

EDUCATION: THE FOUNDATION OF HUMILITY

The Midrash asks, "From where does Sinai come?" (Shocher Tov 68). It comes from Mount Moriah, having been kneaded like challah from dough, from the place where Isaac was to have been sacrificed. Thus G-d said, "Since Isaac should have been sacrificed there, it would be good for his children to receive the Torah there."

We may ask at least three questions on this passage:

1. If Mount Moriah is so important, why was the Torah not given on it (without having a portion taken from it and placed on Mount Sinai)?

2. What exactly does "having been kneaded" mean? Why did our Sages add, "Like challah from dough"?

3. What is the connection between the sacrifice of Isaac and the giving of the Torah? Did these two events have to occur in the same place?

The Torah commands: "Who is the man who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the war and another man will inaugurate it" (Deuteronomy 20:5). What exactly does "lest he die" signify? Everyone who goes out to war is exposed to danger. What is the meaning of, "Who has built a new house and has not inaugurated it"? It means that even the construction of a house implies the performance of several mitzvot that are inseparable from one another, from the mitzvot connected to the house itself (such as the mezuzot [Deuteronomy 6:9] and the fence on the roof [ibid. 22:8]) to the mitzvot that one performs within its walls (such as the laws of kashrut, family purity, being fruitful and multiplying). The precepts carried out within the home, and the Shechinah found therein, constitute the very foundation of the Torah. With regards to this, the Talmud teaches that if a man and his wife are worthy, the Shechinah dwells among them; if not, they are devoured by fire (Sotah 17a). A man performs mitzvot and good deeds in every corner of the house. He impregnates it throughout with holiness, and it is difficult to commit a sin there. The beams and walls of the house will witness against him if he commits

a sin within it (Taanith 11a). In the same way that one educates one's children, one educates and impregnates one's home in the service of G-d.

If, as the Talmud relates (Yoma 47a; see also Vayikra Rabba 20:11), Kimchit had seven sons who all became High Priests, it was because the beams of her house never saw the braids of her hair. She was careful to hide them even when she was alone in the house, doing so in order to impregnate it with holiness. Because of her modesty, she merited giving birth to seven High Priests.

Therefore if a person has built a house without having performed the mitzvot intended for it, he does not have the right to go to war. He will be judged for not having inaugurated it with mitzvot and good deeds. Moreover, Yonatan ben Uzziel translated the verse in question into Aramaic as follows: "If someone has built a new house, and has not affixed a mezuzah to it..." This is because the mezuzah and other mitzvot constitute the foundation of the Jewish home and generate humility in man, a guarantee that the Divine commandments will be carried out.

On Mount Moriah, our Patriarch Isaac was taught to fear Hashem and serve Him with the greatest of devotion (Berachot 62b; Taanith 16a; Zohar III:53b). Our Sages teach that when the Jewish people finds itself in distress, the "ashes" of Isaac rise toward the Holy One, blessed be He, and his merit saves them. Yet where, in fact, do these "ashes" come from? Isaac was never sacrificed! The answer is that his modesty and humility allowed him to reach the level of dust and ashes that wind scatters to the four corners of the earth. It is similar to the challah that we take from the dough: It is really bread, but when we burn it, it is literally transformed into ashes.

The Talmud teaches (Taanith 16a; see also Bereshith Rabba 55:7) that from Mount Moriah, an educational message was relayed to the Jewish people – one of modesty, submission, and the fear of Heaven. Just as Mount Moriah was uprooted, the Torah does not stay in one place; one finds it everywhere. We too must perform mitzvot

everywhere, with the greatest humility – that is the essential thing. As we have seen, the Torah was given on Mount Sinai because it was the smallest of mountains, and it is part of Mount Moriah.

Desiring to impregnate the Torah and mitzvot within themselves in order to defeat the evil inclination, the Children of Israel settled in the desert, where the forces of evil fiercely raged, close to Sinai. They wanted to attain high levels of spirituality on this mountain, which Meromem Y-H (Moriah=Meromem Y-H), Hashem uplifts. Note the similarity in the numerical values of Y-H (Hashem) and ga'avah (pride), both equal to 15. By the study of Torah, we array ourselves in Hashem's majesty alone.

This Torah portion carries the name Yitro because he, fleeing all honors, went to the desert to impregnate himself with the worship of Hashem and to fight the evil inclination.

This is also what the Children of Israel did. In fleeing from honors into the desert, they were then "pursued" by Mount Moriah, which elevated them and allowed them to reach sublime spiritual levels.

Commenting on the verse that states, "So shall you say [ko tomar] to the House of Jacob and relate [vetaged] to the Children of Israel" (Exodus 19:3), the Talmud explains (Shabbat 87a) that Hashem uses gentle language with the House of Jacob (that is, with the women), and rough language with the Children of Israel (that is, with the men). Why two different ways of speaking? Furthermore, why does the verse mention the women before the men, which is contrary to the norm?

The answer is that a man learns the virtue of humility from a woman. If on Mount Sinai it was the Torah that reminded man to conduct himself with complete humility, who would remind him to do so in his home, if not his wife? The Midrash teaches that all while being strong, a woman is born with a discreet, modest disposition (Bereshith Rabba 18:2). This is why, in order to learn humility (which is the very foundation of the entire Torah), a woman needs ko tomar ("so shall you say") and "I am the L-RD your G-d."

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Preparing for the Festival of the Giving of the Torah

As we know, the names of the festivals are generally determined by the events that transpired on their dates. That being the case, why is the festival of Shavuot called the day of “the giving of the Torah”? We also need to understand why, in our prayers, we refer to Shavuot as the day of the giving of the Torah, not as the day when we received the Torah. The festival of the giving of the Torah, which occurred on Sivan 6, is dependent on the seven weeks that preceded it. This emerges from the words of the Tanna: “The Torah is acquired by 48 qualities” (Perkei Avot 6:6). The expression, “The Torah is acquired” teaches us that it is not enough to know the Torah; we must also acquire it. As is the case with acquisitions in this world, if we fail to pay for the object that we want to buy, the transaction will not take place and the object will continue to be viewed as the property of the seller. The same applies when we want to receive the Creator’s Torah: If a person neglects even a single element by which the Torah is acquired, it remains the property of the Holy One, blessed be He, and a person cannot take possession of it.

To what can this be compared? It is like a wealthy man who placed one of his young servants in charge of the homes he possessed. Over the course of time, the young man learned everything there was to know about all the wealthy man’s properties and their particulars. However even though he knew more than the owner himself, it was still the owner who retained exclusive possession of his property. With regards to the owner, this young man – regardless of what he knew – had no ownership rights over any of his homes, not even the smallest part of one. The same applies to the Torah, as King David said: “His desire is in the Torah of the L-RD, and in his Torah he meditates day and night” (Psalms 1:2). At first it is called “the Torah of the L-RD,” but once a person has studied it, it is called “his Torah” (Kiddushin 32b). When does this happen? When he has acquired the Torah by appropriate means.

The Children of Israel had breached the 49th gate of impurity while in Egypt (Zohar Yitro 39). However as soon as they left Egypt, they began to work regularly and diligently to leave the gates of impurity and enter the gates of holiness. To accomplish this, they acquired the 48 qualities mentioned above, one quality each day. On the 49th day, which was the day before Shavuot, they went over everything. It was after having gone through this extraordinary preparation that they proceeded to receive the Torah.

Consequently, this is why the festival is called Shavuot, for during those weeks (shavuot), the Children of Israel acquired everything they needed in order to receive the Torah. This also answers our second question, which is why the festival is called the day of “the giving of the Torah,” rather than the day of “the receiving of the Torah.” It is because the Holy One, blessed be He, gives the Torah (and Heavenly assistance with it) to every Jew, but not every Jew “receives” the Torah in the same way. Each person receives the Torah according to his own abilities that he developed for this goal, according to the effort he invested during the seven weeks leading up to its giving. It is precisely in accordance with his efforts that he may receive the Torah. The book *Kol Yehudah* by Rabbi Tsadka Zatzal states that Shavuot is called “the festival of Bikkurim [First fruits]” in the Torah because all other festivals are solely limited to the days when the celebrated event took place, which is not case for the giving of the Torah. It did not take place solely on that day, for Hashem gives the Torah anew each day, as the Sages have explained: “They [the mitzvot] should be new to you, as if you heard them on this very day.” It is our duty to prepare ourselves to receive the Torah.

The gaon Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer Zatzal wrote something amazing in regards to this: In the same way that the world is judged on four occasions

(on Passover for the grain harvest, and so on [see Rosh Hashanah 16a]), on Shavuot Hashem judges man for every moment that he was given during the year. Did he use each moment to study Torah, or did he unfortunately squander them away? It is only after verifying how a person spent his time that Heaven decides his spiritual condition for the year to come, as well as the amount of heavenly assistance that he will be given to study Torah.

Unity Leads to Torah Study

Commenting on the verse that states, “And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain” (Exodus 19:2), Rashi explains that the Children of Israel journeyed to receive the Torah like a single person, with a single heart (see *Mechilta*).

As we have explained several times before, this was precisely the goal of their departure from Egypt, as it is written: “When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12). What, therefore, does this verse reveal to us?

It teaches us the importance of the unity of the Children of Israel. Due to the fact that the majority of mitzvot deal with relationships between man and his fellowman, we can only accomplish them by impregnating ourselves with the virtues of peace, harmony, and love. Moreover, in revealing Himself to the Children of Israel as He gave them the Torah, Hashem used the singular: “I am the L-RD your G-d, Who has taken you [singular] out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2). The plural form is not used in Hebrew. The most complete harmony was to reign among the Children of Israel when they were to receive the Torah. They were to be guarantors (arevim) for one another (zeh bazeh). The latter expression has a numerical value of 26, equal to that of G-d’s Name (Havayah), meaning that if harmony reigned among them, the Shechinah would reside in their midst (see *Sanhedrin* 27b).

Consequently, only perfect unity allows for the study of Torah and the acceptance of the yoke of the mitzvot. Neither the evil inclination nor foreign nations will have any power over Jews if they refrain from committing sins (Ketubot 66b; *Tanhuma*, *Shoftim* 18; *Zohar* I:200b). If the evil inclination finds the slightest fault (i.e., the least bit of dissension) among them, the Shechinah will no longer abide with the Jewish people, and the evil inclination can then come and destroy all traces of holiness. However if harmony reigns among the Jewish people, they can very well find themselves “opposite the mountain” (an allusion to the evil inclination), all while triumphing over it.

Our Sages also teach that at the giving of the Torah, the evil inclination left the hearts of the Children of Israel (*Shabbat* 146a). This was due to G-d’s Name being found in their hearts because of their unity. They were then crowned with two crowns, one for having proclaimed, “we will do,” and the other for having proclaimed, “we will listen” (*Shabbat* 88a; *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shemot* 277). Although the evil inclination resides between the two parts of the heart (*Berachot* 61a), Rashi specifically asserts that the Children of Israel encamped before the mountain “with a single heart.” This is because harmony reigned among them at that point and the evil inclination no longer resided in their hearts. Thus their hearts were reserved solely for receiving the Torah.

Yet if so, then why did G-d threaten them by lifting the mountain over their heads like a barrel, thus forcing them to accept the Torah (*Shabbat* 88a)? Had they not proclaimed, “We will do and we will listen” (Exodus 24:7)? Did Hashem have any doubts concerning their sincerity? The Satan was no longer present, for it had left them at that point.

Let us begin by recalling that the Greeks had forced the Jews to renounce Hashem and His commandments, such as the observance of Shabbat, Rosh Chodesh, and circumcision. They did not want to exterminate them physically, but rather spiritually. This is why the Greeks defiled all the oil in the Temple, for oil alludes to the soul (see *Zohar Chadash*, *Ruth* 108a). They also prohibited the Jews from lighting the Menorah, which alludes to

the body. Thus the Greeks were content with desecrating all the oil (Shabbat 21b), without completely breaking the flasks in which it was kept, for their primary aim was to desecrate the oil (hashemen), which is composed of the same letters as the word soul (neshama). They did not seek to destroy the flasks, which allude to the body.

A miracle nevertheless occurred, and there remained a small flask of pure oil, sealed with the stamp of the High Priest (Shabbat 21a). Why didn't two or three flasks remain, containing just enough oil to light the Menorah for eight days? That too was a miracle.

The reason is that the flask alludes to the unity of the Creator, Who blesses abundantly starting from one. The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted Jews to understand that by sacrificing body and soul in order not to be defiled by the Greeks, they resembled Pinchas, the son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron the High Priest. Pinchas "was jealous with My Jealousy in their midst" (Numbers 25:11), and many miracles were performed for him (Tanhuma Balak 21) because he wished to annul the strict sentence pronounced against the Children of Israel.

Furthermore, the flask alludes to the unity that reigns among the Jewish people, which enables miracles to occur. The Shechinah resides among Jews only when they are united, having one heart (soul) as a single body. This is why a miracle occurred with a single flask.

G-d caphah (forced) the mountain upon them to demonstrate the importance of unity. The letters of cephyah can be rearranged to form pachyah. In other words, Hashem (Y-H) united the Children of Israel in a single pach (flask) that, as we saw above, alludes to the body. He showed them how the Satan, alluding to the mountain, is like a barrel without end, one from which we cannot flee. Thus G-d told them: "If you accept My Torah as a single person, with a single heart, you will be happy. If not, this mountain will become your grave. You will not be able to escape from the evil inclination [the mountain] that lives with you."

We therefore see the importance of unity in the eyes of the Holy One, blessed be He. Before the creation of the world, the Children of Israel were a uniform whole (Bereshith Rabba 1:5), and G-d greatly desires for harmony to reign in this world as well. Thus Hillel declared to a future convert: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man" (Shabbat 31a), and Rabbi Akiva added, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19:18] is a fundamental rule [klal] of the Torah" (Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:4). It is only in this way that one can acquire the Torah. The Divine commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" embodies kolel, the Torah in its entirety, and a person who distances himself from this commandment puts the entire Jewish people at risk. Hashem turned the mountain upside down and held it over the Children of Israel like a barrel in order to frighten and dissuade them from leaving the klal, the people as a whole.

Regarding this subject, the Gemara cites the case of Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Meir, whom the evil inclination desired to have sin (Kiddushin 81a). However G-d rebuked the Satan, which then left them. Yet Rabbi Yochanan, who was a High Priest for 80 years, nevertheless became a Sadducee near the end of his life (Berachot 29a; Tanhuma, Beshalach 3), and Elisha the son of Avuya, one of the great Tannaim, became a heretic (Hagigah 14b). This shows us just how the evil inclination strives at inciting sin. Only harmony allows a person to conquer the evil inclination and come closer to the Holy One, blessed be He. May Hashem help all of us love one another! Amen!

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Traditions of Shavuot

There exist numerous and varied customs regarding the holiday of Shavuot, ones that we will cite and expand upon below.

Decorating the Synagogue and the Home

On Shavuot people usually decorate the synagogue and their homes with greenery and flowers, and they also place trees in the synagogue (Rema 494). The Mishnah Berurah (494 al. 10) states that we do this in order to remember that we are judged with regards to the fruit harvest. The Vilna Gaon annulled this custom because it is similar to the customs of non-Jews. However many Poskim have written that there is no reason to take this into account, for our custom has a reason behind it and has spread to Jewish communities everywhere (Da'at Torah 494). We must simply be careful not to pluck branches from fruit-bearing trees, for some believe that doing so constitutes a transgression of the verse, "You shall not destroy its trees" (Deuteronomy 20:19). The Ya'avetz described the reason for this custom in the following way: It is done in memory of the giving of the Torah, which took place on a verdant mountain. This is why we use many trees and all kinds of fragrant flowers to rejoice in this great day. The Tiklin Chadetin states that Moses was born on Adar 7, and the Torah states: "She hid him for three months" (Exodus 2:2) – until Sivan 6 – at which point "she placed it among the rushes" (v.3), meaning the reeds and greenery that we display in memory of the miracles that were performed for Moses. The Bnei Issachar states that the customs of the Jewish people must be considered as Torah, and they prepare roses and other greenery on Shavuot in accordance with the following words of the Midrash: "The matter may be compared to the case of a king who had an orchard planted with one row of fig-trees, one of vines, one of pomegranates, and one of apples. He entrusted it to a tenant and went away. After a time the king came and looked at the orchard to ascertain what it had yielded. He found it full of thorns and briars, so he brought woodcutters to raze it. He looked closely at the thorns and noticed among them a single, rose-colored flower. He smelled it and his spirits were calmed. The king said, 'The whole orchard shall be saved because of this flower.' In a similar manner, the whole world was created only for the sake of the Torah" (Vayikra Rabba 28:3).

Studying Torah on the Night of Shavuot

Yesod Veshoreish HaAvodah states: In the Arvit prayer of Shavuot, we recite the Ahavat Olam blessing with great joy because it is on this day that Hashem chose our forefathers and sanctified them by a Torah of truth and righteous laws. Let us therefore rejoice in our G-d, in His Torah and mitzvot, and may we be careful not to eat excessively on that night, that we may recite the Tikkun. Immediately after reciting Birkat Hamazon, we should quickly make our way to the Beit Midrash, without losing a single moment in mundane conversation. The Ya'avetz states that those who stay awake on that night should not involve themselves in useless pursuits. There is no place for joking around or having lighthearted conversation on that night, for in such a case it would be better for them – and everyone else – to have slept. The Pele Yoetz states that the Tikkun on the night of Shavuot effects a great repair for the damage caused by a person looking at forbidden things, as well as by what a person damages by a few nights of working and rage, for he was awake to disturb his Creator by his laughing, lightheartedness, and other detrimental things.

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REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT (CONTINUATION FROM PAGE 3)

Milk Products

The Rema states (494:3) that in certain places people customarily eat milk products on the first day of Shavuot. The reason behind this is for people to take two kinds of food, much like on the night of Passover when we mention both the Passover and Chagigah offerings. Similarly, on Shavuot we eat milk products first and then meat. (See Mishnah Berurah *ibid.*, which explains the remarks of the Rema.)

The Mishnah Berurah gives a second reason for this custom by citing the words of a great Torah figure, who said that when the Children of Israel stood before Mount Sinai, they received the Torah and went back to their dwellings. However upon returning, they did not find anything to eat other than milk products, for it took a great deal of effort to prepare meat. They had to slaughter an animal with a knife that had been checked, the forbidden fat on the animal had to be removed, and the meat had to be salted and cooked in a new vessel, since the vessels they had used up to that point were now forbidden. This is why they decided to eat milk products.

A third reason for this custom is given in the Kolbo: In certain places people customarily eat milk and honey because the Torah is compared to these things, as it is written: "Honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11).

A fourth reason is cited by the Magen Avraham: According to the Zohar, for the Children of Israel these seven weeks were like the seven days of a woman's purification. We know that blood is transformed into milk, meaning that it goes from the color of strict justice (red) to the color of mercy (white). Now the customs of our forefathers must be considered as Torah.

Mateh Moshe cites a fifth reason: The Torah alludes to the fact that people ate milk products on Shavuot, as it states: *Mincha Chadasha L'Hashem B'Shavuotaychem* ("A new meal offering to Hashem in your feast of weeks" – Numbers 28:26), the initials of which form the word *M'chalav* ("from milk").

Sixth reason: When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to give the Torah to Israel, the ministering angels wanted to keep it in Heaven. Hashem said to them: When you descended to visit Abraham, you ate milk and meat, as it is written: "He took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared" (Genesis 18:8). When a child of theirs returns from school and the mother gives him a meat sandwich and some milk, the child replies: Today our rabbi taught us, "You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk." From this we conclude that by the merit of the warning against mixing meat and milk, Hashem rejected the arguments of the angels. This warning earned us the giving of the Torah, hence we eat milk on Shavuot to demonstrate how careful we are to separate milk from meat.

Seventh reason: The word *chalav* (milk) has a numerical value of 40, alluding to the Torah that was given in 40 days. The importance of the Torah is such that all the good things of the earth are worthless in comparison to it. To demonstrate how much they love the Torah, the Children of Israel adopted the practice of eating milk products, which alludes to this idea.

– Sources: *Rema 494; Magen Avraham al. 6; Beit Halevi, Yitro; Baer Heitev 494;*

Sefer Nezirut Shimshon; Kovetz Mivakshei Torah, par. 187;

Sefer HaToda'ah.

A TRUE STORY

The Power of a Sigh

The Baal Shem Tov recounted the following story to his disciples:

Two neighbors lived in a single residence. One of them was a scholar and the other a blacksmith. Both of them arose before dawn for their occupations. One went to the Beit Midrash to study, while the other went to the metal shop to work.

When the time for breakfast arrived, these two men both went home. On the way, the blacksmith hurried to the Beit Midrash in order to "grab" a quick morning prayer. Each day the two neighbors met one another along the way. A slight smile of self-content could be seen on the face of the scholar, and his eyes conveyed a certain look of disdain for his neighbor, as if he were thinking: "We both work hard. I study a few pages of Gemara, purify myself in the mikveh before prayer, and my prayer is said calmly and with concentration, as if I were counting money, whereas for him..."

On the other hand, the face of the blacksmith was filled with worry, and his eyes expressed the suffering he felt. It was as if they were saying, "Woe to my years that are going up in smoke! My neighbor has certainly filled himself with much Torah today, while as for me – what have I filled my life with? I'm always next to the anvil, always with horseshoes and horses. What's going to become of me?"

Years passed, and both men left this world and were called before the Celestial Court to answer for their deeds. The talmid chacham was summoned first to give his accounting. He approached with an air of confidence, holding his head high and feeling sure of himself. He said, "Supreme judges, I am not coming before you as one poor and needy. I have learned much Torah and performed many mitzvot. Each day before the rooster crowed, I was seated before the Gemara. I unified the Names of G-d during prayer, and I was meticulous in carrying out mitzvot, both easy and difficult."

Angels for the defense emerged from the Celestial Treasury carrying a stack of all the pages of Gemara that he studied during his lifetime, and they placed them on the right side of a balance. They also added his prayers and yihudim, all being verified and weighed. There was no doubt that the judges would grant him an honorable place in Gan Eden. However before the supreme judge opened his mouth, the accuser raised his hand and said, "The Celestial Treasury contains a slight smile of self-content and a look of disdain that this talmid chacham had on his face whenever he encountered his neighbor the blacksmith." All while saying this, the accuser took out this smile and deposited it on the left side of the balance. It too was also carefully verified and weighed, and it turned out that this small smile was so heavy it tilted the balance to the left, such that the scholar's sentence was one of condemnation!

The scholar departed, and in his place the blacksmith came forth with great sobs. His head was lowered, and with a soft voice he said: "I stand before you, equitable judges, as a vessel filled with shame. I did not learn Torah, and my prayers were always said in haste. All the days of my life, from the wee hours of the morning until late at night, I put horseshoes on horses and greased wheels. On my neck I carried the yoke of providing for my family, since I had a wife to feed and daughters to marry off."

When the blacksmith finished speaking, the angels brought the two bags that accompany all men. On the right side of the balance they placed his bag of mitzvot, and on the left his sins. This time as well, the weight of each mitzvah, as well as the nature of each sin, was verified and weighed, and the balance swung from right to left. The defending angel then came forward and said, "I kept a sigh in reserve, a small 'woe' that escaped the blacksmith's heart whenever he saw his neighbor the scholar, a sigh of grief for not being able to study Torah like him. May this sigh be regarded in his merit!"

It was this sigh that tilted the balance to the right side, opening the gates of Gan Eden to the blacksmith.