

The Holiday of Shavuos



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The Holiday of Shavuos



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 – thus 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 even though 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 because 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 *Hashem*, 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 *Hashem*. The Jewish people at Sinai had an unusual level of love for *Hashem* 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 *Hashem* has provided for him – even in the most unusual circumstances that person will not suspect that *Hashem* 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 *Hashem*, 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 *Hashem*. 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 *Hashem*.

Rava's level of immersion in *Torah* had a semblance of the Jews at Sinai because of his trust in *Hashem*. 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 *Hashem* and then listens. Similarly, the Jewish people expressed themselves as angels because of the 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 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 *Hashem* without any other motive or personal benefit, identically the Jews at Sinai assumed that level.

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 *Hashem'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 *Hashem*) 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.” 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.

Gemara: *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 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*.

Acher 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 *Hashem* 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 *Hashem* to hold a mountain over their heads to compel them to accept the *Torah*? 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* it referred to as “*Reishis*.” The setting for the giving of *Torah* at Sinai was one of obligation because *Hashem* 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 to that in which the *Torah* was given at Sinai, (that there is no choice but to do the Will of *Hashem*), 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 worth of being remembered? Give Your glory to heaven.”

Hashem spoke to *Moshe* saying, “Answer them.” *Moshe* then responded and refuted the angels’ claim by saying, “The *Torah*: “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 you 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? *Hashem* 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 the 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, *Hashem* 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 *Hashem's* Presence and the purity of the world was at such a level that it was able to contain

Hashem's Presence (no less than heaven could). However, because of the sin of *Adam* he had introduced a level of spiritual contamination 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 *Hashem'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, *Hashem's* Presence was able to descend again into this existence. This was the symbolism of G-d's bringing heaven to earth at Sinai.

Chazal: Initially, before the sin, the extent of *Adam's* grasp was touching upon the unlimited. 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 *Hashem*, "Give us a portion in Your *Torah*." It is true *Hashem* 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 *Hashem*. The First Born were originally designated by *Hashem* 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 *Hashem*. 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?

Torah: 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 *Hashem* 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 *Hashem*). *Rabbeinu Bachya* is saying that 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 *Hashem* – who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that has a commonality with *Hashem* 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 *Hashem* (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 *Hashem* 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 (*Hashem*) 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 *Hashem* 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 *Hashem* that he recognized *Hashem* 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 *Hashem* refers to *Avraham* as, “My beloved” because he possessed this commonality with G-d.

Reb Meir Simcha zt'l: There is 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). *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*.

Midrash: At this point, *Hashem* transferred the *Kehuna* status (the Priesthood) from the other descendants of *Shem* to the descendants 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 *Hashem* and proclaim His Omnipotence.

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 *Hashem*.”

Yirmiyah the Prophet: “Just as one's belt is attached to one's waist so too are the Jewish people attached to *Hashem*.”

Yalkut: “Hashem 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 Hashem is identified and how the Jewish people are identified in a similar manner. For example, Hashem is referred to as *Elokim* (an appellation for G-d) and Hashem called the Jewish people by His appellation.

Tehillim (Psalms): “I have said that you (the Jewish people) are *Elokim*.” Hashem is called Chacham (wise) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Chachamim*. Hashem is referred to as *Dodi* (Beloved) and He refers to the Jewish people as beloved. Hashem is identified as *Chassid* (scrupulously Pious) and He refers to His people as the scrupulously pious. Hashem 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 Hashem 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 Hashem 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 Hashem 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.



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