

ב"ה

SHAVUOT 5780/2020



# Archways

IN TORAH

COLLECTION OF INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

SHABBOS HOUSE CHABAD - UALBANY

## WELCOME TO “ARCHWAYS IN TORAH”

Why archways? First of all, everyone who went to UAlbany is very familiar with its ubiquitous myriad of archways. Archways have lots of symbolism. They are supportive yet open, they are entrances and exits at the same time, they are guideposts that draw and raise our eyes upward and frame our perspective. UAlbany buildings have many archways on every side, for all its length and breadth, from every angle. All of this can be a metaphor for Torah.

In his very first public letter (August 31, 1950) the Rebbe wrote, “There is no man or woman in Israel who cannot, in some way, positively impact his or her fellow Jews.” He would often encourage: “If you know Alef, then teach Alef, even if you haven’t yet learned the letter Bet.” The Rebbe was insistent that each of us have a unique mission and contribution, that each of us is likened to the sun and the moon, we each ought to be both a giver and a recipient. Regardless of levels of knowledge or observance, we each have what to give and take, that which we can learn from and what we have to teach each other. Hence this booklet with a smorgasbord of Torah insights from and by our extended UAlbany Jewish community.

Many thanks to all who’ve contributed to this booklet. We took liberty to do some edits, to add or remove bits and pieces for the sake of clarity and elucidation, but maintained the message and expressions of each writer.

The traditional Chabad wish/greeting for Shavuot is: “May you receive the Torah joyously and inwardly!” Indeed, especially at a time like this.

Love,  
Mendel and Raizy  
Shabbos House

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# WORKING UP TO SHAVUOT

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# PREPARING FOR THE WEDDING DAY

ELIRAN REBEYEV - 2018

Rav Nissim Yagen zt”l, writes in his *Netivei Ohr*, (Zafarani Jerusalem, Israel: Nivei HaKtav Institute, 2011 Page 560.) “... When Hashem created the world, he gave every animal a spouse: The lion got the lioness, the rooster got the hen, etc. etc., every species having a male and female (even among the plants). Then the holy Torah came before Hashem and said, “Master of the Universe, You created a spouse for everyone but me!” Hashem told it, “Am Yisrael will be your spouse.” The Torah agreed to this, and Hashem proclaimed a wedding day - “the day of his wedding and the day of the gladness of his heart” (Shir Hashirim 3:11). The ‘reception’ was set for the 6th of Sivan. Location: every house and every synagogue in Am Yisrael. So the Torah waits and waits, it counts the days of the Omer, and then finally the great day comes – and ...” And? What do we have to show for preparing to receive the holy Torah?

Shavuot, literally means ‘weeks’. Why ‘weeks’? Because Hashem commanded us to count seven weeks (i.e. the Omer) beginning from the second day of Pesach (Vayikra/Leviticus 23:15-16). Shavuot is also known as Chag Matan Torah, because on this day, the Jews received the Ten Commandments verbally, the first two directly from Hashem and the remaining eight from Moshe Rabbeinu. What we do during the time between Pesach and Shavuot defines how we prepare ourselves to receive the holy Torah. This very interim period, the days and weeks we spend counting up to the giving of the Ten Commandments, parallels the tremendous efforts we have exerted to improve ourselves, be it emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually, etc., and culminates with receiving the Torah.

In this greatly challenging time of the Coronavirus

pandemic, we are given the opportunity to self-reflect and pay extra attention to areas of our life that may need improvement. It can be regarded as an opportunity, an impetus to grow, to improve. As Simon Sinek writes in *The Infinite Game*: “‘Better’ suggests a journey of constant improvement and makes us feel like we are being invited to contribute our talents and energies to make progress in that journey.’

In the journey of life, doing one (even seemingly small) mitzvah, taking one small action (of kindness), one small step, one small decision at a time can help us move in the “better” direction. This is what we have to show for preparing to receive the holy Torah.

But it shouldn’t have to stop there. We don’t need to wait for Pesach to roll around to begin preparing for Shavuot. Every moment we are awake may be aimed toward the goal, the objective, the mission of improving ourselves to be ready at any moment to not only receive the Torah, but also to receive Mashiach. We have to lead our lives; take charge of our lives; engineer our future the way we envision it. During this journey, let’s not forget to leave the world better than we found it, as is the message of “tikkun olam.”

Hashem giving the Jews the Torah was not a one-and-done type of deal. Every year we commemorate receiving the Torah anew by celebrating Shavuot. And every year may bring some new insight into the Torah. Some have the custom of staying up the entire first night of Shavuot to study and read the Tanach and Tehillim, because that is, in part, how we renew our vow to keep and hold steadfast to the Torah. Rav Nissim Yagen zt”l says, “On Shavuot we need

to focus on the important aspects of the holiday – the fact that we received the Torah, and that we have to keep trying harder to learn Torah [and to serve Hashem]... That’s how we’ll be worthy of reaching

that glorious day, ‘the day of his wedding and the day of the gladness of his heart.’”

## **OMER COUNT UPWARDS ESTABLISHES SHAVUOT** **ELIOT HECHT - 2016 WITH HIS SISTER SYDNEY HECHT**

Shavuot means weeks. Why is the holiday where we celebrate Matan Torah named after the seven weeks of counting (Sefirat Haomer) between leaving Egypt (Passover) and receiving the Torah (Shavuot)? Ex - other holidays like Purim (the lottery) and Pesach (the Korban, Hashem passing over the Jews) are named after significant events.

To answer this, we first have to see the significance of the counting.

What is the significance of the counting? Every year we are told to count the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot even though the number never changes. We all know that counting in anticipation for an exciting event is understandable. We have all our counted DOWN for a big event whether it be a graduation, a birthday, or a party. The difference for Sefirat Haomer is that between Passover and Shavuot we count UP.

Why is this so important? To answer this we must first understand why Hashem had to wait 50 days after leaving Egypt to give the Jews the Torah. Why not give it right away?

The Jews were not ready spiritually to receive the Torah. They had been living in Egyptian society for over 200 years. They had slipped into the 49th level of Jewish impurity with 50 being the lowest. Hashem was unable to give them the Torah at this point. They had to “grow up” first. The ten plagues and the splitting of the sea launched the Jews into a physical freedom. These miraculous events were a jumpstart to the spiritual possibilities that lay ahead. Although

these were powerful experiences, a powerful event may not permanently change a person’s emotional attitude. (Ex- sometimes we hear inspiring stories and suddenly feel a spark of inspiration. These inspiring moments are very important but they do not always last.) Staying inspired is only possible through repeated practice over time. Real change only occurs through a steady day-to-day growth and commitment to a consistent program.

This is why the counting of Sefirat Haomer is in a forward progression, starting at 1 and going up to 49. We peel off a layer of impurity every day in order to grow spiritually. Every step reduces the negative number and increases the positive.

A major issue with growth is that many of us tend to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task. We must remember that Judaism is not an all or nothing religion. One reason that people fail is because they believe it is all or nothing and set a goal that is unreachable.

In Yaakov’s dream, Hashem shows him a ladder reaching to heaven. Spiritual growth, like climbing a ladder, is a step-by-step process. By setting smaller goals for ourselves, we will be encouraged by the periodic success. Feeling successful will boost our determination to reach higher goals.

Unlike what secular society sometimes shows, we are not competing with anyone but ourselves. Sometimes we may fail, but that is why Kabbalists say that spiritual growth is “one step forward and two steps back.” As we strive to climb the ladder of

spiritual growth, it matters more which direction we are headed then which rung we are on.

Nowhere in the Torah is the actual date of Shavuot mentioned. It just takes place at the end of the fifty day count from the Exodus. The key is to get there at your own pace. Ideally at the end of the Omer process, we should experience a journey of self-improvement

and be prepared to receive the Torah. The holiday we are working toward is called Shavuot, WEEKS, because without the weeks beforehand, there is no Shavuot. If after the exodus the Jews did not have these WEEKS of growth, they would not have been prepared to receive the Torah.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE & SEQUENCE OF NUMBER 3

SARAH SCHWEDELSON - 2008

The verse doesn't tell us the specific date Torah was given (this is deduced from the narrative) but it does make a significant mention of it being in the third Hebrew month (counting from Nissan, the month of the Exodus). The Talmud makes a big deal of this and (along with the Rabbenynu Nissim commentary) lists a number of threesomes that are related to the Torah. But why focus on number 3 when so much of Judaism is based on oneness? One G-d, one Torah, for example.

To explain this, the Rebbe's quotes a Chassidic teaching which explains that "Echad" oneness or unity is different than singularity. The sequence of numbers demonstrates this: One is singular, it's the one and only thing around. Two represents division or opposites. Three is the number that reconciles the two opposites and unifies them. You take two separate things and unite them as one. There first has to be a difference to be able to create and test that kind of unity. There's a parable about this: when a king sends his son to another distant land far away from the palace. If the prince still acts like royalty or if he is acting different. If he is still like royalty even in a distant land, this is the concept of true unity. But you have to have something different to test the unity. Torah is much more about unity than singularity.

Nissan is the first month, the month of the Exodus, which is all about G-dliness. Everything is coming from above, the plagues, the miracles, the redemption. Iyar is the second month, that's when we count the sefiras haomer, we are refining ourselves, working from below, Iyar is much more about human effort. Sivan, the 3rd month, is the month of G-d's giving and our receiving the Torah. This month is both from above and below, it is from G-d and from us. This is the higher level of true inclusive unity.

Unity vs. singularity is like the salad bowl and melting pot metaphor. In the melting pot everything becomes one and there is only one, anything individual is gone. But in a salad bowl you still have all of the different parts to it, the cucumber, tomatoes, and lettuce, all the ingredients remain distinct yet unified. The melting pot is different because the individual pieces get lost in the shuffle. Shabbos House has that #3 type of unity, everyone has their individual place and pace and yet it is still one unified community.

May we each experience a true inclusive level of unity this holiday!

# AS ONE PERSON WITH ONE HEART

TALI SEINFELD - 1998

When the Torah describes Bnei Yisrael's travels from Egypt, it uses plural terms such as "they journeyed"(Vayisu) and "they arrived." (Yavaviu) However, something striking occurs once Bnei Yisrael arrives at Har Sinai.

When Bnei Yisrael sets up camp around Har Sinai "Vayichan Sham Yisrael Neged HaHar" - "and Bnei Yisrael set up camp there, opposite the mountain, here the word Vayichan is written in the singular form and not in plural form Vayichanu. Why all of a sudden is Bnei Yisrael referred to in singular form? We learn the answer to this famous question in Rashi. Rashi comments "K'Ish Echad B'Lev Echad" - "as one person with one heart." We learn that during the time that Bnei Yisrael were getting the Torah, all of Bnei Yisrael were united like a single person with a single heart in a beautiful demonstration of achdut and unity. It was only then that they were worthy to receive the Torah. From here we can truly learn the concept our rabbis taught us, Derech Eretz Kadma LeTorah - The way that we act and treat others comes before Torah study.

This should make us ALL realize that every Jew should feel responsible for each other, and shows us the value and importance of each and every person. Every person has a special job, and has unique talents to contribute. Unity does not mean that we all need to be identical, rather, unity means showing respect to each individual despite our differences. Especially here at SUNY Albany, Rabbi Mendel and Raizy are exemplary role models for us to follow in this highest regard of treating each and every Jew as important, special and needed. It is so important that we build unity among each other, wherever we all be at this point in our lives by being kind and respectful towards each other every single day!

Finally if you look at the word Achdut, the first three letters are Aleph, Chet and Daled. which is ECHAD - ONE. This really comes to teach us that the only way we can really show togetherness is by being one. It is only when we all work TOGETHER like one body and one heart that Hashem will shine down on us, just as he did by Matan Torah. It will be at that time that we will see the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash.



**B A M I D B A R**



## A BAMIDBAR MESSAGE TO GRADUATES OF 2020

YASMINE PESSAR - 2016

Congratulations, and mazal tov on your graduation! On this day, it is important to reflect on your journey through college, but also ahead into a new chapter of life. This past week we began a new book of the Torah called Bamidbar, meaning “In the Desert.” It gets its name from its opening verse, “And G-d spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai...” It is also known as the Book of Numbers because it begins and ends with a detailed census, or count, of the people of Israel.

In this parasha, the Israelites are faced with the challenges of entering into a land of the unknown. They not only have to survive the natural elements surrounding them, but also conduct a census of all twelve tribes (excluding the Levites), to determine men at a draftable age – in preparation for the battle that lies ahead. Notwithstanding, the Levites were counted separately and assigned Tabernacle duties. Later on, this book introduces additional challenges

that the Israelites face, be it condemnation to wander the desert or settling national unease and rebellion. Despite these challenges the Israelites continue to move forward and persevere to meet their goal of entering into the Land of Israel, because they believed that even confronted with hardships and trials of the desert, the best was still yet to come.

There is no denying that this year the graduating class is faced by unprecedented circumstances. Similar to the Israelites, you may feel as though you are wandering through the desert, with things like finding a job seeming far away or out of reach. When you have those moments that test you, remember that no matter where you are in life, or whatever challenges lie ahead for you, you are not alone. Family, friends and community will always be there for you. Let them lift you up and guide you as you reach your goals no matter how big or small.

## READING BAMIDBAR BEFORE SHAVUOT

RABBI MOTTI WEIN - 2006

The last Torah portion we read before Shavuot is called Bamidbar, the first Parsha in the Sefer BaMidbar, the Book of Numbers, about our travels through the desert. Another census was taken, our encampments are listed and the status/responsibilities of the Levites are taught as well.

Talmud tractate Megillah 31b teaches that harsh curses appear twice in the Five Books. The first set of curses are in Bechukotai (which concludes the Book of Leviticus) and that’s read two weeks before Shavuot. The second set of curses are in Parsha Ki Tavo and that’s always read close to Rosh Hashanah,

so that “the curses should end and close out with the old year” before the new year begins. And in some sense Shavuot is also considered a new year (see Rosh Hashanah 16a) so it makes sense that the other set of curses precedes this holiday as well.

But the Tosefos commentary on Megillah 31b points out that there’s always one Shabbos of separation between when the curses are read and the new year begins. There’s a one-Parsha buffer. That’s why we always read Bamibar after Bechukotai and before Shavuot. The same happens before Rosh Hashanah. There’s always a Parsha buffer, so that the curses

don't flow into the positivity and blessing of the new year.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l points out another similarity and connection between Parshas Bamidbar and Shavuot, and that's because of the census. We read Parsha Bamidbar about the counting of the Jewish people immediately prior to the Giving of the Torah to remind us that every Jew (along with his Torah study) counts, and is able to learn Torah and grow with it equally, no matter what level they are on.

Back in Parsha Ki Tisa (30:12) we learn about the machatzis hashekel half-Shekel coin donation which was given equally by all the Jewish people. Regardless of your personal economic standing, all Jews gave the same coin equally. And each person only gave one half, so it was a co-joined gift with another person. A poor person's half-Shekel coin could be joined with someone with a wealthy man's coin.

There was a father and son who once toiled to learn one page of Talmud together. The father had little background in it and it took a long time and a great deal of effort to learn that one double-sided page. The son felt his father deserved a celebration for all this effort, but wasn't sure, because usually the Siyum celebration is reserved for one who completes an entire tractate of Talmud, not one page. They asked Rav Moshe for his guidance, and he ruled that given the amount of time and effort invested, a full Siyum celebration was warranted and said that he would also come and participate as well.

They made an elaborate Siyum celebration for that one page of Talmud that father and son learned assiduously together. Then, tragically, the very next day, the father suffered a heart attack and died.

Rav Moshe came to the funeral and in his eulogy adapted the Talmudic saying "some earn their world to come in one moment" to be that one page of intense father and son Torah study which earned the father his share in the world to come.

Now think about this: Rav Moshe himself completed cycles of the entire Talmud dozens if not hundreds of times. He knew all of Torah and commentaries by heart, and wrote extensive rabbinic responsa that was looked to and respected by all streams of Orthodox Jewry. Yet he so extolled and cherished the one single page of study of this father and son!

We can't reach Rav Moshe's levels of Torah study. But we're not expected to! What Hashem does expect of us is to spend a fixed amount of time each day learning at whatever level we are on. And that learning can be as equally pleasurable to Hashem as Rav Moshe's learning. When my daughter finished learning her 10 first letters of the Hebrew alphabet we made a celebration for that, too. All learning is worthy of celebration!

**H O W   Y O U   S E E   I T**

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# V'HAGISO - TORAH AS PERSONAL EXPRESSION

RABBI MENDEL RUBIN

There's a verse in the beginning of the book Joshua (as well as in the first chapter of Psalms) that is often quoted as a biblical source for the mitzvah of Torah study each day and night. The rare enigmatic and seemingly ambiguous word at the heart of this verse is the subject of this study: "And you shall *V'hagiso* in it (the Torah) day and night." A paraphrased version of this verse is also incorporated in our daily prayer book it is recited nightly in Maariv (the evening prayer) just before the Shema. In the Yeshiva world this word refers to assiduous diligence in Torah study.

So what does this unusual but familiar Hebrew "Hegeh" (the root of *V'hagiso*) word mean? It is translated in different ways. Some translate it as thought and study, others see it as speaking words of Torah. This variation in interpretation in modern day prayer book and bible translations trace back to classic biblical commentaries who see it both or different ways.

The Metzudot commentary to Joshua 1:8 as well as to Psalms 1:2 (where this same word appears) clearly says that this word has two meanings, that it sometimes means speech and sometimes means thought, and there are biblical texts that seem to support one meaning or the other. Rashi, the great biblical commentary says that all biblical uses of this word refer to thought, but even Rashi occasionally translates it as speech!

Onkelos, the famous biblical translator almost always published side by side with the biblical text, usually translates the word "Hegeh" as a song, to sing. It is a form of speech, but not quite.

To add to the confusion about this word, note that this same "Hegeh" word is also used biblically for

animal sounds including that of a lion's roar, or the coo of a dove. In "Ki Hinei KaChomer" a classic liturgical poem in the Yom Kippur Machzor "Hegeh" is used in a sailor metaphor and is translated either as a rudder or anchor. In modern Hebrew "Hegeh" means a steering wheel.

Why is there so much confusion or varied translation for this word? And why not be more explicit when it comes to Torah study? There certainly are better Hebrew words for both thought and speech! Why use such an ambiguous word?

Perhaps this word means neither thought nor speech. Perhaps the essence of this word means "personal expression" which is why it can refer to all of the above: thought and speech, songs, animal sounds or sailor movements. "Hegeh" is how we convey and articulate, whether through speech, in thought or in song. Our innerness is finding its outward expression. This jives well with the frequent use of "Hegeh" in conjunction with the heart, as we say thrice daily at the end of the Amidah. It is about expressing something personal, articulating in some way that which is internal.

If so, the verse, which is an important source for the mitzvah of Torah study, now may take on new meaning. Instead of referring to either speaking words of Torah or thinking about them, perhaps now we can see this verse as meaning something deeper and different: Torah ought to be a way for us to express our inner selves, we should find our personal expression through Torah!

Rava in the Talmud uses the "Hegeh" verse from the first chapter of Psalms to describe the ownership we can take of Torah. At first the verse (Psalms 1:2) describes it as G-d's Torah, and by the end of the verse

it becomes the person's Torah, we internalize G-d's Torah and we make it our own. How appropriate that "Hegeh" is an operative term in this verse! For if the word "Hegeh" means to personally express ourselves through Torah, it is very fitting for Rava's message of internalization and personalization.

This may also explain why Onkelos translates "Hegeh" as a song. The Alter Rebbe described song as the pen of the soul. In a twist on a Talmudic statement (Shabbos 51b) the Alter Rebbe sees song as a means of transferring from the concealed (of the soul) to the revealed (expression). It is said of the Tzemach Tzedek that you were able to tell what he was thinking about by the song he was singing.

I wrote this suggested interpretation in honor of my father's, Rabbi Yisrael Rubin, 70th birthday in tribute to his decades of Torah study, research and creative original thought devoted to connecting the teachings and the teachers of the Talmud, particularly in Ethics

of our Fathers. My father learned this method first-hand from a well-known farbrengen of the Rebbe in 1965 where the Rebbe in an then-unconventional manner explained Rabbi Akiva and the Rabbis perspectives at the end of tractate Makkot, to be based on their personal perspectives, how their life stories and backgrounds provided the lens of their respective interpretations and insight. My father was so inspired by this approach, he was so taken by the important role that our personal story (and that of the famous teachers in Israel) plays in Torah that it totally transformed his own Torah learning and thinking going forward, and features prominently in much of his commentary.

At the end of the Amidah each day we pray, "May it be Your will... grant us OUR share in YOUR Torah." May we each merit to find our personal expression through G-d's Torah.

## FROM DAUGHTER'S EYE-ROLL TO ROLL OF THE DIVINE DICE

RABBI BINYAMIN (GREGG) GILBERT - 1999

Our daughter Miriam Chana's birthday is in the Hebrew month of Shevat and in preparation for her Bat Mitzvah I told her the unfortunate news that we would be expecting her to say a few words during the party. She rolled her eyes and to make matters worse I told her she couldn't just say something generic about Tu B'Shvat, the New Year for the Trees, being a new beginning or something of that nature. So she asked if she could talk about the Parable of Jotham in the Book of Judges chapter 9.

I did not know what she was talking about, since like many who studied in Yeshivah my scriptural game is rather weak. Another eye roll, she walked to the bookshelf and took out a Judges and share with me the story.

During this lockdown I started to do something that I should have done then and started to go through the Prophets & Writings, known by their abbreviation: Nach. Here's something that stuck me in the chapter 18 of the Book of Joshua. The remaining seven tribes that had not yet received their portions of the Land of Israel were to send out representatives to explore the land and come back and write about what they saw, then a lottery would be held to determine what portion they would receive. A lottery in this context is not some act of random assignment but a Divinely determined division of the land amongst the seven tribes.

I would like to suggest that one understanding, perhaps what would "influence" the portion a tribe

would receive is that which the representative of the tribes put into their writings. If they turned in a 3rd grade book report, “for my exploration I visited the beach it was warm and sunny and the waves were big” that is not telling G-d that this meant all that much to you. However if you return and write meaningfully about beauty and potential that might leave a different impression.

In the interest of keeping this on the shorter side I would like to conclude with what this brings to

mind for me the Rolling Stones - “You can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need” The tribes would certainly get what they needed, they would receive the portion that was most fitting for them, but their efforts in their explorations and writing, their “try” would raise the level of what and how they understood their “need”.

## COMMITMENT REGARDLESS

WENDY LAX - 2007

*Hashem gave us a present, do you know what it was? He gave us the Torah, so we can keep its laws. He asked the many nations, do you want this gift of mine? But they said “no, thank you” for Torah there’s no time. Then to the Jewish people Hashem did go. We said “Na’aseh Ve’nishma\*”, Cuz we love Hashem so.*

The other day I was singing this with my 4.5 year old twin boys, as it is a song that is commonly sung to preschool kids around Shavuot time. It is an easy way for the children to learn the concept of Shavuot, the holiday that marks when the Jewish people received the Torah from Hashem. When the Jewish people were asked if they would like the Torah, right away they answered “ Naaseh Venishma—we will do & we will hear.” They didn’t stop to think about it, how hard it would be to keep the 613 mitzvot- they right

away agreed and sprang into action keeping the Torah. This is an important lesson for children- to serve G-d readily, and with joy.

This reminds me a bit of what we are going through. On a thursday morning, two days after Purim my kids went to school, the babysitter came to watch the baby and my husband and I each went off to work. By midday the emails, calls and texts came- PA was going into lockdown. I picked up my kids that day and life hasn’t been the same since. Similarly to asking if we would like the Torah, there was no time to think or plan- just do. This demonstrates the character trait of zrizus- quick readiness. This is one of the qualities the Jewish people are blessed to have and have demonstrated throughout history... when there is something to do we say yes and spring into action. G-d willing we will continue to be blessed with the ability to do Hashem’s mitzvot!

# HASHEM'S TREASURE AND OURS

DANIEL COHEN - MASTERS 2019

One of the central themes of the holiday of Shavuot is the children of Israel's acceptance of the Torah. In shul, we read Parashat Yitro in which Hashem says to Moses: "Now therefore, if ye will hearken unto My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be Mine own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine;"

In Parashat Yitro, we see the making of a covenant, a mutually binding promise, between Hashem (G-d) and the children of Israel. Hashem essentially sets forth a condition to the promise that if the nation of Israel keeps his covenant ("Brit" in Hebrew), then Hashem will reward us by being his treasure among the rest of the world. Many Rabbis opine that the Brit refers to the adherence of the laws set out by Hashem in the Torah. Hashem goes further and mentions that we shall be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" among the world.

Prior to the giving of the Torah, the nation of Israel commits that "everything that Hashem says we're going to observe and understand (naase venishma)," acknowledging and promising a commitment to the Brit (covenant). The commentaries write that the correct translation for the word nishma (literally meaning: to listen) here means to understand. If you

do before you listen, you may not be following the directions properly, so it must refer to understanding. While obedience comes first, and that is a primary focus of this famous covenantal commitment, it must be followed with an attempt to interpret and understand. In Judaism, we see the importance of understanding first-hand in our shuls where rabbis congregate to argue over how to correctly interpret the Torah. The saying "two Jews, three opinions" has some truth after all.

A nation is defined as a body of people united by common descent, experience, history, culture, or language. For nearly 2,000 years, we, the nation of Israel, have been living in exile in all four corners of the earth. The holiday of Shavuot represents the common experience that binds us together while in exile, through our covenant with Hashem. The Torah has united us as a nation for thousands of years and without it, we lose the possibility of being Hashem's treasure. By the nation of Israel saying "naase venishmah" we promise to pass down both the observance ("naaseh") and the understanding ("nishma") of the Torah to our children to ensure the continuity of our nation.

## G - D AS A TEACHER

A TWEET THREAD BY RABBI MENDEL & RAIZY RUBIN

#GDasTeacher isn't a perfect hashtag but it is a way to link all these thoughts about "G-d as a Teacher" thru lens of giving Torah at Sinai.

#Sinai on #Shavuot was a multisensory, multidimensional, audio-visual experience.

#GDasTeacher wants to reach us in many different ways.

The Medrash says the revelation at #Sinai proved to be too spiritually intense for us to handle, so #GDasTeacher worked with Moshe & adjusted accordingly. Teachers do that.

#GDasTeacher "came down to #MtSinai" because as with a good teacher, lesson was meant to reach us at our level, age-appropriate & within reach. But



Moshe (Moses) also climbed the mountain, put in 40 days & nights, because even w/ #GDasTeacher students' initiative & effort matters.

At one point at #Sinai G-d told Moses to hold onto His "Throne of Glory" because #GDasTeacher students need support & security, confidence. This throne-holding is a Talmudic account of Moshe responding to angelic claims to Torah, who were against it being given to earthly humans.

The quiet advantage of 2nd Tablets (in contrast to the fiery and thunderous dynamics of the first set) teaches: sometimes private is better, less can be more & longer lasting than loud dynamo theatrics.

#GDasTeacher is blends of closeness & distance, love & respect, both on our level & beyond - as Chassidus sees in divine names "Hashem Elokecha" The former representing G-d's infinity, the latter how G-d relates to the finite.

#Rebbe sees "No Echo at #Sinai" speaking to mission of #Torah to be absorbed & internalized, not bounced off/back. Another #GDasTeacher goal for students to absorb, take it in; and don't speak AT the students but WITH them.

Boundaries & limits at #MtSinai are another aspect of #GDasTeacher: kids need limits, learn parameters, know appropriateness & proper place.

Of course, the dual interdependent Written & Oral Torahs is great example of #GDasTeacher, we still learn that way today: text & teaching!

Like many organized teachers, #GDasTeacher at #Sinai categorized Luchot Tablets into #Mitzvot between us & G-d in one column, & Mitzvot between people in the second column. But there's always exceptions: #HonoringParents is in Column #1!

Rashi (based on Talmud) also describes a pathway made for Moshe within all the cloud & smoke that surrounded #MtSinai at Giving of the Torah. Moshe had to find his own way up, but teachers create pathways. #GDasTeacher #Shavuot

One reason Medrash says #Torah was given in Desert/Wilderness is to demonstrate its wide open accessibility, no first dibs, no prerequisites, expectations or requirements. #GDasTeacher wants all students to have equal access regardless of background or knowledge or skill.

Like any teaching, #Torah has gentler & firmer aspects. Wisdom is whom to tell what, when & how. #GDasTeacher made it a priority b4 #Sinai.

The Hebrew word for #Shavuot holiday has roots in (1) Weeks - time, (2) Oaths - commitment, & (3) Fullness - ample plenty. #GDasTeacher gives/ endows us with all 3 to truly receive the #Torah.

Lest you think this thread of #GDasTeacher is a parable gone too far: Medrash compares Jewish people at #Sinai to schoolchildren in G-d's classroom. Rashi says G-d gave Moshe breaks or recess between subjects, just as a teacher would. Another thought on that pathway thru the clouds & smoke at #Sinai: #GDasTeacher helps us with clarity, focus - helps us cut thru the smoke.

All teachers know how crucial good attendance is to student success. Isn't there a quote "80% of life is just showing up"? This #Shavuot (Friday 5/29/2019) many of us (depending on circumstances and locale) can not show up in person in synagogue as we do each year, so we should read and absorb #10Commandments read with #GDasTeacher in our own homes!

**U N D E R   T H E   M O U N T A I N**

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# THE MOUNTAIN AS A PRISM

AVI SOLKOFF - 2017

In Parshat Yitro, the story of the revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments is described. The scene is filled with theatrical wonders galore, but one seemingly mundane line stands out for me and that line is the following; “Moses brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain” (Exodus 19:17). From the basic description, it seems pretty straight forward.... until you hear the Talmud’s interpretation. Instead of the Israelites being at the bottom/foot of the mountain in the normal sense of the phrase, the Talmud adds to the theatrics of the scene by stating “G-d held the mountain over them like a jar and said to them: If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here shall be your grave.”. Revelation.... Just got much more intense!

Most commentaries from this point usually go into the more legal repercussions of this incident if whether or not the Torah was accepted under duress, but I want to talk about an interpretation I started considering while I was at Albany. I was learning with Rabbi Gavriel Horan, a former Aish Rabbi on campus, about this particular scene in the Torah and we came up with an idea: What if Mt. Sinai wasn’t just a normal mountain, but a large prism of sorts? If we take the Talmudic interpretation where the mountain was being held above the Israelites heads, then any of G-d’s “light” (both literal and metaphorical) would have to pass through the mountain before it reached the Israelites below, like a prism.

The basic science behind how a prism works is from one end white light enters the prism matrix and because of its structure and refraction of the light, exits the prism not as white light, but (when done correctly), as a rainbow of colors. Keeping this concept in mind, we can see why it was necessary for the mountain to act as a prism between G-d’s

“light” and the Israelites. If the Israelites were not protected by the mountains “prism matrix” there is no doubt in my mind G-d’s intense “light” would have overpowered the Israelite’s and they would have ceased to exist. This point is made relevant later on in the Parsha when the Israelites say to Moses “You speak with us, and we will hear, but let G-d not speak with us lest we die.” (Exodus 20:16). Even with the mountain prism matrix, the Israelites recognized G-d’s “light” as too powerful and needed a 2nd barrier (i.e. Moses) in order to live to tell the story of what happened and pass Judaism unto the next generations.

To take this lofty mountain prism matrix concept and make it more relatable to today, I believe this scene at Mt Sinai is the perfect example of a learning moment for both student and teacher. From a teacher’s perspective, the information you will be transmitting to your student will be the same, but unless you follow the prism’s method and break the concept into more manageable and understandable pieces, you run the risk of overwhelming and confusing your student even more. G-d understood that the “light” would be too powerful to take all at once and used the mountain to try and make it more understandable. From a student’s perspective, it is important to understand how best YOU as an individual learn so that you can continue to grow, and ask for help when needed. Even with G-d’s mountain prism matrix, the Israelites realized it was still too much for them to handle and sought out help from a more knowledgeable intermediary, Moses.

May we take this lesson and apply it to all aspects of our life and use them when we are teaching others and learning new things for ourselves. Shavuot Same’ach!

# CHOICES AT SINAI, AT UALBANY AND BEYOND

SHAUN ZEITLIN - 2001

Shavous is the holiday that celebrates the Jewish people choosing to be Jewish. The medrash states the Jews were under the mountain and uses the word under to illustrate Hashem held up the mountain and if they didn't choose his way the mountain would have come crashing down on them. Does not exactly seem like a choice. I think sometimes just looking at the simple meaning is easier to understand. The Jewish people literally were at the bottom of the mountain or maybe even so, under the mountain of Torah. Torah and a Jewish lifestyle is sometimes a mountain on top of us and often we see ourselves at the bottom of the mountain. That mountain can seem to get in the way of our lives, or no matter how hard I am trying somehow we feel like the top of the mountain is just a faraway vision.

I, like many of you reading this, did not have any clue what path up the mountain of Torah I would take as I graduated high school. I was graduating from a modern orthodox high school but was leaving with an underwhelming feeling. I debated between Albany and Yeshiva University. My cousin was already a freshman at Albany and most of my class was going to Yeshiva University, so it would be almost a continuation of high school. I applied to both and Albany accepted me and YU asked for one more piece of paper to complete the application process. Albany was half the tuition and that included room and kosher meals. Decision made.

My first experience was Freshman orientation I came from a school with a graduating class of 48 kids and was now sitting in an LC of probably 500 kids I have never seen before they did a quick introduction and then said we know you all traveled far to get here and are hungry so we are going to start with lunch does anyone need a kosher meal, just raise your hand. I wanted to but that mountain of Torah seemed too

heavy that day. I looked at my friend, the only kid I knew and said I guess its salad for the next 3 days.

We all faced similar stories of not being ashamed to be Jewish but not proud enough to announce it and feel prejudged.

Freshman year started and I lived with a bunch of really nice guys, including a few I am still friends with today. They all knew I was Jewish but there was a constant struggle of how Jewish I publicly wanted to be. They would often walk with me to Dutch so I can eat Kosher but other things made me feel more like a hidden marrano Jew. At that time there was a Monday and Thursday Morning minyan at the Hillel office which was hidden so I was able to put on Tefillin a few days a week. I had two dumbbells I kept in my room and at night I would lift them for 10-15 minutes as I muttered maariv (the evening prayer) to myself. One time a roommate asked me why I talk to myself when I lift weights and I said it is just inner motivation. I also played for the schools Rugby team. Every game was on Shabbos, for home games I remember going to Chapel House where we had Shabbos minyans and then running back to my dorm to get dressed and be on the field by 1pm. For away games I remember waking up around 6 to find a quiet spot to daven before having to catch the van ride (its not very hard to find a quiet area with no one around on a weekend morning before 12pm on campus). Shabbos House was always that oasis. We used to joke around was it the second light post or third light post where you put on and off your kippah. Although these days were very tough for a 17 year old internally, it turned out to be an amazing opportunity. It was learning to choose mitzvahs because I wanted to, not because I had to. It was learning to deal with being different and being OK with that while explaining my beliefs to others. It was

making friends from many other backgrounds while trying not to hide your own. It wasn't always easy but many times the harder way up the mountain gives you a greater sense of pride and accomplishment.

Mendel and Raizy, for their part, always accepted us all at our own level and were ready to hold a hand when we wanted to take the next step up or just remind us they loved us if we needed to take a step or two down that mountain.

Luckily, as you get more comfortable with your roommates you all start to open up and can remove some of the sense of embarrassment. They also help keep you in check. I remember one morning sophomore year going off to a class and I left my tzizit on the back of my chair. I was often afraid to wear them in case a strand came untucked. My family didn't wear them but for my high school it was required. My father used to love to put my tzizit on to wake me up and sing "If I were a rich man" and then say "Tevye wake up its time for school".

Many Albany kids know Jews, but not many have ever seen a pair of tzizit. So my roommate sees them and says hey where are you going you forget your tzizit, I said yeah I am not going to put them on today. He answers me "oh, you don't need G-d today?", "you don't have a big test or anything important to worry about?" He was right, I am not going to say I started wearing them right away but I definitely thought about it every time I didn't.

I reminisce about these stories because it is what built me. In many ways I look back at that 17 year old kid and am so proud of him that he didn't just give up.

This is what Shavous is, a group of Jews who were always made to be different in Egypt have finally made it out and they just want to be left alone. Not very different than many survivors of the Holocaust. I do not want to be persecuted for who I am. Shavous is Hashem explaining to the Jews you are at the

bottom of a mountain if you choose to be nothing you will always remain at the base of a mountain. Life has to have meaning, life has to have goals, life has to be something you are proud of.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe classically spoke about why the Torah was given on Har (Mount) Sinai. Most of us learned as little kids in Hebrew School because it was the smallest of the mountains and it was the humblest. The Rebbe said if that's the case, just give it on flat land or even more so in a valley. Instead Rebbe explains, Har Sinai was chosen because humility can also have pride. Sinai was humble but it was also a mountain. In order to be a Jew you have to be proud. That is not always an easy task. Often the world does not let us feel that way. Our responsibility is to make sure we feel that way and try our best to give off the proper image to others.

As many of you start your lives in the business world and the dating world you realize how important this message replays itself. I want everyone to accept me but what they are really accepting is not me. Yes, I lost a job during the interview because of my not being available on Saturdays, and yes, some girls did not want to date me because I was too religious and some because I was not religious enough.

At the end of the day your life is your challenge to try and climb as much of the mountain as you choose and at the pace you feel comfortable. You have to surround yourself with others, like-minded people who make the challenge so much more enjoyable. My wife and I while we were dating said to each other we know we are different but the similarities are so much stronger. Let's both work on those differences and make each other better. Thank G-d we committed to that concept of marriage and we are still continuing the trip up the mountain with 4 little children who each help us find new and unique paths up the same mountain.

# BOOK OF RUTH

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## DID RUTH PUT PEOPLE OR G-D FIRST?

CHAYIM (CRAIG) MESSER - 2008

Every year on Shavuot, there is a custom to read the book of Ruth which talks about a person's journey to the Jewish people. It is a story of belonging and joining a group for a specific purpose. The rabbis explain that this was the reason why she is the ancestor of King David, who led the Jewish people as its first king.

Many of us come from different backgrounds and are connecting to our "Judaism" in different ways. Ruth's conversion doesn't start off as religion. It's begins as one of family.

*And Ruth said [to Naomi], do not force me to leave you because where you go, I will go. Where you sleep, I will sleep. Your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d. (Ruth Chapter 1)*

It always strikes me that Ruth's build up to G-d does not start with G-d! It starts with her personal relationship with Naomi and her desire to stay with her. Then it moves to Naomi's membership with the Jewish people. Only then Ruth declares she wants to be a part of this purpose which is to serve G-d.

This process teaches us an important lesson. In order to be a part of G-d's nation, the first step might not be about accepting G-d! It starts off with the desire to be an active part of the Jewish people. HaRav Avraham Yizhak HaKohen Kook, z"tzl explains the Jewish people's purpose in his work Orot (Lights):

*Israel sings G-d's praises - strength, power, and highness. In his beautiful design in every place of his world, from now and forever, and all high praises and blessings. That's Israel's lot. (Orot, Yisrael u'Tchiyatav, 1st essay).*

Ruth's conversion reminds us that we are Jews, and

we should remember that serving G-d is something we do because we are Jews. Ruth wants to be a part of that Jewishness, that's where it all starts for her.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe ztz"l always talks about the pintele yid – the Jewish spark inside each of us. That spark sometimes is hidden, but it's always there waiting for us. When we come to Shabbat Dinner, dance on Simchat Torah, or even give tzedakah, we reveal some of our own Jewish spark and realize our potentia as Jewish people. That's our lot. The events and people are what draw her to G-d, not the other way around.

Tanya chapter 18 speaks about the Pintele Yid spark, and that chapter switches gears in Tanya's encouragement of contemplative meditation. Until chapter 18 Tanya's focus is to meditate about G-d, but in chapter 18 the focus of the meditation is on the Pintele Yid, the spark of Judaism in all of us, our sense of identity and peoplehood. For some, the meditation into our Jewishness, is more effective and transformative than the meditation on G-d.

This year, it's going to be difficult to join together to learn Torah and have meals, but that won't stop us! We must remember that it is because of our Jewish heritage that we are making meals to go, visiting those who need it, and making the world a better place. Our Jewishness is us. It is wherever we are.

Wishing you from Israel a Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom, and reminding you to make an Eruv Tavshilin (done on Thursday before the holiday begins to allow us to cook – with holiday restrictions – on Friday for Shabbat)!

## FOR G-D'S SAKE!

SETH BROOKS - 2020

*This message about being there for our (grand) children is dedicated to my grandmother Ruth Brooks.*

Megillah Ruth is the megillah which is normally read in shul on Shavuot. The basic story is how Naomi goes to the land of Moav to escape a famine with her family and her sons marry Ruth and Orpah they then lose everything which leads Naomi and Ruth going back to the holy land where they encounter Boaz a wealthy land owner who is related to Naomi. This encounter leads to series of events which ends in a marriage between Ruth and Boaz and that leads to King David. Now there are many lessons that can be learned out from the Story of Ruth and Naomi and the trials and tribulations that they have but there is one interesting note that I feel is relevant to us in times like this.

As mentioned above the primary reason for Naomi leaving Israel is that there is a terrible famine there. Her husband who was man of wealth himself decides to leave the holy land and go to the land of Moav for literally greener grass. However, because of this, his wealth is reduced to nothing and he pays the price when he and his two sons die. Naomi is now stuck in Moav with Orpah and Ruth.

When does Naomi make the decision to go back? *Ruth Rabbah Parshah Bet Siman 11* describes that Naomi knew that the famine had ended and that

it was time to go back to Israel when she heard peddlers in the street who were bringing food from Israel say that Hashem had not forgotten his people. It says things like this all over our liturgy. But then the Midrash takes an interesting turn which I feel is very meaningful:

The Midrash goes on to say that when the Children of Israel are meritorious Hashem remembers us for the sake of our people. When we are not so worthy (G-d forbid) it says we will be remembered for the sake of His great name.

I find this to be very meaningful in this troublesome time. We are Hashem's children. He does not expect us to be perfect nor does he want to see us suffer. In this time of disease which can be equated to a horrible famine in the days of old this proves that Hashem has our back worthy or not. Now, we should strive to be close to him and if you make a mistake or two along the way it is ok because Hashem will remember us, he will take care of us and he will help us in our times of need. Much like the Jews in the time of Ruth and Naomi. It does not mention if the Jews in Israel repented or not it merely says that Hashem remembered them which is something that He will always do for us. In these troublesome times with great uncertainty all around it is important for us to remember and be certain that just like back then Hashem will always protect us.



# SHAVUOT CUSTOMS

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# WHY DO WE STAY UP TO LEARN ALL SHAVUOT NIGHT?

JASON FLOUMANHAFT - 2023

The midrash tells us a great story. The night before the Jewish people were to receive the Torah, all the people decided to go to sleep early. The problem was that they slept so well, that Moshe Rabeinu had to go around waking everyone up. This showed a lack of eagerness to accept the Torah. Even Hashem said, "Why have I come, and no one is here to receive me?" To rectify this embarrassing mistake, and to cure this error in judgement, we stay up all night learning Torah to show our enthusiasm and anticipation for accepting the Torah.

Rav Yosef Cairo, the famous author of the Shulchan Aruch, is generally recognized as the authority urging everyone to stay up way into the night learning. However, the root of this custom appears to be much older than that. The Zohar describes the custom of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who stayed up all night learning, his reasoning for doing so was that he compared himself to a maid who helps prepare the bride for a wedding. This was a common metaphor that the Jews were compared to a bride and the Torah was the Ketubah. There are many other examples throughout the medieval into modern times of halachic authorities urging all night learning on the first night of Shavuot. A famous medieval kabbalist called the Arizal, wrote a text combining biblical and Talmudic passages called the Tikkun Leil Shavuot. For many centuries this text was learned from beginning to end on Shavuot night. Though the custom has changed in recent modern times, the concept of learning both from the texts of the Torah and the Torah shebal peh remains till today. There is only one problem about the midrash I cited

above. The fact that they slept well seemed to imply that they were not excited to accept the Torah. In fact, the Jewish People were very excited, and for the 49 days they worked on every personal characteristic to prepare themselves to accept the Torah. So why would they sleep in on the day that prepared and worked for and were eagerly awaiting?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that we are misunderstanding the midrash. He says that the Jews did not go to sleep because they did not care, they went to sleep because they cared so much. To understand the Rebbe's point, we have to understand the nature of sleep. When we sleep, part of our soul leaves our body and goes to heaven and learns Torah with the angels and the other souls that are there. When we wake, the soul returns to our body. How much of the Torah our soul learned up in heaven is retained, is connected to how much Torah we learn during the day. So, the Jews had for 49 days brought themselves up to a very high level of spirituality and therefore, when they slept that last night before formally accepting the Torah, they were at a very high level. However, they misunderstood the point of the Torah. The Torah is given not to make us purely spiritual beings, but rather, the purpose of the Torah is for us to use it to elevate the physical world. The point is to bring it down to this world!

So now we understand how staying up rectifies the mistake of our forefathers. We stay up, we are awake and present in this world. We learn and discuss, we have a good snack and we integrate the Torah into our lives to engage and elevate the physical world. Chag Sameach!!

## A CALL TO CULINARY ARMS

AJ NORDLICHT - 2016

How does one show love?

A hug? A kiss? Perhaps a pat on the shoulder, or maybe a back rub after a long day? You could tell the person how you feel, but what's that old cliché? Actions speak louder than words?

As the coronavirus forces the world over to evolve into newer, safer practices (the term "social distancing" drives me crazy, shouldn't it be physical distancing?), incredibly, miraculously, people seem to be coming together to support the front-line workers, either by applauding from their homes at a specific time, or perhaps sending food to the local hospitals, firehouses, police precincts, etc.

As a professional cook for many years, I've seen first-hand what food does to people. It's impossible to be mad, or upset, while eating a really good meal. Conversely, I've seen some pretty angry people eating really bad food, myself included.

Everyone has their definition of comfort food, something that's transformative. Whatever that person grew up eating will forever evoke a certain feeling of loving tranquillity that could easily erase whatever wrongs the universe sent them that particular day. For me, the smell of roasting beef, regardless of who's roasting it, will always make me think of sitting in my grandmother's kitchen watching her hard at work preparing a meal with the kind of love that only a grandmother could muster. I smell that wondrous smell of roast, and I could close my eyes and see myself as a small child standing in my grandmother's kitchen, and this feeling of tranquillity begins to hit me like waves crashing into a rocky shoreline. Who could possibly be angry, or upset when they conjure that kind of image? To this day I firmly believe we could end wars with a

perfectly cooked meal (and drink).

If you don't believe me, think back to the last time you went to a restaurant. Weren't you excited? You got dressed up, not black tie, maybe not even your Sunday best, but you dressed up didn't you? You went to that restaurant which had just the right kind of ambiance, lighting, music, even smell. You read that menu, and you got excited about a certain dish, something just jumped out at you didn't it? And you tell the server what it was, and you then wait, sometimes what seems like an eternity, as the kitchen crew toils tirelessly to create the dish you're envisioning. The server takes your plate from the service window, and begins to walk towards you. You're beginning to get excited as the plate gets closer, and closer, and finally set perfectly in front of you. Now all that's left is to taste it, taste the love put into the dish by the dedicated kitchen crew in the back who no doubt works for way less pay than they should, or maybe I'm just biased.

My point is, after experiencing all that, whether or not you live to eat, or eat to live, at that moment in time, you're happy.

Nowadays, with restaurants being very limited in what they're able to do, it seems more, and more people have no choice but to have home cooked meals. If you walk the aisles of your local grocery store you'll find a lot of items aren't on the shelves, or at least not on the shelves long. Who knew flour was such a hot commodity? With people being stuck at home, and with lots of time on their hands, cooking certainly isn't the worst past time is it? Unfortunately, there are plenty out there, who never were able to learn to cook. Or maybe they just didn't want to. Regardless, while people are stuck at home,

feeling stressed, anxious, fearing what may happen next, maybe try a cooking class. I can't tell you how many friends are calling me, asking me for recipes, or simple ideas for dinner. Recently, a friend of mine in Boston told me meat is almost impossible to acquire in the local supermarkets and has had to buy whatever is available. She then asked me, what are beef shanks? And what am I supposed to do with them? I could hear the anxiety in her voice, and I reassured her, that with a little time, and the right supplemental ingredients she could make a dazzling dish that would please her very picky husband's palate.

The next day, she called me no longer with anxiety in her voice, but with delight, "that was incredible! It was so good! Why isn't that on more menus?" I couldn't really answer her question but listening to her rave about a dish she not only made, but her husband enjoyed immensely got me thinking, why aren't more people taking this opportunity to expand

their culinary knowledge? To create that meal that brings you back to whatever kitchen you grew up in, smelling that roasted meat.

There's no shortage of cooking shows that will teach you how to create a certain dish. Don't feel like searching? Google a recipe. Ask a friend who cooks, even better if said friend cooks professionally. But take this opportunity to learn, to grow, and have a little something in your arsenal that you can pull out when that loved one is having a bad day, or when you feel a little stressed out and need a pick me up.

We're already showing our appreciation to others, as we come together to not only protect ourselves from this ongoing pandemic, but others as well. Why not do something for ourselves too? Create that meal that will melt away that anxiety. Transport yourself, and the loved ones you're cooking for, to their happy place. Mine's my grandmother's kitchen, where's yours?

## WHY DAIRY?

AVI SOLKOFF - 2017

Though the focal point of Shavuot is the receiving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, let's be honest everyone is excited for the cheesecake. For me growing up, Shavuot and dairy based items were inseparable, which being a lover of all cheese products, I never questioned the custom. It took until me going on Nativ for an academic gap year program in Israel to take a step back and think, "Hmmm, why do traditionally eat dairy on Shavuot?".

A friend of mine led a learning session the night before Shavuot where she discussed some of the rationales behind eating dairy. I was intrigued by what she had found and decided to do some digging on my own. Here are a few rationales I've learned over

the years of why we eat dairy products on Shavuot.

1. Before the giving of the Torah, the Laws of Kashrut weren't an established practice and so to prevent the Children of Israel from committing an aveira (sin), they refrained from eating meat based products. According to the Talmud, the original Shavuot at Mt. Sinai was also on a Shabbat and as such the Israelites were not allowed to slaughter cattle or kosher utensils.
2. As compared to meat, dairy products tend to be a "lighter" meal. Lighter meals don't make you feel as tired after you eat them and as it is a tradition to stay up the night of Shavuot and learn, it would make sense to have a lighter meal, thus the tradition.

3. The hebrew word for “milk” (chalav) has a gematria numerical value of 40, representing the 40 days Moses spent on Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah.

4. In mammals, milk’s sole purpose is to provide nourishment for its young and without it, it is difficult for the mammal to survive and thrive as it starts its life. Similar to a young mammal, the Israelites were just starting out on their “Jewish Journey” and the Torah was going to be the sustenance that would help them survive and thrive. It is for that reason

we emulate and represent the desire for continued Jewish enlightenment through the eating of dairy products.

There are for sure plenty more reasons explaining the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot that aren’t listed above, but I hope that the above has provided some insight into a delicious Jewish custom.

And for those who are lactose-intolerant, there is a special blessing you add on Shavuot... Thank G-d for Lactaid! Shavuot Same’ach to everyone!

## TWEETS ON DAIRY

### A TWEET THREAD BY RABBI MENDEL & RAIZY RUBIN

Here’s a thread about the delicious & beloved dairy custom on #Shavuot & some #Torah-dairy connections. Some old tweets, some new (fitting as Torah is new & old at same time), some based on sources, others random insight. Lactose-intolerant? Messages will still work for you!

One of the best known reasons for dairy on #Shavuot is that the laws of #Kosher were brand new & there wasn’t time or ability (first Shavuot was on Shabbat) to Kosherize and properly prepare meat foods. So dairy it was then, and dairy it remains to celebrate the Shavuot holiday.

This dairy reason makes me think of students & alum who have become more religiously observant (Kosher & otherwise) than their family homes, & to preserve family harmony & respect, they seek to find areas of least conflict, solutions with least amount of tension points.

Another reason dairy foods are customary on #Shavuot is because babies (human & animal) are nourished by their mother’s milk. At Sinai, we were all newbies, all starting fresh, we were infants in our Judaism. Drinking milk (& eating dairy) reminds us of that & keeps us young!

One lesser known Halachic reason for #Shavuot dairy works for those eating 2 separate meals, dairy and (then) meat, because having two meals, each with its own bread, would represent the unique offering of Shavuot known as “The 2 Breads” which wasn’t offered on any other holiday.

Milk has to be fresh and if left out too long it goes sour. This is an important #Torah metaphor. You can’t rely on old learning or prior achievements. We can’t rest on our laurels. We have to study anew each day, we must keep it fresh!

Milk teaches us that you don’t lose by giving, on the contrary you only gain! The more baby suckles, the more milk mother produces. Sharing Torah with others won’t diminish our knowledge, it only causes us to deepen and further our own studies, we will produce even more!

Some #Shavuot dairy foods have neat #Torah metaphors. Blintzes (aka crepes) are wrapped with the filling within, much like a Torah scroll. Lasagna has layers, like the many layers of meaning beneath each verse. And sauces? Sauce is “Lachluchis” flavoring connecting binder!

A little more on pasta sauces (white or red) in a

**#Shavuot #Torah lens: The right viscosity is crucial for a good sauce. You want it to stick to the noodles & not slip off, but not too dense or intense to become the primary focus. Like #Rebbe's #MtSinai balance of Har & Sinai.**

**Into #Gematria? The Hebrew word for milk/dairy is Chalav with the numerical value of 40. Forty is a significant #Shavuot number as it represents the days Moses spent up on #MtSinai to get the #Torah (more than once actually).**

**The latest science says that kids need whole milk, not skim milk. In education as well, don't skimp or dilute, give them the whole creamy richness.**

**One #Shavuot we realized how the Kabbalistic sequence of spiritual worlds can be visualized in an #icecream cone. See thread below (itself a reference to "hishtalshelut" chain & sequence of spiritual worlds & levels).**

**First think of the ice cream itself as the light & the cone as the vessel. The former fleeting & less tangible but contained and manageable through the cone vessel. The heaping crown of ice cream above the cone is #Keter higher & before vessels begin.**

**That first uppermost rim where ice cream and cone first meet is like the highest world of #Atzilut where vessels first emerge. But the cone is still at its widest most open point, it is still more ice cream than cone.**

**Indeed, at the #icecream cone level of #Atzilut even though the cone is present (the vessel has emerged) the primary focus remains ice cream, not cone. You know that smoothing with the tongue where it meets the rim.**

**And as the cone narrows as it extends downwards, so it is with the chain of the descent of the worlds. The narrower of the cone, it's gradual increasingly constriction allows for less and less ice cream, or**

**less spiritual light.**

**As we eat our way down the cone, cone becomes much more of a focus. We get more & more preoccupied with the integrity of the cone, cracks in it, and how well it's holding up. The worlds of #Beriah & #Yetzirah still are full of light/ice cream but are much more about vessel/cone.**

**The lowest point of the cone is the narrowest, sometimes (alas!) #icecream doesn't even make it all the way down to the very bottom...**

**But it is always a disappointment not to find #ice-cream in the narrow hollow on the bottom of the cone. The goal of the chain of the spiritual worlds is for the light to reach all the way down to the lowest point, anything less disappoints the whole chain.**

**Indeed, there's special satisfaction (& element of surprise) to find good dose of ice cream wedged down in the very bottom of the cone - perhaps even more satisfying & rewarding than the apparent & obvious ice cream crown atop the cone!**

**In fact, some pre-prepared cones (like the paper wrapped Nutty Buddy's) tuck inside a luscious chunk of chocolate all the way at the bottom of the cone.**

**This is all the more true many times over with the Divine cosmic Will that is especially found & expressed in the lowest world! There are spiritual opportunities (albeit hidden & challenging) to be found down here at the lowest point inaccessible in higher loftier realms...**

**Now, of course there's sugar cones & unsweetened cones. The vessels of the individual #Sefirot in the chain of spiritual worlds can be seen both ways, but preferably sweet because the vessels are not merely a handle/container, they also add their own flavors & benefits to the Divine light.**

# QUARANTINE TORAH

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## SHTISEL & OUR QUARANTINE STORY

AARON WEIL - 2015

Judaism is stories. The stories we tell each other around the Shabbos table. The weekly portion read each week from the bimah. The recipes passed down from grandmother to granddaughter. For me, during the last 3 months I found comfort in the fictional stories on netflix, told in the show Shtisel.

Now I know I'm a little late to the Shtisel party, but this show is great for any Jewish person who is looking representation on the small screen. The stories told in this show are our stories. The search for a wife, how to love and live as a religious person, personal identity when confronted with religious obligation.

For the longest time I'd been waiting for a Jewish show where the problem isn't just will the youngest son actually come home for Rosh Hashannah. Shtisel forces us to question what is important to us, makes the viewer wonder how would they respond to a given situation. Shtisel thrives when its characters are pushed to question themselves. What is more important? Who is the real family? What are we willing to give up?

Shtisel is a really good show, I cannot recommend it enough. What I love most about it is the writing.

The way these people feel real. During the finale of season 2, when Reb Shulem is trying to figure out what to do with his sons painting, you too are forced to figure out what the painting means. Is it just the son's vision of his mother and orthodox mothers everywhere? Or is it the small personal moment of a husband looking at his wife one more time?

This show is a great fictional look at religious life. Just as their characters struggle to find their way, to tell their story, we also now are stuck in our own stories. The story of our quarantine is being written. What struggles in the current world are worth fighting? What of it is real and what is some loshen harah looking to make it harder for us to get through the current pandemic? We must also fight with the things that we want to do. We want to go to the beach, we want to see our friends. However we have to hold strong to the laws and rules created to keep us safe. Just as we wash our hands before a Shabbos meal, we must keep ourselves clean when we venture out in public.

Let us all stay safe until this is over. Enjoy a new show, reach out and take comfort with the people you love. We will get through this.

## QUARANTINING IN THE DESERT

BENJAMIN ANTEL - 2010

Certainly there's no shortage of comparisons being made between our wanderings in the desert, and our current world of social distancing, but I'd like to share a few thoughts! And of course, this isn't to make light of Matan Torah, but rather to try to draw some parallels in these bizarre times.

Shavuot celebrates the gift of Torah to Israel, a nation who wandered through the desert. We now find ourselves waiting to receive a gift of slightly different timbre, in the form of vaccinations and immunity. But these are more surface comparisons. Instead, we should compare the more holistic gifts



received, and earned, during these times. While it was surely not pleasant bamidbar for 50 days, we look upon this time in our shared history as a galvanizing event, one that is significant in forming a collective consciousness that persists to this day. So too now do we find ourselves galvanized by our world- we value those close to us that much more, reach out to those around us in whatever ways we can, maintaining and strengthening connections. There is wisdom to be gained, as well - maybe not of the divine type, but perhaps personally, or societally- these days that we have lived in quarantine present opportunity

for personal growth and learning, and further, that we may take this wisdom gained and apply it as we (hopefully) approach a more normal world in the coming weeks and months. Shavuot celebrates the gifts we've received - Torah, the harvest times in ancient Israel, our people.

It's easy to say we should count our blessings, but it can be difficult in times like these. Perhaps this year on Shavuot we can try that much more to recognize both what we have and what we don't, and be further motivated to better our own lives in our time.

## BY PERSONAL EXAMPLE

ALEXANDRA NEWMAN KOFINAS - 2007

Over the last few weeks, we all have been at home trying to be so many things at once; teacher, caregiver, employee, cook, therapist, the list goes on and on. As we approach Shavuot, we will all hopefully slow down a little. In our house, we always read holiday theme books with our daughter in anticipation of the upcoming holiday. For Shavuot, we've been reading *A Mountain of Blintzes* by Barbara Goldin. On my most recent reading of this book, I couldn't help but notice how the parents in this story want to make the holiday extra special and take on more work to have extra money in order to afford the additional expense of blintzes for the family's Shavuot meal. It got me thinking about how they are leading by example. By the end of the story, we find out that the children have seen and learned to follow their example, likewise taking on additional chores in order to provide for their family.

Reflecting on the book, I see two takeaways. At first glance, I thought this book was simply a funny story and only minimally about Shavuot, but as I thought about it further, the parents remind me of Moses. His

faith in and example to the people of Israel was clear when he went up Mt. Sinai and received the Torah and then brought it back to the people. He was their teacher, who left our ancestors with a rubric of faith and commitment.

The second takeaway for me has to do with where we find ourselves today, in 2020. Those of us with children are at times struggling to be present, let alone leading by example and yet I've seen my daughter imitate my husband and I in being kind and practicing chesed, traits that we have worked to impart on her. Even though schools are closed, our children are still learning, just in a different setting than we're used to thinking about. Likewise for those without children the lesson from this story is the same. In this time of crisis lead by example, we only can take responsibility for our action and not that of others but when we set a standard we want to live by, as Moses did for the Israelites that others will see and follow.

May we all enjoy this slowed down time and set a new example of community and kindness. Chag Sameach!