



Sefirat Haomer



English version

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A CONNECTION TO G-D

One of the amazing things that happened to me in Miami was a conversation I had on the way to the airport with the Uber driver, an African American.

“Are you a Rabbi?” I try to be. I try to help people get closer to their Creator, through words of Torah. “You can call me Rabbi.” “Can I ask you a question?” “Sure.”

“Did G-d give the whole Five Books of Moses to Moses at Mt. Sinai? Or did G-d give just the Ten Commandments? I keep the commandments, because that is what G-d gave the whole world. Not just the Jews. So, I keep that. The rest of the Five Books, was that also given to Moses at Mt. Sinai?”

I replied that it is not clear what extent of detail Moses received at Mt. Sinai and what he accepted in the Tabernacle, in the Tent of Meeting (See Sotah 37b). But, one thing for sure is that the Ten Commandments were not given to the Gentiles. They were given to the Jews, as the beginning words start off saying, *I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt, from the house of slavery*. Gentiles never went through Egyptian slavery. All the gentiles need to keep, according to Judaism, are the 7 Noachide laws.

"What? How do you say that? You call yourself a Rabbi? You discriminate? Don't you think that G-d wants the gentiles to live a life of morality with an ethical code?" I never had someone so angry with me in my entire life! He would have thrown me out of the car, if he could have. But, I tried to gently explain that we have 613 laws that we connect to

G-d with, and he has only the 7 Noachide laws that he can connect with. He would not accept that. I tried to explain that we are to be G-d's Knights, bringing G-dliness to the world, to be a light unto the nations. Nothing doing. He would not accept that G-d would let the gentiles alone without ever speaking to them, never telling them how to behave, bar the 7 Noachide laws.

This was right before Purim, when I was thinking of the words of the Vilna Gaon, explaining the words of the Megilla. לַיהוּדִים הָיְתָה אֹרֶחַ וְשִׁמְחָה וְשָׁלוֹן וַיִּקְרַךְ *For the Jews, there was light,...* The Talmud says that the light that the Jews merited was Torah. (Megillah 16b) The Vilna Gaon explains this to mean that on Purim, the Jews realized that Torah is the light of their lives. This gentile wanted to feel that he had some light in the darkness, some ethical code, in an immoral world. Torah means: a light guiding you, showing you how to live. I never realized how lucky we are to have a connection to G-d, to have direction in life, until I met that Uber Driver in Miami.

Shavuot is not a holiday meant to just celebrate our accepting the Torah, our standing at Mt. Sinai. Shavuot is to celebrate the beginning of a relationship. Every day we accept the Torah, and every day G-d gives it to us, as we say in the blessing, בּוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה. The One who *gives* Torah. Not בּוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה, the One who *gave* us Torah 3000 years ago. Every day, every word of Torah we learn, G-d is giving us that Torah. Every generation has its leaders, and the leaders of each generation are as great as Moshe and Aharon (Rosh Hashana 25b).

For in each generation, G-d *is giving* the Torah, and it is the duty of each generation to look to their Torah leaders to direct the people, guiding them how to live, according to what G-d is teaching that generation, keeping to the Jewish Code of Law.

What does a person need to do, to feel closeness to G-d, and to see how the Torah is the light of his life? How does a person connect in a way that G-d is talking to him, now, in the present?

First and foremost, in order to connect, Torah needs to be sweet to you. Ever notice the uniqueness of the Birkot Hatorah in Birkot Hashachar? It is the only blessing of a Mitzvah that we pray for it to be sweet, והערב נא. This is because the sweetness of Torah is fundamental for connecting to G-d and knowing what He wants from us. How does Torah become sweet? By taking each word and thinking about it. By chewing it, slowly. No matter how expensive the steak you are eating, if you swallow it all at once, you will not taste its quality. You need to savor each bite.

There is a Midrash that gives us the secret code to connecting, and the prerequisite for savoring the sweetness of Torah. The Torah is compared to water, fire, and desert. כי נר ; הוי כל צמא לכו למים וידבר ה' אל משה במדבר סיני באוהל מועד ; מצווה ותורה אור (Bamidbar Rabbah 1; 17) Why these three?

Water- Uniqueness of water is that it flows only to a lower place. Torah will go only to one who becomes humble. Only a humble person is not bashful to ask what he does not know. אין הבישן למד. (Avot 2;5) Only a humble person is willing to review again, and again and again, and... And only a humble person will listen when wise people speak.

Why not compare Torah to a sweeter, tastier, drink? Why is Torah not comparted to orange

juice? Why water? The Chafetz Chaim would explain that this is because there is a uniqueness in water, that it is a drink that we do not make a blessing on unless we are thirsty. Unlike orange juice, you can enjoy water only when you are thirsty (See Sh"A- OH 204;7). Torah is sweet only if you realize how much your survival is dependent on it (See Midrash Shir Hashirim 1;3).

Fire – Uniqueness of fire is that it lights up darkness. If you want Torah to speak to you, you need to look at the world around you as darkness, a world of fantasy, delusion, imaginings. Only Torah is reality. Only Torah can shed light on what is right and what is wrong (See Or Hachaim Behukotay 26;27).

Desert – Uniqueness of desert is that the place you are in is not the destination. And the more possessions that you have with you, the more difficult it is for you to get out of the desert, to move around, to enjoy your journey. The lighter the better. For you to realize what G-d is saying to you, for you to connect to the Torah He is giving you, you need to travel light. Not to look for more than you have, not to let your eyes search the world around you for more material possessions than you already have, but to keep going in the direction of your destination. From the person's first day in this world, he is walking towards death, toward Olam Haba. Life is a journey. And only when you accept that, can you taste the sweetness of Torah and really connect.

So, here are the Selfie Steps. The self-help steps to Sweetness of Torah.

Water – Humility, Thirst. **Fire** – Recognizing that the Torah we learn is our flashlight, a beacon of clarity in a confusing world. **Desert** – Not taking this world seriously. But taking the destination seriously.

BIRDFATE

At the end of a thirteen-year cave life, R' Shimon Bar Yochai sat at the entrance to what had been his "home". He saw a hunter who was setting up a bird

trap. The hunter scattered some seeds, so that birds would be attracted to the trap, going for the bait. R Shimon noticed that some birds would come close

and almost get trapped. At that critical moment for the bird's life, R Shimon heard a Heavenly voice. When he heard "Dimos", "Mercy" the bird's life was saved; if the Voice said "Spekila", "Death," that bird would get caught!

R Shimon learned a great life's lesson from this: If a bird does not die unless there is a decree from Heaven ... surely a human, who does not move his finger down here without it having been decreed from Above, will not die without it having been decreed!

That is when R Shimon left the cave. (Yerushalmi Shivit 9; 1) When he realized that *he is protected*. *And not because he protected himself*. Not because he was hiding out in some cave.

We are all like those birds. If you are successful, popular, healthy - if your children are doing great, if you are able to grow spiritually, it is because there was a Heavenly voice that called out Dimos - Mercy. If you can't make ends meet, if you are not doing well socially, if there are health problems, if children are not bringing you Nachat, if you are not living up to your spiritual standard, it is because there was a Heavenly voice that called out ...

Shemitta is a whole year dedicated to internalizing *I am protected, and not because I protected myself*. וְכִי תֵאמְרוּ מִה־נֶאֱכַל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע וְלֹא נֶאֱסַף אֶת־חִבּוֹאֵתֵינוּ: *And if you will ask, what will we eat in the seventh year, if we are neither planting nor harvesting our grains?!!* We can't plow, we can't tend to our fields and orchards. This year, no one can work in agriculture -one of the main sources of income for the country. A whole year of economic crisis!!

The Netziv asked the obvious question. In the seventh year, the silos are full from the sixth! Why is he crying out from anxiety that he won't have food in the seventh year? I could understand his worry for the eighth year, but why worry for the seventh??

The Netziv answers with an eye-opener. The poor are not worried about their financial state as much

as the rich. The poor are used to not having bread for tomorrow, and they are used to having miracles for breakfast, lunch or supper, whenever G-d gives them food.

But the rich, successful farmer who works hard for his bread, got used to the false belief, *I am protected, because I protected myself*. This can be a great cause of anxiety. *This year, I cannot protect myself!! What will I do?* Only after the seventh year, when he sees that he is protected, and *not* because he protected himself, will he not worry about the eighth year... He will not ask, "What will I eat in the eighth?"

We like to feel in control, so our natural instincts would rather that we feel safe, feel protected, *because I protected myself*. This may be the reason why it is easier for us to see this truth in others than to internalize it in ourselves. R Shimon and his son had tried leaving the cave a year earlier, but then, they felt indignation at seeing people busy working for their livelihood instead of spending their time learning Torah. After all, R' Shimon and his son believed that G-d supports those who do His will; their work can be done through gentiles. A burning fire consumed every field they looked at. A Heavenly voice came out and said, "Did you come out to destroy My world?! Go back into your cave!!!" They returned to the cave for another 12 months. R' Shimon practiced his belief regarding others, but when it came to himself, hiding from the Romans in a cave, he needed to internalize it even more. He needed to learn it from the birds.

This core belief is something we need to learn from the world around us. Below are the selfie steps, the self-help steps that can help one internalize this belief.

SELFIE STEPS

The belief that *I am protected, and not because I protect myself* is something that is difficult to internalize if we cannot conceptualize it. I need to mention a joke that my Rebbi told me many times. We might already know the joke, so it won't sound

so funny. But what is funny is that we are the person in the joke, way too often.

A non-religious driver in Tel Aviv has difficulty finding a parking spot. He goes around the block a few times, but every space is taken, even the parking on the sidewalk. He is late for his meeting. He turns to G-d and says, "Master of the world! If you find me a parking spot, I swear to You that I will put on Tefillin today!" As he turns the corner for the fifth time, there it is! An open parking spot! He turns to G-d and says, "Thank you G-d, but no need to find me a parking spot. I managed without You." Try to find all the times in your life that you were similar to that Tel Aviv driver, write them all down, and laugh at yourself.

Sometimes we need concrete tools to internalize a new belief. Here is a tool I adapted from a self-assessment checklist to assist pilots in determining their own physical and mental health before a flight. The *I'M SAFE Checklist* is taught early in-flight training and is used throughout a pilot's professional career to assess their overall readiness for flight when it comes to Illness, Medication, Stress, Alcohol, Fatigue, and Emotion. If we want to fly above the emotional potholes in life, we need to assess our overall readiness for life, with a different *I'M SAFE Checklist*.

I Identify the stressor. What is really bothering you? What are you really anxious about?

M Make a plan and a prayer. If you prepare ahead of time for important events and make plans, you may not have to cope with as much stress later. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. If you realize that you are dependent on G-d, it will now be easier for you to connect to Him in your prayers, before you are approaching a stressful situation.

S Stop interacting with the stressor, if possible. Even if it is just to take a few seconds' time out, before dealing with the stressful situation. Taking some deep breaths can be enough to keep you calm.

A Air. Watch how you breathe. Air flows in and out of your body. Even without your deciding to breathe, G-d makes you keep breathing. You can't stop breathing even if you want to, because G-d is constantly breathing life into you, from birth, until your last day. Inhaling and exhaling slowly is a great way to blow the stress out of your body, to become calmer and more relaxed.

F Focus on all the times that things "worked out" for you, in ways that were better than your wildest dreams! On all those "parking spots" that G-d helped you find.

E Exercise. Preferably swimming. If not swimming, brisk walking. 30 minutes of exercise a day will release endorphins, and help you relax. These are great times for you to meditate on mantras like, "I am protected, and not because I protected myself".

I was actually very stressed after I put my thoughts onto paper. I identified the stressor. I needed to give two important Torah classes, and I did not have the time to be as prepared as I usually am. So, in my mind, I quickly made a plan of the ideas that I have been thinking about, and how I could convey those ideas in the most appealing way to my audience. And then, I made my prayer, that whatever happens should be for the best.

I stopped thinking that I do not have enough content, and that I am not ready for the class. I started taking deep breaths and realizing how my breathing and my thinking are in the hands of G-d. I focused on all the classes I have given that came out amazing, even when I was not prepared as much as I believed is important. And I did all this as I was walking to my class.

B'h. The ideas came to me. Those classes ended up being from the best I have ever given. When you knock down the walls of stress, it clears the way for good ideas to flow freely, for it clears the way for the belief "I am protected, and not because I protected myself."

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IN LOVING MEMORY OF SONNY AND IRENE GINDI A"H