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Houston	7:50	Phoenix	7:05
Jerusalem	7:12	Pittsburgh	8:13
Johannesburg	5:10	Seattle	8:24
Los Angeles	7:30	Sydney	4:45
London	8:30	Tokyo	6:22
Miami	7:42	Toronto	8:19
Montreal	8:01	Washington DC	7:57

Weekly Parsha

Bemidbar

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon saying: Do not cause the tribe of the families of Kahat to be cut off from among the Leveyim. Do this for them, so they should live and not die, when they approach the Holy of Holies. Aharon and his sons

(continued on next page)

Holiday

FOR THE NON-OBSERVANT

AN OPEN LETTER
To the Non-Observant

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

I write this with a sincere desire that you – our religious readers – share my words with those who are yet not religious. I am convinced that some of those with whom you share this article, will realize the profound lessons of the Shavuot holiday...helping another person in the most profound manner. And as we are commanded to teach others, you will – on this holiday commemorating the greatest act of education – fulfill that great mitzvah, as you attempt to benefit others. How can we not share our “wealth”? Of course, we must first comprehend our fortune as a real fortune...I mean this Torah God gifted to the world, and us.

(continued on page 5)



Replicas of the two sapphire tablets
Moses received from God on Sinai

(Bemidbar cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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shall come and appoint each man individually to his task and his load. They shall not come in to see when the holy [vessels] are being wrapped up, lest they die." (BeMidbar 4:17-20)

The Mishcan – Tabernacle – was the central feature of the camp of Bnai Yisrael in the wilderness. When Bnai Yisrael camped, the Mishcan was erected. When the nation traveled to its next encampment, the Mishcan was disassembled and transported by the Leveyim – the Levites – to this new location. Parshat BeMidbar describes the disassembly of the Mishcan. The various families of Leveyim were assigned the responsibility of transporting specific portions of the Mishcan. The family of Kahat was assigned the responsibility of transporting the most sacred elements. These elements included the altars, the Table of the Shewbread, the Menorah, and the Aron – the ark.

Our passages describe the special treatment of these sacred objects. As the Mishcan was disassembled, the Kohanim – the priests – placed each of the items assigned to the family of Kahat in its own individual wrapping. Only after each item was wrapped was it assigned by the Kohanim to members of the family of Kahat for transport. The Kahati – the member of the family of Kahat – was not permitted to unwrap the object or gaze inside the wrapping. The passages indicate that if a Kahati unwraps the object or looks into the wrapping, he is subject to death.

Maimonides does not include the prohibition against unwrapping these objects or looking into their wrappings as one of the six hundred thirteen commandments – Taryag mitzvot. Maimonides outlines the reason for this exclusion in the second principle of his Sefer HaMitzvot. He explains that in order for a commandment to be included within Taryag mitzvot, it must apply for all generations. Any commandment that is only applicable in a specific period of time cannot be included. The injunction against unwrapping these sacred objects or looking within their wrappings only applied in the wilderness. Once the Bait HaMikdash – the Holy Temple – was built this injunction became meaningless. The components of the Mishcan were no longer transported from one encampment to the next. The sacred objects were no longer placed in their special wrappings for transport. So, the injunction no longer had a context.

Maimonides acknowledges that there is a difficulty with his position. The Talmud explains that a person who steals one of the sacred vessels of

the Mishcan or Bait HaMikdash is subject to death. The Talmud cites the final passage above as the source for this law. This passage can alternatively be translated to prohibit stealing one of the sacred vessels and as assigning the penalty of death for violation of this prohibition. This alternative translation is not the literal meaning of the passage. The literal meaning is that the Leveyim cannot unwrap the sacred vessels or gaze within their wrappings. However, the alternative translation provides an allusion to the restriction against stealing a sacred vessel and to the penalty of death for the violation of the prohibition.[1]

This prohibition does exist throughout the generations. Therefore, it seems to meet the standard required for inclusion within Taryag mitzvot. Why does Maimonides not include this prohibition?

Before we can consider Maimonides' response to this question, additional information is needed. As



previously explained, the penalty for stealing one of the sacred vessels is death. However, in this instance, the death penalty is not executed in the typical manner. Generally, the death penalty is administered by the courts. An individual who witnesses a crime or sin punishable by death does not have the authority to execute the penalty. He must bring the violator to courts for judgment. However, there are four instances in which the courts do not and cannot execute the death penalty. Instead, a righteous zealot is authorized to execute the violator. One of the

four special instances is the stealing of a sacred vessel. In this instance, the courts do not execute the death penalty. Instead, it is left to the righteous zealot to execute the offender.

Maimonides outlines two considerations that dictate excluding this prohibition for Taryag mitzvot. First, the Talmud explains that our passage is merely an allusion to the prohibition. Maimonides explains that in order for a prohibition to be included in Taryag a more direct reference in the Torah to the prohibition is required. An allusion to the prohibition is not adequate. Second, Maimonides explains that a person who steals a sacred vessel is not subject to the death. This implies that he has not violated one of the 613 commandments.

This second consideration seems bizarre. A person who steals a sacred vessel is subject to execution by any righteous zealot! How can Maimonides contend that he is not subject to the death penalty? Apparently, Maimonides does not equate execution by the righteous zealot with application of the death penalty. In other words, the thief is not subject to the

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death penalty. Nonetheless, the righteous zealot is permitted and encouraged to execute the violator.

Nachmanides objects to Maimonides' position. He asserts that the prohibition against stealing a sacred vessel is one of the 613 commandments. The source for the commandment is our final passage. Nachmanides also dismisses Maimonides' second consideration. He explains that it is impossible to assume that the Torah allows and encourages the righteous zealot to execute one who steals a sacred vessel if the thief is not in fact subject to the death penalty. If the righteous zealot can execute the thief, he must have violated a commandment that is subject to the death penalty. Therefore, the authority of the righteous zealot to carry out the execution clearly indicates that a commandment associated with the death penalty has been violated.[2]

Nachmanides' argument seems compelling. How is it possible for the righteous zealot to execute a person who steals a sacred vessel if this person has not violated a mitzvah punishable by execution? In order to understand Maimonides' position another issue must be considered.

Maimonides explains in his code of law – Mishne Torah – that there are circumstances in which the courts can execute a person even though the individual has not violated a mitzvah that is punishable by death. Let us consider one of these instances. A person violates a commandment that is punishable by lashes. The lashes are administered. The person then violates the same commandment and lashes are again administered. The person violates the same commandment a third time. The courts do not administer lashes a third time. Instead, the person is subjected to kipah – imprisonment. He is imprisoned and placed on a restricted diet that ultimately results in digestive distress and death.[3]

There are a number of difficulties with Maimonides' treatment of kipah. First, he does not indicate the source for the courts' authority to administer this consequence. In other words, the person has repeatedly violated a commandment punishable by lashes. The courts are authorized by a specific commandment to administer lashes. But the person has not violated a commandment punishable by death. From where do the courts derive the authority to administer the consequence of kipah? Second, Maimonides places his discussion of kipah in the chapter of his Mishne Torah that deals with the commandment that authorizes the courts to administer lashes. What is the connection between the commandment authorizing lashes and this consequence of kipah?

Maimonides provides a hint to his position in the opening of this chapter. He explains that lashes are administered in three instances. The first instance is the violation of a negative commandment associated with karet – forfeiture of the afterlife – and there is no death penalty administered by the court



for the violation of this mitzvah. The second instance is the violation of a negative commandment associated with the death penalty, but the penalty is not administered by the courts; instead it is left to the heavenly court to administer. The third instance is the violation of a negative commandment that involves an action but for which no punishment is specified. In all of these instances, the courts are required to administer lashes. This seems to be a cumbersome formulation. Maimonides could have expressed himself far more concisely. He could have explained that lashes are the general – or default – punishment for the violation of any negative commandment involving an action. If the violation is not associated with any other punishment carried out by the courts, lashes are administered. This simple principle would cover all of the instances enumerated by Maimonides. Why did Maimonides provide a listing of all of the individual instances in which lashes are administered rather than providing a simple, concise principle?

Maimonides' formulation reflects his fundamental understanding of the punishment of lashes. Lashes are not a typical punishment. It is not engendered as a direct consequence of the violation of a specific commandment. Maimonides seems to contend that the courts are charged with the responsibility of enforcing observance of the commandments. In order to carry out this responsibility they are invested with the authority to administer the

punishment of lashes in cases in which a severe violation of the Torah takes place. Maimonides opens the chapter by listing the types of violations that are regarded as adequately severe as to require the courts to administer this punishment. Maimonides adopts this formulation in order to communicate that lashes are not administered by the courts as a direct result of the violation of the commandment. Instead, lashes are administered in order to enforce overall observance of the Torah. Therefore, the violation of any commandment of adequate severity requires that the courts respond with the administration of the punishment of lashes.

An example will help illustrate this distinction. If a person commits murder, he is subject to the death penalty. This punishment is a direct result of the violation. The violation carries with it the punishment of death. In contrast, if a person eats meat and milk, he receives lashes. It seems that according to Maimonides, this is not a direct result of the violation. It is not completely proper to assert that the violation carries with it the punishment of lashes. Instead, the violation is of sufficient severity as to require a punitive response from the courts. Lashes are the punitive response that the courts are authorized to administer.

This interpretation of the punishment of lashes provides an explanation of Maimonides' treatment of kipah. The consequence of kipah is applied in an instance in which standard tool provided to the courts to respond to violations of the Torah has proven ineffective. The person has received lashes for the violation on multiple occasions without effect. He continues to violate the same mitzvah. The commandment authorizing the courts to administer lashes charges the courts with the responsibility of assuring observance of the Torah. Implicit in this commandment is the responsibility to take more effective measures – such as kipah – in instances in which lashes are ineffective. Maimonides places the law of kipah in this chapter that discusses lashes in order to communicate the source of the courts' authority to utilize kipah. The commandment that authorizes lashes implicitly charges the courts with the responsibility to take this more drastic measure when lashes prove ineffective. This interpretation explains the placement of the law of kipah in the chapter is devoted to the commandment authorizing lashes and identifies the source of the courts' authority to administer this consequence. In short, the commandment authorizing lashes implicitly empowers the courts to resort to measures – such as kipah – in instances in which the typical judicial punishment of lashes is ineffective.

Let us now return to Nachmanides' criticism of Maimonides' position regarding stealing a sacred vessel. Both acknowledge that in this instance the righteous zealot is authorized to take the life of the thief. Nachmanides argues that this authority

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presumes that a mitzvah has been violated. Maimonides argues that this consequence is unique. It does not imply the violation of a commandment. Nachmanides' criticism is simple. How is it possible for the Torah to authorize an execution if no commandment has been violated?

In order to answer this question, three additional points must be noted. First, Bait HaBechirah, in his comments on this issue notes that the act of stealing a sacred vessel does not meet the technical legal requirements required for the act to be regarded as theft. In halacha, the crime of stealing always involves the violation of the owner's right of possession. The crime presumes the existence of an owner. A sacred vessel does not have an owner in the typical sense. The object is a component or element of the Bait HaMikdash or Mishcan. But its identity as an element of the Holy Sanctuary is not regarded as ownership.

Second, Bait HaBechirah explains that the stealing of the vessel is not prohibited by any commandment that explicitly prohibits this activity. Instead, it is derived from our passage. Bait HaBechirah acknowledges that our passage's fundamental message is that it is prohibited for the Leveyim to glance at the sacred vessels as they are covered by the Kohanim in their wrappings. Nonetheless, he indicates that this passage serves as a derivation for the prohibition against stealing one of these vessels.[4]

Let us consider this second point more carefully. Bait HaBechirah seems to maintain that the stealing of a sacred vessel is clearly prohibited. However, on technical grounds it is not considered a violation of the standard commandment prohibiting stealing. Nonetheless, our passage does communicate that the activity is prohibited. He makes no mention of the Talmud's device for relating the prohibition to the passage though an alternative translation. He seems to imply that this alternative translation is not the fundamental link to our passage. Instead, this device merely brings to our attention a more fundamental link. What is this link?

The covering of the sacred vessels in their wrappings and the prohibition against looking upon them implies that these objects are to be treated with extreme deference. This deference prohibits the Leveyim from directly handling the objects. They can only transport them once they are installed in their wrappings. This deference does not only prohibit the Leveyim from handling the objects. It also prohibits even gazing upon them! It seems that Bait HaBechirah is suggesting that stealing such an object is clearly inconsistent with the attitude of extreme deference required by the Torah. So, although the Torah does not state an explicit commandment prohibiting stealing one of the sacred vessels, it is quite clear that such behavior is an affront to the sanctity of the object. In short, no

specific commandment prohibits stealing the sacred vessel. But the Torah's overall treatment of these objects clearly communicates that this behavior is grossly inappropriate.

The third point that must be noted is Maimonides' placement of this law in his code – Mishne Torah. Maimonides places his discussion of stealing a sacred vessel and the consequences for this act in the same chapter that discusses the commandment authorizing lashes and kipah![5] Why is the discussion placed in this chapter?

As explained earlier, the commandment authorizing lashes fundamentally authorizes the courts and charges them with the responsibility of ensuring observance of the Torah. This responsibility is the basis for the administration of lashes and kipah. But both of these measures can only be taken by the courts. The courts can only act when a specific commandment has been violated. Stealing a sacred vessel presents a unique dilemma. Because of technical considerations, no specific commandment has been violated. The courts are powerless to respond. Nonetheless, an egregious violation of Torah principles has taken place. How can this dilemma be addressed?

Maimonides seems to maintain that the commandment authorizing lashes is not restricted to the courts. The nation is charged with the enforcement of the Torah. The courts are the agent of the nation. But in an instance in which the courts are not empowered to act – when no specific commandment has been violated – then the nation is responsible to respond with extra-judicial measures. The righteous zealot is authorized and expected to redress the violation.

We can now understand Maimonides' position. The key to this understanding is to recognize that Maimonides contends that the actions of the righteous zealot are an extra-judicial measure. It is specifically because no explicit commandment has been violated, that an extra-judicial response is required. There is no question that stealing the sacred vessel is an egregious violation of Torah principle. But the court cannot act as no specific mitzvah is violated. Therefore, the same commandment that authorizes the nation to administer lashes -- or kipah -- through the courts authorizes and urges the righteous zealot to take action.

This interpretation of Maimonides' position resolves another issue. There is a general principle that when a person commits a violation that simultaneously subjects him to two possible punishments, the courts apply the more severe of the two punishments. For example, if a person ignites a fire on Shabbat and this fire burns someone's crops, the violator is executed for the violation of Shabbat. But, he is not required to first make payment for damages.[6] Based on this principle Rav Eliezer Shach Zt"l raises a simple question. In addition to a

person who steals a sacred vessel, there are other instances in which the righteous zealot is permitted and encouraged to execute the violator. One of these involves a violation which the courts can punish with lashes. Rav Shach asks: If the person can be executed by the religious zealot, how can the punishment of lashes ever be administered? The principle discussed above should apply. The person should be left to the zealots to execute and the courts should not be permitted to administer lashes.[7] Similarly, this question can be expanded to include all instances in which lashes are administered. If the violation continues, the more severe punishment of kipah can be administered. How can the courts ever administer lashes, if the violation is ultimately subject to this more severe punishment?

Rav Shach offers a number of insightful answers to his question. However, the above analysis suggests an obvious response. The principle that the potential of a more severe punishment exempts the violator from the less severe punishment only applies when dealing with the typical punishments administered by the courts. According to Maimonides, any punishment executed by the righteous zealot is extra-judicial. It is not court-administered. Therefore, this principle does not apply. This explanation also explains the administration of lashes despite the potential for the more severe punishment of kipah. Kipah is not a typical punishment. It is a completely different class of response. It is only allowed when the standard response of lashes has not been effective. Because it is only permitted in such circumstances, it is not proper to argue that the potential application of this punishment exempts the violator from the standard punishment of lashes. ■

[1] Mesechet Sanhedrin 81b.

[2] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Critique on Maimonides' Sefer HaMitzvot, Principle 3.

[3] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 18:4.

[4] Rabbaynu Menachem Me'eri, Bait HaBechirah, Mesechet Sanhedrin 81b.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 18:6.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Genayvah 3:1-2.

[7] Rav Eliezer Shach, Avi Ezri, Commentary on Maimonides Mishne Torah, volume 4, p 303.

Why Read any Further?

I ask you to consider reading this entire essay based on the following. The most brilliant minds including Kings David and Solomon, Moses, Maimonides and an array of other sages and prophets selected the Torah lifestyle. They did so out of sheer enjoyment and happiness experienced in Torah study and fulfilling the various commands. They saw it as God's will. Since they are wiser than us, give them the benefit of the doubt, and read on...perhaps you too will understand why they chose such a life, and you will enjoy your life more than you imagined. Don't pass an opportunity to finally answer yourself on this issue.

Why You Exist

Think about it: this massive universe and we were once nothing: an abyss of all that was to be. "Then", God created everything: expansive space itself, the billions of galaxies, our souls, and our bodies. Scientists as well admit that some "Intelligence" had to cause the Big Bang, since nothing can create itself. And even after all was created, nothing could sustain itself, since its existence remains dependent on the Creator's will. We are here by God's will. How then can we violate His conditions of our existence? And why should we violate: do we know better than our Creator the purpose and true benefit of our existence? Can you answer the simple question, "How can you be happiest"?

The first thing you must ask yourself is, "Am I convinced of God's existence?" You must admit that "Something" caused everything else. To suggest the eternity of the universe, that there was no beginning, is akin to saying that nothing "caused" this universe. In that case, if there is no cause...it could not exist! But as we do witness a universe, we simultaneously must admit of a Cause. Call this Cause what you want.

The event of Revelation at Sinai – what we celebrate on Shavuos – is as indisputable as any historical account. If you accept Caesar's existence, you must accept any historical account witnessed by masses, including God's revelation at Sinai. Now, primary to Revelation at Sinai, was the intelligent voice emanating from flames. The "sudden" nature of the inferno out of nowhere – itself – was also a miracle. The next fact you must accept is that only that Being that created and governs all existences including laws of fire, can perform this miracle of a mountain suddenly ablaze with no fire source. Thereby, Sinai synthesized natural law and Torah law as emanating from a single source...God. Meaning, God who gave Torah on Sinai, also suspended natural law at that precise moment. Both systems came together,



validating "God of the universe", as the same "God of Torah". And to prove the event was not man made, God created intelligent words emanating from flames: for it is fire that opposes all biological life. Thus, the source of those intelligent words was not of this world...but it was God. This idea alone is sharp: God orchestrated a specific fire/voice miracle, for this miracle precisely addresses His objective to prove that a supernatural being exists, which is not of this Earth. This should appeal to you...it should hit you with a sense of appreciation for His wisdom.

Consider this next truth: you exist due to the will of the Creator, and He also wills that you adhere to the Torah given at Sinai 3319 years ago. Does this make clear sense to you? Ask yourself. You have but one life, so be careful to examine it well, and understand your mission. If He created you and also gave a Torah to follow, does this not impose an obligation on you? Do you feel God is unjust by demanding so many Torah laws? If you do: then do you also feel He is unjust, by granting you life this far? Do you enjoy how you have lived so far? If you do enjoy the life He gave you, then you must be thankful to your Creator. And with this thanks for this good life He has given so far, don't you feel He has intended good by offering you the

Torah as well?

Can you really feel that God, who designed you with pleasant emotions, also created the Torah lifestyle as something that causes pain? Isn't it possible, that whatever you know about Torah, and kept you non-observant, is somewhat incorrect? Hundreds of genius Sages and Rabbis for 1000s of years gravitated to daily Torah study and practice. That was all they desired, and we are including great people like King Solomon, in whom world leaders marveled at his wisdom. These leaders did not marvel at 'our' wisdom, but at Kings David and Solomon. These facts should compel you to finally give the Torah lifestyle a thorough examination. Don't you want to know what drew thousands of the wisest people to it? Don't you wish to sample that, from which geniuses could not tear themselves away? And they weren't geniuses when they started...but they were like you and me. And even then, they were drawn to something you have yet to experience...but you can.

Honesty

Be aware of your emotions. Admit that you don't enjoy following rules, instead of your own wishes. You want no restrictions: no religious book telling you what to do. "I've been free to live as I wish for so long, so any change is going to feel uncomfortable", you think to yourself. But do you know better than God how you should live your life? Do you know better than your doctor, who knows nothing compared to God?

Honesty is demanded at this point, and if you seek to deny what is proven and sensible, you need not read further. I write for those who do not wish to fool themselves.

When you feel the urge to repel Torah investigation or practice, ask yourself if it is the "Torah" that is frustrating, or perhaps, your desire to do "something else" frustrates you: you are not doing what you're accustomed to. Many times we assume that our pain comes from a current activity, when in fact, we are frustrated because we'd rather be somewhere else. But the current activity is not painful at all.

You must admit: since you still don't grasp the Torah's message, something "unknown" cannot be distasteful. So why do you associate pain with observance? It is because humans crave consistency, and any change in your daily pattern arouses uncertainty, uneasiness, and a desire to fall back to your regular, comfortable activities. Many people stay with partners and jobs that are painful, simply because they're "used to it". So too, when you experience pain in an attempt to study or observe Torah, this is not a reflection on Torah. It simply means that people select known 'comfortable'

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When considering a religious lifestyle, be sensitive and alert to the numerous rationalizations that will present themselves to your emotions. Recognize that they are all attempts to take the easy way out. But do not listen. Instead, remain focused on the indisputable truth that God created you, He knows what you need to be happy, and He gave you a Torah.

activities, over the 'unknown' Torah lifestyle. How many times did the Jews say to Moses, "Take us back to Egypt"? They too preferred the 'known' and painful slave existence – to the unknown life that awaited them. But they lacked intelligence at that point. They forgot that God rendered 10 Plagues to save them. They forgot quickly...so I advise you: don't repeat their mistake. Have some trust in the 1000s of genius minds that never veered from a Torah lifestyle because of the pleasure they found. King Solomon was one of the world's wisest men. Place some trust in his mind for a brief while.

Unhappy with Life?

Are you unhappy with your life? Do you know why you are unhappy? Wouldn't you have already changed your life, if you knew what it was that required change? Now what if someone told you that you could change and be happy? What if you were not only told, but it was explained to you exactly how and why you could be happy? Wouldn't you at least listen? Of course you would. So of you would give another person your ear, why don't you give at least that much to God and His Torah?

The greatest minds understood: man cannot be happy simply by earning a living, being social, enjoying pleasures, or traveling. In all these activities, man's central component – his soul – remains unattended. And when the central element of man is not engaged, he feels pain. Foolishly, we blame our pain in life on not traveling enough, or not earning enough. But this is easily disproved. A fish requires fins to reach its food: without fins, the fish is frustrated, and soon dies. A monkey requires arms for swinging, to collect its food, and reach others of its species. Remove its arms, and even if surrounded by others, it will yearn to climb, since it was designed to do so, and removing its arms does not remove its internal makeup. The monkey will be frustrated. Mammals and humans have lungs that require air. If we avoid breathing, we soon die. In every being, there are central functions and components, and when they are removed or even stifled, the being is in pain. Most central to man is his intelligence. For this is our distinguishing mark. This is our definition. If you do not engage in study and personally enriching enlightenment, you will be in pain. But you falsely think your pain comes from the lack of money or lack of travel.

Do you know what hurts you most? Not if someone else says you can't dress, or that your ball pitching is very poor. You are most disturbed if someone calls you stupid. Here, your central and defining component – your intelligence – is attacked, and you sense that this is what truly defines "you". Not your pitching or your clothing

style. Similarly, if you ignore your soul, and attempt a life without Torah study, you will always remain frustrated. Your lifeline is severed. God designed man to achieve fulfillment only in a life that includes intellectual and philosophical activities. God designed man to be happy through Torah study and observance.

We all want to be part of something, something bigger than ourselves. We sense this. Well, this is your soul making a desperate plea that you pay attention to. It is your soul reaching out for you to enrich your life with meaning and purpose, not simply to be "well traveled" or to "die rich".

Obstacles

Many considerations may hold you back from making an honest effort at examining a religious lifestyle, like peer pressure, or your self-image. "How can I follow what I have rejected for so long?" "How can I change, while my peers will mock me?" you ask yourself. "It's demeaning to accept what I have refuted for so long". The list goes on. But these arguments hold no water. Not one of them is a critique of the Torah itself. I can only tell you to follow one rule: abandon your ego. It will get in the way of your true happiness. Forget about what people will say, and live for yourself. Forget about your own pride...for pride cannot satisfy your need to be happy.

Extremist Jews may be a turn off to you. "I don't want to dress that way," you say. Well you don't have to. Much of what is repelling to you may in fact not be required by Torah, like dress codes. So ask someone you respect who has sound Torah knowledge.

Be sensitive and alert to the numerous rationalizations that will present themselves to your emotions. Recognize that they are all attempts to take the easy way out. But do not listen. Instead, remain focused on the indisputable truth that God created you, He knows what you need to be happy, and He gave you a Torah.

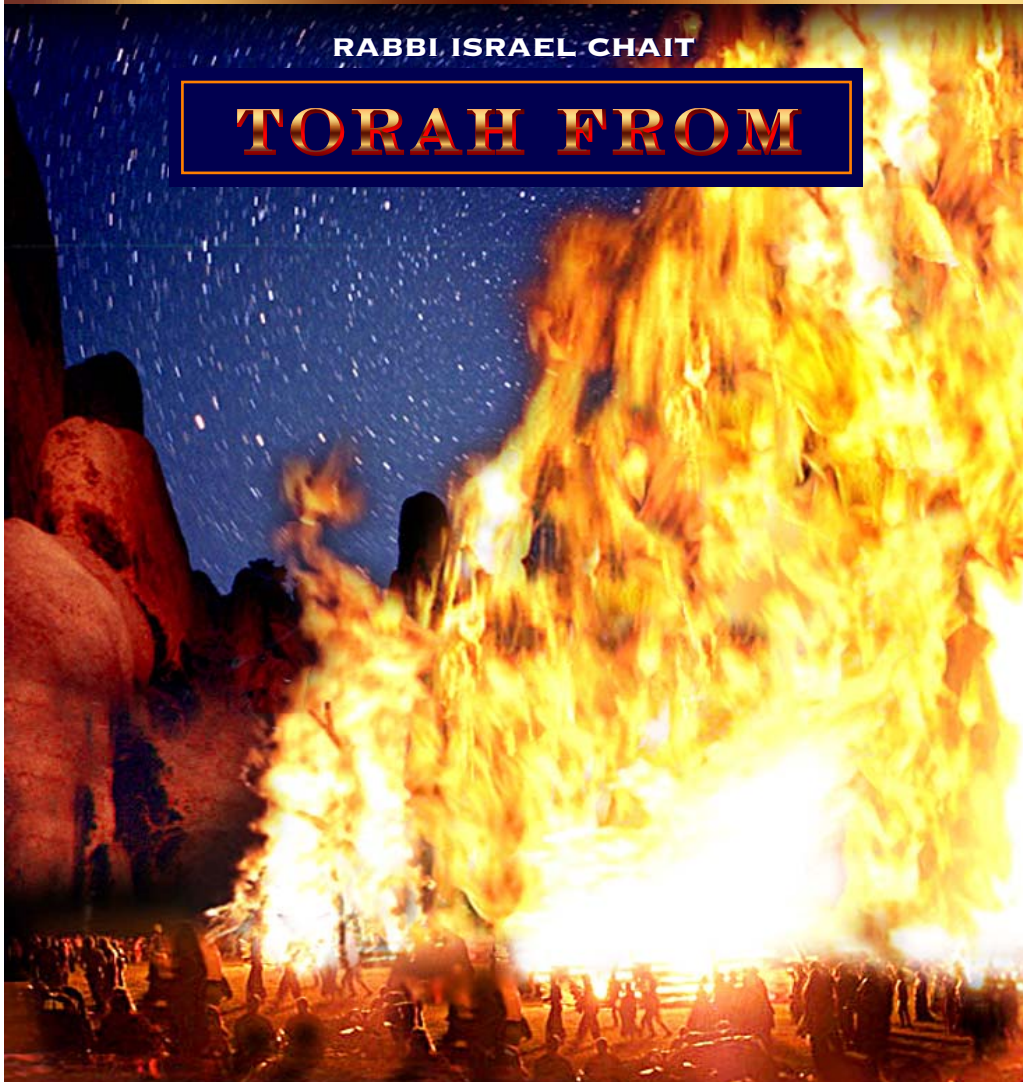
The first Jews, who by definition were not yet observant, received the Torah on Shavuot. This Shavuot holiday – and for all generations – God teaches us the same lesson: mankind cannot achieve happiness and purpose without a Torah.

Shavuot is truly a Holiday for the Non-Religious. And this one can be the first of many happy ones for you. Make the next step and meet with a knowledgeable Jew, ask your questions, start learning regularly...and you will see how wonderful your life will be. Trust those wiser than you...like our greatest kings and prophets. Give a chance to hear what they have to say.

Start your quest now with an investigation into a proof that God exists, based on Rabbi Israel Chait's essay reprinted herein, "Torah from Sinai". ■

RABBI ISRAEL CHAIT

TORAH FROM



SINAI

Introduction

Judaism, as seen through the eyes of the scholars of the Talmud, has its own unique religious orientation. While basing itself on a cataclysmic event - revelation, it does not look to miracles as the source of its intimate relationship with God. God's revelation at Sinai was a one-time occurrence never to be repeated. This is expressed in Deuteronomy 5:19, "a great voice which was not heard again." (1) In the mind of the Talmudic scholar God continuously reveals himself not through miracles but through the wisdom of his laws. (2) These laws manifest themselves in Torah - the written and the oral law - and in nature.

The Psalmist expresses this view most clearly. He speaks freely of the wonders of nature and the awe-inspiring universe as in Psalm 8:4, "When I look at the heavens, the work of Your fingers; the moon and stars which you have established". Psalm 104, dedicated to the wonders of nature, climaxes with the exclamation, "How many are Your works, O Lord! You have made them all with wisdom." Regarding the sheer intellectual joy one derives from studying Torah, he states, "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul, the testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making wise the simple person. The

precepts of the Lord are upright, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is lucid, enlightening the eye. The statutes of the Torah are true; they are all in total harmony. They are more to be desired than gold, even fine gold, and they are sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

When speaking of man's search for God the Psalmist states, "The Lord, from heaven, looked down upon the children of man, to see if there were any man of understanding searching for God (14:2)." Man discovers God only through understanding. Accordingly, the righteous are depicted as being constantly involved in this process of searching for and discovering God. "But only in the Torah of the Lord is his desire, and in His Torah he mediates day and night" (Psalms 1:2). Maimonides sharply criticizes those who consider themselves religious and search for God through the miraculous. "Say to a person who believes himself to be of the wise men of Israel that the Almighty sends His angel to enter the womb of a woman and to form there the foetus [sic], he will be satisfied with the account; he will believe it and even find in it a description of the greatness of God's might and wisdom; although he believes that the angel consists of burning fire and is as big as a third part of the Universe, yet he considers it possible as a divine miracle. But tell him that God gave the seed a formative power which produces and shapes the limbs - and he will turn away because he cannot comprehend the true greatness and power of bringing into existence forces active in a thing that cannot be perceived by the senses." (3)

While Judaism is based on a supernatural event, it is not oriented toward the supernatural. The essence of Judaism is not realized through religious fervor over the miraculous but through an appreciation of God's wisdom as revealed both in Torah and the natural world. A miracle, being a breach of God's law, does not contribute to this appreciation. This distinction is crucial since it gives Judaism its metaphysical uniqueness.

I

The foundation of our faith is the belief that God revealed himself to the people of Israel a little over three thousand years ago. The revelation consisted of certain visual and audible phenomena. The elements of fire, clouds, smoke pillars, and the sound of the shofar were present. God produced an audible voice of immense proportion that He used to speak to Moses and then to the people. The voice conveyed intelligible Laws of great philosophic and halachic import. The event left no doubt in the minds of those present that they had witnessed an act of God. The Torah describes the details of the event in two places,

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first in Exodus 19 and then in Deuteronomy 4, where Moses recounts the event to the people before his passing. What was the objective of the event? In both places the Torah very clearly tells us the purpose of the revelation. The statement that God made to Moses immediately before the event reads as follows:

“I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will also then believe in you forever.” (Exodus 19:9)

When Moses recounts the event to the people he says,

“Teach your children and your children’s children about the day you stood before God your Lord at Horeb. It was then that God said to me, “Congregate the people for Me, and I will let them hear my words. This will teach them to be in awe of Me as long as they live on earth, and they will also teach their children.” (Deuteronomy 4:9-10)

God clearly intended the event to be a demonstration that would serve the present and all future generations. Nachmanides and others consider it one of the 613 commandments to teach the demonstration of the event at Sinai to every generation. We are therefore obliged to understand the nature of this demonstration and how it was to be valid for future generations. An understanding of the foundations of a system offers insight into the character and philosophical milieu of that system. Comprehension of Torah from Sinai provides the most rudimentary approaches to the entire Weltanschauung of Torah.

II

The very concept of a proof or evidence for the occurrence of the event at Sinai presupposes certain premises. It sets the system of Torah apart from the ordinary religious creed. The true religionist is in need of no evidence for his belief. His belief stems from something deep within himself. Indeed, he even senses in the idea of evidence for his belief a mixed blessing, as it were, a kind of alien ally. He does not enjoy making recourse to reality. Judaism, on the other hand, doesn’t just permit evidence; it demands it. If one were to say he believed in Torah from Sinai and does not need any evidence, he would not be in conformity with the Torah. The Torah demands that our conviction that it was given to us by God be based on the specific formula of the demonstration He created for us. Nachmanides states further that were it not for the event at Sinai we would not know that we should reject a false prophet who performs miracles and tells us to abandon any of the laws or ways of the

Torah. It is written in Deuteronomy 8:2-6 that we should not follow such a prophet. But, says Nachmanides, were it not for the demonstration at Sinai we would be totally in a quandary, unable to know whether we should follow the Torah based on miracles that occurred in Egypt or follow the false prophet based on his miracles. (4) The event at Sinai resolves this dilemma. After the event at Sinai the Jew remains unimpressed even by miracles that would lead an ordinary person to conclude that the words of the false prophet are true. We shall return to this point later.

Clearly then, the basis on which one’s religious convictions are built differ in the cases of the strict religionist and the man of Torah. The difference might be stated in the following manner: The religionist believes first in God and then in his mind and senses, while the man of Torah, who bases himself on evidence, accepts his mind and his senses and then proceeds to recognize God and His Torah by means of these tools. Only the man of Torah perceives God as a reality as his ideas concerning God register on the same part of his mind that all ideas concerning reality do. (5)

Let us proceed to the demonstration that took place at Sinai. We must understand not only how this event would serve as proof for those immediately witnessing it but for future generations as well, as it is stated in Deuteronomy, “and they will also teach their children.” We must define at the outset what we mean by proof. The term proof as it is commonly used has a subjective meaning. We mean proof to the satisfaction of a given individual. As such it is subject to a wide range of definitions and criteria. There are those for whom even the world of sense perception is doubtful. In order not to get lost in the sea of epistemology let us state that the Torah accepts a framework similar to the one a scientist employs. It accepts the world of sense perception and the human mind. The events that occurred at Sinai are according to Torah valid evidence from which a rational person would conclude that a). There exists a deity, b). This deity is concerned with man, and c). This deity entrusted Moses with the task of conveying his system of laws to the people. To anyone who maintains that even if he were at Sinai he would remain unconvinced, the Torah has little to say.

The Torah addresses itself to a rational mind. It must be remembered that every epistemological system that is defensible from a logical standpoint is not necessarily rational. Rationality demands more than logical consistency; it requires clear intellectual intuition. One may argue, for instance, that we possess no real knowledge of the atom. One might contend that all electrons and protons conspired to act

in a certain way when they were being observed. It may be difficult to disprove such a hypothesis, but it is easy to see that it does not appeal innately to the human mind. (6) Our intuitive intellect rejects it. (7)

III

Let us now proceed to the question of how the events at Sinai, which occurred over three thousand years ago, were to serve as evidence for all succeeding generations. We may begin by asking what kind of event, if any, could possibly be performed that would qualify as evidence long after such an event has transpired? What criteria could we set forth that would satisfy such a requirement? Let us analyze how we as human beings gain knowledge. What methods are available to us? It would seem that there are two methods we use to obtain knowledge. The first is by direct observation. This course seems simple enough and for our purpose requires little analysis. Very little of our knowledge, however, is obtained through direct observation. We would know little or nothing of world history if we limited ourselves to direct observation. Even in science little or no progress could be made if one were limited to direct observation. We could not rely on textbooks or information given to us by others. Instead, each scientific observer would have to perform or witness all experimental evidence of the past firsthand. Knowledge in our personal lives would be equally restricted. When we place ourselves on the operating table for surgery we have very little firsthand knowledge about our physical condition or even whether the practitioner is indeed a physician. We put our very lives on the line with almost no firsthand, directly observed evidence.

Why do we do this? Are there any criteria we use that can rationally justify our actions? Here we come to the second class of knowledge available to us - secondhand knowledge. Secondhand knowledge seems to us quite reasonable provided certain criteria are met. When secondhand knowledge comes to our attention we are immediately faced with the question: Is this piece of information true or false? We cannot directly know whether or not it is true since we have not witnessed it directly; we can, however, know if it is true by way of inference. If we can remove all causes of falsehood we can infer that it is true. How can we remove all causes of falsehood? The rationale is simple. If the information that others convey to us is false, it is so for one of two reasons. Either the informer is ignorant and mistaken in what he tells us, or his statement is a fabrication. If we can rule out these two possibilities, there remains no cause for the information to be false. We then consider it to be true.

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How can we eliminate these two possibilities? For the first one, ignorance, we only need to determine whether the individual conveying the information to us is intellectually capable of apprehending it. We deal here with a direct relationship. If the information is simple we may trust an average person. If it is complex or profound we would only trust someone capable of understanding such matters. The more complex the matter, the more qualified a person is required to be; the more simple the matter, the less qualified an individual needs to be. If an ordinary person would tell us it was raining we would be inclined on the basis of the first consideration to believe him. If he would tell us about complex weather patterns we would doubt his information. If, however, an eminent meteorologist would describe such patterns to us, we would believe him. The day President Kennedy was assassinated word spread almost instantly that he was shot. This report remained accurate although it passed through many hands. The details about how or where he was shot were confused. The shooting was a simple item of news capable of being communicated properly even by many simple people. The details of how and where were too complex for ordinary people to transmit properly.

Sometimes our criteria are fulfilled in concert with each other. We may believe a layperson's testimony that another individual is a well-qualified physician and then take the physician's advice. In another case we may accept a layperson's assertion that a text is the work of notable scientists. We would then proceed to accept as true ideas stated in this text even though they seem strange to us. We would not accept these very same ideas from the original simple person. Our acceptance of the information found in textbooks is always based on this process.

Now we come to the consideration of fabrication. Here again we operate through inference. We may rule out fabrication when we trust the individual or think he has no motive to lie. If we do not know the individual we work with a second criterion. We accept the information if many people convey it, and we doubt it when its source is only one individual. The rationale is based on the assumption that one individual may have a motive to lie, but it is unlikely that a group of people would have a collective motivation to lie. If we met someone who told us that the 8:30 train to Montreal derailed we might at first be doubtful, but if several passengers gave us the same report we would accept it. We deem it unreasonable to assume a universal conspiracy. Our acceptance of the authorship of books by those named on the covers is based on this assumption. The moment we hear information our minds automatically turn to these

two factors. We ask ourselves if the informant is capable of apprehending the information he is conveying and if there is any reason to assume fabrication. If we can answer in the affirmative to the first question and in the negative to the second question, we accept the information as true.

These are the criteria, which guide our lives. They determine the choices we make in both our most trivial and most serious decisions. With this modus operandi we conclude that so and so is a highly qualified physician. If we suspect his integrity or his capabilities we consult a second physician or even a third. If all of them agree we would submit to even a serious operation on the grounds that a universal conspiracy is absurd.

Our acceptance of all historical data is based on the previous considerations. We are satisfied with the verisimilitude of certain historical events and unsatisfied with others depending on whether or not our criteria for reliability have been met. We are quite sure of simple well-known facts. For example, no one would dispute the claim that World War I occurred. Again, we are quite certain that George Washington existed, but we are not so sure of what size shoe Washington wore. A simple fact readily observable by many individuals we accept as true. Details we doubt. For these and for complex information we require qualified individuals. By ruling out fabrication we accept their communications as true. Because of our system we often arrive at gray areas when our criteria have not been adequately fulfilled. To the degree that they are not satisfied we are infused with doubt.

We are now in a position to determine what event could be performed that would retain its validity for future generations. Since future generations cannot observe the event directly, it would have to be an event that rules out in its process of communication the causes of doubt due to the ignorance of the communicators and due to fabrication. A simple event grasped easily by the senses that occurs before a mass of people who later attest to its occurrence would fulfill the requirements. Such an event would have all the credibility of the most accepted historical fact. If we doubt either a simple event attested to by masses of people or a complex event attested to by qualified individuals, we would ipso facto have to doubt almost all the knowledge we have acquired in all the sciences, all the humanities, and in all the different disciplines existing today. Moreover we would have to desist from consulting with physicians, dentists, lawyers, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, or specialists in any field who work from an accepted body of knowledge.



The event at Sinai fulfills the above requirements. The events witnessed as described were of a simple perceptual nature so that ordinary people could apprehend them. The event at Sinai was structured with the same built-in ingredients that cause us to accept any historical fact or any kind of secondhand knowledge. Moses himself points this out (Deuteronomy 4:9-13,32-36). Moses notes that those events that transpired before the entire nation were clearly perceived. He states,

"You are the ones who have been shown, so that you will know that God is the Supreme Being and there is none besides Him. From the heavens, He let you hear His voice admonishing you, and on earth He showed you His great fire, so that you heard His words from the fire."

Someone may ask how we know that these events were as described in the Torah, clearly visible, and that they transpired before the entire nation. Perhaps this itself is a fabrication? The answer to this question is obvious. We accept a simple fact attested to by numerous observers because we consider mass conspiracy absurd. For the very same reason no public event can be fabricated, for we would have to assume a mass conspiracy of silence with regard to the occurrence of that event. If someone were to tell us that an atomic bomb was detonated over New York City fifty years ago, we would not accept it as true because we would assume that we would have certainly heard about it, had it actually occurred. The very factors, which compel us to accept as true, an account of an event of public proportion safeguards us against fabrication of such an event. (8) Were this not so all of history could have been fabricated. Had the event at Sinai not actually occurred anyone fabricating it at any point in time would have met

with the stiff refutation of the people, "had a mass event of that proportion ever occurred we surely would have heard of it." Fabrication of an event of public proportion is not within the realm of credibility.

History corroborates this point. In spite of the strong religious instinct in man, no modern religion in over two thousand years has been able to base itself on public revelation. A modern religion demands some kind of verifiable occurrence in order to be accepted. For this reason the two major Western religions, Christianity and Islam, make recourse to the revelation at Sinai. Were it not for this need and the impossibility of manufacturing such evidence, they certainly would not have based their religions on another religion's revelation.

IV

We now face one question. One may argue that we are to accept Torah much as one would accept any major historical event, and we may put our lives on the line based on no stronger evidence, but doesn't religion demand certitude of a different nature? Here we are not looking for certitude based on some formula, which we are forced to employ in our daily lives but certitude, which gives us conviction of an absolute and ultimate nature.

To answer this question we must proceed with an examination of the tenets involved in the institution of Torah from Sinai, to which the rest of this paper is dedicated. Maimonides states that the nation of Israel did not believe in Moses because of the miracles he performed. (9) Moses performed these miracles out of simple necessity. They needed to escape from Egypt, so he split the sea, they needed food, so he brought forth manna. The only reason the people believed in Moses and hence God and Torah was because of the event at Sinai where they heard a voice that God produced speaking to Moses and instructing him to teach the people. But we may ask, weren't the miracles in Egypt enough to convince the people of Moses' authenticity? Didn't they follow him out of Egypt based on what they observed of God's miracles? And doesn't the Torah itself state at the splitting of the sea (Exodus 14:31),

"The Israelites saw the great power that God had unleashed against Egypt, and the people were in awe of God. They believed in God and his servant Moses."

But Maimonides is thoroughly supported by the Bible itself since after this very statement, after the splitting of the sea, God says to Moses (Exodus 19:9),

"I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then also believe in you forever."

It is clear, as Maimonides concludes, that there was something lacking in the previous belief for if it were complete the very motive for the Revelation, as stated clearly in the Torah, would be lacking.

A belief instilled by miracles, even miracles of cataclysmic proportion forecasted in advance and occurring exactly when needed is lacking according to Maimonides. They do not effectuate total human conviction. It is, in the words of Maimonides, "a belief which has after it contemplation and afterthought." It may cause one to act on it because of the profound improbability of coincidence but it is not intellectually satisfying. The mind keeps returning to the event and continues to ponder it. God wished Torah to be founded on evidence that totally satisfies the human mind - Tzelem Elokim - which He created. He wished Judaism to be based on a sound foundation of knowledge, which would satisfy man's intellect completely. Miracles may point to something. We may be convinced that coincidence is improbable but such conclusions are haunted by afterthoughts. When the voice produced by God was heard from the heavens there was no further need for afterthought. It was a matter of direct evidence. Only then could it be said that the people knew there is a God and that Moses was His trusted servant. The requirements for knowledge were complete.

Maimonides concludes, "Hence it follows that every prophet that arises after Moses our teacher, we do not believe in him because of the sign he gives so that we might say we will pay heed to whatever he says, but rather because of the commandment that Moses gave in the Torah and stated, 'if he gives you a sign you shall pay heed to him,' just as he commanded us to adjudicate on the basis of the testimony of two witnesses even though we don't know in an absolute sense if they testified truthfully or falsely. So too is it a commandment to listen to this prophet even though we don't know if the sign is true. Therefore if a prophet arose and performed great wonders and sought to repudiate the prophecy of our teacher Moses we do not pay heed to him. To what is this similar? To two witnesses who testified to someone about something he saw with his own eyes denying it was as he saw it; he doesn't listen to them but knows for certain that they are false witnesses. Therefore the Torah states that if the sign or wonder comes to pass do not pay heed to the words of this prophet because this (person) came to you with a sign and wonder to repudiate that which you saw with your own eyes and since we do not believe in signs but only in the commandments that Moses gave how

can we accept by way of a sign this (person) who came to repudiate the prophecy of Moses that we saw and heard." (10) The Jew is thus tied completely and exclusively to the event at Sinai which was formulated to totally satisfy the human mind. (11)

This explains the main idea of the chapter of the false prophet given by the Torah in Deuteronomy 13:2-6.

"If there arise among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you comes to pass, and he says, 'Let us go after other gods which you have not known and let us serve them.'"

"Do not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. God your lord is testing you to see if you are truly able to love God your Lord with all your heart and all your soul."

What is this test? The test is to see if your love (12) of God is based on true knowledge, which He has taught you to follow and embrace, or if you are to fall prey to the unsound primitive emotions of the moment that well up from the instinctual source of man's nature. The faith of the Jew can never be shaken by dreamers or miracle workers. We pay no attention to them. Based on the rationally satisfying demonstration of Sinai we remain faithful to God through His wisdom and knowledge. (13) Our creed is that of His eternal and infinite law. When we perfect ourselves in this manner we can say that we truly love God with all our hearts and with all our soul. We then serve God through the highest part of our nature, the Divine element He placed in our soul.

V

We have so far dealt with the actuality of the event at Sinai and with the nature of this event. We must now concern ourselves with the purpose of this event. When the Jews received the Torah at Sinai they uttered two words, naaseh v'nishma, "we will do and we will hear", the latter meaning we will learn, understand, and comprehend. The commitment was not just one of action or performance but was one of pursuit of knowledge of the Torah. Rabbi Jonah of Gerundi asks, (14) how can one do if he doesn't understand? A performance of a rational person requires as a prerequisite knowledge of that performance. Rabbi Jonah answers: The event at Sinai served as a verification of the truth of Torah. The Torah set up a system of scholarship to which its ideas are entrusted. "We will do" means we will accept the authority of the scholars of Torah

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concerning proper religious performance until we can understand ourselves by way of knowledge why these performances are correct. The commitment of naaseh (action) is preliminary until we reach the nishma, (hearing) our own understanding. Our ultimate objective is the full understanding of this corpus of knowledge known as Torah. We gain knowledge of Torah by applying our intellects to its study and investigation. The study of Torah and the understanding of its principles is a purely rational and cognitive process. All halachic decisions are based on human reason alone.

Until rather recently the greatest minds of our people devoted themselves to Torah study. Since the tradition of our people has lost popularity, the great intellectual resources of our people have been directed to science, mathematics, psychology, and other secular areas from which eminent thinkers emerged. In former years our intellectual resources produced great Torah intellects like Maimonides, Rabbeinu Tam, and Nachmanides. In modern times these same resources produced eminent secular giants like Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, and Sigmund Freud. I mention this so that the layman may have some understanding of the intellectual level of our scholars, for just as it is impossible to appreciate the intellect of an Einstein unless one has great knowledge of physics, it is impossible to appreciate the great minds of Torah unless one has attained a high level of Torah knowledge.

The greatest thinkers of science all share a common experience of profound intellectual humility. Isaac Newton said that he felt like a small boy playing by the sea while the "whole ocean of truth" rolled on before him. Albert Einstein said, "One thing I have learned in a long life: that all our science measured against reality is primitive and childlike - and yet it is the most precious thing we have." The human mind cannot only ascertain what it knows; it can appreciate the extent and enormity of what it does not know. A great mind can sense the depth of that into which it is delving. In Torah one can find the same experience. The greatest Torah minds throughout the centuries have all had the realization that they are only scratching the surface of a vast and infinite body of knowledge. As the universe is to the physicist, Torah is to the Talmudist. Just as the physicist when formulating his equations can sense their crudeness against the vast reality he is attempting to penetrate, so too the Talmudist in formulating his abstractions comes in sight of the infinite world of halachic thought. As the Midrash states, "It is far greater than the earth and

wider than the sea, and it increases infinitely." The reason for both experiences is the same. They both derive from God's infinite knowledge.

Let me elaborate further on this point. When the scientist ponders the phenomena of nature and proceeds to unravel them, he finds that with the resolution of each problem new worlds open up for him. The questions and seeming contradictions he observes in nature are gateways that guide him to greater understanding, forcing him to establish new theories, which, if correct, shed light on an even wider range of phenomena. New scientific truths are discovered. The joy of success is, however, short-lived, as new problems, often of even greater immensity, emerge on the horizon of investigation. He is not dissuaded by this situation because he considers his new insight invaluable and looks forward with even greater anticipation to future gains in knowledge. The scientist is propelled by his faith that nature is not at odds with itself, that the world makes sense, and that all problems, no matter how formidable in appearance, must eventually yield to an underlying intelligible system, one that is capable of being grasped by the human mind. His faith is amply rewarded as each success brings forth new and even more amazing discoveries. He proceeds in his infinite task.

When studying man-made systems, such as United States Constitutional Law or British Common Law, this is not the case. The investigator here is not involved in an infinite pursuit. He either reaches the end of his investigation or he comes upon problems that do not lend themselves to further analysis; they are attributable to the shortcomings of the designers of the system. The man-made systems exhibit no depth beyond the intellect of their designers. Unlike science, real problems in these systems do not serve as points of departure for new theoretical insights but lead instead to dead ends.

Those who are familiar with the study of Torah know that the Talmudist encounters the same situation as the scientific investigator. Here difficulties do not lead to dead ends; on the contrary, with careful analysis apparent contradictions give way to new insights, opening up new highways of intellectual thought. Wider ranges of halachic phenomena become unified while new problems come to light. The process is infinite. The greatest human minds have had this experience when pondering the Talmud; indeed, the greater the mind, the greater the experience. We are dealing with a corpus of knowledge far

beyond the ultimate grasp of mortal man. It is this experience, this firsthand knowledge of Torah that has been the most intimate source of faith for Torah scholars throughout the ages.

The ultimate conviction that Torah is the word of God derives from an intrinsic source, the knowledge of Torah itself. Of course this source of conviction is only available to the Torah scholar. But God wants us all to be scholars. This is only possible if we do the nishma, the ultimate purpose of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

The revelation at Sinai, while carefully structured by the Creator to appeal to man's rational principle to move him only by his Tzelem Elokim, is only a prelude to the ultimate direct and personal realization of the Torah as being the work of the Almighty. The revelation at Sinai was necessary to create the naaseh, which is the bridge to the nishma where anyone can gain firsthand knowledge of Torah and the truth it contains. As Rabbi Soloveitchick once said, the study of Torah is a "rendezvous with the Almighty". When we begin to comprehend the philosophy of Torah we may also begin to appreciate how the revelation at Sinai was structured by God in the only way possible to achieve the goals of the Torah - to create a religion, forever secure, by means of which man worships God through the highest element in his nature.

Postscript

A statement of Nachmanides warrants inclusion here. Nachmanides says that we can infer the truth of the Torah from the principle that a person would not bequeath a falsehood to his children. At first sight this seems inexplicable. Idolatry could also avail itself of the same argument. We must obviously say that the principle, it may be true, must be amended to read a person would not transmit intentionally a falsehood to his children. How then does this show Judaism is true? All religious people believe their religion is true and that they are bestowing the greatest blessing on their children by conveying to them their most cherished beliefs.

The words of Nachmanides become clear when we realize that his inference is based on a certain level of Torah knowledge. Either the emotions or the intellect generates a belief. But Torah is a vast system of knowledge with concepts, postulates, and axioms. If such a system were fabricated it would have to be done so intentionally. Nachmanides therefore states his proposition that a

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person does not bequeath a falsehood to his children.

For the purpose of Nachmanides' inference, one would have to attain at least a basic familiarity with Torah. The ultimate recognition of Torah as a science would of necessity require a higher degree of knowledge. Nachmanides' proof is partially intrinsic, whereas the demonstration of Torah from Sinai is totally extrinsic. There are then three levels of knowledge of Torah from Sinai: the demonstration, the intrinsic verification through knowledge, and that of Nachmanides.

Epilogue

Torah completely satisfies the needs of the Tzelem Elokim in man's nature. Every human mind craves Torah. Man was created for it (see tractate Sanhedrin 99b). Following the example of Maimonides, who said "Listen to the truth from whomever said it (Introduction to Avos)," and his son Reb Avraham, who endorsed the study of Aristotle in the areas in which he does not disagree with Torah, (15) I take the liberty to quote Bertrand Russell: "The world has need of a philosophy or a religion which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something other than mere life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, incapable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. If life is to be fully human it must serve some end, which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have life for their purpose. They aim rather at what seems like a gradual incarnation, a bringing into our human existence of something eternal, something that appears to the imagination to live in a heaven remote from strife and failure and the devouring jaws of time. Contact with the eternal world - even if it be only a world of our imagining - brings a strength and a fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of our temporal life." (16)

Torah makes our lives worthwhile. It gives us contact with the eternal world of God, truth, and the beauty of His ideas. Unlike Russell the agnostic, we do not have to satisfy ourselves with a world of "our imagining" but with the world of reality - God's creation. How fortunate we are and how meaningful are the words we recite each day, "for they [the Torah and mitzvot] are our lives and the length of our days." ■

End Notes

1. See Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra on this verse.
2. In his description of the Torah scholar, Rav Soloveitchik states, "He does not search out transcendental, ecstatic paroxysms or frenzied experiences that whisper intonations of another world into his ears. He does not require any miracles or wonder in order to understand the Torah. He approaches the world of halacha with his mind and intellect just as cognitive man approaches the natural realm. And since he relies upon his intellect, he places his faith in it and does not suppress any of his psychic faculties in order to merge into some supernal existence. His own personal understanding can resolve the most difficult and complex problems. He pays no heed to any murmurings of [emotional] intuition or other types of mysterious presentiments." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*. (Philadelphia: 1983, Jewish Publication Society of America) p.79.
3. Maimonides, Moses. *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Trans. by M. Friedlander. (London: 1951 Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd) p. 161.
4. From both Maimonides and Nachmanides who concur on this point, as well as from the plain meaning of the Bible itself with regard to the objective of Revelation, it is clear that Judaism does not give credence to the existence of an authentic inner religious voice. Were this the case, there would be no need for the demonstration at Sinai in order to discredit the false prophet (Deuteronomy 8:2-6). On the contrary, this would be the exact test spoken of, to see if one will be faithful to this inner voice. For Judaism this inner voice is no different from the subjective inner feelings all people have for their religious and other unwarranted beliefs. It stems from the primitive side of man's nature and is in fact the source of idolatry. This is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 29:17, 18:
Today, there must not be among you any man, woman, family or tribe, whose heart strays from God, and who goes and worships the gods of those nations. When [such a person] hears the words of this dread curse, he may rationalize and say, "I will have peace, even if I do as I see fit."
Why does the Torah here as in no other place present to us the rationalization of the sinner? The Torah is describing the strong sense of security these primitive inner feelings often bestow on their hosts and is warning of the tragic consequences that will follow if they are not uprooted.
5. It is imperative that the reader examines the passages in the Torah relevant to this notion. These include Exodus 19:4, Deuteronomy 4:3,9,34,35, and 36.
6. As a classic example, metaphysical solipsism may be logically irrefutable but is to the human mind absurd.
7. We may even be able to discover why we reject it, let us say, due to Occam's razor, the maxim that assumptions introduced to explain a thing must be as few as possible, but our rejection is not due to a knowledge of Occam's razor but rather Occam's razor is based on our rejection. It is part of the innate rationale of our mental system. Occam's razor, a rather marvelous formula, does not rely on deductive logic. It shows

that the natural world somehow conforms to our mental world. The simplest idea is the most appealing to the human mind and is usually the most correct one. The world is in conformity with the mind. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible."

8. It should be understood that the mere claim that an event was a public one and its acceptance by people does not qualify the event as fulfilling our requirements; it is only if the people who accept the information are in a position to reject it that their acceptance is of value. If a person from Africa claims to people of Sardinia that a public event transpired in Africa, the acceptance by the Sardinians is no indication of reliability as they are not in a position to confirm or deny the event. It is only if the claim is made to the same people who were in a position to observe the event that acceptance is of value. Claims made by early Christians about public miracles of the Nazarene do not qualify, as the masses of Jews before whom they were supposedly performed did not attest to them. The same is true of claims made by other faiths (though, as we will see, after Sinai miracles have no credibility value).

9. See Maimonides, Code of Law, Chapter VIII, Laws Concerning the Foundations of Torah.

10. Ibid. Chapter VIII.

11. This point is crucial. It contradicts popular opinion. The Jew remains at all times unimpressed by miracles. They do not form the essence of his faith, and they do not enter the mental framework of his creed. Though the most righteous prophet may perform them, they instill no belief. His credence harks back to only one source - Sinai.

12. See the concept of love of God as described by Maimonides Code, Laws of the Foundations of Torah Chapter II 1,2, and our elaboration on this theme in "Why one should learn Torah."

13. When visiting the Rockefeller Medical Institute, Albert Einstein met with Dr. Alexis Carrel, whose extracurricular interests were spiritualism and extrasensory perception. Observing that, Einstein was unimpressed. Carrel said, "But Doctor what would you say if you observed this phenomenon yourself?" To which Einstein replied, "I still would not believe it." (Clark, Ronald W. Einstein: The Life and Times. (New York: 1971, Avon Books) p. 642). Why would the great scientist not capitulate even to evidence? It is a matter of one's total framework. The true man of science who sees knowledge permeating the entire universe from the smallest particle to the largest galaxies will not be shaken from his view by a few paltry facts even though he may not be able to explain them. Only the ignorant are moved by such "evidence." In a similar manner miracles do not affect a man of Torah who is rooted in Sinai and God's infinite wisdom. His credo is his cogito.

14. Rebbeinu Yonah Avos III 9.

15. Concerning books that are proscribed, this follows the precedent of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 110b], *mili mealyesah deis baih darshinon* - those true things that are contained in them we do study.

16. Schlipp, Paul R. *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. (LaSalle: 1989, Open Court Publishing). p.533.

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MATT SCHNEEWEISS

to whom was the

TORAH GIVEN

The central theme of Shavuos is the giving of the Torah. People assume that the Torah was given to all Jews. According to Ibn Ezra, however, this assumption is not entirely correct. In his introduction to the Ten Commandments, Ibn Ezra writes: "Hashem only gave the Torah to rational people; a person who is not rational has no Torah."

According to Ibn Ezra, people can be divided into two groups: "rational" and "irrational." The question is: "What do these two labels mean?" After all, everyone thinks and behaves irrationally from time to time. What defines a person as "irrational"?

Let us set this question aside for a moment and take a detour . . .

One of the most important mitzvot in the Torah is: "You shall not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray" (Bamidbar 15:40). The Sages explain: "after your heart" refers to heresy; "and after your eyes" refers to licentiousness (Sifre: Bamidbar 115). The Rambam elucidates this mitzvah in Laws of Idolatry 2:3:

The Torah did not only prohibit us from inclining toward idolatrous thinking, but any thought which causes a person to uproot one of

the fundamentals of Torah. We are commanded not to bring it to mind, and not to occupy our thoughts with it - not to speculate and to be drawn after the musings of the heart. For man's mind is deficient, and not all minds are capable of clearly ascertaining the truth. And if every person were to be drawn after the thoughts of his heart, the whole world would be destroyed as a consequence of his deficient mind.

How [does one transgress this mitzvah]? Sometimes a person will explore idolatry, and sometimes a person will think about the Oneness of the Creator: "Perhaps He is One, perhaps He is not?" "What is above, what is below, what is in front, what is in back?" and sometimes about prophecy: "Perhaps it is true, perhaps it is not?" and sometimes about Torah: "Perhaps it is from Heaven, perhaps it is not?" And he will not know the methods of judging these matters to be able to clearly know the truth, and he will consequently become a heretic.

There are two major questions we can ask. The first question is rooted in the Rambam's last example: and sometimes [a person will muse] about Torah: "Perhaps it is from Heaven, perhaps it is not?" The Torah itself commands us to verify, through rational argument, the Torah's divine origin - the event

at Sinai. Without a method of validating the historicity of the event at Sinai, we would be unable to differentiate between the authority of Moshe Rabbeinu and the authority of a false prophet who performs miracles and commands us to deviate from the Torah.[1] Part of the process of demonstrating the historicity of the event at Sinai is entertaining the possibility that the event never occurred. According to the Rambam, however, it is prohibited to think such a thought!

This presents us with a contradiction: on the one hand, the Torah commands us to rationally demonstrate that the Torah was given at Sinai; at the same time, the Torah prohibits us to engage in the very cognitive process involved in such a demonstration!

The second question we can ask on this mitzvah concerns the second component: "after your eyes." The Rambam explains (Sefer ha'Mitzvos: Lo Saaseh #47): "The Sages' statement 'this refers to licentiousness' refers to the pursuit of physical pleasures and bodily desires and constant preoccupation in thinking about them."

The question is: What is the relationship between the two components of this mitzvah? "After your heart" (thinking thoughts which lead to heresy) seems to be entirely unrelated to "after your eyes" (preoccupation with the pursuit of physical pleasure). How can we unify these seemingly disparate behaviors?

To review, we have three questions on the table:

Question #1: According to Ibn Ezra, the Torah was not given to irrational people - who is considered "irrational" and why wasn't the Torah given to such people?

Question #2: How can the Torah prohibit thinking "perhaps the Torah is not from Heaven" and at the same time obligate every Jew to demonstrate the Torah's divine origin through rational argument?

Question #3: What is the relationship between thinking heretical thoughts and licentiousness?

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Let's take another look at the Rambam.

We are commanded not to bring it to mind, and not to occupy our thoughts with it - not to *speculate and to be drawn after the musings of the heart*. For the mind of man is deficient, and *not all minds* are capable of clearly ascertaining the truth. And if *every* person were to be *drawn after the thoughts of his heart*, the whole world would be destroyed as a consequence of his *deficient mind*. How [does one transgress this mitzvah]? *Sometimes a person will explore* idolatry, and sometimes a person will think about the Oneness of the Creator: "*Perhaps* He is One, *perhaps* He is not?" . . . *And he will not know the methods of judging these matters to be able to clearly know the truth*, and he will consequently become a heretic.

There are two ways in which a person can approach a philosophical question. The first way is to engage in an intellectually honest, unbiased, methodical investigation. A person who engages in such thinking will be cautious, thorough, and rigorous in his analysis, scrupulously avoiding fallacy and error. He will guard against cognitive and emotional biases and not rely on first impressions. He will consult experts when he has questions and will discuss his thoughts with other people before drawing any conclusions. Most importantly, he will recognize the limitations of an untrained mind, and will only venture into areas which are within his intellectual capacity. Let us call this approach: analytical investigation.

The second way to approach a philosophical question is with intuitive musing. A person who uses this method will think casually, lazily, and uncritically. He will stick with his first impressions, not bothering to scrutinize his reasoning for bias and error. He will not consult experts, nor will he bother to discuss his questions with others. He will confidently think about any area, and will not feel the need to train his mind. Let us call this thinking: affective speculation.

According to the Rambam, the Torah never prohibited analytical investigation of philosophical questions. Indeed, one who is capable of such an investigation is obligated to validate the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Rather, the whole prohibition of "exploring after your heart" refers to affective speculation. The Torah recognized that this form of

"thinking" is the source of idolatry and heresy and prohibited it. Moreover, the Torah recognized that an untrained mind will naturally lapse into this sort of speculation. If an individual is intellectually incapable, or emotionally susceptible to idolatry or heresy, the Torah prohibits him from investigating certain questions. The Torah is pro-intellect - but only when the intellect is used responsibly.

Let's take another step and ask: what makes affective speculation so attractive and convincing? And what is the relationship between affective speculation and preoccupation with physical pleasure?

Apparently, the prohibition of "you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes" was designed to eliminate more than just a particular way of thinking. Rather, the objective of this prohibition is to uproot an entire philosophy of life, the philosophy which proclaims: what feels true is true.

There are two types of truth: theoretical and practical. "The earth is round," "2+2=4," and "God is One" are all statements of theoretical truth; they proclaim what is or is not the case. "Look both ways before crossing the street," "eat healthy," and "don't drive recklessly" are statements of practical truth; they proclaim what one should or should not do.

In short, the mitzvah of "you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes" prohibits us from relying on our hearts for theoretical and practical truth. The message of this mitzvah is: just because it feels true doesn't mean it is true, and just because it feels good doesn't mean it is good.

Perhaps this is the answer to our original question. A person who embraces the philosophy of "what feels true is true" is the "irrational person" of whom Ibn Ezra speaks. He is definitively irrational, rejecting the Tzelem Elokim as a perceiver of reality and relying on his feelings instead. Deep down, he assures himself saying, "I will have peace, for I proceed on the authority of my heart" (Devarim 29:18). Such a person will not be enriched by the Torah.

The system of 613 mitzvot is a blueprint for the happiest life for a human being. Shavuot is a time to reflect on Hashem's kindness in giving us this system. May we all merit to fulfill that which is written, "to observe the commandments of Hashem and His decrees, which I command you today, for your benefit" (Devarim 10:13). ■

(Special thanks to Levi and Ben, who helped me with these ideas.)

[1] See Laws of the Fundamentals of Torah 8:1-3; for an elaboration, see Torah from Sinai, by Rabbi Yisroel Chait and chapters 3 and 6 from Living Up to the Truth, by Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb.



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Shavuot: the Ultimate Connection

LAURA KOSTER

When G-d created the world, He decreed and said: "The heavens are G-d's, and the earth is given to man." But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His original decree, and declared: The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin -- as it is written, "And G-d descended on Mount Sinai,⁴ and then it says, "And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d."⁵ (Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4)

G-d came down from Mount Sinai in order to bring the spirituality of the heavens down to earth. He called Moses to the peak of the mountain so mankind would ascend beyond physicality, reaching a higher spiritual level. G-d's Torah could now sanctify physical life through the Jewish people. We strive to emulate Moses by learning Torah, growing spiritually to reach our highest potential.

The Torah is G-d's guidebook. It teaches us how to conduct our daily lives, whether in the

home, in the workplace or in our relations with parents, spouse, and fellow man and woman. The 613 laws and commandments enable us to fulfill obligations by devoting our lives to G-d. The word 'mitzvah' means both commandment and connection. Every mitzvah we perform perfects us further, and is recorded to our merit. G-d knows our thoughts, deeds and actions.

The Torah is our blueprint for life. Its purpose is to direct us through the journey of life, similar to the GPS in our car that helps us get to our destination. Imagine driving on an unfamiliar road without a clue to where you're going. One becomes lost and frustrated, driving in circles for hours and hours. Thanks to the invention of the GPS, the driver punches in his/her starting address and final location. A friendly voice on the computer gives step-by-step directions on how to travel to the desired destination. When we learn and adhere to the commandments of the Torah, G-d leads and helps us maneuver our way through life. (Adapted Lori Palatnik, Your Inner GPS, www.aish.com).

Of course, the ego in human nature makes us want to live according to one's own wishes, lacking the understanding and connection with G-d. People focus on materialistic pleasures, fancy cars, homes, expensive clothing, making big bucks to afford Starbuck's coffee and NIKE sneakers. We live in a society where wealth, fame, looks, and getting to the top is overly valued and involvement with traditions and religion has been shunned. It is easier to follow one's ego, to try to obtain physical fulfillment, than to focus on developing our spirituality. But that does not mean that man must forego pleasure; He showed us the way to experience pleasure in its highest forms. G-d created human beings to attain physical and emotional pleasure by performing acts of kindness, giving charity to the poor, reciting blessings prior to eating and drinking, and sanctifying the holiness of marriage between man and woman.

The Jews were freed from the oppressive physical slavery of Egypt. On Shavuot, G-d gave us the Torah when we were transformed by experiencing freedom to achieve life goals without distractions. We were given freedom by doing mitzvahs and carrying out G-d's laws. G-d blessed us with the intellect, motivation and ability to use our freedom to achieve our goals and mission in life. Every person has a different mission to work so as to reach his or her perfection. It may be teaching children,

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healing the ill, feeding the poor, developing one's character, providing for the family, exercising to lose weight or giving emotional distress to a friend. But Torah study is for all.

Shavuot is symbolically a wedding between G-d and the Jewish people. G-d descended from Mount Sinai to embrace his loved ones in a holy marriage. By accepting His commandments and mitzvahs before we knew the intricate obligations involved, we were betrothed to G-d.

Seven days prior to celebrating our joyous festival of Shavuot, I was honored to attend my dear friend's wedding in Cedarhurst, New York. This was one of the most beautiful and special weddings I have ever seen. I arrived at The Kabbolas Panim where I greeted the happy smiling bride with a hug and "Mazel Tov"! Shortly after, I met a sweet girl from the Stella K. Abrams High School who accompanied me to get a drink. Within minutes, the girl introduced me to several of her friends who also attend SKA. On the way upstairs to the chuppah, two girls, realizing that I have a mild physical challenge, escorted me into sanctuary ornamented with colorful stained glass depictions of the flood, Chanukah menorah, harvest of Succos and sailboats. The carved stained glass picture of the Ten Commandments had an emotional impact on me.

I was seated with these two wonderful girls towards the left side of the synagogue. Towards the front of us, the whole group of high-school girls was gathered in their seats, waiting patiently for the ceremony to begin.

I was curious and asked the girls, "How did you meet my friend?"

The one I had initially met, replied, "Our school was asked to do a project by helping the kallah and chasson with the wedding."

Surprised, I said, "What kind of things did you help out with?"

"Well, we decorated the chuppah, made decorations and signs, and the boys yeshiva volunteered their band for the wedding. They're really amazing."

Tears dwelled up in my eyes when I realized that all of these young girls and boys helped to make my friend's wedding a reality. Their pure chesed and unconditional self-less giving filled the sanctuary with tremendous love and

joy. Following the ceremony where the bride circled her groom seven times, seven blessings were recited, and the glass was broken, we entered the reception. The girls invited me to join them with their school friends at their table. I engaged in conversations with many girls who asked my name and admired my pink and purple Star of David from Israel. Suddenly, more than 50 students jumped up from their seats, forming two lines facing each other and holding bright arches decorated with bright blue, orange, yellow and purple. As I approached one side of the line, a tall girl handed me the arch. All of the girls began shouting with loud singing and waving arches with great excitement as my friend walked under the rainbow arches.

The women and girls formed into several circles, dancing hand in hand, and singing. The boys from the yeshiva played boisterous wedding music, filling the room with simcha.

A few people asked, "Do you want to dance with the kallah?"

I responded somewhat nervously, "Later, there are too many people."

One of the women wearing a pink outfit grabbed my hand, leading me through the crowd of swaying girls. They moved aside gracefully, allowing me to enter the center of the circle. I hugged the bride and we jumped up and down together to the rhythm of the music. The entire yeshiva yelled out with cheer, encircling us. My friend gave me a blessing before I stepped backwards and parted from the dancing.

Throughout the affair, I observed the yeshiva boys serving dinner, refilling glasses with water, cleaning off tables, and bringing chocolate mousse cake with blueberries to the guests. The girls were still filled with much energy, performing for guests with hats, twirling streamers and dancing around the tables. Towards the end of the wedding, I was touched by how the girls and boys worked together to clear off all the tables and clean floors.

The girls from SKA Yeshiva and boys from Davis Renov Stahler Yeshiva joined together to create this heart-warming wedding. The students are all true examples of serving G-d with joy, devotion and incredible kindness. Just like the Jewish nation accepted G-d's Torah without questioning what was in it, these young girls and boys agreed to fulfill the highest mitzvah to volunteer and bring happiness to the married couple.



In the week before Shavuot, I was privileged to experience the joy that a wedding could bring. I understood the importance in reestablishing my connection and simcha in our betrothal to Hashem from this holiday on. ■

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Mesora wishes everyone a very happy Shavuos. During this holiday, share your knowledge with your friends and family, educating them on God's Revelation at Mount Sinai. **If we don't, no one else can.**