

# Shavuot

We know that on the day after Pesach there was a special Omer offering which consisted of barley from the new crop<sup>1</sup>. On Shavuot there was a similar offering of two loaves of bread<sup>2</sup>. However on Shavuot the offering was of wheat instead of barley. The obvious question here is what is the significance of wheat and barley? And why was it necessary to bring different offerings for the two holidays? Perhaps the following can clarify this question for us.

The period of the Omer enables us to transition from the physical freedom that we received on Pesach to the spiritual freedom of Shavuot. On Pesach Hashem brought about the ten plagues, split the sea and drowned the Egyptians, all the while we stood back and watched. In Egypt we had sunk to such a low level that Hashem had to save us in a rushed manner so that we wouldn't reach the 50<sup>th</sup> level of impurity, a point of no return<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, on Pesach we were so spiritually weak that Hashem had to do everything for us. During the Omer we have the opportunity to show that we deserved the miracles. On Pesach we passively got our freedom. However, this was a limited form of freedom as it was only physical, spiritually we were still plagued by the Egyptian mentality which was engraved in us during our 210 year exile there. However, during the 49 days of the Omer we spiritually purified ourselves thereby receiving our spiritual freedom which was a prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah.

Now we can begin to appreciate the difference between the barley and wheat offering. The Sfat Emet explains that barley is food for animals<sup>4</sup> while wheat is a human being's food<sup>5</sup>. On Pesach we were no different than animals. We stood back and watched as Hashem did everything for us. We barely exercised free will<sup>6</sup> which is what makes us different than animals. In fact the Maharal<sup>7</sup> points out that Pesach is referred to as Shabat in the Torah<sup>8</sup> because Shabat is a holiday whose time is determined by Hashem while the holidays are determined by the Beit Din's announcement of the new moon. Therefore, we again see an allusion to the fact that on Pesach we didn't have a hand in anything and it was all Hashem.

When we left Egypt we weren't spiritually refined and were still very much exclusively physical beings just like animals. However as we worked throughout the 49 days of the *omer* we gradually climbed the 49 levels of purity until we were finally at the level of being able to receive the Torah. In other words on Shavuot we became humans through exercising our free will and spiritually refining ourselves to the point where we could finally be distinguished from the exclusively physical and free-will-less characteristic of animals.

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 23:10-14

<sup>2</sup> Vayikra 23:17

<sup>3</sup> See Ohr Hachaim to Shemot 3:7 and Devarim 32:10

<sup>4</sup> See Sotah 9a which says barley is used as animal fodder

<sup>5</sup> Bereishit 3:19 and Devarim 8:3

<sup>6</sup> There are two exceptions. We did exercise free will by fearlessly slaughtering the sheep which the Egyptians idolized in front of them as Hashem commanded. Also we did exercise free will by the sea when we went in up to our necks before it split. However none of these were deserving of all those miracles.

<sup>7</sup> Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 25

<sup>8</sup> Vayikra 23:15

## How to Properly Prepare for Matan Torah

Just like any other holiday Shavuot has a special energy associated with it that replays itself at this time of year. Just like we had a revelation from Hashem on Shavuot and received the Torah for the first time on Shavuot, so too we re-experience these events every Shavuot. In fact when the Torah is describing the revelation it says “ro'im et hakolot”<sup>9</sup> they saw the sounds. However we see that in Hebrew the word for see is in the present sense. The Sefat Emet<sup>10</sup> explains that this alludes to the fact that every year on Shavuot we can see again what we saw then.

However, as we said before even though the miracles of Pesach were given to us without our having earned it, on Shavuot we have to work for every bit of spirituality that we are to receive. Therefore, if we want to relive the revelation and receive our own portions in the Torah there are certain prerequisites that need to be fulfilled. In Pirkei Avot<sup>11</sup> it says there are 48 prerequisites for Torah however here we will present a smaller and broader list which with the help of Hashem will help us prepare for receiving the Torah.

During the seven weeks of the *omer* we traditionally read *Pirkei Avot* which is essentially a thorough lesson in character building. This is because having good middot comes before the Torah. The commentators point out that in the entire book of *Bereishit* there are only three halachot that are brought out. Now if the Torah is a book of instructions then why is the entire book of *Bereishit* only consist of three *halachot (laws)*? The same commentaries answer “*derech erez kadma latorah*”<sup>12</sup> meaning having good character traits precedes the Torah. The book of *Bereishit* goes through the lives of the forefathers so that we can learn from their everyday actions how to have good character traits, without that one can not absorb Torah. Therefore, pre-requisite number one for accepting the Torah is to work on our character traits.

We know that the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, which was the smallest mountain in the region. It is taught that Hashem gave the Torah on this mountain to teach us that to receive the Torah we need to be humble and low. In fact this is why Moshe Rabbeinu was the one who got the Torah on our behalf. As the Torah itself points out, he was the humblest of all men<sup>13</sup>. If a person thinks high of himself then he leaves no room for the Torah to go in, therefore, being humble is most important when it comes to receiving the Torah. It must be pointed out that other commentaries ask if Hashem wanted to teach us the idea of humility then why didn't He give the Torah on a valley which is even lower than the lowest mountain? To this they answer it is not good for a talmid chacham (Torah scholar) to be humble to a degree where he thinks of himself as a nobody, because then the kavod (respect) of Torah will be compromised. Therefore, prerequisite number two is to be humble in a balanced fashion and make room for the

On Shavuot we have a tradition to read *Megilat Rut*. One of the reasons we read this Megila is to teach us that for a person to merit spiritual elevation he must be prepared

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<sup>9</sup> Shemot 20:15

<sup>10</sup> Shavuot 5661, Parshat Yitro 5661

<sup>11</sup> Pirkei Avot 6:5

<sup>12</sup> ???

<sup>13</sup> Bamidbar 12:3

to face poverty, deprivation and humiliation<sup>14</sup> just like Rut did. Rut, who was a convert, went from being the daughter-in-law of a Princess to going around collecting left over wheat. In life we know that anything worth having takes hard work. In fact many times when things come easy we don't appreciate or even value it as much. Imagine there was a puzzle which had numbers on the pieces which told you exactly where the pieces go. Would one feel accomplished after having finished it? To the contrary one might not even want to attempt to put the pieces together because the lack of challenge makes it meaningless. In Judaism we say one has to toil to acquire Torah<sup>15</sup>. In fact this is why the *Gemara* is set up the way it is. The *Gemara* doesn't give us the straight answer to a question. Rather it takes us through a challenging intellectual journey to finding the right answer. On a similar note the *Gemara*<sup>16</sup> says "Torah will be acquired permanently only by an individual who takes great pains to acquire it". One look at the hard lives of the giants of Torah throughout history will show us what this *Gemara* is talking about. It is the hard work that makes it worth it and that is pre-requisite number three for receiving the Torah.

It is taught that Moshe Rabbeinu spent 40 days and 40 nights without food and water on Har Sinai in order to receive the Torah. We are also taught that the Jewish people had to prepare three days in advance for "*matan Torah*" (giving of the Torah) by separating from their wives<sup>17</sup>. From here we learn that another prerequisite for the Torah is self control in all areas of physicality. A person who is looking to fill himself with the wisdom of the Torah can't be overly involved with physical pleasures of food, intimacy and an overall luxurious life. While Judaism certainly preaches against total abstinence from the physical<sup>18</sup> we are still obligated to sanctify ourselves in what is permitted and not become addicted to the physical world. For us the physical world is like a train whose destination is *olam haba* (*world to come*), the more time we spend trying to make it a permanent dwelling place, the harder it will be to detach ourselves from it when the time comes for us to leave this world.

Pirkei Avot says<sup>19</sup>: This is the way of Torah, eat bread with salt, drink water by the measure, sleep on the ground live a life of hardship and toil in the Torah. If you do this you will be happy in this world and it will be good for you in the world to come. This isn't coming to preach to us to live a life with the bare minimum but it is coming to teach us to be so detached from physicality that living a life of bare minimum wouldn't bother us the least bit. Therefore, prerequisite number four for acquiring Torah is to use the physical world in a balanced fashion and not become attached or addicted to any physical pleasure.

It says in the Torah that when Hashem asked the Jewish people if they wanted to accept the Torah, they responded with the words "naaseh vnishma" meaning "we will do and we will listen"<sup>20</sup>. In Pirkei Avot it says<sup>21</sup> one whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin,

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<sup>14</sup> Yalkut Shimoni on Rut section 596

<sup>15</sup> Pirkei Avot 6:4 This is the way of the Torah..... live a life of hardship and toil in Torah. If you do this you will be happy in this world and it will be good for you in the world to come.

<sup>16</sup> Berachot 43b

<sup>17</sup> Shmot 19:15

<sup>18</sup> For example unlike other religions we encourage marriage, partaking of good food and wine and indulging in the physical at the right times as a spring board to the spiritual.

<sup>19</sup> Pirkei Avot 6:4

<sup>20</sup> Shemot 24:7

<sup>21</sup> Pirkei Avot 3:11

does not have his wisdom endure. Similarly in another Mishna it says in the name of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria that anyone whose wisdom is greater than his deeds is like a tree which has many branches and few roots, the wind comes, uproots it and turns it over..... But anyone whose deeds are greater than his wisdom he is like a tree which has few branches and many roots, even if all the winds in the world come and blow on it they can not move it from its place. It is not enough for a person to just learn the Torah, he has to incorporate it into his actions as well. Perhaps we can suggest this as the reason why the Rabbis warn against laymen learning the Kabbalah. Because once they acquire knowledge about the deeper things it is as if they had a mini revelation and therefore Hashem expects more of them. If they cant live up to this new expectation for them then they can be punished for it. Rav Dessler explains that this is why the Jewish people, after hearing the first two commandments directly from Hashem<sup>22</sup>, asked Moshe to reveal the rest to them. They didn't want to hear the rest from Hashem because then the revelation would be bigger and therefore Hashem would hold them to a higher standard afterwards.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is also not correct to take this idea to the extreme and say "I wouldn't learn at all so I wouldn't be held accountable". Obviously a person like this will be held accountable for not learning in the first place. Therefore, prerequisite number five is to incorporate what one learns into his actions so that he too will be able to symbolically exclaim "*naaseh vnishma*" just like his ancestors did over 3,300 years ago on Har Sinai.

It is taught that before Hashem gave the Torah to the Jewish people, He offered it to the other nations and they refused to accept it<sup>24</sup>. When Hashem offered it to Eisav they asked Him what is in the Torah? Hashem said "do not kill". They replied: killing is an integral part of our lives we can't accept it. When He offered it to Ammon and Moav they asked whats in it? Hashem replied "do not be perverse". They replied: we are offsprings of the incestual relationship between Lot and his daughters. Sexual perversion is part of our lives therefore we can't accept it. When he offered it to the descendents of Ishmael they asked: what is in it? Hashem replied: do not steal. They replied back: stealing is what we do we can not accept it. Finally Hashem came to the Jewish people and without asking any questions they replied "*naaseh vnishma*" we will do and we will hear.

What is fascinating about this is that Hashem told every nation something in the Torah that He knew was hard for them to keep. One might ask: this is not fair, had Hashem presented the entire Torah to them they might have accepted it! The answer to this is that the second the nations began to ask what is in it, it meant that they wanted to live by their own values. They didn't want to submit to the morals laid down to them by Hashem. Therefore, the moment they asked "what is in it?" they already failed the test! How does this apply to us? Today we see many people rejecting the Torah because they don't want to inconvenience themselves by changing their way of life. To take it a step further, there are many people who do believe in the Torah and its divinity yet refuse to keep certain commandments. They say things such as "I keep everything it says in the Torah but this commandment I just can't do!" What these people fail to realize is that

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<sup>22</sup> The word Torah adds up to a Gematria (numerical value) of 611 to hint at the fact that we were given the first two commandments directly from Hashem and the rest we got from the Torah.

<sup>23</sup> See Ramban to Shmot 20:17 where he translates the word "*nasot*" to mean test. Meaning Hashem would later test the Jewish people according to the intensity of the revelation they had at the time of the giving of the Torah.

<sup>24</sup> Sifri, vzot habracham, 308

keeping *that specific* commandment is their test in life! The commandments that are easy for them to keep show no act of submission to Hashem's will. A person like this is comparable to the responses given by Eisav, Ammon and Moav, and Ishmael. The Torah is truth and for us to pick and choose between the words of Hashem is utterly wrong. Therefore, prerequisite number six is to submit ourselves fully to the morals of the Torah and especially those commandments which are hard for us to keep; because ultimately keeping those very commandments is our test in life.

Another idea behind "naaseh vnishma" is doing before understanding the reasoning behind the commandments. While in Judaism we are encouraged to try and understand to the best of our ability the reasoning behind the commandments<sup>25</sup>, we are not to make this a prerequisite for doing them. Perhaps an analogy will make this clear. When we go to the Doctor and he instructs us to take a certain medicine, do we refuse to take the medicine until we know the ins and outs of how it will heal us? No! Because we know the track record of the Doctor and we know that what he says is based on his vast knowledge in medicine and the anatomy of the human body. Similarly, for a person who knows that the Torah is from Hashem, it should be no question that He knows what is good for us even if we can't understand why. Therefore, prerequisite number seven is for us to accept to fulfill the commandments even before we understand the deeper reasons behind them and with this demonstration of emuna (belief) we will merit to have revealed to us the depth behind Hashem's commandments.

*Amalek battled Israel at Refidim*<sup>26</sup>

The Kli Yakar points out that the word "Refidim" has the same letters as the Hebrew word for divisiveness (hafradah). It was because they weren't united that Amalek was able to attack them.

*In the third month of the Exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, They arrived at Sinai. They traveled from Rephidim and arrived at the wilderness and encamped in the wilderness; and Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain.*<sup>27</sup> )

Rashi comments that the word for encamped "vayechan" is in the singular to teach us that the huge multitude of people encamped like a single person with a single desire.

It was only once *they traveled away from Refidim* (place of divisiveness) and *encamped* (in unity) by Har Sinai, that they were not vulnerable to the powers of Amalek and were thereby able to receive the Torah. It was only because *the entire people responded together and said everything that Hashem has said we shall do*<sup>28</sup> that they came to merit receiving the Torah. This shows us the importance of unity when it comes to receiving the Torah. We also know that during the days of the Omer which precede Shavuot, 24,000 of Rabbi Akiva's students passed away because of disunity between them<sup>29</sup>. Therefore prerequisite number eight is unity and respect for our fellows.

Think about all the major religions you have heard about. How did they come to be? The story seems all too familiar: one man in search of truth had a private revelation which he revealed to others and through time gathered enough followers to form a

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<sup>25</sup> in fact books such as Moreh Nevuchaim of the Rambam, sefer Hachinuch and Taamei Hamitzvot all attempt to explain the reasons for the Mitsvot.

<sup>26</sup> Shmot 19:2

<sup>27</sup> Shmot 19:2

<sup>28</sup> Shemot 19:8

<sup>29</sup> Yevamot 62b

religion. A private revelation is somehow a common factor in all of them! However, when one reads the Torah he can see clearly that the Jewish people had a mass revelation at the time of receiving the Torah. Three million people heard Hashem speak! To make up a revelation made to one person is easy to do but one to three million people is nearly impossible. Proof for the impossibility of it is that no other religion ever claimed to have it! This is exactly what the Torah says . It is speaking in future term implying that there will never be a nation who will even claim to have mass revelation!<sup>30</sup>

The time of the giving of the Torah was a time when every member of the nation of Israel was able to hear Hashem speak. One didn't have to be a prophet or a person of high spiritual stature to be able to hear Hashem. In fact the commentaries point out that the smallest person at that time saw more than Yechezkel (a famous Jewish prophet who saw the chariot of Hashem) ever saw. SOURCE  
Blind, deaf etc.

Therefore, we see that on Shavuot every person despite his/her spiritual disability, has an opportunity to hear Hashem if he just tunes in by standing at the foot of the mountain through having the above mentioned prerequisites to Torah.

## Seeing Sound

*The entire people saw the sounds<sup>31</sup>*

Rashi comments: they saw what was normally heard

*Said Rabbi Abba: these sounds were etched into the darkness, cloud and mist and were visible.<sup>32</sup>*

While the Torah is always true on the literal level there is always a deeper idea that can be derived as well. What is the idea of being able to see sounds? Perhaps we will be able to answer the question by delving deeper into the difference between seeing and hearing. When a person sees something he sees its totality. He can be shown the entire thing at once. However, when it comes to hearing the person who is hearing the sound has to put together letter, syllables, words and finally sentences to finally get the totality of the idea. When Rashi says they saw something that was normally heard he perhaps meant that Hashem usually reveals himself only through us putting seemingly irrelevant things together and seeing Hashem's hand in it. However during the giving of the Torah He revealed Himself in a way that we didn't have to do any work of putting things together. We *saw* his words meaning we were given a perception of Him in one shot.

The time of the giving of the Torah was distinct in this way. At all other times in history we as the Jewish people have had the responsibility to put together the disparate sounds of Hashem together and show the world that there is a G-d. In fact that's why in Shema Yisrael we say "*hear*" because hearing means taking different meaningless sounds and combining them to make something meaningful. In this world in which Hashem is not visible it is our job as Jews to reveal him. Perhaps this is why the Mitsva

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<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that this does not go against what we said before about Hashem asking the other nations if they wanted to accept the Torah. That was not a revelation from Hashem. As the Zohar points out that was a revelation to the head angels of those nations (Zohar, Balak p. 192b)

<sup>31</sup> Shmot 20:15

<sup>32</sup> Zohar Yitro P.81a

on Purim is to *listen* to the Megillah, because as mentioned in the Purim essay, purim was a time when Hashem was fully hidden. Therefore through putting every sound together and through analyzing the seemingly natural events of the Megilla at a deeper level we would be able to reveal Him in this world.

However, during the giving of the Torah this was not needed. Hashem revealed Himself fully and therefore as Rashi says we were able to see something that was normally heard. Customs of Shavuot

Pesach has matsa and the seder, Sukot has the suka lulav etrog and hadasim but Shavuot does not have its own distinct Mitsva. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro is quoted<sup>33</sup> as saying the reason for this is that Torah is the totality of everything and therefore the day on which it was given can not be encapsulated in one ritual. Despite this Shavuot has its Minhagim. The explanation of the following minhagim was taken from Hilchot Chagim by Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu.

### **Eating Dairy Foods**

1) So that we will eat from two loaves of bread in memory of the two loaves which were offered in the Temple. By eating a meat and a dairy meal we will be sure to eat two loaves because a loaf that was used with a dairy meal cant be used for a meat meal and vice versa.<sup>34</sup>

2) Being that when our forefathers had just received the Torah and yet know the laws of slaughtering an animal thoroughly, they could only have dairy. Therefore we have dairy now to remember that.

3) Another reason is that the Zohar says<sup>35</sup> that the days of the sefirat Haomer are like the seven days that a woman must keep in order to purifu herself. Similarly the Jewish people counted seven weeks to purify themselves of the blood of Egypt. Just as our sages teach us that a woman who is nursing sees no blood (since her blood transforms into milk) after these seven weeks we purified ourselves of the blood, and the milk is a sign of purity.<sup>36</sup> This is not to be taken literally! It is from the Zohar which is a deep mystical book.

### **Reading Megilat Rut**

Because:

1) It mentions the beginning of harvest and Shavuot is harvesting time<sup>37</sup>

2) Our forefathers originally received the Torah through circumcision, immersion, and bringing a sacrifice, in the same manner that a convert requires these things to convert.

3) Megilat Rut tells the story of Rut's conversion and so we read it on Shavuot.<sup>38</sup>

Megilat Rut is about doing kindness which complements the Torah, which starts and ends with lovingkindness<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Gateway to Judaism by Rabbi Mordechai Becher Essay on Shavuot

<sup>34</sup> Rma 494, 3

<sup>35</sup> Parshat Emor 97b

<sup>36</sup> Magen avraham 494, 6

<sup>37</sup> Avudarham, Tefilot Pesach

<sup>38</sup> Avudarham, Tefilot Pesach

<sup>39</sup> It starts with the creation of Adam and Chava and getting their needs and ends with the burial of Moshe Rabbeinu.

4) King David passed away on Shavuot and according to some he was born on Shavuot as well therefore we read Megilat Rut which explains the family background of King David.

5) The Jewish nation received 606 additional Mitsvot<sup>40</sup> and the gematria (numerical value) of the name “Rut” is 606.

It says in the Midrash “what is the connection between Rut and Shavuot? To teach us that Torah can be acquired only through affliction and poverty.<sup>41</sup> The kind of affliction that Rut went through to become a Jewess.

### **Decorating with trees**

1) Because Har Sinai, where the Torah was given, became miraculously green when the Torah was given.

2) Also because it is a day when trees are judged as to how much they will grow and produce.

### **Learning all Night**

1) The Jewish people slept on the night prior to the giving of the Torah as is written “And Moshe went from the camp to the nation, towards the Lord.<sup>42</sup> Therefore to correct their fault we stay awake the whole night on Shavuot<sup>43</sup>

2) Shavuot mystically corresponds to Yitschak whose midda was gevura. Therefore to sweeten the gevura we learn all night.

3) According to the Kabbala, the Zohar explains that this learning is to crown the Shchina (divine presence) the “bride”, with 24 pieces of jewelry, to prepare for the giving of the Torah in the morning.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> In addition to the 7 Noahide laws which everyone had to keep prior to the giving of the Torah.

<sup>41</sup> Yalkut Shimoni Rut 596

<sup>42</sup> Shmot 19:17

<sup>43</sup> Magen Avraham 494

<sup>44</sup> See all the above reasons in Kaf Hachaim 494:6 and Mishna Berura 494:1 and Hiclhot Chagim of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu



Zohar yitro p. 93b and Rashi to shmot 24:12 say 10=613

Rut=606

Nefesh Hachaim gate IV ch. 11 if there would be one moment of Torah the world would be destroyed.

It is not an empty thing from you Yerushalmi peah 1:1 if torah seems empty it is from you!

For us action is every thing shem mishmuel

Midrash is not the essence action is the essence (pirkei avot 1:17)

Kohelet 1:18 increase knowledge increase pain if not live upto it

Sefat emet sound is internal sight is on surface (5635)

Steipler modesty

Shem mishmuel and pirkei avot not midrash but action is most important

Dr headache

Took you out of misrayim

Klev echad

Add Rashi on shmot 19:2 to Purim