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THROUGH UNIMAGINABLE CHALLENGES
WITH **NATHAN WITZTUM**

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The Shavuot Issue | May 2026

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Dawn	4:12 AM	
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ASCENDING

The Making of Wings

The traits that allow a soul to soar



RABBI BRAHM WEINBERG

I have long been struck by a beautiful image about the interdependence of Torah and moral character taught by the Slonimer Rebbe, Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky¹, in his Sefer Netivot Shalom:

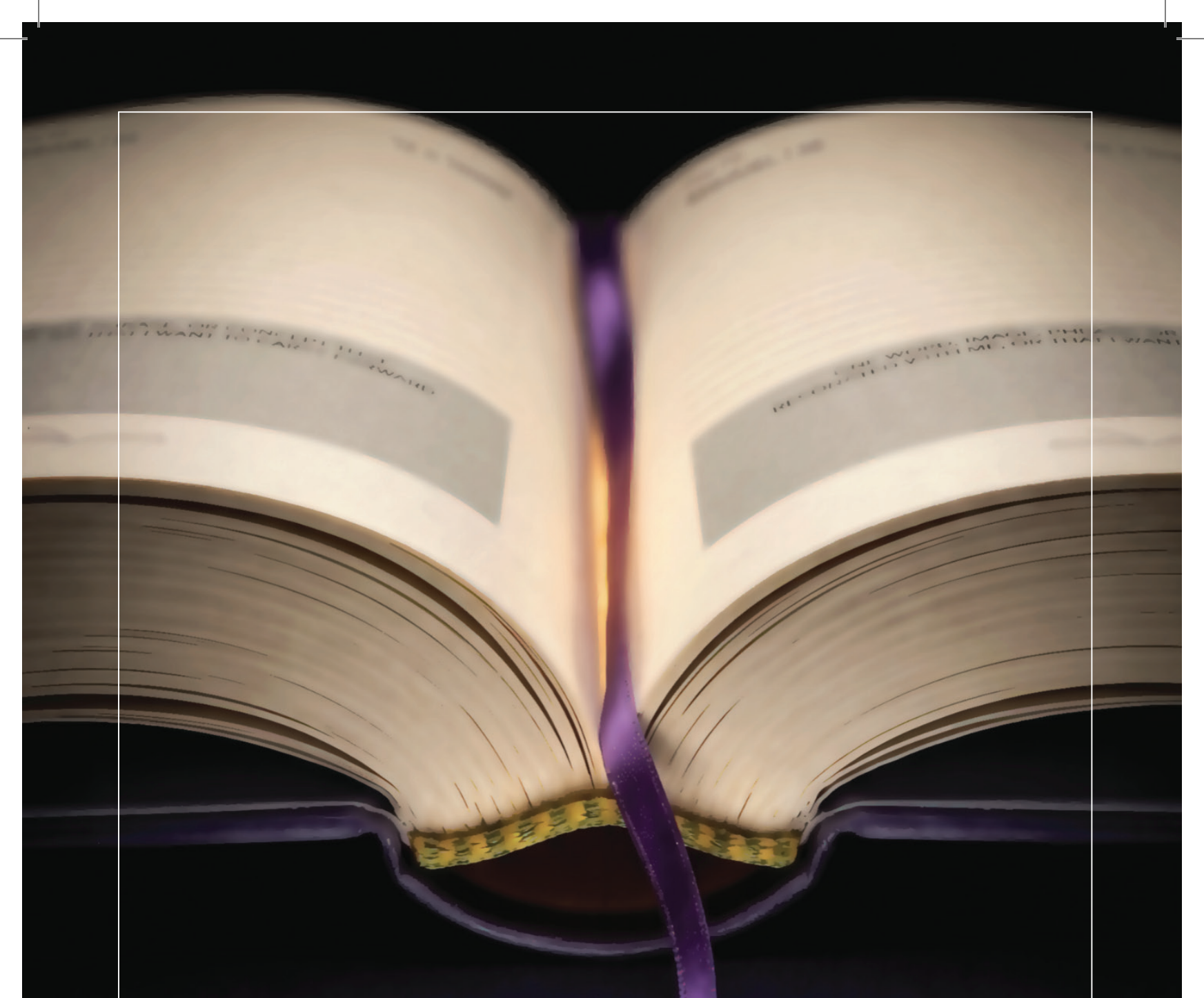
Character traits are the wings of our service of Hashem. Just as winged creatures cannot rise and fly without their wings, so too humans who engage in Torah and mitzvot cannot rise without the purification of their character traits which are their spiritual wings. The more a person purifies and refines his character traits, the more his entire existence is elevated and the more his Torah and Divine service is elevated to a higher level as well.²

I love that image of the purity and sincerity of our characters acting as the wings that help us to fly and soar in Torah. The image is deeply empowering, highly optimistic, and one that underscores the connectedness of Torah to the lives we live and the people that we are. The Netivot Shalom is suggesting that we do not learn Torah as robots processing information, but as real human beings attempting to make the Torah part of our identity. For that kind of integration to occur, our souls and characters must be refined, attuned, and purified enough to absorb the Divine teachings and bring us closer to Hashem. If the Torah enters a being whose holiness of character is not on par with what is expected, then that Torah may well fall flat and lose the potency required to elevate the individual.

Rabbenu Yona³ offers an interpretation of a well-known Mishna in Pirkei Avot that supports this teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe. The Mishna states: Rebi Elazar ben Azarya says: If there is no Torah, there is no Derech Eretz and if there is no Derech Eretz, there is no Torah."⁴⁻⁵

There are many interpretations of what "Derech Eretz" means in this context. However, Rabbenu Yona defines it as the moral imperative of character refinement. Rabbenu Yonah explains that Rebi Elazar ben Azarya believes there is a codependent

CONTINUED ON PAGE 21



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HIGHER

More Than Just Another Shavuos



Rabbi Shmuel Leigh
Director
The Golden Network



The Yerushalmi states that each Shavuos, we accept the Torah anew. On reflection, though, how can we undertake the immense responsibility that the Torah demands of us?

We all know that time flies by quickly when you are having fun. When engaged in an enjoyable activity, we do not tire so quickly and can keep going, even when the activity requires much effort. On the other hand, a task we dislike feels burdensome from the start. The key to accepting the Torah is to appreciate it.

I was privileged to study in Kollel at the Yeshiva of Rabbi Dovid Trenk, zt"l, a legendary educator. The Rosh Kollel was his illustrious son, R Elimelech, and it was established to bring a real Torah environment into the yeshiva. The kollel members dedicated their time to learning and didn't interact much with the students or other faculty, including Rabbi Trenk. Yet, the excitement, respect, and love that Rabbi Trenk had for each word of the Torah were contagious. He could never get enough of it, and he made the kollel members feel like they were the greatest gift to the world. It was evident that he understood the sanctity of each word.

Shavuos is about significant commitments. But to achieve one's spiritual goals, it's essential to appreciate every letter, word, and moment spent learning.

Rabbi Shmuel Leigh, the director of The Golden Network (TGN), studied at Beth Medrash Govoa, and the Greater Washington Community Kollel before founding TGN in 2011. TGN offers retirees and seniors a variety of engaging programs, including classes, learning, and entertainment at private homes and senior facilities. For more information about Rabbi Shmuel Leigh and The Golden Network, please visit goldennetwork.org. TGN is a non-profit organization (Tax ID #45-3515527). For questions or additional information, please call 301-732-1773 or email director@goldennetwork.org.



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- 725 mls thickened cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla bean extract
- 2-3 punnets of raspberries (we used 2)
- 1 large pomegranate or 2 small ones
- 2 teaspoons dried rose petals (food grade, organic if possible)

Serves 16-18

Prep Time: 30 minutes est.
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INSTRUCTIONS

- Preheat oven to 200 degrees Celsius.
- Line three baking trays with baking paper or tin foil and draw a 20cm circle on each.
- Wipe mixing bowl with vinegar and then beat egg whites with salt until soft peaks form.
- Add sugar in five batches (1/2 cup at a time), beating thoroughly between each addition until meringue is thick and shiny. Try holding the bowl upside down – if the meringue doesn't move, it's thick enough!
- Add cornflour, vinegar and vanilla extract and gently fold in.
- Divide mixture equally between three baking trays and spread gently to fill in the circle shape (an offset spatula is great for this). Smooth the top and the sides.
- Place the trays in the oven and immediately reduce heat to 120 degrees Celsius. Bake pavlovas for 90 minutes and then turn off heat, leaving them to cool in the oven.
- When ready to assemble, whip cream with 1 teaspoon vanilla bean extract.
- Take one pavlova and spread with a third of the cream, leaving a 2 cm gap around the edge. Decorate with a handful of berries and pomegranate seeds, concentrating the berries at the sides and the pomegranate seeds in the middle). Repeat with two other layers.
- Add a few extra raspberries and pomegranate seeds on the sides and then sprinkle rose petals over the whole thing, letting some fall over the berries and pomegranate seeds and some on the sides.



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Revelation and Search

The Hidden Flame of Sinai



RABBI AARON LOPIANSKY,
ROSH YESHIVA, YESHIVA OF GREATER
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I. The Mountain and the Choice

Revelation is the cornerstone of faith upon which all of Judaism rests. As the Rambam (Yesodei HaTorah 8:1) points out, it is not simply a proof of faith but the perception of the Divine in the most direct way possible. While other miracles served to prove Divine existence, pointing to such, Revelation was the experience of the Divine itself. For one brief moment, the curtains of concealment were parted, letting in the rays of the Divine in all its brightness.

Yet, strangely enough, Chazal tell us that the experience of Revelation at Sinai was somehow not the ultimate in acceptance of God's dominion. The Gemara (Shabbos 82) tells us that at Sinai "the mountain was poised over the Jews like a barrel." The Jews were forced into accepting the Torah. It was not until the miracle of Purim, a thousand years later, that the Jews willingly reaffirmed their commitment to Torah. Besides the strangeness of having to be forced to accept the Torah when one has beheld and experienced the Divine in all its glory, the literal description of these events in the Torah does not mention this tradition. The passages describing mattan Torah make no mention of force, while prior to the original Purim, the Jews were, indeed, threatened with extinction, until they did teshuvah and returned to God.

II. Searching to Fill the Void

In two ways does one become cognizant of the sun. One can behold the sun in its dazzling glory, or one can be locked into a pitch-dark room wherein every minute of waiting for a crack of light makes one even more aware of the joy of basking in the sun. Similarly, a father-son relationship peaks with a warm embrace

at the height of a moment of joy. Yet it can be outranked by the feelings of yearning and pining that accompany a prolonged absence from home. Many a son who has not responded to a warm embrace has found the pangs of absence unbearably strong.

This phenomenon is explained in the discussion by the Maharal on the importance of the Four Questions, and why someone who conducts his seder in a monologue fashion, not following a question-and-answer format, does not fulfill his obligation to tell the story of the Exodus on Pesach. He explains that when one merely hears a statement, one does not incorporate it into one's personality. It is just tagged on to one's awareness. This is not the case when one receives an answer to a question. For, by having posed the question, one opens a void, so to speak, and the answer fills it, forming a unified entity with the person rather than adding on a superfluity.

The Vilna Gaon's commentary on Shir HaShirim makes a similar observation. The pleasure a person derives from food is in direct proportion to his hunger. A sated person can be presented with the tastiest of dishes, and he will reject it in disinterest; and should he force the food in, it will not easily find its way down.

The Sefas Emes (parashas VaYeitzei) also refers to this principle in explaining why Yaakov Avinu did not receive his dream and prophecy until after he had left the yeshivah of Shem and Ever. When a man is in an atmosphere of kedushah, his thirst for ruchniyus (spirituality) is not comparable to the thirst that wells up within a person stumbling through the desert. He bases this on a midrash: "My soul thirsts for you. Where? In a barren and arid land."

III. Compulsion through Clarity

Similarly, this is the difference between Shavuos and Purim – the festival of receiving the Torah at Sinai and the holiday of its reaffirmation in Shushan. In the first instance, klal Yisrael was compelled to accept the Torah, but not simply by a physical force; the impact from the enormity of the event of revelation was so immense that it was likened to the mountain poised over their heads. The brilliant light of revelation left no room for doubt, and under that circumstance it was impossible not to accept the Torah. At Purim, however, it was not the threat to life in itself that inspired klal Yisrael's teshuvah and its return to pristine purity. Rather, the hester panim – the feeling of abandonment – bestirred powerful yearnings for a Sinai-like encounter with the Divine.

Our Chazal (Megillah 15b) tell us that when Queen Esther was to confront Achashveirosh, she cried: "My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?" To this day, the designated psalm of Purim (according to the Vilna Gaon) is the one in which this outcry appears; and, as Chazal explain, the psalm refers to the darkest hour of the night. Thus, while Shavuos marks the cognizance of God through revelation, Purim celebrates the cognizance of God that follows a desperate search in the darkness.

IV. The Gift and the Acquisition

Torah itself consists of these two parts. One, the Written Law, which is "God's Torah," so to speak, was given to us as a revelation. Yet, as it reads, it would remain closed to us. We must refer to the second part of the Torah, the Oral Law, also given at Sinai, to understand the written word. This encompasses the Divine



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interpretations and expositions, which are accessible to human comprehension; and it includes the rules of exegesis by which God instructs man in how to delve more deeply into the law and teaches him how to apply it to evolving circumstances. Chazal (Sanhedrin 24a) describe the long and tortuous system of analyzing every word and nuance of the Torah recorded in the Babylonian Talmud as “You restored me in the darkness,” for struggling through passages of the Talmud is like “grappling in the dark.” The Oral Torah, therefore, has special properties: it introduces queries and leads the student to conclusive answers, which become integrated into his personality. The results are deeply satisfying – not unlike the end result of the Pesach seder, as described by the Maharal.

Thus, it has been pointed out, the Mishnah opens with a question: “When does one begin reciting the Shema?” and ends with the word “shalom” (harmony). Understanding the Oral Law is not a matter of absorbing a statement. It is an answer derived from a query, and that is why the Oral Law (and not the Written Law) has been described as the human portion of the Torah.

The same principle can be applied to explain the Maharal’s statement: while the Torah was given on Shavuot, *deveikus* beTorah (clinging to the Torah) was the result of Purim. True enough, Torah can be presented to people – and it was, on Shavuot – but it can only become integrated within one’s personality (*deveikus*) if he searches first.

V. Revelation Again

Search is deeper than revelation, and its findings more permanent. What need, then, is there for revelation? To be sure, we must refer to the Kuzari’s answer: not everyone at every time can achieve a higher level of contact with God through personal search, nor will God reveal Himself to every generation. Thus, God’s original revelation at Sinai gives all subsequent generations – especially those unable to reach spiritual heights on their own – a tradition to fall back on.

There is yet another profound thought involved, one that concerns our discussion. The Yerushalmi (Peah 1:1) explains the verse, “It is not an empty thing

from you,” to mean that if a person finds any part of the Torah “empty” – without meaning – it is “from you.” That is, Torah cannot be faulted as being meaningless. Rather, this vacuous feeling in the student is an indication that somewhere within him he is lacking receptivity to that part of Torah. When a work of art is meaningless to a blind man, or a concert uninspiring to a deaf person, the fault is in the viewer not the composition.

The revelation at Sinai created an indelible impression on the Jewish personality, giving us, as a people, a point of reference for all future searchings for truth. Thus, all the individual *neshamos* of Klal Yisrael had to be at Sinai – even a proselyte had to be there (Shevuot 39a). Had we not the memory of Sinai deep within us to drive us in our exhaustive search for meaning and understanding in Torah, we could not persevere in mastering Torah; and we would not succeed. We would be “empty” from ourselves. It is for this same reason that (as the Talmud tells us) a person learns the entire Torah when in his mother’s womb, even though he is destined to forget it prior to birth; for if he had not first learned the Torah, he would not be able to relate to it later.

VI. Return to Torah

Studying Torah, then, is always a return of sorts. This is expressed in our daily prayers: “Return us...to Your Torah.” Indeed, parts of the Oral tradition – such as Targum Onkelos, Onkelos’s Aramaic translation of the Torah – were forgotten and later rediscovered (Megillah 3a). Human endeavor alone would have proven insufficient for composing the targumim, had it not been for the spark of Sinai buried deep within the *neshamah*. This creative endeavor was not one of initial discovery; it was a return.

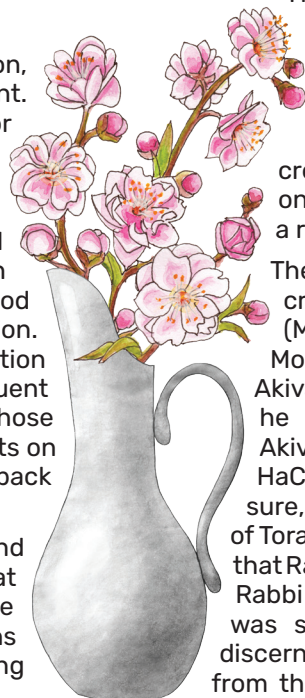
There are other instances of creative recall. The Gemara (Menachos) relates that when Moshe Rabbeinu saw Rabbi Akiva teaching his disciples, he became envious of Rabbi Akiva’s vast knowledge. The Or HaChayim explains that, to be sure, Moshe Rabbeinu knew all of Torah sheba’al peh, the Oral Law that Rabbi Akiva had mastered; but Rabbi Akiva’s level of attainment was such that he was able to discern how the Oral Law is derived from the Written Law. It has been

said that in his last years the Vilna Gaon studied only Chumash. His encyclopedic grasp of Oral Law was such that he was able to deduce which of the myriad teachings of the Oral Law are implicit in the Written Torah. In a similar vein, the Gaon is reported to have said: “There are three levels of understanding: *peshat* (simple explanation), *amikus* (depth), and again *peshat* (simple explanation). There is, however, an infinite difference between *peshat* before depth and *peshat* after depth. The revelation one discovers after “search” is worlds apart from the revelation one starts with.

A shaliach (emissary) sent to strengthen Judaism in an outlying community later reported to his rebbe that an estranged Jew had asked him to explain his mission. He told him a parable: “In the days of yore, scribes would go from town to town filling in ‘letters’ that had been rubbed out from Jewish *neshamos*.”

After the shaliach told the rebbe his parable, the rebbe shook his head: “Chas veshalom that a letter of a Yiddish *neshamah* becomes erased! It is rather like an engraving that becomes filled with dust: blow the dust away and the original letter reappears.”

We must think of our *avodah* as circular, not linear. We do, indeed, start with revelation. But that which is not earned has no permanence. We must toil on our own until we rediscover the revelation imbued within each of us. For when we do arrive at our goal, it is not a new enlightenment that awaits us; rather, we unearth that which has driven us so relentlessly – the eternal flame of Sinai.



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The Profound Principle Of The Torah



NATHAN WITZTUM

We find that there is a big emphasis on working on our *bein adam l'chaveiro*, our interpersonal relationships, during the period of Sefiras Ha'Omer. There is a *minhag* to learn the six chapters of Pirkei Avos, which deal primarily with *middos* and interacting with others, on the six *shabbosos* between Pesach and Shavuos. We also read Parshas Kedoshim during this period, which contains the bulk of the more fundamental *mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro*, including their crown jewel, *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho*, loving your fellow as yourself. And perhaps most starkly, Rashi teaches us that immediately prior to Matan Torah, B'nei Yisrael were "*k'ish echad b'lev echad* – like one person with one heart." Evidently, Sefiras Ha'Omer is a time primed for growth and improvement in the area of *bein adam l'chaveiro*.

The question is: why? Why would the lead up to Shavuos constitute a time period during which it's necessary to work on the aspect of *bein adam l'chaveiro*? Shavuos is the day in history when Hashem gave us the Torah on Har Sinai. What do interpersonal relationships have to do with the giving of the Torah?

Invariably, Shavuos falls after Parshas Bamidbar, when the Jewish People are counted. It is said that the word 'Yisrael' is an acronym for "*Yesh shishim ribo osiyos l'Torah* – There are 600,000 letters in the Torah." Now, there aren't actually 600,000 letters in the Torah. Not even by a longshot. So what exactly are we supposed to learn from this? The idea is that there were approximately 600,000 Jews in the count, and hence, there is a letter in the Torah corresponding to every Jew.

The holiday of Shavuos is referred to by Chazal as "*zman matan toraseinu* – the time of the giving of our Torah." We actually employ a similar phrase throughout the year – "*v'sein chelkeinu b'sorasecha* – grant us our portion in Your Torah." On Shavuos, we as a nation were collectively gifted the Torah. But in addition, every Jew was granted their own unique portion, a distinctive "letter" in the

Torah that is theirs and theirs alone. This is what the 600,000 letters symbolize. Yes, everyone in principle received the same Torah. We all have the same Tanach and Gemara and Mishnah Berurah. But every person connects to the Torah in a different way. Everyone finds the particular areas of Torah that animate them. And it is in that one-of-a-kind combination that a person can find their special "letter", their *chelek* in Torah which has been gifted to them. When a person is *mechadesh* Torah, they are truly bringing out their letter of Torah to its full potential.

Thinking about this more deeply, we see that this must be the case. The Zohar teaches: [*Hashem*] looked into the Torah and created the world אמלע ארבו את־יומא לכתסא

The source for everything in the world is in the Torah. Consequently, if the Torah is the blueprint for the world, and every Jew is unique, then we must all have a unique portion, a unique "letter" in the Torah. By attaching ourselves to our *chelek* in Torah and bringing it to fruition, we are connecting with the source of our very existence!

The person in history who perhaps best understood, and even personified this idea, was Rabbi Akiva. In Menachos 29b, the Gemara relates that Moshe Rabbeinu could not fathom some of the Torah that Rabbi Akiva would later expound. The explanation is that this was Rabbi Akiva's unique portion of Torah. Not even Moshe Rabbeinu could access that *chelek* that was set aside for Rabbi Akiva to develop centuries later.

We can now begin to understand why improving our *bein adam l'chaveiro* is a necessary prerequisite for Matan Torah. If every Jew has a special "letter" in the Torah, then it behooves us to treat our fellow Jew with the appropriate respect and esteem. Comprehending the idea of the Zohar, we recognize that there is a letter in the Torah that was written to create this person! Our fellow Jew only exists because there is an irreplaceable part of the Torah which is their source of existence! Therefore, when we fail in the realm of *bein adam l'chaveiro*, we are also implicitly denigrating the Torah and accusing it

of having a deficiency, *chas v'shalom*. In order to truly appreciate and deserve

the Torah, we are obligated to value our fellow Jew who represents a part of the Torah.

This is the deeper meaning of what Rabbi Akiva meant when he commented on the mitzvah of *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho* by saying, "*zeh klal gadol b'Torah* – this is a profound principle of the Torah." It is a foundational tenet of the Torah itself to love your fellow as yourself. By acknowledging someone else's potential to bond with the Torah in a unique way, we recognize the completeness and perfection of the Torah itself.

This is why it was specifically during the period of Sefirah that Rabbi Akiva's students died. The Gemara gives the reason as "*lo nahagu kavod zeh bazeh* – they did not treat each other with respect." Besides failing on the basic level of *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocho* which we must show to every Jew, these *talmidim* were actively connecting with their own portions in Torah and realizing the potential latent in each of their letters. Hence, their failure demonstrated their complete inability to understand what the Torah is really about and its infinite nature. For this reason, their sin was of such magnitude that it dictated that they not be the bearers of Torah for the next generation, for they didn't appreciate what the Torah is!

As mentioned, there is a custom to learn Pirkei Avos between Pesach and Shavuos. Remarkably, the first five chapters deal almost exclusively with how we should relate to others. Yet, the sixth and final chapter is entirely devoted to the study of Torah, and more specifically, the acquisition of Torah. The takeaway is obvious. In order to acquire Torah, which is what we are hoping to do on Shavuos, we must learn to respect someone else's *chelek*; that they were also given a part of the Torah. In order to truly appreciate the Torah and our connection to it, we must recognize that it is infinite and everyone has a unique portion of it. Only then are we capable of receiving our *chelek* on Shavuos.

Nathan Witztum is the author of *Marchiv Gad: A Haggadah Companion* and writes the weekly *Imrei Shefer* parsha sheet. He initiated the *Daf Yomi* shiur at *Ohr HaTorah*, which he delivered for two years. Professionally, Nathan is a senior ship systems engineer for the U.S. Navy, designing and optimizing cutting-edge naval systems that power the fleet. He has lived with his wife and children in Kemp Mill since 2019.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

relationship between Torah and character refinement: Torah is necessary to build character, but character is also necessary for the acquisition of Torah. While there must be a simultaneous and reciprocal process of Torah study *and* character refinement informing each other, Rabbenu Yona does suggest that having a certain basic level of moral character is a necessary pre-requisite for the acquisition of Torah.

Based on this teaching, we can infer that one of the critical ways that we must prepare for the re-acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot is through the perfection of our character traits. We might want to work on general traits as the Rambam lays out for us in Hilchot Deot. We might want to work on specific traits that are associated with the acquisition of Torah such as the forty-eight pathways stated in Pirkei Avot 6:6 such as awe, fear, humility, joy, truth etc...

We might want to work on the trait of Chesed so prominent in our Halachic and Hashkafic tradition and so central to Megilat Rut which we read on Shavuot. If we can work on developing our midot, our character traits we will, hopefully, sprout the wings that will allow us to not only absorb the Torah to its fullest, but also soar to the heights of spiritual accomplishment.

Rabbi Brahm Weinberg is the Rabbi of Kemp Mill Synagogue (KMS) in Silver Spring, Maryland, and plays a leading role in the Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington, helping guide halachic standards and communal direction for the region. He is known for his warmth, thoughtfulness, and commitment to Torah and community. Rabbi Weinberg delivers multiple daily *shiurim*, including his renowned "Rashi a Day" and "5-Minute KMS Divrei Halacha" series—available on Apple Podcasts—with close to over 1,000 *shiurim* published online. He and his wife, Elana, are beloved figures in KMS and the broader community, admired for their kindness, approachability, and deep devotion to Torah, people, and Klal Yisrael.

¹Rav Shalom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000) was born in Belarus and was a descendant (on his mother's side) of the rebbes of the Slonimer Hasidic dynasty. He was educated in the Slonimer yeshiva in Baranovich which combined both Hasidic and Mitnagdic approaches to Torah study. Rav Shalom Noach came to the Land of Israel right before the Holocaust and, in 1941, established the Slonimer Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. After most of the dynasty was wiped out in the Holocaust, R. Shalom Noach was a big part of its revival and rejuvenation through his Torah teachings, his prolific writing, and his dynamic personality. His magnum opus, *Netivot Shalom* (on Chumash, Pirke Avot, Moadim, and Midot) has become wildly popular in many Hasidic and non-Hasidic circles.

²*Netivot Shalom, Netivei Taharat Hamidot - Kedoshim Tiheyu*

³Rabbenu Yonah Gerondi (d.1264) was from the city of Gerona in northern Spain and then later lived in Toledo in southern Spain. He was a cousin of Ramban. He published many works on a few of which have been preserved including his students' notes on certain sections of the Rif on Berachot, his famous work *Shaare Teshuva*, and his commentary to Pirke Avot. We know of more of his teaching since they are quoted by later scholars such as Rashba and Shita Mekubetzet.

⁴*Pirkei Avot 3:17*

⁵This teaching is similar to the famous rabbinic aphorism of "Derech Eretz Kadma L'Torah," "Derech Eretz" must precede Torah. There is no exact source in early rabbinic literature that mentions this phrase verbatim. There are similar phrases and the closest one is from Vayikra Rabba (9:3)



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RABBI MICHOEL FRANK
Kehillas Ohr HaTorah

The deeper message of Shavuos may lie in what the Torah chose not to say.

We know that Shavuos is a Yom Tov instituted because we received the Torah on this day. We say it in davening: וּנִתְּרֹת נָתַם מֵי. But strangely, the Torah makes no mention of this at all. The Torah calls it תּוֹעֹבֶשֶׁה גַּח, or מִירוּכִיבָה מֵי, or גַּח יִתְּבֹשֶׁה גַּח—ריצקה—but makes no mention of Torah! Why would the Torah leave out this crucial point about the Yom Tov?

Pesach is called תּוֹצְמָה גַּח, and its purpose—to remember leaving Mitzrayim—is repeated multiple times in the Torah. The Torah makes clear the purpose of Sukkos—יִתְּבֹשֶׁה גַּח—when we left Mitzrayim. But why Shavuos? No one learning the Torah would know, other than by making the calculation and correlation between the dates. The truth is that the Torah doesn't even give a date—it only commands us to

count 50 days and make Yom Tov. What is the reason for this secrecy?

We have to explain the reason the Torah doesn't say it—yet we do in davening.

I saw three answers to this question, which complement each other, and I think are all integral to internalizing what Shavuos is all about.

The first answer is given by the Kli Yakar in Parshas Emor, and I saw it was quoted as well from a sefer called יִשְׂרָדֵם written by Rav Shlomo Ashturk zatzal, who lived during the end of the Rishonim period. He writes two reasons why the Torah didn't refer to it as Mattan Torasainu. One: the Torah didn't want to tie the Torah to a day! We could and should accept the Torah every single day. The second thing he writes is that

Hashem wants that the Torah should be beloved to us every day as if that is the day it was initially given, because we find new Chiddushim—novellae in the Torah, new depths, and new ideas. And that's why it is called

מִירוּכִיבָה גַּח, the Yom Tov when things ripen—symbolizing the Chiddushim one can perceive in Torah.

We can understand this sentiment: the Torah is something we are meant to find fresh insights and depth in each time we learn. Still—why the secrecy?

The second answer is given by the Akaidah, and essentially by the Avudraham: that the other Yomim Tovim are there for us to remember something that happened. But Torah isn't a past event! We don't need anything to remind us of the Torah—we have a constant mitzvah of מְתִיבוּ וּבְמִתְיָבוּ

Cognitive Health



ADAM SRAGG
ADULT PRIMARY CARE
NURSE PRACTITIONER

Memory care is an important topic for those between the ages of 45 and 65. For those in this age range, it is necessary to address the critical health strategies that can prevent cognitive impairment. Mild cognitive impairment is a decline in memory that is more apparent than would be expected for normal aging. The symptoms include missing appointments, trouble following a conversation, difficulty making decisions, and poor judgment. Along with these symptoms, those with cognitive changes may experience depression, anxiety, aggression, and lack of interest in daily activities or hobbies. In some cases, the cause of mild cognitive impairment is due to Alzheimer's disease, which can progress to dementia. The following are lifestyle changes that can help prevent cognitive decline:

- High blood pressure is the most common condition that can lead to dementia. High blood pressure can damage small blood vessels in the brain, which affects thinking and memory.
- Another health risk is heavy alcohol use, which is associated with brain changes. Research notes that chronic heavy drinking (more than 21 drinks per week) is associated with a 17% increased risk for developing dementia.
- Diabetes is another common condition that damages the blood vessels, as elevated sugar levels degrade and change the brain cells over time.
- An easily preventable risk factor for dementia is management of hearing loss. Hearing loss can make the brain work harder and often results in decreased social engagement. It is critical for older adults to get annual hearing screenings and discuss hearing aids when necessary.
- Cigarette use increases the risk for vascular problems with the heart and blood vessels, which is associated with Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia.
- Regular physical activity can help you prevent and delay dementia through increasing blood flow to the brain.
- It is important to get adequate sleep to help maintain thinking skills.
- The most important diet to help prevent cognitive decline is called the Mediterranean diet. The main foods that are included in this diet are fruits, vegetables, brown rice, quinoa, whole wheat bread, olive oil, nuts, beans, lentils, and chickpeas.
- There are no supplements that prevent dementia, but there is some information that Folic acid, Vitamin B12, and Omega-3 can be beneficial for cognitive function.

If you or a loved one is experiencing symptoms of mild cognitive impairment, be sure to discuss this with your primary care provider. They can administer simple screenings and advise on preventative strategies to slow the progression of memory loss."

Adam Sragg is a nurse practitioner. After working in surgical nursing for multiple years, he earned a master's degree from Simmons University's family nurse practitioner program, allowing him to focus more on preventative medicine. Adam has worked as an adult primary care nurse practitioner for over four years with a diverse patient population.

Adam has done clinical work at a variety of local hospitals including Holy Cross Hospital, Adventist Healthcare White Oak Medical Center, Medstar Montgomery Medical Center, Children's National Hospital, and other local primary care facilities.

His nurse practitioner position gives him the opportunity to maintain his nursing passion and act as the patient's advocate in a provider role. His main goal is to provide focused and individual patient care with an emphasis on education, compassion, concern, and encouragement. Adam has experience with helping children and adults of physical and mental disabilities in reaching their health goals.

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הלילו. The Torah is eternally something we have, learn, and appreciate!

But still, how can you say Shavuos isn't celebrating Mattan Torah?

The third answer I saw is from the Shem Mi'Shmu'el, quoting his father, the Avnei Nezer. He asks: why would the Yom Tov be called תועובש, if the "weeks" we counted have already passed? He says that essentially, every single person is unique in their character traits and personality. Each person has strengths and weaknesses: one person may be kind but lacks courage, and another may be strong but impatient, and so on. We have been given the days of Sefira to improve our middos, but he writes:

This is the concept of Sefira, as it says in seforim: to purify our Middos. And it doesn't make sense! How can a mere 49 days be sufficient to rectify all our Middos? I wish our whole life would be enough time! (That made me feel a lot better.)

He explains that the key is: הנקיש ותורתו ת"ישה תעדל לוטיבה תדמ מדאה— for acquiring the trait of subjugating

ourselves to Hashem's wisdom and His Torah. That is the concept of Shavuos—just as in those days, Klal Yisrael managed to achieve a level of subservience to Hashem, and they said עמשנו השענ, which is the ultimate "bittul," that is the power of these days which we strive to connect to. The "Shavuos"—the weeks of preparation—are utilized by working on our desire to be filled with Toras Hashem, submitting our minds and hearts to His will. We celebrate the seven-week preparation for Torah, because purity is achieved through opening our hearts and minds to Torah. Torah itself represents the purity of Hashem's will.

Now we can really understand what all the answers are trying to say. Shavuos is here so that we can realize what we have all year! We always have the Torah and are always obligated to learn it and grow through it. But with the passage of time, we lose the appreciation for what we have. On Shavuos, we work towards once again recognizing how much we need the Torah, how empty we are without it. We celebrate the work we invested in the weeks prior to Shavuos, and we try to

achieve a level of saying עמשנו השענ, just as the Jews did then.

The Torah doesn't want to call it a Yom Tov of Mattan Torah, because indeed, we always have the Torah—and we are always obligated to learn it, accept it anew, and feel like it is new. However, every year we are required to revive the feeling and memory of how much we need the Torah!

Rabbi Michael Frank is the *Mora D'Asra* of Kehilas Ohr HaTorah in Kemp Mill, Maryland. Renowned for his depth in *Halacha* and clarity in teaching, Rabbi Frank plays an integral leadership role in the Greater Washington community. He serves on the Vaad Harabanim of Greater Washington and is the primary *posek* for the Chevra Kadisha of Greater Washington, where his halachic expertise guides sensitive end-of-life matters with care and precision. A prolific teacher, Rabbi Frank has over 1,000 recorded Torah shiurim—on almost every topic—new uploaded shiurim weekly are available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and TorahAnytime. Rabbi Frank and his wife, Rivkie, are known for their warm hospitality and deep dedication to community building, fostering a strong sense of belonging and spiritual growth among their growing *kehillah*.



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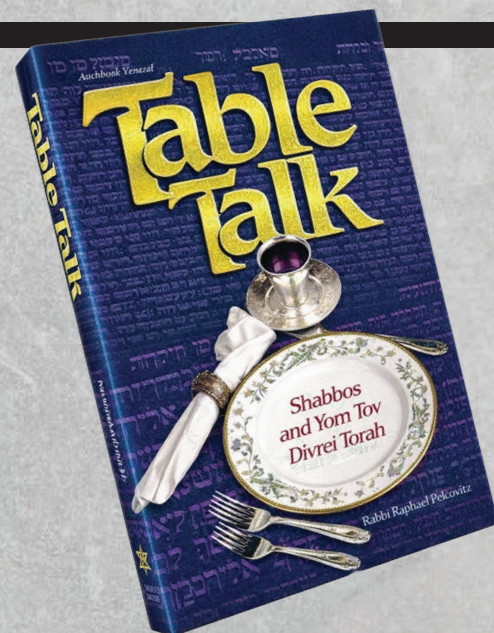


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The Power of Daily Renewal

Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz



In the tefillos of Shavuos, we refer to this Yom Tov as Z'man Matan Toraseinu – “The Season of the Giving of the Torah.” Yet when we study the Parashas HaMoadim in Emor, something striking emerges. The Torah refers to this holiday only as Chag HaBikkurim, “The Festival of the First Fruits,” with no explicit mention of the awe-inspiring event at Har Sinai that forever shaped the destiny of Klal Yisrael.

Instead, the pesukim focus on the culmination of Sefirah, the offering of the shtei halechem, the korbanos, and the prohibition of labor that define the sanctity of the day. But regarding the giving of the Torah itself – the dramatic encounter between G-d and Israel at Sinai – the Torah remains silent.

A similar phenomenon appears regarding Rosh Hashanah. There, the Torah describes the day as Yom HaZikaron, “A Day of Remembrance,” yet omits any direct reference to its identity as Yom HaDin – the Day of Judgment, when all mankind passes before G-d to be judged for the coming year.

Why does the Torah remain silent regarding these two foundational themes – the giving of the Torah on Shavuos and G-d’s judgment on Rosh Hashanah?

The Kli Yakar offers an illuminating answer. Although the giving of the Torah took place at a specific moment in time, the acceptance of the Torah must occur every single day. Torah is not merely a historic event commemorated once a year; it must constantly feel alive, fresh, and newly received.

Rashi, commenting on the phrase הַיּוֹם, “today” (Devarim 26:16), says: בְּכֹל יוֹם יְהִיּוּ בְעֵינֶיךָ הַדְּבָרִים – “Let the words of Torah be new in your eyes every day,” as though you had just received them. There must be freshness, excitement, and wonder each time we study Torah and observe its mitzvos. Torah should never become dry routine; rather, every day should carry the feeling of standing once again at Har Sinai.

For this reason, the Torah deliberately avoids explicitly identifying Shavuos as “the festival of the giving of the Torah.” Instead, it states: וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה לַיהוָה – “And you shall bring a new meal offering to Hashem” (Vayikra 23:16), subtly conveying that the true celebration of receiving the Torah lies in continually discovering what is new and vibrant within Torah itself.

Similarly, Yom HaDin is not mentioned explicitly regarding Rosh Hashanah, lest one mistakenly think that judgment exists only on that single day. Judgment, accountability, and

repentance are daily realities that accompany a Jew throughout the year.

Judaism rejects the notion of a mere “leap of faith.” Rather, it emphasizes a growing awareness of G-d, a constant reaffirmation of faith, and the discipline of mitzvos that shape everyday Jewish life.

Moments of inspiration are powerful, but they naturally fade with time. What ultimately defines a person is not the rare emotional high, but the ordinary daily commitments infused with holiness and meaning.

This, explains the Kli Yakar, is why the Torah avoids explicitly mentioning either Matan Torah or Yom HaDin. Instead, they are alluded to through the phrases minchah chadashah and Yom HaZikaron, teaching that the essence of these ימים טובים lies not only in commemoration, but in cultivating constant renewal and spiritual continuity.

Modern man desperately needs this twofold lesson of Shavuos and Rosh Hashanah. In a world constantly chasing innovation and reinvention, the Torah teaches that true greatness is found not in abandoning eternal truths, but in discovering renewed vitality within them each day.

Modern religionists should carefully

TABLE TALK

consider how far capitulating to radical elements can remove them from the authentic spirit of Torah. How tragic are the changes introduced into religious practice in the name of progress, yet which in reality reflect an erosion of loyalty to the authenticity and timelessness of Torah itself.

When leaders lose faith in the minchah chadashah quality of Torah – its eternal freshness and relevance – they begin embracing change merely for the sake of change. But Torah does not require reinvention to remain meaningful. Its strength lies precisely in its timelessness.

Regarding the Akeidah, the Kotsker Rebbe asks: What was so extraordinary about Avraham Avinu's willingness to obey G-d directly? He answers that the greatness of Avraham was that the Akeidah took place on the third day. There was time to think, reflect, reconsider, and cool off emotionally – yet Avraham's devotion remained just as strong as when G-d first commanded him.

A moment of inspiration can ignite a person instantly, but emotion naturally fades with time. Yet this is precisely what made Avraham extraordinary. Even on the third day, his readiness to fulfill the will of G-d remained fresh and unwavering.

This insight of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk adds depth to the commentary of the Kli Yakar. Authentic faith is not found only in moments of inspiration, but in the ability to preserve commitment long after the emotion has faded.

It is a psychological truth that enthusiasm wanes with time. That is why our Sages teach that a person must train himself to accept Torah anew each day and appreciate its constant freshness. This is the meaning of the phrase: **בְּכֹל יוֹם יִהְיוּ בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַדְּבָרִים** – "Let the words of Torah be new in your eyes every day."

Just as Avraham on the third day was no less determined to fulfill G-d's command than on the first, so too must Jews, centuries after Sinai, say naaseh v'nishma – "We will do and we will listen" – as though the Torah is being given today. Those who never lose their enthusiasm and freshness for Torah are the ones who ensure the future of Torah and Klal Yisrael. May we merit to be among them and to be mekabel the Torah each day, be'ahavah.



Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz זצ"ל, was the beloved rabbi emeritus of the famed "White Shul" in Far Rockaway, he was a master teacher whose warmth, clarity, and depth inspired generations, making Torah learning both accessible and uplifting. As one of the crown jewels of the American rabbinate, he guided thousands with wisdom and simplicity, leaving behind a towering legacy of faith, leadership, and devotion that continues to illuminate lives worldwide. At his side stood his wife, **Mrs. Shirley Pelcovitz**, a woman of vision and strength who helped pioneer Miami's first Torah community, laying the groundwork for Jewish education there, and later brought her passion and leadership to Far Rockaway. Her courage, grace, and boundless heart built the foundation for generations of Jewish life, turning dreams into reality and inspiring communities for decades with a legacy that will endure for all time.



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The Heart Behind Ben Yehuda Pizza

Some businesses become successful. Very few become part of the emotional fabric of a community.

For more than two decades, Ben Yehuda Pizza has quietly been far more than a pizza shop for thousands across Silver Spring and Greater Washington. Behind the busy counter, late-night orders, and familiar slices is a place built on something deeper — quiet acts of kindness, community responsibility, second chances, fundraising efforts, hospitality, and countless moments most people never see.

For this year's Shavuot Issue of the Washington Jewish Journal, we sat down with owner Josh Katz for a thoughtful conversation about community, hospitality, hidden acts of chesed, growth, mozzarella sticks, and the deeper purpose behind one of Washington's most beloved neighborhood staples.

Ben Yehuda has become such a staple of the community. How did it all begin?

It's actually a really great story because Ben Yehuda was built specifically for this community. Back in 2000, Roger Kerlins, Steven Franco, and Ronnie Rosenbluth felt the Kemp Mill area needed something local — a pizza place people could walk to, something that felt connected to neighborhood life. At the time, there were kosher

pizza options, but nothing that truly felt like it belonged right here in the center of the community.

I was there from the very beginning. I was actually the first person officially hired by the founders, which is funny to think about now. The restaurant opened in the summer of 2000, originally for a private baseball team event for Roger's daughter, but word spread quickly and people started showing up before we had even officially opened. In a way, the community opened the restaurant with us.

That's incredible — almost like the restaurant belonged to the community from day one. How did you eventually become the owner?

It happened very naturally. Scott Schlesinger bought the business in 2008 during an incredibly difficult economic time and really strengthened the operations side of the restaurant. By 2012, he was ready to move on, and at the time I had been working in e-commerce for Sammy Franco.

The opportunity came up, and honestly, it just felt right.

I already understood what the restaurant meant to people. This was never just about pizza. Community pizza shops are different. People celebrate there, they bring their kids there after school, they stop in after

shuirim or games or family events. There's a responsibility that comes with that.

So when I took over in May of 2012, the biggest thing for me was preserving that community-centered feeling while continuing to improve the business itself.

You can really feel that community aspect when you walk in. Ben Yehuda seems to constantly support local causes and organizations.

That's always been important to us.

We've done fundraisers for schools, organizations, and community causes over the years. One example was Noah Night Out at Max's which helped support the Torah School. We try to look at these partnerships as a win for everybody involved — the institution benefits, the community comes together, and yes, it helps the restaurant too.

Sometimes financially it may not even be the best decision on paper, but community businesses shouldn't only think on paper.

A fundraiser brings in new families, introduces people to the restaurant, creates positive experiences. That matters long term. If you're part of a community, you have to actively participate in it.

That mindset probably explains why people feel so connected to the restaurant. But at the same time, Ben Yehuda has also modernized a lot over the years.

Absolutely — and honestly, that's become one of the biggest focuses for us.

I once attended a seminar where they said something that completely changed how I think about restaurants. They said your biggest competitor isn't another restaurant. It's the customer's refrigerator.

That's so true.

If ordering food feels complicated or annoying, people will just stay home and make something themselves. So our job is to make ordering as easy and seamless as possible.

That's why we changed our POS system, introduced the app, improved online order-



Josh Katz of Ben Yehuda Pizza with Montgomery County's finest outside the Silver Spring community staple.



ing, and added self-service kiosks. We're constantly trying to remove friction from the experience. People are busy. Families are busy. Convenience matters.

That's actually such a smart way to think about it. Are there plans to expand even further?

We've definitely explored ideas.

One thing we've been researching seriously is a movable pizza trailer concept. The idea would be to have flexibility – being able to serve different areas or events while still maintaining the Ben Yehuda quality and experience.

The challenge with kosher restaurants is density. You need enough of a Jewish population concentrated in one place to support it consistently. Pizza is also different from something like shawarma – people will travel farther for certain foods



Ben Yehuda Pizza's massive 28-inch "Goliath Pizza" has become a local favorite for pizza lovers looking for a true challenge.

than others.

So expansion has to make sense operationally and for the community. We never want growth to come at the expense of quality in our current location.

Speaking of quality – people definitely have their Ben Yehuda favorites. What's your personal order?

I keep it pretty simple actually.

Usually a smaller pie with thinner crust, light cheese, and green peppers.

But one thing I always tell people is underrated is the Tony sauce. It's a thicker sauce with a stronger tomato base and people who try it usually love it.

We even tested changing sauces entirely at one point, but customers were very attached to the original. That taught us something important – consistency matters. People build emotional connections to food.

And of course, the mozzarella sticks get a huge reaction from people, especially customers visiting from out of town. They're hand-made with our own spice blend and people are genuinely shocked by how good they are.

What stands out most to you after all these years running the restaurant?

Honestly? The moments that have nothing to do with pizza.

The feedback that means the most to me is when customers compliment our staff for kindness or hospitality.

There was one story that really stayed with me. A family came in one night and one of our employees, Ashley, noticed they seemed upset and emotionally drained. Without anyone asking, she offered the kids free ice cream just to brighten the mood a little.

Later, the family sent us a letter explaining how difficult their day had been and how much that small gesture meant to them.

That's the stuff that matters most.

Anybody can serve food. But hospitality – real hospitality – is different. We want people to feel cared about when they come in here.

That really says a lot about the culture you've built there.

The truth is the staff deserves most of the credit.

The restaurant only works because of the people behind it every day. We have team members constantly looking for ways to help others – whether it's donating supplies to food banks or helping organize community efforts quietly behind the scenes.

There was even a fundraiser one of our assistants helped coordinate while she was literally in a bomb shelter in Israel. That level of dedication is humbling.

And most community impact doesn't happen through giant public campaigns. Usually it's small acts. Quiet moments. Helping someone out when they need it.

That's really what we try to be about.

Last question – after all these years, what do you hope people feel when they think about Ben Yehuda Pizza?

I hope they feel community.

Of course we want them to love the pizza. But bigger than that, I hope they feel like Ben Yehuda is part of their lives in a positive way.

This community supports local businesses in an incredible way, and we never take that for granted. If we can continue serving good food while also supporting people, schools, organizations, and families along the way, then we're doing something meaningful.

That's always been the goal.



ASK THE RABBI:

Shavuos Edition



RABBI EPHRAIM MIRETZKY
*Regional Executive Director
Greater Washington NCSY*

"One Nation. One Torah. A Thousand Questions."

Every year as Shavuos approaches, my inbox, DMs, and coffee shop conversations start lighting up. Some are from teens at NCSY, others from college students, young professionals, or parents I bump into at Starbucks in Rockville or late-night *kumzitzes* in Kemp Mill. They're not always religious—but they're real, thoughtful, and looking for connection.

So, in the spirit of Torah being for *everyone*, here are some of the most common—and most thought-provoking—Shavuos questions I've been asked lately.

Got your own? Email me at Rabbi@WashingtonJewishJournal.com. It might just show up in next month's edition.

"Why do we eat dairy on Shavuos?" – *Rebecca A., Woodside*
After we received the Torah at Har Sinai, we became responsible for keeping all the kosher laws, including how meat must be slaughtered and prepared properly. Since we didn't have kosher meat ready or the right utensils yet, we ate dairy instead. Many also point out that Torah is compared to milk—pure, nourishing, and sweet—like it says, "*like honey and milk under your tongue*" (Shir HaShirim). Eating dairy reminds us of that sweetness and the special connection we have to Torah. Eating dairy reminds us of the beauty and sweetness of Torah itself.

"Did we really stay up all night at Har Sinai? Is that why we stay up now?"
– *Ari K., Arlington*
Actually, quite the opposite. The Midrash says the people *overslept* on the morning of Matan Torah! So today we stay up learning Torah to show we're alert, eager, and ready for the moment.



“Do I have to go to shul to accept the Torah, or can I just connect from home?”

– Daniel M., Alexandria

You can connect anywhere. Torah can be accepted anywhere—but hearing the Ten Commandments read publicly in shul connects us back to the moment all of Klal Yisrael stood as one at Sinai. Being together matters. It’s not just about personal connection—it’s about showing up with your people to say, once again, “We will do and we will listen.”

“What is the Torah? Just the Five Books?”

– Rachel S., Aspen Hill

The Five Books of Moses are the written core, but Torah is much broader. It includes the Oral Torah—passed down and later written in the Mishnah and Gemara—which explains how to live the written part. Think of it as the blueprint *plus* the instruction manual.

“Is Shavuos a happy holiday? It doesn’t feel like it has much going on.”

– Eli M., Washington, D.C.

It’s got a quiet power. We don’t blow shofars or build huts—we just celebrate the biggest moment in Jewish history: the giving of the Torah. No props needed when the message is that epic.

“What does cheesecake have to do with God?”

– Sophie G., Baltimore

Great question. Cheesecake’s just one tasty way we honor the day—but dairy itself is symbolic of Torah’s purity and sweetness. It also connects to the laws we received, which made meat a lot trickier overnight.

“What bracha do I say on cheesecake?”

– Maya R., Potomac

Great question—and it depends. If the crust is prominent (like a full layer of graham cracker or cake), you’d say *Mezonos*. If it’s a plain slice without real crust, you’d say *Shehakol*. But here’s the pro tip: if you’re not sure, and you’re eating a mezonos snack with it, just have that in mind when making the bracha. (Ask your local rav if you’re still unsure—it can depend on how it’s made!)

“If we got the Torah at Sinai, what did people follow before that?”

– Jonah B., White Oak

Our ancestors had a sense of right and wrong—some even knew divine laws prophetically. But they didn’t have the 613 mitzvos. Sinai turned values into a national covenant, with shared laws and responsibilities.

“Why do we read Megillas Rus on Shavuos?”

– Lily C., Fairfax

Rus left her entire world behind to join Am Yisrael and accept the Torah’s way of life. Just like us at Sinai, she said “yes” before asking questions—“*Where you go, I will go.*” She’s also the ancestor of King David, who was born and passed away on Shavuos. Her story is all about loyalty, kindness, and choosing Torah with love.

“What’s different about Jewish law versus secular law?”

– Ava K., North Bethesda

Secular law maintains order. Torah law builds people. It guides our actions *and* shapes our character, with God as both the source and the standard.

“Why was the Torah given in a desert? Wouldn’t a city make more sense?”

– Shira B., Takoma Park

The desert has no distractions, no ownership, no ego. Hashem gave the Torah there to show it’s for everyone—rich or poor, insider or outsider. It’s about humility, not location.



“If every Jewish soul was at Sinai, where was I?”

– Max S., Chevy Chase

According to our tradition, your *ne-shama*—your soul—was there. You may not consciously remember it, but you’re spiritually wired to respond to Torah. That spark is real.



“Why doesn’t Shavuos have any mitzvos like a sukkah or matzah?”

– Rina G., Baltimore

Because *Torah itself* is the mitzvah. Shavuos is like getting the master key—every other mitzvah flows from here. No extras needed when you’re celebrating the source.



“If God knows everything, how is free will real?”

– Yonatan F., Arlington

Great question. God exists beyond time—He *knows* what you’ll choose, but doesn’t *force* it. You still make choices freely; He just sees the full picture before you do.



“I love Torah ideas, but I don’t keep everything. Am I a hypocrite?”

– Nina S., Kemp Mill

Not even close. Wanting to grow and struggling is what makes you *authentic*, not fake. Torah is a path, not a pass/fail test.



“Why is Shavuos only one or two days—when Pesach and Sukkos are much longer?”

– Avi D., North Bethesda

Excellent question. Shavuos celebrates one event—the *giving of the Torah*—and it happened in one day. Pesach and Sukkos represent longer journeys (freedom and protection), so their timelines reflect that.

But one day doesn’t make it less powerful. Shavuos is the root of everything—we get Torah, we get our purpose, and we say “yes” again every year.

Shavuos isn’t just about remembering a moment—it’s about *reliving* it. Every question we ask, every answer we learn, is another way of standing at Har Sinai and saying, “I’m in.” Whether you’re pulling an all-nighter in yeshiva or sneaking in a page of Torah before bed, you’re part of the story. So keep asking. Keep learning. Keep showing up. And if something’s on your mind, email me anytime at Rabbi@WashingtonJewishJournal.com. Because Torah was given to *all* of us—and there’s always more to discover.

Rabbi Ephraim Miretzky serves as Regional Director for Greater Washington NCSY, leading impactful programs that inspire Jewish youth and foster leadership. Rabbi Miretzky can be reached at Miretzkye@ncsy.org.



BETTER THAN GOOD: INSIDE B.A.D CAMP



Talya Weinberg

If you happen to be walking through the neighborhood this spring and ask a local third-grader about their summer plans, don't be alarmed when they grin ear-to-ear and tell you they're going to "BAD Camp." Your first instinct might be to call a family therapist, but for those in the know, it's the most coveted ticket in town. It turns out that B.A.D. stands for Baking, Art, and Drama—and for the kids, the only thing better than the punchline is the fact that they actually get to spend a week being professionally creative, remarkably messy, and unreservedly loud.

The name started as a playful inside joke. Talya Weinberg, a local artist and educator, originally coined the term while heading the art department at Moshava Alevy. What began as a witty WhatsApp group name for her staff eventually evolved into a professional mission. Now entering its fourth summer, B.A.D. Camp was built on the belief that "a joyful heart makes a cheerful face" (Mishlei 15:13), providing a space where kids can create with pure joy, free from pressure or stress.

The program is designed specifically to solve the "gap week" dilemma, offering one-week sessions during those tricky transitions: the weeks immediately after school ends and the weeks right before the new school year begins. It's the perfect antidote to the "I'm bored" blues that inevitably set in during the summer margins.

The program's success lies in its intentional intimacy. Talya caps the group at just 22 campers, ages 7 to 11, ensuring every child is truly seen and supported. The studio becomes a whirlwind of high-level creativity where the projects are anything but basic. On any given day, campers might temper chocolate to craft artisanal bars from scratch, meticulously hand-paint Batik challah covers, or experiment with mixed-media landscapes that parents actually want to hang on their walls.

The "Drama" component is perhaps the most transformative. Rather than reciting a canned script, the kids build an original production from the ground up. They write the dialogue, design the props, and assemble the costumes. By the time the

Friday performance arrives, the "Broadway-level" energy in the room is a testament to the ownership they feel over their work.

Beyond the paint and the stage lights, the camp serves as a bridge. Jewish children from all of the various local schools and neighborhoods sit side-by-side, covered in flour and glitter, forming friendships that last well beyond the summer. It's a place where they build the confidence to take creative risks and find a genuine sense of belonging.

Because of the small group size and its growing reputation, the camp consistently sells out long before the summer transition weeks begin. For parents looking to turn those "gap weeks" into a highlight of the year, the time to register is now. You can view the full schedule and secure a spot on the website. After all, it's better than good—it's B.A.D. in the best possible way.

Talya Weinberg is an artist, educator, and founder of B.A.D. Camp, where creativity, confidence, and joyful self-expression take center stage. Through her art classes, camps, and workshops, she creates imaginative spaces where children can explore, create, and thrive. All information can be found on her site at Talyaweinberg.com

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Consistency is key

There is a topic I want to write about that weaves into Shavuot in such a beautiful way that this article kind of wrote itself. I am often asked "what is the biggest construction/design mistake people make?" And in my opinion, the biggest mistake I see is that people will not keep consistency in mind when creating a layout or design. Keeping a consistent and smooth flow throughout a house is so important that without it a home looks awkward and off putting.

In construction, I often see the mistake of lack of consistency when someone wants to enlarge certain rooms with no consideration to the rest of the rooms that they feel can stay "as is", for example they will only extend their kitchen and dining room but keep the original small living room at the front of the house. While this seems to be a great way to save some money, the result is a layout that is extremely disproportionate. One of the most important features in a home is the flow, which is how people will walk from one room to another and when walls are taken down to create one or two extralarge rooms the flow of the home is severely affected. This creates an awkward feel to the home that takes away a bit of the calmness in the feeling of the design: the layout of a home but stay consistent.

When working on a design I am extremely particular that the whole house keeps to one style. All the rooms should not look the same but they all need to follow the same style. The most inspirational home I ever saw, and had the privilege to work on, was a large horse farm near Manhattan designed in a Ralph Lauren pallet. Each room had a very rich and authentic Ralph

Lauren feel but each room was uniquely different. The foyer was the classic navy and red wallpaper with walnut flooring while another room was monochromatic white with white horse paintings, and yet another had wooden judges paneling with strong green accents. Consistency, consistency, consistency is key to creating a smooth harmonious design in a home.

Shavuot is a holiday that I think exemplifies this idea of consistency. To begin with, from Pesach until Shavuot the Torah tells us to count the 49 days leading up until we receive the Torah on Mount Sinai. The counting prepares us with consistency; it anchors us and reminds us every day that we are getting closer to accepting the Torah from G-d. Additionally I think Torah in itself represents consistency.

We are told "delve into it, delve into it (Torah), because everything is included in it." It is not enough to open and learn the Torah once; it has to be something that we are constantly looking into so that it becomes and is the center of our lives.

In his bestselling book Atomic Habits, James Clear, writes about how true personal growth comes from the idea of consistency. The concept of taking something and repeating it until it becomes habit. Consistency is kind of the gift that keeps giving. When something becomes so habitual it takes up almost no brain space and we then have room to expand and increase, we see this in all areas: in Torah, in design, and in personal development. Enjoy your cheesecake!

Aviva Waxman is the owner of Sheva Interiors, an interior design firm covering Maryland and DC. Aviva loves to work with her clients to bring out their style in a contemporary and You-nique way. She can be reached at shevainteriors@gmail.com or 443-272-5879.



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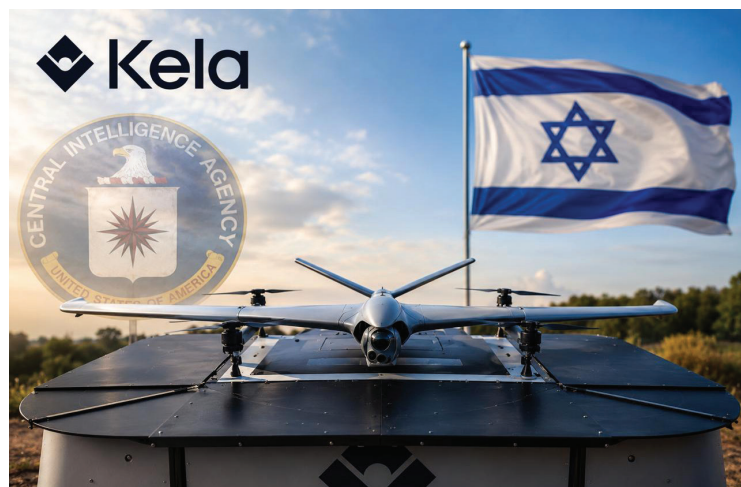
Google's \$32B Israeli Power Move

Google officially closed its \$32 billion acquisition of Israeli cybersecurity giant Wiz – the largest purchase in the company's history, and another reminder that the AI race is quietly becoming a security race. Because in a world sprinting toward artificial intelligence, the real advantage may not be who builds the smartest system... but who protects it best. Israel isn't just exporting startups anymore. It's becoming the security layer beneath the modern digital world.



Israel's New Arsenal of Innovation

The countries that shape the future are usually the ones forced to recognize reality before everyone else does. Israeli defense-tech startup Kela has raised \$39 million from some of the most influential names in American power and technology – including Sequoia Capital, Lux Capital, and In-Q-Tel, the CIA-linked investment arm that backs technologies considered strategically important to America's intelligence and defense future. Founded in the aftermath of October 7, Kela develops systems that help modern militaries integrate commercial technology directly into real-world defense operations, from border security to battlefield coordination. And in many ways, the company reflects something deeper about Israel itself: while much of the old defense world still moves through committees, delays, and systems built for yesterday's threats, Israel learned long ago that survival belongs to societies capable of adapting faster than danger evolves.



Pete Hegseth's Pentagon Is Starting to Feel Different

For years, the Pentagon mastered the art of turning urgency into paperwork. Pete Hegseth seems increasingly uninterested in continuing that tradition. His new initiative, nicknamed "Deal Team Six," aims to cut through layers of defense bureaucracy and speed up weapons development before America's enemies politely agree to slow down. And whether people agree with him or not, Hegseth keeps forcing Washington to confront a question it usually avoids: in a world where threats evolve by the month, what exactly is the strategic advantage of moving carefully? The old defense world often confused caution with wisdom. But history tends to reward the societies that recognize reality first.



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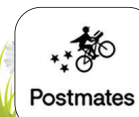
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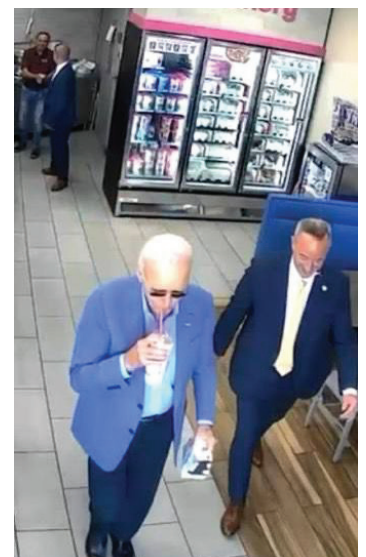
SNAP Says No Soda

Several states are using USDA waivers to restrict SNAP purchases of soda, candy, energy drinks, and similar products. Supporters say taxpayers should not subsidize junk food. Critics say it creates confusion at checkout and punishes poor families. Both arguments will get loud. But politically, the idea has legs because it sounds simple: public help should help people get healthier. The grocery aisle may become the next major front in America's culture war.



Presidential Scoop at Kensington's Kosher Baskin-Robbins

Former President Biden made a sweet stop last month at the Kosher Baskin-Robbins in Kensington, right along the Silver Spring border, ordering his favorite milkshake and snapping a selfie with co-partner Mr. Dalsania inside the beloved neighborhood staple – a stand-alone Baskin-Robbins proudly serving kosher-certified ice cream, without a Dunkin' attached. Sometimes diplomacy happens at 30,000 feet; sometimes it happens over a milkshake – proof that while power travels, community remains.



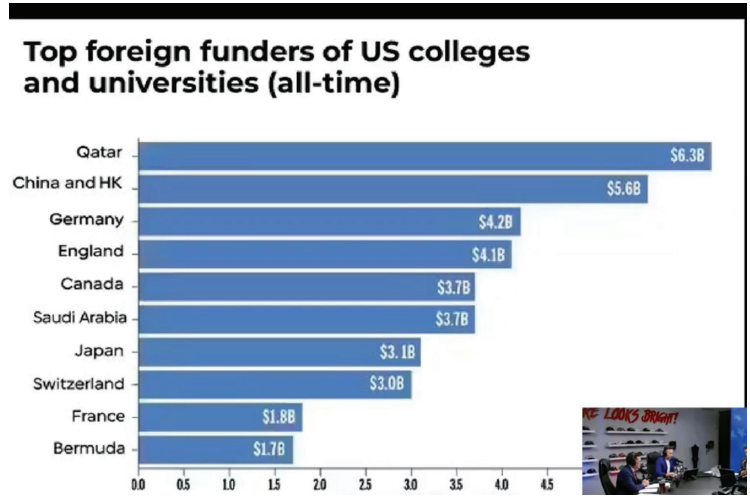
“They’re Buying Ears” - Exposing Qatar’s \$6.3B Propaganda War

Look at the numbers,” says Patrick Bet-David. Billions flowing into U.S. universities—and Qatar isn’t just on the list, it’s leading it by a mile. Meanwhile, Israel doesn’t even appear.

His point is simple: money at that scale isn’t neutral. Campuses shape conversations—and funding shapes campuses.

“I’m all for free speech,” he says—but not when it’s selective, when some voices get amplified while others get dismissed.

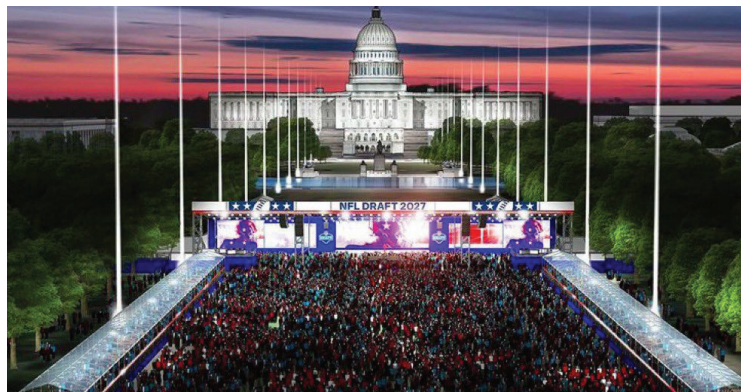
The real question: if money is influencing the message... is it still really free?



The Draft Goes Monumental

Washington, D.C. is officially set to host the 2027 NFL Draft, and the plan is massive. The event is expected to take place on the National Mall, stretching between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial—one of the most iconic backdrops in the country. They’re not thinking small either. Officials are targeting up to 1 million attendees over three days, which would make it one of the biggest draft events ever.

The NFL isn’t just hosting an event—it’s taking over the nation’s front yard.

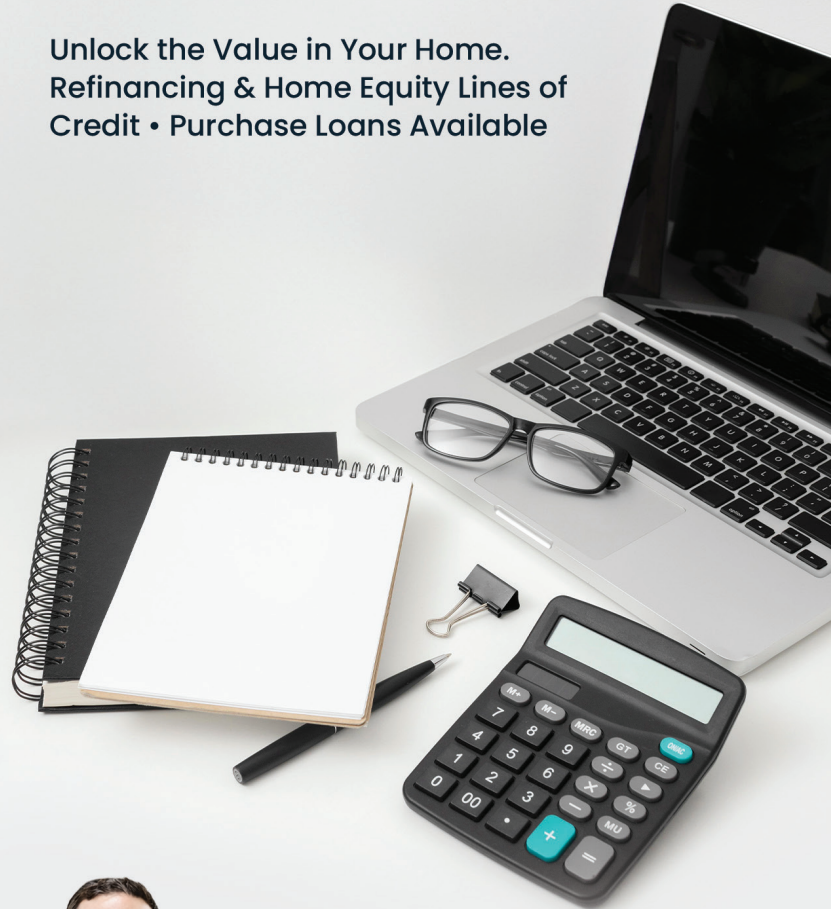


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The Silence Around Sinai



Matan Friedman

What if Shavuos is less about what was given – and more about what we become?

When we look at the Torah's description of the holiday of Shavuos, something startling emerges. Despite Shavuos being traditionally related to the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the Torah never directly connects these together. Instead, the name the Torah (Bamidbar 28:26) designates to the holiday is "Yom Habikkurim", a reference, according to most commentaries, to the unique offering brought on Shavuos called the Shte Halechem, the two loaves of bread.

While Chametz, leavened bread, is generally prohibited from being brought as part of an offering during the rest of the year, Shavuos is an exception, and we are explicitly commanded to bring two loaves of bread to Hashem. The question is why? Additionally, if Shavuos is the day that we received the Torah, why not say so explicitly? Why name it after the offerings brought on that day?

"The Torah doesn't name the day after Torah—because this day is really about you. Who you choose to become matters most."

To answer these questions, we first have to understand the significance of the two loaves that were brought on Shavuos. On the second day of Pesach, we are commanded to bring the Omer offering from barley, count seven whole weeks, and bring the Shte Halechem from wheat on the 50th day.

Why do we bring a barley offering on

Pesach and a wheat one on Shavuos? The Maharal (Tiferes Yisrael 25) explains that barley is animal fodder, and on the holiday of Pesach, when we were just freed from Egypt without a Torah to guide us, we were like animals. Only with the giving of the Torah on Shavuos did we receive the ability to bring out our human potential, and therefore, only at that point are we able to bring an offering of human food (wheat).

"The Torah wasn't just given—it was planted in us. And every act of kindness, patience, or faith is how it grows."

Using this explanation of the Maharal, perhaps we can now explain why Shavuos is deemed "Yom Habikkurim" without any explicit mention of receiving the Torah. The very fact that we are commanded to bring the Shte Halechem is in itself the greatest testament to the giving of the Torah on Shavuos, alluding to the reality that only now, once we have received the Torah, can we truly become the people that Hashem desires from us. What greater sign is there of inner elevation than our ability to sanctify even chametz, that which was previously disqualified? The Torah is not simply a set of laws—it is a refining fire that transforms the very material of our lives. Bread, in this context, is not mundane—it is elevated, intentional, and deeply symbolic. So too are we: transformed from passive recipients into active partners with Hashem in creation. For this reason

as well, the Torah's name for Shavuos, "Yom Habikkurim", truly reflects what the essence of Shavuos is all about.

This name, "Yom Habikkurim," also invites us to ask: what are our bikkurim—our first fruits? What do we offer from the best of ourselves, from the growth we've cultivated since Pesach? It is not only the wheat that ripens—it is the heart, the mind, and the soul that mature through the weeks of Sefirah. Shavuos is not the end of the count—it is the moment that gives the count meaning. We arrive not only with loaves in hand, but with a readiness to live with purpose, depth, and connection.

May we learn from the message of the Shte Halechem and Shavuos, and achieve our potential through the wisdom and guidance of our Torah! Let us recognize that our offering is not merely symbolic—it is deeply personal. Every relationship we invest in, every challenge we rise above, and every moment of spiritual clarity we embrace is a form of our own Shte Halechem. Torah is not just learned—it is lived. And through it, we become the offering that brings light and meaning into the world.

Matan Friedman currently serves as the Assistant Rabbi at The Roslyn Synagogue. A Kemp Mill native, he graduated Yeshiva University with honors in Mathematical Economics and Biology and is currently pursuing Semicha at RIETS. Matan has recorded over 520 shiurim, totaling more than 5,000 hours of Torah, reaching thousands of daily listeners around the world through YU Torah. He is also the author of 12 seforim and advanced Torah monographs presenting original insights in areas such as Talmud, Halacha, and Machshava—many of which have received haskamos from leading Gedolim. Matan is available for private tutoring and can be reached at Matan@WashingtonJewishLife.com.

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