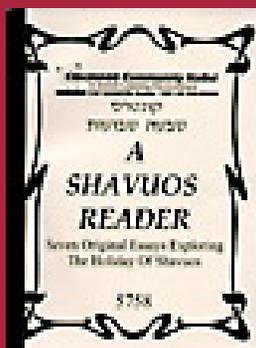


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The cover of the original Shavuos Reader.

A Shavuos Reader

Seven Original Essays

5758

About this Reader

The essays in this collection were originally published by the Cincinnati Community Kollel in May, 1998. A few hundred copies were printed in report format and distributed in local synagogues.

This represented the Kollel's first attempt to share its scholarship with the community in printed form. The Kollel subsequently has published several other Holiday Readers and, beginning with the High Holiday Reader of 1999, thousands of copies of the Readers have been distributed, in booklet format.

Four years after its first printing, only a handful of copies of the original, printed Shavuos Reader remain. Its content has now been revised and reformatted to more closely resemble the Readers that have followed it.

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A Shavuos Reader

*Seven Original Essays
by the Staff of the
Cincinnati Community Kollel*



5758

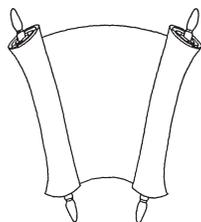
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Our Mission:

*To enrich
the Cincinnati Jewish community
by creating an environment
of Torah study
and providing access
to our spiritual heritage.*



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Cincinnati Community Kollel

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The dedication page of the original Shavuos Reader read:

קונטרס זה מוקדש
לעילוי נשמת
האשה הכשרה והיקרה
מרת **מאיה ע"ה**
בת ר' אלישר גדעון ולילי אלדד שיחיו
ת. נ. צ. ב. ה.

This Shavuos Reader is dedicated
to the memory of
Maya Eldad ע"ה

*Throughout her brief life she taught to all
the importance of
shalom, sh'miras halashon,
and dedication to Torah.*

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Rabbi Meir Minster

Shavuos and the Real Date of the Giving of the Torah

The holiday of Passover, when we reenact the Exodus from Egypt, and the holiday of Shavuos, when we mark the giving of the Torah, are undeniably linked. As we count the days between them with *Sefiras ha'Omer*, we affirm this linkage.

However, it is not merely the holidays which are connected; not surprisingly, the events themselves which these days represent are inherently interdependent. Even before Moses accepted the task of leading the Jewish people out of Egypt, G-d presented the success of the mission as pivoting on the events that were to transpire on Mount Sinai. In the course of their first conversation, G-d made the following statement to Moses:

... And this is the sign for you that I have sent you: When you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship G-d on this mountain.¹

Rashi, as we will see, understands this verse as G-d's response to Moses' doubts about the people's merit to be redeemed. Redemption from Egypt was possible, G-d answered, because the Jewish people would later accept the Torah at Sinai. This is a very

¹ Exodus 3:12

profound concept: G-d will save the Jewish people based on the merit of a future event. Furthermore, we see that the giving of the Torah was not only the purpose of the Exodus but the very means by which it was able to happen.

When G-d speaks of the Jewish people accepting the Torah, we immediately associate this with the day of Shavuos, the time of the giving of the Torah. Therefore, we would conclude that it was the events of Shavuos that G-d was referring to as the source of the people's merit to be redeemed.

A closer look, however, will challenge our assumptions. Let us examine the words of Rashi:

And in answer to that which you asked, "What merit does Israel possess that they should depart from Egypt?" I have a matter of great consequence dependent on this departure of the Israelites from Egypt. For they are destined to receive the Torah on this mountain three months after they leave Egypt (lit., at the conclusion of three months from their departure from Egypt).²

Rashi's choice of words in this last statement is difficult to understand. As our counting of the Omer will attest, there are only fifty days between the Exodus (marked by Passover) and Shavuos, the time G-d appeared to the Jewish people and gave them the Torah!

A simple solution to this problem is to suggest that Rashi does not literally mean three complete months; rather, Rashi is referring to the fact that the Exodus occurred during the Hebrew month of Nissan, which was followed by the month of Iyar, and early in the next month, Sivan, G-d appeared on Mount Sinai. Thus, the giving of the Torah took place in the third month after the Exodus.

Although this approach certainly resolves the problem it is undoubtably a forced reading of the Rashi.³ The question must

² Ad loc.

³ Especially with respect to the Hebrew word *l'sof*, which means "after," or "at the end."

also be raised that if Rashi's choice of words is merely to identify the month in which Shavuos falls, why not use its proper name—Sivan? Also, the Midrashic commentary on this verse (which Rashi is paraphrasing) makes no mention of the month at all. What does Rashi add by giving us this well-known fact?

There is another approach⁴ to understanding Rashi, a far more novel idea, which accepts the words of Rashi literally, and thereby solves the difficulties raised: Rashi is truly referring to a point of time precisely three months after the Exodus.

A careful look at the calendar will place this date as the seventeenth of Tammuz, a day now associated with many historical tragedies which occurred over the generations.⁵ The first of the tragedies that occurred on this date was the smashing of the Tablets, when Moses descended from Mount Sinai and saw the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf.

Obscured by this great sin and the ensuing events is this very point, that this was the day that Moses came down with the Tablets and the Torah for the Jewish people. This day was intended to be the day the Jewish people would *receive*⁶ the Torah. To clarify that point: The Ten Commandments were given on Shavuos and G-d taught Moses the remainder of the Torah over the next forty days. The Jewish people, however, did not have access to the Torah until Moses came down from Mount Sinai at the end of those forty days and presented it to them. Hence, the day Moses came down, the seventeenth of Tammuz, was intended to be the day the Jewish people received the Torah.

Typically, however, we do not associate any day other than Shavuos with the giving of the Torah, and understanding Rashi's meaning in this light would seem odd, unless we were to consider a reference in the Talmud⁷ and Rashi's comment there. The Mishnah there concludes with a verse:

⁴ See *Sifsei Chachomim*, ad loc., par. 5, where both of these answers are offered.

⁵ See Talmud, Ta'anis 26a, for a list of five events.

⁶ Ta'anis 26b

⁷ Note Rashi's use of the word *l'kabbel*, "to receive." The common reference to Shavuos is *Z'man Matan Toraseinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah.

Go forth and gaze, O daughters distinguished by loyalty to G-d, upon the King to Whom peace belongs, adorned with the crown His nation made for him, on the day He became one with Israel, and on the day His heart was gladdened.⁸

The Mishnah explains that “the day He became one with Israel” refers to the giving of the Torah, and “the day His heart was gladdened” refers to the consecration of the Temple. Rashi, based on the context of the Mishnah,⁹ explains that the giving of the Torah here refers to Yom Kippur, the day Moses came down with the *second* set of Tablets—and not Shavuot!¹⁰ It emerges now that both Shavuot (the time G-d initially offered or gave the Torah to his people) and Yom Kippur (the day they actually received the Torah) carry the title of *Mattan Torah*—the giving of the Torah.

Although it is Yom Kippur that we are now equating with Shavuot, this is because the sin of the Golden Calf delayed that element of *Mattan Torah*, namely the receiving of the Torah. From a pre-Exodus perspective, however, the seventeenth of Tammuz was anticipated to be the day the Jewish people would receive the Torah. This is the day, three months from the Exodus, that Rashi refers to in his comments to Exodus 3:12, the day which G-d pointed to as the justification for allowing the Jews to leave Egypt.

The question that we must ponder is why this day, the seventeenth of Tammuz, is favored by Rashi over Shavuot as the crucial day, on which the redemption from Egypt hinged.¹¹ What is Rashi telling us by ignoring Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah, with all of its obvious importance, and instead choosing the day Moses was to come down with the Torah, as the day the Jewish people earned their redemption?¹²

⁸ Song of Songs 3:11—translation based on Artscroll’s allegorical rendering.

⁹ See also Talmud, Ta’anis 30b, for further support of Rashi’s explanation.

¹⁰ Bartenura, ad loc., adds that *the day of consecration* also refers to Yom Kippur, which fell out during the time of the consecration of the first Temple.

¹¹ This same question can be asked of the aforementioned Mishnah in Ta’anis, as well—why choose Yom Kippur over Shavuot as “the day He became one with Israel?”

Perhaps the answer lies simply in the point of distinction between the descriptions of these two days. Shavuot is the day G-d gave (offered) us the Torah; the seventeenth of Tammuz (or, in reality, Yom Kippur) is the day we received the Torah. To be the people to whom G-d offered the Torah was not enough to allow them to be taken out of Egypt; they still had to receive the Torah, to accept it, and to make it a part of their lives. Only a people that were to live their lives according to the Torah could be redeemed from Egypt. In order to begin that process they needed to have the Torah in their midst.

To use the metaphor of the verse from Song of Songs, this was the time of the marriage of the Jewish people with G-d. The offering of the Torah was G-d’s marriage proposal to Israel, but a proposal merely offered is only that—a proposal. It does not mandate change or signify a new way of life for either party. Once the proposal is accepted and implemented, however, lives are forever changed and the marriage creates a new reality and sense of existence for each individual. The Jewish people needed to accept the proposal from G-d and then create the reality of this marriage. This was signified and made possible by Moses’ bringing the Torah to them. It was this achievement that G-d referred to as the merit by which the Jews would be taken out of Egypt.¹⁰

The significance of this difference can shed much light on our celebration of receiving the Torah on Shavuot. The gift of the Torah was never meant to be an honor or a banner awarded to the Jewish people, something to be waved or pointed to with a sense of national pride. *Its value to us is only as great as our commitment to*

¹² See *Sifsei Chachomim*, *ibid.*, who suggests that Shavuot represents the giving of the Written Torah, and the seventeenth of Tammuz the giving of the Oral Torah, thus forming the complete Torah.

¹³ It is now most instructive to reexamine the verse in Exodus (3:12) in light of Rashi’s comments. The verse speaks of worshiping G-d on Mount Sinai, which Rashi explains as receiving the Torah on the seventeenth of Tammuz. The events of Shavuot, where G-d merely presented the Torah, could hardly be described as an act of worship. The significance of seventeenth of Tammuz is that it represents the Jewish people’s commitment to incorporate the Torah into their lives and to define themselves as a people that worships G-d, as well as representing the actual start of that worship.

its values. The Torah was given to be followed, and to the extent that we are able to incorporate its teachings into our lives, we fulfill our purpose as a people.

This is the message of Rashi's choice of dates to connect the Exodus with the giving of the Torah. Passover marks our freedom from slavery and the start of G-d's plan to form us into a people. This was not achievable, certainly, without Shavuot, which represents the giving of the Torah. The Torah not only defines the type of people we are meant to be; it is the very reason we were redeemed from Egypt and given the opportunity to become a people. However, to merit that opportunity we needed to ultimately accept the Torah and live our lives accordingly, as signified by the events of the seventeenth of Tammuz.

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Rabbi Dovid Spetner

Shavuot and the Meaning of the Second Day of Yom Tov

When the Jewish people boldly entered into the covenant with G-d with the famous statement of “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*—we will act and [then] we will listen,” they exhibited an unquestioning faith in G-d and his Torah by accepting the Torah “sight unseen.”

It was not so simple, though, says *Midrash Tanchuma*.¹ The Talmud² tells us that “the mountain (Mount Sinai) was held over them like a barrel,” in essence *forcing* them to accept the Torah!

The resolution, says the Midrash, is that the people had faith in was G-d and, by extension, His finite Written Torah. What they had to be forced to accept was the Oral Torah, a Torah that would be under the control and decision-making power of man. That they were unwilling to accept, and it had to be forced upon them.

Few things have been less understood than the Rabbinic institution of a second day of Yom Tov (Festivals) in the Diaspora. A full six days a year are spent in Rabbinic Yom Tov, and this seeming incursion into our lives deserves examination.

First, a bit of history.

¹ Parashas Noach

² Shabbos 88a

Every month in the Hebrew calendar is either twenty-nine or thirty days long, since the moon takes over twenty-nine and a half days to complete its orbit around the Earth. Accordingly, the first day of the next month will fall on one of two days (the thirtieth or the thirty-first). Until the fourth century CE and the establishment of a fixed calendar, this determination was made by a Jewish court, based on the testimony of witnesses who had seen the new moon. With the court in Jerusalem and a great Jewish population in the Diaspora, primarily in Babylon, how was the start of the new month—and the correct dates of the holidays—communicated to the Diaspora?

The Mishnah³ describes a system of bonfires on the mountaintops from Jerusalem to Babylon that would be lit, thereby informing the Diaspora of the correct date of the new month in a matter of minutes. The Mishnah goes on to report how the Tzedokim (Sadducees), avowed enemies of the Rabbis and the Oral Torah, began to light their own fires in order to confuse the Diaspora and spoil the system of communication. Subsequently, the court was forced to send notarized agents to the communities of the Diaspora, a process which would take weeks—and would force the communities to keep what was normally a one-day Festival for two days, due to their doubt over the correct day of the month. Even after the permanent calendar was established, and the doubt as to the day of the month universally removed, the practice of keeping two days of Yom Tov in the Diaspora remained.

The basis for maintaining two days of Yom Tov even with the benefit of a calendar, is recorded in the Talmud.⁴ There we are told how the Sages of Israel urged the Sages of Babylon to heed “the custom of their fathers,” and to practice two days of Yom Tov. This was necessary, they said, in case the study of Torah were to be outlawed by the government, causing the application of calendar calculations to become skewed.

The Talmud’s technical rationale notwithstanding, how are

³ Rosh Hashanah 22b

⁴ Beitzah 4b

we, in the age of universal and instant communication, supposed to understand the need for a second day of Yom Tov? And even if we are ready to submit to the reasoning of our Sages, how are we to relate to the spiritual themes and prayers of our holidays, such as judgment on Rosh Hashanah, joy on Sukkos, freedom of Passover, etc., when Yom Tov observance on these additional days is due merely to technicalities?

In order to begin to approach this issue, we must first assimilate an idea expressed by the Vilna Gaon. He explained that in every Rabbinical law where a rationale is given, there are many additional, unrecorded, and even mystical reasons for the law. Therefore, he explains, although the given reason for a particular Rabbinical law may no longer exist, the law still remains in force.

There is a famous question regarding the name given to the holiday of Shavuot in our prayers, *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, The Time of the Giving of Our Torah. The date of Shavuot is given in the Torah as fifty days after the bringing of the Omer offering. The Omer was brought on the sixteenth of Nissan, making the date of Shavuot the sixth of Sivan, and in the Diaspora, the sixth and the seventh. There is a dispute in the Talmud⁵ whether the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan or the seventh.

The discussion, however, is not merely academic, as the disagreement in the Talmud revolves in part around a technical point in the laws of *niddah*. In *Yoreh De'ah*,⁶ the law is codified in accordance with the view that the Torah was given on the *seventh* of Sivan. If this is so, how do we say *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, The Time of the Giving of Our Torah, in the prayers of the first day of Shavuot if it wasn't given until the second day?

Rav Yehoshua Isaac Shapiro (nineteenth-century *Rav* of Slonim), in his work *Emek Yehoshua*, offers an answer based on a statement in the same passage in Shabbos that we mentioned above.

The Talmud writes that although G-d had asked Moses to

⁵ Shabbos 86a-88a, the end of the ninth chapter

⁶ Chapter 196

prepare the people for the Revelation at Sinai for two days prior to the event, Moses added a third day of preparation. This postponed the Revelation by a day and, indeed, G-d responded by not giving the Torah till the next day!

Based on this, Rabbi Shapiro explains that the essence of our receiving the Torah was not just a matter of learning information; it was *taking control of the reality of Torah*. Since the Torah is the blueprint of the universe, when the Sages would decide one way or another in a point of law, it would now become a reality affecting both the physical and spiritual worlds. Our first act as the possessors of Torah, says Rabbi Shapiro, was Moses' postponing of the Revelation and G-d's holding Himself "bound" to man's decision! Therefore G-d, by not giving us the Torah on the sixth of Sivan, was giving us control over the Torah. Hence both the sixth of Sivan and the next day, when the Revelation actually took place, are *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*.

With this background we may now appreciate a cryptic comment of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Rav Menachem Azarya Mipano, in his work *Asarah Maamaros*. He writes that G-d gave us the Torah on the day *after* the Biblical Shavuot in order to allude to His approval of the future, Rabbinical second day of Yom Tov, which would fall on that day. What does this mean? Why does the second day of Yom Tov need a place at Sinai?

We mentioned earlier that the keeping of a second day came as a result of the activities of the Tzedokim (Sadducees). Is that mere coincidence? Are the myriad *mitzvos* and prayers performed by millions of Jews over thousands of years in no way a response to that ancient heretical group?

The Tzedokim are described throughout the Talmud as the opponents of the Oral Torah and the role of the Sages in interpreting the Written Torah. What were the Tzedokim really challenging? They weren't challenging the Sages' ability to legislate the Torah the way any government creates laws. What they refused to believe was that the decision of the Sages had *a cosmic reality*. To the Tzedokim, *halacha* was just man-made law, but the

Sages understood that G-d was responsive to their decisions, as He was to Moses' postponement of the Revelation at Sinai.

The second day of Yom Tov is a significant expression of Divine response. Our holidays are called *mo'ados*, meetings, because they are times when we and the Divine connect in a unique way. In creating a second day of Yom Tov, the Sages were not merely asking us to pretend we are conducting Yom Tov, but were extending that sanctified time when we meet with our Creator, known as *mo'ed*, or Yom Tov. As such, the eighth day of Passover is also imbued with a Divine influence of freedom, and the second day of Shavuot with Torah, and so with the other holidays.

The need for a second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora, where we lack the sanctity of the Holy Land, was not just a practical, *halachic* need to resolve the doubt created by the Tzedokim. It was a need for six additional days of Rabbinically-created Divine reality, with which to spiritually fortify ourselves against the new philosophy of the Tzedokim. This need was foreseen at Sinai and was alluded to by Moses's *Rabbinic* decision to postpone—and by G-d's consent.

The philosophy of the Tzedokim was that Rabbinical Judaism is nothing more than an arbitrary, legalistic structure, devoid of any relationship to the Divine. Since its introduction, this outlook has remained alive in one form or another, making the warning of the Sages of Israel to the Diaspora to "heed the custom of our fathers" as important today as it ever was.

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Shavuos— A Time for Torah

In the Shavuos prayers, we thank G-d for giving us the holiday of Shavuos, which we refer to as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, the time commemorating the giving of the Torah. We customarily stay up through the night, studying Torah. Some have the custom of going through the *Tikun*, a collection of verses and phrases representing a cross-section of the entire Written and Oral Torah.

Yet with all of its fanfare and celebration, and cheesecake to boot, Shavuos in the 5700's¹ seems a far cry from what must have occurred on Mount Sinai some 3,300 years ago. Are we to relate to our modern-day observance as simply a commemoration of that awesome day, to which we have little connection? If there really is more to the Yom Tov than mere commemoration, how can we modern-day Jews bridge the gap of the millennia which separates us so profoundly from the day of our inauguration as a nation?

Rav Eliyahu Dessler, in his collected writings, has several profound insights into the workings of the Jewish calendar, and establishes a unique manner through which the Jewish people can relate to the annual “commemoration” of events.² A brief analysis of some of the concepts he discusses will enable us to connect in a more meaningful way with the Sinaitic experience and, in general, with the various Jewish Holidays.

¹ The Jewish calendar counts years from the Creation, following the chronology given in the Bible; the secular year 1998 corresponded with the Jewish year 5758. The Revelation on Mt. Sinai took place in the Jewish year 2448 (1312 BCE), 3,310 years before this essay was first published.

² Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Eliyahu*, Vol. 1 p. 103, Vol. 2 pp. 17-18, Vol. 4 p. 113

Rav Dessler quotes Rav Tzvi Hirsch Brodie, of the Talmud Torah of Kelm, as saying, “Time doesn’t pass us by; rather, we pass through time.” The choice in emphasis may seem quite arbitrary, but a closer analysis reveals a startling difference.

There is a famous Midrash which states, “G-d looked into the Torah and created the world.” That is to say, the Torah acted as the metaphysical blueprint of Creation for the entire universe. Long before the existence of parchment and ink, the verses in the Torah—which, for example, coronate G-d as our King, or which instruct the methods of animal sacrifice—bespoke G-d’s “need” to create a physical world, in which to house flesh-and-blood “subjects,” and animals to slaughter.

In the twentieth century, particularly with the work of Einstein, the scientific world has become aware of the fact that time itself is a limited dimension. It can therefore be altered; hence we can go “beyond” time. Rav Dessler expresses essentially the same idea, with perhaps a far more profound implication. We, as spiritual beings, he says, exist in a physical world, and are indeed bound, during our lifetimes, to a physical body. However, our knowledge regarding *Olam Haba*, the World to Come, dictates that our souls have existence outside of the physical restraints of the body. Therefore, says Rav Dessler, we as Jews supercede the physical limitations of time. In fact, our souls, our Sages say, were present at the revelation of Mount Sinai; and after death, our souls will eventually, if we merit, bask in the glory of Gan Eden.

If so, asks Rav Dessler, why did G-d stress the factor of time in the creation of the world, specifically orchestrating the Genesis story in seven days? The answer, he explains, relates intimately to the paradox of an Infinite Creator creating a physical universe.

Our Sages made the observation that the degree of physicality in the world relates inversely with the manifestation of G-dliness in the world. This is seen in the very root of the Hebrew word *olam*, world, which is based on another Hebrew word, *he’elam*, or hiddenness. That is to say, G-d created a world (*olam*) in which He is “hidden” (*ne’elam*). The more physical an item is, and the

deeper we understand the workings of the physical laws surrounding it, the more we will tend to see the item as divorced of spiritual qualities.

Had G-d created a world of minimal physical content, His involvement would be apparent, and the need to follow His commands would be obvious. Therefore, says Rav Dessler, the creation of the world is fashioned in a highly physical manner. Moreover, to the student of science, the universe appears to have been created in a single moment in time. This is in sharp contrast to the way we are taught by the Sages to view Creation—as an ongoing occurrence. As we say in the morning blessings of Shema, “...Who renews, in His goodness, every day, always, the work of Creation.” G-d is constantly and intimately involved in Creation. In fact, the Talmud says that if, for a moment, G-d did not actively “will” the world into existence, it would cease to be.

The task of a Jew therefore is to see beyond the physical world, to the One who created it. To the extent that we are able to see G-d’s involvement in the world, we are able to make the “olam,” or world, more revealed.

This need to look beneath the surface of apparent reality, says Rav Dessler, should also affect our approach to the existence of time. Time is another physical element of Creation in the universe, as is seen in the seven-day order of Creation. To the extent that we can look beyond time, to view ourselves outside of the framework of time, we can see spiritual elements which time hides. Thus, for example, Shabbos is not truly a weekly day of rest, a time to restore the physical energies after six days of toil. In truth, it is an avenue for reflection, and it allows us to repeatedly reacquaint ourselves with the reality that G-d is the only Creator, and that our productivity is entirely dependent upon His permission.

To relate this to our original point of discussion, it becomes apparent that our approach to Jewish holidays is totally different when contrasted with secular holidays. A country may commemorate an event from long ago with a turkey, or a day without business. Yet there is nothing intrinsic about the day, per sé. The Jew-

ish calendar, however, is not a linear scale of time, where the present moment becomes further and further removed from any connection to an ancient event. Rather, we are to look at the calendar, in the analogy of Rav Matis Weinberg, as a spiral staircase where each year on a particular day we reconnect (hopefully on a higher level) to the spiritual potentials that are inherent in the day.³ Thus, the holiday of Shavuos is not a commemoration of the long-ago reception of the Torah; it is an annual opportunity to connect to the day which has the strongest infusion of the concept of Torah reception.

(Why there needs to be an annual cycle in which different days have different infusions—e.g., one day most strongly connected with repentance (Yom Kippur), and another period most intensely connected with joy (Succos), etc.—is not specifically dealt with in Rav Dessler’s writings. Perhaps G-d “assessed” that we are unable to connect to all of these spiritual concepts on a daily basis, and need an annual cycle through which to internalize the experiences of the different elements of spirituality before coming back to the same element.)

In light of these insights of Rav Dessler, the custom of Torah study on the night of Shavuos, which was questioned at the onset, is a totally appropriate means of connecting to the concept of accepting the Torah. In fact, by selecting bits and pieces which comprise the entire Torah as the emphasis of the evening’s study, we connect to acceptance of Torah in the manner in which it was given—in its entirety.

If we take this analysis one step further, hopefully we will appreciate yet another aspect of the significance of Torah study on this night.

We refer to the time of Passover as *Z’man Cheruseimu*, the Time of Freedom. Yet, in reality, Passover represents not freedom in and of itself, but *a road to freedom*. Passover begins the daily counting of the Omer, which culminates with the resultant time of Shavuos. In relation to the concept of freedom, a Baraisa in Avos (6:2) has

³ Rav Matis Weinberg, *Patterns in Time*, Vo1. 8 pp 39-42

the following insight. The tablets of the Ten Commandments were the “handiwork of G-d,” as it were. The Baraisa continues:

‘...And the script was G-d’s script, engraved (*charus*) on the Tablets.’ (Exodus 31:18) Do not pronounce the word (lit., read) “*charus*,” but rather “*cheirus*” (which means freedom). For there is no freer man than one who engages in the study of Torah.

When our Sages say that a word has letters that can be read two ways, they are not just noting a similarity in the letters; rather, they are saying that there is an intrinsic connection in the words. Therefore, the engraving of the tablets itself, which symbolizes Torah study, is connected to *cheirus*, freedom. How does learning Torah bring one to freedom?

With Rav Dessler’s comments about our appreciation of time, we can begin to understand the power of Torah and the true import of the Baraisa we have mentioned. Torah study is the quintessential means by which we can come to see G-d’s involvement in the world. To the extent that we reinforce in our minds the concepts of spirituality that the Torah teaches, and to the degree that we can break through the barriers of physicality in the realms of the natural world, we become *free*—unbound by nature’s limitations and the restrictions of time.

Thus, the inherent infusion of holiness on the special day of Shavuos has much to offer us. The opportunity exists to reconnect to the annual reception of the Torah. As we relive the Sinai experience through the study of Torah, we consciously reawaken ourselves to the reality of G-d’s involvement in the physical world. This in turn aids us to summon our energies in the pursuit of the spiritual. That is the ultimate freedom.

May we merit to feel the ecstasy of freedom on this Shavuos night, as we connect to G-d through His Torah. May we all merit to the coming of *Moshiach*, the Messiah, when we will experience the ultimate freedom from physicality, as an entire nation.

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Rabbi Boruch Leff

Shavuos: Relax and Reflect

Passover has its Seder. Purim has its Megillah. Chanukah has its menorah. Sukkos has its *sukkah*. Shavuos, however, seems to be quite a barren holiday in terms of *mitzvos*. True, many have a custom to remain awake the entire night, studying Torah on Shavuos, *but this is merely a custom*. The Torah does not prescribe any particular directive to be performed on Shavuos. This unique aspect of Shavuos, in contrast to the other Yomim Tovim is extremely surprising.

Shavuos is certainly more significant, more inspirational than any of the other Festivals. The others derive their validity, both legal and spiritual, from the giving of the Torah—which occurred on Shavuos. Why then must we struggle to find meaning and growth from Shavuos? Beyond the special sacrifices brought on the festival, why shouldn’t the Torah assist us, as it characteristically does, by requiring a *mitzvah* of some kind that would call to mind the Revelation on Mount Sinai? Why isn’t there a *mitzvah* to recount the story of Sinai, similar to the *mitzvah* on Passover of reliving the Exodus? (Although in Deuteronomy 4:9-10 the Torah commands us to remember the events of Sinai, we do not find any particular mention that this should take place on Shavuos.) What is the Torah’s message in this blatant omission? Indeed, we now appreciate the Ramban’s comment¹ that the Torah’s presentation of Shavuos is a *chok*, a decree which we can not understand.

¹ Commentary to Deuteronomy 16:12

Yet we can make an attempt. However, our quest for a solution to this problem must begin with another question.

The most common understanding of the significance of Shavuot is that it is, as our Sages describe it, *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, the appointed time when our Torah was given. Yet the Torah never mentions this. The Torah refers to Shavuot in five places, yet is silent about any relationship to Har Sinai. Shavuot is called the Festival of the Harvest;² Shavuot and a holiday of the wheat harvest;³ an almost anonymous festival taking place fifty days after Passover;⁴ the Day of First Fruits and Shavuot;⁵ and simply Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks.⁶ Nowhere does the Torah offer a hint or a whisper that Shavuot is celebrated as a commemoration of the Giving of the Torah! How can such a fundamental aspect be lacking?

The Maharal⁷ offers a perplexing solution. A free translation follows:

Concerning the question that people⁸ ask—that if the holiday of Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah, why doesn't the Torah mention this, especially since the Sages describe it in the liturgy as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*—this is not a question at all. G-d gave us Yomim Tovim in order to rejoice in them, but it is difficult to rejoice in Shavuot due to the fact that on it we received the Torah, which is a yoke and a burden upon us. This is why the gentiles rejected the Torah. Now, it is true that we accepted the Torah upon ourselves when we proclaimed “*Na'aseh*

² Exodus 23:22

³ Exodus 34:22

⁴ Leviticus 23:16

⁵ Numbers 28:26

⁶ Deuteronomy 16:9 and 16:16

⁷ *Tiferes Yisrael*, end of Chapter 27

⁸ Note the use of the term “people,” (in general), as if Torah scholars (in particular) would never ask such a question. This would be in accordance with the rule the Rabbeinu Bachya establishes in his commentary to Leviticus 23:24, that the more esoteric the subject, the shorter and more vague the account in the Torah. True understanding is reserved for unique individuals, not for the masses. This rule would apply to Shavuot.

v'nishmah—we accept to do it and then we will hear what it is,” but, in actuality, G-d forced us to accept it against our will, by placing a mountain over our heads.⁹ So how could the Torah refer to Shavuot as a Festival of the Giving of the Torah, when G-d forced it upon us? (A festival is for *rejoicing*.)

The Maharal continues to explain a similar phenomenon concerning Rosh Hashanah, in which the Torah does not refer to it as a Day of Judgement.

Since judgement is not received well or desired by people, the Torah does not mention it. Nor does it mention anything associated with a negative [connotation] when referring to a holiday.

The Maharal's words are shocking! Impossible! Can any holiday be understood as negative? Could the memory of the giving of the Torah at Sinai really be a cause of distress?

We shall return to this Maharal later and make it, we hope, less horrifying.

For now, there is a common misconception concerning Shavuot that must be addressed. If you were to ask someone to explain what the focus of Shavuot is, no doubt he/she would tell you that the focus is the *mitzvah* of studying Torah. While this may be true if measured by a standard of time—we do spend the entire Shavuot night studying Torah—it is somewhat inaccurate.

The Torah's understanding of Jewish Festivals is fundamentally different when compared to non-Jewish holidays. Non-Jews *commemorate* events, while Jews *reexperience* them. Every Festival is an opportunity for growth, because the Festival is infused with spiritual forces that were unleashed due to an historical event.¹⁰ On Shavuot the Jewish People received and accepted the Torah. Thus, every year we accept the Torah anew, and we must find

⁹ See Talmud, Shabbos 88a

¹⁰ See Rav Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Volume 2, p. 21, as well as the essay “Shavuot—A Time for Torah,” in this booklet, by Rabbi Yuval Kernerman.

ways in our personal service of G-d to strengthen our commitment to the Torah on Shavuos.¹¹

So, what then, is the focus of Shavuos?

It seems that the focus should be a reestablishment of our connection to the Torah. Torah is one of the four items that are in need of constant strengthening,¹² but it is on Shavuos when this reinforcement takes on added importance.

Actually, the Kli Yakar¹³ explains that Shavuos is not described in the Torah as *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu* because Torah should be constantly reaccepted renewed, daily.¹⁴ This is the symbolism of the “new meal offering” brought on Shavuos. In a similar vein, the Kotzker Rebbe explains that Shavuos is not called *Z'man Kabbalas Toraseinu*, the appointed time for the *acceptance* of the Torah, because although the Torah was given on Shavuos, we accept it constantly.¹⁵ Rav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory, dean of Ner Yisroel Baltimore, once said that Shavuos has no calendar date and is described in the Torah simply as “fifty days after Passover,” because acceptance of the Torah is not particular to a specific calendar date. But all would agree that Shavuos is a most potent time for a stronger acceptance and renewal.

Rav Tzadok HaCohen¹⁶ asks a very stimulating question on the verse, “And the entire nation was seeing the thunder... The nation saw, and trembled...”¹⁷ Why does the Torah describe the Children of Israel as “seeing” (present tense) and then as “having seen” (past tense)?

Rav Tzadok explains that the use of present tense is really a description of all generations throughout Jewish history. Every Jew has the ability to access the spiritual sounds and sights of Sinai

¹¹ Ibid., p. 40

¹² See Talmud, Berachos 32b

¹³ Commentary to Leviticus 23:16

¹⁴ See Rashi to Exodus 19:1

¹⁵ See *Imrai Shamai*, Moadim p. 312

¹⁶ *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 50

¹⁷ Exodus 20:15

right now, because they are part and parcel of the subconscious of the Jewish soul. In a similar vein, *Sfas Emes*¹⁸ states emphatically that “all understanding and insight that Jews have gained throughout the generations derives its source from the impactful sounds of the Sinai experience.”

As Rav Dessler pointed out, Shavuos is the day when the Revelation on Mount Sinai’s spiritual effects are strongest. One may assume that the access to the “Revelation on Har Sinai” described by Rav Tzadok is also strongest on this day. Therefore, it is easier to establish a new commitment to the Torah on Shavuos. As Ohr Gedalyahu writes,¹⁹ “A person must prepare for the awesome spiritual light that is present on Shavuos.” Then he writes,²⁰ “Every year the Torah is given anew on Shavuos, and we must be ready to receive it.”

These ideas help us understand the practice on Shavuos called *Tikkun Leil Shavuos*. This practice, carried out on Shavuos night, has its origins in the *Zohar*, and was popularized by the Arizal and his students (see Rabbi Yaakov Weingarten’s *Tikkun Leil Shavuos*). The practice involves the recitation of verses from every weekly Torah reading and every book of the Prophets and Hagiographa (*Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*). If time allows, the same procedure is done with every tractate of Mishnah. Other customs are not as demanding, but simply require one to recite a listing of all the *mitzvos* of the Torah while having in mind to accept them. The central theme of this *Tikkun* is not to engage in hard-core depth of study, but rather to connect oneself to all aspects of Torah. Shavuos night is not spent simply engaged in Torah study; rather, it is used to recommit oneself to the Torah.

Whether one recites the *Tikkun Leil Shavuos* or learns normally on Shavuos night, one must realize that the focus of Shavuos must be to strengthen one’s commitment to Torah. It is not only a holiday celebrating the learning of Torah. We do not call the fes-

¹⁸ volume 4, p.26

¹⁹ Moadim, p. 160

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 166

tival *Chag Mattan Torah* (the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah), but Shavuos, which means “Weeks.” The stress is on the culmination of the weeks counted—weeks spent preparing to reestablish our commitment to Torah.²¹ Our study of Torah on Shavuos should be a reflection of the depth of our appreciation of—and commitment to—accepting the Torah.

Having established Shavuos as the festival for a strong recommitment to Torah, we return now to the perplexing Maharal cited earlier. We wondered what the Maharal could have meant in referring to Shavuos’ connection to the giving of the Torah as a depressing, rather than a joyful, memory. The solution lies in a proper understanding of our role as the bearers of the Torah.

It is often explained, especially in modern times, when many people have difficulty with the concept of a “Chosen People,” that our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai not only made us G-d’s special nation, but also infused within us tremendous responsibility. We were no longer bound by the seven Noahide Laws only, but we became responsible to keep all 613 Torah laws. We became moral leaders of the world—indeed, “a kingdom of priests—” but not a superior race.

Greater responsibility should be a cause for celebration, especially when the responsibility is to carry out G-d’s will for the world. This was the excitement exhibited in our grand declaration “*Na’aseh v’nishmah*, we accept to do and [then] we’ll hear [later what it is we are to do],” because we trust that G-d is concerned only in our best interests.

But responsibility can come together with a feeling of burden. (See Talmud, Horiyos 10b- “You think I’m giving you power? I’m actually making you slaves!!”) It is this point that G-d was conveying by holding the mountain over our heads. Torah in this world is not voluntary, subject to man’s choice to accept it. It is a necessary burden of instructions that enable the world to exist.²² While it may be true that “G-d wanted to increase the merits of the

Jewish people; therefore, He gave them many mitzvos,”²³ it is only natural that Jews feel a sense of difficulty and burden at times. We appreciate the beauty and greatness of the Torah and the spirituality and meaning that it injects into our lives, but there are times when we feel overwhelmed by the vastness of the demands of the Torah. In a sense, we actually *requested* of G-d to “force” us to accept the Torah, so that these nervous feelings wouldn’t overtake us at Mount Sinai. (See *Or Gedalyahu*, p. 82, for a beautiful parable concerning a mentally ill patient who asks his friends, while in a healthy state of mind, to restrain him from causing damage to himself or others.)

So it is this fear, says the Maharal, which can make Shavuos quite unnerving. If we internalize the awesome responsibility that Mattan Torah at Sinai places upon us, we could not react instinctively with festive rejoicing. The Torah acknowledges this and therefore does not mention the giving of the Torah explicitly, with regard to Shavuos. Rather, the stress of Shavuos in the Torah is placed upon the gratitude that we should have to G-d for providing new crops and fruits.

Only in the Oral Torah do we discover that Shavuos is the festival celebrating the giving of the Torah. After a mature realization, we can and we do rejoice immensely in the fact that G-d has given us His treasure—His instructions for living. After introspection we can realize that this “burden” is really the key to life itself, and *that realization is exhilarating*. Rav Tzadok²⁴ suggests that this is the reason why the Talmud²⁵ states that on Shavuos everyone agrees that there is a physical *mitzvah* to eat, drink and feast (whereas regarding other festivals there is a dispute), because the body feels this burden most strongly. (The soul, in contrast, is spiritually inclined.) It is the body that must demonstrate that, ultimately, it too appreciates the “burden” of the Torah.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the Torah does not prescribe a

²³ Mishnah, Makkos 23b

²⁴ *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 56

²⁵ Pesachim 68b

²¹ Rav Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory

²² see *Tiferes Yisroel*, Chapter 32

specific *mitzvah* for Shavuos. On other holidays, the Torah gives specific directions, both in letter and in spirit, how to fulfill the laws intended for those festivals. At times one can “get lost” in the performance of a *mitzvah* and fail to achieve significant general growth due to a lack of focus on the meaning of the festival. The Torah accounts for this, but for most holidays allows the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* to suffice.

On Shavuos, however, the Torah does not want us to be “distracted” by the performance of any specific *mitzvah*. The Maharal has shown us that Shavuos is a day of grand, “burdensome” implications. As Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch writes:²⁶

Shavuos... represents purely spiritual matters and therefore has no *mitzvah*-symbol of its own, no outward expression in action of its significance. This would seem to suggest that Israel would cease to exist if the significance of... Shavuos, which concerns the national soul of Israel, were to disappear from the minds of Israel.

The Giving of the Torah is far too powerful to enable any expression of *mitzvah* through physical action to be meaningful. The Torah encompasses all *mitzvos*. No one particular *mitzvah* could suffice. A *mitzvah* obligation would actually detract, not enhance. G-d gave us a festival to commemorate the giving of the Torah, in which we refrain from performing creative work—but that is all. *We are to refrain from work in order to establish a proper atmosphere for contemplation on the meaning of the day.* Our Sages call Shavuos *Atzeres*, which means simply “refraining from work.” This is the sole festival aspect of Shavuos,²⁷ in order to allow a focus on the implications and responsibilities of receiving the Torah. Seforno²⁸ explains the name *Atzeres* to mean “absorption” of the spirituality of the day. Rav Tzadok²⁹ cites the Arizal, who explains both

²⁶ *Horeb*, p. 98

²⁷ See *Tu'amei Minhagim*, p.279, for a similar explanation from R' Levi Yitzchak Berditchev.

²⁸ Commentary to Leviticus 23:36

²⁹ *Pri Tzadik*, volume 4, p. 34)

Shemini Atzeres and Shavuos/*Atzeres* in this manner as well. Indeed, Shavuos offers “little else” but pure, simple basking in the holiness and splendor of the day.

We must ask ourselves some difficult, penetrating, and even shocking questions on Shavuos. How strongly are we connected to the Torah? Are there areas in which we find the Torah to be burdensome? Are we Jews both on the outside and *internally*, or is there room to enhance our real, genuine inner selves? Are we fully committed to all aspects of the Torah, or can we use an over-haul in our spiritual growth? What is the purpose of life? What is the meaning of our existence?

Ruth contemplated these questions and decided to convert to Judaism. It is perhaps for this reason (in addition to the classical reasons) that we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuos.

(According to the Shlah Hakodosh, cited by Rav Matisyahu Solomon,³⁰ Shavuos is actually a Day of Judgement, on which G-d evaluates our deeds and asks these very questions. On Shavuos the world was recreated through the giving of the Torah, and G-d judges on the anniversary of recreation as well as on Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of Creation itself. G-d judges particularly on the commitment (or lack thereof) to Torah study. *S'fas Emes*³¹ states that every year on Shavuos we receive the ability to learn and understand all parts and levels of the Torah that we are to engage in that year. Later,³² *S'fas Emes* connects this homiletically to the Mishnah³³ that says fruit trees are judged on Shavuos—man’s “fruit” is *mitzvos* and good deeds.

The Torah poses solutions to all of these questions and we should seek them and apply them to our lives. We should choose an area of growth and strengthen our commitment to it on Shavuos. We must also commit to the responsibility of applying the Torah’s teachings to every aspect of our lives, and let the Torah’s

³⁰ *Mat'nas Chaim*, p. 318

³¹ Numbers, p. 25

³² *Ibid.*, p. 33

³³ Rosh Hashanah 16a

beauty be our guiding inspiration. If we appreciate the Torah for what it truly is, we will better appreciate our lives. We will then realize that Shavuos is bereft of *mitzvos* only because *we* are bereft of complete Torah observance. Shavuos is an opportunity to think deeply about our real connection to Torah.

So, this Shavuos, let's take a contemplative walk and think about these extremely significant issues. Only then will we have fulfilled the maxim, "If you have experienced a Jewish holiday and haven't profoundly changed as a result, you've missed the point of the Jewish holiday!"

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Rabbi Dov Moshe Lipman

Shavuos and First Fruits

Time to Take Stock

The Torah refers to the holiday of Shavuos as the Day of First Fruits.¹ Jews are required to bring their first fruits to Jerusalem, beginning on this holiday.² As we know, Shavuos celebrates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people. It is a day that we generally associate with learning Torah and rejoicing over its beauty and meaning. What connection could there be between a holiday which celebrates the Torah and the bringing of the First Fruits to Jerusalem?

The Torah describes the *mitzvah* to bring the first fruits of the crop in Deuteronomy 26. The verses immediately prior to that discuss the commandment to remember the attack of the nation of Amalek upon the Jewish people.³ As we know, the sequence of verses in the Torah has great value, so we must search for an explanation of the connection between the attack of Amalek and the bringing of the First Fruits.

My teacher, Rav Yitzchak Prag, Dean of Mercaz Hatorah in Jerusalem, suggests a beautiful explanation for the connection

¹ Numbers 28:26

² The actual verse "the Day of First Fruits" refers not to the *mitzvah* of *Bikurim* (bringing First Fruits to Jerusalem) but to the *Korban Shte Halechem*, the bread offering brought on Shavuos (see Rashi's commentary to Numbers 28:26). However, Shavuos is the first day of the season during which *Bikurim* may be brought. (See Mishnah, *Bikurim* 1:6)

³ Deuteronomy 25:17-19

between these two seemingly unrelated concepts.

What is the primary theme of the *mitzvah* of the First Fruits? The Torah states that one must present the basket of first fruits to a priest. The presenter must then say, “I declare today, to G-d, that I have come to the land that G-d swore to our forefathers to give to us... And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the ground that You have given me...”⁴ Rashi, quoting the Sifri, sums up the purpose of this declaration: “To show that you are not an ingrate.” A person must acknowledge the good which has been done for him. G-d has brought this person and his family blessing in the land of Israel, and he must show that he recognizes this by bringing the first of his fruit to Jerusalem and by proclaiming that his blessings come from G-d. We see, therefore, that the essence of the *mitzvah* of the first fruits is recognizing good that was done to you, as opposed to denying or ignoring it.

Why did Amalek attack the Jewish people? Our Sages teach us that “Amalek, the nation which denied the good done to them, would come and attack the nation (Israel) which denied the good done to them.”⁵ Putting aside for a moment just how and when the Jews “denied the good which was done to them,” we see clearly that they were punished for this flaw. Amalek, the nation which denies good to the highest degree by completely denying the existence of G-d’s influence in the world, was sent to attack the Jews, who also succumbed to this negative trait of denying the good of G-d.

Now we can clearly understand the relationship between Amalek’s attack and the *mitzvah* of bringing the First Fruits. The Jewish people were given the opportunity to correct the flaw which brought about the war with Amalek, through the *mitzvah* of the First Fruits. Their rejection and display of ingratitude could be rectified through the fulfillment of this *mitzvah*, which has at its essence the recognition of good.

I would like to suggest that this point can be inferred from Rashi’s exact choice of words. Rashi did not say that the First

⁴ Deuteronomy 26: 3-10

Fruits were to show that we recognize good done to us in positive terms. Rather, Rashi says that we come to show that we “*have not rejected* the good done to us.” The Jewish people exhibited that negative trait at an earlier time, leading to the attack of Amalek. Now, through the *mitzvah* of the First Fruits, we come to show that we no longer have this flaw. We have rectified the problem.

When did the Jewish people exhibit this trait of ingratitude, as mentioned earlier in the Midrash? Rav Prag explains this based on a teaching of the Talmud.⁶ Our Sages teach that the Jews displayed this flaw by rejecting the manna which G-d sent to sustain them in the desert. G-d provided the Jews with sustenance for their families that required no effort on their part, and yet they complained about the manna, thereby rejecting good done for them.

I would like to suggest an additional approach to explain in what way the Jews rejected the good that they received from G-d, which directly led to the attack of Amalek. This will also shed light on the connection between Shavuot and the Day of First Fruits.

Immediately prior to Amalek’s attack, the Torah describes that the Jews encamped in a town called Refidim.⁷ In fact, when Amalek actually attacked, the Torah specifically mentions that the Jews were in Refidim.⁸ The Talmud⁹ understands that the name Refidim is a contraction of the Hebrew words *rafu yedeihem midivrei Torah*, “they loosened their grip on the study of Torah.” That, according to the Talmud, left the Jews open to attack.

The Jews in the Wilderness were given the greatest opportunity to study Torah. They literally had nothing else to do. G-d provided them with sustenance and security, so that they would be able to devote all of their time exclusively to immersion in the

⁵ Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach 25

⁶ Avodah Zarah 5b

⁷ Exodus 17:1

⁸ Ibid., verse 8

study of Torah. If the Jews had truly recognized this opportunity, given by G-d, they should have maximized their efforts to capitalize on it. Thus, the Jewish people's laxity in Torah study, linked by our Sages to the attack of Amalek, was ultimately a rejection of good, a flaw which our Sages also link to the attack of Amalek. The Jews, despite the greatest opportunity to study Torah, fell short of what they could have accomplished in this area. Therefore the *mitzvah* of First Fruits, which came to rectify the flaw of being ingrateful, which in turn caused the attack of Amalek, did not come to rectify and atone for just any rejection of good. It came to specifically atone for the sin of not fully taking advantage of the opportunity to study Torah.

Now we can understand the connection between the holiday of Shavuos and the *mitzvah* of bringing the First Fruits. Shavuos celebrates the acceptance of Torah and the learning of Torah. The *mitzvah* of First Fruits comes to remind us to be grateful to G-d, and to take advantage of the opportunity we have to study Torah.

All of us are blessed with the opportunity to study Torah. G-d has given this generation more opportunities to learn Torah than any other in recent history. Whether it's through classes, study partners, books translated into or written in English, or the Internet, Torah is everywhere.

But do we truly take advantage of these opportunities? Can we say that we are really *involved* in the study of Torah? Do we have more time, or can we make some more time, to study Torah? Shavuos is the time not only to ask these questions of ourselves but to act on correcting the problem.

If we are not at the very least making the attempt to establish Torah learning as a focus of our lives, we are guilty of being ungrateful. The message of the First Fruits on Shavuos teaches that we must act upon the good which G-d has given us and study Torah with diligence.

Let us all accept upon ourselves, this Shavuos, to open our-

selves to one more Torah study opportunity. This will set us on the path of the message of the First Fruits—to be people who appreciate the opportunity which G-d has given us, specifically in our generation, by taking advantage of it.

Have a happy and *meaningful* Shavuos.

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⁹ Sanhedrin 106a

The Milk and Meat of Shavuos

Aside from the spiritual import of the Shavuos holiday, this period also conjures up images in our minds of cheesecake, blintzes, and ice cream. The widely practiced custom of eating dairy products on Shavuos is mentioned in the *Code of Jewish Law*¹ by the Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserlis).

There are several reasons offered for this custom.

The Rema suggests that one will be reminded of the *Shtei Halechem*, the two special loaves of bread offered in the Temple on Shavuos. Because there is a prohibition against using the same bread for both dairy and meat, one will eat his dairy meal with one loaf of bread and will eat his meat meal² with another loaf of bread. Consequently his meals will consist (at least in part) of two loaves.

*Mishnah Berurah*³ mentions another reason. Prior to receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Jewish People were not commanded to follow the laws of kashrus. Then, immediately after receiving of the Torah, it would have been difficult for the Jewish People to prepare a meat meal, because of the intricate laws involving meat. Therefore they prepared dairy meals—the laws governing dairy foods are less complex. To commemorate this aspect of the Sinai experience we eat dairy products.

Although the widespread custom is to eat dairy at some point on Shavuos, many also eat meat, in honor of the holiday. This

¹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494:3

² See *Mishnah Berurah* 529:11 for the requirement to eat meat on a festival.

³ 494:12

presents a difficulty, because Jewish law requires one to keep meat and milk separate. Aside from keeping one's dishes separate, one must also eat them at separate times. A brief overview of the laws pertinent to our discussion is therefore in order.⁴

In general, after eating meat, one must wait a period of time (one, three, or six hours, depending on one's custom) before eating dairy products. There are two reasons given for this halacha. First, the fatty residue of meat remains in one's mouth⁵ (mixing milk and meat is prohibited even inside one's mouth). Second, one might find meat in between one's teeth.⁶

In contrast, when one eats dairy first, no waiting period is required.⁷ One exception to this rule pertains to the eating of "hard cheese." In general, hard cheese is defined as cheese that has been aged for six months. One who eats hard cheese must wait before eating meat products, as one waits between eating meat and dairy.⁸

Another issue relates to eating meat following regular cheese or other dairy foods. After eating these dairy foods one must rinse his mouth well, with water or another liquid. Alternatively, one may wipe or clean one's mouth with a substance that won't stick to the roof of the mouth. (An example of this is bread made with wheat.) In addition, it is best to wash one's hands with cold water up to the knuckles⁹ prior to partaking of the meat, because we are afraid that there might be a dairy substance or grease on one's hands. Checking one's hands to see if they are clean also suffices. There is an opinion that states that one should say the Grace after Meals, or the applicable blessing on finishing the cheese meal, before eating the meat.

A final halachic issue is that one is forbidden to use the same tablecloth or placemat for both dairy and meat, because we are

⁴ For a detailed analysis of these laws, see Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 89.

⁵ *Taz*, Yoreh De'ah 89:1; *Shach*, *ibid.*, 89:2

⁶ *Ibid.*, in the name of Rambam

⁷ See Bais Yosef, *Tur*, Orach Chaim 173, in the name of *Zohar*: Some do not eat dairy and meat in the same meal.

⁸ Rema, Yoreh De'ah 89:2.

afraid that the crumbs of one might mix with the food of the other. Because of this, one must use different tablecloths or placemats for dairy and meat.

Based on the above concerns, we can readily understand why many people eat some dairy meals and some meat meals on Shavuos, but don't eat meals consisting of both. It is a *mitzvah* to eat meat on Shavuos, as it is on every festival. It may also be a "*mitzvah*" to eat cheesecake on Shavuos. If we plan to eat dairy and meat at the same meal, let's make sure we do it properly.

A good Yom Tov (holiday) to all!

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Rabbi Yitzchok Preis

The Holy Language of our Holy Torah

The holiday of Shavuos, with its central theme of *Z'man Mattan Toraseinu*, Time of the Giving of our Torah, draws attention to an often underappreciated dimension of Torah. As we focus on the Revelation at Sinai, it is important that we recognize that this was only the beginning of an ongoing communication from G-d to the Jewish people. Through the Torah, G-d speaks directly to each and every generation of world Jewry and to each and every individual Jew.

In the following pages, we will reflect upon the unique nature of the language chosen by G-d as His vehicle of expression in this ongoing communication.

I

Our sages refer to the language of the Torah as *Lashon Hakodesh*—the Holy Tongue.¹ In his *Guide to the Perplexed*,² Maimonides writes that the *kedusha*—holiness—of this language derives from the fact that concepts pertaining to base, bodily functions have no unique, distinctive names in this language, and are referred to only by euphemism. The Maharal³ differs, arguing that the holiness of *Lashon Hakodesh* is innate and not merely the result of a lack of vulgar terminologies. The Maharal says that it is

¹ As examples, among many, see Talmud Bavli, Berachos 13a, Sotah 33b and 49b, Beraishis Rabbah 18, or Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 25

² 3:8

³ *Nesiv Hatz'nius*, chapter 3

⁹ *Darkei Teshuva* 89:26

actually *because* of its holiness that *Lashon Hakodesh* is void of such verbiage.

Nachmanides⁴ rejects all such approaches, charging that the Torah has no qualms about addressing any body part or bodily function. He proposes that the title of *Lashon Hakodesh* derives from its use as the language of Torah and prophecy, coupled with the fact that it was utilized by G-d in creating and naming all of the world's components.

II

The very fact that the Holy Tongue is so named has been cause for legal discussion regarding the parameters of its use. In fact, Hebrew's sanctity has been cause for suggestion that it not be treated as a language like all others. The *Shulchan Aruch*⁵ rules that secular matters may be discussed using *Lashon Hakodesh*, even in an environment in which Torah study would be prohibited (e.g., foul-smelling). However, the Magen Avrohom, quoting the *Sefer HaChasidim*, deems it an act of piety to avoid the use of *Lashon Hakodesh* in such circumstances. In his glosses (ad loc), the Chasam Sofer extends this concept to apply to *spiritually* vile places as well; he suggests that speaking *Lashon Hakodesh* in the proximity of houses of pagan worship would fall into the "best avoided" category. Accordingly, the Chasam Sofer advances the idea that this is why *Lashon Hakodesh* was not commonly spoken during the Babylonian Exile—and, he adds, this was the cause of a tragic "forgetting" of the language.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden⁶ takes a very different approach. He responds to a question regarding the permissibility of studying Hebrew grammar in a bathroom or similar setting, and rules that inasmuch as the student would be apt to contemplate verses of *Tanach* (Scripture), in search of examples of grammatical rules, such study is inappropriate. Though he takes a stringent approach

⁴ Commentary to Exodus 30:13

⁵ Orach Chaim 85:2

⁶ Responsa *Sh'eilas Yaavetz*

in this situation, one can deduce that Rabbi Emden sees no problem with general use of the Hebrew language in such an environment. As Rabbi Emden himself comments, so long as *Lashon Hakodesh* was the common language of our people, it was surely used in all types of locations and environments.⁷

III

In a letter printed in the final pages of *Michtav MeEliyahu*, volume III, Rav Eliyahu Dessler addresses another ramification of the sanctity of our language. Citing as his sources the *Orchos Chaim*, *Shibbolei Haleket*, and other Rishonim,⁸ Rav Dessler explains that the teaching of *Lashon Hakodesh* would optimally take its unique nature into consideration. Accordingly, instruction, even of the alphabet,⁹ would aim not only at retention, but also at the forging of a loving bond between the student and the language of holiness, even if this would slow the learning process. Rav Dessler acknowledges, though, that due to the limited hours dedicated to Judaic studies in many contemporary educational systems, expedient methods must be utilized, even if the aforementioned goal is forfeited.

Rav Dessler's concession to modern methods notwithstanding, this "bond-forming, holiness-inspiring" ideal should enlighten us as to the great regard and admiration we should have for our most distinctive of languages.

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⁷ It should be noted, however, that both of the pillars of contemporary Jewish law, the *Mishnah Berurah* (ibid., 9) and the *Aruch Hashulchan* (ibid., 2) quote the ideal of the *Sefer HaChasidim* without challenge.

⁸ Judaic scholars who lived between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries.

⁹ See also *Shem Hagedolim* (entry on Rabbi Yitzchok of Acco), where the Chida addresses the sanctity of the very letters of the *aleph-beis*. He describes each letter as having its own spiritual root, and various combinations of letters as evoking different "spiritual lights."