Dedicated in memory of Rachel Leah bat R' Chaim Tzvi

תורת אמך WOMEN'S TORAH WEEKLY

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Struggle and Supplication: Shavuot

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz-Stein

Shavuot is called Chag Habikurim, the holiday of the first fruit. How is this relevant today and what is the connection to Shavuot, asks Rabbi Hofstedter? Further, asks Rabbi Revibo, if the purpose of the holidays is to forge a connection between Hashem and Bnei Yisroel, why is Shavuot only one day?

Another offering unique to Shavuot was the shtei halechem, the two loaves of bread made from the new harvest of wheat. According to the Sefat Emet, one loaf represents Torah and the other refers to prayer. Rabbi Kanatopsky explains that they are two parallel streams that are necessary for maintaining a fulfilling Torah life. One of the loaves represents the truth of halacha while the other represents song and prayer, the emotion and heart of a Jew. The Gemara finds allusions to this in acronyms for Anochi in the first of the Ten Commandments, ne'eman (truth) and ne'emah (pleasantness). The models for these two parallel streams are Moshe who brought the Torah to us, and David Hamelech who was born and died on Shavuot and who composed Tehilim. The Torah is referred to as Torat Moshe, and David was the embodiment of, V'ani tefilah. Each mitzvah that a Jew does, must include not only adherence to halachah, but the emotional joy of connecting to Hashem.

The Gemara says that the world was created in the merit of Moshe and David. Sichot Eliyahu cites the Torah command not to forget what we saw at Sinai. The experience itself must be remembered. It taught us not only to believe in Hashem, but also in Moshe as the truthful transmitter of His word. It taught us that while the world was created with Ten Utterances in the beginning, it is maintained since then through these Ten Utterances. We see that the hidden element of the physical existence of the world (ha Olam) is its spiritual component. Nothing is random. Just as Hashem has created it, so does He maintain it. Each year Shavuot concretizes this notion.

The Peninei Chen explains that although the people saw and heard all the pomp at Sinai, at the center was the smoke and fog. It was precisely within the fog that Hashem was found. Moshe entered this darkness, and there he encountered God. This is what we must never forget, that in the darkest of times, we can see Hashem and move forward with the light of Torah. In fact, on Rosh Hashanah in the brachah of Shofrot we say, "You revealed Yourself in thick clouds of purity (clarity)." How could one get clarity in such darkness? The Tolna Rebbe explains that the Torah was given in darkness and under pressure because we are meant to accept the Torah even when we feel it as a yoke. It is when we break through the darkness that we can see Hashem with clarity.

Rabbi Biederman cites the Chasam Sofer on Megilat Ruth. When Naomi and Ruth returned to Beit Lechem, all the townspeople came out to accompany Boaz as he went to bury his wife. Naomi felt her death as a severe blow as she had hoped to approach her relative for help. Now who would assist her? But in truth Hashem was setting the stage for her salvation and all of Bnei Yisroel. The death of Mrs. Boaz was not darkness, but the beginning of the light, so that Boaz could marry Ruth and create the future Davidic Dynasty. Yom Habikurim teaches us that the natural world all comes from the Creator. Everything is tailor made for my benefit, even if I cannot see it, even if I cannot bring Bikurim today.

Rabbi Tatz quotes the Rambam to explain why Shavuot is only one day. When one is lost on a dark path, one momentary flash of light will be enough to find the right direction. Shavuot is that flash of light that helps us find God through the dark paths of life. Our prayers on Shavuot are extremely powerful. After all, it represents the marriage of the King with His beloved Bnei Yisroel, say Rabbi Meislisch, when He is inclined to bestow gifts. All we need do is ask. And one of the most powerful prayers is Ahavah Rabbah which incorporates so many of our requests for spiritual growth.

Shavuot is the call of tefilah and Torah. Since David is the embodiment of tefilah, we harness his power in our prayers. Some have the custom to recite all of Tehillim. The Mussaf Amidah of Shavuot has the same power as Neilah, writes Rabbi Pincus. We ask that Hashem purify our hearts and make His words sweet in our mouths. It is not a choice between Torah and tefilah, between Moshe and David that makes Shavuot so powerful; it is the combination of the two.

Shavuot: Naaseh V'Nishma

Based on a Naaleh.com Shiur by Rabbi Beinish Ginsburg

The Gemara in Shabbat writes that when the Jewish nation said naaseh v'nishma at Har Sinai, six hundred thousand angels placed two crowns each on every Jew's head, one for naaseh and one for nishma. A critical aspect of kabbalat ha'Torah was captured within these two words.

Every year, on Shavuot we relive Matan Torah. As Shavuot draws near we re-experience the naaseh v'nishma of Klal Yisrael. How do we understand it? There are three approaches.

The Rishonim say that the greatness of naaseh v'nishma was our blind faith. We assured Hashem that we would do whatever He commanded of us even before we knew or heard what it was. Rashi explains that the magnitude of naaseh v'nishma was that we accepted the mitzvot before we knew how difficult they would be.

The Mishna in Avot writes, "One whose deeds are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom will be retained." How can a person's actions be greater than his wisdom? If one does not know, how can he act? Rabbeinu Yonah explains that if a person accepts upon himself to do whatever he is later commanded to do, he receives reward as if he did the actual deed. He then receives reward again when he does the mitzva. Therefore, it is possible to have more deeds than wisdom. This is the meaning of naaseh v'nishma. We received reward for all the mitzvot we would later do.

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The Maharsha offers another explanation. The Jews consented to do the mitzvot before they understood the rationale behind them. First they said naaseh, we will do the mitzvot, and then nishma, we will study the reasons for them. Rav Aaron Soloveitchik notes that the word taam has two meanings: reason and flavor. This teaches us that the reasons for the mitzvot are not their true essence but rather add flavor and desire for the mitzva.

The Maharal explains a third approach. A person's Torah learning must match his living of Torah. It is not enough to study the Torah, one must apply it to actual life. That is why the students of Rabbi Akiva died. Although they were great in Torah, their middot were flawed.

The Maharal asks, why were the two crowns given by one angel and then later taken away by two angels? He explains that naaseh v'nishma, learning and doing, are really one unit. Since an angel can only accomplish one mission, one angel was able to give one crown. However when the Jewish nation sinned, they split naaseh from nishma. Two angels were then needed to remove them.

This is the lesson of naaseh v'nishma. We need to ask ourselves, "Does my personal life reflect my Torah learning?" Shavuot night is not just about studying Torah, it is about committing yourself to keep it so that your learning and living become one. May we merit to reach this lofty goal.

Re-Experiencing Receiving of the Torah

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

The Torah tells us, "Rak hishomer lecha pen tishkach et hadevarim h'eleh." Hashem adjures us not to forget what we experienced at Har Sinai. We must teach our children about the day we stood at the foot of the mountain and accepted the Torah. It's not just what we heard, but we must remember the day and what we saw. The experience is supposed to be alive for us on an ongoing basis and that is why it is among the six things we must remember daily. In the Rambam's letter to the Jews of Yemen he tells them to raise their children with this experience. It is supposed to be a part of our essence, something that we must remember always.

The Torah discusses the experience of Har Sinai in Parshat Yitro and again in Devarim. The Torah says in Parshat Yitro that on the third month, the Jewish people left Egypt. On this day they came to the desert of Sinai. Why doesn't the Torah clearly state the day? The Ohr Hachaim explains that it teaches us the great love Hashem had for the Jewish people and the deep desire He had to give them their bride, the Torah. Why then did Hashem wait till the third month? The Ohr Hachaim explains that it was because Klal Yisrael were not ready when they just left Egypt. Hashem could have brought them to Har Sinai in one day and they could have prepared there. Why did He make them go through a long journey? For the groom to already be at the wedding hall and be forced to wait is very difficult. That is why the Torah says, on the third month on this day. Hashem wanted to show His great desire to give the Torah to the Jewish people and that is the first thing we have to keep in mind if we want to re-experience the giving of the Torah.

What did Klal Yisrael experience on Shavuot? Hashem descended to the mountain in a fire. There was a cloud and smoke. It was heaven coming down to earth. There was an intense revelation that was so strong that we couldn't be exposed to it directly. It was hidden. That is hinted to with the smoke. Still it was a very intense level of revelation. The Torah describes it in Devarim as "Panim el panim diber Hashem," similar to the quality of the prophecy of Moshe. There was total clarity. The people saw and heard that Hashem gave them the Torah through Moshe.

At Har Sinai, sounds that are usually heard were seen, and sights that are normally seen were heard. Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that when we look at a thing we normally see its physicality, which is not the full picture. For example, when we look at a person we see a human body. We do not see the person's essence, his thoughts, experiences and memories, and definitely not his soul. When we experience the inner aspect of something, we momentarily stop focusing on the outer aspect.

When the Jewish people stood at Har Sinai and Hashem spoke to them, they saw the voices that He created. We cannot hold sounds. Sounds are less physical, and perhaps more spiritual. Hashem made the people shift their focal point and revealed to them the spiritual reality of this world. At that time, when they saw people, they saw souls. When they saw trees they saw the divinity within them. They saw what they heard, something intangible. Hashem opened up their eyes to see spirituality and they did not see physicality.

That's the meaning of what happened at Har Sinai. It was an experience beyond this world. Suddenly they saw the world the way it really was.

On an ongoing basis we don't see it this way, because if we would we would not have free choice. But in order to make it totally clear to us that the Torah is from heaven, Hashem gave us this experience and brought all of our souls to experience it. We have an inner knowledge of it and we can reveal it. That is our mission and that is the meaning of remembering the day of the giving of the Torah. We must understand that when we look at things, the reality is not just what we see. We only see the external aspect of it. There's so much more to reveal and discover through the lens of Torah and that is the true reality.

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