

The Holiday of Shavuos



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Weekly Torah Commentary Series: Shavuos

The Holiday of Shavuos



Shavuos, Cause For Celebration

There is an argument between *Rebbe Yehoshua* and *Rebbe Eliezer* in the *Gemara* in Tractate *Pesachim* regarding the manner how one must celebrate the festivals. One opinion is that the Jew has a choice to celebrate the festival either in a completely spiritual manner (*kulo l'shem* – all for G-d). He could fully invest the day in the study of *Torah* and prayer. Or the day could be observed within the context of physical celebration (*kulo la'chem* – all for yourselves). The other opinion is that the Jew must divide the days of the festival in a manner that part is for the sake of G-d and part is for oneself (*chatzei l'shem* and *chatzei la'chem* – half for G-d and half for yourselves).

Although *Rebbe Eliezer* is of the opinion that one could celebrate the festivals in a completely spiritual manner (*kulo l'shem*) he agrees with *Rebbe Yehoshua* regarding three festivals that they should also be celebrated in a physical manner through festivities. These exceptions are: *Shabbos*, *Shavuos*, and *Purim*. Since the Prophet

Yeshaya says, “and call the *Shabbos* a delight (*oneg*)” both *Rebbe Eliezer* and *Rebbe Yehoshua* agree that the *Shabbos* must be celebrated with physical celebration as well as the spiritual. Regarding the festival of *Shavuos*, the day of the giving of the *Torah*, *Rebbe Eliezer* says that one must celebrate in a physical manner “because it was the day that the *Torah* was given to the Jewish people.” *Purim* is another holiday that *Rebbe Eliezer* agrees that should be celebrated in a physical manner as it states in the *Megillah*, “it is a day of feasting....”

It is interesting to note that *Rebbe Eliezer* explains that the reason one should celebrate the festival of *Shavuos* in a physical manner is because it was the day that the *Torah* was given to the Jewish people. One would think that the giving of the *Torah*, which is G-d's prescription to lead a spiritual life, would be a time to be fully engaged in the spiritual. One of the early commentators explains by citing the *Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos* that initially the angels were opposed

to G-d giving the *Torah* to the Jewish people. G-d said to Moshe to respond to the angels.

Moshe asked the angels, "It says in the Ten Commandments 'I am your G-d who took you out of Egypt' Were you ever in Egypt? If not, how could you fulfill the *mitzvah* of remember that you were taken out of Egypt which is mentioned in the *Torah*? It says in the Ten Commandments that one must honor his father and mother and father. Do you have a father and mother? If not how could you fulfill the *Torah* dictate of honoring one's father and mother...."

Moshe cited many examples to indicate to the angels that they have no relevance to the *Torah*. It is precisely because the Jewish people are physical beings that they had relevance to the *Torah*. Therefore, the festival of *Shavuos* is celebrated through physical festivities. However, this explanation is not sufficient to understand why *Rebbe Eliezer* believes that *Shabbos* and *Purim* should also be celebrated in a physical manner.

We find that there is a common principle that touches upon *Shabbos*, *Shavuos*, and *Purim* which will explain why these particular days must be celebrated through physical festivities. The ultimate objective of a Jew is to achieve perfection within himself and the world. There are many milestones for perfection. When one comes upon these milestones it is a time for celebration.

Shabbos was the time when G-d completed Creation. The world reached its level of perfection for it to fully function within its capacity for the fulfillment of the *Torah* on *Shabbos*. Thus, G-d dictated that it must be celebrated through "*Oneg*" *Shabbos* (delight).

Gemara in Tractate *Avodah Zorah*: Regarding the Festival of *Shavuos*, the world was not tranquil until the Jewish people accepted the *Torah* at Sinai. The *Torah* tells us that on the sixth day of Creation, "it was evening...and it was The sixth day." *Rashi* cites *Chazal* regarding the "sixth day" (of Creation), "The world did not assume a level of permanence until the sixth day of the month of *Sivan*, which is the time the *Torah* was given." If the Jewish people were to accept the *Torah* the world would continue and have a permanence; however, if they did not accept the *Torah*, the world would revert back to a state of nonexistence. Thus, *Shavuos* is a time of perfection and completion when the world assumed a state of permanence. Therefore, it must be a time that is celebrated.

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: Since the Jewish people were compelled to accept the *Torah* at Sinai because G-d had held the mountain over their heads like a barrel, it is not considered the acceptance of *Torah* at the most advanced level. As it states regarding the ultimatum that G-d had given the Jewish people, "If you accept the *Torah* it will be good; however, if you do not, you shall be buried under it."

The *Torah* at Sinai was given to the Jewish people under duress. *Purim*, on the other hand, was a time when the Jewish people reaffirmed their acceptance of *Torah* out of love. After they had seen how G-d had interceded at the last moment on their behalf not to be annihilated, it brought a clarity to the Jewish people – understanding His love for them. They thus accepted the *Torah* out of love for Him. *Purim* was a qualitative establishment of perfection. Therefore, *Purim* is a time for celebration.

When one completes a Tractate of *Gemara*, even during the nine days, when one is not permitted to eat meat and wine, one is however permitted to celebrate his achievement with a festive meal with meat and wine. Every Tractate is a level of perfection in the life of a Jew. Therefore, one must celebrate. We find that the name "*Avram*" was the name of our Patriarch before circumcision. After his circumcision he was given the name "*Avraham*" which has the numerical value of 248.

Chazal: Until he was circumcised he was not complete in his control of all of his limbs. It was then that he reached perfection through the circumcision, which was a time of celebration.

The Meteoric Ascent of the Jewish People

Torah: On the second day of Passover the *Omer* offering was brought. This offering was comprised of barley flour. On the festival of *Shavuos*, the day on which the *Torah* was given to the Jewish people, the communal offering that was brought was comprised of two loaves of wheat bread. What is the significance of the *Omer* offering being made of barley flour and the two loaves of bread brought on *Shavuos* being made of wheat flour?

Mishna in Tractate *Sotah*: The meal offering (*Mincha*) that is brought by the suspected adulteress was made

of barley flour. It explains, "Since her behavior was similar to that of an animal (by sequestering herself with a man other than her husband), the material make-up of her meal offering is the grain used as animal fodder (which is barley)." The majority of barley grain is used for animal consumption.

Maharal: When the Jewish people left Egypt they were devoid of spirituality. They were at the point of spiritual extinction, which is the 49th level of spiritual contamination. At that point, the classification of the Jewish people was the equivalent of the animal that has no relevance to spirituality and is totally physical.

Therefore, the *Torah* chooses the ingredient of barley for the *Omer* offering to signify the spiritual level of the Jewish people at that moment. Fifty days later at Sinai when the *Torah* was given to the Jewish people, they had reached the pinnacle of their spirituality. At that moment they had achieved the classification of "adam (man/the perfected human)" whose objective and function is to achieve spirituality. As it states, "You (the Jewish people) are called 'adam (man)' but they (the nations of the world) are not called 'adam'."

Adam was the ultimate spiritualized being that was created by G-d Himself. After the Jewish people accepted the *Torah*, their status no longer was the equivalent of the animal, but rather, they reflected the characteristic of *Adam*. In order to signify their advanced spiritual level at the time of the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai, the *Torah* tell us that the communal offering must be comprised of wheat flour. As the *Gemara* in Tractate *Huryos* tells us that the primary consumption of wheat grain is by human beings.

Chinuch in his codification of the *mitzvos* explains the philosophical understanding of the counting of the days of the *Omer*. He writes, "The counting of *Sefira* is from the time of the exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the *Torah* at Sinai. We count in anticipation of that special moment which culminates on the 50th day after we began counting. Just as the slave who works in the sun longs and yearns for the moment that he will have the relief of the shade, so too is our counting an expression of anticipation and yearning for that moment of the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai."

The level of clarity that the Jewish people had achieved at Sinai was unique. The *Gemara* in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that when they unequivocally accepted the *Torah* by declaring "*Naaseh V'nishma* – we will do and

we will listen" G-d had said, "Who revealed this secret to My children?" The Jewish people were willing to do the Will of G-d even before understanding the extent of the commitment, which is the characteristic of angels. They were able to assume the level of clarity of an angel because they had advanced to the ultimate level of their own spirituality.

Hagadah: "If G-d had only brought us to Mt. Sinai and had not given us the *Torah* it would have been sufficient." If the objective of leaving Egypt was for the sake of receiving the *Torah* at Sinai, why would it have been sufficient for them to merely be brought to the foot of the Mountain? The ultimate achievement of man is to come to the realization that his only purpose and function is spirituality. All that exists is only a means to that end. It was only because the Jewish people had come to their pinnacle of spirituality at the foot of Mt. Sinai that they were able to make the declaration of "*Naaseh v'nishmah*." This is the meaning of the statement, "it would have been sufficient."

Appreciating the Declaration of Naaseh V'nishmah

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: A *Sadducee* (heretic) observed *Rava* engrossed in *Torah* study to such a degree that he was not aware that his hand was wedged under his foot –causing it to bleed. The heretic said to *Rava*, "You impulsive people! Just as in the past your mouth spoke before your ears listened, you are behaving in a similar impulsive manner – not thinking about the consequences of your behavior." Initially at Sinai when G-d offered the *Torah* to the Jewish people their response was *Naaseh V'nishmah* (we will do and we will listen). They had accepted the *Torah* unequivocally – regardless of the extent of the obligation.

The *Sadducee* had criticized our ancestors at Sinai for behaving irresponsibly by accepting something upon themselves although they were not aware of the degree of obligation it entailed. *Rava* responded, "The Jewish people accepted G-d's *Torah* with a pure and trusting heart. One who loves another assumes that the one he loves would not burden him with more than he can assume. Therefore, we accepted His *Torah* unequivocally because of our faith and trust in Him."

Mishlei (Proverbs): "The innocence of the just will guide them but the corruption of the faithless will

despoil them.” Rava was able to immerse himself in his *Torah* study, to the point that he was oblivious to his surroundings, because of his trust in G-d. Rava understood that G-d would not allow any harm to come to him when he was engaged in *Torah* study. However, the Sadducee, on the other hand, who did not have a trusting heart or faith in G-d, would not merit G-d’s protection.

What causes one to be trusting in G-d? Contrastingly, what causes one to be suspicious of Him? Human beings naturally have many needs and thus feel insecure because of their concern that they may not be able to fulfill them. It is when one focuses on his own needs and insecurities that he becomes suspicious. Whereas, one whose heart is filled with love for G-d does not focus on himself but rather on G-d.

The Jewish people at Sinai had an unusual level of love for G-d because of their understanding of what they meant to him. Therefore, they had no concern that their needs would not be addressed. It is comparable to a child who has always been provided for by his father without fail. That child will not be concerned that his father will stop providing. When one knows that G-d has provided for him – even in the most unusual circumstances- that person will not suspect that G-d will offer him anything that would be beyond his capacity.

Gemara in Tractate *Megillah*: One merits *Torah* through Divine Assistance. In order to merit Divine Assistance one must have a relationship with G-d, which comes about through trust. If one is distracted while studying *Torah* because of his concern for his material needs, he is failing in an area, which is fundamental to the acquisition of *Torah*. The Jewish people only merited the *Torah* because of their unswerving faith in G-d. If we are to be the proper receptacle to receive the *Torah* at a special level, we must have that unconditional trust and faith in G-d.

Rava’s level of immersion in *Torah* had a semblance of the Jews at Sinai because of his trust in G-d. He was not concerned that his needs would not be fulfilled. It is because of that unswerving faith/trust and that Rava merited an advanced level of Divine Assistance. Contrary to the Sadducee’s claim that the Jewish people impulsively declared their acceptance of the *Torah* with *Naaseh V’nishmah*, it was their level of trust that caused them to accept the *Torah* unequivocally.

Understanding Choice Within the Context of Torah

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: “Reb Elazar says, “When the Jewish people said *Naaseh V’nishma* (we will do and we will listen) a heavenly voice was heard saying, “Who revealed this secret to my children? It is an expression used only by the angels!” As it is alluded to in *Tehillim* (Psalms), “Bless Hashem O His angels; mighty in strength who do His bidding to obey the voice of His word.” Meaning, the angel first does the Word of G-d and then listens. Similarly, the Jewish people expressed themselves as angels because of their advanced level of spirituality that they had achieved at Sinai. Thus, we see that the Jewish people assumed the posture of *malachim* (angels) at Sinai through their own free will.

Throughout the *Torah* when the various levels of obligation are delineated, it is stated in the following order: *Chukim* (Statutes), *Mishpatim* (Commandments), and *Mitzvos*. *Chukim* (Statutes) are laws that are not able to be understood within a rational context (such as dietary laws, Red Heifer (*parah adumah*), prohibition of wool and linen, etc.). *Mishpatim* are rational laws (such as those pertaining to stealing, murder, charity etc.). The *Torah* introduces different classifications of obligations in this specific order to communicate that even when one performs a so-called “rational” *mitzvah*, in essence it is being observed as a *Chok*. The fundamental principle of *Torah* is *Chok*.

Meaning the Jew accepts the *Torah* only because it is the Will of G-d. In essence this is the equivalent of “*Naaseh V’nishmah*.” The only reason the Jewish people merited the *Torah* and became the nation of G-d was that they had accepted it unequivocally without any need to understand its extent or rational value. The significance of the *Torah* to the Jewish people was only to do the will of G-d.

The Jews at Sinai established themselves as angels. Just as an angel’s function is only to do the Will of G-d without any other motive or personal benefit, identically the Jews at Sinai assumed that level.

We say in the *kiddusha*, “We will sanctify Your Name in this world, just as they (the *malachim*) sanctify it in heaven above.” What relevance do the Jewish people have to the manner in which the angels sanctify the Name of G-d? Since the Jewish people at Sinai

accepted the *Torah* with the declaration of *Naaseh V'nishmah*, they assumed the status of *malachim*. The only people who are qualified to sanctify G-d's Name as it is done in heaven is the Jewish people because they possess the innate characteristic of angels.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt'l, in *Nefesh HaChaim* citing the *Zohar*: The angels in heaven cannot say *shirah* (the praises of G-d) until the Jewish people from below have said their *kiddusha* (*shirah*).

Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin*: "The *tzaddik* (devoutly righteous person) is greater than the *malach*." Although the angel has greater understanding of G-d, the *tzaddik* is greater because when he does the Will of G-d it is only through his free choice – which is not the case with the angel (who does not have free choice). The angel was created to perform only the way G-d willed him to function. The Jewish people at Sinai – with the declaration of *naaseh v'nishmah* chose through their own volition to accept G-d's *Torah*. Thus, the angels in heaven must wait to sing G-d's *shirah* until the Jewish people (who are angels at a more advanced level) have sung theirs.

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: One of the reasons Jerusalem was destroyed was because the Jewish people disgraced the "*malachei Elokim* – the angels of G-d."

Gemara: The *malachei Elokim* is referring to the *Torah* sages.

Rebbe Yishmael: There are 13 methods through which the written law can be interpreted. It is only through this methodology that the interpretation of *Torah* is considered accurately the Word of G-d. Any other interpretation, which is not limited to these parameters, has no relevance to the divine. Despite the breadth and depth of proficiency of the *Torah* sage (and the genius that he may possess), he understands that he is bound by a specific structure of interpretation – regardless of his own ability to see it differently. Thus, the *Torah* sage assumes the posture of the *malach* – who is bound by the Word of G-d.

Acher (*Alisha ben Avuya* – the *rebbe* of *Reb Meir*) was a *Torah* sage that had reached a unique level of *Torah* knowledge; however, he became a heretic. The *Gemara* explains that the reason for this is that he had "an impurity in his heart." *Acher* had studied Greek writings, which have a sensual appeal and created a conflict that ultimately caused him to process information differently.

He was a man of unlimited ability who wanted to go beyond the parameters that were set by the *Torah*. He rebelled against the concept of limitation – thus giving up his posture of *malach*. A *malach* functions within the context of what he was created to do. Similarly, a Jew, despite his ability to do differently must live within the limits that are set by the *Torah*. The Jew must do the Will of G-d only because it is His Will and not because of his rational understanding.

Maharal of Prague: "If the Jewish people had already accepted the *Torah* at Sinai with the declaration of *Naaseh V'nishmah* why was it necessary for G-d to hold a mountain over their heads to compel them to accept the *Torah*? The *Maharal* answers that it is true that the Jewish people had said *Naaseh V'nishmah*; however, the mountain over their heads was to demonstrate to them that they must accept the *Torah* because it is the Will of G-d regardless of their own preference.

The world was created only for the sake of the Jewish people who are referred to as "*Reishis* – the first/ chosen" as the *Torah* is referred to as "*Reishis*." The setting for the giving of *Torah* at Sinai was one of obligation because G-d was communicating to them that in order to have relevance to the *Torah*, one must assume the posture of an angel. Just as the angel functions as he does only because G-d Wills it to be so, similarly the Jewish people must accept the *Torah* because G-d Wills it to be so. Therefore, if the Jew is able to perform within a similar context in which the *Torah* was given at Sinai, (that there is no choice but to do the Will of G-d), he can achieve a level that is even greater than the angel because he has the choice to do otherwise.

The Human Mind Vis-à-vis G-dliness

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: When *Moshe* ascended to heaven (to receive the *Torah*) the angels said to G-d, "Master of the Universe, why is there a mere mortal among us?" G-d responded, "He came to receive the *Torah*." The angels said to G-d, "This precious treasure that has been hidden away for 974 generations before creation, are you giving it to a mere mortal? What is the value of this undeveloped being that he is even worthy of being remembered? Give Your glory to heaven."

G-d spoke to *Moshe* saying, "Answer them." *Moshe* then responded and refuted the angels' claim by

saying, “The *Torah* states, ‘I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of Egypt’ – were you ever in Egypt? The *Torah* says, ‘You shall honor your father and mother – do you have a father and mother?’” *Moshe* provided the angels with many examples, which confirmed the fact that the *Torah* was intended for man and does not have relevance to the heavenly body of angels. Thus, *Moshe* acquired the *Torah* for the Jewish people. Why was it necessary for *Moshe* to respond to the angels’ claim when the question was directed to G-d Himself? G-d could have responded to them directly.

Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia*: *Rebbe Eliezer*, the *Chachamim* (rabbis) and *Rebbe Yehoshua* debated the status of an earthenware oven that had become contaminated and subsequently severed into parts. The contamination of an earthenware vessel can be removed only if that vessel is broken and thus loses its status as a vessel. The question was if that vessel that was broken were to be reassembled, would it contain the original contamination or would it be considered a new vessel, which is uncontaminated.

Rebbe Eliezer’s position was that the reassembled oven is considered spiritually pure; however, the majority of his colleagues disagreed and ruled that it was spiritually contaminated. After a lengthy exchange between *Rebbe Eliezer* and the *Chachamim*, a *Bas Kol* (Heavenly Voice) declared, “The law is according to *Rebbe Eliezer*.” *Rebbe Yehoshua* stood up and said, “*Lo ba shamayim he* – *Torah* is not in heaven!” Meaning, the definitive legal rulings of *Torah* were given to man to decide and not G-d. Thus, the declaration of the *Bas Kol* was irrelevant. It is not that the human mind has greater understanding (G-d forbid) than the Divine Mind; but rather, when the *Torah* was given at Sinai it was given to be processed and elucidated with the human intellect of the Jew – (within the context of the 13 methods of interpretation).

It was necessary for *Moshe* to participate in the acquisition of *Torah* through his response to the angels in order to establish the principle of “*Lo ba shamayim he* – *Torah* is not in heaven!” The way *Torah* is acquired is through human initiative. For example, the *Vilna Gaon zt’l* shared with his closest disciples that although angels were made available to him to reveal the hidden secrets of the *Torah*, he was not interested. He rejected the offer from the angels. The *Vilna Gaon* said that if he has the capacity and ability to derive from the *Torah* the information that would be

transmitted to him by the angels, he preferred to use his own initiative to bring that about. This is based on the principle of “*Lo ba shamayim he*.” *Torah* was given to the Jewish people to toil and understand through their own initiative and intellect.

Gemara in Tractate *Megillah*: If a person toils sufficiently in *Torah* he will come upon its truth. Although the human mind processes the *Torah* with its own intellect; nevertheless, one succeeds only through Divine Assistance.

Chazal: At Sinai, G-d brought down heaven to earth. Why was this necessary? He could have remained in heaven and communicated the *Torah* from there. What is the symbolism of bringing heaven to earth?

Before the sin of *Adam*, physical existence was meant to accommodate G-d’s Presence and the purity of the world was at such a level that it was able to contain G-d’s Presence (no less than heaven could). However, because of the sin of *Adam* a level of spiritual contamination was introduced into existence that made it unfit for the Divine Presence. It was only later when the Jewish people were commanded to build the *Mishkan* that G-d’s Presence was accommodated in their midst. The *Mishkan* was a microcosm that was symbolic of all existence. G-d’s entering into that location was a semblance of the initial intent of Creation. When the *Torah* was given at Sinai, the Jewish people were reinstated to the state of pre-sin of *Adam*. Thus, G-d’s Presence was able to descend again into this existence. This was the symbolism of G-d’s bringing heaven to earth at Sinai.

Initially, before the sin, the extent of *Adam*’s grasp was touching upon the unlimited. As *Chazal* tell us before the sin, *Adam* was able to see from one end of world to the other. He had a level of clarity that there was nothing occluded from his understanding. Thus, the mind of man initially was the mechanism used to process spirituality. The intent of creation was that *Torah* should not be in heaven because of man’s special ability. The way one acquires *Torah* is only through toiling and applying oneself on a continuous basis. We pray to G-d, “Give us a portion in Your *Torah*.” It is true G-d gives us our portion of *Torah* however to be worthy of that acquisition is only through our own efforts.

The Innate Characteristic of G-d

Torah: The *Levyim* were designated to redeem the *Bechorim* (The First Born). “Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, ‘Behold! I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel, in place of every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine.” After this process was completed the *Levyim* were designated to assist the *Kohanim* (Priests) as the officiants of G-d. The First Born were originally designated by G-d to be His officiants (as *Kohanim*); however, because of their involvement with the *Chet HaEigil* (The Sin of the Golden Calf) they were disqualified. Since the *Levyim* were not tainted with the impurity of idolatry, they retained that special relationship with G-d.

Why was the First Born initially more qualified to be the *Kohen*? What is the innate characteristic of the *Bechor* (First Born) that makes him special? The *Torah* states that on the Festival of *Shavuot* one must begin bringing the first of the newly ripened fruits (*Bekurim* – from the same word as *Bechorim*) to the Temple Mount for G-d to be given to the *Kohen*. At the Temple Mount, the *Bekurim* must be given to the *Kohen*. At the time of the ceremony (the *Bekurim*), the one who brings the new fruits must declare his gratitude to G-d for the land that was given to bring forth this produce. Subsequently he prostrated himself in order to negate himself in the presence of G-d.

Rabbeinu Bachya, in his introduction to *Ki Savo* (where the *Mitzvah* of *Bikurim* is mentioned): This process involves bringing the new fruits that are *Reishis* (first), to the location that is *Reishis* (The Temple Mount – which is the most special location), for G-d who is the *Reishis Kol* (Beginning of everything). Then it is given to the *Kohen* (who is *Reishis* because he was chosen to be the officiant of G-d).

Rabbeinu Bachya: There is a single thread, which weaves through the entire *Bikurim* ritual that reflects the concept of *Reishis*. The *Torah* is revealing to us that anything, which reflects the characteristic of *Reishis*, has an innate holiness and special status because it possesses the innate characteristic of G-d - who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that has a commonality with G-d can be associated with Him. The *Bechor* (the First Born) innately shares the characteristic of being the first, since he is the first child to open his mother's womb. Thus, sharing

this innate characteristic of G-d (of being first) allows him to have a special relationship with Him.

However, because the *Bechorim* became tainted with the *Chet HaEigil* they no longer qualified to have that special relationship. The *Levyim*, on the other hand, who were unique because they were the only ones who did not succumb to the *Chet HaEigil*, assumed the status of *Reishis* (unique/ one of kind). Thus, they assumed the characteristic of G-d which is unique and one of a kind qualifying them to be the officiants.

Midrash: The letters of the word “*B’Heboram*” are the same letters as *Avraham*.

Maharal of Prague: The word “*B’Heboram*” which means, “And He (G-d) created them (existence)” has the same letters as *Avraham* to indicate that *Avraham* himself is the beginning of a new existence within creation.

Gemara in Tractate *Berachos*: *Avraham* was the first human being to refer to G-d as “*Adni* (Master).” The commentators point out that although Adam had referred to G-d as “*Adni* (Master)” it was only because he was the handiwork of G-d that he recognized G-d as the Master. *Avraham*, on the other hand, was born into a pagan world where G-d's existence was unknown; despite this, he was able to recognize G-d as the Master. According to this understanding, *Avraham* also possesses a uniqueness- being the first human to recognize G-d's existence- *Reishis*. This is why G-d refers to *Avraham* as, “My beloved” because he possessed this commonality with G-d.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z’tl cites a verse that refers to *Avraham* as the “*Navone*” (Perceptive and insightful one) and to *Yitzchak*, *Yaakov*, and *Moshe* as “*Chacham*” (One who is a repository of knowledge). *Reb Meir Simcha z’tl* explains that *Avraham* is referred to as *Navone* because he was able to perceive G-d's Omnipotence despite the lack of His obvious presence. However, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov* were initially made aware of G-d's Presence through the teaching of their father and were only able to advance themselves spiritually because of that previous foundation. Therefore, they are referred to as “*Chacham*.”

After *Avraham* defeated the four kings, *Malki Tzedek* (*Shem*, the son of *Noach* who is referred to as *Kohen*) came to offer *Avraham* bread and wine to restore his strength after the battle. *Malki Tzedek* then blessed *Avraham*. At this moment, the *Midrash* tells us that G-d

transferred the *Kahuna* status (the Priesthood) from the other descendents of *Shem* to the descendents of *Avraham*. *Avraham* merited this new status of *Kohen* because he possessed the characteristic of *Reishis*. He was the only human being in all existence who was willing to die for the sake of G-d and proclaim His Omnipotence/Unity.

What is the Essence of the Jewish People?

Torah: “You (the Jewish people) shall be holy because I your G-d am holy.”

Yalkut: An application of this concept is found in the verse stated in the Book of *Devarim* “And you are attached to G-d.”

Yirmiyah: “Just as one’s belt is attached to one’s waist so too are the Jewish people attached to G-d.”

Yalkut: “G-d said to the Jewish people, “I am not like the mortal king who does not permit his subjects to carry his name (which would be punishable by death). You (the Jewish people) carry my Name.”

Midrash: There are various ways G-d is identified and how the Jewish people are identified in a similar manner. For example, G-d is referred to as *Elokim* (an appellation for G-d) and G-d called the Jewish people by His appellation. As it is stated in the verse in *Tehillim* (Psalms), “I have said that you (the Jewish people) are *Elokim*.” G-d is called *Chacham* (wise) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Chachamim*.

G-d is referred to as *Dodi* (Beloved) and He refers to the Jewish people as beloved. G-d is identified as *Chassid* (scrupulously Pious) and He refers to His people as the scrupulously pious. G-d is referred to as *Kadosh* (holy) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Kadoshim* (holy). What is the significance of identifying the Jewish people with the many appellations of G-d Himself?

Tana d’vei Eliyahu (teachings of *Eliyahu* the Prophet): Every Jew must say, “When will my accomplishments be comparable to the accomplishments of my forbearers *Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, and *Yaakov*?” Some commentators explain the reason one must aspire to the accomplishments of nothing less than our forefathers (and not to people of lesser dimension) is that one must set his goals at the most advanced level in order to go farther. However, we are able to explain this passage of the *Tana d’vei Eliyahu* differently.

Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos*: Jewish people possess three innate qualities: they are merciful, have shame and perform acts of loving-kindness. These qualities exist within the Jew because they are passed down to us from *Avraham* our Patriarch. The Jewish people are the spiritual heirs of their forefathers and thus possess the innate characteristics and qualities exemplified by *Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, and *Yaakov*. They are part of our spiritual gene pool.

The spiritual potential of the Jew goes beyond ordinary limits only because of his relevance to his forbearers. It is only because the Jew descends from the holy Patriarchs that he has unlimited spiritual potential. Therefore, one must aspire to the accomplishments of *Avraham*, *Yitzchak* and *Yaakov* because his potential in this regard is defined by their accomplishments. One cannot achieve the same level as our Patriarchs; nevertheless one must aspire to it because we are a semblance of who they were.

The Jewish people may think that they are no different from any other nation. To this G-d says that the Jewish people are truly unique. He identifies them with many of His own appellations (Wise, Pious, Beloved, Holy, etc.). Since G-d identifies the Jew as such, it is evident that the Jew possesses these inherent qualities and characteristics. He possesses a semblance of G-d’s Wisdom because G-d chooses to refer to the Jew as *Chacham*. The Jew must understand and appreciate who he is. If the Jew is able to value and understand his intrinsic ability, he will be able to appreciate his potential.

At Sinai when G-d identified the Jewish people as “My kingly, priestly and holy people,” after they had said, “*Naaseh V’nishmah* – we will do and we will listen,” He was revealing to them that they are inherently kingly, priestly and holy. It was only because they possessed the potential for these qualities that they were able to accept the *Torah* unequivocally with the declaration of “*Naaseh V’nishmah*.” G-d commands the entire Jewish people, saying, “You must be holy, because I am holy.” This is to communicate to every Jew that he has relevance to G-d’s holiness because of his unique commonality with Him. How does one hone and appreciate these special characteristics? The tool that was gifted to us for this specific purpose is the *Torah* itself. It is through the study of *Torah* that one is able to achieve and appreciate his potential.

Discerning Between the Sinai Experience and Purim

Torah: “They stood at the foot of the mountain.”

Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos*: When the *Torah* states, “They stood under the mountain (*tachtis ha hahar*)” it does not mean “at the foot of the mountain” but rather “under the mountain.” Meaning, that G-d held the mountain over their heads “like a barrel and He said to them: If you accept the *Torah* you will live; however, if you do not, there you will be buried.”

Gemara: “Because of the manner in which the Jews accepted the *Torah* – under duress and coercion – it is to be made known that qualitatively speaking, the Jews should not have the same degree of culpability as the one who accepts the *Torah* wholeheartedly.” *Raba* states, “Nevertheless at the time of *Achashveirosh* (*Purim*) the Jewish people reaffirmed their acceptance of the *Torah*. It was an acceptance out of love. As it is stated in the *Megillah* of *Esther*, ‘They fulfilled it and accepted it upon themselves.’” Seemingly, the need for the Jewish people to reaffirm their acceptance of the *Torah* at the time of *Purim* seems to be difficult.

Gemara in Tractate *Bava Basra*: If one is coerced to relinquish/accept something but is compensated for his compliance, it is considered a valid transaction. At Sinai G-d had told the Jewish people that if they accept the *Torah*, the world would continue and they would have their lives. Despite the fact they were coerced to accept, the Jewish people were compensated for their acceptance – with their lives/existence. Thus, it is a valid transaction and there is no need for a future reaffirmation of the original acceptance. If this is so, then why does the *Gemara* tell us that because of the circumstance of coercion at Sinai, the Jews have a lesser degree of culpability? What was the value of the reaffirmation of *Purim*, which was out of love?

The experience of Sinai/the time of our accepting of our *Torah* was in fact a valid transaction. However, qualitatively speaking it was not the same had they accepted the *Torah* out of love. The *Gemara* states, “If one performs a *mitzvah* for its own sake (*l'shmah* – proper intent) the *Torah* acts as a life potion – and he will merit having long days (eternal share in the World to Come).

However if one performs a *mitzvah* not for its own sake but rather in a “left-handed” manner (with an

awkwardness) the *Torah* acts as a death potion.” Although the experience at Sinai had value, because the Jewish people were compensated with their lives, qualitatively speaking it does not represent the ultimate life potion. (However, the Jewish people definitely merited a share in the world to come).

When the Jewish people reaffirmed their commitment to the *Torah* out of love on *Purim*, their *mitzvah* involvement assumed a more advanced level of value. It was only after they had seen the miracle of *Purim*- that the decree of *Haman* that every Jewish man women and child be annihilated was overturned at the last moment, did they reaffirm their acceptance of *Torah* out of love. When the Jewish people understood and appreciated the love that G-d had for them, and did not allow them to go into oblivion, they accepted the *Torah* out of love. The Jewish people thus became greater beneficiaries of their accomplishments in *Torah*.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the Second Temple (which came after the event of *Purim*), prophecy ended. During the time of the Second Temple, the Jewish people relied on tradition as the basis for the authenticity of the *Torah*. This was the Oral and Written Law being Divine. Prior to this period, the divinity of the Oral Law was unquestioned because of the existence of prophecy. However, during the Second Temple Period the *Sadducees* (a sect of Jews) denied the authenticity of the Oral Law. This posed a threat to the Jewish people because the entire *Torah* could have been undermined. It was only now (after the reaffirmation of the *Torah*) that the *Torah* assumed a new level of value, that it came under attack.

When one fulfills the *mitzvos* out of love and not as a burden, qualitatively speaking he is a greater beneficiary of his accomplishments. However if one only fulfills the *mitzvos* as a burden to be dispensed with, then he will not merit the proper level of spirituality that was meant to be.

The Essence of Shavuos

There is some degree of symbolism associated with each of the Holidays/Festivals. On *Rosh Hashanah* we blow the *Shofar*, which reminds G-d of the merit of the *Akeidah* (the binding of *Yitzchak*) and thus silences *satan's* prosecution of the Jewish people. On *Yom Kippur* we repent and afflict ourselves by assuming the

posture of heavenly angels accepting upon ourselves the five areas of deprivation.

On *Succos* we commemorate the Clouds of Glory that protected us for forty years in the desert, with the *Succah*. We also take the four species, which symbolize the four segments of the Jewish people being united as one. On *Pesach* (Passover), we partake of the Pascal lamb and we eat *matzah* symbolizing the transition from bondage to freedom. However, regarding the Festival of *Shavuos*, “the time of the giving of our *Torah*” there is no symbolism whatsoever associated with this important day. It is customary to study *Torah* the entire night of *Shavuos*; however, this is only a custom and not a law. A Jew is obligated to study *Torah* every available moment throughout the year.

One is obligated to count the days of the *Omer* (*Sefiras Ha'Omer*) from *Pesach* to *Shavuos*. One counts forty-nine days concluding with the fiftieth, which is *Shavuos* – the day the *Torah* was given at Sinai. *Chinuch* explains the philosophical aspect and understanding of the counting of the *Sefira*. He writes, “The counting of *Sefira* is from the time of the exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the *Torah* at Sinai. We count in anticipation of that special moment which takes place 50 days from the time we begin counting. Just as the slave, who works in the sun longs and thirsts for the moment that he will have the relief of the shade, so too is our counting towards the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai.”

Thus, *Shavuos* cannot be commemorated through a symbol. The essence of the Festival is the “feeling” of being privileged to be taken as G-d’s people through the receiving of the *Torah*. This can only be experienced by the individual who truly values his Jewishness and his relationship with G-d. This is the value and importance of the counting of the *Sefira* to *Shavuos*.

We say in our morning prayers, “Fortunate are we because of our good portion! How pleasant is our lot and how beautiful is our inheritance!” These statements are more than mere words. A Jew should feel fortunate and privileged to have been chosen from among all of the nations of the world to be G-d’s people – the people who were given the *Torah*.

Mishna in Tractate *Shabbos*: “All Jewish people are considered princes.” The *Torah* refers to the Jewish people as “A kingly, priestly, and holy people.” This feeling of being privileged should be experienced as a reality by every Jew.

On *Succos* we dwell in the *succah* to commemorate the reality of being protected by the Clouds of Glory. On *Pesach* we eat the *matzah* to commemorate the reality of leaving Egypt in haste. The reality of *Shavuos* is the sense and feeling of being privileged. That reality is one that exists on an individual basis and cannot be symbolized. Each person will experience the anticipation and excitement of receiving the *Torah* to the extent of his own capacity to internalize the reality of being chosen to receive G-d’s “most prized possession.”

The only way a Jew could truly experience his Judaism is through the *Torah* itself. The pride of feeling special as a Jew comes not from wearing Jewish symbols or participating in political/humanitarian causes; but rather, it is from immersing oneself and actualizing the *Torah* itself. The blessing recited on the *Torah* states, “Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His *Torah*...” Our privileged status from among the nations of the world is indicated by the fact that G-d gave us, and no other nation, His *Torah*. *Shavuos* is a time of experiencing the privileged feeling of being taken as G-d’s people through His *Torah*.

The festival of *Succos* is a seven-day holiday. The day that follows the seven-day period of *Succos* is (*Shemini*) *Atzeres*.

Gemara: Although *Shemini Atzeres* is juxtaposed to the Festival of *Succos*, which seems to indicate that it is an extension of the holiday, it is considered an independent festival. On *Shemini Atzeres* we no longer dwell in the *succah* or take the four species.

Yalkut: In fact *Shemini Atzeres* should have been celebrated fifty days after *Succos* – similar to *Shavuos* following *Pesach*. However if that were the case *Shemini Atzeres* would fall out in the middle of winter and cause hardship for the Jew to return to Jerusalem in order to visit the Temple. G-d had mercy on the Jewish people and allowed us to celebrate (*Shemini*) *Atzeres* immediately after *Succos*, since we were already in Jerusalem. After sitting in the *succah* for seven days commemorating being protected and surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, we celebrate an additional day with G-d – (*Shemini Atzeres*). *Shavuos* is also referred to by the *Torah* as “*Atzeres*” which means to “hold back.”

Chazal: After seven days of *Succos*, G-d says to the Jewish people, “Please remain with Me an additional

day because the parting for Me is difficult.” “*Atzeres*” reflects G-d’s love and desire to have an intimate relationship with the Jewish people. If G-d wants to keep the Jew close to Him on “*Atzeres*” – on *Shavuot* should we not all feel privileged? If one is able to internalize and experience the privilege of being a Jew and performing *mitzvos* similar to the slave who anticipates the moment that he will be relieved by the shade, then one will be able to experience the essence of *Shavuot*. No symbol can encapsulate that feeling.

The Pedigree of the Jewish People Defining Their Essence

Torah: G-d Commanded *Moshe* to take a census of the Jewish people in the desert saying, “*Hashem* spoke to *Moshe* ..., saying ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...’”

Rashi: “They established their genealogy” means that each Jew brought his documents of pedigree which established his paternal line and his particular tribe.

Midrash: After the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai, the nations of the world asked G-d, “Why did You give the *Torah* to the Jewish people and not to us?” G-d responded, “Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?” The nations of the world could not respond. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish people, they were astounded and began singing the praises of the Jewish people.

Proverbs: “Her children have risen and praised her.” The reason the Jewish people were chosen by G-d to be the recipients of His *Torah* was because they were the only nation that could establish its pedigree. The nations of the world, because they had engaged in forbidden sexual relations were not able to establish their pedigree. Why is the purity of pedigree a prerequisite for being qualified to receive the *Torah*?

At the time of creation, regarding all species (plant and animal) the *Torah* continuously reiterates that G-d created them “according to their own kind.” Meaning, when G-d created the world, He did so with a specific order. Because He initially created pure species, He wanted creation to continue within

that context. He did not want cross-breeding of crops and species of animals.

Because the *Torah* is the blueprint of existence, everything must reflect Its plan. If one procreates in a manner that is not permitted by the *Torah* the resulting offspring is considered a “hybrid (mixture).” The Jewish people, in the area of procreation, did not breach the guidelines set by the *Torah*. They maintained the order that reflects G-d’s infrastructure of creation – that each species retains its own purity according to the blueprint of the *Torah*. In contrast, the nations of the world did not reflect the purity of creation because they crossed the lines that were set by the *Torah*/G-d. Therefore, they have no relevance to the *Torah* itself.

Maharal of Prague: Something of a spiritual nature is not subject to change- it affects but it is not affected. If one is subject to the influences of the world, it is an indication that his essence is physical and not spiritual. The physical realm is one of cause and effect. In contrast, if one is able to resist and not succumb to his physical inclinations, he is demonstrating the characteristic of spirituality.

Gemara in Tractate in *Makos*: Stealing and forbidden sexual relations are the two drives that consume the human being. Thus, the Jewish people, by presenting their pedigree, had proven and established their true essence- that they are not dominated and controlled by what all humanity is inclined to do. They established themselves as a spiritual people. Therefore the Jewish people are the only nation that is able to have a special relationship with G-d and consequently be the recipients of His *Torah*. They are a people who have the ability to live within the context of His spiritual infrastructure, which demands that one spiritualize his physicality.

The Unfathomable Essence of Torah

Torah: “*Hashem* spoke with *Moshe* in the Desert of Sinai...”

Midrash: “Why did G-d choose to address *Moshe* in the ‘Desert of Sinai’?”

Chazal: The *Torah* was given within the setting of three things – fire, water, and desert.

Torah: Regarding ‘fire,’ ‘G-d descended upon the mountain with fire...’ Regarding ‘water’ the verse states, ‘G-d came from *Seir* to Sinai in your field (with water).’

Regarding the setting of the 'desert' it states, 'G-d spoke to Moshe in the Desert of Sinai...' Why was the *Torah* given within these settings? In order to teach us that just as fire, water, and the desert are given gratis, so too the *Torah* was offered without cost (*bechinam*)... Why was the *Torah* given in the 'Desert of Sinai?' In order to teach us that unless one is willing to negate/humble himself to the point of being unassuming as the desert, he will not have the capacity to acquire the *Torah* that was given in the desert."

Gemara in Tractate *Berachos*: There are three things that are acquired through suffering – *Torah*, the world to come, and the Land of Israel. If this is so, why does the *Midrash* tell us that the acquisition of *Torah* is without cost? If one must sacrifice (himself) to a point of deprivation, evidently it has a significant cost factor.

Gemara: The *Torah* can only be acquired by the one who is willing to die for it/to be totally negated in its presents. If one were to acquire something of infinite value, although he may have to actually spend a significant amount of money, relatively speaking to its true worth, he has acquired it without cost. As much as one must toil and sacrifice for the sake of the *Torah*, relative to the unlimited value that one receives from it, his contribution is less than miniscule.

The actual sacrifice that one must make to acquire the *Torah*, is only in regard to his humility. If one is willing to negate himself to suppress his ego and assume an unassuming posture, then he will have the capacity to acquire *Torah*. If one truly understands and appreciates the unlimited value of *Torah* his self-negation will come about without any difficulty. Because if one is able to internalize the true worth of eternity, then there is nothing that is too difficult. This is the correlation between *Torah*, fire, water, and the desert– all being given without payment.

In addition, the *Torah* itself is G-d's wisdom, which is unlimited and cannot be fathomed by a mortal of limited intellect and capacity. As a physical being, one cannot appreciate or grasp the essence of spirituality. However, if one humbles himself and is willing to sacrifice for *Torah*, G-d Himself will assist him to comprehend and acquire it. This is another understanding of *Torah* being given without payment/*bechinam*.

The Component of Joy at the Sinai Event

Torah: At the time of the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai, "Moshe, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended. They saw the G-d of Israel... they gazed at G-d, yet they ate and drank."

Rashi citing *Chazal*: They had gazed upon the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) in an inappropriate manner and thus were liable for death. However, since G-d did not want to interfere with the joy of the receiving of the *Torah*, He postponed their death (*Nadav* and *Avihu*) until the inauguration of the *Mishkan*.

Gemara in Tractate *Megillah*: The level of joy that G-d had at the time of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* was the equivalent of the joy that He had at the time of Creation. The inauguration of the *Mishkan* was a confirmation for the Jewish people that they had been forgiven for the Sin of the Golden Calf. The experience was one of the most momentous occasions in Jewish history. Why was G-d not concerned that the death of *Nadav* and *Avihu* would detract from this joyous event? Why was He only concerned with disrupting the joy at the time of the giving of the *Torah* at Sinai?

An essential component in the service of G-d is *simcha* (joy). *Avnei Neizer z'tl* writes in his introduction to the *Iglei Taal* , "When one derives pleasure from his study of *Torah* does that personal benefit detract from the value of the *mitzvah*, which must be selflessly performed (*I'shmah*)?" He explains, "Not only does the joy that one experiences from *Torah* study not detract from the *mitzvah*, it is an essential component that is considered an enhancement of the *mitzvah*."

Tosfos in Tractate *Shabbos*: At the time of the Sinai experience, G-d revealed to the Jewish people all the heavens from above as well as the depths of *gehenom* from below to show them the dimension of His power. As a result of the Sinai event, the Jewish people had the capacity to appreciate G-d. This revelation impacted them and inculcated within their souls a depth of spirituality that was unique. If the Jewish people had not experienced the joy of the giving of *Torah*, their experience would have been deficient. Secondly, if the joy of Sinai were disrupted, they would have been distracted from their focus of value. Thus, undermining the effectiveness of the event. Consequently the Jewish people's capacity for spirituality would have been limited.

It was experiencing the Sinai event with *simcha* that gave the Jewish people the breadth and depth of understanding that would enable them to process all future events despite their circumstance. Although the inauguration of the *Mishkan* was marred with the death of *Nadav* and *Avihu*, the Jewish people were nevertheless able to appreciate the lesson that was meant to be learned from that tragedy. Thus, G-d delayed the death of *Nadav* and *Avihu* until that time.

Once the Jewish people were established as a spiritual entity/ (holy and priestly people), the death of *Aaron's* children did not interfere with their understanding of the innate value of that misfortune. The death of *Nadav* and *Avihu* is classified by the *Torah* as a Sanctification of G-d's Name (*Kiddush Hashem*). As *Moshe* had said to *Aaron* his brother, "It is through those who are holiest I (G-d) am sanctified." The Jew is able to weather many storms of life and to put them into perspective because of what was instilled in them at Sinai.

Midrash: The least amount of wealth that was taken out of Egypt by every Jew was forty pack animals laden with wealth. Nevertheless, the *Torah* tells us that the only gift that qualified for building the *Mishkan* was the one that was given as a result of the generosity of one's heart. If their dimension of wealth was so great why was it necessary for the *Torah* to set that criteria to qualify the gifts? Seemingly, they should have given it without difficulty. Without the proper appreciation of value, even giving an amount that is relatively inconsequential would be too difficult. It was only because of their previous undisturbed experience at Sinai that the Jewish people had the appreciation to participate in the building of the *Mishkan* whole-heartedly.

The Unlimited Ramifications of "Naaseh V'nishmah"

Midrash citing a verse from *Yishaya*: "'You (*hein*) come from nothing. From a putrid wetness do you come. All of your accomplishments come from a groan ...' What is the meaning of this? The word '*hein*' in the Greek language means 'one.' Meaning, the Jewish people are one people who are unique among the nations of the world who are considered to be nothing. As it states, 'All the nations are nothing before Him.' What is the meaning of 'All of your accomplishments come from a groan?'

"All the good and blessing that will come upon the Jewish people until the end of time is only because

of that one groan that they had expressed at Sinai. They had said, '*Naaseh V'nishma* – we will do and we will listen.' G-d said to the Jewish people. 'Even the abomination, you should choose for yourselves.' What is the meaning of this? The Jewish people had chosen to commit the abomination of idolatry with the Golden Calf. G-d said to them, 'Bring the calf as a sacrifice and through it I will choose you.'" If the calf was the basis for the most severe sin of the Jewish people, then how could it be brought as a sacrifice based on the principle 'a prosecutor cannot be an advocate'? Nevertheless G-d specifically told the Jewish people to bring a calf as a sacrifice.

Maharal of Prague: The concepts of repentance (*teshuvah*) and spiritual atonement have no relevance to the gentile. This is within the context of spiritual rehabilitation/reinstatement.

Gemara: If a gentile violates any one of the seven Noachide laws he is liable for the death penalty. As it states, "The prohibition is the basis for his death." This is not the case with a Jew. A Jew has relevance to atonement and can be spiritually rehabilitated, regardless of the severity of his sin (although there are times that the Jew must be put to death because of his transgression). This is because when the Jew sins it is only an incidental to his existence. His sin does not emanate from his essence, which is spiritual and pure. Therefore the consequence of sin does not touch upon his essence. He is kept alive to be able to repent and be reinstated. However regarding the gentile, whose essence is not spiritual (although he has a soul), sin emanates from his essence. Therefore the consequence of his failing must touch upon his essence, which is his physicality. When the gentile sins, the consequences are terminal.

The Jewish people are different from the nations of the world because of their unique spiritual essence. They quantified themselves at Sinai by unequivocally declaring, "*Naaseh V'nishma* – we will do and we will listen." When G-d heard their declaration He said, "Who revealed this secret to My children?" The Jewish people had assumed the posture of angels who perform the Will of G-d without needing to understand the extent of their obligation. The spiritual quantification of the Jew is even greater than that of the angel because despite his human frailties he rose to the level of an angel.

In order to demonstrate and reveal that this fact, regarding the spirituality of the Jew, G-d specifically chose the calf as a sacrifice. Although it was considered an abomination, through which they had gravely sinned, nevertheless, it was to be the spiritual mechanism to reinstate and rehabilitate the Jewish people. If their essence had been physical, they would have perished.

Gemara in Tractate *Kiddushin*: If a Jew intends to perform a *mitzvah*, and he is not able to bring it to fruition because of circumstances beyond his control, he is fully accredited for the *mitzvah*. Since the essence of the Jew is spiritual, he was not able to execute the action only because G-d did not allow it. He is therefore fully deserving. However, regarding the gentile, the *Gemara* tells us that if he had in mind to perpetrate an evil act, although he had failed and could not bring it to fruition, he is fully culpable as if he had actually sinned.

This is extrapolated from the verse, “The *Aramian* (*Lavan*) who killed our father (*Yaakov*).” Although *Lavan* wanted to kill *Yaakov* and his family, he did not succeed because G-d intervened and did not allow him to do so. Nevertheless the *Torah* expresses it as if he had. This is because when evil and sin are perpetrated by the gentile, he assumes full culpability, since it emanates from his essence, which is his physicality.

The Severe Ramifications of Not Observing the Sabbatical Years

Torah in *Bechukosai*: “Then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your foes, then the land will rest and it will be appeased for its sabbaticals. All the years of its desolation it will rest, whatever it did not rest during your sabbaticals when you dwelled upon her.”

Chazal: As a result of violating seventy Sabbatical cycles, the Jewish people were exiled from the Land for seventy years to Babylon. On a simple level, one could understand that G-d allowed the Jewish people to occupy the Land as if it were their own on the condition that on the seventh year they would not be permitted to demonstrate their ownership over the Land. The Land must lie fallow and the produce should be considered ownerless. Violating the Sabbatical year would be the equivalent of violating a landlord/

tenant agreement. For every year they had violated, they must be displaced from the Land. Because they had violated seventy Sabbatical cycles they needed to be exiled from the Land for seventy years.

As a result of the Jewish people spending seventy years in Babylon many of them had intermarried and *Ezra* the scribe, who was the leader had difficulty encouraging them to return to the Land of Israel. He had threatened the Levites if they did not return to the Land, they would not receive their tithes. Ultimately, he succeeded and the Jewish people returned to the Land.

Gemara in Tractate *Yomah*: The First Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people had violated the three Cardinal Sins: adultery, murder, and idol worship. We see that in addition to violating the seventy Sabbatical cycles, the Jewish people had transgressed the most serious of sins and thus no longer deserved to have a Temple in their midst. Seemingly, there is a connection between not observing the Sabbatical cycle and ultimately violating the three Cardinal sins?

Torah: In the seventh year the Land must remain fallow and one is not permitted to engage in agricultural activities because it is, “*Shabbos L’shem* (A Sabbath for *Hashem*)”.

Sforno: The meaning of “*Shabbos L’shem*” that the seventh year (*shmitta*) should be a time of dedicating oneself to introspection, meditation, and the study of *Torah*. It is a time to be completely devoted to one’s spiritual growth.

Although during the six years that precede the Sabbatical year, one must still engage in *Torah* study and conduct himself as a proper Jew through the observance of the *mitzvos* he is not fully focused on the spiritual because he is preoccupied with the mundane. However during the Sabbatical year, one must be fully dedicated to the service of G-d. When the Jewish people violated the Sabbatical years and engaged in agricultural activities, their transgression did not only manifest itself in doing what was prohibited, but rather they did not address their spiritual needs that were critical for their spiritual growth and welfare. By denying themselves the spiritual opportunities of the seventh year, they became desensitized to many issues of spirituality. It precipitated a subliminal spiritual erosion that they did not sense.

Repeating this failing for seventy Sabbatical years ultimately created a spiritual void that allowed them to

violate the most serious of sins: Adultery, Murder, and Idolatry. The severe punishment that resulted from not observing the Sabbatical years was not merely because they had taken what was not rightfully theirs, but rather, it was because they did not restore and advance their spiritual capacity that caused them to fail so seriously.

The Land of Israel is known as the Holy Land.

Gemara in Tractate *Kesubos*: “Whoever lives outside of the Land of Israel, it is as if he has no G-d.”

When the Jewish people dwell in the Land they must have a continuous cognizance of G-d’s Presence, which is only possible through the observance of mitzvos and engaging in *Torah* study. If they chose not to, they will be displaced from the Land, because G-d’s Presence has no relevance to their lives. It was only after the Jewish people spent seventy years in exile did they sufficiently repent to be worthy to return to the Land.

Ramchal in the Way of G-d: Regarding the days of the week, there are six days followed by the *Shabbos*. This cycle repeats itself continuously. Why does the seventh day always need to follow the sixth day? G-d created the Jew in such a way that his spirituality must be invigorated on the seventh day, which is the *Shabbos*.

After being involved and exposed to the mundane one must be touched by the spirituality of the *Shabbos* so that he should not become spiritually depleted. The *Shabbos* itself is a setting that is a semblance of the world to come. Similarly, the Sabbatical year is

dedicated to G-d so that the Jew could meditate and re-immense himself in spirituality after being involved in agricultural activities for six years. If one does not utilize the Sabbatical year for what it was designated, the spiritual consequences will be severe. The Jewish people who had violated seventy Sabbatical cycles after entering into the Land of Israel allowed themselves to become spiritually deficient by not restoring their spirituality in the seventh year. Consequently, the Jewish people lost their sense of spirituality.

Torah: A Jewish slave must be freed after six years of servitude. However if after six years he should say, “I love my master, my wife (a Canaanite maidservant) and my children. I do not want to go free” he is taken before the Court and the master must bore a hole with an awl in the cartilage of his right ear at the doorpost. “He will then remain as a slave forever.”

Chazal: “Forever” does not mean that the slave will be a slave forever but rather until the Jubilee Year (*Yovel*). If this is so, why did the *Torah* not simply state “he will be a slave until the Jubilee year?” It is because G-d had said to the Jewish people at Sinai, “You are My subjects, not the subjects of subjects ...” When the Jewish slave allowed himself to remain in servitude beyond the sixth year, he had violated his status as G-d’s subject to be considered a free man (not affected by another’s mastership). Allowing himself to remain in servitude beyond the sixth year causes a spiritual diminishment that cannot be corrected forever. Thus, he is like a slave forever.



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