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Holiday Divrei Torah, Halakhot & Guidelines



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Laws of Shavuot

I. Intro to Shavuot

Shavuot, a two-day holiday (one day in Israel) is celebrated on the sixth day of Sivan.

Names

In the Torah, Shavuot is called the “Festival of Weeks”¹ (Hebrew: חג השבועות); “Festival of Reaping”² (Hebrew: חג הקציר), and “Day of the First Fruits”³ (Hebrew: יום הבכורים). Shavuot, the plural of a word meaning “week” or “seven,” alludes to the fact that this festival happens exactly seven weeks after Passover.

The Talmud refers to Shavuot as “Atzeret”⁴ (Hebrew: עצרת, literally, “refraining” or “holding back”), referring to the prohibition to perform *melakha* on this holiday and to the conclusion of the holiday of Pesach. It marks the conclusion of the Counting of the Omer, and its date is directly linked to that of Passover.

The Torah mandates the seven-week Counting of the Omer, beginning on the second day of Pesach, to be immediately followed by Shavuot. This counting of days and weeks is our way of expressing anticipation and desire for the giving of the Torah, which occurred at Har Sinai on the 6th of Sivan, the first Shavuot.

On Pesach, Bnei Yisrael were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh; on Shavuot they were given

the Torah and became a nation committed to serving Hashem.

In our (Mashadi) community, Shavuot was referred to by our ancestors as “Moeed-Gol,” the holiday of flowers, as the custom was to decorate the Kannisa (synagogue) with flowers and other greenery (see *Section III. Minhagei Shavuot*).

II. What is Shavuot?



Shavuot has a double significance in Judaism. We know from the Torah that it marks the important wheat harvest in the Land of Israel. We also know, as the Talmud teaches us, that Shavuot commemorates the anniversary of the day that Hashem gave the Torah to the entire nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai.

Giving of the Torah

Shavuot marks the anniversary of the day that, over 3,000 years ago, Moshe Rabbenu descended from Har Sinai with the Luchot (Tablets), and Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah.⁵ On Shavuot, we remember the Brit (covenant) that our ancestors had accepted so many years ago. More importantly, we remember the powerful words of Moshe Rabbenu in Sefer Devarim:

“It was not with our fathers that Hashem made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today.”⁶

The Midrash expands upon that verse and teaches us that all the Jewish souls who had not been born yet were

¹ Exodus 34:22, Deuteronomy 16:10

² Exodus 23:16

³ Numbers 28:26

⁴ Pesachim 68b

⁵ Shabbat 86b: our Sages say that the 10 commandments were given on the 6th of Sivan (Shavuot)

⁶ Deuteronomy 5:3

in fact present at Har Sinai during the acceptance of the Torah.⁷

Wheat Harvest

Shavuot is the season of the grain harvest, specifically of the wheat, in the Land of Israel. In ancient times, the grain harvest lasted seven weeks. It began with the harvesting of the barley during Passover and ended with the harvesting of the wheat on Shavuot. Shavuot was thus the concluding festival of the grain harvest, just as the eighth day of Sukkot was the concluding festival of the fruit harvest.

When the Temple in Jerusalem was standing, this was celebrated by the harvesting and bringing of the new wheat crop to the Holy Temple, where it was prepared and used in the baking of the two loaves of bread and given as an offering. This special sacrifice, the only leaven ever brought to the Temple, was also "waved" before the presence of G-d and thus elevated to holy status. These breads represented the blessing of Hashem's influence on man's earthly, physical needs throughout the year.

Following the act of "waving," the kohanim ate from the two breads together with the remaining meat from the congregational peace offerings. Members of all the priestly shifts join together for this feast, which is eaten within the sanctified area of the Court.⁸

Pilgrimage

Shavuot is one of the Shalosh Regalim (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot), the three Biblical pilgrimage festivals. Jewish

men throughout Israel were commanded to travel (make a pilgrimage on foot, *regel* = foot) to the Temple in Jerusalem, and each holiday had its own special service that was performed there. On Shavuot, one of those services was the offering of the first fruits — Bikkurim.

Bikkurim — Ceremony of First Fruits⁹

Shavuot was the first day on which individuals could bring the Bikkurim (first fruits) to the Temple in Jerusalem¹⁰. The Bikkurim were brought from the Seven Species for which the Land of Israel is praised: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and

dates.¹¹ In the largely agrarian society of ancient Israel, Jewish farmers would tie a reed around the first ripening fruits from each of these species in their fields and would orally declare: "These are the firstfruits!" At the time of harvest, the fruits identified by the reed would be cut and placed in baskets woven of gold and silver.



The baskets would then be loaded on oxen whose horns were overlain with gold and laced with flowers, and who were led in a grand procession to Jerusalem. As the farmer and his entourage passed through cities and towns, they would be accompanied by music and parades.

Arrival at the Temple in Jerusalem

At the Temple in Jerusalem, each farmer would present his Bikkurim to a Kohen in a ceremony outlined in the Torah.¹² The farmer would recite a text that proceeds to retell the history of the Jewish people as they went

⁷ Shemot Rabbah 28:6

⁸ MT Timidim U'Musafim 8:11

⁹ Adapted from "The Festivals: Shavuot by the Temple Institute"

¹⁰ Mishnah Bikkurim 1:3

¹¹ Deuteronomy 8:8

¹² Deuteronomy 26: 1–10

into exile in Ancient Egypt and were enslaved and oppressed; following which Hashem redeemed them and brought them to the Land of Israel.

The ceremony of Bikkurim conveys the Jewish farmers gratitude to Hashem both for the first fruits of the field and for His guidance throughout Jewish history, which led him (the farmer) to be standing where he now is (in the Temple in Jerusalem).

III. Minhagei Shavuot ~ Shavuot Customs¹³

Now that the Temple is no longer standing, Shavuot is characterized by many of its minhagim (customs).

Studying Torah All Night

The practice of staying up all night to study Torah – known as Tikkun Leil Shavuot — is based on the Midrash,¹⁴ which relates that the night before the Torah was given, Bnei Yisrael retired early to be well-rested for the momentous day ahead. They overslept and Moshe Rabbenu had to wake them up because Hashem was already waiting on the mountaintop. To rectify this perceived flaw in the national character, many Jews stay up all night to learn Torah.

The custom of all-night Torah study goes back to 1533, when Maran HaRav Yosef Karo, author of the Shulchan Aruch, invited Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz (author of the Lecha Dodi) and other colleagues to hold night time study sessions on Shavuot night, for which they prepared for three days in advance, just as Bnei Yisrael had prepared for three days before the giving of the Torah.¹⁵

Even though any subject may be studied on Shavuot night, the Arizal, a leading Kabbalist of the 16th century, arranged a special service for the evening of Shavuot. The book “Tikkun Leil Shavuot” consists of excerpts from the beginning and end of each of the 24 books of

Tanakh, 63 books of Mishnah, followed by the reading of Sefer Yetzirah, the 613 mitzvot as enumerated by Maimonides, and excerpts from the Zohar, with opening and concluding prayers.

The whole reading is divided into thirteen parts, after each of which a Kaddish di-Rabbanan is recited when the Tikkun is studied with a minyan.

Studying Megillat Rut

On Shavuot, it is customary to study the Book of Ruth.¹⁶ Megillat Rut is one of five Megillot (scrolls) that are found in Ketuvim. The book tells of Ruth’s acceptance of Hashem as her God and Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, as her own. There are several reasons for this custom:

- (1) King David, Ruth’s descendant, was born and died on Shavuot.¹⁷
- (2) Shavuot is the harvest time, and the events of the Book of Ruth occur at harvest time.
- (3) Because Shavuot is the day of the giving of the Torah, the entry of the entire Jewish people into the covenant of the Torah is a major theme of the day. Ruth’s conversion to Judaism, and consequent entry into that covenant, is described in the book.

Dairy Foods

There is a prevalent custom, mainly amongst Ashkenazi Jewry, to eat dairy foods on Shavuot.¹⁸ The mashadi community also has this custom. There are many explanations given for the consumption of dairy foods:

- (1) Before they received the Torah, the Israelites were not obligated to follow its laws, which include shechita (ritual slaughter of animals) and kashrut. Thus, all their meat, including the cooking pots, were now considered “not kosher.” So, the only

¹³ Largely adapted from Chabad.org

¹⁴ Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:57

¹⁵ This event was recorded by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz in one of his letters

¹⁶ Masekhet Soferim 14:18 says Megillat Rut is read on Shavuot, as practiced in many Ashkenazi communities today

¹⁷ Talmud Yerushalmi Hagigah 2:3

¹⁸ Rama on Shulchan Arukh 494:3

alternative was to eat dairy, which requires no advance preparation.¹⁹

- (2) The Torah is likened to milk, as the verse says, “Like honey and milk [the Torah] lies under your tongue.”²⁰ Just as milk has the ability to fully sustain the body of a human being (i.e., a nursing baby), so too the Torah provides all the “spiritual nourishment” necessary for the human soul.²¹

➤ **Under the direction of HaRav Eliyahu Ben Haim:** in order to satisfy the requirement on Yom Tov to have a festive **meat** meal, and to upkeep the custom of having **dairy** on Shavuot, one can have a dairy meal for dinner the night of Shavuot, and a meat meal for lunch the next day.

Decorating with Flowers

On Shavuot, it is customary to decorate the synagogue with flowers and other greenery (Shavuot was referred to as Moed-Gol (the holiday of flowers) in Mashad. There are several reasons for this custom:

- (1) According to the Midrash, Mount Sinai suddenly blossomed with flowers in anticipation of the giving of the Torah on its summit.²²
- (2) The Mishnah states that on Shavuot, Hashem judges the earth and determines the abundance of the fruits of the trees for the coming year.²³ Therefore, trees are placed in the synagogue to remind us to pray for the trees and their fruits.²⁴

IV. Laws of Yom Tov

This next section is adapted from “*A Guide to Pesach – Laws of Yom Tov*” – by **Rabbi Mosheh Aziz & Rabbi Eliyahu Ebrani**

Cooking

¹⁹ Mishnah Berurah 494:12

²⁰ Song of Songs 4:11

²¹ Rabbi Meir of Dzikov – Imrei Noam al HaTorah

²² Levush HaChur 494:1.

²³ Rosh Hashana 1:2

²⁴ Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494:5

- ❖ Yom Tov is just like Shabbat, except for a few small differences. The biggest difference is that one is allowed to cook on Yom Tov.²⁵
- ❖ In order to cook on Yom Tov, one must light the stove’s fire from an existing flame, such as a candle that was lit before Yom Tov.²⁶
- ❖ One may not turn on an electric oven on Yom Tov, but one may use an electric oven that was already turned on from before Yom Tov or set on a timer.²⁷
- ❖ One is only allowed to cook food on Yom Tov to be consumed on that day. One is not allowed to cook food on Yom Tov to be eaten after Yom Tov, and even cooking food on the first day of Yom Tov for the second day is prohibited.²⁸
- ❖ One is allowed to cook a large pot of food on the first day of Yom Tov even if they will not consume all the food on that day and the rest will be left over, since cooking in large batches often results in a better tasting dish.²⁹ One is not allowed to cook on Yom Tov for a non-Jew. However, one is allowed to cook a pot of food for a Jew to eat and feed some of it to a non-Jew.³⁰

Bathing

- ❖ Unlike on Shabbat, on Yom Tov one is allowed to warm up and use hot water to wash one’s hands, face, and feet.³¹
- ❖ One is only allowed to take a hot shower with water that was heated before Yom Tov. Otherwise, one is only allowed to take a cold shower on Yom Tov.

Driving and Electricity

- ❖ One is not allowed to drive on Yom Tov, since turning on the car ignites a fire within the engine.³²
- ❖ One is not allowed to turn on or off electric switches or appliances on Yom Tov, just like on

²⁵ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט ב

²⁶ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט טו

²⁷ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט לא

²⁸ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט י

²⁹ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט י

³⁰ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט יא

³¹ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט יב

³² חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט טו

Shabbat.³³ Similarly, driving an electric car on Yom Tov is prohibited.

Non-Jews

- ❖ One is not allowed to ask a non-Jew to do something prohibited on Yom Tov, such as to ask a housekeeper to do laundry. However, one may ask a non-Jewish housekeeper to perform an activity that is allowed on Yom Tov like washing dishes.

Carrying

- ❖ One is allowed to carry outside even in places without an Eruv on Yom Tov.³⁴

Meals

- ❖ On Yom Tov there is a Mitzvah of *Simchat Yom Tov* to be happy and enjoy the holiday. Therefore, one should have a festive meal with bread³⁵ ideally involving wine and meat on Yom Tov.³⁶
- ❖ For Yom Tov meals one should ideally try to have beef or lamb but eating chicken would also qualify as having meat on Yom Tov.³⁷
- ❖ One should use 2 challot or loaves of bread when making Hamotzi on Yom Tov, just like on Shabbat.³⁸
- ❖ One should have at least 2 meals every day of Yom Tov, unlike Shabbat where there is a Mitzvah to eat 3 meals.³⁹

Simcha - Joy

- ❖ A husband has an obligation to buy his wife a nice gift, such as clothing or jewelry as the Mitzvah of Simchat Yom Tov includes making one's wife happy.⁴⁰

- ❖ One should give charity to the poor before Yom Tov to enable them to enjoy the holiday as well, as part of the Mitzvah of *Simchat Yom Tov*.⁴¹

Pets

- ❖ One may feed fish in an aquarium and other pets on Shabbat and Yom Tov.⁴²

Two Days

- ❖ Outside of Israel we keep two days of Yom Tov, and the second day of Yom Tov must be kept exactly the same as the first day.⁴³
- ❖ One who lives in Israel and travels outside of Israel for Yom Tov still keeps only one day of Yom Tov. However, on the second day of Yom Tov they may not do anything in public that is prohibited to do on Yom Tov, out of respect for the local Jewish community observing the second day of Yom Tov.⁴⁴
- ❖ If the person owns an apartment or home in Israel, he should keep only one day of Yom Tov in Israel. It is as if he is going back to his own home, even if it is only temporary.⁴⁵ This is the case even if he is not staying in his apartment in Israel, and instead chooses to stay at a hotel there.
- ❖ However, if the apartment/home is not vacant for use, and was just purchased for the sake of collecting rent, one must keep a modified version of a 2-day chag. In this case, one may not perform melacha on the second day of Yom Tov. On the second day he should pray and put on Tefilin as though it is a regular weekday. However, he should not work on Yom Tov or engage in any acts of Melacha which are prohibited on Yom Tov such as driving or turning on lights.

³³ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט טז
³⁴ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - מהלכות יו"ט לו
³⁵ יחיה דעת ח"יה לו מביא שדעת מרן שחייב לאכול פת ביו"ט
³⁶ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ח
³⁷ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ח
³⁸ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ה
³⁹ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ו
⁴⁰ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ח
⁴¹ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - שמחת יו"ט ח

⁴² דרכי משה או"ח תצז. א. וטעמו הואיל ואין להם מזונות ממקום אחר. שמירת שבת כהלכתא כז, כז. וכן פסק בילקוט יוסף
⁴³ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - יו"ט שני של גלויות א
⁴⁴ חזון עובדיה יום טוב - יו"ט שני של גלויות ב, אור לציון ח"ג פ"כג א
⁴⁵ מורנו הרב נר"ו אמר שכך שמע מפי הרב מרדכי אליהו כששאל אותו הלכה למעשה
⁴⁶ עיין חזון עובדיה יום טוב - יו"ט שני של גלויות יח

❖ If the person is single (unmarried), and in theory if the circumstances were right (he would find the perfect spouse in Israel and his expense would be taken care of) he would move to Israel, he should also keep only one day.⁴⁷ It is on this basis that students studying in yeshiva or seminary in Israel should only observe one day of Yom Tov.

❖ If an individual is married however, and does not have a residence in Israel, he should be strict and not perform melacha on the second day of Yom Tov, as described above. An Israeli who is not keeping the second day of Yom Tov may perform these acts for him.

⁴⁷ שו"ת יחווה דעת חלק א סימן כו

The Gift of the Torah

adapted from the lectures of HaRav Eliyahu Ben-Haim sblita

Transcription of a shiur given by Rabbi Eliyahu Ben-Haim at SBM on June 2, 2022 (Shavuot 5782).

Shavuot is known by many names: *Chag HaShavuot*, *Chag HaAtzeret*, and above all, *Zman Matan Torateinu* – the time of the Giving of Our Torah. Yet at the heart of all these titles lies one central truth: on this day, we received the Torah.

There is a well-known debate between Rabbi Yose and the Sages regarding the exact date the Torah was given – the sixth or the seventh of Sivan. All agree, however, that it was given on *Shabbat*.

Our ancestors left Egypt on a Thursday. The tenth of Nissan, when they took the Paschal lamb, fell on Shabbat – which is why we call it *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Great Shabbat. Why “great”? Because of the extraordinary miracle and display of courage that took place.

Imagine the scene: Every Jewish family was commanded to take a lamb – an animal the Egyptians worshipped as a god – tie it to their bedposts for four days, and then slaughter and roast it publicly. In the eyes of the Egyptians, this was an unthinkable act of defiance.

The Jews were not only rejecting idolatry but openly preparing to sacrifice the very symbol of their oppressors’ religion. It required immense faith and courage. Yet our ancestors did it without hesitation. They took the “god” of Egypt, slaughtered it, roasted it, and filled the land with the aroma of the *korban*. That bold act of faith is what made this Shabbat “great.”

Since they left Egypt on Thursday and Shabbat HaGadol was the tenth, the Giving of the Torah occurred on the fifty-first day after the Exodus – not the fiftieth. The Torah was given on Shabbat, and this calendar alignment carries a lasting message: the second day of Pesach will always correspond to Shavuot in our festival cycle.

The Torah Was Given in the Desert – Why?

The Torah was not given in the Land of Israel or in a great city, but in the *midbar* – the wilderness. This was no coincidence. The desert is *befer* – ownerless, free for all. Just as the wilderness belongs to no one, so too the Torah has no exclusive owners. “Anyone who wishes to take it may come and take it.” It is open and available to every Jew who seeks it with sincerity.

This is why the Mishna in Horayot teaches that when redeeming captives or prioritizing Torah scholars, a *mamzer talmid chacham* (a Torah scholar of illegitimate birth) takes precedence over a Kohen Gadol who is not learned. Torah elevates a person above all other statuses. As the Yerushalmi adds, even a Jewish king yields precedence to a *mamzer talmid chacham*. The Torah is the true crown.

In our times, this teaches us the immense value of yeshivot and Torah institutions. Baruch Hashem, many are being established. We must support them generously, for they are the places where this ownerless treasure is studied and transmitted.

A Beautiful Story of Torah Without Ownership

Once, the Rosh Yeshiva of Slobodka approached the Chazon Ish and asked if he would approve of opening a new yeshiva in Bnei Brak. The Chazon Ish replied, “What kind of question is that? There is no greater merit than establishing a yeshiva in Bnei Brak!” Still, to show respect, he suggested they consult the Ponovezh Rav, who had already founded a major yeshiva there.

They went together. The Ponovezh Rav received them with great honor. When asked if he would mind another yeshiva opening nearby, he responded enthusiastically: “Not only do I not mind – I want you to open it! And I’ll tell you why.

“Where do you find the best business and the most customers? In a private store, or in a bustling market? In the market, of course! Let there be a ‘market of

Torah' here in Bnei Brak. The more yeshivot, the better it will be for everyone – including my own.”

This is the way of Torah: there is no ownership or monopoly. If someone wants to open another yeshiva or Talmud Torah in the spirit of authentic Torah, we should say *adraba*— all the more so! The more Torah, the greater the glory of Heaven.

The Hidden Treasures of the Desert

The desert appears barren and empty from the outside. Yet within it lie priceless treasures – oil, diamonds, and vast riches. The same is true of Torah. To the superficial eye, it may seem like “just a book” or simple stories. But its inner depths are infinite. The more you learn, the more you realize how much remains to learn.

This is hinted at in a beautiful custom: the Gemara always begins on *Daf Bet* (page 2), never page 1. The message is clear – you have never truly finished. Even after completing the entire Shas, you have not

exhausted even the “aleph” of the Torah. Torah study is endless.

The Torah begins with the letter *Bet* (“Bereishit”) to teach us the same: you have not even begun to master the “aleph” until you immerse yourself deeply.

Our Task on Shavuot

On this holy day, we renew our acceptance of the Torah. We remember that it was given in the desert so that every Jew, regardless of background, can claim it as his own. We are reminded to support and celebrate every genuine Torah institution, because Torah multiplies when it is shared freely.

May we all merit to receive the Torah anew with joy and enthusiasm, to study it deeply, and to live by its light. May the study of Torah continue to flourish in our midst, filling our lives and our world with its hidden treasures.

Chag Shavuot Sameach

Why We Count

Rabbi Dr. Avraham Ben-Haim

One of the ironic twists in the Torah is the fact that Shavuot has no unique *mitzvot* to call its own. Every other holiday on the Jewish calendar comes along with a *mitzva* or two that can only be done on that day: On Pesach we are obligated to eat the *Korban Pesach* and to eat *matza*, on Rosh Hashana we hear the *shofar*, on Yom Kippur we fast and on Succot we wave the *lulav* and *etrog* and we eat in the *succab*. Even the rabbinically commanded holidays of Chanukah and Purim each have *mitzvot*. But on Shavuot, the day we celebrate accepting all the *mitzvot*, we have no special or unique *mitzva* to observe. The void is so striking that we needed to come up with customs to fill it, like eating dairy and staying up all night (and for some, staying up all night eating dairy).

The closest thing Shavuot has to a *mitzva* is one that we complete each year immediately before Shavuot starts: counting the Omer. We count up the days and weeks from the second night of Pesach until the night before Shavuot. In the days of the Temple, this count would bridge two notable sacrifices- the Omer sacrifice on the second day of Pesach (offered from the first harvest of barley) and the two loaves of *chametz* offered on Shavuot. (רמב"ם פ"ז ופ"ח מהלכות תמידין ומוספין) Like all *mitzvot*, we observe *sefirat haomer* without question because it is what Hashem commanded us to do, but it is still appropriate to contemplate: what is the message of this *mitzva*? Several suggestions have been offered.

Perhaps the most boring answer is that the function of the counting was to make sure nobody forgets to show up for Shavuot. Shavuot, an otherwise unremarkable holiday (and too short a visit to Yerushalayim to eat at all those new trendy spots in the Shuk) would be at risk of neglect, especially given that on the agricultural calendar, this season is as busy as can be. (ספר אבודרהם ד"ה והטעם שצוה הקב"ה)

A more inspiring answer is that the count is a manifestation of the love and excitement we have towards the Torah. After celebrating the redemption

from Egypt, we eagerly count the days up to accepting the Torah, which is what gives meaning to our redemption in the first place. (רמב"ם במד"ג ח"ג פרק מג ועוד ראשונים) Our anticipation is compared by the Midrash to a man locked away in prison, counting up excitedly to the day of his release back into civilization to once more pursue his aspirations. (ספר אבודרהם שם)

Another approach that is a favorite of A"R Harav Ben-Haim שליט"א is best illustrated by a story (inspired by a parable from "the Maggid MiDovno" Rabbi Yaakov Kranz [1741-1804]): There once was a beggar who would go from synagogue to synagogue collecting change to get by. One day, he showed up but no longer went around with an outstretched hand begging for pennies. When asked about it, he scoffed and said, "I am no longer a pauper. I am actually quite wealthy now! You wouldn't believe how much change I have in my jar at home!" The crowd ridiculed him and so he brought the jar before them and counted out his pennies. "You see, I have a million pennies in my jar; I am a millionaire!" he told them. Now they ridiculed him even more. "A million pennies," they said, "are only \$10,000; you couldn't even live off that for a year!" (If he was shopping at Great Neck supermarkets, they undoubtedly would have told him that he couldn't even live off that for a month.) We too look at an average lifespan and assume it is plenty of time for all we need to accomplish. The Torah commands us to count it out and quantify it, to make it less abstract and instead more concrete and objective. This demonstration of how quickly seven weeks pass by will certainly motivate us to use our time more effectively!

I would like to propose an additional reason for the counting of the Omer (inspired by ספר אבודרהם who offers a similar explanation). On the agricultural calendar, this was the time of year when the crop would grow. Farmers would stand by and watch as their wealth literally grew out of the ground. These few weeks would set the income for the coming year. It is easy to get distracted during this time of financial success.

Counting the Omer serves as a daily reminder that the physical growth and the fiscal success of this season is not an end to pursue but rather a means. As the crops grow, we count our way up to what actually matters most: studying and observing the Torah, as represented by Shavuot. This material growth is just the journey

bringing us closer to our actual purpose. At a time like this, it is easy to confuse the process with the result. Wealth and sustenance and all else physical that Hashem blesses us with are there to facilitate our spiritual elevation, and we must always remember to regard it as such.

Why Torah Is Our Very Purpose

Rabbi Ryan Levian

Shavuot marks one of the most defining moments in Jewish history – the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. It is not just a commemoration of an event that took place thousands of years ago, but a yearly opportunity to reconnect to the very purpose of our existence.

Chazal describe how Hashem offered the Torah to the nations of the world, and ultimately Bnei Yisrael accepted it. They responded with the powerful declaration of Na'aseh v'nishma – “we will do and we will listen,” committing themselves fully even before knowing all the details.

However, another teaching presents what seems to be a contradiction. The Gemara in Avodah Zarah (2b), and more explicitly in Shabbat 88a, tells us that Hashem held Har Sinai over the Jewish people like a barrel and said: “If you accept the Torah, good – and if not, here will be your burial place.” At first glance, this sounds like coercion. Was the Torah accepted willingly, or was it forced upon them?

A deeper understanding reveals that this was not coercion in the conventional sense, but rather a revelation of reality itself.

Hashem was not forcing Bnei Yisrael to accept the Torah. Rather, He was showing them that Torah is not just a set of laws or a lifestyle one can choose to adopt or reject. Torah is the very foundation and purpose of existence. Without Torah, life itself has no direction, no meaning, and no reason to continue.

In this light, the statement “If you do not accept the Torah, here will be your burial place” is not a threat – it is a truth. It is Hashem revealing that a world without

Torah is a world without purpose. If Torah is removed, existence itself loses its meaning.

This transforms our entire understanding of the acceptance of the Torah.

When Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah, they were not blindly committing to something unknown. They were recognizing, on a deep level, that Torah defines who they are and why they exist. Na'aseh v'nishma reflects this clarity – a readiness to embrace Torah completely, because it is not external to us, but essential to us.

The image of the mountain being held over them, then, was not about removing free will. It was about revealing a truth so absolute that rejecting it would be equivalent to choosing a life without purpose. Hashem was showing them: this is your existence. This is your reason for being here.

And that is the message of Shavuot for us today.

We often think of Torah as something we fit into our lives – another responsibility among many. But Shavuot reminds us to shift that perspective entirely. Torah is not part of life; it is the core of life. It shapes our values, guides our decisions, and gives meaning to everything we do.

When we recommit to Torah on Shavuot, we are not just accepting commandments. We are reaffirming our purpose. We are choosing a life that is grounded in meaning, direction, and connection to Hashem.

May we merit this Shavuot to internalize that Torah is not a burden, but our greatest gift – the very reason we are here – and may we embrace it with clarity, depth, and conviction.

Vayhi Bime Shefot haShofetim

Yaakob Bitton

At first glance, the book of *Rut* seems a bit too uneventful relative to other books of *Tanakh*. There are no events of obvious geopolitical significance for 'Am *Yisrael*, there are no grand prophetic messages, no mesmerizingly beautiful poetry, no wondrous miracles, and no explicit moral teachings or mandates of any kind. It is perhaps the plainest and most ordinary book in *Tanakh*. It is decidedly not of biblical proportions. And yet, it resonates with all of us in some unique and special ways.

In a sense, precisely because it is a mundane book, some of us identify with it in a very personal manner. Any of us could be *Bo'az*, *Elimelekh*, *Maḥlon*, *Kilyon*, *Na'omi*, *Rut*, or 'Orpa. There's something else that catches my eye in the book of *Rut*, and it is one of the reasons I like it so much. A story as simple and relatable, and a plot as relatively uneventful as the story of *Rut*, happens to give us one of the best

perspectives on what "common" life would have been like at the time. The sociocultural setting that serves as a backdrop to the story of *Rut*, the pastoral area of *Bet Leḥem* in the Tribe of *Yehuda*, is shown to us very transparently. Through the book of *Rut*, precisely because the book takes place without any life-disrupting events, we can get a sense of what life was truly like for the average person in that epoch.

A few years ago, I realized that the book of *Rut* could help me with one of the most troubling books of the *Tanakh*: the book of *Shofetim*. The book of *Shofetim* shows life in *Yisrael* not long after the death of *Yehoshua*'. The bulk of the Land had been conquered, the People of *Yisrael* had had the *Tora* for a couple of generations now, had a functioning *Mishkan*, were well-organized into tribes, and had everything going for finally living

up to their promise. Isn't this what their forefathers had dreamed about since *Ayraham Aḃinu*?

And yet, the book of *Shofetim* is a series of scandalous and tragic failings. From the communal violation of a certain concubine and the civil war that ensued, to the idolatrous temple erected by *Mikha* in *Efrayim*, and then its violent appropriation by the tribe of *Dan*, worship of the *Ba'al* in the times of *Gide'on*, and on and on. Given the high expectations, it is very easy to read the book of *Shofetim* and end up with a sense of painful disappointment. Is this what their forefathers had dreamed about since *Ayraham Aḃinu*?



It is difficult to accept that 'Am *Yisrael*'s commitment to *Tora* would have been so direly diluted in the first few generations following the events of *Moshe Rabbenu* and *Yehoshua*'. And not only because it is difficult to accept this emotionally. If things were as bad as the bitter taste some of the

episodes in *Shofetim* leave us with might suggest, then how can one explain how giants such as *Hanna*, *Eli*, *Shemuel*, and even *Shaul* and *David* could develop? They surely would have been the product of a better and healthier society, wouldn't they? How could one explain the contrast between the times of *Shofetim* and the chapters that follow it?

And this is where the book of *Rut* comes in. The book of *Rut* actually takes place at the same time as the book of *Shofetim*. And the picture one gets of day-to-day life in *Yehuda*, which the book of *Rut* presents almost inadvertently and merely as context for the main plot, is much closer to the idyllic *Tora*-centric society the *Ayot* and *Moshe Rabbenu* would have been proud of.

Every person we encounter in the story—the common folk — seems sincerely fearful of God. Here are a few points to consider:

1. The fact that *Elimelekh* abandons his land to go to *Sede Moav* is presented with a negative connotation. This was not Ok.

2. That *Maḥlon* and *Kilyon* marry non-Jewish girls is noteworthy. The book calls them “*Nashim Nokbriyot*,” and this was true even though *Elimelekh* may seem to have chosen to integrate within *Moav*. This also was not Ok.

3. When *Na’omi* hears the famine is over, what she actually “hears” is that God remembered His people and is granting them food.

4. In turning to her daughters-in-law and asking them to leave, *Na’omi* beseeches them, invoking God’s name and showering them with prayers to God.

5. Arriving at *Bet Lehem*, when people ask if this is *Na’omi*, she responds, “Don’t call me *Na’omi* (pleasant); call me *Mara* (bitter), as God has greatly embittered my circumstances... ..as God has decided against me, and God determined to afflict me...”

6. *Na’omi* trusts the town enough to understand that a widow with her young daughter-in-law, also a

widow, would be safe and taken care of by the people (otherwise, she would have stayed in *Moav*).

7. *Na’omi* knows she can take for granted that the town of *Bet Lehem* will be keeping all the *Miṣvot* regarding supporting the poor during the various stages of the agricultural cycle (as they do). She also knows they will punctiliously honor the laws of *Geulla* (buying back the land for a relative who had to sell it) and of *Yibbum* (marrying the widow of a relative).

8. The first words out of *Bo’az*’s mouth—not in the middle of prayers or learning *Tora*, but in the middle of the workday, to his workers—are “God be with you.” *Bo’az*’s workers, who—given the historical milieu—were likely not exceedingly scholarly, also respond in kind: “God bless you.” (Incidentally, we learn from this exchange how to salute the congregation before starting *Barekhu* when approaching the *Bima* for the reading of a portion of the *Parasha* every week: “*A-donay Immakbem!*” — “*Yevarekhekha A-donay!*”)

9. Although *Rut*’s physical appearance is not described, there are a couple of hints suggesting she at least caught *Bo’az*’s

attention, and that *Bo’az* also spared her from spending too much time with his younger male workers (sending her instead with his female workers, and commanding his younger male workers “not to touch her”). And yet, the way *Bo’az* and each of his employees deal with her and



speak of her is utterly respectful, to the point that she felt absolutely safe in their company for days at a time.

10. Needless to say, the *Hesed* we see everywhere, by everyone, especially by those in *Bet Lechem* with the most power (*Bo'az*, for starters), is indicative of a very healthy, well-functioning Jewish society in *Eretz Yisrael*.

So, the next time you study the book of *Shofetim*, know that it's a book on geopolitical history, not personal history. We cannot deduce what Jewish life was like

during that time just from reading *Shofetim*. All the grave transgressions we read about were exceptional. We read about them because they had national implications for *'Am Yisrael*. They were that bad. If we want to have a better sense of what day-to-day life looked like, we should not look at *Pilegesh BaGiv'a*, we should read the book of *Rut*. It is this kind of society that was prevalent in the generations after *Moshe Rabbenu* and *Yehoshua' Bin Nun*. It is this kind of society that yielded giants such as *Hanna*, *'Eli*, *Shemuel HaNavi*, *Shaul HaMelekh*, and *David HaMelekh*.

Not for the Angels

Moshe Enayatian

Shavuot is one of the most unique holidays in the Jewish calendar. Unlike Pesach, it has no long story or special seder. Unlike Sukkot, it does not have any special major physical mitzvah like sitting in a sukkah or shaking a lulav and etrog. In the Torah itself, Shavuot is primarily described as an agricultural holiday - Chag HaKatzir or Chag HaBikkurim, the festival of the harvest and first fruits, when farmers would bring the first produce of their fields to the Beit HaMikdash as an expression of gratitude to Hashem.

Yet our Chachamim transformed the meaning of the day. They taught that Shavuot is not merely an agricultural celebration, but the anniversary of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. At first glance, this shift seems surprising. Why would a holiday rooted in farming become identified with the most important spiritual event in Jewish history?

Perhaps the answer lies in the connection between the two themes. Agriculture teaches that growth requires effort. A farmer may receive rain, sunlight, and fertile land from G-d, but none of that becomes a harvest without human labor. The field must be cultivated, planted, protected, and developed. In the same way, Torah was never meant to remain only as a moment of divine revelation at Har Sinai. Hashem provided the initial gift, but human beings are responsible for developing it through study, interpretation, and application.

The Torah was never intended to stay on the mountain or remain confined to the walls of the Beit Midrash. It is meant to enter everyday life: our homes, schools, workplaces, businesses, communities, and relationships. It is meant to serve as a blueprint for creating an ideal civilization in our homeland.

Judaism does not ask a person to escape the physical world in pursuit of spirituality. Instead, it asks us to elevate the physical world itself.

This idea is one of Judaism's most radical contributions. Many spiritual systems and world religions view holiness as something detached from ordinary life. Judaism insists on the opposite. Holiness is created precisely within ordinary life, in the way a person speaks, conducts business, raises children, treats employees, honors parents, and interacts with society. The Torah is not only about private religious experiences or fleeting moments of inspiration. It is about building a moral society rooted in justice, responsibility, compassion, and holiness.

Shavuot reminds us that Torah is not simply information to consume. It is meant to shape the way we live.

Judaism believes that Torah must engage with the modern world without surrendering its values to it. Jews have always carried the challenge of living in two realities at once participating in society while remaining anchored to core values and eternal principles. Shavuot, the holiday of the harvest, reminds us that the Torah was not given to angels detached from human struggle. It was given to ordinary people with responsibilities, temptations, families, pressures, and complicated lives.

This idea appears in a remarkable Midrash about the giving of the Torah. When Moshe ascended to heaven to receive the Torah, the angels protested before God. They argued that such a holy treasure belonged in heaven among spiritual beings, not among flawed human beings.

Moshe responded with a powerful argument. He asked the angels: "Do you have an evil inclination? Were you slaves in Egypt? Do you struggle with jealousy, business dealings, family obligations, or human temptation?" The commandments, Moshe explained, were created specifically for human beings living in the physical world. Torah is meaningful precisely because it addresses the challenges of ordinary life.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that this Midrash reveals the ultimate purpose of creation. Hashem did not give the Torah so that it would remain in the purity of heaven. He gave it so that human beings could transform the physical world itself into a dwelling place for the Divine.

Every year on Shavuot, we return, in a sense, to Har Sinai not simply to remember that the Torah was given, but to recommit ourselves to bringing Torah values into

every aspect of life. Shavuot reminds us not to dilute the Torah so that it fits comfortably into our lives, but to shape our lives around Torah.

Because the Torah was never meant to remain on the mountain.

It was meant to shape the world below.

Tora is Our Language - Reflections for Shavuot

Rivka Bitton

On *Shavu'ot* we commemorate one of the most defining moments in human history: receiving the *Tora* from *Hashem* through *Moshe Rabbenu* at *Har Sinai*. As I wrote in my *Shavu'ot* essay last year, the *Tora* is not merely a sacred text belonging to scholars or rabbis. It is described as “מורשה קהילת” — an inheritance of the entire congregation of *Yaakov*.

An inheritance belongs equally to everyone. Old and young. Learned and simple. Men and women. Those deeply immersed in study and those just beginning their journey. Every Jewish soul stood at *Sinai*, and every Jewish soul received the same gift — the privilege and responsibility of engaging with *Tora*.

But receiving the *Tora* once was not enough. Jewish history teaches us that *Tora* must continually be received again.

***Ezra HaSofer*. Receiving the *Tora* Again**

Centuries after *Sinai*, following the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile, the Jewish people returned home spiritually weakened and fractured. Many Jews were disconnected from *mitzvot*, intermarriage was widespread, literacy was low, and national identity had blurred after years away from the land.

At that fragile moment emerged one of the most remarkable leaders in Jewish history, *Ezra HaSofer*.

The *Gemara* makes an astonishing statement:

Rabbi Yose says: Ezra was worthy for the *Tora* to have been given through him to Israel, had *Moshe* not preceded him (*Sanhedrin* 21b).

The comparison is amazing. *Moshe* brought the *Tora* down from Heaven; Ezra, in a sense, brought it back to the people.

Ezra has always been one of my heroes. He understood that rebuilding Jewish life had to begin with *Tora*—not as an abstract ideal, but as a living, shared experience.



Together with Nehemiah, Ezra instituted one of the most transformative practices in Jewish history: public *Tora* reading on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat afternoon. (*Moshe Rabbenu* had already instituted every Shabbat morning). According to some traditions, the framework of the *Haftarah* reading (text from *Nevi'im* relating to the *parashah*) also emerged during this period.

Ezra understood that as a priority, we cannot go more than three days without touching base with the text of the *Tora*.

Back to Basics

The returning Jewish nation was at risk. Ezra decided to do his part not necessarily by advancing high-level *Tora* scholarship, but rather by trying to provide as much basic exposure as possible so

most of the people get basically familiar with the *Tora*.



His open invitation to the people was simple. Hear the *Tora*. Listen to its words. Encounter its language again and again.

This way, he restored *Tora* to its rightful place as the center of communal life. During his era, the early structure of synagogue worship as we know it developed. Jewish service shifted from being centered solely around sacrifices to becoming centered around communal engagement through prayer and *Tora* reading.

This decision shaped Jewish survival more than perhaps any other institutional change in history.

From that moment onward, wherever Jews traveled — Babylonia, Spain, Morocco, Poland, Germany, Yemen, America — something astonishing remained constant: We were reading the same weekly *parashah*. Listening to the same words. Living within the same rhythm of *Tora*. *Tora* became the heartbeat of Jewish existence in exile. Our portable homeland. Our shared anchor. Ezra reignited a Jewish renaissance by reminding us of a simple truth: *Tora* is a *Morasha* — accessible, shared, and meant to be heard by everyone.

Why Repetition Matters

Every week we return to the same cycle. Every year we start again from *Bereshit*. At first glance, it can feel repetitive. Haven't we heard these stories before?

But *Chazal* teach:

“הפוך בה והפוך בה דכולא בה” — Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is contained within it (Pirkei Avot 5:22).

The *Tora* does not change. We change. A *parashah* read as a child sounds different when we are parents. A *pasuk* heard during joy resonates differently during struggle. Words once familiar suddenly reveal entirely new meanings. Each encounter reshapes us — and

gradually, *Tora* becomes more than something we *study*. It becomes something we *speak*.

Language Shapes How We See the World

Modern linguists often refer to this phenomenon as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis: language influences how we perceive reality.

For example, Arctic Indigenous communities such as the Inuit have many different words describing subtle shades and types of snow and ice. Because snow is such a central part of their environment, their language developed precise vocabulary to distinguish between variations that others might overlook. Someone who

does not speak their language may look at two shades of white and see them as completely identical. But when an Inuit speaker is shown those same two shades, they perceive them as distinct from one another. Because they possess the words to describe those differences, they are actually able to notice and see them. Their language trains their perception, allowing them to experience nuances that others quite literally do not see.

We see this even in young children. Toddlers who learn emotional vocabulary earlier become better at identifying and regulating their feelings. A child who only knows the word “mad” may react with frustration or tears to many situations. But a child who learns words like disappointed, jealous, nervous, or overwhelmed can pause and say, “I’m frustrated because my tower fell,” or “I feel nervous about going to school.” The language gives structure to the emotion, and that structure creates understanding, self-control, and emotional regulation.

Some Aboriginal Australian communities use directions like north, south, east, and west instead of left and right. Rather than saying, “Move the cup to your left,” they might say, “Move the cup slightly to the northwest.” As a result, speakers constantly track their orientation in



space. Even young children in these communities develop an astonishing internal compass because their language trains them to remain aware of direction at all times.

Language doesn't only describe reality. It trains the brain to notice certain things and overlook others.

Researchers have shown that English speakers tend to say, "He broke the vase," even when an accident occurs, emphasizing personal agency. Spanish speakers, however, more often say, "Se rompió el jarrón" — literally, "The vase broke itself" — focusing on what happened rather than on who caused it. Remarkably, studies show that English speakers are more likely to remember who was responsible for the accident, while Spanish speakers remember the event itself. The structure of language subtly guides attention, memory, and judgment.

Words shape perception. They shape values. They shape identity.

Tora as Our Language

If language has the power to shape perception, we can begin to appreciate *Ezra HaSofer's* extraordinary insight. He understood this long before modern linguistics or psychology gave it a name. Ezra did not merely want the Jewish people to know the *Tora*; he wanted us to live its language. By instituting regular *Tora* reading — again and again, every few days, every week, every year — he ensured that the words of *Tora* would become familiar to our ears and natural on our tongues.

This idea is reflected in the promise of the *Navi*: "לֹא יִמְּוּשׁוּ מִפִּיךָ וּמִפִּי בְנֵיךָ וּמִפִּי בְנֵי בְנֵיךָ... מֵעַתָּה וְעַד עוֹלָם" — "These words shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children... from now and forever" (Yeshayahu 59:21). *Tora* is meant to be spoken, heard, and continually present in our lives. When the language we hear most often is the language of *Tora*, it inevitably

begins to shape how we interpret the world. *Tora* becomes our language, and we begin to see the world through its lens.

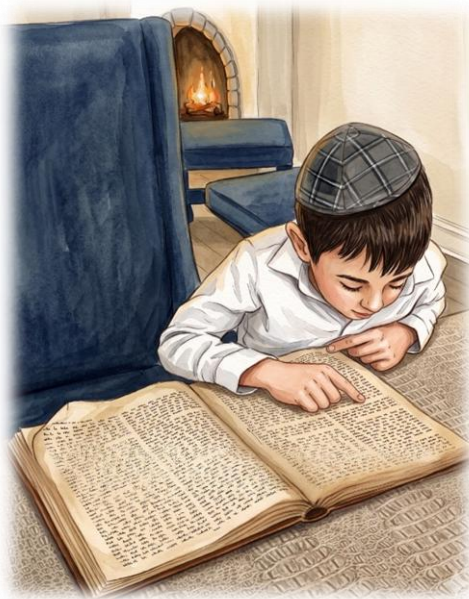
The language of *Tora* does more than guide behavior; it shapes how we understand and experience this world and our lives. Because we read and hear the *pesukim* in which *Hashem* promises *Eretz Yisrael* to our people, we do not see the land merely as territory but as covenant and inheritance — something we feel deeply connected to because that language lives in our minds. Even the way *Tora* frames questions reflects this perspective. In Hebrew, the word *lamah* — usually translated as "why" — should more appropriately be read as a variation of *le-mah*, "for what purpose." The *Tora* mindset therefore

moves us away from asking *Why is this happening to me?* toward asking *For what purpose is this happening?* What am I meant to do now? And instead of starting witch hunts for "whys," we engage in the much more helpful quest for "what now."

Tora also shapes how we understand emotion. Happiness is not assumed to be the constant human state; *simchah* itself is a *mitzvah* — "וְשִׂמְחָתָהּ בְּחֻצְיָהּ" (Devarim 16:14). We do not simply wait to feel happy. We are commanded to actively create joy — through gratitude, celebration, connection,

and conscious choice. As Jews, we understand that *simchah* is something we cultivate, not merely something we feel. Relationships, too, are framed through *Tora* language. The *Tora* says about *Yitzchak* and *Rivkah*, "וַיִּקַּח... וַיֵּאָהֱבָה" — he married her, and then he loved her (Bereshit 24:67), teaching that love grows through commitment and shared life.

These are only a few examples, but this principle extends to every aspect of our lives and our entire human experience. The more we engage with the words of *Tora* — hearing them, reading them, returning to them again and again — the more naturally we begin to experience the world through a *Tora* lens and not just



a text we study. And that, perhaps, is one of the greatest gifts *Tora* offers us- a way of seeing reality that is not only meaningful and purposeful, but deeply grounding and healthy.

Experiencing the world and life through a *Tora* lens does not require advanced scholarship. It begins simply with exposure to its words, which is exactly what *Ezra HaSofer* understood when he established regular public *Tora* reading. Transformation doesn't begin with mastery, but with familiarity and consistent encounter with the text. Come to *kanissa* and hear the *Tora* read. Read it at home. Learn a *pasuk* with your children. Recite it. Enjoy its sounds and intonations. Make a craft out of pronouncing its every syllable with respect and precision.

As the *Tora* itself commands this continuity of language and transmission: “וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ” — “You shall teach them (these words) to your children and speak them” (Devarim 6:7). *Tora* is meant to be spoken - recited aloud, read together, repeated, and woven into everyday conversation. *Vedibarta bam* calls on us to make the words of *Tora* the language we actually speak- saying *pesukim* at the table, learning with our children from the text, quoting a *pasuk* when facing a challenge, allowing *Tora* words to become familiar sounds within our homes.

Because we can be sure that minds follow words. Whatever language fills our mouths and our ears ultimately shapes how we experience and perceive the world.

Receiving the *Tora* Again

On *Shavu'ot* we do not merely commemorate an event that happened thousands of years ago. In a way we reenact it. Each year, we stand again at *Sinai*. The *Tora* was already given to us at *Sinai*. The question on *Shavu'ot* is are we willing to continue our millenary commitment also today. *Ezra* taught us that receiving *Tora* means engaging with it consistently until it becomes the language through which we understand life and the world around us.

This *Shavu'ot*, it is my hope that may we cherish the extraordinary inheritance we were given. May we listen to the precious words of the *Tora*, engage with the text, revisit its stories, and allow its holy language to form the lenses through which we see the world. And perhaps, slowly and beautifully, *Tora* will stop being something external that we study and become the language we live.

Chag Sameach!



What's Rut doing in Tanakh?

Adam Aziz

Our Tanakh is filled with rich meaning; both of our past, as well as our future. From beginning to end, Tanakh is a book that tells the Jewish story, from creation of man, to creation of a Jewish nation, and all that happened (and will happen) along the way. Tanakh contains sublime prophecies foretold to our people, as well as core fundamentals that define our faith and understanding of God and his interaction with His nation, and all of mankind.

Based on this understanding, the question begs to be asked; what exactly is Rut doing as one of 24 books of Tanakh? This short book seems to contain none of the above; nothing terribly relevant to Jewish heritage nor destiny, no groundbreaking core tenants to our faith, etc. Just a convert with no one in life to take care of her, and in her great need of kindness, a man emerged to take care of her in her most vulnerable state. And I believe therein lies the answer...

Tanakh is filled with the hero's of Am Yisrael who impacted Jewish history forever. Their deeds and contribution to both Judaism and humanity are felt after thousands of years, until today. Rut is a story of ordinary people, living their ordinary lives, but through kindness, sacrifice, and righteousness.

Hakhamim teach us (Sanhedrin 105b) that Rut descended from royalty (Eglon, and preceding him Balak, both kings of Moav). Through her sacrifice to leave her royal lineage, she is blessed to be the forebearer of the royal Davidic (and thereby Messianic) dynasty. The message to us is clear; even the most ordinary amongst us who chose to live a life of morality, modesty, and generosity are worthy of being canonized in Tanakh. You don't need to be Avraham/Sarah to be relevant. When you chose the path of emulating God's ways, pursuing loving kindness and sacrifice for God and His nation, you are writing yourself into the next book of Tanakh.

The Hakhamim teach us (Bereshit Raba 12:4) that the first tablets of the 10 commandments Moshe received did not last, due to the fanfare of lightning, thunder, Shofar blasts, ("בפומביות גדולה") that they were given with. The 2nd tablets, however, were successfully delivered to Benei Yisrael, since they were given quietly and modestly, without any commotion or pageantry. Not everything you do will be noticed by everyone. In fact, the vast majority of your day is not under anyone's spotlight. It's precociously those moments where you are achieving ultimate greatness.

Spark of Shavuot

Aaren Hakimi

What A man came up to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev completely broken. He said, “Rabbi, I’ve tried changing myself so many times. Every year I get inspired. Every year I make promises and goals. However, every year I fall back into the same bad habits. I’m tired, maybe this is just who I am.”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak did not answer him. Instead, he took the man outside late at night. The streets were empty and dark. Close to them stood a blacksmith shop. Inside the shop sparks were flying in the air as the blacksmith was hammering the hot metal. The rabbi then pointed at the metal and asked, “What happens if the blacksmith stops hitting the metal?” The man responded, “The metal hardens.” Rabbi Levi Yitzchak looked at him and said, “And what happens if he keeps heating it and striking it again and again?” The man said, “Then it can be reshaped and turned into anything.” The rabbi smiled. “As long as the soul is warm, a Jew can still change.” That is Shavuot.

Many people think Shavuot is the anniversary of receiving the Torah. But it is much deeper than that. Shavuot is a reminder that no Jew is ever spiritually or physically stuck. A Jew can always be reshaped, like the metal. Because the Torah isn’t just meant to teach us, it was meant to transform us into someone greater.

This might answer one of the most famous questions about Shavuot. Why does the Torah not give Shavuot an exact date? The Torah tells us exactly when Rosh Hashanah is. Exactly when Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Pesach are, but not Shavuot. The Torah only tells us how many days to count and when to start counting. It never gives a clear date like the 6th of Sivan. Why is the Torah hiding the most important part of the Jews’ lives?

Rabbi Shimshon Pinkus explains something incredible. He says, it’s because the Torah cannot belong to one date. Pesach celebrates an event that happened many years ago. Shavuot celebrates an event that is always happening. Every single day, Hashem gives us another opportunity to reconnect, restart, and receive the Torah

again which changes our entire lives. Almost everyone has the same thought: “I’m too far.” Whether it’s in spirituality, business, or even just life. It’s always the same thought. However, the Torah teaches us the exact opposite. Moshe Rabeinu started his journey as a shepherd. Rabbi Akiva couldn’t read at the age of 40. King David was pushed away from his family. Almost every great person in the Tanach started from failure, struggle, or rejection. Judaism does not believe that you are born with greatness, It believes that you build greatness. That is why we were given the Torah in the desert. A desert is empty. There are no distractions, luxury, or ego. A person can only truly receive the Torah when they are humble enough to admit they still need to grow.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once said, “There is nothing more complete than a broken heart.” This sounds very strange. How is a broken heart complete? The Kotzker Rebbe meant something powerful. When a person thinks that they are perfect, they eliminate any room for growth. However, a person who feels incomplete, who accepts that they need to improve, and who struggles and still keeps trying is the person who can truly become great.

This might be the reason we stay up all night on Shavuot and learn Torah. What are we really doing? Hashem is not impressed that we’re losing sleep. The learning is a statement. We are saying to Hashem: “I will not spiritually fall asleep.”

The world is always pulling us away from our path. Many people spend hours scrolling through other people’s lives and journeys that they forget to build their own journey and grow their own lives. Then the holiday of Shavuot comes and reminds us that a Jew isn’t just a body with wants and desires. A Jew is a soul with a mission.

At Har Sinai, the Torah says the Jewish people answered with two words: “Naaseh v’nishma” - “We will do and we will hear.” Before even understanding

everything, they committed themselves. Why? Real growth begins when a person stops waiting to feel perfect before taking action. If people waited until they felt fully ready to change, nobody would ever change. The Jews jumped forward first. Only afterward came a deeper understanding.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler explains that spirituality works like fire. A tiny spark, if protected, can grow into something enormous. However, if ignored, it fades away. Every Jew has sparks inside them. Some people buried those sparks under mistakes. Some buried them Yes!

under pain. Some buried them under years of feeling disconnected.

However, Shavuot comes and says:

The fire is still there and if a Jew still has fire, then they can still become great. That is the power of this holiday. Shavuot is not celebrating that Jews once stood at Har Sinai. Shavuot is the moment Hashem asks every Jew again, “Do you believe you can still become more than who you are today?” And the answer of the Jewish people has echoed for thousands of years:

Trust Before Understanding

Rabbi Yoav Arjang

There is something remarkable about the way Klal Yisrael accepted the Torah. At Har Sinai, the Jewish people declared “Na’aseh v’Nishma,” “We will do and we will understand.” Chazal tell us that because they placed “Na’aseh” before “Nishma,” six hundred thousand malachim came and placed two crowns upon every Jew: one for “Na’aseh” and one for “Nishma.”

At first glance, this seems difficult to understand. Why was saying “Na’aseh” before “Nishma” such a great accomplishment? Isn’t it more logical to first understand something before committing to it?

The answer is that Torah is not merely wisdom or philosophy. Torah is the infinite *ratzon Hashem*, the will of Hashem Himself. Human beings are limited, while Hashem’s wisdom is infinite. Had Klal Yisrael first said “Nishma,” it would have implied that they would only accept the Torah if it fit within the boundaries of human understanding. But by saying “Na’aseh” first, they demonstrated complete trust in Hashem. They accepted the Torah even before fully understanding it, knowing that whatever comes from Hashem must be **אמת** - truth.

Only afterward came “Nishma,” the desire to learn, understand, and connect to the Torah as deeply as possible. True understanding only comes after humility and commitment. When a person approaches Torah demanding that everything make sense before he commits, he limits himself to the boundaries of his own intellect. But when a person first accepts Torah with trust and sincerity, Hashem opens his heart and mind to deeper understanding.

Rav Meir Shapiro explains that this incredible ability was inherited from Avraham Avinu. When Hashem

told Avraham to look at the heavens and count the stars, Avraham immediately began trying, despite the impossibility of the task. Hashem then asked him, “Are you able to count them?” The message was that Avraham’s greatness was not in whether he could accomplish it, but in his willingness to begin simply because Hashem asked him to. That same spirit carried over to his descendants at Har Sinai, when they said “Na’aseh v’Nishma.”

Perhaps this is one of the most important lessons of Shavuot. Torah is not built only through understanding; it is built through trust, commitment, and consistency. Sometimes we wait to feel inspired before learning, before davening properly, or before growing. But the lesson of “Na’aseh v’Nishma” is that growth begins with action. First comes “Na’aseh,” showing up, trying, and committing ourselves to Torah and mitzvot. Then comes “Nishma,” the understanding, inspiration, and connection that follow.

This idea also helps explain the custom of staying awake throughout the night of Shavuot learning Torah. Chazal say the Jewish people slept the night before Matan Torah, and we remain awake to “correct” that mistake. But on a deeper level, staying awake demonstrates how precious Torah is to us. We are showing Hashem that Torah is not a burden, but something we eagerly anticipate and cherish.

May we be *zocheh* this Shavuot to once again accept the Torah with the spirit of “Na’aseh v’Nishma,” with trust, excitement, and dedication, and may Hashem bless us not only to keep His Torah, but to truly understand and connect to it.

Sefirat HaOmer - A Journey Between Freedoms

Zachary Zar

As we approach each of our holidays, we must contemplate how the commemorated event in the past can change our lives today. Wrapping up Sefirat HaOmer, I would like to discuss the seemingly odd placement of forty-nine grieving days between two very happy events - Pesach and Shavuot. Why is our amazing journey from freedom to receiving the Torah filled with melancholy and abstinence?

To begin, let's dive into the state of our nation during Pesach. As we all know, our nation was mercifully released from captivity after years of degradation in Egypt. At last we were physically free, yet Egyptian ideology still poisoned our minds. We were still mentally enslaved to the lusts and negativity that ruled over Egyptian society. This mindset is expressed through the constant complaints and fights in the desert approaching the Red Sea, to the point that the Jews begged to return to Egypt. Therefore, Pesach represents physical freedom with a mental state that is far from that clear, pure, peaceful state required to receive the Torah.

Shavuot demands the latter mind-frame. Hashem graciously chose us to be His elite force, to use the Torah as our guide to build meaningful lives and families in a crazy world. The reason why we were freed from Egypt was not only to be physically free, but more so to be elevated as the unique Chosen Nation. Therefore, Shavuot represents mental freedom - the Torah being our guide to break free from mental prisons like jealousy, lust, and ego and to be great in our own way.

Now, once we reframe the Omer period as the journey between physical freedom of Pesach and the mental freedom of Shavuot, we can begin understanding the theme of discipline and seriousness to bridge our two major holidays.

I would like to suggest that the underlying meaning of the Omer period can be found in a teaching that I consistently heard in Israel: "be honest with yourself about yourself." This maxim helped me and my peers introspect during our year away, so that we can individually work on our characters through the wisdom of the Torah. Of course, the Torah's teachings cannot solve our problems immediately, but they guide us to improve 1% every day. We have stated that Pesach unlocks the mind-state of physical freedom, but the issues that often arise with physical comfort and freedom are that we tend to overlook our smaller problems and character flaws.

It is evident that "there is no growth in the comfort zone," so the Omer serves as a designated seven-week period of daily personal introspection amidst our physical freedom. A time to evaluate our character flaws and map out what we need to work on before receiving the Torah. The minhagim of refraining from music and new clothing on the Omer, although certainly uncomfortable, ensure that we don't get too caught up in our material strivings and force us look deep into our character strengths and weaknesses with little distraction.

Furthermore, the entire reason for the mourning practices is to commemorate the death of 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students - Torah giants who failed to show respect to one another.¹ This reason is seemingly small to justify a major plague, but a profound teaching in Pirkei Avot can explain the calamity: "Do not make words of Torah a crown to make yourself great, or a spade with which to dig."² Without realizing, Torah learning can so easily lead to glorifying one's knowledge over another or fuel harsh judgements upon others. The significance of the Omer is to pause before receiving the Torah, to ensure that we only learn Torah for positivity and unity rather than tension and exclusion. Just like we have the entire Omer to reflect

¹ Gemara Masechet Yevamot 62b

² Pirkei Avot 4:7, Reworded Me'am Lo'ez Translation

before the major reception, we must pause and reflect before learning any minute of Torah to ensure that it will only lead to growth and positivity.

To conclude, the juxtaposing themes of Pesach, Sefirat HaOmer and Shavuot all harmonize once we identify

our physical and mental states at each point. In our world of physical freedom, we must carefully introspect and map out our smaller problems, although we are comfortable, to improve ourselves through the Torah. May we be blessed with a peaceful and meaningful Shavuot. Chag Sameach!

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