



Shavuoth



English version

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## THE ART OF TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIPS

The time is perfect for Mashiach to come. Israel cannot put together a government, and after four rounds of voting, no one here in Israel has the energy to vote a fifth time. The government is a joke. אין בן דוד בא עד שתכלה מלכות הזולה מישראל (Mashiach) Ben David will not come until the low-value kingdom finishes from Israel. (Sanhedrin 98a) The Mashiach will come in the merit of 45 tzaddikim, and we just lost 45 tzaddikim in Meron. (Ben Ish Chai, Rosh Hashana; fourth chapter) This is the year תשפ"א, of מאשפת ירים אביון. *G-d will lift the impoverished of merit from the rubbish heap.* We are in Erev Shmittah, and the Talmud teaches that the 6<sup>th</sup> year, there will be "Sounds", the Seventh year will be wars, and in the Eighth year, Mashiach will come. In the ninth chapter of Zecharia, four pessukim before the passuk mentions how Mashiach will arrive on a donkey, the passuk says. תָּרָא אֲשַׁקְלוֹן וְתִירָא וְעֵזָרָה וְתַחֲתִיל מְאֹד וְעַקְרוֹן כִּי־הוֹבִישׁ מִבְּטָחָה וְאָבֵד מְלֶכֶךְ מְעֵזָה וְאֲשַׁקְלוֹן לֹא תִשָּׁב: *Ashkelon shall see and fear, and Gaza - and [she] shall quake violently-and Ekron, for the one to whom she looked was ashamed. And a king was lost from Gaza, and Ashkelon shall not be inhabited...* , וְהִכַּרְתִּי גִזְזוֹן פְּלִשְׁתִּים, *and I will cut off the pride of the Philistines.* I am not sure what it means, but before Mashiach comes, there will be a lot of fear and violent quaking in Gaza and Ashkelon, and there will be no ruler in Gaza. This week, the world witnessed a fire on Temple Mount, and as we say in our prayers of Tisha B'av in the blessing of Nachem, כִּי אֲתָה ה' בְּאֵשׁ הַצַּתָּהּ. וּבְאֵשׁ אֲתָה, *Because you Hashem in fire you burnt*

the Temple, and in fire, You will, in the future, rebuild it. So, why isn't Mashiach here yet?

There were times in the past that were appropriate for Mashiach to come, but we missed the opportunity. When we said Kaddish and answered Amen, we did not intend to ask for G-d's Name to be great, for Mashiach to come. We wanted the world to be "back to normal," to return to the lifestyles we were used to, for *us* to become great, *not* G-d. We did not want Mashiach to come for the sake of G-d's Kingship or for the sake of our being vessels to bring G-dliness to the world.

There are two types of relationships. There is a one-way relationship, and there is a two-way relationship. The reason why Mashiach is not here yet is because we want a one-way relationship with G-d. You could be talking to G-d, saying אַתָּה-YOU, countless times a day, and not even think for a moment that G-d is right there, in front of you, and you are talking to Him. If you would realize this, just once, you would faint.

G-d hates one-way relationships. G-d tells us why He does not answer our prayers, וְהָיָה כְּאֲשֶׁר־קָרָא וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ בְּן יִקְרָאוּ וְלֹא אֶשְׁמָע *And it came about; as He called and they did not listen, so shall they call and I will not listen...*(Zecharia 7;13) The reason why He does not answer our prayers, is because we do not listen to His messages. G-d sends us messages, and we are not listening. Our hearts are closed. There is nobody home. So, G-d is not answering our prayers, either. G-d keeps talking to us. A



person can learn Torah, as if it is an intellectual challenge, but never once realize that it is G-d, TALKING TO YOU! As we bless before learning Torah המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל, the One who teaches Torah to His nation Israel. We were thrown out of our Land because we did not bless the blessing of the Torah before learning. (Bava Metziyah 85b) Not because we were not learning Torah. It was all because of **how** we learned Torah. We learned Torah, but we did not internalize that G-d is talking to us in our deepest consciousness. We thought learning Torah was building knowledge, sharpening our minds, and, simply, how we live our everyday lives. But real Torah learning is not about building YOU. It is about building eternal, spiritual skyscrapers and the eternal you,... והיי אלעזר, אמר רבי חנינא, תלמידי חכמים מרבים שלום בעולם, שנאמר "וכל בניך לימודי ה' ורב שלום בניך", אל תקרי בניך בויך.. What does this even mean?

G-d gave us 365 negative commandments, one for each limb of our body, so that even if the limb dies after 120, spiritually, the limb will live on. 365 negative commandments, one for each day of the year, so that, by keeping the commandment, the day doesn't ever "pass away", but remains eternal. This is what the Torah is about, freeing you from the curse of humanity, from death. "והלוחות מעשה אלקים המה והמכתב מכתב אלקים הוא חרות על הלוחות", אל תקרא חרות אלא חירות, שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה... *The only one who is a free man is the one who deals with Torah study.* (Avot 6;2) By making each limb, each day, holy, you build your eternal self, because you took this world and you made it holy. G-d is waiting for us to build spirituality so that we are ready for the Bet Hamikdash, the epitome of spiritual transformation, the purpose of Creation.

This is the reason we have two meals on Shavuot, one Meat and one Dairy. Because if you count the negative commandments, you will see that the negative commandment of לא־תִבְשֵׁל גְדִי בַחֲלֵב אִמּוֹ not to eat Meat with Milk, is Negative commandment number 65. If you count from the first day of the year, first of Nissan, day 65 is... the day of Shavuot! We have two meals to show that we don't eat these two together. This way, we make the day eternal by keeping the commandment of the day. The commandment, the מצווה, is from the word צוותא, an immortal, spiritual bond.

Shavuot is not just the *end* of a seven-week count. Shavuot is eternal; it is the holiday of two "oaths". We are making a vow to G-d, and G-d is making an oath to us. This is our wedding anniversary, בַּעֲטֻרָה שֶׁעֲטָרָהּ לּוֹ אִמּוֹ בְּיוֹם חֲתֻמָּתוֹ וּבְיוֹם שִׁמְתַתּוֹ לְבָנוֹ *The crown that the Jewish Nation crowned Him on the day of His wedding, the day of our accepting the Torah.* (Taanit 4;8) וְאָרְשָׁתֶיךָ לִי, לְעוֹלָם G-d swears that He will be married to us, forever. We count 49 days, out of anticipation of this marriage, of this two-way commitment.

If we stay up the whole Shavuot night learning without one word of interruption, we are promised that we will not die this year, and that no harm will befall us all year long. (Arizal; Shaar Hakavanot) Why does learning on the night of Shavuot, specifically, save you from death?

As we said, Shavuot is the marriage, and if we show G-d we want to spend the night with Him, we show that we are in on this relationship thing, in this two-way relationship; we are in on this marriage. Why is marriage called נישואין, with the root of נשא, which means to lift? What are we uplifting when we get married? *On the night of the wedding, G-d forgives the groom for all of his sins, even if he sinned like Esav.* (Yerushalmi Bikurim 3) Why??

Marriage can only work when you rise above yourself, and when you rise above your nature, when you go from being a one-way-relationship personality to a two-way-relationship personality;

when you are willing to give up something that is important to you for the sake of something greater than you. Marriage means giving up of yourself for the sake of a greater you, an eternal you, for the you that will live on in your children after you die, and that is something that is considered a valid reason for G-d to forgive you for everything wrong you've ever done. The Torah refers to a woman as שאר, the remainder (see Vayikra 21;2), because marriage is about leaving a remainder of yourself after you pass on. That is the mission of a woman, and she is hardwired physically and emotionally to give her husband eternity. Man must accord his wife the ultimate respect, for giving him a chance to be eternal. This is why we read Ruth on Shavuoth, because it is the story of Naomi living on, eternally, through Ruth, after Naomi was gone, as is clear from how the story begins and ends. Torah is about building eternal, spiritual skyscrapers by living a Torah-infused lifestyle. Staying up learning all night on Shavuoth is about rising above yourself, for this eternal bond, something greater than life itself.

On Shavuot and every holiday, we pray, והשיאנו, uplift us from who we are, from our one-way relationships. From our closed hearts. פתח לבנו פתח לבנו Open our Hearts with Your Torah. It does not say, פתח לבנו לתורתך, Open our hearts to learn your Torah, because the focus of the prayer and the purpose of the Torah is to open the heart, to build a two-way, eternal, relationship. הרחמן הוא יפתח לבנו

### THE ART OF DEPENDENCY

Each day, in the blessing before Shema, we pray to G-d that we be connected to Him and His Torah. We ask for this connection, in the merit of our ancestor's Bitachon, their trust in G-d. בעבור אבותינו ... כי בשם קדשך הגדול הגבור והנורא בטחנו. *In the merit of our Forefathers that trusted in You... for in Your holy, great and mighty Name, we trusted...* Where do we see that the Jewish people merited the Torah, or a connection with G-d, in the merit of trust in G-d?

Another question. The Torah was given to us in the Desert. The Baal Haturim derives from this an

בתורתו. Help us get back into a relationship with You. The place to build this relationship is inside our hearts. This eternalness, the way to bring our Mashiach and for G-d to rebuild His Temple depends on our opening our hearts through Torah learning and a two-way relationship.

Selfie steps to get into the zone of a two-way relationship with G-d:

1. Constantly work on going against your grain for Him. The relationship is "built" from many pieces, from a lifestyle, not from a one-time act.
2. Always approach your relationship with Him from a position of gratitude.
3. Make a prayer, before prayer, to have proper concentration while praying. This is what is meant when it says, (Berachot 30b) חסידים הראשונים היו שוהין שעה א' ומתפללים כדי שיכוונו לבם לאביהם שבשמים *The original pious men would wait one hour before praying, so that their prayers would be focused to their Father in Heaven.* The Kotzker points out that it should have said שוהין שעה אחת ואחר כך מתפללים They would wait one hour and then pray. From this we can understand that in the "hour wait" before prayer, *they would offer supplication, asking to have concentration in their prayers.*

important lesson. *The only way a person can know the Torah and its mitzvot is if he makes himself like a desert.* What does this mean, to make yourself like a dessert? How do you make yourself like a desert? What was special about the Desert that made it iconic for Torah learning and connecting to G-d? And why did G-d give us the Torah in the Desert and not in the Holy Land, the land where the 613 are most relevant?

Yirmiyahu told us what G-d said when he reminisces about the Jewish People, and the kindness He received from them: **כֹּה אָמַר יְקִיָּקָה זְבַרְתִּי**

לָךְ חֲסֵד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֶהְבֵּת כְּלוּלְתֶיךָ לְכַתּוּב אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאַרְצִי לֹא זָרַעְתָּ (Yirmiyahu 2;2) So said YKVK, “I remembered for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days, your going after me in the Desert, in a barren land. The Abudraham explains that the Desert is the icon of ultimate faith in G-d for survival. As the Mechilta explains the passuk that describes how we left Egypt וְגַם צָדָה לָהֶם לֹא-עָשׂוּ לָהֶם *And, also provisions they did not make for themselves.* (Shemot 12) The Jews left Egypt without packing food, totally relying on G-d and His messenger Moshe. This is the lesson of the Desert and what makes it have such pivotal importance. That you rely on G-d, without anything else to rely on. The whole Torah revolves upon total trust in G-d. The Vilna Gaon teaches that if you do not totally trust G-d, you cannot keep His Torah. This is the secret and the power of the magical words our nation said at Har Sinai when we accepted the Torah, נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע. We will do, and we will listen—total dependency on G-d.

The Torah was given to a united nation. וַיִּזְחַן שָׁם *And he, Yisrael, camped there, opposite the mountain.* Our Rabbis deduced from the singular form of the word, “And **he** camped there,” that the Jews achieved an extraordinary level of unity—כֵּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלִב אֶחָד Like one man, with one heart.

The only way to be one as a nation is with faith. You can never serve G-d with all your heart if you do not believe that the life He gave you, the strengths and weaknesses that make you unique, are all because this is your custom-tailored life’s mission to perfect your soul. This is the idea of the encampment in the Desert and the *Degalim*, the flags: each one has his place in the circle. The concept of the circle is that each person is equally distant from the center and has his unique place as part of a bigger picture. And the idea of the flags is that you know your G-d given identity and are proud of it. All of these are concepts of faith.

This answers the second question, as well. If G-d would give the Torah in the Holy Land, when each person sits under his grapevine or fig tree, that

would not be G-d’s Torah. Torah, in all of its 613, is about connecting with G-d, relying on him. The whole Torah is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and the Ten Commandments are capsulized in the last of the ten, ***Do not covet.*** (Vilna Gaon) You cannot hold yourself back from jealousy if you do not have faith. It is emotionally impossible. Your friend’s wife, his house, his car, and everything that is his are irrelevant. You cannot have a healthy marriage without faith. R’ Chaim Vital in Shaarei Kedusha writes that the woman that G-d arranged for you is the only woman in the world who will help you perfect yourself.

You cannot educate your child to become a Torah Jew if you are not living with faith. Rashi in Shir Hashirim (4;5) mentions that a man who is jealous of others will cause his son to curse him and respect men other than his own father. Why is this the punishment, measure for measure? Because if you don’t believe that you have what you have only because G-d gave it to you, you do not believe that your son is the son that G-d gave you! What an insult to your son!

The Halacha in Shulhan Aruch is that a person should set aside a set time for Torah study and not give up this set time, even if it entails the loss of a significant profit. You obviously cannot get a set time for Torah study in your schedule, if you are not a master of faith.

The whole Torah is about bringing G-d into every core belief that you have. Accepting the Torah is step two to Exodus, for only after you believe that there is no other power in the universe other than Him, can you truly accept the Torah. This concept of ultimate faith, that everything is from G-d, and that there are no other powers in the world, is not only the pivotal point of the whole Torah. It is the most amazing Segulah. If we believe in Him, with all of our hearts, nothing bad will ever happen to us. (Nefesh Hachaim) King David promises the one that trusts in G-d will be surrounded with G-d’s kindness. וְהַבּוֹשֵׁת בַּיהוָה חֲסֵד יְסֻבְּכֶנָּה



Here are the selfie steps to dependency:

1. People see G-d every day; they just don't recognize Him. To the hungry, He appears as bread. To the fearful, He appears as courage. To the sick, He appears as health. To those who live in the past or in the future, He appears as the present. G-d gave you a gift of 86,400 seconds today. Use at least one to say thank You.
2. Allow all that you have seen to teach you to trust the Creator, for all you have not seen. Awareness of the Creator in past and present is what develops dependency on Him, for the future. *If you have bread in your basket for today, and you ask where will I have bread for tomorrow, you are lacking in faith. (R' Eliezer HaGadol, Sotah 48b)*
3. Take one day at a time. G-d meets daily needs, daily. Not weekly or annually. He will give you what you need, when it is needed. He made the world round, so we would never be able to see too far down the road.
4. Realize that your whole world depends on you, and you depend on G-d. Dependency on Him is the yellow-brick road to true independence.

### THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

The atheist believes that the world happened on its own and has no purpose. He believes we are here to survive, to make the best of it. Those who believe in G-d, though, have a question to answer: What is the purpose of Creation? What is its meaning? There are a lot of answers. Every religion has its own answer, its own belief. What is Judaism's belief?

On Friday night, over a brimming cup of wine, we recite Kiddush. We stand, while testifying that G-d created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. There are many who begin Kiddush with the last two words of the *passuk* before *Vaychulu - Yom Hashishi- Vaychulu Hashamayim...* On the sixth day. And He finished the Heavens and the Earth...

There is not even one extra letter in the Torah. Why does the Torah refer to *Yom Shishi* "sixth day" as "*Yom Hashishi*," the sixth day? Our Rabbis derive that *the* sixth day, is referring to the sixth day of the month of Sivan, which is Shavuot, the day we accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai. G-d created the Universe on condition that the Jews accept the Torah on that sixth day of Sivan. If not, the Universe would revert to nothingness. (Shabbat 88a)

How can we understand that G-d, epitome of kindness, would destroy the world, if no nation accepted the Torah? Doesn't our kind G-d want to be good to us and give us a world of pleasure? Even if it is only materialistic, not spiritual, pleasure?

The question is not a question. A world of material pleasure alone, devoid of spirituality, is life without meaning. Material pleasure is short – lived. You blink, and it's gone. Such a world is already a world of nothingness, *Tohu Vabohu*, because it has no point, no purpose. It is like a wedding without a bride. A Brit Milah without a baby. A Shabbat table without Kiddush. There is no meaning, just make merry, make merry. Being on this lifelong merry-go-round doesn't make sense. Work to make money, Money to buy food, Food to give Energy, Energy to go Work, Work to make Money, etc. etc. It is like chewing flavorless chewing gum. A world without Torah, a universe without a purpose, is an absurdity. No point. Why bother? Who is G-d being kind to by keeping Planet Earth spinning? The Universe would go back to nothingness without Torah, because a world without a reason to live, a world without a purpose to die, is not a world that's worth spinning.



We remind ourselves daily of the answer to this fundamental question when we recite in our prayers: *Baruch Elokeinu Shebraanu Lichbodo...* Blessed is our G-d, Who has created us for His Honor ... and Who has given us the Torah of truth, and instilled in us everlasting life (World to Come). These are the purposes of Creation. To honor G-d, to learn Torah and

to elevate the physical world, by living a life of purpose and meaning. Out of His infinite kindness, G-d created the Universe so that we could have a good, meaningful time with Him in our lives down here, and afterwards, we could enjoy being with Him up there. So, have a good time. Just don't leave G-d out!

## MORE PRECIOUS THAN PEALS

There is a custom to read Megillath Ruth on Shavuoth. What is the meaning of this custom? There are different reasons. Here is a thought I had.

Our Rabbis teach that a Talmid Hacham who is a *mamzer* deserves more respect than a Kohen Gadol who is a simpleton. This is learnt from the passuk *יְקָרָה ה'יָא מִפְּנִיָּים* which literally means that Torah is more valuable than pearls. (Mishlei 3; 15) Our Rabbis ask, how could the value of Torah even be compared to the value of pearls, something which is merely material? From here, the Rabbis read this passuk with a unique twist, to teach us something amazing. The Torah is more valuable than *לפני* *ולפניו*, the Holy of Holies. (Horayut 13a; Sotah 4b) Imagine, after Covid-19, we are all standing inside the Beit Hamikdash on Yom Kippur, and before the Kohen Gadol enters the Holy of Holies, he comes to you and asks you if you want him to pray for your loved ones while inside. And you tell him, *"No, it's okay. I already have some Yeshiva students learning in our merit. But thanks! What?!"* That's right! The Torah is greater than the Holy of Holies.

In the times when the words that compare the Torah to entering the Holy of Holies were written, entering the Holy of Holies was an experience of magnitude that people today cannot even imagine. There are far fewer things today that people are passionate about, far less concepts of issues of great significance and value. For many, being at the Super Bowl or the World Series is the most exciting and biggest event that their minds can conceive of. But whatever the greatest experience

you can possibly imagine, learning Torah is greater.

Life is like a parachute jump: you have to get it right the first time. We all have one life to live. Make sure you live life to the fullest. Bronnie Ware, an Australian palliative care nurse, wrote a book *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying*. She's noticed themes and trends among people whom she's assisted. Here are the top five life regrets, according to Ware. *I wish I had let myself be happier. I wish I hadn't worked so hard. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.*

Whenever I want to clarify what is most important in life, I do futuristic regretful thinking. What is it that I will regret, one day. The greatest regret of the Torah Jew is going to be not learning or teaching more Torah, not doing more Mitzvoth, not trusting in G-d more. This explains the law of *loeg larash*, not to wear tzitzit strings openly in the cemetery so as not to cause jealousy to the dead: you can visit the cemetery with your Lamborghini car, wearing a Patek Philippe watch, a Brioni suit, Ferragamo shoes and belt. This does not make the dead there jealous whatsoever. But if your tzitzit string is sticking out, this is jealousy they cannot handle! There is nothing more that the dead want in the cemetery than being able to wear tzitzit, put on tefillin, or learn another few words of Torah!! (Berachot 18a)

At the peak of the love story in between the Jewish Nation and G-d, G-d gives us the Torah. The Torah is not just a book that He gave to His Beloved, the Jewish Nation. It is not just an instruction manual how to live. It is life itself. כי הם היינו ואורך ימינו. Without Torah, you have no life, no meaning to it all. There is nothing more precious than Torah.

This is why we read the story of Ruth the royal princess, granddaughter of King Eglon, who converted. She gave it all up, for the Torah. Literally. She was willing to move to the Holy Land with Naomi and start from the bottom, with nothing. Because she knew that the only way to live with meaning, and the only way to die with meaning, is as a Torah Jew. יקרה היא מפנינים.

One of the reasons why we eat a dairy meal on Shavuoth is because the word for cheese, in Hebrew, is גבינה. Mt. Sinai had five names, one of which was הר גבונים. Why was it called that name? The word גבנה means hump, or peak: this was the peak of all experiences. The Torah refers to a hunchback as a גבן, because of the hump in his back, sharing the root of the word גבוה. Although

### THE BORSALINO BLUFF

At the Shabbat table last week, I played a game with my children. I started off with a fill-in-the-blank statement, and they needed to generate more sentences using the same line.

*With money, you can buy a clock, but not time.  
With money, you can buy medicine, but not health.  
With money, you can buy a mansion, but not tranquility at home. With money, you can buy a bed, but not a good night's sleep...*

Maybe you can add some, yourself.

My 12-year-old son had a great filler. "With money, you can buy a *streimel*, Borsalino black hat or a yarmulke, but not Fear of Heaven." His older brother added, "With money, you can buy *sefarim*, but not Torah knowledge."

At the end of the day, everything valuable has a price, and to achieve your desired life value, you

Har Sinai was not the tallest of mountains, but it was given that name for it brought to the world the way to live a life of peak performance, by living a life of Torah. This is the lesson of Ruth. This is the lesson of Shavuoth.

Here are the Selfie Steps to keep Torah life your highest priority in life:

1. Ask yourself each day, "What am I willing to die for? What am I willing to live life for, even if it is not the life I wished for?"
2. What am I going to regret on my last days, at my last breaths?
3. Why am I living a life of an Orthodox Jew? Why did my ancestors give up so much to live an Orthodox life?
4. G-d gave me, is giving me, and will give me, so much. How can I get to know Him better through His Torah?

usually need to pay the price in full, and in advance. The price of health is usually proper eating habits, exercise, sleep, doctor visits, and stress management. The price of a tranquil home is making it home for dinner, Triple A (Attention, Affection, and Appreciation), filling your family's needs and stress management. The price of a good night's sleep is time management, family management, digital management, and you guessed it: stress management. Most of the time, people are readily willing to pay the price of external things, like money, resources, and other "things," than they are willing to pay the price of those really personal sacrifices. i.e., letting go of the past, admitting mistakes, adapting patience, ignoring comments, and tapping into the trait of resourcefulness.

But what is the price you need to pay to become a *Talmid Chacham*? Is it just getting a big fat *Oz*

*Vehadar Gemarah*, a good study partner, a good seat in the Beit Midrash, and getting into a top shiur?

The ingredients to bake a *Talmid Chacham* is in the *Mishna*, in the last chapter of *Avot*,(6;5) that lists the 48 קניינים, or ways to acquire Torah. If you are a yeshiva student, and you do not know that list well and are not working on it, it is like driving your car without any motor oil. You will burn out your engine before you reach your desired destination. If you are learning and not becoming wise, not seeing success, I guarantee you that most probably you are missing at least one of those 48 ingredients. The Talmud teaches that a person can know that he will not be successful in learning, if after five years of learning he did not yet see any positive results (Hullin 24a). But until you keep to those 48 things, you have never really given yourself a chance. You have never started your 5 years.

One of my favorites is Brian Tracy's book "21 Secrets of the Self-made Millionaire." It really spells out - in a concise and clear way - the main traits of those who became wealthy. When coaching people for making a livelihood, I know that none of these 21 traits can be missing to attain true financial success. You see, these ingredients are the basic ingredients; if you do not follow them, if you do not enter all of the missing ingredients into your dough, if you did not follow the instructions, you have never really tried to bake your *parnassah* cake.

If you want to become a *Talmid Chacham*, you need to view your learning like a business man views his business. People who made money, worked hard to make money. In the Torah world, people are commonly referred to as either a "working guy" or a "learning guy." This black and white thinking works against us, because the words of our inner lexicon pave the pathways of our thinking. These two life "situations," learning or working, are not mutually exclusive. Even if you are a learning guy, your learning will not be

fruitful, if you do not relate to your learning as if you are working.

People who made money did not need their money to make their initial money, but their work ethic was their key to success. Many got up at 5 a.m. to maximize their workday, beat traffic and capitalize on those morning hours, when focusing is so much easier. The rule of 40+ hours a week says that you need to spend more time than the average 40 hours a week of work, to be ahead of the business game and attain wealth. You need to work all the time you work, with a minimum of socializing, as that can be a formidable source of procrastination. The people who are in the really high-income brackets of self-earned wealth practice frugality, questioning every expenditure. One such wealthy man I personally know, does not allow the secretaries in his office to print on only one side of a piece of paper, just to keep the frugality atmosphere in the office. These are all just a few of the ingredients of the self-made millionaire. And the same is true in acquiring Torah.

Successful students come to the study hall on time and leave on time, without wasting a minute in between, just as if they are at work. No socializing. They come earlier than expected and leave after everyone else. They are willing to give up worldly pleasures, practicing frugality, and they are willing to pay the price of the 48 characteristics one needs in order to become a *Talmid Chacham*.

It is not one specific ingredient of the 48 ingredients that makes the *Talmid Chacham*. It is what Brian Tracy calls the Law of Integrated Complexity. The more strengths, knowledge and resources you integrate into your business model, the greater the sum total of your performance. The total becomes greater than the sum of its individual parts. The more skills a person has – the better and more proficient the all-around successful will be.

The same is true in regards to your performance in learning Torah. The more you acquire from these 48 ingredients, the more unstoppable you become.



## WISHING TO BE A JANITOR

Shavuoth is more than a holiday. It is a day of judgment. The Talmud tells us that the world is judged on Shavuoth, regarding the trees (Rosh Hashana 16a). We know, כי האדם עץ השדה *For Man is the tree of the field* (Shoftim 20;19). According to the Zohar, the fruits of the tree are the souls. Your soul is being judged on this day, as to exactly how much wisdom it will attain. How much you will be able to learn and accept wisdom from others (Sfas Emes).

I asked my students this question on their last test: "What does it mean to you, accepting the Torah on Shavuoth?" It's very interesting. Each one had his own answer, and they were all right. How so? I asked my Rabbi this last Shabbat, what does it mean that we are judged on Shavuoth. In what ways are we accepting the Torah on Shavuot? He answered me with something he heard from his Rabbi. Each person has his own portion of Torah. On the day of Shavuoth, you will be judged, a verdict is given to decide exactly how much Torah you will merit. He continued, that this concept is very real. This is why, he said, we read in the Torah right before Rosh Hashana of this Shavuoth, the curses of *Parashat Beha'alotcha*. תכלה שנה וקללותיה. So that the last year, and its curses, should be over. So that we can start a new year of wisdom. Similar to the concept that we have the curses of *Parashat Ki Tavo* before Rosh Hashana of Tishrei. That there also, before the judgment of the year we hope that the curses will be left behind in the past year, תכלה שנה וקללותיה.

To me, this concept - that everyone has their portion in Torah, is a very personal concept. With Hashem's help, I merited teaching and learning with people who would not have learned, otherwise. People who had never been able to learn Torah found that they could connect with it, when I used this approach. The reason why sometimes people fail in Kiruv is because they come with the approach, "join me," or "follow me." But the real approach in Kiruv is to get a person one step

closer, from wherever he is, to the Jew he wants to be. Not copying or following.

With this belief in mind, I never tried to persuade anyone. I just understood what the person I was learning with wanted, and helped him get to the next step. By discovering together with them, that person's unique next step, what he was able to access from his individual place, made it easier for him to get there. The same holds true for our children, when we help them get closer to G-d. Each and every one has his own special portion of Torah. His/her own next step.

As I write this article, I am all "Charlie horse." Literally. I just took my students for two hours of horseback riding, right outside Jerusalem, during the afternoon break, rewarding them for a test they all passed. During the horseback riding, the one giving us the tour was not letting the horses gallop, but just trot or canter. Some of the boys were getting frustrated. They wanted to gallop and go much faster. So, some of the boys, and I, as well, kept asking the leader if we could pick up speed. But he did not want to go any faster than 20 kmh, on the hilly paths on the outskirts of Jerusalem. At the end, he sat us all down, and said that the fastest these horses could go is 60 kmh. But we were not experienced riders, and he would be responsible if anything happened, and if something would happen, he would be thrown in jail. It was his responsibility to gauge our level of experience, and in accordance, gave us the best speed he could. He even prided himself in being able to pick out the right horse for each person's build and strength.

Everyone has his own unique portion of Torah, and if they go too fast, or they learn something they don't connect to, they can fall off and get hurt. We need to learn and know, how to find our portion of Torah; what is just right for each person.

As a matter of fact, one person I learn with has the attitude that whenever he is not interested in something, he tells me, "Rabbi, let's skip this. Next subject." I asked R Yehuda Ades, *shlit"a*, what to



do about this, as sometimes I prepared a particular lesson, thinking it was important for this specific person. R Ades told me, “Listen to the student. Move on.” Find his portion in Torah.

עקב תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהילת יעקב *Moshe commanded us the Torah, an inheritance for the community of Yaakov*. The Talmud takes a twist on the word מורשה, inheritance, and says it means מאורסה, an engaged woman, instead. Each and every Jew is naturally *engaged* to his own portion in Torah, but not everyone is *married* to their portion in Torah. The way to marry your portion in Torah is by dedicating yourself to it (Pesachim 49b see Maharsha). Making your own personal learning goals. Just like if you want to build a relationship with your wife, you can't look around and compare her to other women, so too, if you want to build your relationship with your portion in Torah, you need to focus on *your* portion; not on the portion that others around you are choosing. But where your heart takes you. מקום שלבו הפץ. And by doing this, your Torah becomes ובתורתך יהגה. This is why we pray, ותן חלקנו בתורתך. *Give us our portion in Torah*.

Now, of course not everyone can stay in learning. But everyone has his portion of Torah that he needs to develop. Women, too, have certain *halachot* and parts of Torah that they can learn and connect to. They can merit their portion in Torah by being supportive of their husband's and children's

learning (Berachot 17a). You can get your portion by supporting Torah. R H Abulefia in his work, Etz Chaim, writes that the same power that is given to the *Talmid Hacham* for fighting his *Yetzer Hara*, (something he merits for his engrossment in Torah), will equally aid the one who supports him to fight his own *Yetzer Hara*! Because by supporting Torah, you become an equal partner, exactly as if you, yourself were learning.

I remember how my Rosh Yeshiva would tell us how his mother used to pray for every one of her sons; If they don't merit teaching Torah in Yeshiva, and they don't merit supporting Torah financially, that at least, they would be a janitor in the Yeshiva. Each one should merit his *own* portion in Torah.

The biggest problem most people have with connecting to Torah is that they don't realize that there is a portion in the Torah that belongs to them. They do not feel that G-d is talking to them. But the saying goes, *When you pray, you are talking to G-d. When you are learning Torah, G-d is talking to you!* The reason why people who were brought up in the frum system somehow disconnect from Torah is because for too long, they had the mistaken notion that Torah belongs to the Jews, and not to the Jew. Not to me, personally.

We all have our own next step. Our own next step of behavior. Our own next step of understanding. Our own next step of connection.

## COUNTING ON YOU

Parashat Bamidbar begins with the census and the flags. The census was taken of male Jews from age twenty and up, of those eligible for the army. Two concepts are difficult to understand. If the Jews did not have any plans to go to war, what was the purpose of the count? And what is the importance of a detailed description of the flags and formation of the Tribes around the Tabernacle?

The Midrash tells us that when the Jews stood at Mt. Sinai, they saw the skies open up, as the Shechina descended onto the mountain on that 6th

day of Sivan. They did not see the Shechina, G-d's glory; they saw the Merkava, the hundreds of thousands of angels that were surrounding G-d in an orderly fashion. Michael on the right, Gavriel on the left, Raphael behind and Uriel in front. Each of these chief angels stood at the top of a pyramid of “angel troops”. Each troop with its flag. When the Jews saw the honor that the angels give G-d, in troop formation, they also yearned to have flags and troops and to surround the Shechina. They desired to be holy and close to G-d, just like the angels! So, in this week's parasha, G-d granted



their wish. They could have both flags and troops, in formation encircling the Tabernacle. G-d would count them, just as he counts an army. What is the significance of the count?

People count what is important to them. Numbers are used to count money and time, for these are things people value. The more one counts an item, the more he values it. G-d counts His children in the desert, because they are of utmost importance to Him. Each and every Jew. He is forever counting us, because each and every one of us is so, so important to Him. Having just left the darkness of Egyptian slavery, a Jewish slave could have thought, “Does G-d know what I went through? Was He involved with me on a personal level? Does He even know that I exist?”

We are presently in the Facebook exile. To feel good, to feel that I am worth something, I need to be validated, to know that someone values my existence. If no one validates me, how do I know that I have any worth? Well, if you are Jewish, this is not a question, because even if no one

“validates” you, G-d validates you. People today have a hard time believing it, because they did not get “thumbs up” from G-d on Facebook, and because they do not see G-d following them on Twitter.

In light of this, we can understand the flags and the arrangement of the Jewish nation around the Tabernacle. We are the nation that G-d’s glory rests upon, and He is sanctified in this world through us. Each Tribe had its own flag and its special position in the tribe formation around the Tabernacle, symbolizing each Tribe’s identity. Not only does G-d value you, He even values your identity, your traditions, and your family. He is sanctified through so many individuals who all proclaim “G-d is King!” Each and every member of the Jewish Nation is a number in G-d’s count. G-d does not want a big mesh, a faceless conglomeration, because people are different from one another. He appreciates that you are who you are, and that you serve Him with your identity. Because no one can serve Him with your identity the way you can.

## THE SH’LAH ON SHAVUOT

The Sh’lah Hakadosh, on Shavuot, writes something that gives us all a punch. First, he notes that despite its being a day of tremendous happiness for our receiving the Torah, the day of Shavuot is also a day of judgment. Judgment on how much effort we put into our learning, quality and quantity, all year long. This is one reason why we stay up all night learning: to express on this day of judgment that we realize the great importance of learning at night. Then, he lays the punch.

The Midrash says, *R Pinchas, in the name of R Chilkia, said, הקובע עתים לתורה מיפר תורה שנאמר עת* *one who sets aside time for Torah study is annulling Torah, as it says in the passuk, A time to do for Hashem, {literally, but “to do” meaning setting aside a time for your study} is annulling your Torah.* The Sh’lah questions how this is possible, as we know that the first thing a person is asked when he gets up to the Heavenly Court is קבעת עתים לתורה “Did you set aside time

for Torah study?”. If so, how can the Midrash say that if someone sets aside time for Torah study, he is annulling the Torah?

The Sh’lah answers that if someone is not busy working, not a businessman, he is obligated to learn day and night, without stopping for a second, except for the time he needs to pray, eat and sleep. If such a person makes a schedule in which he learns three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon and an hour and a half at night, while the rest of the day not thinking in learning, he is annulling the Torah. For such a person, his whole day should be learning. כי בתורת ה' חפצו ובתורתו יהגה. *Hashem is his desire, and he contemplates Torah learning day and night.* He must always be thinking in learning. The principle of a person being קובע עתים לתורה, having a set time for learning, is reserved for one who is a “working guy”. *He, at least, has to set aside time to learn.* And this is why it says קובע עתים in the

plural, and not קובע עת, in a singular form, to imply that it is not enough to set aside only a “one hour-and-a-half block” of learning. Rather, he should make another seder whenever he does have time. In the car, on the way to work, with his wife at supper and any other opportunity he can take advantage of. Get yourself a time-management coach.

It is interesting how, in life, we get busy all day long taking care of those things that are important and urgent. The things that are just important and not urgent just sit around waiting to be done. It does not make a difference how important something may be; if it is not urgent, it is usually ignored. Included in this group of important and not urgent are our close relationships, health and fitness, organization, and last, but not at all least, setting aside time for learning Torah. If we could just find time somewhere in our schedule for these things, it would add quality to our lives.

When I was a yeshiva bachur, I had such a goal. To always be thinking in learning, wherever I was. An older bachur, a friend, told me to give up such an unrealistic, unattainable goal, for “it will make you crazy.” Only now, I realize how wrong he was. The words והגית בו יומם ולילה “You should think about it day and night”, do not mean that a learning guy has to be thinking stressfully about the hard parts of the Talmud and lose focus on his daily life and responsibilities. It just means thinking about any part of Torah that you can. An idea on the parasha, a thought of mussar, or a story from the Tanach. This is not only a mitzvah, but has a very practical application, as well. I have noticed that when I am under stress or about to get angry, I can avoid both situations if I have something else to focus on. So, I think over what I have learnt that day, and – like a charm – I am able to stay calm.

There is only one way to make time for learning. Mark it not only important, but *urgent* and

important. Stay up all night for it. Do it the first thing on the schedule of the day. This is the only way the learning will get done. And, if it is not getting done, it means ...

My neighbor has a friend, a chassidische friend, that learnt Massechet Shabbat (with Tosefot) a number of times. They both know the Gemarra of Shabbat very well. I liked this American chassidische guy a lot, and every time that he came to visit my neighbor for Shabbat, I enjoyed chatting with him. I asked my neighbor what this guy was up to lately, where he was learning. My neighbor answered that he has gone to work: he became a painter. He paints walls. I could not believe it. I thought that this fellow who loves learning had a future in Torah. I discussed this with my neighbor. He responded, leaving me shocked. “The chassid needs parnassah, to make a living. He wanted to work in something that did not involve his seeing immodest sights, and, because he loves learning so much, he wanted to be able to think in learning while working. He has just made a siyum on Beitzah. He learnt it five times without opening it once. All day, as he paints, he listens on the headphones to daf yomi on Beitzah; he knows it by heart...”

Painting is a job where one could be thinking in learning. Many of the Tanaim and Amoraim had jobs that made it possible to be thinking in learning while working, R' Yochanan Sandlar-shoe maker, R Yitzchak Nafcha – blacksmith, etc. It seems that some people try to learn between working. These people worked *while* learning. Torah is called a song, in the sense that just as when you are walking down the stairs you can sing a tune, you can relate to Torah the same way. Walking down the stairs, in the car, and wherever life takes you...

## 80/ 20

The book of Bamidbar is referred to as the Book of Numbers, because that is how it begins: taking the census of the Jewish people in the desert from the

age 20 and up, the age from which males were eligible for the army. Each tribe was counted separately – from Reuven down to Binyamin, their



numbers ranging from the greatest of the twelve tribes, Yehuda, 74, 600 to Binyamin with 35,400. The sum total of all tribes together was 603,550. All were included in this census, except for the Levite tribe. G-d specifically commanded Moshe to count them separately and in a different way. Males from the tribe of Levi were to be counted from the age of one month. The sum total of the tribe of Levi was a mere 22,000, almost half the smallest of all the other tribes.

The book Shaarei Aharon quotes seven reasons for this large gap between Levi and the other tribes. One interesting approach is a reason offered by the Netziv in Ha'amek Davar. It relates to the pregnancy of Sarah's maidservant Hagar, from her first night with Avraham. *And she saw that she became pregnant, and her mistress (Sarah) became of less importance in her eyes.* Rashi quotes the Midrash Rabbah (Breishit Rabbah 45,4). *"Hagar said to the people: Sarai, my mistress, is not the same on the inside as she appears on the outside. She looks righteous, but she is not. If she were righteous, why did she not get pregnant in the course of so many years, while I became pregnant in one night?"*

The Yeffe To'ar offers an interesting interpretation to this Midrash. Hagar meant to imply that she was praiseworthy; however, the fact that Sarah did not have a child for so long while Hagar conceived immediately was not actually complimentary for Hagar. On the contrary. In order for a Yishmael to be created, no prayers needed to be offered, and no tears needed be shed. But for a Yitschak, who was one of the three Forefathers, tens of childless years, of heartfelt prayers and tears were a prerequisite.

The Midrash continues. No effort is needed to plow and plant thorns. Thorns sprout and grow on their own. But with wheat, one needs to expend a considerable amount of effort before he witnesses the fruits of his labor. The Yeffe Toar explains that things of value are small in number and are achieved only through much toil. This is not so with lower quality and second-grade goods. Hagar, therefore, became pregnant immediately, while for

Sarah, it took time and tears. Because good quality comes infrequently, after toil, tears, and prayers .

The Leviim, the cream of the crop, were a mere 22,000, because quality is always rare. "Precious" implies small in number, few and far between. 22,000 reminds me of the **80-20 rule**, also known as the **law of the vital few**. **The Pareto Principle.** In 1906, Vilfredo Pareto observed that 80 percent of the land in Italy was owned by 20 percent of the population. Pareto developed this idea when he discovered that 20 percent of the pea pods in his garden contained 80 percent of the peas. Management consultant Joseph M Juran applied this principle to business: 80% of a company's profits come from 20% of its customers. 80% of a company's sales are made by 20% of its sales staff. 80% of a company's profits are a product of 20% of the time its staff spends working. 80% of a company's sales come from 20% of its products. Therefore, business consultants recommend focusing one's attention on those 20% of customers, sales reps, and products that account for 80% of the income.

The Leviim were those 20% who could be relied upon to bring G-d's Glory unto the nation. They did not sin in the incident of the Golden Calf and responded Moshe's plea to eradicate the idolaters from amongst the nation. They were counted separately from the rest of the nation, because they were the 20 percent who kept the Jewish people true to their steadfast faith in G-d.

Pareto's Principle is equally applicable to spiritual perfection. It is not about how many mitzvot one can perform. It is about that one mitzvah that you can do with all of your heart. It is not how many students the Rabbi has that defines or measures his success as a Rabbi. Sometimes, it is just that one student. All the Arizal's teachings were written by one student, R' Chaim Vital. And of all R' Akiva's 24,000 students, only five transmitted the Torah to the next generation.

In learning and studying, I have found this to be true as well. When you are unable to understand



something, it is wise to focus on the 20% of the learning that you do understand well. This will help you comprehend the other 80%. Try to memorize 20% of the information, the main points, and through associations you will be able to recall the

other 80%. Focusing on the opening and closing of each Beracha (about 20% of the total prayer) can greatly enhance our concentration on the other 80 percent, as well.

## A TORAH EDUCATION

...ונתתי גשמים בעתם... אם בחקתי תלכו... *If you follow my statutes...I will provide you with rain at the appropriate time...* Rashi explains that this verse teaches us about “toiling in Torah study” (שְׁתֵּהוּי ק”א ח”א ס (עמלים בתורה). Indeed, as the Chazon Ish (י”ב) points out, all the brachot in the following verses are reserved for those who exert themselves in studying Torah. This concept of toiling in Torah – known in Hebrew as *amal ba’Torah* – refers to more than intellectual exertion alone, as we shall soon see.

One sign of truly fulfilling the injunction to be a person who is *ameil ba’Torah* is one’s total absorption in Torah learning. It is possible to witness this in a serious *beit midrash*, where study partners often voice their opinions in booming voices without disturbing those studying right next to them. Compare this with the library or study hall in the secular world, where it is accepted that people need silence in order to concentrate.

This is just one of the many differences between the approach to learning in the *yeshiva* world and the approach just about everywhere else. Indeed, many *yeshiva* students are unaware of the many significant differences which they simply take for granted. A few years ago, a non-religious Israeli professor visited *Yeshivat Mir* in Jerusalem – host to almost 6,000 students – and recorded the differences he observed:

- The Talmudic scholar studies and explains his point of view using his hands.
- He often sways while studying.
- He usually studies with a partner.
- When he asks the teacher a question, he gets up and goes over to the teacher. Out of respect, he

usually remains standing while the teacher continues sitting. This is different from the secular classroom, where the student usually raises his hand, and the teacher address the question while the student remains seated.

- In Talmudic study, the student is expected to manage relatively long periods of concentration – at times, even four and a half hours. This is very different from the secular educational systems, where focused learning times or class periods tend to be no more than an hour.

-The study halls of *yeshivot* thunder with noise, and it does not seem to bother anyone. Instead of learning by reading with the eyes alone, the students insist on verbalizing, considerably slowing the reading.

-A question-and-answer format is very widely used.

-No cell phones are allowed in the *beit midrash*.

After thinking about these differences, the professor reached the conclusion that the learning in the *yeshiva* *beit midrash* is education at its best. “Education” comes from the Latin word “*educor*” – to pull out or extract. And this is just what *yeshiva* learning is all about. Let us elaborate.

Upon being asked a question by a teacher, a student will extract the information from his own mind, on his own. This is far superior to being spoon-fed by a teacher. Real education involves drawing conclusions through outside guidance. This results in recall far superior to that of the student who is responsible only for swallowing information. When studying in pairs, the students are expected to verbalize the information they have gleaned and express ideas in their own words while relaying it. By learning in pairs, each partner

stimulates the other's intellect for maximum results.

Verbalizing the information and ideas with excitement (even if sometimes a bit artificial), helps one focus and contributes to long-term memory. Studies have proven that students absorb information in noisy classes better than in silent ones. The commonly used technique of starting off in a low tone of voice and gradually increasing the volume adds to the listener's excitement about the information and ideas being discussed.

The swaying while learning affects body heat and helps blood circulation, sending oxygen to the brain, which contributes to clear thought and focus. The rhythm caused by swaying enhances concentration as well. This is why it is more effective to study while standing, pacing or walking. (It is not surprising that the theory of relativity was conceived while walking!) Body movement keeps the mind awake and energetic, and brings emotion into learning.

Although the professor's observations are revealing, there are many things that he could not possibly be aware of. Behind the scenes, the first conscious decision the true yeshiva student must make is at what level he wants Torah study to be in his hierarchy of values. For the serious student, a good resource for the proper way to learn Torah can be found in the end of Pirkei Avot (6:5), where the 48 traits and techniques needed to succeed in acquiring Torah are listed. All the blessings attributed to one who toils in Torah are for learning through these 48 "ways." The first on the list is learning with continuity. We see this clearly from the Chafetz Chaim's characterization of a proper Torah study session: It must be uninterrupted Torah learning, unless something comes up that must be taken care of specifically by the learner and immediately (Mishna Berura, Shaar HaTzion 250:9). The ultimate example of continuous learning (besides Moshe Rabbenu) was that of Rabbi Akiva.

Rabbi Akiva was encouraged by his wife, Rachel, to maximize his potential by learning Torah away from home for twelve years. Rabbi Akiva grew in his studies and became Rosh Yeshiva for 12,000 students. When the twelve years had passed, Rabbi Akiva returned home with his students, all the while expressing the gratitude he felt towards his wife. All of our Torah learning is in her merit, he told them. Before entering his home, he overheard his wife saying to a friend that if it were up to her, she would be delighted if her husband would continue learning for an additional twelve years. Upon hearing this, Rabbi Akiva returned to his yeshiva to complete a total of twenty four years of uninterrupted Torah study. (Ketubot 63b)

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz asks the obvious question: Why didn't Rabbi Akiva enter his home for a few minutes and have a cup of tea with his wife, before returning to learn for an additional twelve years? His answer is legendary: In this context, twelve plus twelve does not equal twenty four!

But, we might ask, doesn't the question remain? If R. Akiva had already left yeshiva to come home to his wife, had he not already broken his continuity?

The answer to this question provides us an important rule of thumb. As long as Rabbi Akiva was doing what the Torah expected of him – such as visiting home for family obligations – he was still in the same flow of continuity in Torah learning by living according to its obligations. But once he overheard his wife saying that she would rather he continue learning another twelve years, entering his home for his own reasons would break his 24-year learning streak.

Anything that will interrupt continuity, such as the use of cell phones, is a breach in the spirit of a proper study session. I remember a more subtle application of this important principle. In one yeshiva where I studied, there were no cups for the students to drink from the water fountain. Wanting to offer students the option of drinking in a more comfortable way, I set up a "cup fund." But when



the Rosh Yeshiva found out about it, he approached me and asked if he could donate all the cups. He wanted to keep his yeshiva a place where nothing is “going on” except for learning – not even cup funds.

During this time of year, especially – the period of Sefirat HaOmer – we should remind ourselves that the proper approach to Torah study goes all the way back to Matan Torah and the Mishkan. The Ba'al HaTurim writes that the two Cherubim facing each other on top of the Holy Ark symbolized (among other things) two students learning together, asking questions and answering one other (Sh'mot 25:18). Furthermore, the way we accepted the Torah at Mt.Sinai – with thunder, lightning and fire – is the way it must be passed on through the generations. Practically speaking, this means that whatever excitement or “fire” that can be instilled into our Torah learning is **essential for re-living Matan Torah**. Unity and mutual responsibility – like all the 48 requirements listed in Pirkei Avot – are absolutely necessary for Torah learning. These, too, were a crucial part of accepting the Torah at Mt.Sinai (כאיש אחד בלב אחד). This is the way we accepted the Torah – and the only way it can be passed on is in its original form. These qualities are so crucial that all 24,000

students of Rabbi Akiva perished because they did not possess them to the extent they should have. Thus, despite their superior learning, they were prevented from being the ones to transmit Torah to future generations.

Students of Torah sheh-Ba'al Peh know that the Gemara repeatedly uses a question-and-answer format. Indeed, it never hesitates to question even basic assumptions. And this is a technique we can use effectively in our own lives as well. The way a question is asked is going to affect what type of answer the brain will come up with. A great question can give birth to a new approach; it can even change humanity.

One powerful question that a Jew should ask himself is the one asked by Rabbi Akiva, then a shepherd, when he noticed that steady stream of drops of water had cut through rocks. Must a rock always remain a rock, or can small, constant change as consistent and gentle as dripping water make a major revolution – either to a seemingly rock-hard assumption or even to person set in his ways? In our terms: Can I get more out of life than I am at the moment; can I change significantly for the better and realize my full potential?

## BOOTLEG TORAH

Enjoying Torah, making it sweet, is not just Torah with extra credit. Sweet Torah, Torah that is enjoyable, is the only Torah. If it is not sweet, if you do not enjoy it, it is not Torah; it is just a bootleg version of it. A bootleg recording is an audio or video recording of a performance that was not officially released by the artist. Torah that is without your being involved in it, wanting more of it, is not the original Torah G-d gave at Har Sinai. It is just a bootleg version.

Enjoying Torah is so important that we pray for its sweetness every day in והערב נא, in Birkot Hatorah. If a teacher does not make the Torah sweet to his students, it is better that he should not teach. (Midrash Shir Hashirim 2; Midrash Tanchuma Ki

Tisa 16; Shemot Raba 41) Why is this infraction so serious that Rabbi Sugarfree should find another job? Because Torah is not a subject or a discussion of philosophy, or even a religion. It is a way of life, and an ongoing conversation of the ages between G-d and His People.

This is where we face a huge problem. There is so much Torah learning, so many boys in Yeshiva. So many girls in school. So many audio and video recordings on line. It seems as if everything is bliss. But, the individual is lacking the practical tools to make his Torah learning sweet and enjoyable. Parents and teachers are lacking guidance in how to make Torah sweet for their disciples.







the ram that replaced Yitzhak on the altar. (Tur Rosh Chodesh 417) In Yitzhak's merit, we have Har Sinai. How so? Where did Har Sinai come from? R' Yossi said that it was separated like Challah from the dough, from the place of Yitzhak's Akeidah, from Har Hamoriah. G-d said, "Since their father, Yitzhak, was bound to the altar on this spot, it is appropriate that his sons will accept the Torah there (Midrash Shochar Tov, Tehillim 68).

Yitzhak is the representative of total Mesirut Nefesh. Giving up everything to G-d. The way that we can tap into Yitzhak's Mesirut Nefesh is by totally focusing when learning. Because the only way we can stay focused is if we give up all of our emotions to G-d. This concept of self sacrifice is the secret power of נעשה ונשמע. We accepted – before even knowing what we were accepting. Because at Har Sinai, we all tapped into the Mesirut Nefesh of Yitzhak, of giving all we have to G-d. That is the secret to focusing when learning.

There are many ingredients to make your Torah learning sweet. The first is to pray to taste its sweetness, in the Torah blessings in the morning and in Arvit before Shema. The second is to understand its value, אין לו שיעור למטה and the Torah is שקולה כנגד כולם. The reward for learning even one letter of Torah is equal to performing and

#### YETZER HARA LEMONADE

One of the greatest gifts G-d gave you in life is your Yetzer Hara. The Midrash teaches us, "וַיֵּרָא אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְהוָה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי טוֹב זֶה" - And G-d saw all that He made, and it was very good. 'זה' ה'יצר הרע *It was good—refers to the Yetzer Hatov. And it was very good—this is the Yetzer Hara* (Breshit Rabbah). What does this mean? How could the Evil Inclination be very good?

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לְבָבְךָ And you shall love your G-d with all of your heart, both the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara that reside in the heart.(Rashi; Berachot 54a) How does one serve G-d with his Yetzer Hara??

observing all of the 613 mitzvot (Gra, Sh'not Eliyahu Peah 1; 1). And to understand that every word of Torah a person learns is as if it comes "from G-d's mouth", תורת פיך (R Chaim Volozhin Ruach Chaim 6;9). The Chazon Ish says that by internalizing the 13 principles of Emunah, one acquires love for Torah. R Baruch Ber says that tasting Torah's sweetness is not possible when someone is living a life of lies, or learning false philosophies. (Birkat Shmuel Kiddushin 27) Someone once asked R Aharon Lev Shteinman how to make Torah sweet. He responded "How do you make honey sweet? Torah is similar to honey דבש וחלב תחת לשונך, but if you have sores in your mouth, you won't be able to taste its sweetness." Another idea, presented by the Vilna Gaon, is that lack of clarity brings lack of sweetness (Mishlei 1;22-23).

If we want our children and disciples to love Torah, we need to love Torah ourselves, and enjoy it ourselves. We need to learn from King David. He had this Kinor and Nevel that he would play at midnight while he was learning. His friends would hear him play, and they would say, if King David is learning Torah, we should do so as well. (Yerushalmi Berachot 1,1; see Bavli Berachot 3b)

על חטא On Yom Kippur, we ask for forgiveness שהטאנו לפניך ביצר-הרע For the sin that we sinned before You with our Yetzer Hara. What? Aren't *all* sins committed with our Yetzer Hara?

כך הקב"ה אמר להם לישראל בני בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי לו תורה תבלין ואם אתם עוסקים בתורה אין אתם נמסרים בידו *G-d told the Jewish People, My sons! I created the Yetzer Hara, and I created the Torah to be its spice. And if you study Torah, you will not be in his hands...* (Kiddushin 30b). The Maggid of Mezritch pointed out the precision of the words used here. Generally, we understand that the Yetzer Hara is like a sickness, and the only cure is the Torah. But the word used is not תרופה, which would mean

cure. Rather, the word that is used is the word תבלין, which means spice. It does not say that the Torah can *annul* the Yetzer Hara. No. The Torah does not undo the Yetzer Hara, for that would not be a good thing. We need our Yetzer Hara, in order to serve G-d with extra oomph.

Before we explain how to serve G-d with your Yetzer Hara, we need to realize that serving G-d with our Yetzer Hara is the pinnacle of the holiday of Shavuot. Shavuot is the only day of the year we are to bring a korban of bread, of wheat flour and yeast, in the Beit Hamikdash. The rest of the year, yeast is not allowed. כְּלֵי־הַמִּנְחָה אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרִיבוּ לַיהוָה לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה תִמְזִין כִּי כְלֵי־שֶׂאֵר וְכַל־דְּבַשׁ לֹא־תִקְטְרוּ מִמֶּנּוּ אֲשֶׁה לָהּ: (Vayikra 2;11) The Talmud teaches us that yeast and Chametz are symbolic of the Yetzer Hara. (Berachot 17a) The reason for this is because of the parallels in their natures: yeast rises, symbolic of haughtiness. Haughtiness is the root of all anger. Laziness is linked to dough, for dough needs to sit in order for it to rise, and laziness is what holds us back from keeping the positive commandments in the way they are supposed to be kept. Therefore, G-d does not want any bread offerings in His Temple. G-d wants us to rid ourselves of Chametz on Pesach, so that we can free ourselves of our Yetzer Hara. But on Shavuot, when we are accepting the Torah, we want to bring the Yetzer Hara in to this holiday, for we have just the right spice for it. Torah.

The Vilna Gaon explains that one cannot change one's mazal, one's negative nature, one's Yetzer Hara. That would be going against one's grain. The only choice one has is what one does with that nature. The Talmud teaches us that one who is born with the nature of Maadim will be one who spills blood. R' Ashi teaches, this means either as a Mohel, a butcher or a murderer (Shabbat 156a). Spilling blood is inevitable; the choice, though, is still available where to direct this nature. Tzaddik – Mohel. Beinoni- Butcher. Rasha- Murderer. When Shmuel Hanavi was sent by G-d to appoint the young David to be King of the Jewish People, Shmuel jumped back. He saw that David was Admoni, that he was redheaded, that David was

from the Mazal of Maadim. Shmuel feared that this might mean that David has the nature, the Yetzer Hara, to become a killer... Admoni hinting that he has the nature of a bloodthirsty person. Esav was also Admoni... and look how Esav turned out! G-d told Shmuel not to worry – *But he has nice eyes...*) See Shmuel A 16;12 ) The Midrash explains G-d's comment as follows: *Esav killed on his own prerogative. But this (David) will kill from the verdict of the Sanhedrin* (Breshit Rabba Toldot 63; 8). Even a good nature can be used for bad. Shaul was born with the Mazal that had in it the nature of humility. Shaul used his humility in a negative way – he did not stand up against the Nation when they went against the Will of G-d. (See Biur HaGra Mishlei 22; 6) (See Rabbenu Yonah Berachot 54a)

הוּי עַז כְּנֶמֶר, וְקַל כְּנֶשֶׁר, וְרִמְז כְּפֶצֶי, וְגִבּוֹר כְּאַרְיֵה לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן אָבִיךָ שְׂבִשְׂמִים (Avot 5;20) If you have chutzpa in your nature, if you are brazen, like a leopard... If you have a nature that you are light, like an eagle, and you don't get stuck on things, if you are as swift as a deer to run after your desires, if you are strong, like a lion, to get what you want... "be who you are, be as G-d created you, and use that nature to do the will of your Father in Heaven." The Chazon Ish was quoted as saying that kids who are the wildest, (just like the wild animals mentioned in the Mishnah -) only *they* have the potential to become the Gedolei Hador, the leaders of the next generation.

Our strengths and weaknesses are like a seesaw, "package deals", that you can't have one without the other. Torah is the solution to that balance. G-d does not want us to uproot the seesaw, to throw out the whole package because there are some parts that we don't like. אל תהי בז לכל אדם ואל תהי מפליג לכל דבר שאין לו שעה ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום. *Do not hold any person in contempt, and do not consider anything worthless. For there is no person who does not have his hour. And there is no thing that does not have its place* (Avot 4;3). If not for the Yetzer Hara, people would not get married, have children, build homes, businesses, etc. (See Yoma 69b; Midrash Tehillim 37a).

On Shavuot, we bring the korban of the two breads, to thank G-d for giving us the spice to make our lives the best lives possible. We just need to give the Yetzer Hara the right flavor. The Torah is what makes the Yetzer Hara something we can do great things with. This is why we need to say Viduy, if we do not serve G-d with our Yetzer Hara, because there is a special way to serve G-d, that can be done only with your Yetzer Hara, something that G-d calls Tov Meod, very good.

Here are the *Selfie Steps*. These Self-Help steps teach you how to take the lemons that G-d gave you in life... and make them into lemonade.

1. Your Personal Strengths/Weaknesses ID Card. List all of your strengths and all of your weaknesses. This will be your personal ID card, a card to identify your negative behaviors and tendencies, not as your identity, but as a part of a whole picture. It is just another animal to tame in your zoo of tendencies.
2. Connect the Dots. Try to see if there are any connections between your strengths and your weaknesses. Once you realize that your weaknesses and strengths are connected, thank G-d for the inseparable package of strengths and weaknesses. It is easier to appreciate G-d when you realize how the most interesting part of your life is

the delicious lemonade you made out of the lemons.

3. Embrace your weaknesses. Accept what you cannot change... and take that creation that G-d made, and uplift it. I.e., If you have fear, bring that fear as a metaphor to your fear of G-d. If you love something, and you can't hold yourself back from it, take this love to be a metaphor for your love of G-d. If you feel that you are angry, take that anger as a metaphor of how G-d can get angry at you, for your inappropriate behaviors... and He does not. (See Rambam on Mishna Berachot 9;5)
4. Work in Progress. Set aside time in your life, on a daily/weekly/monthly basis to add the proper spice to these weaknesses. Put it on to your To-do list by actually taking out time to find the right spice that you need to transform your weaknesses into strengths. Your weaknesses are a work in progress over a span of a lifetime, they are not a devaluation of one's self.
5. Fresh perspective. G-d does not create anything bad. Find how your natural strengths can complement your natural weaknesses. Think out of the box. When you look at your weaknesses, find how those weaknesses can be your greatest assets.

## G-D'S TORAH AND HIS APPROACH

The Sifri (Devarim שמג) relays the following Midrash: Before G-d came to Mt.Sinai to give the Torah to His People, He approached the nations of the world, one by one, and offered them the Torah. He first approached the nations of Esav. Esav's descendants responded by first asking G-d what is written in the Torah. G-d answered Esav that the Torah says לא תרצח *you shall not kill*. The nations of Esav replied, "We cannot accept the Torah. Esav, our forefather, was a habitual killer and was

even blessed by his father Yitzchak that he live by his sword על חרבך תחיה. We are also murderers, and we cannot accept a Torah that forbids murder."

G-d then went to the nations of Amon and Moab. He asked if perhaps *they* want the Torah. They also replied by first asking what the Torah says. G-d answered לא תנאף *You shall not have forbidden relations*. They replied that the Torah is not for them. The Amon and Moab family tree was rooted

in forbidden relations. Their forefather, Lot, had had incestuous relations with his daughters, and from such a shameful beginning, Amon and Moab were born.

G-d approached Yishmael and asked if he was at all interested in accepting the Torah. Yishmael asked – What does the Torah say? – G-d answered that the Torah says לא תגנוב *Do not steal*. The Ishmaelites answered G-d that their forefather, Yishmael, was actually a thief by trade - ויהי רבה קשה : he sat waiting in the desert and would rob the passersby. The Midrash continues that there was not a nation in the world on whose door G-d did not “knock” to see if they would be willing to accept the Torah. Finally, G-d approached the Jews, who did not ask what the Torah has to offer. Instead, they proclaimed ונעשה ונשמע : “We will do, and we will listen.” They trusted that if G-d asked them to do something, then whatever it would be could be done.

This Sifri is mindboggling. If we examine it carefully, we notice that G-d approached the Gentiles with the **latter five** of the Ten Commandments, the ones that pertain to a man and his fellow. Approaching the Jews, however, G-d presented the **first five** commandments, which are mitzvot between man and G-d. Only after informing us of the first five commandments did G-d mention the commandments between man and his friend. *(This may be the reason why all the nations of the world write from left to right, and only Jews, and subsequently the Arabs, write from right to left. The Jews were offered the Tablets from the right to left, whereas the tribes of the world were offered them from left to right. The tablets and the Ten Commandments were the first written word in Creation, created on the very first Erev Shabbat – Avot ch. 5)* Why did G-d approach the nations of the world with different mitzvot from those He presented first when He approached the Jews?

Another question: Why did the nations of the world turn down the Torah on the grounds that it says not to steal or kill? Don't the nations of the world have

judicial systems where killing and stealing are forbidden? If so, why did they turn down the Torah for containing such a logical commandment?

And a third question. Why did G-d approach each of the nations of the world with exactly what was hard for them? G-d approached the descendants of Esav and told them not to kill; Yishmael, and told them not to steal, and Amon and Moab, and told them not to engage in forbidden relations. These were *the specific points* that were hard for these nations to overcome. So what type of game is this – if G-d did not want to give them the Torah, then why would He come and give each one the very issue that was the hardest for him to deal with?

R' Moshe Feinstein explains that although the nations of the world have judicial systems which forbid and penalize for murder and theft, the reason behind such laws is as protection for the other civilians, and not because the act in and of itself is so unethical that the person deserves punishment. The nations of the world at the time were not willing to forbid murder as something that deserves punishment in and of itself, for they felt that in essence, they themselves were actually murderers, and thus could not be held responsible for their actions. The reason, then, why the murderer is executed or jailed is not because of the absolute value of human life; in the laws of the nations, it is only of practical expedience, just for the safety of the public.

G-d specifically approached the nations and told them that the Torah has laws that He forbade. *If I forbade something, then it must be that it is possible for one to control himself and not kill or rob.* G-d specifically wanted the gentiles to hear that the Torah forbids what they feel is impossible to overcome. G-d also wanted to make it clear that a person is responsible for such acts as murder, theft or forbidden relations, despite what type of family he comes from.

The Jews, on the other hand, were willing to accept without asking. They knew that if the Torah forbids something, refraining from doing it can be



accomplished – that we are held responsible for obeying the Law. They believed in G-d, and so G-d approached them first with the Mitzvot of Emuna, the first five commandments, knowing that this is the basis for keeping the five latter ones. The Jewish court penalizes not because we are afraid of the rest of society getting hurt. We have Emunah, so we are not worried about that. In the Jewish court, the punishment is for the transgressor and the punishment meted out fits the crime.

We do not approach the mitzvot of the Torah from a logical point of view. We approach the mitzvot from a religious angle. For us, the latter commandments come after the first ones specifically to remind us that the underlying reason for the mitzvot that are logical are **not logic**, but faith.

The Rebbe from Pasische was asked by his followers: All the books of the world have an introduction. What, then, is the introduction to the Torah?

The Rebbe answered that the introduction to the Torah is Derech Eretz. דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה. These words must mean that a person must make sure he

is a man of character and decency before he becomes a man who presents Torah.

This can also be understood in the following manner. We are taught that without Torah the world cannot exist אלמלא בריתי יומם ולילה חוקות שמים וארץ לא שמתיה. How, then, did the world exist before the Torah was given? The answer is that the Torah that held up the world before it was given was the way of derech eretz – אלמלא תורה היינו למדים גזל' . This derech eretz held up the world, for it was Torah of the time. After the Torah was given, however, things changed. We now had to observe Torah teachings as a religious way of life, and not just because this is something that seems right. This is the way of the Torah. Ethics based upon common sense comprise the introduction to the Torah. Then, the Torah tells us that these things are not just ethics. We must live according to them and understand that G-d, in His wisdom, has given a much deeper meaning to why the ethical way is the right way. And, the Torah wants us to be able to be humble and to make our way of thinking subservient to the teachings of the Torah.

### King David's Secret Weapon

The other day, the teacher of my seven year-old son gave him a newspaper article to take home. I was very grateful to the teacher, for this was an article on my family's lineage. I expected to read about Chaim Farhi and other famous Farhi family philanthropists from the past – information that I already knew. When I read the second line of the article, however, I jumped off my chair: "According to tradition, the Farhi family lineage goes all the way back to King David." After verifying that the article was based on reliable sources, I passed on this revelation to close family members. Needless to say, I was very excited. I asked my wife if we could buy a donkey. After all, someone in the family might turn out to be Moshiach. For some reason, she refused.

The Chida says that the reason why Megillat Ruth is customarily read in shul on Shavuot is to draw attention to the lineage of King David, whose birth and death occurred on Shavuot ((שמת הרגל ג). King David led a most turbulent and difficult life. Early on, the special circumstances of his birth and his unusual complexion triggered accusations by his older brothers that he was illegitimate. In an attempt to rid their prestigious family of him, David's brothers sent him to pasture the sheep in dangerous places. Then, because he was seen out late at night attending his father's flock, people in his home town of Beth Lechem began to accuse him of being the town thief. No one stood up for him. Only his mother encouraged him to always turn to G-d. "He will never forsake you," she reassured him.

In the next stage of his life, David was forced into an ongoing struggle with King Shaul, his father-in-law. In their first encounter, King Shaul did not honor his promise to give him his daughter Meirav, whose hand had been offered to the one who succeeded in killing Goliath. He made another outrageous bet for David to marry his second daughter Michal. But, in the meantime, Shaul secretly married off Michal to someone else. After David did eventually marry Michal, his father-in-law became convinced that David was plotting to overthrow him, a crime which carries the penalty of death. He thus sought to kill him.

David's parents and brothers became endangered through this struggle as well. David thought they would be safe by bringing them to be guarded by the King of Moab, to whom he was related through his great-grandmother, Ruth. When things calmed down with Shaul, David asked for his father, mother, and brothers back from his trusted Moabite brethren. To his utter shock and dismay, his family had been murdered.

Later in life, King David was targeted by Avshalom, his most successful son. The background of the conflict stemmed from still another family tragedy. Avshalom himself died a tragic death which David mourned greatly. In short, King David – who was forced to bloody his hands in war after war – had no peace from his own family, teachers and friends; and no rest from all his enemies and traitors throughout all seventy years of his life.

Fortunately, though, David managed to keep a kind of diary of his experiences. He would compose a psalm (poem/song) to G-d for each challenging experience. He collected all 150 of them as a book, known as Tehillim (Psalms). One can wonder in amazement as to how David was able to muster up the emotional strength and find time to compose so many of these songs to G-d despite his never-ending challenges. With such a difficult life, how was David constantly singing songs, and compose more songs than any other Jew in history? Perhaps

we can get some insight through a glimpse that Chazal give us of the future.

The Talmud (Pesachim 119b) tells us that in the future, G-d will make a lavish feast for the righteous. After the feast, the cup of wine will be passed to Avraham to make the blessing after Birkat Hamazon. Avraham will decline, feeling undeserving for having brought Yishmael into the world. Yitzchak, too, will decline because he fathered Esav; and Yaakov will turn down the honor because he married two sisters, something that the Torah later prohibited. Moshe will refuse because he did not merit to enter Eretz Yisrael, and Yehoshua because he did not have any sons. But King David will say: I will make the blessing, and it is fitting for me to do so ( כּוּם יִשׁוּעוֹת אִשָּׁא וּבִשָּׁם ה' ) (אקרא)!)

Now, how can we understand this self-confidence on the part of King David? Did he not also have some problematic children, and a personal failing or two that should prevent him from feeling worthy? He was not, after all, worthy of the Holy Temple being built in his lifetime, but only later in the lifetime of his son Shlomo. Why will King David feel faultless in comparison to all the greatest figures in Jewish history?

This can be understood through King David's use of the term למנצח – the common title for many of his psalms. The word נצח means everlasting. But למנצח means “to the Victor.” In other words, the “Ultimate Victor” – G-d – is “everlasting,” and His victories demonstrate His “everlastingness”.

King David learned from early on in his difficult life that there are battles and struggles that cannot be won through purely physical means. Fortunately, he realized that there is more to the story and he adapted the following belief: “If I praise the Ultimate Victor for all my successes, then no challenge is too hard to tackle, for it is not my strength that will determine my triumph.” This belief made it easy for young David to fight the most experienced and well-armed warrior in the world, Goliath. Although he had no armor or prior

military training, David was right there to fight the battle when Goliath said that he will take on the Jews *and their G-d*. “Once it is a battle with G-d, the Ultimate Victor, even I (David) am able to fight it.”

At the Final Banquet in the future, King David will announce that it is not his own value or strength that brought about his successes. And, of course, he may not be more worthy than the Forefathers. On the contrary, because he feels that he is even less. If we think about it, we will realize that there are so many moments during the day where we have an opportunity to give a heartfelt blessing. The Torah tells us that one who blesses a Jew, any Jew, will be blessed by G-d “ואברכה מברכך”. But let us keep

worthy, King David will raise the cup and make the blessing, all the while proclaiming that despite the unworthiness of mankind, G-d is our steadfast Victor.

Life has too many impossible battles to fight. Pull out a Tehillim and call out למנצח from the depths of your heart! That was King David’s life secret.

in mind that the way we bless others is the way we ourselves will be blessed by G-d. As the Baal Shem Tov would say on the passuk ה' צלך (“G-d is your shadow”): G-d shadows or mirrors whatever

## Shavuot, the Veiled Festival

The Torah refers to the Festival of Shavuot in two different ways: Shavuot (weeks) and Atseret (cessation). Interestingly, though, it does not refer to Shavuot in a way that reflects what happened on this day, the Giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. This contrasts with the way the Torah refers to Passover and Succoth, where the words reflect the occasions that we are commemorating.

This is because there is an essential difference between Shavuot and the other Festivals. Pesach and Succoth are characterized by two concepts – the prohibition against doing melachah as well as the special mitzvot of the day, such as eating matzot and sitting in the succah. Shavuot, in contrast, has no unique mitzvot. It has only the prohibition against doing melachah. This is why it is called Atzeret, meaning cessation. The only thing we “do” is to cease doing melachah. The other name for the Festival, Shavuot, commemorates the conclusion of the counting the weeks of the Omer, the period between Passover and Shavuot. But there is no hint at the Giving of the Torah at Sinai.

There is another difference between Shavuot and the other two Festivals: the date is not set on the

Jewish calendar. Rather, the date is arrived at by counting forty-nine days from Pesach. The message is that Shavuot marks the end of the preparation for our receiving the Torah at Sinai. Forty-nine days of spiritual preparation were required. The preparation represents the excitement and enthusiasm we have for the Torah and its Mitzvot. In a sense, we celebrate the preparation for accepting the Torah more than the acceptance of the Torah itself.

This approach should not seem entirely strange to us – especially those of us who are married. Wasn’t the excitement of the engagement period even greater than the wedding itself? When I think back on my own experience, I recall occasional frustration during the days of wedding preparation that certain things were not turning out the way I had expected. I was fortunate in having a rabbi who put me at ease by reminding me that the true happiness of getting married is not the four hours of the wedding itself, but the new life that the couple is about to start.

Shavuot is the holiday where we celebrate the excitement of starting a new life. The new life, however, is not limited to one day, but should stay



with us the whole year long. The day itself cannot be referred to as the day of our “Receiving the Torah” because, in a sense, we accept the Torah every day. It is, though, the day we celebrate the love we felt through anticipation for the Torah.

We can now better appreciate why we don’t have special mitzvot to commemorate anything specific on Shavuot. It is because this day gave us a whole new life and way of living. We can thus best commemorate the receiving of the Torah by living according to its ways, and projecting the joy we have in our Covenant with G-d.

### Being a True “Receiver” of Torah

How do you explain why people playing “Telephone” have trouble passing a simple statement down to the last person in line without distorting the original statement?

I have posed this question to a number of people recently, and I would like to share with you what I consider to be the best answer. Each person puts his own perspective into the original statement until you can barely recognize what the first one said.

As we approach the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, Shavuot, this insight can help us stand in awe at how the Torah was passed on from Sinai down to our generation without the slightest alteration.

When examining this chain of transmission I think the best place to start is the very first mishnah in Masechet Avot. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin calls our attention to the fact that while this Mishnah speaks of Moshe receiving the Torah at Sinai and then passing it on to Yehoshua, it does not explicitly mention that Yehoshua received the Torah from Moshe. The mishnah takes this for granted and simply goes on to delineate how Yehoshua passed on the Torah to the next generation, and how each succeeding generation passed it on to the next. In contrast, with reference to Moshe, the mishnah does not say that G-d passed it on to Moshe and Moshe passed it further. The emphasis is on Moshe

receiving the Torah from G-d. What is the importance of this emphasis on Moshe as a “receiver”?

We find the answer to this question in our parashah. Moshe was different from all the other prophets in that he had much greater clarity of vision when G-d spoke with him. We also see in our parashah that Moshe was the most humble of men – (והאיש משה עניו מכל האדם). These two special qualities of Moshe are very much related. G-d specifically chose Moshe to be the one to receive the Torah because he was the only human being who could preserve the original in its entirety – without the slightest modification. Moshe’s humility and perception of himself as nothing ( ואנחנו מה ) stemmed from his awareness that none of his successes were attributable to himself. This aided Moshe in receiving the Torah without mixing his own understanding or opinions into it. Once an iota of self-pride exists, a personal perspective will automatically surface. Since Moshe attributed all of his successes to G-d, he was able to attain a “transparency” beyond all the other prophets. For this reason, only Moshe was able to say, “This is what G-d said to me” ( זה הדבר ) – in contrast to all other prophets who introduced their prophecies with the expression, “So said G-d” ( כה אמר ה' ).

There is a famous question everyone asks – or should ask – on Shavuot regarding Chazal’s account of how the Jewish People felt in anticipation of receiving the Torah at Sinai. Although we find in the Torah that the Jews demonstrated readiness and willingness when they declared, We will do and we will listen ( נעשה ונשמע )!, the Talmud tells us that G-d still had to threaten them: If you do not accept the Torah, you will be buried by an uprooted mountain! How are we to explain this seeming paradox? (See Tosofot Shabbat 88a.)

The Zohar explains that their readiness was for the Written Torah. The threat was needed to get them to accept the Oral Torah. What was the difficulty of the Oral Torah that made them so hesitant to accept?



The Alter of Kelm offers this keen insight: The difficulty of passing on the Oral Law is that each person has to take responsibility to pass on the Torah as it was given at Sinai and become a נותן התורה – a pure conduit of Torah precision directly from Sinai. There is only one way to overcome the broken telephone problem that we mentioned at the outset: Placing G-d's values and principles ahead of our personal opinions and wants. And so, one of the key questions one should ask himself on Shavuot is: "How can I make sure that I will be a נותן התורה – able to pass on the Torah the way it is supposed to be passed on?"

Post script

The aforementioned concept can be very beneficial in understanding how we can improve our

seemingly short-circuited communications with others. When conversing with others, especially our loved ones, a critical mistake would be to understand things from our personal perspective. If we pay attention to the differences in the assumptions, beliefs, and behavior patterns of those around us, we will notice that what seem to be their obvious assumptions (etc.) about any given event or situation are really based on existing subconscious perspectives, values, and even instincts. The most valuable and effective thing we can do when communicating with someone we love is to hear what they have to say and validate their perspective before offering our own opinion or comment. Most communications are short-circuited because what one hears is not what the other meant to say.

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