

THE ESSENCE OF SHAVUOS

BY: RAV YAAKOV WEINBERG ZT"l



About Rav Weinberg zt"l

HaRav Yaakov Weinberg, zt"l, was the Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisrael in Baltimore, Maryland from 1987 until his petira in 1999. For many decades he was a force for Torah in the Jewish world. He was the ultimate Rabbi, transforming the hearts and minds of thousands of talmidim with his unfaltering adherence to the truth of Torah and the words of Chazal. With his incisive analysis and penetrating insight, he developed generations of outstanding leaders. They follow his example in their understanding of Torah and in their responsibility for its transmission. His talmidim have been instrumental in creating communal organizations including shuls, schools and kiruv centers. Rav Weinberg was a sought-after advisor, involved in hundreds of private and public issues within the Jewish community. He often conducted the question and answer sessions at Torah Umesorah conventions where many benefited from his counsel. Rav Weinberg was married to Rebbetzin Shaina Chana Ruderman, the daughter of Rav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, zt"l, the founder of Ner Yisroel. He was the older brother and mentor of Rav Noach Weinberg, zt"l, the founder of Aish HaTorah.



Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Berkovits in honor of the grandchildren

Dedicated by Dr. and Mrs. Michael Ring l'iluy nishmas

חיים יעקב בן יבל"ט מיכאל שמחה

Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Moishe Bane l'iluy nishmas

Edith, a'h & Hyman, a'h Bane

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The Rosh HaYeshiva had a distinctive and expressive style of speaking. The text has been edited extensively for readability. However, where necessary, the usual grammatical rules have been relaxed to retain the force and flavor of the Rosh HaYeshiva's delivery.

The Essence of Shavuos

The first statement that we have to make about *Shavuos* is that it is not really a separate *Yom Tov*, a separate holiday. It is in its essence a continuity of *Pesach*. This is indicated by the fact that *Shavuos* does not have a date. It is the fiftieth day after the first day of *Pesach*, after the

"ספירת ארבעים ותשעה ימים, החל מן היום השני של חג הפסח – טז בניסן, מלבד קיום המצוה שבה, היא גם ספירה לקראת חג השבועות, לחג זה לא קבעה תורה יום מסוים בחודש סיון, אלא חוגגים אותו לאחר השלמת הספירה – ביום חמישים. בזמן הזה, שאין מקדשים את החודש על פי הראיה, וכל שנה חודש ניסן הוא חודש "מלא", וחודש אייר "חסר", חג השבועות חל תמיד בו' סיון. אולם בזמן שמקדשים את החודש על פי ראיית הלבנה, לא היה תאריך קבוע לחג זה, אלא לעיתים היה חל בה' בסיון, ולעיתים בו' בסיון, ולעיתים בז' בסיון – ביום שלאחר השלמת הספירה." [ע' ספר תרי"ג מצוות השלם על המועדים, דף תרעה]

omer, which means that *Shavuos* is tied directly to *Pesach* rather than being a separate *Yom Tov*.

Although we know that now *Shavuos* always comes out on *vuv Sivan*, it didn't have to be that way. *Shavuos* was not always on *vuv Sivan* depending on the workings of the calendar.

This being the case, before we can even begin understanding *Shavuos* we have to understand where it's coming from. Being connected to *Pesach* tells us at least the following minimally: that *Pesach* is not complete without *Shavuos* and that *Shavuos* has no meaning without *Pesach*.

That *Pesach* is not complete without *Shavuos* is practically self-understood. Because as we defined the concept of *cheirus* as to be found only in Torah, obviously the significance of *Pesach*

"...ואומר, והלוחות מעשה אלהים המה והמכתב מכתב אלהים הוא חרות על הלוחות. אל תקרא חרות אלא חירות. שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה..." [אבות, פרק ו, משנה ב]

is never completed until the time of the giving of the Torah – *zman matan Torasanu*. And so *Pesach* finds its culmination and its justification and its meaningfulness of *zman*

cheirus, of freedom, in the giving of the Torah on *Shavuos*. So this connection and this relationship is immediately apparent.

The question is, how does *Shavuos* derive from *Pesach*?

Well, we have only to take a look at the words of with which *Shavuos* opens up to see the intense relationship that it has to *Pesach*. The beginning of the dialogue, of the presentation, of the Lord Himself at *Har Sinai* when He revealed Himself to us and proclaimed His Torah to us begins

"אמר החבר:...וכן פתח דבריו אל המון ישראל: "אנכי יי אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים", ולא אמר: "אני בורא העולם ובוראכם"...אמר הכוזרי: אם כן אני רואה שתורתכם אינה נתונה כי אם לכם, ואין חיב בה זולתכם. אמר החבר: כן הוא...ואילו היה חיוב התורה מפני שבראנו, היה שוה בה כל בני אדם, הלבן והשחור, כי הכל בריאותיו. אך אנו חיבים בה מפני שהוציאנו ממצרים, והתחברות כבודו אלינו, מפני שאנחנו הסגולה מבני אדם." [כוזרי, מאמר ראשון, אות כה, כו]

with the following statement: "אנכי יי אלהיך אשר" "I am the G-d your Lord who took you out of the land of Egypt, from a house of bondage."

The proclamation that G-d made is not "G-d the Creator of the universe." Not G-d who maintains and gives existence to all creatures.

Not the G-d upon whom you are dependent for your sustenance and health and well-being and every aspect of being. But the G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt from a house of bondage. How do we understand that? Should He not have spoken to us as the Creator and maintainer of the universe and of ourselves? Is that not His first claim to our loyalty? Is that not

His first claim to our need to worship Him, to accept His suzerainty [i.e., overarching control], to accept His commandments?

Obviously, the fact that He proclaimed Himself differently says that it would not be His claim to our allegiance. And if we stop for even one moment of thought we will see immediately that this is true. Because if He said I am the Lord your G-d who made you and all that exists then He would be speaking not to the Jew but to all mankind, because as G-d the Creator He is no more to us than He is to all the nations of the earth. If G-d is to enter a covenant, and as we spoke, the concept of our relationship to G-d is that of a covenant, of a peoplehood, then it is to us as His people that He must speak. And to us as His people He speaks only because I took you out of the land of Egypt, a house of bondage. It is this that made us, as we said in *Pesach*, **והייתם לי לעם** – you will be to me a people, a nation. **והייתי לכם לאלהים** – and I will be to you a master, a Lord. Therefore, the very possibility of there being a covenant and a Torah which is a covenant is only a consequence of the fact that we became His people through His taking us out of the land of *Mitzrayim* away from a house of bondage.

The freedom that He gave us was the freedom to accept or reject this Torah. And it is only the people whom He gave this *cheirus*, the people to whom He brought into this freedom, to whom He could speak on *Shavuos*. Therefore, it is correct for Him to say **אנכי יי אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים**. It is the G-d who took you out the land of Egypt and house of bondage who is speaking to you and giving you these commandments because of the covenant that was created by your becoming His people and He, your master, your Lord.

Therefore, the very fact that this is the beginning of *Shavuos* gives us the connection. *Shavuos* is the culmination of *Pesach*. It is a *Pesach* in which a nation was created that makes it possible for a *Shavuos*, a covenant, to be entered into fifty days later. Therefore, if *Pesach* needs its culmination in *Shavuos*, *Shavuos* is the culmination of a process that has in fact begun in *Pesach*.

Then, *Shavuos* becomes the time of the renewal of our fealty to G-d as our partner and covenant. This is what *Shavuos* becomes. It becomes the fulfillment of our acceptance of this special relationship. We call this *emunah*; this is faith. Not faith in G-d's existence alone, but faith as our bond between Him and us.

It is interesting that in the *halachos* of *chinuch*, in the laws of educating our young, there is a *halacha*, a specific law that states as follows. As soon as a child begins to talk we have to teach him two

"מאימתי אביו חייב ללמדו תורה משיתחיל לדבר מלמדו תורה צוה לנו משה ושמע ישראל..." [רמב"ם, הלכות ת"ת, פרק א הלכה ו']

verses, then, any verses we choose. But that first we have to choose two specific verses. The two specific verses that we have to teach him,

we teach him in the following order. Verse number one, "תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהילת יעקב" - Torah was given to us, commanded to us by Moshe as an inheritance to the community, to the congregation of Jacob. It is the giving of the Torah that is the basis of our belief. Only then, do we say "שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד", the Hear O Israel, which is the affirmation of our faith.

One might ask, would you not have expected the opposite to be true? First affirm your faith, then you can talk to me about a Torah. But first affirm the faith. The answer is it's not true. Our faith derives from the relationship between us and G-d. That's the true basis of our *emunah*. And that faith then enables us to accept and live in full recognition and awareness of the fact that He

is our master, directly involved in guiding us, training us, teaching us, and that He is, in fact, one, a total and absolute unique unity. The beginning is relationship with G-d; therefore, that is the true basis of *emunah*, of faith. It is a true basis of our relationship to our Creator.

And *Shavuos*, which is *zman matan Torasanu*, then, is the *Yom Tov* in which we hone to a bright sharpness, to a clarity, the faith that we possess as Jews, which is one that is an intense relationship between ourselves and G-d Himself. This is the basis of the concept of *Shavuos*. The *middah*, the principle that *Shavuos* has to engender within us then, is *emunah*.

We then have to face up to the reality that we do not have any unique *mitzvah* bound with *Shavuos*. We have this with every other *Yom Tov*, whether it be Biblical or rabbinic. Every *Yom Tov* has a specific law, a specific set of *mitzvos* that are relevant to the day or that are part and parcel of the day. *Pesach* has the *korban Pesach*, the eating of *matzah*, the not eating of *chometz*, a whole series of laws that tell us about *Pesach*. *Rosh Hashanah*, *shofar*. *Yom Kippur*, fasting. *Succos*, sitting in the *sukkah*, *luluv* and *esrog*. *Purim*, all the various laws, reading the *megillah*, the *seudah*, the *mishloach manos*. *Chanukah*, the lighting of the candles, *hallel*. Every *Yom Tov* has its specific *mitzvos*.

[In response to an inaudible question:] The question was that on *Shavuos* in distinction to what I just said that it has no specific *mitzvos* of the day, the claim is there are two *mitzvos* of the day.

"וביום הבכורים בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה ליהוה בשבעתיכם מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו. " רש"י ד"ה וביום הבכורים כתב: "חג השבועות קרוי בכורי קציר חטים, על שם שתי הלחם, שהם ראשונים למנחת חטים הבאה מן החדש." [במדבר, כח כו]

Mitzvah number one, the Biblical commandment to bring the *bikkurim*. Over there you can make it more specific than the *bikkurim*, you can make it the *mitzvah* of the *shtei halechem*, which is a

specific *mitzvah* to *Shavuos*. *Mitzvah* number two, the rabbinic *mitzvah* of reading the *megillah* of *Rus*, which we made analogous to the reading of the *megillah* of Esther on *Purim*. I claimed that Esther on *Purim* was a specific commandment of the day. Why is that not true of *Rus* on *Shavuos*?

Neither of these is an accurate description. The *shtei halechem* that we bring on *Shavuos* is not a *mitzvah* of a *yuchid*, an individual. It's not a *mitzvah* that we do. It is part of the *mitzvah* of the *rabbim*, part of the national reaction and that is not what we mean by a *mitzvas hayom*. *Mitzvos hayom* is how each individual Jew has to react to the day. Therefore, *korban* will never be part of the *mitzvos hayom*. Each *Yom Tov* has its *korbanos*. *Shavuos* has a specific unique one. But you cannot call it anymore the specific *avoda* of the *Yom* because it is a community obligation, a national obligation rather than an individual use of the *Yom Tov*.

As to the second, the reading of *Rus*, there is no such *mitzvah*. We read it as a *minhag* and we find good reasons to and it's a *minhag* that Jews have taken. But it never was a *mitzvah* of the *Yom*. If we don't read the *megillah* on *Purim* we are *mevatel*, violating, a rabbinic precept. But if you don't read *Rus* on *Shavuos* you're not violating anything; you just don't have the benefit of the custom of reading *Rus* on *Shavuos*. Whereas, *Purim*, it's a specific rabbinic charge that you have to read or hear the *megillah* and if not you are *mevatel* a *mitzvah d'rabbanan*. Whereas, on *Shavuos*, you didn't read it, so you didn't keep a *minhag*, but you weren't *mevatel* a specific decree that the *Chachamim* made. And that's a very, very large difference. That's why I say that *Shavuos* has no particular *mitzvah* of its own.

But again, a moment's thought will show that there is no possibility of a *mitzvah* of its own for *Shavuos*. *Shavuos* is *zman matan Torasanu*. The work of *Shavuos* is to accept the entirety of Torah. How can you have a specific *mitzvah*? All of the *mitzvos* are the day...that's what *Shavuos* is. *Shavuos* is the total acceptance of all of Torah. And because *Shavuos* is this total acceptance of all of Torah, *Shavuos* remains without a particular *mitzvah* that is appropriate to the day in and of itself. And therefore it does not have one.

Now, what are the particular *mitzvos*, what are the peculiar features of the day? It's a *Yom Tov* like all *Yomim Tovim*. It doesn't have specific *mitzvah*. What is that which identifies it as *Shavuos*? I think it would be terrible if the only thing that identified it as *Shavuos* is because it's the only *Yom Tov* without anything to identify it with. That just doesn't seem satisfactory.

We do find an area in which *Shavuos* is unique and by which we identify it. And a very surprising one. *Shavuos* is the one *Yom Tov* that must be according to everyone *chatzi lechem v'chatzi l'Hashem*. In other *Yomim Tovim* the possibility exists of using the *Yom Tov* completely for spiritual worship. *Shavuos* is set aside as a day which of necessity has to have both the intensity of spiritual worship, which is *chatzi l'Hashem*, and at the same time an acceptance of satisfying one's own physical needs satisfactorily with pleasures, which is the *chatzi l'chem*. The *Yomim Tovim* can be entirely spiritual but not *Shavuos*.

Which says that the giving of Torah and the practice of Torah, the carrying out of Torah, can never be regarded as no more than a spiritual exercise. That isn't Torah. Torah must include the physical needs as well. It would be a terrible error to think that we worship G-d in our learning, in our prayers and in our rituals, but in the mundane life, the eating, the going home, the taking care of children, over there we really are meeting the practical realities of existence. And you

can't help but being human you've got to take time off from serving G-d to eat, to sleep, to take care of children, to have children. That's a deep and serious error. That's not true at all. The taking care of the children and the eating and the dressing are themselves, in the deepest and most profound sense, the worshipping of the *Ribonoy Shel Olum*. It's part of

"והנה האיש המתקדש בקדושת בוראו אפילו מעשיו הגשמיים חוזרים להיות ענייני קדושה ממש, וסימניך אכילת קדשים שהיא עצמה מצות עשה, ואמרו ז"ל (פסחים נט ב) כהנים אוכלים ובעלים מתכפרים. ותראה עתה ההפרש שבין הטהור לקדוש: הטהור, מעשיו החומרים אינם לו אלא הכרחים, והוא עצמו אינו מתכוין בהם אלא על צד ההכרח, ונמצא שעל ידי זה יוצאים מסוג הרע שבחומרות ונשארים טהורים, אך לכלל קדושה לא באו, כי אילו היה אפשר בלתי, כבר היה יותר טוב. אך הקדוש הדבק תמיד לאלהיו, ונפשו מתהלכת בין המושכלות האמתיות באהבת בוראו ויראתו, הנה נחשב לו כאילו הוא מתהלך לפני ה' בארצות החיים עודנו פה בעולם הזה. והנה איש כזה הוא עצמו נחשב כמשכן, כמקדש, וכמזבח, וכמאמרם זכרונם לברכה (בראשית רבה מז:ח) ויעל מעליו אלהים, (בראשית לה:יג) האבות הן הן המרכבה, וכן אמרו (רש"י בראשית לה:יג) הצדיקים הן הן המרכבה. כי השכינה שורה עליהם כמו שהיתה שורה במקדש. ומעתה המאכל שהם אוכלים הוא כקרוב שעולה על גבי האישים, כי ודאי הוא שיהיה נחשב לעילוי גדול אל אותם הדברים שהיו עולים על גבי המזבח כיון שהיו נקרבים לפני השכינה..." [מסילת ישרים, פרק כו]

the covenant. And therefore we sanctify it. We eat differently than the animal and we sleep differently than the animal and in every aspect of our existence we keep our physical selves, our physical realities distinct from the same physical functions of the animal. The point is to sanctify, to make holy, to recognize as being of the essence of Torah, our physical needs as well. It isn't a separate aspect of our existence which, unfortunately, we've got to suffer. But part and parcel of the very act of being G-d's people, worshipping Him, serving Him, is through our physical existence as much as our spiritual one.

As a matter of fact, the “book of sanctity” in the *Rambam* deals only with matters of our physical needs and gratifications. *Sefer Kedusha*, the book of sanctity, deals with the laws of cohabitation,

”וראיתי לחלק חיבור זה לארבעה עשר ספרים...ספר המישי: אכול בו מצוות של ביאות אסורות ומצוות של מאכלות אסורות. לפי שבשני עניינים האלו קדשנו המקום והבדילנו מן האומות, בעריות ובמאכלות אסות. ובשניהם נאמר ואבדיל אתכם מן העמים, אשר הבדלתי אתכם מן העמים. וקראתי שם ספר זה ספר קדושה.” [רמב”ם, הקדמה למשנה תורה]

and with the laws of proper foods, *macholos asuros*. Both are the expression of our deepest animal physical needs, both are dealt with in the Book of Sanctity. Because true sanctity is to be

achieved only in this area. You do not achieve sanctity in the spiritual. You achieve sanctity in your physical needs by lifting it and transcending it into the spheres of G-d-worship and G-d-service.

This is why *Shavuot* is *chatzi l'chem* as well as *chatzi l'Hashem*. What is the understanding out of which this law derives? They first had to understand this truth in order to see that this should be the law of *Shavuot*, of *chatzi l'chem* and *chatzi l'Hashem*. We see it from the fact that there is such a law. It makes it clear. But how did it derive from the giving of Torah that there should be this insight out of which this law is promulgated? This law is a consequence of something that we knew before making the law. And that is because it must have been that in the very giving of the Torah this statement was being made. How is this statement being made in the very giving of the Torah?

Well, in a very deep and meaningful way, the Torah is given to us, in the words of G-d Himself, so that we may be a *mamleches kohanim* and a *goy kadosh*, a kingdom of priests and a holy people, a sanctified people. What did G-d say? You will be to Me, if you accept the Torah, a *mamleches kohanim*, a *goy kadosh*. Which means that somehow or other, the very definition of Torah is that it makes us into a kingdom of priests and a holy people.

A kingdom of priests and a holy people says a couple of things. It says that we cannot be followers and servants of G-d individually, alone, but only through a peoplehood. For the true worship of Jew to G-d is by what he represents as a people, as a kingdom and a nation. It is in our function as a kingdom of priests and a nation that is holy that we fulfill ourselves in doing G-d’s will, in serving Him, in relating to Him, in entering this covenant. This is twofold. One, it means that through the life history of the Jewish people G-d’s reality within His universe is made manifest and known. It is not through the relationship of G-d to any one individual through whom G-d is made manifest and known. But rather it is through the workings of G-d as the history of the Jewish people unfolds that the truth of G-d’s oneness and manifestation becomes known to all. Therefore, it is through the people that G-d is truly served. Two, the very fact that the giving of the Torah was entering into a covenant indicates a relationship with a people. You don’t enter into a convent with individuals, there is no such thing. A covenant is

”ויהיה אמר המכסה אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה: ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ: כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמר דרך יהוה לעשות צדקה ומשפט למען הביא יהוה על אברהם את אשר דיבר עליו.” [וירא, יח: יז יח יט]

between peoples. Between two entities, G-d on the one side, the nation of Israel on the other.

[In response to an inaudible question, presumably concerning the *bris bein habisarim* which was made with *Avraham Avinu* as an

individual:] The *bris bein habisarim* with *Avraham Avinu* is because you’re going to become a nation. All is contingent upon that fact. And it is only with the statement that you’re going to become a nation that the *bris bein habisarim* can take place. G-d says of *Avraham* **ויהיה אמר המכסה**

אני מאברהם אשר אני עשה. ואברהם היו יהיה לגוי גדול ועצום ונברכו בו כל גויי הארץ. כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את
 " When G-d defines the uniqueness of *Avraham* which makes for His particular relationship to this man, He defines it because I know that he will command his children and household after him to follow in the ways of G-d. He is a potential nation because he's not just interested in serving. He wants to create a people who will serve. Therefore, he already has a peoplehood in potential.

That is what makes him unique and what differentiates between him and *Shem v'Ever*, for instance. *Shem v'Ever* worshiped G-d as individuals. *Avraham* recognized that it is worshiping G-d through creating, developing and making a whole people...that's his uniqueness and that's

"כתב הראב"ד ותמה אני שהרי היו שם ועבר איך לא היו מוחים...עכ"ל...ולענין התמיה שתמה יש לומר דמעיקרא ליתא שאברהם היה בבבל ושם ועבר היו בארץ כנען ושם לא שיבר אברהם הצלמים אלא שהיה קורא ומכריז אמונת היחוד ושם ועבר היו מודיעים דרך ה' לתלמידיהם אבל לא נתעוררו לקרוא ולהכריז כמו אברהם ועל כן גדלה מעלתו ביותר." [כסף משנה ד"ה והיה מהלך וקורא וכו' עד שהגיע לארץ כנען, הלכות ע"ז, פרק א הלכה ג]

why he became the progenitor of the nation of G-d, the people of G-d, a sanctified people.

This means, of course, that individually we must recognize that we are not going to be able to fulfill our obligations to G-d. We can only fulfill it as part of the people as well, which means that we must constantly be aware of ourselves as part

of a peoplehood, with all the implications, with the responsibilities each for the other, with a realization that completeness can only come when all Jews know and when all Jews live properly. That fulfillment is to be seen in the welfare of the people as a whole, not as any individual no matter how religious, no matter how devoted, no matter how sincere, because the very essence of the true service of G-d is in the peoplehood, in the nationhood. The whole meaning of the *מצרים מארץ מצרים* was this: "you are My people, I took you out," not "you are My individuals." As individuals we worship G-d through the peoplehood.

It is the reason that we are called *geirim*. Which is really the main reason we read *Rus*, because *Rus* is the practical outline of the process of converting. *Shavuos* was the time of the conversion of all the people. We learn out the laws of conversion from what the Jews had to do for *Shavuos*. It's

"והמנהג לומר בו...ובחג השבועות רות מפני...ועוד שאבותינו שקיבלה התורה נתגיירו וכך רות נתגיירה." [דרכי משה, טור, אורח חיים, תצ א]
 "רבי אומר ככם כאבותיכם מה אבותיכם לא נכנסו לברית אלא במילה ושבילה והרצאת דם אף הם לא יכנסו לברית אלא במילה ושבילה והרצאת דם." [כריתות, דף ט.]

because *Shavuos* is the establishment of a peoplehood. We're becoming not just us, but part of the whole people, which starts at *Har Sinai*. And therefore we learn from it the *halachos*...we became converted into a new people. It is this people who are truly the carriers of Torah. And therefore we must possess at all times a clarity in terms of our

responsibility each to the other if we are to fulfill our obligations as religious Jews. There is no way that we can live a truly fully religious Jewish life without undertaking a full gamut of responsibilities for the spiritual wellbeing and physical wellbeing of other Jews as well. We are one. And this again is inherent in the "אנכי יי אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים", from the house of bondage. It's inherent in that very aspect.

This then is the meaningfulness of the peculiar laws of *Shavuos*, mainly the *chatzi l'chem v'chatzi lo* and the statement that it is as part of a peoplehood that we worship Him.

There remains a serious problem on *Shavuos*. While we pointed out the impossibility of their being a specific law, a specific *mitzvah* peculiar to the *Yom Tov* of *Shavuos*, because *Shavuos* being *emunah*, faith, *Shavuos* being *kabalos haTorah* encompasses the entirety, there is nothing that you can do to make it specific to the day. Whereas every other *Yom Tov* that comes to deal with specific aspects of our relationship to G-d has specific *mitzvos* that are the expression of those

specific aspects, *Shavuos*, being universal and general in G-d's appearance to us, cannot have a specific methodology by which to bring this out. It's the entirety of Torah that brings it out. But this leads us to a terrible lack. It is true that the specifics and the particular values and meaningfulness of a *Pesach* are brought out through the laws of *Pesach*: the eating of the *matzah*, the eating of the *marror*, the bringing of the *korban Pesach*, the refraining from *chometz*, refraining from breaking the bone. But on the other hand, it is by fulfilling these laws that we can inculcate within

"שלא לשבר עצם מן הפסח - שלא לשבר עצם מכל עצמות הפסח, שנאמר (שמות יב מו) ועצם לא תשברו בו. משרשי המצוה. לזכר נסי מצרים כמו שכתבנו באחרות. וגם זה גזע מן השרש הנזכר, שאין כבוד לבני מלכים ויועצי ארץ לגרר העצמות ולשברם ככלבים, לא יאות לעשות ככה, כי אם לעניי העם הרעבים. ועל כן בתחלת בואנו להיות סגלת כל העמים ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש (שם יט ו), ובכל שנה ושנה באותו הזמן, ראוי לנו לעשות מעשים המראים בנו המעלה הגדולה שעלינו בה באותה שעה. ומתוך המעשה והדמיון שאנחנו עושים, נקבע בנפשותינו הדבר לעולם. ואל תחשב בני לתפש על דברי ולומר ולמה יצוה אותנו השם יתברך לעשות כל אלה לזכרון אותו הנס, והלא בזכרון אחד יעלה הדבר במחשבתנו ולא ישכח מפי זרענו? דע, כי לא מחכמה תתפשני על זה, ומחשבת הנער ישיאך לדבר כן. ועתה בני, אם בינה שמעה זאת, והטח אזנך ושמע (משלי כב יז), אלמדך להועיל בתורה ובמצות. דע, כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבתיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עוסק בהם אם טוב ואם רע....ועל כן אמרו חכמים ז"ל (מכות כג, ב) רצה הקב"ה ליכות את ישראל לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצות, כדי להתפיס בהן כל מחשבותינו ולהיות בהן כל עסקינו והטיב לנו באחריתנו. כי מתוך הפעולות הטובות אנחנו נפעלים להיות טובים וזוכים לחיי עד. ורמזו ז"ל על זה (מנחות מג, ב), באמרם כל מי שיש לו מזווה בפתחו וציצית בבגדו ותפלין בראשו, מבטח לו שלא יחטא, לפי שאלו מצות תמידיות, ונפעל בהן תמיד. [ספר החינוך, מצוה יז]

ourselves and make a part of our very beings the concepts and the meanings and the significances of *Pesach*. And the *mitzvahs* of *matza* and *marror* and *korban Pesach* and the *issur* of eating *chometz* become the vehicles through which we can absorb the concepts of *Pesach*, through which we can achieve that potential for which *Pesach* opens us for us, as we've described it previously. So that on the one hand it is what *Pesach* is that becomes the basis for promulgating these special *mitzvos*, these special commandments with which to celebrate the *Pesach*, but immediately it becomes reciprocal. We now have a methodology by which to imbibe and to come to understand and absorb and make a part of us the concepts and the laws of *Pesach*, the meaning of *Pesach*. By carrying out these special laws of *Pesach*, these special *dinim* of *Pesach* we make a part of our very existence the reality of what *Pesach* offers. The same is for all the other *Yomim Tovim*. We acquire and can make a permanent acquisition of the special qualities that every *Yom Tov* offers by keeping the specific commandments, the specific *mitzvos* of that *Yom Tov*. And therefore it becomes not only a consequence but an enormous tool, an aid, a method by which we can achieve so much.

Are we then to lose that on *Shavuos*? It doesn't have the *mitzvah*, true, it can't, but that means that we do not have the methodology by which to acquire the potential that *Shavuos* offers every living Jew.

You could claim that *Shavuos* is different because the significance of *Shavuos* is an inner one. What is the significance of *Shavuos*? The *naaseh v'nishma*, the inner commitment, the inner acceptance, the inner reaching out to G-d and saying yes, we take you, we accept you, we're part of it. If that's it then *Shavuos* doesn't require a physical expression as do other *Yomim Tovim*.

The expression is the *emunah* itself. That's true. It's clearly true. But it's not that helpful. Because you need *mitzvos*, activities of different kinds, to make *emunah* itself more real.

[Question from the audience: Isn't the counting of the *omer* itself a preparation for *Shavuos*?] True, true. We will speak about that momentarily, *b'ezer Hashem*. But the fact remains that on *Shavuos* itself, which is the time of the great potential, we don't have a specific method with which to make that potential realized, which to bring it out into full existence, into full acquisition, to make it a part of ourselves. To say that it is not needed would obviously be an enormous advantage. The acceptance then of *zman Torasanu* has to serve in lieu of any other particular act.

I will say this, there is a particular act which is enjoined on *Shavuos*, even though there's no particular *mitzvah* as we pointed it out just a moment ago. The uniqueness is that everybody

"...דתניא רבי אליעזר אומר אין לו לאדם ביום טוב אלא או אוכל ושותה או יושב ושונה רבי יהושע אומר חלקהו חציו לאכילה ושתיה וחציו המדרש ואמר רבי יוחנן ושניהם מקרא אחד דרשו כתוב אחד אומר עצרת לה' אלהיך וכתוב אחד אומר עצרת תהיה לכם רבי אליעזר סבר או כולו לה' או כולו לכם ורבי יהושע סבר חלקהו חציו לה' וחציו לכם...אמר רבי אלעזר הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם מאי טעמא יום שניתנה בו תורה הוא." [פסחים, דף סח:]

recognizes that *Shavuos* must have a *chatzi l'chem*. The *chatzi l'chem* of *Shavuos* must be the means by which we can make the potential of the day our own. What do I mean by that? The meal that we eat on *Shavuos*, using that meal as a gateway to sanctity, does for *Shavuos* what the *lulav* and *esrog* and the *succah* do for *sucoos*. That which *matza* gives us on *Pesach*, eating the *Shavuos* meal as an

act of serving *Hashem Yisborach* does for *Shavuos*. It is through the very eating and drinking of the day as an act of our relationship to our Creator that we make real the potential of *kabalos haTorah*. It's a tremendous *davar*. Think the implications. We use the very secular, mundane, physical acts by which to bind ourselves, and by which to really absorb into our beings, the whole significance and meaningfulness of *Shavuos* itself. That's a glorious concept if you stop to consider it for a moment.

We cannot go on without pointing out the very unique necessity that accepting Torah poses. Of all the *Yom Tovim*, the only one with a prescribed preparation is *Shavuos*. *Succos* doesn't have a

"משרשי המצוה...לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה...ומפני כן, כי היא כל עיקרן של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו כעבד ישאף צל, וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחירות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא." [ספר החינוך, מצוה שו]

specific law of preparation in the Torah. *Succos* doesn't, *Rosh Hashanah* doesn't, *Yom Kippur* doesn't, *Shabbos* doesn't, *Shavuos* does. Forty nine days. Prepare yourself. Forty nine days count to when will the day come of *Shavuos*. A preparation. You cannot accept the Torah, we are being told, without a preparation. You can't just go into it. You've got to make yourself ready. But more, you

cannot enter the covenant, you've got to prepare. You've got to prepare to meet G-d. You've got to prepare to know Him. You've got to prepare to allow yourself to be permeated by Him, by the acceptance of His reality and truth. You've got to prepare. "אנכי יי אלהיך" cannot be said to people who haven't prepared.

What this preparation has got to consist of is the anticipation, that's what counting means. How many days that went by, how many days are left? You know, like a pregnant woman, *zul zeing gzunt un shtark zein*, is counting "how many days before my due date?" And hoping that the due date will be the date, not that she'd mind a little early, but certainly she's counting the days.

Counting, when will it be? When will it come? When will it come? Another day, another day, closer, closer, to that magic number when it's going to come. *Shavuot* needs that kind of anticipation. We've got to count, prepare. Make ourselves ready to accept it. When can it come?

This itself evidently is a preparation that the Torah is describing. The counting. The excitement. The anticipation, meaning the awareness that something special is happening. The awareness of I'm waiting and counting the days for it to come, in itself, evidently, by the fact that this is THE prescribed *mitzvah*, must be a great means by which to bind ourselves. Anticipation, excitement, preparing and being aware that the day is coming, and looking forward to it, anticipating it, is itself already making ourselves more fit to accept the covenant and the Torah that goes with it. This is what the counting tells us.

But it also has told us that you can't do without it. It told us that it helps but it also told us that you can't do without it. You can't just take a Torah. You can go free, you can do *teshuva*, repentance, on the spot. But accept a Torah you have to know what you're doing. We pointed out that excitement helps. True. But the fact is that it means preparing. Awareness of days. What do you have to wait for the days to pass? It means that you have to be able to put in perspective, what I am doing over here?

The minute we recognize that *Shavuot* is different than any other day because we participate actively, we participate with a *naaseh v'nishma*. We participate in an acceptance. We're not just going out. We're participating in a giving because you cannot give without a taker. We're part of the work of the day. That means we've got to make ourselves ready to carry out that part. We cannot hear a Torah said without explaining to ourselves the implications of a Torah being said.

"כדי שיזכה האדם לקבל את תורת ה' בשלמות באהבה וברצון בחג השבועות, ראוי הוא שישבות קודם לכן שבע שבתות מתוך התבוננות. זאת ההכנה למתן תורה, המושגת על ידי ספירת העומר." [פי' הרש"ר הירש ויקרא כג טו]

The preparation in terms of what do we need to accept it properly, to live it properly, to undertake it properly. This is being said by the *mitzvah* of *sefiras haomer*. *Shavuot* is a day of your active participation. It's not just G-d giving

a Torah. Giving a Torah that doesn't fall in your lap is giving a Torah that you're taking. You've got to be there to accept it. You've got to be there to accept it. You've got to be there to live it, accept it. Which tells you that taking a Torah is not just automatic. It requires knowing what we're doing. Why we're doing? To whom we're doing? What's happening? And to prepare ourselves properly for it. To think about it, to understand it, to make ourselves into the kind of a person who can hear it and use it most properly and fully. And that is the way we have to treat *Shavuot* now.

"ויקה ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דיבר ה' נעשה ונשמע." [שמות, כד, ז]

"ויקח ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דיבר ה' נעשה ונשמע." [שמות, כד, ז]

"שלמה המלך מזדמה את כלל ישראל לתפוח – "כתפוח בעצי היער כן דודי בין הבנים, בצילו חמדתי וישבתי ופריו מתוק לחכי" (שיר השירים ב ג). חז"ל מבארים, שמשול זה מלמד על מעלתם של ישראל בשעת קבלת התורה וההכנה לקראתה. "רבי אחא ברבי זעירא אמר...מה תפוח זה ניצו קודם לעליו [כלומר, בשונה משאר אילנות, התפוח מתחיל להצמיח את הפרי לפני העלים], כך ישראל בסיני הקדימה עשייה לשמיעה, שנאמר (שמות כד ז): 'נעשה ונשמע'. רבי עזריה אמר...מה התפוח זה אינו גומר פירותיו אלא בסיון, כך לא ניתנו ישראל ריח טוב אלא בסיון. רבי עזריה אמר...מה התפוח זה משעה שמוציא ניצו ועד שגומר פירותיו חמישים יום, כך משעה שיצאו ישראל ממצרים ועד שקבלו את התורה חמישים יום, ואמתי קבלו אותה: 'בחודש השלישי לצאת בני ישראל מארץ מצרים ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני' (שמות יט ט)."

[שיר השירים רבה ב ג. וראה פסיקתא דרב כהנא פסקא יב אות י. וראה שבת פח א]



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