

Shavuot: Glimpses of Redemption

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

The Gemara in Pesachim tells us that while on all other *yamim tovim* one can spend the entire day on spiritual pursuits, on Shavuot all agree that one must devote part of the day to material pleasures. This seems perplexing. Why is one of the holiest experiences in Jewish history marked by physical celebration? Additionally, what was the significance of bringing the sacrifice of the *shtei halechem*, the unique bread sacrifice brought only on Shavuot?

The Mishna in Rosh Hashana says that the world is judged at four times in the year: on Pesach for the grain; on Shavuot for the fruit; on Rosh Hashana for our deeds; and on Sukkot for water. It is fascinating to note that Shavuot has almost the same responsibility and accountability as the judgment on Rosh Hashana. The Gemara teaches that Ezra Hasofer established that Parshat Bechukotai should be read before Shavuot, similar to Parshat Ki Savo which is read before Rosh Hashana. Both readings contain the blessings and the curses. We ask that the year should end along with its curses and that we should begin on a positive note.

When Hashem created the world, the *pasuk* says Yom hashishi with a *heh hayediah*, the definite article. The whole world waited to see if the Jews would accept the Torah. If they would refuse the world would return to desolation. It's almost as if we have this same judgment every year on Shavuot. Will we re-accept the Torah or not?

The Shlah Hakadosh notes that just as on Rosh Hashana, Hashem reexamines every individual, similarly on the day of receiving the Torah He looks to see if we are upholding the Torah. According to Kabbalah, every Rosh Hashana Hashem recreates the world again. Every person must ask himself, "Where do I fit into this new world?" On Rosh Hashana our material portion for the year is decided. Our children, livelihood, and health hang in the balance. On Shavuot the stakes are higher. Hashem evaluates our spiritual affinity to

Torah. This will determine how much spirituality we will receive in the coming year.

Rav Salomon asks, why don't we don't feel the same trepidation before Shavuot as we do before Rosh Hashana? He explains that the period of *sefirat haomer* is a period of mourning meant to prepare for us for the judgment of Shavuot. It's not a time of trepidation, because the judgment is about our desire and our will to come closer to Hashem. We want to show our love and attachment to Hashem, so we eat and drink and rejoice. On Shavuot, our mindset has to be total dedication to the will of Hashem. We may not be there one hundred percent. But if we have the *ratzon*, it can influence the judgment for good.

How can we awaken our will to serve Hashem? The Matnat Chaim quotes the Mesillat Yesharim that the way we act on the outside has a direct impact on the inside. *Zerizut*, doing *mitzvot* with alacrity, can awaken a desire for more *mitzvot*. Rav Hillel notes that every time a person does a good deed with *zerizut*, he arouses love for the *mitzvah*. The more we do good deeds with alacrity, the more we strengthen our spiritual connection to Hashem. Rav Wolbe notes that every *mitzvah* is a direct gift from Hashem. Every opportunity to do a good deed is priceless. The Ari Hakadosh said that all of his spiritual achievements came from the joy he had while fulfilling *mitzvot*. Shavuot is a time to show Hashem clearly that our desire is to do His will.

The Imrei Shefer asks, why is it that the sanctity of Har Sinai did not last while the holiness of Har Hamoriah remained forever? Rav Chaim Sanzer explains that at Har Sinai, Hashem Himself came down to the mountain. However, at Har Hamoriah Avraham brought Hashem's presence down. At Har Sinai there was no real effort made to accept the Torah. In fact, Hashem had to force it on the Jews' heads. In contrast, the *akeida* was a testimony to the incredible strength Avraham invested to overcome his *nisayon*. His struggle created a

reality that engendered *kedusha* for eternity.

The Baal Hatanya explains that going above and beyond what is required is a reflection that one is not just doing *mitzvot* by rote. It's a sign of true *avodat Hashem*. *Yegiah*, extending oneself for a *mitzvah* is a reflection of one's desire for it. There is a transformation on Shavuot similar to what happens on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We are purified of our sins. The gift of Torah, an expression of Hashem's divine will, has the power to change us.

Although Shavuot commemorates a spiritual experience, its ultimate purpose was to provide us with a divine blueprint for our daily lives, especially in the areas where we are naturally weak. In the world of business, where greed lures us to be dishonest, and even in communal affairs, where our egos can be aroused, the guidance of Torah helps us stay on the straight path. The *shtei halechem* were brought on Shavuot because specifically in the areas of *lechem*, physicality, we can become a *mincha chadasha*. We can create ourselves anew. We have the ability to experience the transformative power of Torah. During Mussaf on Shavuot the gates of heaven are open and we can ask Hashem to give us spiritual blessing for the coming year.

In chapter three of Megilat Ruth, Naomi tells Ruth to go down to the threshing floor at midnight and ask Boaz to redeem her. Chazal say that David Hamelech would awake every night at midnight to the song of his harp. At this hour Hashem visits Gan Eden and the souls of the *tzadikim* awaken and sing *shira* to Him. The harp within the heart of David Hamelech perceived this and was aroused. Naomi knew Boaz would awaken at midnight. He would sense the harp of Ruth and recognize that she too was destined to be a part of the messianic vision. On Shavuot night our voices join with the souls of all the righteous *tzadikim* throughout the generations. As we lift our voices in song and praise to our Maker, we express our ultimate hope that He will redeem us.



Torah: The Garment of Hashem

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

Yirat Hashem (fear of Hashem) is a key aspect in winning the battle against the *yetzer hara*. There are different levels of *yirah* beginning with fear of consequences and moving up to inner fear of Hashem. The reason why *yirah* is so central is that it has the power to break a person's will. Many times we make the wrong choices, not because we don't know right from wrong, but because we don't have the emotional strength to do what's right. Focusing on the intellectual evils of a bad trait isn't going to help when the alluring image of sin haunts us. But if we have the emotional image of *yirat Hashem* we can subdue the *yetzer hara*.

After *Akeidat Yitzchak*, Hashem told Avraham, "Now I know that you fear Hashem." Avraham loved his son very deeply. Yet his *yirat Hashem* was able to break his instinctual will to preserve his son's life. When a person confronts the *yetzer hara* forcefully with the weapon of *yirah*, he fulfills an impressive number of *mitzvot*. Chazal say, "Greater is he who is commanded to do something and does it than someone who does the same thing and isn't commanded." A command forces a person beyond his limits. The *mitzvah* of *Yirat Hashem* is listed 52 times equaling the numerical value of *ben* (son). It reflects our relationship to Hashem as his children. A person can't come to true *yirat Hashem*

without studying Torah as the mishna says, "*Ein bor yareh cheit*." (An ignoramus will not fear sin.) Bor means an empty pit. A person whose mind is empty has no awareness of Hashem's presence. Only Torah can fill the vacuum in a person's mind with sensitivity to the Creator. When one studies Torah one gets a sense of Hashem's greatness, His kindness, and His desire to benefit us. This fills a person's heart with awe and *ahavat Hashem*.

One of the words that are used to describe Hashem's communication with us is *pi hagevura*. This literally means the mouth of He who is most strong. *Gevurah* is the numerical value of *yirah*. *Yirah* comes when Hashem reveals something of the hidden power of what the Kabbalists call *reishit d'lo yada*, the unknowable Hashem. There's an aspect of Hashem that can't be put into words because it is beyond limitation. What Hashem did in the Torah was to take his unknowable self and apply more and more definition to it until we could grasp something of Him. But there's always a core kernel of that which is unknowable and that is the source of *yirah*.

Mitzvot are meant to bring us to *yirah*, as the verse says, "And now Israel what does Hashem want from you but to fear him." Yet there's more than one kind of fear. The kind of fear that Rashi explains is inferior is fear of

consequences, because in that person's view Hashem is hardly there. The person is afraid of suffering, not of Hashem. A higher level of *yirah* is when one trembles before Hashem's exalted being. One could argue that *yirah* is only meant to get us to *deveikut*. But in fact both *yirah* and *deveikut* are experienced through learning Torah because the Torah is Hashem's communication.

Learning is like a kiss. A kiss is an expression of attachment of one spirit to another. The Zohar says that when a person speaks words of Torah he is speaking Hashem's words so that both are sharing one communication. This is what Shlomo Hamelech said in Shir Hashirim, "*Yishkeinu m'nishkot pihu*. He kisses me with the kisses of his mouth." It doesn't say *piv* but *pihu* with an extra *heh*. The *heh* hints to the five books of the Written Torah and the *vav* are the six Sidrei Mishna of the Oral Torah. When Hashem addresses us in the Written Torah and we respond by developing its thought and integrating it with the Oral Torah it's like the relationship of the groom who gives of himself to the bride and the bride who receives him. There are thirteen principals of logic through which the Torah is interpreted. This equals the numerical value of *ahava* (love) and *echad* (one). The Torah is Yisrael's groom. It gives us a glimpse of the infinite greatness of the Almighty.

Questions & Answers For Today's Jewish Woman – Class #2

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller

Question:

Can you explain the idea of the separation of the waters above from the waters below in the creation narrative?

Answer: The Kabbalists understand that the upper waters are the spiritual source of reality and the lower waters are their physical manifestation. At the very beginning, you could see rainfall along with its life force coming down without having to make the intellectual effort to define it as such. Concerning this Chazal say, "*Gadol yom hageshamim*

m'yom techiat hameisim. The day of rain is greater than the day of revival of the dead."

Rain is life force embodied in physical reality. If not for the separation between the physical and spiritual, it would be visible as a united force. The separation of the waters is what created free choice and it is one of the most important and specifically human facets of creation. We see physicality and know spirituality. Although we live in a material world, we must choose to bring Hashem into it. The process of free choice is what the Gemara

refers to when it says that the day of rainfall is greater than the day of the revival of the dead.

Choosing to see Hashem is greater than Hashem revealing Himself to us without any effort on our part. Each of us is a small world and there are higher and lower waters within our hearts. We each have spiritual and material consciousness, and the empty space between them is where either denial of Hashem or *emunah* (faith) lives. The choice is up to us.