai, and that those Ten Commandments were singled out to be engraved on the Luchot HaBrit (the Tablets of the Covenant), these commandments must have special significance. In fact, the Ten Commandments encapsulate core Jewish values. Thus, they can be considered to have laid the foundation for the rest of the Torah to be received by the Jewish people. On the other hand, however, they should not be seen as occupying a position of greater importance than any of the other mitzvot. Judaism is careful not to overemphasize these mitzvot relative to the other mitzvot in the Torah.

1. Based on Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, Shemot 20:14 – The Ten Commandments prepared the Jewish people for the remainder of the Torah.

... The "Ten Commandments" in no way have any greater holiness or greater importance than any other commandment in the Torah. They are neither the whole Law nor are they holier laws than all the rest. God clearly and expressly proclaimed them as merely a preparatory introduction to the whole Law, which would be given afterwards. "I come to you," God has said, "so that the people may hear that I speak to you and have belief in you (Moshe) forever" (Shemot 19:9).

Thus, the Revelation on Sinai is expressly intended to (1) prepare the people for the rest of the Torah which was to be transmitted to them by Moshe, and (2) prove to them beyond all possibility of doubt, by their own experience, that "God does speak to Man" (as it says later), so that they would receive the entire Torah that Moshe was to bring to them, with unswerving belief and trust, as "the Word of God."

This explains the purpose of a public revelation, but what was significant about the Ten Commandments themselves? In what way do they encapsulate Judaism's essential values?

2. Ibid. Shemot 20:13 – The themes of the first five of the Ten Commandments.

The first five commandments of **אֱנִי וְיְהוָה לֹא יֵדִיעַ לְךָ** and **אֱנִי** proclaim the acknowledgment of God as the One Who is responsible for our fate and the guide of all our acts, in their positive and negative signification respectively. In **לֹא תִשָּׂא** this knowledge and acknowledgement is set as the whole basis of our individual and social life. In **זִכָּר**, respect to this idea is ensured by the ever-recurring act of cessation of work. And in **וְאָמַרְךָ וְאָמַרְךָ** its continual transmission through the ages is ensured by the influence of the home.

3. **Ibid. – The themes of the second five of the Ten Commandments.**

The following five commandments proclaim the result of this knowledge and acknowledgment in our social life. If God is the One Who is solely responsible for our fate in life and is to be the Guide of all our actions, then every one of our fellow-men must be considered as standing equally under His care, and every one of our actions towards Him comes under His observation. Every person at our side is placed where he is by God's Direction and, equally with yourself, has all human rights granted by Him, so that all his possessions, his life, his wife, his freedom, his happiness, his honor and his property must all be considered as sacred to him. You shall not take his life, nor break up his marriage, nor rob him of his freedom, nor smirch his honor and his happiness by false evidence, more, you shall not even allow yourself to covet anything which makes the home of your fellow, and that includes everything which he can call his own!

Despite the fundamental significance of the Ten Commandments, the Sages went out of their way to ensure that people did not misconstrue them as being more important than the rest of the Torah. It is for this reason that the Ten Commandments were removed from the daily prayers. While we do recite certain pivotal passages of the Torah every day (the three paragraphs of the Shema), we are not permitted to recite the Ten Commandments on a daily basis.

4. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Berachot 12a – The Ten Commandments are not read at Shacharit (morning prayers) ...**

[In the morning service in the Temple] they read the Ten Commandments, the Shema [and other prayers]. Rav Yehudah said in the name of Shmuel that the people outside of the Temple wanted to recite the Ten Commandments [every day], but the practice had already been discontinued on account of the arguments of the heretics.

וקורין עשרת הדברות שמע ... אמר רב יהודה אמר שמואל: אף בגבולין בקשו לקרות כן, אלא שכבר בטלום מפני תרעומת המינין.

5. **Rashi, ibid. – ... in case people might think that the Ten Commandments are more important than the other mitzvot.**

[The Ten Commandments were not included in the prayers] so that the heretics would not tell Jews unfamiliar with the tradition that the other parts of the Torah are not true. [The heretics would have cited as proof for their argument the fact that] only the Ten Commandments, which God said and the Jews heard from His mouth at Sinai, were recited in the prayers.

שלא יאמרו לעמי הארץ: אין שאר תורה אמת, ותדעו שאין קורין אלא מה שאמר הקדוש - ברוך - הוא ושמעו מפיו בסיני.

PART C. THE TEN COMMANDMENTS CONTAIN ALL THE MITZVOT

In addition to embodying fundamental values and concepts that lay the foundation for the rest of the Torah, the Ten Commandments actually allude to, and, in a sense, encompass, the remaining 603 mitzvot of the Torah. This is another reason that the Ten Commandments, specifically, were given to the Jews at Sinai. When they received these Ten Commandments, the rest of the Torah was included in their transmission.

1. **Rashi, Shemot 24:12 – The 613 mitzvot are subcategories of the Ten Commandments.**

All the 613 mitzvot are included within the Ten Commandments.

כל שש מאות ושלוש עשרה מצוות בכלל עשרת הדברות הן.

There is an amazing allusion to this aspect of the Ten Commandments, one that could only be attributed to the Torah's Divine origin.

2. **Bamidbar (Numbers) Rabbah 13:16 – There are 613 letters in the Ten Commandments corresponding to the 613 mitzvot, and another seven letters corresponding to the seven days of Creation.**

You find that there are 613 letters from “I am” [at the beginning of the Ten Commandments] to “to your fellow” [at the end], which correspond to the 613 mitzvot. And the seven extra letters [“to your fellow”] correspond to the seven days of Creation. This teaches you that the entire world was only created in the merit of the Torah.

את מוצא תרי”ג אותיות יש מן אנכי עד אשר לרעך, כנגד תרי”ג מצוות, וז’ יתירות כנגד ז’ ימי בראשית, ללמדך שכל העולם לא נברא אלא בזכות התורה.

The very number of the Ten Commandments also alludes to their all-encompassing nature.

3. **Sefas Emes, Yisro, s.v. Mitzvos Zechiras Matan Torah – Just as there were ten general statements by God that brought every detail into being, so the Ten Commandments contain the details of all the other mitzvot.**

The Ten Commandments contain the entire Torah and the mitzvot. They correspond to the “Ten Statements” with which God created the world. Just as in Creation, all that came into being, in general and in detail, were contained in these Ten Statements, similarly all the Torah and mitzvot that are fulfilled by the Jewish people are contained in the Ten Commandments.

דעשרת הדיברות הם כלל כל התורה ומצוות. והם מכונים מול עשרה מאמרות. וכמו דכל מעשה בראשית. וכל מה שמתהווה בעולם בכלל ובפרט היה נכלל בעשרה מאמרות. כמו כן כל התורה ומצוות שנעשו מכל בני ישראל בכלל ובפרט. הכל נכלל בעשרת הדיברות.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ The Ten Commandments are: to believe in God, not to recognize the gods of others, not to take God's Name in vain, to observe Shabbat, to honor one's parents, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to kidnap, not to perjure oneself, and not to covet another person's property or force him to relinquish it.
- ☞ The Ten Commandments encapsulate fundamental Jewish values.
- ☞ Despite the pivotal significance of the Ten Commandments, the Sages cautioned us not to overemphasize their importance, to prevent people from thinking that the rest of the Torah is not equally significant.
- ☞ All 613 mitzvot are included in the Ten Commandments.

SECTION II. PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE TORAH ON SHAVUOT

PART A. THE FRAMEWORK OF SEFIRAT HA'OMER AND MATAN TORAH

Matan Torah (the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai) transformed the essence of the Jewish people. Such a monumental event could not possibly have taken place without the Jewish people undergoing a period of intensive preparation prior to it. As we discussed in the Morasha classes on Sefirat Ha'Omer (Counting the Omer), only through seven weeks of preparation, during which time they worked to transform themselves into fitting recipients of the Torah, was it possible for them to experience the Revelation at Sinai.

Every year on Shavuot, we accept the Torah anew, just as our ancestors did thousands of years ago. And just as our ancestors needed to prepare themselves for that spiritual experience, every Jew today must also have his own period of preparation before Shavuot. How do we prepare to receive the Torah? The forty-nine-day period of Sefirat Ha'Omer is a Divinely designed program to enable us to do this.

1. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306 – The period from the Exodus of Egypt until Shavuot is the time we count the Omer in preparation for receiving the Torah.**

[The Torah] is the entire essence of the Jewish people and it is because of it that they were redeemed and reached the level of greatness that they attained. We were commanded to count from after the first day of Pesach until the day of the Giving of the Torah to show our great desire for the day that our hearts yearn for, as a slave yearns and counts the days until he will go free, because counting [toward a particular date] demonstrates that a person's whole desire is to reach that time.

כי היא כל עיקרן של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו, כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחירות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.

The precedent for this period of preparation was set thousands of years ago, during the first Omer period, when our ancestors were given seven weeks to purify and perfect themselves in preparation for the great revelation that would take place on Mount Sinai. But what should we be working on? What defines a person who is "ready" to receive the Torah? We will see that there are three principal areas in which one must strive to improve oneself in preparation for Shavuot: in commitment to Torah study; in the refinement of one's character; and in one's interpersonal relationships, which foster Jewish unity.

2. **Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, Sichos Mussar, p. 149 – Our preparation for Shavuot is based on the actions of the Jewish people immediately prior to Matan Torah.**

The Torah writes, "They travelled from Rephidim and encamped in the desert, and the Jewish people encamped there opposite the mountain" (Shemot 19:2). The Ohr HaChaim writes that these three phrases allude to the preparation necessary to accept the Torah.

"ויסעו מרפידים... ויחנו במדבר ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר", וכותב האורח חיים הקדוש שכונת הכתוב ללמודנו שלשה ענינים שהם עיקרי ההכנה לקבלת התורה.

PART B. STRENGTHENING TORAH STUDY

The first phrase in the verse describing the Jewish people's preparations for Matan Torah is "They travelled from Rephidim." After God brought the Jewish people out of Egypt, they were attacked by the nation of Amalek at Rephidim. How is this connected to preparing for Matan Torah? We know that the Torah only tells us details that are significant to us. The Hebrew root of the term *rephidim* means "soft" or "lax;" the Torah is hinting that the Jews were vulnerable to Amalek's attack because they developed a laxity toward Torah study. If they had remained diligent in their Torah study, the merit of their learning would have served as a spiritual shield that would have prevented Amalek from attacking them. (Even though the Torah was not given until after Amalek attacked, the Jews had already been instructed in certain mitzvot; those instructions constituted the Torah that they were expected to study.)

When the Torah tells us "They travelled from Rephidim," it doesn't refer merely to their physical journey; it means that the Jewish people distanced themselves from the laxity that Rephidim represented. In order to receive the Torah, they needed to develop an attitude of diligence and dedication toward its study.

1. Ohr HaChaim, Shemot 19:2 – Prepare by increasing Torah study.

"They journeyed from Rephidim" ... The first preparation to receive the Torah is strengthening and intensifying one's involvement in Torah study ...

"ויסעו מרפידים... ההכנה הראשונה לקבלת התורה
היא התגברות והתעצמות בעסק התורה..."

The Torah's wisdom is both exceedingly vast and exceedingly precious. It should come as no surprise that in order to master this huge body of wisdom, a tremendous amount of dedication and diligence is required. The Hebrew word *hatmadah*, which can be loosely translated as "diligence," refers to the attitude that a person must take in order to become a Torah scholar. The word *hatmadah* is derived from the word *tamid*, "constant," which means that the key to success in Torah study is *constant* effort. More specifically, however, the Sages enumerate forty-eight different traits that aid in acquiring Torah wisdom. In order to achieve a perfect mastery of the Torah, a person should make an effort to master these forty-eight traits.

2. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 6:6 – The Torah is acquired through forty-eight forms of acquisition.

The Torah is acquired through forty-eight means of acquisition, and they are as follows: study, listening with one's ear, verbalizing [the concepts] with one's lips, understanding with one's heart, awe, humility ...

התורה נקנית בארבעים ושמונה דברים ואלו הן
בתלמוד בשמיעת האוזן בעריכת שפתים בבינת הלב
באימה בענוה...

The fact that the Omer period consists of forty-nine days to prepare for Matan Torah is not random. Our Sages, with their absolute mastery of the Torah, have taught us that the key to attaining Torah wisdom lies in forty-eight "ways" or means of acquisition. From the time that the Torah was given, God prepared for us a forty-nine-day period during which we can devote one day to each of these "forty-eight ways," and dedicate the final day to mastering all forty-eight as a group.

3. Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Mishnas Rabbi Aharon, Vol. III, p. 13 – Each day of counting the Omer we develop specific attributes to enhance our Torah study.

The days of counting the Omer are days of preparation for the Giving of the Torah. There are forty-eight ways to acquire the Torah

ימי הספירה הם ימי ההכנה למתן תורה. וכיון שקנין
התורה תלוי במ"ח דברים שהתורה נקנית בהם

(Pirkei Avot/Ethics of the Fathers, Ch. 6), just as there is a specific process to establish ownership over any object, as Rav Chaim elaborated. Therefore, it is clear that the way to prepare is through these forty-eight ways ... The [first] forty-eight days correspond to the forty-eight ways that the Torah is acquired. The forty-ninth day is a complete day dedicated to sanctity and preparation for receiving the Torah ...

The reason that this preparation is connected to the Omer is to entrench and implant within us the recognition that everything comes from God, which is the meaning of the Omer, the offering of the first crops.

(אבות פ"ו) הרי הוא כשאר דברים הנקנים רק בקנינים המועילים להם, וכמו שהאריך בזה הגר"ח זצוק"ל, וא"כ מובן שמדרכי ההכנה להתאמץ ממ"ח דברים אלה. ... והמ"ח ימים הם כנגד מ"ח הדברים שהתורה נקנית בהם, ויום המ"ט הוא יום שלם לקדושה בהכנה לקבלת התורה....

והא דהכנה זו למתן תורה נתלית בעומר, היינו להשריש ולנטוע את ההכרה כי הכל מהשי"ת, שזהו ענין העומר, הקרבת הראשית.

PART C. REFINING OUR CHARACTER

After telling us that the Jewish people travelled away from Rephidim, the Torah then relates that they encamped in the desert. This hints to the fact that the Jews incorporated certain characteristics of the desert as part of their spiritual preparations. Let us examine these characteristics. A desert is a large, ownerless tract of land that possesses no distinguishing qualities. It produces no vegetation; has no distinguishing features to take pride in; and no particular owner to prevent others from utilizing it. The very nature of a desert represents humility. A person who adopts a "desert-like" attitude embodies this attribute.

1. **Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, Sichos Mussar, p. 150 – The second aspect of preparation based on the Ohr HaChaim: Become humble and willing to learn Torah from everyone.**

The second component of preparation for Shavuot is alluded to in the verse, "They encamped in the desert," which is symbolic of character refinement. [A person should] become like the desert [recognizing that our stature is ultimately a gift from God]. As the Talmud teaches: when a person makes himself into a desert, i.e. removing the trait of haughtiness and recognizing that one can learn from everyone around him, then he gains a special ability to study and understand Torah, which will then be given to him as a gift (Nedarim 55).

הכנה שניה לקבלת התורה, כותב האוה"ח, נרמז בכתוב "ויחנו במדבר" והיא תיקון המידות, וביחוד מידת הגאווה, והוא עפ"י מה שאחז"ל (נדרים נ"ה) "כיון שעושה אדם את עצמו כמדבר שהוא מופקר לכל-תורה ניתנה לו במתנה, שנא' 'וממדבר מתנה'".

While the Jewish people's encampment in the desert alludes to the need to cultivate an attitude of humility, the preparation for Matan Torah calls for each and every person to strive to improve their character in all areas. While achieving perfection of character is a meritorious goal in its own right, it is also a fundamental component of the preparation for receiving the Torah.

2. **Rav Chaim Vital, Shaarei HaKedushah, Section 1, Gate 2 – Good character traits are a prerequisite for the fulfillment of the Torah's commandments.**

Good character traits are not included in the 613 mitzvot, but they are essential preparations for the 613 mitzvot, leading to their fulfillment or [if not properly developed, to] their violation ... Therefore, a person must take care to keep away from bad character traits even more than he must be cautious to fulfill the positive and negative commandments, because when he achieves refinement of character, he will be able to easily fulfill all of the mitzvot.

אין המדות מכלל התרי"ג מצוות ואמנם הן הכנות עקריות אל תרי"ג המצוות בקיומם או בביטולם ... ונמצא כי יותר צריך לזהר ממידות רעות יותר מן קיום המצוות עשה ולא תעשה כי בהיותו בעל מדות טובות בנקל יקיים כל המצוות.

More than being a period of general self-improvement, the Sefirah period as a whole provides us with a carefully calculated program of how to do this. Kabbalistic sources identify each week of the Omer with a different character trait, and each day of each week with a specific subsection of that week's character trait. If a person utilizes each day of the Omer by trying to improve in the area that is specific to that day, he will certainly have made great strides toward self-improvement by the end of the Omer – in time to receive the Torah.

3. **Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, Ohr Gedaliyah, Moadim, p. 150 – We grow by working on the particular character traits relative to each day of the Sefirah.**

The days of Sefirat Ha'Omer are a time to rectify character attributes. The first week is to rectify the attribute of *chesed*: to fix [the attribute of] love and make it appropriate; the love of God and the love of friends. The second week is for the attribute of strength: to fix the attribute of fear [of God]. And similarly with all the weeks.

ימי הספירה הוא זמן לתיקון המדות, שבוע ראשונה לתקן מדת החסד, לתקן האהבה שיהי' כראוי, אהבה להשי"ת ואהבת חברים, שבוע שני' מדת גבורה, לתקן מדת היראה, וכן כל השבועות.

PART D. CREATING JEWISH UNITY

Even if we manage to perfect ourselves as individuals, there is another stage in the preparation for receiving the Torah – the establishment of unity within the Jewish people. The principal way to create unity in a group of people is for the members of that group to practice kindness with each other.

1. **Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, Sichos Mussar, p. 152 – The third aspect of preparation based on the Ohr HaChaim: Create unity by doing acts of kindness for one's fellow.**

The third component of preparation for Shavuot is "The Jewish people encamped there opposite the mountain." This represents the unification of individuals with a sincere, full heart ... Corresponding to this the Torah writes, "Vayichan Yisroel" (Israel camped) in the singular to demonstrate that the Jewish nation was now unified like one person [with one heart] and as such they deserved to receive the Torah.

והכנה שלישית לקבלת התורה, "ויחן שם ישראל נגד ההר", וכ' האוה"ח וז"ל "וענין ג', יעוד חכמים בהתחברות בלב שלם ותמים... וכנגד זה אמר "ויחן ישראל" לשון יחיד, שנעשו כולן יחד כאיש אחד [בלב אחד], והן עתה ראויים הם לקבלת התורה."

For each person assisted his neighbor in finding a good encampment and in providing for his physical needs. This was the third aspect of their preparation for receiving the Torah.

כי כל אחד עסק בהכנת מקום טוב לחבירו, זה היה כל עסקם בחניה ובצרכיה, והיא היתה הכנתם לקבלת התורה.

What is the connection between unity and the Torah? The Torah's ways are pleasant, and the Jewish nation is fit to receive the Torah only if they rid themselves of conflict and divisiveness, which are the opposite of the Torah's pleasantness.

2. Midrash Tanchuma Yashan, Yitro 9 – We can receive the Torah – whose ways are peaceful and pleasant – if we embody these qualities.

“Her [the Torah’s] ways are ways of pleasantness.” God wanted to give the Torah to the Jews as soon as they left Egypt. But they were arguing with each other and continually saying, “Let us appoint a new leader and return to Egypt” ... When they came to Rephidim they were all equal and became united ... God said, “The entire Torah is peace. To whom should I give it? To a nation that loves peace.” This is the meaning of the end of the verse, “And all her paths are peace” (Mishlei/Proverbs 3:17).

דרכיה דרכי נועם וגו'. ביקש הקב"ה ליתן תורה לישראל בשעה שיצאו ממצרים, והיו חולקין זה על זה והיו אומרים בכל שעה נתנה ראש ונשובה מצרימה... כשבאו לרפידים הושוו כולם ונעשו אגודה אחת... אמר הקב"ה התורה כולה שלום, ולמי אתננה לאומה שאוהבת שלום, הוי כל נתיבותיה שלום (משלי ג:י"ז).

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ In order to properly prepare for receiving the Torah on Shavuot, we must prepare ourselves in advance. The nature of the preparation that is required can be derived from the preparations that our ancestors undertook before they received the Torah on Mount Sinai.
- ☞ The first form of preparation is to strengthen our own Torah study, increasing the amount of study in which we engage and working on mastering the forty-eight means of acquiring the Torah.
- ☞ The second form of preparation is working on refining our personal character. We should learn the attribute of humility from the fact that the Torah was given in a desert.
- ☞ The third form of preparation is the fostering of Jewish unity. By doing kindnesses for others, we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah, whose ways are pleasant.

SECTION III. MEGILLAT RUTH

One of the customs of the festival of Shavuot is to read Megillat Ruth, one of the Five Megillot which are among the twenty-four Books of the Tanach (Bible). It tells the story of Ruth, a non-Jewish princess from the land of Moav. Ruth married a Jew who had fled to Moav to escape a famine in the Land of Israel. When Ruth's husband died, along with her brother-in-law and father-in-law, her impoverished and bereaved mother-in-law Naomi chose to return to Israel, and Ruth forsook her entire upbringing and the land of her

birth to convert to Judaism and accompany Naomi back to Israel. In Israel, Ruth and Naomi were penniless, and Ruth collected grain from the field of a wealthy relative named Boaz, along with other paupers who were sustained by his charity. Ultimately, Boaz married Ruth, and they became the ancestors of the Davidic dynasty, the ultimate monarchy of the Jewish people.

PART A. WHY DO WE READ MEGILLAT RUTH ON SHAVUOT?

1. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 490 – It is a custom to read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot.

The custom is to read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot.

ונוהגין לומר רות בשבועות.

Ruth's story will reveal lessons that are fundamentally connected to Shavuot.

2. Rabbi Yisroel Miller, *A Gift for Yom Tov*, pp. 123-124 – The story of Ruth serves as a model for us when we come to accept the Torah anew on Shavuot.

To obtain a picture of what happened at Sinai to the Jewish nation as a whole, we learn Chumash. But to discover how each of us as individuals today can bring ourselves to an acceptance of Torah this Shavuot, we must examine the story of a sincere individual convert, someone who accepted the Torah on her own. Sinai was the conversion to Judaism of the entire nation; our mitzvah today is for each of us to make an effort to reconvert ourselves. To teach us how, Tanach devotes an entire volume to the story of one person who did it, perhaps the greatest convert of all: the Megillah of Ruth.

3. Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer – Judaism requires dedication, a quality which we learn from Ruth.

The conversion of Ruth to the Jewish faith was a great act of self-sacrifice. Instead of returning to the physical luxury and status of her Moabite royalty, she clung steadfastly to her Jewish mother-in-law, determined to find her place “beneath the wings of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence).” One of the reasons that Ruth is read on the festival of Shavuot is to demonstrate that Judaism requires sincere dedication.

PART B. RUTH IS THE PARADIGM OF A PERSON WHO EMBRACES JUDAISM

The Book of Ruth may be considered an anomaly: an entire book of Tanach devoted to the story of an individual who converted to Judaism. But the truth is that as such, Ruth stands out as an example for all future generations both of the type of convert that the Torah accepts, and of the status accorded to sincere converts who depart from their previous lives with great self-sacrifice in order to embrace the Torah and its commandments.

From a halachic perspective, the Book of Ruth is an important source for the laws pertaining to potential converts. Halachah requires us to test the sincerity of potential converts by seeking to dissuade them; we learn from Megillat Ruth how far we must go to attempt to dissuade them, and how adamant they must be in order to be accepted.

1. Rashi, Ruth 1:16 – We learn laws of conversion from Ruth.

[Ruth told Naomi,] “Do not prevent me. Do not argue against me. For wherever you go I will

אל תפגע בי. אל תפצרי בי. כי אל אשר תלכי אלך.
מכאן אמרו רבותינו ז”ל (יבמות מז:): גר שבא להתגייר

go.” From here our Sages said that someone who comes to convert should be told some of the punishments [for transgressing the Torah’s laws] so that if he wants to change his mind he can. From the words of Ruth you learn what Naomi said to her.

מודיעים לו מקצת עונשים שאם בא לחזור בו יחזור. שמתוך דברים של רות אתה למד מה שאמרה לה נעמי.

2. Targum, Ruth 1:16-17 – Ruth’s acceptance of Jewish law (part of the conversion procedure).

Ruth said, “Do not entreat me further to leave you, for I wish to convert to Judaism.” Naomi told her, “We are commanded to keep the Sabbaths and Festival Days, on which we may not travel more than two thousand *amot* beyond the town.” Ruth replied, “Wherever you go I will go.” Naomi said, “We are commanded not to lodge together with the nations.” Ruth replied, “Where you lodge I will lodge.”

Naomi said, “We are commanded to guard six hundred and thirteen mitzvot.” Ruth replied, “That which your nation guards, I too shall guard; it is as though it has always been my nation.” Naomi said, “We are commanded not to worship other gods.” Ruth replied, “Your God is my God.” Naomi said, “We have four capital punishments...” Ruth replied, “Where you die I will die ... And do not continue to speak with me; God do so to me, and more also, for only death will come between me and you!”

ואמרת רות לא תקניטי בי למשבקיך למיתב מן בתרך ארום תאיבא אנא לאתגירא אמרת נעמי אתפקדנא למטר שביא ויומי טבא בגין דלא להלכה בר מתרין אלפין אמין אמרת רות לכל מן די את אזילא איזל אמרת נעמי אתפקדנא דלא למבת כחדא עם עממיא אמרת רוב לכל אתר די תביתי אבית.

אמרת נעמי אתפקדנא למנטר שית מאה ותלת עסר פקודיא אמרת רות מה דנטרין עמיך איהא נטרא אנא כאילו הוו עמי מן קדמות דנא אמרת נעמי אתפקדנא דלא למפלח פולחנא נוכראה אמרת רות אלהך הוא אלהי אמרת נעמי אית לנא ארבע דיני מותר לחייביא ... אמרת רות לכל מה דתמותי אמות ... ולא תוסיפי עוד למללא כדנן יעביד ה' לי וכדנן יוסיף עלי ארום מותא יהא מפריש ביני ובינך.

Although we must attempt to dissuade prospective converts, a person who does convert to Judaism with sincere motives is accorded the highest accolades.

3. Midrash Mishlei (Proverbs) 31 – Woman of Valor.

“Many women have achieved valor, but you have surpassed them all” (Mishlei 31:29). This refers to Ruth who entered under the wings of the *Shechinah*.

רבות בנות עשו חיל ואת עלית על כולנה. זו רות המואביה, שנכנסה תחת כנפי השכינה.

PART C. LEGITIMIZING KING DAVID’S LINEAGE

Another theme of Megillat Ruth is the validation of the lineage of King David. Since David was a descendant of Ruth, who was a Moabite convert, a controversy arose regarding his lineage. In order to validate him as the king of Israel, it was necessary for the Sages of the era to publicize a little-known tradition that the Torah bars only male Moabite converts from marrying into the Jewish people; female Moabite converts, such as Ruth, are completely permitted to marry Jewish men. Because he was the progenitor of the Jewish people’s royal family, from which the Messiah will eventually come, it is of vital importance to establish that King David’s

lineage is completely unblemished. The Book of Ruth attests to the fact that her conversion and marriage to Boaz was unchallenged and perfectly acceptable according to Torah law.

1. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 23:4 – Ammonite and Moabite men may not marry Jewish women even if they convert.

An Ammonite or Moabite may not come into the congregation of God.

לא-יבא עמוני ומואבי בקהל יהוה: גם דור עשירי, לא-יבא להם בקהל יהוה עד-עולם.

2. Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 77a-b – King David was descended from a female Moabite convert (Ruth) who was allowed to marry a Jewish man.

Doeg the Edomi then said to him [Shaul HaMelech], "Before you ask whether he [David] is fit to be king or not, find out whether he is permitted to be part of the Jewish community or not!" "What is the reason?" "Because he is descended from Ruth the Moabitess"... Doeg raised all these objections to them and they remained silent. He wanted to make a proclamation against him [David] ...

But [Amasa] girded his sword like a Yishmaeli and exclaimed, "Whoever will not obey the following halachah will be stabbed with the sword; I have this tradition from the *Beit Din* (court) of Samuel the Ramati: An Ammoni but not an Ammonite [female Ammoni]; A Moavi, but not a Moabite [female Moavi]!" ... Samuel and his Beit Din were still living.

א"ל דואג האדומי עד שאתה משאיל עליו אם הגון הוא למלכות אם לאו שאל עליו אם ראוי לבא בקהל אם לאו מ"ט דקאתי מרות המואביה ... אקשי להו דואג כל הני קושייתא אישתיקו בעי לאכרוזי עליה מיד...

חגר חרבו כישמעאל ואמר כל מי שאינו שומע הלכה זו ידקר בחרב כך מקובלני מבית דינו של שמואל הרמתי עמוני ולא עמונית מואבי ולא מואבית.... שאני הכא דהא שמואל ובית דינו קיים.

What does all this have to do with Shavuot? According to tradition, Shavuot is both the birthday of King David and the anniversary of his death – a fitting date for the annual reminder that our monarchy has unblemished lineage.

3. Shaarei Teshuvah, Orach Chaim 494:2 – King David was born and died on Shavuot. It is appropriate to read of his lineage on this day.

The custom is to read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. My grandfather wrote in *Bechor Shor* (p. 121) that the reason is because King David died on *Atzeret* (Shavuot), and God completes the years of the righteous [so that they die on their birthday, and in this way live out their full number of years]. Certainly, then, King David was born on this day. The Book of Ruth was written to legitimize David's lineage.

נוהגים לומר רות בשבועות ואא"ז בבכ"ש דף קכ"א הטעם שלפי שדוד המלך ע"ה מת בעצרת והקב"ה ממלא שנותיהם כו' ובודאי בעצרת נולד ומגילת רות נכתב לייחס דוד.

Throughout the generations, other non-Jews, many of them living lives of comfort and privilege, also followed Ruth's example, forsaking their families, their upbringings, and their comfortable lives to embrace

Judaism and the Torah. Their self-sacrifice stands out as a scintillating example of what it means to be dedicated to Judaism and its ideals.

As Rabbi Natan Gamedze likes to tell it, his path to self-discovery – his transformation from prince to rabbi – was paved with chance encounters, mystical experiences, and guideposts, all orchestrated to lead him to his present life as an observant Jew. A linguist with an honors degree from Oxford, Rabbi Gamedze is the grandson of a former king of Swaziland and scion of the royal Gamedze dynasty that had ruled Swaziland (bordering South Africa) for generations.

He first encountered Judaism in college, while taking a class in Italian literature. Rabbi Gamedze, who is fluent in twelve languages, noticed a fellow student scribbling in a script he did not recognize. He was intrigued. After class, the student told him it was Hebrew. “I’m usually slow to make decisions,” admits Rabbi Gamedze. “But right after I spoke to the student, I dashed down to the Languages Department and signed up for an introductory course in Hebrew.” Six months later, the language whiz had mastered basic Hebrew, and was taking Hebrew classes with a native Israeli. “During the first session, I was listening to a tape in Hebrew of the Torah reading Lech Lecha, and the words resonated,” says Rabbi Gamedze. “I felt that the text was talking to me. Hebrew seemed to speak to my soul, and I started reading more and more texts until I came to Rambam’s Mishneh Torah, which struck a huge chord. I loved it. I carried a volume of the Rambam with me wherever I went, and I discussed its teachings with my Jewish friends on campus, who were not well-versed about their own tradition. Ironically, my enthusiasm for their religion turned them on to Judaism, and they began studying themselves. It was a bit strange that the very person who ended up bringing them closer to Judaism wasn’t Jewish himself.”

One day, in the spring of 1988, Rabbi Gamedze had one of those mystical encounters he refers to. “I was sitting in the campus restaurant, having a cup of coffee, when a stranger walked in and started speaking Hebrew to me,” he says. Rabbi Gamedze had never met this man before, but the man – a visiting professor from Israel – seemed to know all about him. “Would you be interested in pursuing a PhD in languages at Hebrew University in Jerusalem ... on a full scholarship?” the professor asked.

“When I left South Africa, I had a strong feeling that it was for good, that I wasn’t just leaving for a few years, but that I was getting myself into something much bigger than that,” says Rabbi Gamedze. “I felt that the appearance of the professor that day was not just a coincidence – it was a sign from God. I’ve always believed that God is guiding me, and that I have to be attuned to the signs He drops. My motto was: ‘Seize the signs, even if you don’t know where they will take you.’ In this particular case, they took me to Jerusalem.”

“For two years I was taking classes in Biblical Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, Aramaic, but I felt that something was lacking,” Rabbi Gamedze says. “I couldn’t put my finger on it, but a certain dimension that I had found in Rambam was absent from my studies. I was in a quandary ... trying to figure out what Hebrew had to tell me ... and I didn’t know how to progress. Then I got a call from the Jewish friends I had left behind in South Africa.” Rabbi Gamedze remembered that when he introduced his friends to Mishneh Torah, he had sparked their interest in Judaism, but he hadn’t known to what extent. They had come to Israel as well and were studying at a yeshivah (Ohr Somayach). “Come join us,” they urged him.

*After Hebrew University, Rabbi Gamedze enrolled full-time at Ohr Somayach, where he ultimately stayed for five years. In 1995, Rabbi Gamedze left Ohr Somayach to study at Brisk Yeshivah, one of the most prestigious yeshivot in Jerusalem. He completed his studies in 2000, received rabbinic ordination, subsequently married, and now works in Jewish education. (From **Jewish Action Magazine**, Summer 2006.)*

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

☞ On Shavuot, we read Megillat Ruth, the story of a non-Jewish princess who converted to Judaism and became the forerunner of the Davidic dynasty.

- ✎ Ruth stands out as a paragon of selfless dedication to Torah and self-sacrifice to fulfill its commandments. This is a fitting lesson for Shavuot, when we must also accept the Torah with great dedication.
- ✎ Megillat Ruth is a source of many important laws regarding conversion to Judaism.
- ✎ Megillat Ruth is also an important source that reflects the validity of King David's lineage.

SECTION IV. SHAVUOT CUSTOMS

Many of our festivals are marked by distinguishing mitzvot; Rosh HaShanah has the shofar, Sukkot has the sukkah and the Four Species, and Pesach has the matzah and the Seder Night. While Shavuot is not marked by any such observances, it is distinguished by a number of revered customs – which, while perhaps not as well known, are still quite significant.

PART A. STUDYING ON THE NIGHT OF SHAVUOT

One of the customs of Shavuot is to put in an “all-nighter” on the first night of the festival. Throughout the world, Jews gather in their synagogues and spend the entire night immersed in Torah study – until dawn, when they conduct an early prayer service. What is the reason for this practice?

1. **Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) Rabbah 1:12:2 – On the day of Matan Torah, when God came to Mount Sinai to give them the Torah, the Jews were sleeping.**

God came first [to Mount Sinai] as the verse states, “On the third day, in the morning.” It also says, “On the third morning God descended before the eyes of the nation.” The Jews were sleeping all night, because the sleep of *Atzeret* is very sweet and the night is short. Rabbi Yuden said that even the fleas did not bite them. God came and found them sleeping. He began to wake them with fanfare, as the verse says, “On the third day, in the morning, there were sounds and thunder.” Moshe woke up the people and brought them out before the King of kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He.

הקב"ה הקדים דכתיב (שם) ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר וכתיב (שם) כי ביום השלישי ירד ה' לעיני כל העם ישנו להם ישראל כל אותו הלילה לפי ששינה של עצרת עריבה והלילה קצרה אמר ר' יודן אפילו פורטענא לא עקין במ. בא הקדוש ברוך הוא ומוציאן ישנים התחיל מעמיד עליהם בקלאנין הה"ד ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר ויהי קולות וברקים והיה משה מעורר לישראל ומוציאן לאפנתו של מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה.

2. **Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494 – To rectify the mistake of the generation who received the Torah, we stay up all night on Shavuot learning Torah.**

The Zohar says that the early pious ones would stay awake all night on Shavuot and learn Torah. Nowadays our custom is for most learned people to do so. Perhaps the reason is based on the fact that the Israelites slept all night long and God had to wake them when He wanted to give them the Torah, as it says in the Midrash, and therefore we must repair this.

איתא בזוהר שחסידים הראשונים היו נעורים כל הלילה ועוסקים בתורה וכבר נהגו רוב הלומדים לעשות כן ואפשר לתת טעם ע"פ פשוטו לפי שישראל היו ישנים כל הלילה והוצרך הקב"ה להעיר אותם כדאיתא במדרש לכן אנו צריכים לתקן זה.

Beyond rectifying our ancestors' mistake, however, our act of staying up all night is an important demonstration of our own inner, emotional commitment to the Torah.

3. **Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, The Jerusalem Kollel – Demonstrating our dedication to Torah study.**

On Shavuot, there is a special reason to stay up all night learning Torah. Even if one would argue that you can learn more hours during Shavuot by keeping to a regular schedule, the goal here is different. We are showing our uncompromised, extraordinary dedication to the study of Torah on the day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people.

The significance of this custom is highlighted by the sources that indicate that it affords a certain mystical protection to those who observe it.

4. **Mishnah Berurah 494:1 – Staying up all night on Shavuot affords one protection from harm during the year.**

In the Shulchan Aruch Ha'Ari it says: You should know that anyone who does not sleep at all on the night of Shavuot but stays awake and learns Torah is guaranteed that he will fulfill his potential during the coming year and no harm will befall him.

ואיתא בשו"ע האר"י ז"ל דע שכל מי שבליילה לא ישן כלל ועיקר והיה עוסק בתורה מובטח לו שישלים שנתו ולא יארע לו שום נזק.

PART B. EATING DAIRY FOODS

On most festivals, it is preferable to serve meat exclusively. On Shavuot, however, there is a custom to serve dairy as well. One explanation for this is that the consumption of both dairy and meat creates an allusion to the offering of the Two Loaves that the Torah prescribes for Shavuot.

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494 – Reminder of the offering of the Two Loaves of bread.**

The custom is to eat dairy foods on the first day of Shavuot. It seems to me that the reason for this is like the two cooked dishes that we eat on Pesach as a reminder of the Pesach and Chagigah sacrifices. So too, on Shavuot we eat dairy followed by meat, [which requires us to] have two separate loaves of bread on the table, which symbolically represents the Altar. In this way we have a reminder of the Two Loaves of bread that were offered on Shavuot, the day of *bikurim*.

נוהגין בכל מקום לאכל מאכלי חלב ביום ראשון של שבועות. ונראה לי הטעם, שהוא כמו השני תבשילין שלוקחים בליל פסח, וזכר לפסח וזכר לחגיגה, כן אוכלים מאכל חלב ואחר כך מאכל בשר, וצריכין להביא עמהם ב' לחם על השלחן שהוא במקום המזבח, ויש בזה זכרון לב' הלחם שהיו מקריבין ביום הבכורים.

2. **Mishnah Berurah 494:14 – The allusion to the Two Loaves offering lies in the fact that the consumption of both dairy and meat foods requires us to use two separate loaves of bread at the meal.**

"Just like the two cooked dishes ... so we eat ..." In other words, just as on Pesach we have a reminder of the Pesach sacrifice, so too on

כמו השני תבשילין וכו' כן אוכלים וכו' - ר"ל כשם שבפסח עושין זכר לקרבן כן אנו צריכין לעשות

Shavuot we have to make a remembrance of the Two Loaves of bread that were brought in the Temple. Therefore, we eat dairy foods and afterwards meat foods. Each one requires separate bread to accompany it, because it is forbidden to eat from the same loaf of bread with both milk and meat, and in this way we remember the Two Loaves from the Temple.

בשבועות זכר לשתי הלחם שהיו מביאין וע"כ אוכלים מאכלי חלב ואח"כ מאכל בשר וצריכין להביא עמהם שתי לחמים דאסור לאכול בשר וחלב מלחם אחד ויש בזה זכרון לשתי הלחם.

Furthermore, our ancestors ate dairy foods on the first Shavuot, after they had received the Torah, because they had just become aware of all the laws pertaining to meat preparation and did not have time to prepare kosher meat.

3. **Ibid. 494:12 – Reminder of how the Jewish people kept kosher after Matan Torah.**

The Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah [even though they only heard the Ten Commandments, these contained within them all the other parts of the Torah, as explained by Rav Saadiah Gaon]. Afterwards, they returned to their homes but were not able to eat meat products immediately because that requires preparation: *Shechitah* with a knife which is sharp and checked; removal of the sciatic nerve, forbidden fats, and blood; soaking and salting; and cooking in new pots because all the existing pots had been used in the preceding twenty-four hours for non-kosher food and were therefore forbidden. As such, the Jews chose to eat dairy at that time. We therefore eat dairy in remembrance of this.

כי בעת שעמדו על הר סיני וקבלו התורה [כי בעשרת הדברות נתגלה להם עי"ז כל חלקי התורה כמו שכתב רב סעדיה גאון שבעשרת הדברות כלולה כל התורה] וירדו מן ההר לביתם לא מצאו מזה לאכול תיכף כ"א מאכלי חלב כי לבשר צריך הכנה רבה לשחוט בסכין בדוק כאשר צוה ה' ולנקר חוטי החלב והדם ולהדיח ולמלוח ולבשל בכלים חדשים כי הכלים שהיו להם מקודם שבישלו בהם באותו מעל"ע נאסרו להם ע"כ בחרו להם לפי שעה מאכלי חלב ואנו עושין זכר לזה.

4. **Ibid. 494:13 – Torah is compared to honey and milk.**

Some people also have the custom to eat honey and milk because the Torah is likened to honey and milk, as the verse states: "Honey and milk are under his tongue" (Shir HaShirim 4:11).

גם נוהגין בקצת מקומות לאכול דבש וחלב מפני התורה שנמשלה לדבש וחלב כמש"כ דבש וחלב תחת לשונך וגו'.

The consumption of dairy is also symbolic:

5. **Rabbi Shimon Finkelman, Dairy on Shavuot, in "Shavuot," published by ArtScroll Publications – Just as a mother's milk provides an infant with all its nutritional needs, the Torah provides the Jewish people with all their spiritual needs.**

Man cannot live on bread alone, nor can he survive on just water. Yet, one of the miracles of childbirth is that a mother's milk provides her newborn with all the nourishment it needs. In this sense, Torah is like milk, for it encompasses within it all the sustenance that man's soul needs for spiritual vitality and growth. Thus, the milk foods of Shavuot allude to the Torah itself (Imrei Noam).

PART C. DECORATING THE SYNAGOGUE WITH FLOWERS AND TREES

Another festive practice on Shavuot is adorning the synagogue with plants and flowers.

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494 – The decorative plants and flowers are inspired by the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.**

Our custom is to decorate the synagogues and houses with plants and flowers on Shavuot as a reminder of the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.

ונוהגין לשטח עשבים בשבעות בבית הכנסת והבתים,
זכר לשמחת מתן תורה.

2. **Mishnah Berurah 494:10 – The decorations allude to the fact that Mt. Sinai miraculously sprouted with vegetation at the Giving of the Torah.**

“A reminder of the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.” Because there were plants around Mount Sinai, as the verse states: “The sheep and cattle must not graze ...”

זכר לשמחת מתן תורה - שהיו שם עשבים סביב הר
סיני כדכתיב הצאן והבקר אל ירעו וגו'.

In addition to alluding to the Giving of the Torah, the plants and flowers also allude to another aspect of Shavuot – as the day on which the world is judged regarding the productivity of its fruit-bearing trees.

3. **Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494:5 – The decorations are to remind us that Shavuot is when we are judged for the fruit of the trees.**

The custom is to put trees in the synagogues and houses. It seems to me that the reason for this is that on *Atzeret* we are judged for the fruit of the trees, and we should pray for them.

ונוהגין להעמיד אילנות בבה"כ ובבתים ונ"ל הטעם
שיזכירו שבעצרת נידונים על פירות האילן ויתפללו
עליהם.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ It is customary to spend the entire night of Shavuot involved in Torah study. In this way, we rectify the mistake of our ancestors, who did not arise early to receive the Torah on the first Shavuot. We also demonstrate our own dedication to Torah study.
- ☞ It is customary to consume dairy foods on Shavuot. There are several reasons for this, among them: to create an allusion to the Two Loaves offering brought on Shavuot; to commemorate the fact that our ancestors ate dairy after they received the Torah; and because dairy foods are the symbol of complete sustenance, just as the Torah provides our complete spiritual needs.
- ☞ It is also customary to decorate the synagogue with flowers on Shavuot. This reflects our joy on the festival of receiving the Torah, as well as alluding to the fact that plants and flowers sprouted on Mount Sinai when the Torah was given. Furthermore, it is an allusion to the fact that Shavuot is the day on which the world is judged regarding the fruit trees.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHY WERE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS GIVEN ON MOUNT SINAI?

The Ten Commandments are in no way holier or more important than the other mitzvot. God gave us the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai because they encapsulate fundamental Jewish values and thus prepared us to receive the rest of the Torah. The first five of the Ten Commandments create and instill the knowledge that our lives are under God's absolute dominion, and the second set of five dictate how our interpersonal relationships are governed by this awareness. Furthermore, the Ten Commandments encompass all 613 commandments of the Torah.

WHY IS PREPARATION PIVOTAL IN MAXIMIZING THE SHAVUOT EXPERIENCE AND HOW IS THIS ACCOMPLISHED?

The Torah is both exceedingly precious and exceedingly vast, and it cannot be properly acquired without prior preparation. Our ancestors were given the days of the Omer to prepare to receive the Torah, and we can learn from them the proper way to approach Shavuot. There are three principal areas of preparation: intensifying one's Torah study, refining one's character, and fostering Jewish unity by performing acts of kindness for others.

WHAT WAS OUTSTANDING ABOUT RUTH THAT WE READ IN MEGILLAT RUTH?

When we accept the Torah and its commandments, we can learn from the example of Ruth, a non-Jewish princess who abandoned her life of privilege and luxury in order to convert to Judaism. Ruth's outstanding dedication and self-sacrifice ultimately made her a pivotal figure in Jewish history: the great-grandmother of King David.

WHY DO WE STAY UP LEARNING TORAH THE NIGHT OF SHAVUOT, EAT DAIRY FOODS, AND DECORATE THE SYNAGOGUE WITH FLOWERS?

We devote the entire night of Shavuot to Torah study to rectify the mistake of our ancestors, who slept late on the day they received the Torah, as well as to express our own dedication to Torah study. We eat dairy foods to commemorate the offering of the Two Loaves in the Temple and to commemorate the fact that our ancestors ate dairy after they received the Torah. We decorate the synagogue with flowers to express our joy at receiving the Torah, to allude to the fact that flowers bloomed on Mount Sinai when God gave us the Torah, and to allude to the fact that the world is judged on Shavuot regarding the productivity of its fruit trees.

**This class was prepared by Rabbi David Sedley
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