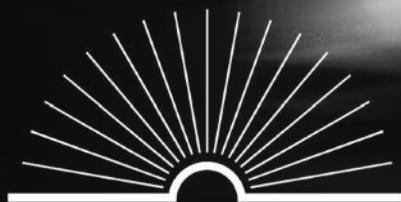
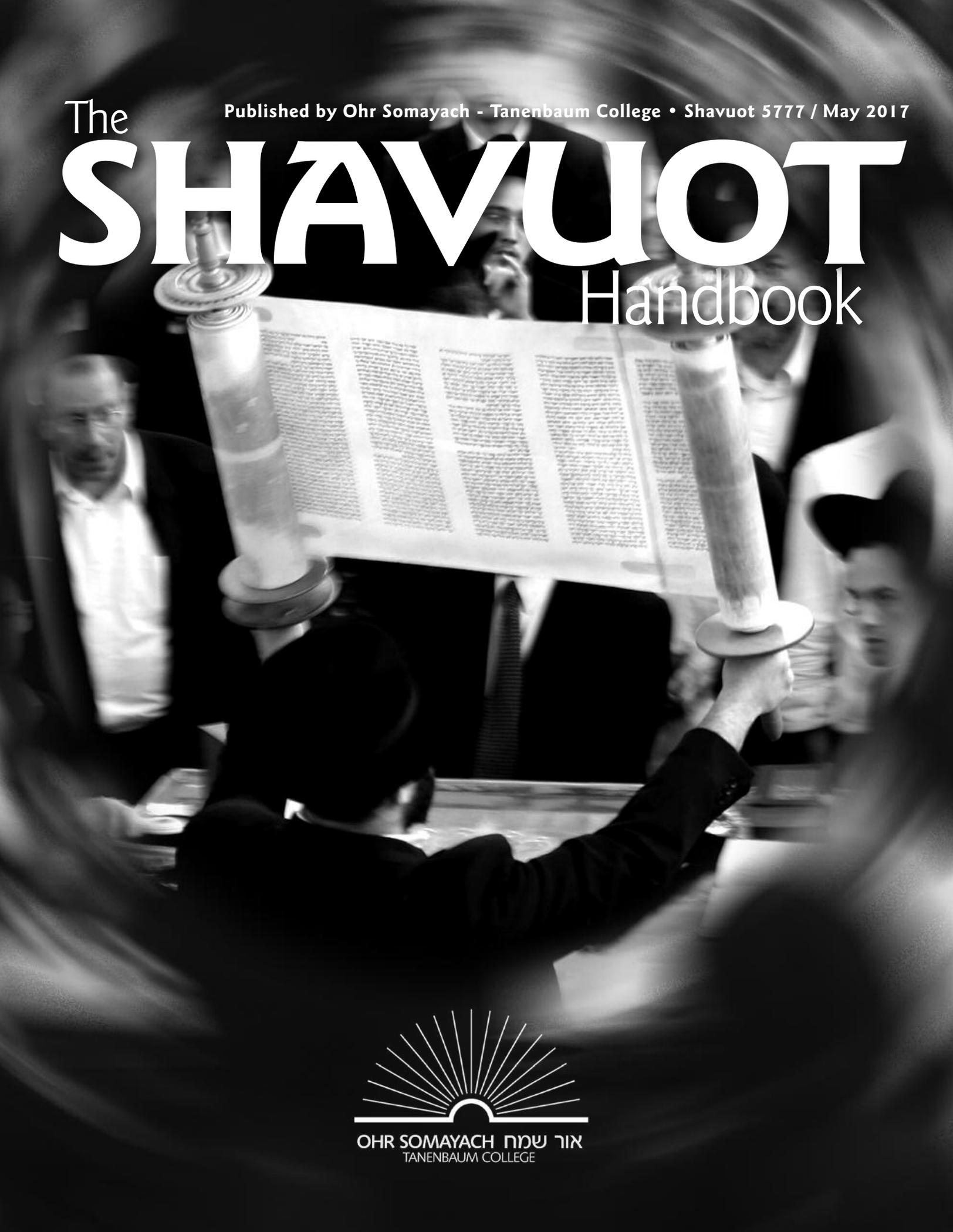


The

Published by Ohr Somayach - Tanenbaum College • Shavuot 5777 / May 2017

SHAVUOT

Handbook



אור שמוח
OHR SOMAYACH
TANENBAUM COLLEGE

The SHAVUOT Handbook

Sivan 5777 • May 2017

Published by
OHR SOMAYACH
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T A R Y A G

BY RAV MENDEL WEINBACH, *Zatzal*

The Taryag Mitzvot

The Jew was given 613 commandments (*mitzvot*), according to the Talmud, which contain 248 positive commands and 365 negative ones. The positive *mitzvot* equal the number of parts of the body; the negative *mitzvot* correspond to the number of days in the solar year.

Thus are we introduced to 613, the magic number of Torah scholarship and Jewish living. Its source is the Babylonian Talmud; its importance is echoed in a vast body of scholarly literature spanning a millennium; its potential as an aid to studying and remembering Torah deserves our careful analysis.

The Talmud refers to this number as *taryag mitzvot*. Classical Jewish sources assign a numerical value to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is treated not as a mere utilitarian collection of word components but as a conveyor of esoteric information through the Kabbalistic medium of *gematria*. Thus the *gematria* of *taryag* is 613 (*tav* = 400, *raish* = 200, *yud* = 10, and *gimel* = 3). The tradition of *taryag mitzvot* was developed by Rabbi Simlai of the Talmud, reasoning as follows: Scripture tells us that Moses commanded the Torah to the Children of Israel. The *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of the four Hebrew letters of the word Torah is 611. Add to this the two commandments which all of Israel heard from God Himself at Mt. Sinai and you have a total of 613 - *taryag*.

Before any ambitious Bible student goes plunging into the five books of the Torah in search of a list of these commandments, he should be warned that the task is more formidable than it seems. The Torah is a fascinating complex of prophetic history and Divine guidance, encompassing the entire human and universal experience, and the commandments contained therein represent but one of its dimensions. Tradition has it that God used the Torah as His blueprint for creating the world and that all of its letters can be combined to form the different sacred names of the Deity. Attempting to approach the Torah superficially is therefore as safe as negotiating

an iceberg. One unfamiliar with the Talmudic ground rules for calculating the *mitzvot* is likely to come up with a number far below or beyond the 613 total. In actuality the Torah contains thousands of rules and the *taryag mitzvot* are only the broad classifications.

The First Shorthand

The first recorded attempt to develop scholarly criteria for counting the commandments was made close to 1,000 years ago by Rabbi Shimon Kaeira, whose classic *Halochot Gedolot* (The Great Laws) became the pacesetter in this field. The famed medieval Spanish scholar, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, suggests that something along the lines of Rabbi Kaeira's work had been written more than two millennia earlier by Joshua and the Children of Israel when entering the Land of Israel. Commanded by God to record the entire Torah in 70 languages on 12 great stones after crossing the Jordan, they faced the apparently insurmountable task of inscribing millions of words. Ibn Ezra concluded that they only listed the 613 commandments in each language, rather than the whole Torah.

Even if Ibn Ezra was correct in his assumption, later generations had no record of which commandments were indeed inscribed on those stones. Kaeira's work won wide acceptance but by no means went unchallenged. There has probably been no single item of the Talmud which has been the subject of so much critical analysis as Rabbi Simlai's statement. Rav Saadia Gaon's listing differed from Rabbi Kaeira's, and Maimonides challenged them both. His own compilation laid the groundwork for his *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Book of the Mitzvot) and the classic *Mishne Torah* codification which followed. Dozens of volumes and epic poems have been authored throughout the generations of the *taryag* theme, with earlier generations favoring Rabbi Kaeira's system and the later ones following the pattern of Maimonides.

But on one thing there was consensus: the usefulness of the listing of the *mitzvot* as a medium for gaining a perspective of all the Divine commandments included in the Torah's message to Jewry.

continued on page four



TARYAG continued from page three

The great French Torah authority and itinerant preacher Rabbi Moshe of Coucy memorized all of the 613 *mitzvot* as a personal checklist when he set out in 1235 on a tour of Jewish communities in France and Spain for the purpose of strengthening their fulfillment of Torah commandments. French Jewry was then suffering from the decree of Crusader King Louis IX (who was later canonized by the Catholic Church) on the burning of the Talmud, and these talks on the *mitzvot* filled a serious intellectual void. In one community after another he was besieged by information-hungry audiences asking him to expand his lectures into a fullfledged book.

Modesty prevented the Sage of Coucy from undertaking a work of such magnitude for the public. Then one night he was commanded in a dream to write a book on the *mitzvot* which was to be divided into two sections: the positive commandments and the negative ones. The response to this prophetic dream was the compilation of the classic Sefer Hamitzvot Hagadol (The Great Book of Mitzvot).

Not long afterwards, another French sage, Rabbi Yitzchak of Couerville, compiled a more concise listing of the *mitzvot*, Sefer Mitzvot Katan (The Small Book of Mitzvot), which he dispatched at his own expense to Jewish communities in western Europe so that they might copy its contents as a record of the commandments they were obligated to fulfill.

The Night-Long Vigils

The situation in Spain was different. There was no need for mitzvah listings as a replacement for banned literature. But even here the need was felt for providing at least a periodical review of the commandments in order to refresh the Torah perspective of both scholar and layman. An ingenious method, typical of the character of medieval Spanish Jewry, was developed. Scholar-poets wove all 613 commandments into long poems to be recited once a year. The time chosen for this unique sort of review was the long sleepless night with which Jews traditionally usher in the Shavuot festival. As they celebrate this holiday, known as “the season of the giving of our Torah,” the People of the Torah recall with shame that on a summer morning in the year 2448 (1312 B.C.E.) in the Sinai Desert, they had to be roused from their sleep by God, anxious to give them His Torah. As an atonement for this ancestral lack of enthusiasm, they stay awake all Shavuot eve studying Torah. The most renowned of these poetic compilations which became part of the *tikkun* (order) of Shavuot eve are the *Azharot* (warnings) of Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gvirol, and it is his version which so many Oriental Jews still recite during their all-night holiday vigil.

There is an apocryphal tale of how Ibn Gvirol’s masterpiece was inspired. Once, when he was still an 18-year-old student in the yeshiva, he heard the master announce that he would offer the hand of his exceptional daughter in marriage to the disciple who would present him with some new scholarly creation. That night the young scholar-poet went without sleep, pouring all of his energies into the writing of his *Azharot* and tossing the finished manuscript into his master’s home through an open skylight. The following morning the master found the papers, recognized Ibn Gvirol’s handwriting, and immediately made arrangements for taking him as his son-in-law.

The once-a-year recital of *taryag mitzvot* through *Azharot* poetry

did not satisfy religious leaders in other lands who felt a need for a more frequent review. Rav Moshe of Couerville recorded his listing of relevant commandments on seven pages so that a Jew could complete the entire listing each week through daily review. Rabbi Aharon Halevi of Barcelona, a contemporary of the sages of Coucy and Couerville, arranged his Sefer Hachinuch (Book of Education) according to weekly Torah portions to encourage his son and other youths to reflect upon the *mitzvot* contained in each chapter. The motivation for this effort, as explained in his introduction, has a ring of contemporary significance: “To familiarize them with the *mitzvot* and to occupy their minds with pure thought and meaningful calculation lest they take into their hearts calculations of amusement, insignificance and meaninglessness; and even when they grow older these *mitzvot* shall not depart from them.” The weekly portion system of listing the *mitzvot* for review was utilized a few centuries later by Rabbi Yeshaya Halevi Horowitz in his Shnei Luchot Habrit (Two Tablets of the Covenant).

Daily Review

The idea of a comprehensive review each week was revived by Rabbi Shabtai Hacoen (1621-1663), author of the classical Siftei Cohen on the Shulchan Aruch. His Poel Zedek (Worker of Righteousness) was a listing of the 613 *mitzvot*, each identified by a one-line scriptural source. He divided them into seven sections to enable readers to easily complete a total review each week. Rabbi David Arel of Volozhin made the same time breakdown in his elaboration of the Keter Torah (Crown of Torah) compilation of *mitzvot* authored by Rabbi David Vital.

Even a week was too long for some authors. Rabbi Shabtai considered a daily review of all the *mitzvot* as the ideal fulfillment of the prophetic command: “This book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall study therein day and night.” He submitted his weekly plan only as a concession to those who couldn’t keep the daily pace.

Somewhere in between the ideal and practical paces discussed by his predecessors is the quota suggested by a Torah giant of the last generation. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacoen Kagan (1838-1933), known as the Chafetz Chaim because of a Torah classic by that name which he authored, wrote Sefer Hamitzvot Hakatzeir (Abridged Book of Mitzvot) in which he offered brief descriptions of the commandments relevant to our own times. He advised reviewing half the positive commands on Monday and half on Thursday, repeating the same pattern the following week in regard to negative commands.

Almost a millennium is spanned by all these efforts, from the pacesetting, comprehensive Halachot Gedolot till the Chafetz Chaim’s concentration on relevance. The common denominator of all these works is their authors’ conviction that it is vital for a Jew to regularly review the commandments as a means of refreshing his sense of duty and his general Torah perspective.

In this age of the information explosion, there is still very little available for the uninformed Jew curious about his heritage, but too impatient to read lengthy works at the outset of his investigation. The experience of 1,000 years teaches us that *taryag mitzvot* may well provide both the medium and the message for the student in search of an introduction to the vast wealth of Torah knowledge.

Sanctifying the MATERIAL WORLD,

Not Rejecting IT

BY
RAV
YITZCHAK
BREITOWITZ

Immediately before G-d gave the Ten Commandments, the Torah describes the lights and sounds the people experienced. They saw *lightning* and heard *thunder*. In fact, according to the *Midrash*, they somehow heard the lightning and saw the thunder as well.

After *Matan Torah* (the Giving of the Torah), a nearly identical experience is described, but this time, the wording is slightly different. It says they saw *torches* and heard the *thunder*. Why is there this difference? What is the significance of the change from lightning to torches?

Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin offers a fascinating and profound insight. The change in visualization symbolizes a spiritual transformation in the way the Jewish people perceived holiness, and this transformation was a direct result of the experience of *Matan Torah*.

Before the Torah was given, spirituality could be achieved only through divorcing oneself from the world. All human souls yearn for transcendence; everything yearns to return to its source. Our source is G-d, and therefore, it is a natural human urge to yearn for the Divine, for meaning. However, the only way to achieve this in the pre-Sinai world was to separate from the physical. This form of spirituality is compared to a lightning flash. It allows you to reach a very high level, but then, like the lightning, that flash of transcendence is followed by total darkness – because human beings inevitably must eat, must sleep and must live in the material world. We still see this in non-Jewish

spirituality, where people take vows of celibacy and poverty, or remove themselves to a mountaintop.

After the Torah was given, the image was no longer of the lightning, but of the torch. That image is a much different one. And it is a somewhat tragic image, in its way. A torch will never give the brilliant light of a lightning bolt. But a torch is steady and enduring. The lesson the people learned through *Matan Torah* was that spirituality could indeed be contained in daily life. The physical world, the mundane, could be elevated and infused with the spiritual. They were not mutually exclusive. We serve G-d not only when we learn or pray, but also in the way that we eat or drink, conduct our business, earn and spend our money, raise our children and relate to our spouses. Every activity of life can be, and must be, invested with depth, significance and meaning. Yes, the daily life of carpools and laundry and PTA meetings will not offer the transcendence of the moment on the mountaintop, but if one can understand the purpose of even the mundane, then life can hold a holiness that will far outlast the bolt of lightning.

No one would navigate a road filled with dangerous turns by lightning. Even with a torch, it is difficult. But a torch provides the steady light, the warmth and comfort, to help us navigate the difficult turns in life and make it safely to the comfort of home.

Wishing our readers and all of Klal Yisrael a

Happy Shavuot

חג שמחה

Of Milchig on Shavuot & the Korban Cheesecake

BY RABBI YEHUDA SPITZ

The upcoming holiday of Shavuot, aside from its most common name, has several others: Chag HaKatzir (The Holiday of the Harvest), Atzeret (Assembly), Yom HaBikkurim (Day of the Offering of the First Fruits), and Zman Matan Torateinu (The Time of the Giving of the Torah). Yet, in Israel, it has gained a new moniker: Chag HaGevinah — The Holiday of the Cheese! Amazingly, and only in Israel, will you find a Jewish custom that has become so commercialized. Although no one really minds paying a lot less for all the various cheeses on sale during the weeks leading up to Shavuot, still, the idea that a holiday can be “commercially sponsored” (by the cheese companies, no less), should give us pause.

Interestingly, having cheesecake on Shavuot is one minhag (custom) with which many non-practicing Jews are stringent! Have you ever met someone who turned down a piece of cheesecake? But where does this time-honored traditional custom of consuming cheesecake on Shavuot come from?

Several early authorities, including the Kol Bo (72 and in Orchos Chaim — Tefillas HaMo’adim 13) and the Melamed HaTalmidim (p. 121b), mention eating “milk and honey” together on Shavuot in order to fulfill the verse in Shir HaShirim (4: 11) “Dvash v’chalav tachat leshonech”, that the Torah is compared to milk and honey. Other Rishonim, including Rav Avigdor HaTzarfati (p. 478) and Rav Yitzchak Isaack Tirnau in his Sefer HaMinhagim (Hilchos Shavuos, Hagahos 49) both write a different reason to eat dairy on Shavuot. The pasuk that describes the holiday of Shavuot (Bamidbar 2:26) states that one should bring a “mincha chadasha la’Hashem bashavuoteichem” (“a new offering to G-d on Shavuot’), of which the first letters spell “m’chalav” — with milk, implying that milk products should be eaten on Shavuot. This minhag is also mentioned by the Terumas Hadeshen (Leket Yosher p. 103) and Maharil (Minhagim p. 85).

Yet, it was not until the great Rema, Rav Moshe Isserles (d. 1572), the authoritative decisor for all Ashkenazic Jewry, codified this minhag in halacha, that it became widespread. The Rema, in the Laws of Shavuot, cites the “prevailing custom” of eating dairy items specifically on this holiday (Orach Chaim 494: 3). Although

there are many rationales and reasons opined through the ages to explain this custom, the Rema himself provides an enigmatic one — to be a commemoration of the special korban, the “Shtei HaLechem” (Two Loaves) offered exclusively on Shavuot during the times of the Beit Hamikdash. This is the first Temple offering from the new wheat crop.

However, since the connection between dairy food and a bread offering seems tenuous, the Machatzis HaShekel (Orach Chaim 494: 7 s.v. h”h) offers a remarkable glimpse as to the Rema’s intent. The halacha states (Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De’ah 89: 4 and relevant commentaries) that one may not use the same loaf of bread at both a dairy meal and a meat meal. The reason for this is that there may be some (possibly unnoticed) residue on the bread, and thus one might come to eat a forbidden mixture of milk and meat.

Therefore, in order to properly commemorate this unique korban that had two loaves of bread, one should have a separate dairy meal aside from the traditional meat meal one has on Yom Tov. In this way he will be mandated to have separate breads for each of these meals, as the challah meant for the dairy meal cannot be used for the meat meal and vice versa.

As the Gemara states in Berachot (55a), it is well known that our tables are compared to the Mizbe’ach (Altar), and our food to korbanot (sacrifices). Therefore, serving a food item at a meal is considered an appropriate commemoration for a korban. Consequently, by having an additional dairy meal, the outcome is a suitable commemoration for this unique korban, as now on Shavuot two separate distinct breads are being served. In fact, the venerated Rav Moshe Feinstein (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim vol. 1:160) cites this explanation as the proper one for maintaining two separate types of meals on Shavuot, one milky and one meaty.

So now we can appreciate that when we sink our teeth into a luscious calorie-laden cheesecake on Shavuot, it can’t be considered sinful, because we are actually commemorating a special korban!

We Will Do & We Will Hear

BY RABBI CHAVIV DANESH

The Gemara relates that there was once a heretic who saw Rava while he was engrossed in his learning. Rava's fingers were under his feet, and he was unknowingly pressing against them, thus causing his fingers to drip with blood. The heretic who witnessed this exclaimed, "You rash nation that put your mouth before your ears (when responding *na'aseh ve'nishma*), you are still continuing in the same hastiness. You should have first heard the laws of the Torah to see if you can keep them, and only then accept it." Rava answered: We who went with Him (G-d) with innocence, it says about us (in Mishlei): "The innocence of the upright will guide them", but in regard to you who look for excuses to reject G-d, it says about you: "The corruption of the faithless will ruin them" (Shabbat 88a-88b). This gemara needs an explanation. What was it about seeing Rava that reminded the heretic of the Jewish People responding *Na'aseh ve'nishma* at Mount Sinai? Also how did Rava's answer address the heretic's claim that they are a rash nation?

To answer these questions we first need to analyze a well-known midrash: G-d offered the Torah to every nation, and, in response, each one asked: What's in it? G-d answered each nation individually, by naming a commandment He knew would be hard for it to keep. When hearing that commandment, each nation consequently rejected the Torah. However, when G-d came to the Jewish People to offer the Torah, instead of asking what commandments it obligates, they immediately responded with "*Na'aseh ve'nishma*" — "We will do and we will hear" (Sifri 343; Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 41).

This gemara raises several questions. If the Jewish People were correct in not questioning what is in the Torah, we must understand what was wrong with the fact that every other nation did ask. Isn't it one's right to understand what's in a contract before signing? Furthermore, when responding, why did G-d tell each nation the single hardest commandment for it to keep? It seems as though He was hoping they would reject the Torah, and they were not given a proper chance to accept it.

The answers to these questions lie in a certain understanding. There are two types of people: One who looks for the truth and is willing to adjust his life accordingly, and one who first chooses the lifestyle he likes best, and then chooses the belief system that fits with it. This second personality is not actually chasing a life of truth, but rather, a life of convenience. A belief that inconveniences him forces him to disprove it, regardless of whether the belief is more convincing than the one he already lives by. We see clearly that many times the reason why one rejects the Torah and mitzvot is because one's desires interfere; as the Gemara says that the only

reason the Jewish People worshipped *avodah zarah* was to find a way to allow immorality (Sanhedrin 63b). Unfortunately, this second personality is more common, as the belief systems with the least obligations and the most questionable evidence are the most popular. (See Kovetz Ma'amarim of Rav Elchanan Wasserman, and Michtav M'Eliyahu III p. 178.)

The midrash mentioned above teaches us this crucial idea. If G-d, the Creator of the world, is offering the Torah — what questions are there? The Master of the universe is offering a set of laws that He guarantees will lead to eternal and supernal bliss. He knows these people; He created them, and He is telling them to keep the Torah. If someone is living a life of truth, he should not even bother to ask what's in it. The other nations, however, showed their true colors and asked in what the Torah would obligate them. They were not interested in the truth at all, and only wanted to accept the Torah if it would fit their already chosen lifestyles. To such a question, G-d responded with the single most difficult commandment for that nation to observe. G-d was essentially explaining that the foundation of accepting the Torah is to be willing to bend when faced with the truth, regardless of the inconvenience. He was telling them to rid themselves of their personal desires so that they may attain a life of truth; first choose the belief system, and then the lifestyle, and not the opposite. When G-d approached the Jewish People, though, they answered *Na'aseh ve'nishma*. There were no questions to determine whether they should accept the Torah since they put all their desires aside to make room for the truth.

When the heretic saw that Rava was so involved in his Torah learning that he was oblivious to the pain it was causing his body, it reminded him of the Jewish People proclaiming *Na'aseh ve'nishma*. Then, too, the Jewish People ignored their bodily desires, knowing full well that the Torah may limit their physical pleasures. They were willing to adjust their lifestyle to fit with ultimate truth, and not the reverse. Rava answered the heretic that we acted with G-d with naiveté. It is true that before one signs a contract he must know what's in it, but we "waive that right" when the One who wrote the contract is the Creator of the universe, and wants only the best for us. If He is offering it to us, then obviously we are capable of keeping it. Once we know it is the truth, we are ready to sign, regardless of our desires. Our innocence led to the great gift of the Torah, while your corruption led to losing the Torah.

This is one of the foundations of Kabbalat HaTorah, receiving the Torah. Before Shavuot, it is incumbent upon everyone to accept the mitzvot without any preconditions, just as the Jewish People did when declaring *Na'aseh ve'nishma*. This is the major work of Kabbalat HaTorah.

Historical Verification of the Torah

C E. K. from Los Angeles, California wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

In a previous "Ask the Rabbi" article, Ohr Somayach wrote the following:

"Our tradition is a faithful, unbroken chain dating back to Sinai. (The evidence for this is a topic for another discussion.)"

I have often debated this with my learned, pious Talmudic scholar of a cousin. The discussion usually starts with my saying: "How can you rely on information 'passed down' orally, when it's impossible to even get a phone message communicated correctly?" My cousin usually replies that the information is 'correctly passed down' because the entire known world witnessed the event, or made the law, and thus everything witnessed is supported. Myself, I still am not convinced. So here's one vote for opening the discussion of unbroken chains of oral tradition. As usual, thanks so much for your service, and keep up the good work. Shalom

Dear C. E. K.,

Because this is such a broad subject, I can only offer a partial answer in this short column. There won't even be room for a joke (but keep your eyes open for a pun or two).

Let's start with a fact everybody agrees upon: There exists today a group of people, the Jews, who claim the following: "3,300 years ago, millions of our ancestors experienced what they felt was G-d's talking to them. We, their descendants, have an unbroken chain passed on through the millennia that tells us two things: (1) That the event took place, and (2) The contents of the message. The Jews are the only people to ever make such a claim."

Let's first look at point number one.

How can you explain a group of people who claim to be descendants of millions of people experiencing the splitting of the sea, the manna and the Revelation at Sinai? How did the first generation start believing it? A charismatic leader? A slowly evolving story? Mass hypnosis?

Could a leader rewrite the oral history of a people and get them to believe it happened to their own ancestors? Imagine Napoleon telling the French "In the year 750, G-d split the Rhine river for your ancestors, commanded them a set of all-encompassing laws, and they passed that experience down from generation to generation." The people would say "What? Dad never told us that! Hey, Grandma, did your grandparents ever tell you about this?" Remember: We not only believe in the Exodus and Sinai; we also believe that we have an unbroken chain back to those events.

Or the slowly evolving story: The people ate sap from bushes that grew in the desert, but used to say "G-d sent us food from heaven" because they wanted to express the idea that all nature comes from 'Above.' One day, Johnny comes home from kindergarten and says "Dad, the teacher told us that food fell from the sky." The father, reading a newspaper, grunts "Uh huh," and Johnny grows up with a misconception. Eventually, Johnny's misconception becomes the

predominant belief. Slightly absurd. And what about Sinai? Was it really a volcano that 'grew' to become a mass prophecy of 613 commandments that we all agree upon?

Mass hypnosis? Martians? Now we come to a second problem. No matter what theory you concoct to imagine how such a belief got started, you must answer the following question: Why are we the only ones in history ever to make such a claim? Why, indeed, didn't Napoleon create such a belief? Why didn't Pharaoh or Hammurabi, Paul or Mohammed, Alexander or Julius, Lenin or Mao? They all could have 'propheted' greatly. No people, clan or country across the globe at any time in recorded history ever claimed that G-d convened their nation and spoke to them. Except us. Why?

Is it that the Jews were simply the most ignorant, superstitious, stupid and gullible people ever to walk the face of the earth? But then, having accepted this belief, they became the most scholarly, unyielding, skeptical people in the world, earning the title 'People of the Book,' surviving the ideological onslaughts of Christianity and Islam, giving their lives to pass on this belief, becoming a 'light to the nations' and spreading morality and monotheism to all humanity?

The Torah itself predicts that no one else in history will ever make a similar claim: "Inquire into the earliest days, the past, from the day G-d created people on the earth, and from one end of the universe to the other: Was there ever such a great thing as this, or was there ever even heard a claim like it? Did a nation ever hear the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you heard, and live (to tell about it)? Or did G-d ever attempt to come and take a nation out from the midst of another nation with miracles, signs, wonders, and with open expressions of Divine might, and with great awe, like all that the L-rd your G-d did for you in Egypt in front of your eyes? (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

Now, how do we know the events and laws were transmitted faithfully? Well, we see Jewish communities dispersed across the globe for millennia: Europe, North Africa, Asia, Yemen, the Middle East. And although they had no central authority and limited means of communication, they all have the exact same Torah and the exact same oral explanations of it. (Obviously, there are some minor differences, but only the type you would expect. What's astounding is how few there are.) Even our Torah scrolls agree to the very last word.

Obviously, therefore, we have a remarkably faithful method of transmission. And the reason is also obvious: We never treated the Torah like a party-game or a 'telephone message.' Rather: "He heard it from his teacher 40 times." "One who studies a chapter 101 times is incomparable to one who studies it only 100 times." "His father left him hundreds of ships, hundreds of fields. But he never saw any of them. Rather, he traveled from teacher to teacher and studied Torah." "Rabbi Akiva studied 40 years, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai studied 40 years..."

The Talmud is replete with examples of the Jewish People's total dedication to Torah study, sometimes suffering even torture and death for it. It's easy to see how such a nation kept the message intact.

The Empty Landscape

BY RABBI YAAKOV ASHER SINCLAIR

Some 3,300 years ago, a little-known Middle Eastern people gathered around a small mountain in a trackless wilderness and underwent an experience which changed the history of the world.

For the first time since the beginning of the universe, the Creator spoke to an entire nation. The nation was called Israel. The mountain was called Sinai. At Sinai, G-d gave the Jewish People the Torah, the mystical blueprint of the Creation. Why did G-d choose a desert as the site for this encounter?

The Landscape of Time

We tend to think of the Jewish festivals as remembrances to remind us of critical events in Jewish history, and that these events recede further into the past every year. This is not so. Time is circular. Every year we revisit the same place in time, the same reality. Every Pesach or Shavuot or Succot we revisit the original event. We do not merely remember what took place on these days, we re-experience them. The word for festival in Hebrew is *mo'ed*. *Mo'ed* means “an appointed time and place of meeting.” Every year, we return to that same meeting place in time, be it Pesach, Shavuot or Succot. We return to that same spiritual landscape.

There's something very unusual, however, about the landscape of Shavuot. It's a meeting place devoid of distinguishing features. It is an empty landscape. A desert. Our other meetings with the Creator all have much more visible scenery: At Pesach we experience the spiritual vista of *matzah*, the *Seder*, the four cups of wine, “*Ma nishtanah...*” At Succot we return to the landscape of the Four Species and the *succah*. Shavuot, however, has no single identifying *leitmotif*, no recognizable landmark in its scenery. Shavuot is an “empty landscape.” Why?

An Offer You Can't Refuse?

Let us try and delve deeper into the essence of Shavuot. The Talmud describes the scene at the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai: G-d said to Israel: “*If you accept the Torah, well and good. If not, right there will be your burial place.*” This seems strange to us. Could it be that G-d coerced the Jewish People into accepting the Torah? Was the Torah the original “*offer you can't refuse*”? This is

both unpalatable and contradictory, for we know that it was Israel alone among the nations that was prepared to accept the Torah “sight unseen.” When the Creator offered the Jewish People the Torah they said “*We will do and we will hear,*” meaning that we will accept the Torah before we know all of what it requires of us. If they were prepared to accept Torah voluntarily, why should coercion be necessary?

The Sixth Day

At the beginning of the book of Genesis it says “*Yom ha'shishi — the sixth day.*” When speaking of the other days of Creation, the Torah does not use the definite article “*the.*” It says “*second day... third day... etc.*” Translators add the word “*the*” to make the English more idiomatic, but in Hebrew, only the sixth day is referred to as “*the sixth day.*” Why?

The stylistic anomaly of the addition of the word “*the*” teaches us that on that first sixth day, at the very moment of the completion of the physical world, G-d placed a condition into Creation. G-d made a condition that the universe would remain in a state of flux and impermanence until the Jewish People accepted the Torah at Sinai. And that was to be on another “*sixth day.*” The sixth of Sivan — Shavuot — the day of the giving of the Torah.

It's an amazing fact to ponder: The very fabric of existence hung in the balance for two and a half thousand years from the Creation of Man until Israel's acceptance of the Torah. In other words, the continuation of the entire Creation was predicated on Israel agreeing to accept the Torah. If they had refused, the entire world would have returned to primordial chaos.

Who's Running the Show?

There's a problem here. How could the whole future of the world depend on the choice of the Jewish People? How can existence itself — reality — be dependent on a created being? A creation cannot dictate the terms of existence — it can only be subject to them. Only one Existence can dictate existence: He who is Existence itself.

G-d held a mountain over the Jewish People, not because they needed a little encouragement, but because Existence cannot de-

continued on page ten

Children of Sinai

From: Beverly

*Dear Rabbi,
Shavuot certainly commemorates G-d's giving the Torah to the Jewish People. But so much of the Torah is about passing it on to future generations. Is this theme found in the teachings of Shavuot?*

Dear Beverly,

You are certainly correct. The transmission of Torah is an integral part of receiving it.

I think this is conveyed by the wording of the very first teaching of Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, in which the Sages expounded (Avot 1:1): "Moses received the Torah at Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly."

Why regarding Moses is the emphasis on his having received the Torah, while regarding all the others the emphasis is on transmitting it? Perhaps in order to convey the importance of receiving the Torah with the intention to pass it on to future generations.

In this vein there's an interesting Midrash which connects G-d's giving the Torah in conjunction with its transmission: "When G-d wished to give the Torah to Israel, He said to them, 'Give me guarantors that you will observe the Torah.' Israel said, 'Are not the Patriarchs guarantors for us?' G-d said, 'They themselves are indebted to me, would that they be able to stand for themselves!'

The matter is likened to one who needs a loan. He was told, 'Bring a guarantor and take as much as you'd like', whereupon he went and brought someone who was also indebted to the lender. His would-be creditor then said, 'You have brought someone who

is indebted to me. Would that he be able to stand for himself! Bring someone who is not indebted to me.'

Thus G-d said to Israel, 'Bring me guarantors who are not indebted to me. And who are those who are not indebted to me? The children.' They immediately brought Him the children. G-d said to them, 'Do you stand as guarantors that if I give your parents the Torah they will observe it, and if not, you will be responsible for them (meaning, even if they don't keep it, you will be responsible to keep it)?' The children answered, 'Yes!' He said to them, 'I am the L-rd your G-d.' To which they answered, 'Agreed!' He said to them, 'You will have no other gods.' To which they answered, 'Agreed!' And so with each commandment, G-d requested the children's affirmation, to which they guaranteed to fulfill the Torah that would be given to their parents (even if the parents would not fulfill it).

G-d then said to the children, 'Through your mouths I give the Torah to the Jewish People'. As it is written, 'From the mouths of babes and sucklings, You, G-d, have founded strength' (Ps. 8:3). And there is no strength other than Torah, as it is said, 'The Lord shall give strength (the Torah) to His People' (Ps. 29:11). Therefore, even if Israel should violate the Torah, Heaven forbid, their children have accepted responsibility to perpetuate it."

Thus we see that not only is transmitting the Torah an integral part of receiving it, but G-d Himself gave the Torah only on condition, and with the guarantee of the children, that it would be passed on from generation to generation forever.

Perhaps it is this resounding affirmation of the children of Sinai to guarantee the Torah's transmission which echoes through the generations, beckoning Jewish children from unobservant families back to Torah observance.

THE EMPTY LANDSCAPE *continued from page nine*

pend on Man's volition. Man cannot govern what must be. Existence depends on G-d alone.

It was for this reason that the Torah had to be given through coercion. For even though Israel was prepared to accept it voluntarily, the Torah, the Will of the Creator, cannot be subject to the will of His creations. Just as G-d *must* be, so too the Torah *must* be. Just as the Torah *must* be, so *must* it be given in a way which *must* be.

The Jigsaw of Existence

Shavuot is the day which completes Creation. It is the day on which the landscape of existence becomes whole. When G-d gives the Torah to the Jewish People the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle of Creation falls into place. Instantly all the lines between the separate pieces of the jigsaw of existence vanish, revealing a complete

and perfect whole.

Shavuot is the day of the completion of existence itself. The landscape looks empty because it contains everything. We can determine features in a landscape only when we see one thing as being separate from another. It is only the difference between things that allows us to see things at all. If we were to look at everything, we would see nothing. For "this" is discernible because it is not "that." It's *not* being everything allows us to perceive its separate existence. But if we were able to see "everything," we would see nothing.

Shavuot is the empty landscape which is full with all of Creation.

- Sources: *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 88a, Maharal, Rabbi E. E. Dessler*

Why Was SIX Scared of SEVEN?

BY RABBI REUVEN LAUFFER

In the Land of Israel the Festival of Succot lasts for a majestic eight days. The Festival of Pesach lasts for an almost-majestic seven days. And the Festival of Shavuot lasts for just one day. It seems a little paltry compared to the other two and yet the Festival of Shavuot represents the absolute foundation of Judaism – the day that the Holy Torah was given to the Jewish Nation.

Why would it be that this day which exemplifies everything that Judaism stands for be encapsulated in just one day? And why is it that Shavuot is a Festival that seems to be devoid of any real trappings? It's true that cheese-cake appears extensively on the Shavuot menu, but there is no obligation to eat it (what a relief for the lactose-intolerant and the cheese-cake intolerant!). Pesach and Succot, on the other hand, are chock-a-block full of symbolism with special activities and special foods.

In Jewish philosophy numbers are very significant. The Maharal of Prague, Rabbi Yehudah Loew, explains that the number seven represents the natural world. The number seven stems from the seven days of the creation and the seven days of the week. A number seven will always be connected to nature. The number eight, on the other hand, represents something that is beyond the natural world, something that belongs to the spiritual realms. With this in mind we can understand why Succot lasts eight days, since it's a time of intense spirituality culminating in Simchat Torah and our expression of love for G-d. But why would Pesach last for only seven days? Why is Pesach, the Festival of Freedom – the time that we commemorate all of the super-natural miracles that God wrought for His Chosen Nation – represented by the number seven? And, last of all, Shavuot, one of the holiest and spiritually transcendent days of the year, is just one day. Why?

Because Pesach does not finish when Pesach ends! The Festivals are given to us to draw closer to G-d and to join together with Him in such a way that we feel their influence throughout the entire year. Pesach is the Festival of Freedom, but Pesach

does not define for us what freedom means. Freedom from what? Freedom for what? Pesach is the beginning of a process that ends with Shavuot. Shavuot, the Giving of the Torah – the defining moment in Jewish history and theology. Of what use is freedom from slavery and subjugation if that freedom is not harnessed to aspirations and goals that will transform us into something better than we were? It transpires that Pesach really does have eight days in a sense. However, the eighth day — the culmination of everything that Pesach truly represents — is seven weeks later on Shavuot. Shavuot is the moment that we, the Jewish Nation, moved out of the physical realms and into the spiritual ones instead. By accepting the Torah on Sinai we declared our absolute allegiance to G-d. We took our oh-so-precious, new-found freedom from Egypt and slavery and we dedicated it to G-d. That is why there are no unique activities on Shavuot that set it apart from the other Festivals. On Shavuot we celebrate by learning G-d's Torah. What could be more Heavenly than that? We do not base the Festival around physical signs because to do so would be too “seven-like” and would detract us from the very essence of the day.

There is a famous children's joke, “Why was six scared of seven? Because seven eight (ate) nine”. The children think it's hilarious and the adults think that it's ridiculous.

And I think that without Shavuot we would really have to be scared of the number seven, scared of the tremendous power that physicality has in the world and how it overwhelms and consumes us so easily. But we don't remain in the realm of seven. From Pesach through Shavuot we push forward and metamorphose into the number eight, leaving the physicality behind as we soar into the spiritual spheres that contain nothing but ourselves and Our Father in Heaven.

Bliss. Pure bliss. Far, far more sublime than even the tastiest cheese cake in the world.

The Custom to Learn Torah Throughout the Night on Shavuot

BY RABBI MORDECHAI PERLMAN

The Arizal writes: “Know that whoever does not sleep at all on this night and is involved in learning Torah, he is promised that he will complete the year and that no harm will befall him.” (Mishneh Berurah 494:1)

The Midrash says that the Jewish People slept on the night before *Matan Torah*, and it was necessary for G-d to wake them up in the morning.

Why did they all sleep on the eve of this most important day? They knew that at the giving of the Torah, G-d was going to speak to them. Previously, prophets received prophesy while asleep: Avraham slept during the “*brit bein habetarim*”, Yaakov slept as he envisioned the ladder, and Yosef’s prophecies occurred to him in a dream. Thus, by going to sleep, they were preparing for *Matan Torah*. However, this was wrong. In order to “rectify” this, we now stay awake all night in anticipation of our own *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

G-d says: “I will sprinkle upon you pure water and you will be pure” (Yechezkel 36:25). “Water” here means Torah. In order to accept the Torah we need to prepare ourselves through purifying our hearts. How do we do that? By bathing in the ‘purifying waters’ of the Torah.

Our Sages say, “If you listen to the old, you will listen to the new” (Succah 46b). By reviewing Torah that we have learned already, we become receptive to learn more Torah.

The Torah is dear and precious to us. Studying Torah with the utmost of our ability highlights this dearness.

“He (G-d) gives wisdom to the wise” (Daniel 2:21). A rich man obtains a loan more easily than a poor man. So, too, a wise person gains wisdom more easily than a fool. When we delve into the wisdom of Torah, G-d responds by giving us more wisdom.

Supernatural Sensory Processing

BY RABBI PERETZ SEGAL

In Parshat Ha’azinu, Moshe Rabbeinu, using the most powerful language, confronts the Jewish People. His penetrating insight leaves the nation painfully aware of their weaknesses and fallibilities. In the midst of his rebuke he calls the Jewish People an “ungrateful and unwise nation” (Devarim 32:6). What is completely surprising is the way the Targum Onkelos translates the word “unwise”: “ama d’kabilo oraiysa”, “a nation that received the Torah”. Now why would “unwise” translate as “a nation that received the Torah”? Surely we should be considered “wise” for committing to take on board the mission of being a spiritual beacon to the world?

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, zatzal, offered an explanation which transforms the way we look at, and relate to, Torah. If you look more carefully at the word “unwise”, it is the Hebrew word “naval”, which means “to wither”. This verb is often used in the context of a tree or some other vegetation that has lost the source of its nourishment and can no longer survive.

The idea of withering, being disconnected from our source, describes a state of being radically different from our origins. Rav Shapiro explains that Avraham Avinu had no need for a Torah to be given. He sensed through his own self-awareness the reality of the spiritual world (Midrash Tanchuma). He was so deeply connected to his source that he didn’t need a Torah.

This sheds light on the Targum Onkelos. The Jews were considered withered because they had lost connection with their source. They could no longer intuit the path ahead in the spiritual

world. They had sunk from the level of Avraham Avinu to a point where they had become spiritually blind. Therefore, ironically, the receiving of the Torah was a sign of their lack of wisdom. “Unwise nation” is a nation that needs a Torah to be given to them!

Although it can be assumed that none of us are on the level of Avraham Avinu, this understanding shifts the paradigm of what Torah is all about in a radical fashion. We are used to thinking about Torah as a “guide book for life” or even a “blueprint for the world”. This understanding allows us to embrace a completely new idea. The Torah is our eyes and ears. The Torah is our sense of touch and smell. The Torah is the deepest experience of the reality of life itself.

We live in a world where we are spiritually deaf and dumb. We cannot smell the rancid smell of impurity, and neither can we feel the thorny exterior of an immoral word or thought. We need to develop those supernatural senses. We need to “grow” a new set of ears, eyes, nose, tongue and sense of touch. To do this, it is not enough to follow the rules. We have to embody them, breathe them, smell them and touch them. That is how to become wise. That is how we transform the experience of Torah from the external to the internal. This in some way will be a return to an Abrahamic state of heightened awareness — this time though, through the intervention of G-d, granting us a new lease on an enlightened life.

ABARBANEL ON SHAVUOT

The Time and Place for Giving the Torah

BY RABBI PINCHAS KASNETT

The Torah portion that we call “Yitro” describes the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the culmination of the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. Abarbanel poses two simple but important questions: Why didn’t G-d give the Torah much sooner in history, to Adam or Noach or at least to one of the Patriarchs? Secondly, why did G-d choose to give the Torah at that particular location? Why not give it when the people were in Egypt, or in the Land of Israel, perhaps on the very spot where the Temple would be built?

In regard to the first question Abarbanel offers three perspectives. First of all, the Torah had to be given to a large congregation of people that constituted an entire nation. Even though Adam and Noach observed the universally applicable Noachide laws, and the Patriarchs observed the commandments of the Torah prophetically even before they were given, they did so only as individuals with a personal intellectual and prophetic connection to the will of G-d. Additionally, according to Kabbalistic thought, the 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60 present at Sinai constituted all the different character types in the totality of Mankind. In effect then, the Torah, although it was only directly given to one distinct nation, was in a sense transmitted to all of Mankind.

Secondly, the monumental task of receiving and transmitting the vast scope of the Torah and ensuring that it would be accepted by the nation could only be achieved through Moshe. Although the Jewish nation produced hundreds of prophets, Moshe stood alone, unique in the history of Mankind. That uniqueness can be characterized as follows: 1) Maturity at an early age and physical strength undiminished by age. 2) Total control over his physical desires. 3) The wisdom to understand almost completely the nature of G-d’s total Creation. 4) A spiritual make-up that allowed him to receive prophecy at any moment, unlike any other prophet. 5) Since he had led the nation out of Egypt, and fought battles and performed miracles on their behalf, it was fitting that only he should be the one to transmit the Torah. 6) He combined all the positive characteristics of the Jewish People into one individual: Royalty, priesthood, scholarship, material and spiritual accomplishment. 7) Most importantly, the nature of his prophecy was unlike any other. He received his prophecies when fully conscious. They were never shrouded in metaphors, images, visions or dreams. His prophecies came in the most directly

manner. This is what is meant by the fact that he spoke with G-d “face to face”.

Thirdly, in order to emphasize the fundamental difference between Torah Judaism and all other religious beliefs and philosophies, the giving of the Torah had to be a clearly miraculous Divine intervention. It was the culmination of the Exodus, from the plagues to the splitting of the sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army, to the miraculous manna from Heaven, to the victory over Amalek, and finally to the thunder, lightning, smoke and fire that surrounded the mountain itself.

In regard to the second question, the Torah was given specifically at Mount Sinai for the following reasons: 1) Because it required Divine intervention, the Torah had to be given in a desert setting where the nation could only be sustained miraculously. It also had to be given soon after the Exodus so that those miracles would be fresh in their minds. 2) Mount Sinai itself possessed a unique measure of spiritual sanctity. It was there that Moshe first encountered G-d in the burning bush. 3) They could not receive the Torah in Israel since they would be overwhelmed by the physical necessities of conquering and developing the Land. At the same time, they could not receive it in Egypt as they were still affected by the spiritual contamination of the immoral and idolatrous Egyptian society. They required a cleansing experience of three months of travel which brought them to Mount Sinai. 4) Finally, the Torah had to be given in a desolate wilderness that was not claimed by any other nation. This symbolizes the availability of the Torah to all peoples. If the Torah had been given in Israel, the nations of the world could claim that since the Torah was given only in the territory of the Jewish People, they had no connection to it, were not bound by the dictates intended to apply to all of Mankind, and were not welcome to accept it in totality voluntarily. Additionally, disputes could arise among the Jews themselves, each tribe claiming that the Torah was given in its portion of the Land.

Therefore the Torah had to be given publicly and dramatically in a place owned by no one, and thus owned by everyone, to a prophet and a nation uniquely prepared to receive the message which would enlighten all of Mankind.

WHAT'S IN A WORD

The Mountain of Many Names

BY RABBI REUVEN CHAIM KLEIN

We are all probably familiar with the name of the site of the greatest mass revelation of G-d's existence — Mount Sinai. However, throughout the Bible that place is variously mentioned under other names. These names include “Mountain of G-d”, “Mount Bashan”, “Mount Gavnunim” (Psalms 68:16), “Mount Hemed” (Psalms 68:17), and “Mount Horeb” (Exodus 33:6). Various Midrashic sources offer different interpretations of how all of these terms refer to one mountain, and in the following paragraphs we will explore some of those ideas and how they relate to the holiday of Shavuot.

The mountain is called *Har Ha'Elokim*, “Mountain of G-d,” because that is where the Jewish People accepted upon themselves G-d as the Creator. Additionally, of all the potential mountains on which G-d may have revealed His glory, Mount Sinai was the most fitting because it had never been previously worshipped by idolaters, while other mountains were, in fact, deified by such people. Moreover, the term *Elokim* (“Almighty”) as opposed to the Tetragrammaton implies G-d's trait of judgment, an allusion to the fact that on Mount Sinai He assumed the role of a “judge” in revealing to the Jewish People all of the civil laws of the Torah (i.e. from Exodus 21 and onwards).

Mount Sinai is called *Mount Bashan* because the name Bashan is a portmanteau of the phrase *ba sham* (“He came there”). The commentaries point out that the consonants *n* and *m* are so similar that they are sometimes interchangeable. This phrase, speaking about His “arrival”, refers to G-d's arrival at the mountain in anticipation of giving the Torah. Alternatively, the word Bashan is an abbreviation of the word *bi'shinav* (“with his teeth”), and alludes to the fact that everything which the Jewish People enjoy “with their teeth” (i.e. all material success, typified by agricultural fecundity) is in the merit of their adherence to the Torah.

The name *Mount Gavnunim* is related to the Hebrew word *giben* (Leviticus 21:20), which is a blemish that disqualifies a *kohen* from service in the Temple (specifically, it refers to abnormally long eyebrows). This is similar to Mount Sinai whose cleanness from idolatry “disqualified” all the other mountains by contrast, rendering them unfit for the giving of the Torah. Alternatively, the Midrash explains that the homiletic similarity between the name Gavnunim and the Hebrew word *gevinah*

(cheese) recalls the fact that at the Sinaitic Revelation all Jews who suffered any ailment or handicap were miraculously healed. Just as cheese is made by separating the most pristine curds of milk from any impurities (i.e. whey), so were the Jewish people at Mount Sinai in their purest state, and nobody had any physical blemishes. Interestingly, some explain that the custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot is related to this alternate name for Mount Sinai, and its comparison to cheese.

Mount Hemed (*Har Chemed* in Hebrew) is another name for Mount Sinai because G-d desired (*chamad*) to dwell His presence upon that mountain in specific. It is also called *Mount Horeb* (*Har Chorev* in Hebrew) in allusion to the word *cherev* (“sword”), and refers to the fact that the Sanhedrin received its right to implement capital punishment from the Torah received at Sinai. Of course, the mountain's most popular name is *Mount Sinai*. This alludes to the fact that from that place comes “hatred” (*sinah*). Opposition to the Jewish People (i.e. “anti-Semitism”) stems from a deep hatred and resistance to the Torah and its values. That antinomian attitude began as opposition to the Jews' cosmic role assumed at Mount Sinai.

Finally, some versions of the Midrash say that *Mount Moriah* is another name for Mount Sinai. The Zohar famously explains that Mount Moriah is called so because of the abundance of sweet-smelling myrrh that is there. This is somewhat problematic because Mount Moriah is understood to be the place upon which the Holy Temple was built — in Jerusalem, not in the Sinai desert! Indeed, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (1075-1141), the famous poet and author of *The Kuzari*, writes in his song *Yom Shabbaton*, “He spoke through His holiness on the Mountain of Myrrh: You shall remember and guard the Seventh Day”. By writing that the commandments to observe the Sabbath were given on the Mountain of Myrrh, he also implies that Mount Moriah is the same as Mount Sinai. The simplest way of resolving this issue is that there are two different mountains which are both named Moriah. However, some of the most prominent Ashkenazi Kabbalists, such as Rabbi Beraichiah Baruch Shapiro (d. 1663) and Rabbi Naftali Katz (1649-1718), explain that Moriah and Sinai are actually the same mountain, and when G-d gave the Torah in the Sinai Wilderness, He uprooted the mountain from its regular place in Jerusalem and brought it to the wilderness, only to return it afterwards.

MEGILLAT RUTH Q&A

Q

1. Who wrote the Book of Ruth?
2. During which historical period did the events of the Megillah of Ruth occur?
3. Who was Naomi's husband?
4. After she returned from Moav, by what name did Naomi ask to be called?
5. How was Boaz related to Naomi?
6. Into what did Boaz tell Ruth to dip her bread?
7. Why is Elimelech's brother referred to as *Ploni Almoni* and not by his real name?
8. With what object did Boaz redeem Elimelech's property?
9. The people and the elders blessed Ruth that she should be like whom?
10. What was Ruth's relationship to King David?

A

1. The Prophet Samuel (*Bava Batra 14b*).
2. During the era of the *Shoftim*, the Judges. Boaz was the *Shofet* at the time (1:1).
3. Elimelech. (1:2).
4. Mara (1:20).
5. He was her husband's brother's son. (2:1, Rashi).
6. Vinegar (2:14).
7. Since he didn't want to redeem his brother's property and thereby discharge his family duty (Rashi 4:1).
8. With a shoe (according to the Targum, a glove) (4:8).
9. Like Rachel and Leah (4:11).
10. She was his great-grandmother: Ruth, Oved, Yishai, David (4:22).

Why we read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot

Here are seven reasons why we read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuot:

1. The events occurred during the harvest season. Shavuot is the harvest festival.
2. Ruth was a convert to Judaism. Conversion is an individual *Kabbalat HaTorah* (acceptance of the Torah).
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on a *drasha* (a teaching of the Oral Law) of the verse, "A Moabite may not marry into the Congregation of G-d" (*Devarim 23:4*). This hints at the unity between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.
4. David Hamelech was born on Shavuot. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of *gemillut chassadim* — acts of loving-kindness.
6. To teach that the Torah is acquired only through affliction and poverty.
7. The name "Ruth" has the numerical value of 606. At Mount Sinai the Jewish People accepted 606 *mitzvot*, in addition to the 7 Noachide Laws which were already incumbent upon them.

I Did Not Know That!

There is a custom to eat "*milchigs*" on Shavuot. Pharaoh's daughter drew Moshe out of the water on the 6th of Sivan, the date of Shavuot, and he was willing to be nursed only by a Hebrew woman. Therefore we recall Moshe's merit on Shavuot by eating milk foods. Furthermore, the numerical values of the letters of the Hebrew word *chalav* (milk) add up to 40, corresponding to the 40 days Moshe spent on Mount Sinai.

• *Sefer Matamim, Rabbi Shimshon of Ostropol*

LOVE OF THE LAND

Gush Chalav - Tomb of the Akdamut Author

BY RABBI MENDEL WEINBACH, ZATZAL

One of the highlights of the Shavuot morning service is the melodic chanting of *Akdamut*, a lengthy Aramaic poem that praises G-d and describes the reward for the righteous in the end of days.



The author of *Akdamut* is Rabbi Meir ben Yitzchak, a twelfth century *shaliach tzibur* (prayer leader) for his German community, and his tomb is in Gush Chalav, about 2 and a half miles north of the Meron Junction on Route 89.

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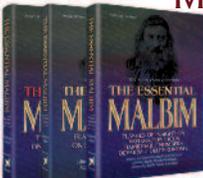
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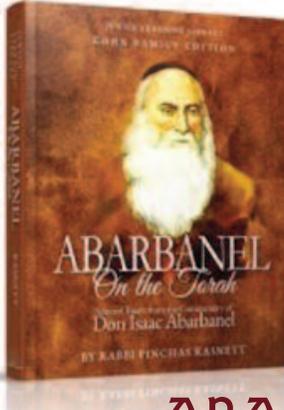
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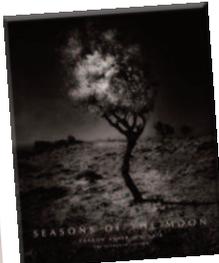
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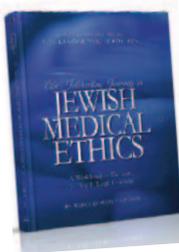
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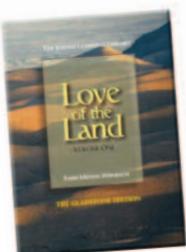
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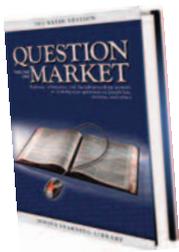
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