
SHAVUOT I

What Does Shavuot Commemorate? & The Eternal Impact of Ma'amad Har Sinai

Shavuot is best known as the day on which we celebrate *Ma'amad Har Sinai* (the Giving of the Torah), yet there are other themes that are also part of the holiday. This class will explain those themes and then focus on the eternal legacy created by Ma'amad Har Sinai which defines the essence of the Jewish people's mission: the Torah, Jewish belief, Jewish identity, and the mitzvot (commandments).

The second Morasha class on Shavuot will focus on the Ten Commandments, preparing for receiving the Torah on Shavuot, Megillat Ruth, and the Shavuot customs of all-night Torah study and eating dairy meals.

In this class we will examine some fundamental questions regarding Shavuot:

- ∞ What are the themes of the holiday of Shavuot?
- ∞ Why is Ma'amad Har Sinai monumental in Jewish history?
- ∞ How is its impact eternal and continuous?
- ∞ Why is Ma'amad Har Sinai the foundation of Jewish belief?
- ∞ How is Shavuot essential to establishing our Jewish identity?
- ∞ What role do the mitzvot play in actualizing our mission?

Class Outline:

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INTRODUCTION. TORAH – BRINGING GOD’S PRESENCE INTO THE WORLD

What comes to mind when we think of Torah? Is it the Biblical accounts of Adam and Eve, Noah, the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and Moshe (Moses) and the Exodus? Is it the intricate system of laws and rituals which the Torah prescribes? Or do we think of the Torah in more global terms – as the single most influential, most far-reaching spiritual force ever to pervade the world; introducing monotheism and the bedrock values of morality, sanctity of life, *chesed* (lovingkindness), and education?

Shavuot is the festival on which we celebrate the Giving of the Torah. What does the Torah mean to us? In order to answer that question, we must understand a different issue: Why did God give us the Torah? Why should the Creator of the universe have desired to bequeath His Divine wisdom to mortal man?

The answer is that God gave us the Torah in order to manifest His Presence even in our physical world. The Torah teaches us that this entire physical world was created to serve as a means for mankind’s spiritual growth and the fulfillment of God’s commandments. Rather than eschewing the mundane – which is what the common perception of spirituality calls for – the Torah tells us to embrace it, to use it, and to elevate it into a vehicle for the attainment of sanctity.

By studying His Torah and observing His commandments, we are able to develop a connection with God, which is the essence of spirituality. The Torah, then, is the means to infuse our physical world with Godliness – which is what gives meaning and purpose to our very existence.

SECTION I. WHAT IS SHAVUOT ALL ABOUT?

The best-known facet of the holiday of Shavuot is its function as the commemoration of Ma’amad Har Sinai, when God gave the Torah on Mount Sinai to the Jewish people. Interestingly, the Torah itself describes Shavuot in other terms and does not mention the Giving of the Torah which took place on that day. The Torah defines Shavuot as a holiday celebrating the completion of the Counting of the Omer, the seven-week count from Pesach to Shavuot (see the Morasha classes on Sefirat Ha’Omer). A special sacrificial offering, the Two Loaves, is brought on Shavuot. The Torah also mentions that Shavuot is the holiday when we celebrate the harvest of the first fruits. Furthermore, we find in the Talmud that Shavuot is the day on which God judges the world and decrees how much fruit the trees will produce in the coming year. Even though these themes may seem to be disparate, some of them are, in fact, linked to the theme of the Giving of the Torah.

PART A. FESTIVAL OF WEEKS

The Torah commands us to count forty-nine days, beginning on the second day of Pesach, and to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot on the fiftieth day. On the holiday of Shavuot, the Torah commands us to bring a special offering of two loaves of bread made from wheat flour.

1. Vayikra (Leviticus), 23:15-17– Counting the Omer and the offering of the Two Loaves on Shavuot.

You shall count for yourselves from the day after Shabbat [Pesach], from the day when you bring

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר
הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָעוֹת תְּמִימוֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: עַד מִמִּחֲרַת

the Omer of the waving, seven weeks; they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh week you shall count, fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering [of two loaves] to God. From your dwelling places you shall bring bread that shall be waved, two loaves made of two tenth-*ephah*, they shall be fine flour, they shall be baked leavened.

השבת השביעית תספרו חמשים יום; והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה': ממושבתיכם תביאו לחם תנופה שנים שני עשרנים סלת תהיינה חמין תאפינה:

2. Devarim (Deuteronomy), 16:9-11 – Counting the Weeks from Pesach to Shavuot.

You shall count seven weeks for yourselves; from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you shall observe the festival of Shavuot for the Lord, your God; the voluntary offerings that you give should be commensurate with how much the Lord, your God, will have blessed you. You shall rejoice before the Lord, your God ...

שבועה שבועת תספר לך: מהחל חרמש בקמה תחיל לספור שבועה שבועות: ועשית חג שבועות לה' אלהיך. מסת נדבת ירך אשר תתן פאשר יברכך ה' אלהיך: ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך...

In fact, the very name “Shavuot” (“Weeks”), which the Torah uses to refer to the holiday, refers to the fact that it represents the culmination of a process of seven *weeks*.

3. Menorat HaMaor, Candle 3, Section 5, Ch. 1 – The name Shavuot (Festival of Weeks) refers to the culmination of counting the seven weeks of the Omer.

This festival is called by the Torah: “The festival of Shavuot (weeks)” because it comes after the completion of seven weeks.

זה החג נקרא בתורה חג שבועות לפי שבא אחר מלאת שבעת שבועות.

This is also one explanation for the term *Atzeret*, which the Talmud uses to refer to Shavuot. *Atzeret* literally means the end or stopping of something, and according to Rabbi Levi Yitzchak from Berdichev, it refers to the fact that on Shavuot, we finish (or stop) counting the Omer.

4. Kedushas Levi, Shavuot – Why is Shavuot also called an *atzeret* (completion)? It comes at the completion of the forty-nine-day counting of the Omer.

I was asked once, while in Lithuania, why the festival of Shavuot is called by the name “Atzeret.” This name is not used in the Torah except when referring to Shemini Atzeret [the last day of Sukkot]...

We understand that all the festivals have names connected to the event that happened on that day. This is true of all the festivals except Shavuot, which is named for the mitzvah of counting [which has already been completed]. We must understand why this festival is named

נשאלתי במדינת ליטא מפני מה נקרא חג שבועות בשם עצרת, והלא לא נזכר בתורה שם עצרת רק בשמיני עצרת (במדבר כט: לה)...

לפי שאנו רואים בחוש השכל שכל הימים טובים נקרא שמותן על שם המאורע, דהיינו על שם מצות הנוהגות וכן שאר מועדים מה שאין כן יום שבועות אין נקרא על שם המאורע רק על שם מצות הספירה. והנה צריך להבין מפני מה נקרא יום טוב ההוא על מצוה שעברה. מפני שהוא כמו סיום מצוה... וזהו גם כן הטעם של

after something that has already happened, [and the answer is] because it is the conclusion of the mitzvah ... this is also the reason for Shavuot – that we make a festival at the conclusion of the mitzvah of counting that God gave to us. For this reason it is called “Atzeret” (completion).

החג שבועות שאנו עושין אותו יום טוב על סיום מצות ספירה שזיכה אותנו הבורא ב"ה ועל זה נקרא בשם עצרת.

The Ramban (Nachmanides) takes this idea one step further, explaining that Shavuot is called an atzeret because it is the conclusion of the period of time that begins with Pesach, just as Shemini Atzeret concludes the festival of Sukkot.

5. **Ramban, Vayikra 23:36 – Shavuot is called an atzeret because, just like Shemini Atzeret which concludes the festival of Sukkot, it concludes the festive period of time that begins with Pesach.**

He commanded us to observe the Festival of Matzot for seven days, with sanctity at the beginning and the end ... and He counted forty-nine days after it ... and He sanctified the eighth day [i.e., the day immediately after the seven weeks] like the eighth day of the Festival [Sukkot], and the intervening counted days are like the Chol HaMo'ed [Intermediate Days] between the first day and the last day of Sukkot. [That fiftieth day] is the day of the Giving of the Torah, when He showed them His great fire and they heard His word out of the fire. For this reason, our Sages of blessed memory always call Shavuot “Atzeret,” because it is like the eighth day of Sukkot, which the Torah describes in that way.

וצוה בחג המצות שבעה ימים בקדושה לפניהם ולאחריהם ... ומנה ממנו תשעה וארבעים יום ... וקדש יום שמיני כשמיני של חג, והימים הספורים בינתיים כחולו של מועד בין הראשון והשמיני בחג, והוא יום מתן תורה שהראם בו את אשו הגדולה ודבריו שמעו מתוך האש. ולכך יקראו רבותינו ז"ל בכל מקום חג השבועות עצרת, כי הוא כיום שמיני של חג שקראו הכתוב כן.

Thus, the Ramban explains that Shavuot is inextricably linked with Pesach, and that the whole period of the Omer, which begins with Pesach and concludes with Shavuot, is really like one long festival. Thus, the forty-nine days of the Omer are like the Chol HaMo'ed (Intermediate Days) of the Sukkot festival, which link the first day of Sukkot with Shemini Atzeret.

But what is so significant about the completion of the seven weeks of the Omer, and how does it relate to Matan Torah? The answer is that the forty-nine days of the Omer are intended to link the festival of Pesach with Shavuot, connecting the miracles of the Exodus with the Giving of the Torah. The days of the Omer are a “count-down” until Shavuot.

6. **Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306 – Because the Torah is the essence of the Jewish people and we were redeemed on Pesach in order for us to accept and keep the Torah, we are commanded to count from Pesach until Shavuot in order to demonstrate our great desire for it.**

For the entire essence of the Jewish people is only the Torah, and the heavens and earth and the Jewish people were created for its sake ... and it is the reason that [the Jews] were redeemed from

... לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל ... והיא העיקר והסיבה שנגאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה

Egypt, so that they would receive the Torah on Sinai and fulfill it, as God told Moshe: “And this will be for you a sign that I have sent you: When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.” . . . Therefore, since the Torah is the essence of the Jewish people and for its sake they were redeemed and reached the level of greatness that they attained, we were commanded to count from after the first day of Pesach until the day that the Torah was given, to show our great desire for the day that our hearts yearn for, as a slave yearns and counts the days until he will go free, because counting demonstrates that a person’s whole desire is to reach that time.

בסיני ויקימוהו, וכמו שאמר ה' למשה "וזה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך, בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה" . . . ומפני כן, כי היא כל עקרון של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוונו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשינו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד ללבינו, כעבד ישאף צל וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחרות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.

Even more than that, however, the days of the Omer are meant to be a period of introspection and self-improvement. When we come to Shavuot, we should be emerging from an extended period of time during which we have perfected ourselves (to the best of our abilities) by working on our character traits, and made ourselves into people who are fitting to receive the Torah. Shavuot marks the conclusion of that period of spiritual endeavour – and, henceforth, spiritual awakening.

7. **Rabbi Yisroel Miller, *A Gift for Yom Tov*, p. 109 – The period of the Omer is a time of spiritual preparation for the revelation of the Torah that takes place on Shavuot.**

Even in our time, the forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot are meant to be days of spiritual preparation. After the first Pesach, our ancestors prepared to receive the Torah directly from God. And we, in each generation, are also to use these days to prepare for Shavuot, to personally accept the Torah upon ourselves, each year anew.

8. **Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Living Inspired*, pp. 158-160 – The counting of the Omer represents the intense effort that is invested in our efforts toward self-perfection.**

Let us understand. The *chiddush* (novel idea) to grasp here is that counting, in Torah terms, is not a sentimental marking of the passage of time until a goal; it is the *building of that goal*. Counting is work. Counting means *accounting* for and developing each component of a process fully, responsibly, and in correct sequence. Only when each detail is painstakingly created and assembled into the process can the goal be reached . . . *Sefirat HaOmer* is such a counting. The transcendence of Shavuot, Torah, is reached not by a single act which builds it, but by a deliberate painstaking building of each of the seven days of the seven weeks which leads to it. When that is done, *Shavuot results*.

Now we can understand why the conclusion of the Omer period itself warrants the establishment of a festival, so much so that both the term “Shavuot” and the Talmudic name “Atzeret” hint to this aspect of the Shavuot holiday. The Omer is a period of intense personal growth and self-improvement, and when we reach the end of the Omer, we have completed an extraordinary process of transformation; we have become fitting receptacles for the Torah.

PART B. HARVEST FESTIVAL OF FIRST FRUITS

In addition to being the conclusion of the Counting of the Omer, the festival of Shavuot marks an agricultural milestone: the beginning of the harvest season.

1. Shemot (Exodus), 23:16 – Bringing the *bikurim* offering.

The festival of harvesting of the first fruits of your produce that you planted in the field.

וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בַּבּוֹרִי מַעֲשִׂיךְ.

The sacrificial offering of the Two Loaves alludes to this aspect of Shavuot, since wheat from the beginning of the harvest is consecrated for that sacrifice.

2. Seforno, Vayikra 23:17 – The Two Loaves offering was brought from the first wheat to be harvested.

The Omer was the beginning of the barley harvest, and [the Two Loaves offering] was the beginning of the wheat harvest, and that is why the holiday is called “the day of the first fruits.”

הַעוֹמֵר הָיָה בַּבּוֹרִי שְׁעוּרִים וְאֵלֶּה הֵיוּ בַּבּוֹרִי קָצִיר חֲטִיִּם
וְעַל שֵׁמֶם נִקְרָא הַחַג “יוֹם הַבְּכוּרִים”

It may seem that the harvest should be a joyous occasion only for the farmers who actually reap it, but the Midrash reveals to us that every member of the Jewish people is required to celebrate this festival of the harvest.

3. Sifri, Re'eh 137– Everyone celebrates Shavuot independent of whether or not they harvest produce.

“You should make a festival of Shavuot for the Lord, your God.” But it says: “The festival of harvesting through the first fruits of your produce.” You might think that only someone who has harvested produce has to celebrate the festival, but someone who doesn’t, does not celebrate the festival. Therefore the verse teaches, “You should make the festival of Shavuot for the Lord, your God” – whether you have or have not harvested produce.

וְעִשִּׂיתָ חַג שְׁבוּעוֹת לַה' א-לֶהֶיךָ. מִכֻּלֵּל שְׁנֵאֱמַר (שְׁמוֹת כג) וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בַּבּוֹרִי מַעֲשִׂיךְ, יִכּוֹל אִם יֵשׁ לְךָ קָצִיר אֶתֶּה עוֹשֶׂה יו"ט, וְאִם לֹא אֵין אֶתֶּה עוֹשֶׂה יו"ט? תִּלְמּוֹד לֹאֲמַר וְעִשִּׂיתָ חַג שְׁבוּעוֹת לַה' א-לֶהֶיךָ, בֵּין שֵׁשׁ לֹא קָצִיר וּבֵין שֶׁאֵין לֹא קָצִיר, אֶתֶּה עוֹשֶׂה יו"ט.

As the festival that marks the beginning of the harvest season, Shavuot is also the first time when it is permissible to fulfill the mitzvah of *bikurim* – bringing the first fruits of the Seven Species to the Temple and giving them to a Kohen.

4. Mishnah, Bikurim 1:3 – Shavuot is the first day of the year when it is permissible to fulfill the mitzvah of *bikurim*.

Bikurim may not be brought before Shavuot. The residents of Mount Tzvoim brought their *bikurim* before Shavuot and they were not accepted because the Torah says, “The festival of harvesting of the first fruits of your produce that you planted in the field.”

אֵין מְבִיאִין בְּכוּרִים קֹדֶם לְעֶצְרָתָא. אֲנָשִׁי הָרַצְבוּעִים הֵבִיאוּ בְּכוּרֵיהֶם קֹדֶם לְעֶצְרָתָא וְלֹא קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם מִפְּנֵי הַכְּתוּב שֶׁבַתּוֹרָה “וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בַּבּוֹרִי מַעֲשִׂיךְ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בַּשָּׂדֶה.”

PART C. DAY OF JUDGEMENT FOR THE FRUIT OF THE TREES

The Talmud reveals yet another distinguishing feature of the holiday of Shavuot. The Mishnah tells us that there are four days during the year when God judges the world with regard to various things. Although the most famous one is Rosh HaShanah, when judgement is pronounced in general on everyone in the world, there are certain natural phenomena for which individual days of judgement are designated. On Shavuot, God decrees how much fruit will be produced by the trees during the coming year.

1. **Mishnah, Rosh HaShanah 1:2 – On Shavuot, the world is judged to determine how productive the fruit-bearing trees will be during the coming year.**

There are four times [each year] that the world is judged ... on Shavuot for the fruit of the trees.

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון... בעצרת על פירות האילן.

According to some commentators, this explains the unique offering of the Two Loaves that is brought in the Temple on Shavuot.

2. **Bartenura, ibid. – We offer to God two loaves of bread made from wheat in order that His judgement should result in a bountiful harvest.**

The Torah says to bring two loaves of bread on Shavuot in order that God will bless you for the fruit of the trees. [The Two Loaves allude to the fruit of the tree because] wheat is called a tree by the Torah, as it says, "From the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil," according to the opinion that the tree they ate from [in the Garden of Eden] was wheat.

מדאמרה תורה הביאו לפני שתי הלחם בעצרת כדי שאברך לכם פירות האילן. וחטה עץ קרייה רחמנא דכתיב (בראשית ב') ומעץ הדעת טוב ורע כמאן דאמר עץ שאכל אדם הראשון חטה היה.

PART D. THE FESTIVAL OF THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

The best-known aspect of the holiday of Shavuot is the fact that it commemorates Ma'amad Har Sinai – the day on which God gave the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai.

1. **Siddur – Shavuot is the day the Jewish people received the Torah.**

This day of the festival of Shavuot, the time of the Giving of the Torah.

את יום חג השבועות הזה, זמן מתן תורתנו.

In truth, unlike all the other festivals, Shavuot is not identified as a specific day in the calendar, but as the fiftieth day after the Omer-offering. Beginning on the second day of Pesach, when the Omer is brought, forty-nine days are counted, and the next day – the fiftieth – is Shavuot.

It is strange, however, that the Torah does not explicitly mention that the holiday of Shavuot is the anniversary of Ma'amad Har Sinai. If that is the significance of the day, why doesn't the Torah mention that fact? Furthermore, why is the special offering of the Two Loaves designated to coincide with the date of the Giving of the Torah? Is there some connection between this sacrificial offering and the event that Shavuot commemorates?

2. **Kli Yakar, Vayikra 23:16** – The verse omits the fact that the Torah was given on Shavuot so as not to limit the Giving of the Torah to a single day. Every day a person should feel as if he just received the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

“You shall offer a new offering [of two loaves] to God.” This is a sign of the day of the Giving of the Torah because the Torah must be new to a person as if he received it from Mount Sinai that very day.

The reason that the Torah does not explicitly mention that this is the day of the Giving of the Torah ... God did not want to limit the Giving of the Torah to a single day because a person should feel every single day of the year as if he received the Torah from Mount Sinai on that day ... Similarly, the Sages have said that the words of Torah should be new to a person every day, not like something old which he can no longer tolerate.

The truth is that one does indeed find something new in the Torah every day. Therefore, the Torah did not specify the day that it was given, apart from the hint in the word “new,” to teach that the Torah is like a new offering every day.

והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה' – סימן ליום מתן תורה כי התורה צריכה להיות חדשה אצל האדם בכל יום כאילו היום קבלה מהר סיני.

ומה שלא נזכר בתורה בפירוש כי יום זה מתן תורה... שעל מתן תורה לא רצה ה' להגביל יום ידוע לפי שצריך האדם שיהיה דומה לו בכל יום ויום מכל ימות השנה כאילו באותו יום קבלה מהר סיני.... ועל כן אמרו רז"ל (ספרי ואתחנן ו' 1) שיהיו דברי תורה חדשים עליך ולא כדבר הישן שלבו של אדם קץ בו.

שהרי באמת אתה מוצא בה דבר חידוש בכל יום ויום, ועל כן אין יום נתינתה מבואר בתורה יותר ממה שנרמז בהבאת מנחה חדשה, להורות שהתורה מנחה חדשה בכל יום ויום.

To celebrate the Giving of the Torah, we are enjoined to treat Shavuot as a truly festive occasion, complete with lavish holiday meals. In fact, the Talmud tells us that on Shavuot, more than any other holiday, there is a requirement to celebrate with food and drink.

3. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Pesachim 68b** – On Shavuot, the Sages of the Talmud are in agreement: Everyone is required to celebrate the holiday with food and drink.

Rabbi Yehoshua ... says that being happy on a festival is also a mitzvah. As it was taught: Rabbi Eliezer says that on a festival a person should either eat and drink, or sit and learn Torah. Rabbi Yehoshua says he should divide the day – half for eating and drinking and half for sitting in the Beit HaMidrash [learning Torah]. They both derive their position from the same verse. One verse says “It is *atzeret* (gathering/ ceasing) for the Lord, your God” (Devarim 16:8), and another verse says, “It shall be an *atzeret* for you” (Bamidbar 29:35). Rabbi Eliezer holds [that these two verses indicate that a festival should be dedicated] either all for God, or all “for you.” Rabbi Yehoshua holds that you should divide the day – half for God and half “for you.” Rabbi Eliezer says that everyone agrees that on Shavuot “for you” is also required. Why? Because it is the day that the Torah was given.

ר' יהושע ... אמר שמחת י"ט נמי מצוה היא דתניא ר' אליעזר אומר אין לו לאדם ב"ט אלא או אוכל ושותה או יושב ושונה ר' יהושע אומר חלקהו חציו לאכילה ושתיה וחציו לבית המדרש וא"ר יוחנן ושניהם מקרא אחד דרשו כתוב אחד אומר (דברים טז, ח) עצרת לה' אלהיך וכתוב אחד אומר (במדבר כט, לה) עצרת תהיה לכם ר' אליעזר סבר או כולו לה' או כולו לכם ור' יהושע סבר חלקהו חציו לה' וחציו לכם. א"ר אלעזר הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם מ"ט יום שניתנה בו תורה הוא.

4. **Rashi, ibid – We rejoice with food and drink on Shavuot to show our pleasure in receiving the Torah on this day.**

We also require “for you” – because a person rejoices with food and drink to show that the day that Israel received the Torah is pleasing and enjoyable.

דבעינן נמי לכם - שישמח בו במאכל ומשתה להראות שנוח ומקובל יום זה לישראל שנתנה תורה בו:

On the simplest level, this requirement to eat, drink, and celebrate on Shavuot can be understood as an indication of the great importance and significance of the Torah to the Jewish people.

5. **Pele Yoetz, “Atzeret” – The anniversary of the Giving of the Torah is an occasion that warrants tremendous celebration and rejoicing.**

Shavuot is a very holy festival, when God sanctified us with His Torah and mitzvot and selected us from amongst the nations to be His treasured nation. If not for this day, we would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah, and the heavens and earth would not have been able to exist. Thus, it is appropriate to rejoice on this day. It is impossible not to rejoice, because the Torah and mitzvot are better for us than all the good things of this world and than the entire life of the Next World.

עצרת הוא חג קדוש מאד, אשר בו קדשנו השם יתברך בתורתו ומצותיו ובחר בנו מכל העמים להיות לו לעם סגולה, ואי לאו האי יומא דקא גרם, כסדם היינו לעמרה דמינו וחקות שמים וארץ לא נתקינו, באפן שראוי לשמח ביום הזה. ואי אפשר שלא לשמח, כי טוב לנו טובת התורה והמצוות מכל טובות העולם הזה ומכל חיי העולם הבא.

It's interesting to note that both the act of Torah study and the observance of its commandments are known to immeasurably enhance the quality of one's life in this world. There is no life as joyous as a life devoted to Torah and mitzvot, as is illustrated by the following story.

The great sage Rabbi Aharon Kotler once delivered a lecture in which he remarked that a person who provides the funds for Torah study will enjoy the same reward in the Next World as the Torah scholars themselves. After his lecture, he was approached by a wealthy man who challenged him: “Rabbi, why should I bother to exert myself to study the Torah? All I have to do is make donations to Torah institutions, and I’ll be assured immeasurable reward in the World to Come?”

Rabbi Kotler regarded the wealthy man with an expression of utter seriousness and responded, “It’s true that your portion in the World to Come will be the same – but your life in this world will not be comparable!”

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ Shavuot marks the culmination of the Counting of the Omer, a seven-week course of self-improvement that prepares us to receive the Torah. The name “Shavuot” (“Weeks”) is derived from this aspect of the day; this is also one explanation for the fact that the Talmud calls it “Atzeret,” a day of ceasing, as Shavuot is the day when we *cease* counting the Omer.
- ☞ Shavuot occurs at the beginning of the harvest season; that is why the Two Loaves offering and the bikurim are brought on this day. These mitzvot help us to focus on appreciating that our annual profits come from God.

- ☞ On Shavuot, God judges the world and decrees how much fruit will be produced by the trees during the coming year. This is another reason that the Two Loaves are offered on Shavuot.
- ☞ Most famously, Shavuot is the anniversary of the day the Torah was given to the Jewish people. We celebrate Shavuot in a particularly festive manner because of the great significance of the Torah to our lives and to the world.
- ☞ The Torah does not make mention of this theme of Shavuot in order to hint to us that the Giving of the Torah is really a process that should take place within each of us every single day.

SECTION II. THE ETERNAL IMPACT OF MA'AMAD HAR SINAI

The Revelation at Sinai, which took place on Shavuot, was a seminal event in world history – in fact, it may have been *the* most significant historical event that ever took place. What is so significant and important about the Giving of the Torah? Let us examine some of the ways that the Torah shapes our lives and our world.

PART A. TORAH IS THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

When the Jewish people accepted the Torah on Mount Sinai, there were cosmic repercussions; the entire universe was affected by their decision. In fact, the entire universe was *sustained* by their decision – because when God created the universe, He did so on condition that the Jews would ultimately accept the Torah.

1. **Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) 33:25 – If the Jews had not accepted the Torah on Mount Sinai, the world would have ceased to exist.**

Thus says God: If not for My covenant [of Torah] day and night, I would not place the laws of heaven and earth.

כֹּה אָמַר ה', אִם-לֹא בְרִיתִי יוֹמָם וָלַיְלָה--חֻקֹּת שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, לֹא-שָׁמֹתִי.

2. **Rashi, Bereishit (Genesis) 1:31 – The world was created because of that auspicious day in the future, the sixth of Sivan, when the Torah would be given.**

“The sixth day.” The Torah adds the letter *heh* [the word “the”] at the end of Creation ... [to allude to] the sixth day that everything [in Creation] was dependent upon, until the sixth day, which is the Sixth of Sivan, [the day which was] prepared for the Giving of the Torah.

(לא) יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי - הוֹסִיף ה' בְּשִׁשִּׁי בַּגִּמְרָה מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית... יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי כּוֹלֵם תְּלוּיִים וְעוֹמְדִים עַד יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי, הוּא שִׁשִּׁי בַּסִּיּוֹן הַמוֹכֵן לַמִּתֵּן תּוֹרָה.

Furthermore, Torah study is so crucial for the world that the world's continued existence is only made possible by constant Torah study.

3. **Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, Nefesh HaChaim, Gate IV, Ch. 11 – If there would be even a single moment when Torah would not be studied anywhere in the world, the entire world would cease to exist.**

The truth, without any doubt at all, is that if the entire world would be devoid, for even one moment, of our involvement in and study of the Torah, all the worlds, both the upper spiritual worlds and lower physical realm, would be instantly destroyed and become an empty void, God forbid.

והאמת בלתי שום ספק כלל שאם היה העולם כולו מקצה עד קצהו פנוי ח"ו אף רגע אחד ממש מהעסק והתבוננות שלנו בתורה, כרגע היו נחרבים כל העולמות, עליונים ותחתונים, והיו לאפס ותהו ח"ו.

While this is true on a global level, it is also true on an individual level. Yes, Torah study sustains the world, but it also sustains us as individuals.

4. **Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, Horeb, pp. 86-88 – Torah is the foundation of life.**

Shavuot represents the foundation of the spirit of the Jewish people. It is the commemoration of the revelation of the teaching with which God, Who had summoned Israel to a national existence by means of physical freedom, now summoned the freed body of the nation to be the bearer of His teaching. This gave spiritual completion to that which had been begun physically in Egypt. Shavuot is thus the commemoration of the Revelation of Sinai, the foundation of life ...

Shavuot is the Divine origin and eternal validity of the teaching and way of life which Israel has in its possession as the revealed Law to be guarded and fulfilled. God summons everything in nature and humanity to its task, educates mankind to its mission, aims at having human action as the servant of His Will and reveals His Will for this purpose. In particular: The One God is Israel's Lawgiver. Israel's only task: To bear and fulfill this Divine law and thus to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Torah: Comes from God, is Israel's ground of existence. Resolution: To cling to this Torah – for the fulfillment of which God caused you to be born in the House of Israel more than to your very life. This leads to **יראה**, awe of God.

On Shavuot, we must recognize that Torah study is far more than a mere pastime. Torah is the *raison d'être* of the Jewish people and the essence of our lives. Its study and observance is more than merely the fulfillment of a precept or group of precepts; it is what defines our role in this world. Consequently, it is perhaps the *most* essential of all of our activities in life, since it is the very purpose for which God placed us in the world in the first place.

PART B. NA'ASEH V'NISHMA – THE COMMITMENT TO BEING JEWISH

When our ancestors stood at Mount Sinai, they didn't merely "sign on the dotted line" to accept the Torah. Rather, they committed themselves to follow God's Will and do His bidding unconditionally. Their declaration of "*Na'aseh v'Nishma*" – "We will do and we will hear" is one that has resonated throughout the generations with a clear message. When it comes to our relationship with God and our acceptance of the Torah, we didn't hesitate or wait to find out what the commitment entailed before obligating ourselves. Rather, we declared our absolute willingness to accept the Torah and observe its precepts, trusting that God would command us to do only that which would be good for us.

1. **Shemot 24:7 – The Jewish people proclaimed that they had complete trust in God and His Torah and that they resolved to follow the commandments even before they fully comprehended them.**

Moshe took the Book of the Covenant and read it in earshot of the people, and they said, "Everything that God has said we will do and we will hear [and understand]."

ויקח ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע.

The Jews' acceptance of the Torah represented a unique willingness to obey the Will of God, which stood in stark contrast to the refusal of all other nations.

2. **Mechilta, Yisro – God initially offered the Torah to other nations who refused to uphold its moral standards.**

God revealed Himself to the children of the wicked Esav and asked them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked, "What does it say?" He replied, "[It says:] You shall not murder." They said to Him, "[Murder] is the legacy we received from our forefather [Esav], as the verse states, 'You shall live by your sword.'"

He appeared to the children of Ammon and Moav [the descendants of Lot] and said to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They asked, "What does it say?" He said, "You shall not commit adultery." They said to Him, "We are all the products of an adulterous relationship, as the verse states, 'The two daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.' How can we accept it?"

He appeared to the children of Yishmael and said to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They said to Him, "What does it say?" He said, "You shall not steal." They said to Him, "That was the blessing with which our forefather was blessed, as it says, 'He will be a wild man,' and it says, 'For I have stolen.'"

When he came to the Jewish people: "From His right hand He presented the fiery Torah to them." They all opened their mouths and said, "Everything that God has said we will do and we will hear."

נגלה על בני עשו הרשע ואמר להם, מקבלים אתם עליכם את התורה, אמרו לו, מה כתיב בה, אמר להם: לא תרצח. אמרו לו, זו היא ירושה שהורישנו אבינו, שנאמר 'ועל חרבך תחיה'.

נגלה על בני עמון ומואב, אמר להם, מקבלים אתם את התורה. אמרו לו, מה כתוב בה, אמר להם, לא תנאף. אמרו לו, כלנו מניאוף 'ותהרין שתי בנות לוט מאביהם', והיאך נקבלה?

נגלה על בני ישמעאל, אמר להם, מקבלים אתם עליכם את התורה. אמרו לו, מה כתוב בה, אמר להם, אל תגנוב. אמרו לו, בזו הברכה נתברך אבינו, דכתיב 'והוא יהיה פרא אדם', וכתיב 'כי גנב גנבתי'.

וכשבא אצל ישראל, 'מימינו אש דת למו', פתחו כולם פיהם ואמרו: 'כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע'...

The nations of the world refused to accept the Torah, justifying their refusal by claiming that the Torah's demands ran counter to their natural inclinations. In other words, they refused to subjugate their own natural drives and desires to the Torah's requirements; rather, they insisted on retaining their lifestyles and cultures, which normalized immoral and wicked behaviors. The Jewish people, on the other hand, had no such hesitation. They immediately embraced God's Torah, committing themselves to observing His

commandments before they even knew what He was going to ask of them. By doing so, they reached lofty spiritual heights. In fact, according to the Talmud, their unequivocal acceptance of the Torah put them on the spiritual level of angels.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a – Capability to act like angels.**

Rabbi Elazar said: When the Jews said “We will do” before “We will hear” a voice came out of Heaven and said to them, “Who revealed to My children this secret that the ministering angels use?” As the verse says, “Bless God, O angels of mighty strength, who do His word, to listen to the voice of His word.” First they do, and then they hear.

אמר רבי אלעזר בשעה שהקדימו ישראל נעשה
לנשמע יצתא בת קול ואמרה להן מי גילה לבני רז זה
שמלאכי השרת משתמשין בו, דכתיב ברכו ה' מלאכיו
גבורי כח עושי דברו לשמוע בקול דברו. ברישא עושי
והדר לשמוע.

How did the Jewish people reach this level? Where did they get the inner strength, the resolve, and the understanding to accept the Torah without hesitation? When the Jews stood at Mount Sinai, the truth of God's existence was crystal clear. They implicitly understood that they were created to fulfill God's mission for the world. Once they grasped the purpose of their existence, there could be no doubt that they would accept the Torah, for they understood that their sole function in this world was to serve God. Their unconditional acceptance of God's Will was merely a function of this recognition.

4. **Rabbi Shalom Brezovsky, Nesivos Shalom, Moadim, Vol. II, p. 345 – The meaning of “We will do, and [then] we will listen” is that at Sinai we made God's Will, our will.**

Saying, “We will do” before “We will hear” represents the concept of complete nullification [before God's Will] ... This is the level of the Jews when they received the Torah ... They completely nullified themselves to God, which is the meaning of saying “We will do” before “We will hear” – that even before they heard any commandment from Him they had already accepted upon themselves to fulfill it. This is complete nullification of our thoughts and will to the Will of God ...

הקדמות נעשה לנשמע הוא ענין התבטלות גמורה...
ובבחי' זו היו ישראל בקבלת התורה... שביטלו אז
את עצמם כליל להשי"ת, שזהו משמעות הקדמת
נעשה לנשמע, שקודם שנשמע ממנו ית' איזה צווי
כבר מקבלים אנו על עצמנו שנעשה, אשר זה היא
התבטלות גמורה של דעתם ורצונם לרצון השי"ת.

When the Jews rose to the exalted level of utter submission to the Will of God, they attained such a high level of spirituality that they saw past the veil of physicality that obscures the true meaning of the world. At Mount Sinai, the Jews recognized that everything in the world was meant to be subjugated to God's Will. This clarity of understanding brought them to the ultimate recognition of their purpose in the world.

5. **Rabbi Noson Weisz, Mayanot, Aish.com – Ma'amad Har Sinai brought clarity and unity of purpose.**

The people who stood at Mount Sinai perceived the soul world with absolute clarity, while the physical world receded into the remote distance generally occupied by spiritual matters. A meeting between the Congregation of Israel and God taking place at this high level of spirituality clearly exposed the spiritual connection that exists between all Jews, as well as the connection between God and Israel. It is not by accident that when Moses retells the events of Mount Sinai in Sefer Devarim, he concludes with the classical statement of the absolute Unity of God, the unity between God and the Jewish people, and their unity with each other, the Shema: Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

PART C. THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH FOR ALL GENERATIONS

Part of the eternal significance of the Revelation at Sinai is the groundwork that it laid for the Jewish people's faith in God throughout the ensuing millennia. The Revelation at Sinai was a public event, witnessed live and simultaneously by the entire nation (some 2.5 million people), all of whom experienced God's Presence and saw Him reveal Himself and declare Moshe to be the messenger of His word. This massive historical event became the foundation of our knowledge of God's existence and relationship with us, and when He declared to us that Moshe was His messenger, the inevitable result was that the Torah was authenticated to us beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Such an awe-inspiring event, conducted publicly before millions of people, is an incredibly powerful basis for our faith throughout the generations. In that respect, it is a far more potent force than any miracles or wonders performed by a prophet could ever have been.

1. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah (Laws of Foundations of the Torah), Ch. 8:1 – Miracles alone do not instill belief.**

The Jewish people did not believe in Moshe Rabbeinu on account of the miracles that he performed. For someone who believes because of miracles will remain doubtful, since a miracle can be performed using sorcery and magic.

All the miracles that Moshe performed in the desert were done for a specific need, not to establish the credibility of his prophecy. When it was necessary to drown the Egyptians, he split the sea and caused them to sink in it. When we needed food, he brought down the manna. When they were thirsty, he split open a rock [and produced a spring]. When the Congregation of Korach denied his position of leadership, he caused the earth to swallow them. And the same applies to all the other miracles.

And why did the Jews believe in Moshe? Because of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – where our eyes, not a stranger's, saw, and our ears, not someone else's, heard – the fire and the sounds and the torches, and he approached the fog and the Voice spoke to him, and we heard "Moshe, Moshe, go tell them as follows." This is as the verse says, "God spoke with you face to face," and it says, "God did not establish this covenant with our ancestors [but, rather, with us]."

And from where do we learn that the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai alone was the proof that his prophecy was genuine? It is written, "Behold, I am coming to you in a heavy cloud in order that the Jewish nation should hear as I speak with you, and also they will believe in you forever." This implies that prior to this they

משה רבנו לא האמינו בו ישראל מפני האותות שעשה, שהמאמין על פי האותות יש בלבו דופי, שאפשר שיעשה האות בלאט ובכישוף.

כל האותות שעשה משה במדבר, לפי הצורך עשאו, לא להביא ראי' על הנבואה. צרך להשקיע את המצריים קרע את הים והצלילם בו, צרכנו למזון הוריד לנו המן, צמאו – בקע להם את האבן. כפרו בו עדת קרח – בלעה אותם הארץ, וכן שאר כל האותות.

ובמה האמינו בו? – במעמד הר סיני שענינו ראו ולא זר ואזנינו שמעו ולא אחר האש והקולות והלפידים והוא נגש אל הערפל והקול מדבר אליו ואנו שומעים משה משה לך אמור להם כך וכך. וכן הוא אומר פנים בפנים דבר ה' עמכם ונאמר לא את אבותינו כרת ה' את הברית הזאת.

ומנין שמעמד הר סיני לבדו היא הראי' לנבואתו, שהיא אמת שאין בו דופי? – שנאמר "הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך וגם כך יאמינו לעולם", מכלל שקודם דבר זה לא האמינו בו נאמנות שהיא עומדת לעולם אלא נאמנות שיש אחריה הרהור ומחשבה.

did not have an everlasting faith, rather a belief that might have been followed by doubts and questions.

How did Ma'amad Har Sinai become the foundation of our faith? At Mount Sinai, the Jewish people heard God speak to them, and they witnessed Him appointing Moshe as His messenger and representative. This solidified their belief in Moshe's prophecy – and, consequently, in that of future prophets as well.

2. Ibn Ezra, Shemot 19:9 – Before Matan Torah the Jewish people did not have complete faith. But after the entire nation heard God speak to them and appoint Moshe as His messenger, their faith became knowledge.

[At the time of the crossing of the Reed Sea] there were individuals who were doubtful about prophecy. Even though the Torah writes, "They believed in God and Moshe His servant," and "Israel saw," that was not all the people.

That is the reason [God said to Moshe] "In order that the entire nation will hear Me telling you the Ten Commandments, and they will believe in you as well" – that you are My prophet. From that point onward, they recognized the truth of Moshe's prophecy.

היו בהם (ישראל) אנשים ... והיתה להם נבואת משה בספק אצלם, ואין טענה ממלת (לעיל יד לא): ויאמינו בה' ובמשה עבדו, כתוב וירא ישראל, ולא כל ישראל...

ובדברי עמך, עשרת הדברים ... וגם כך יאמינו, שאתה נביא, הנבואה ויוסר הספק ממוחשבותם.

The faith that the Revelation at Sinai instilled in the Jewish people was a pure, complete, and unadulterated belief in God and in His servant, Moshe. This faith would then lie at the core of our Torah observance. Jewish observance is based on a faith that is utterly, unquestionably clear. To a Jew, the existence of God, the Divinity of His Torah, and the correctness of Moshe's prophecy are not merely "beliefs" – they are **facts**.

3. Rabbi Yaakov Neiman, Darchei Mussar, pp. 328-9 – Matan Torah created the foundation of eternal Jewish belief.

As a consequence of the Giving of the Torah, everyone had perfect faith. For they saw clearly that God spoke with Moshe and with the entire Jewish people, and it was impossible for there to be even the shadow of a doubt or any question about it. This is the foundation of a faith that is complete, lucid and clear.

True, unadulterated faith is only the type of belief that is complete and clear and has no doubts or negative afterthoughts. Such a clear faith was found only at the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, as the Rambam explains, "And through what did the Jews believe in Moshe? Through the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai." Only then did they have an everlasting faith, one which was not followed by even the slightest skepticism.

במעמד הנבחר האמינו כולם באמונה שלמה, כי ראו בעליל שה' מדבר עם משה ועם כל בני ישראל ולא היה יכול להיות אף צל של מחשבה והרהור שלילי וזהו היסוד לאמונה שלמה, בהירה וברורה.

רק אמונה שלמה וברורה שאין אחריה ספקות והיסוסים, הרהור ומחשבה שלילית, היא האמונה האמתית והצרופה, ואמונה ברורה כזו היתה רק במעמד הנבחר כדברי הרמב"ם ז"ל "ובמה האמינו בו במעמד הר סיני" שאז באה "הנאמנות שעומדת לעולם" נאמנות שאין אחרי' הרהור ומחשבה.

The reason that the Revelation at Sinai was so effective in generating faith in the people was that it presented them with a tangible visual experience which clearly demonstrated the truth of their beliefs. Perhaps in line with the popular expression “seeing is believing,” the Jewish people were not merely asked to accept the essentials of their faith as Moshe told them over. Rather, they were all eyewitnesses to a clear, irrefutable demonstration of the truth of the Torah.

4. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. III, p. 55 – Faith through a tangible, commonly-shared national vision.**

This was faith based on prophetic, tangible, vision: [as the verse states,] “All the people saw the sounds.” As our Sages explained, they saw things that are normally only heard. Something which is heard is more distant [conceptually] from a person than something which is seen. In their prophecy they saw the Revelation of God to Moshe without any barriers and impediments that would prevent them from seeing this revelation. Therefore, the Torah testifies that: “Also in you [Moshe], they will believe forever.” Someone who has seen the Revelation of God in this tangible way has eternal faith.

היתה זו אמונה מתוך ראייה נבואית וחושית “וכל העם רואים את הקולות” (שמות כ, טו), וכדברי חז”ל “רואין את הנשמע”. (מכילתא שם והובא ברש”י). דבר הנשמע הוא כרגיל דבר רחוק יותר מדבר הנראה, והם בנבואתם ראו את הדבר הרחוק באופן מוחשי וקרוב, ראו את גילוי ה’ אל משה בלא מחיצה וחציצה שתמנעם מראיית גילוי זה. ועל כן מעידה התורה – “וגם בך יאמינו לעולם”, מי שראה גילוי ה’ בכזו ראייה חושית, אמונתו היא “לעולם”.

Because the Revelation at Sinai is the cornerstone of our faith, it makes sense that Shavuot, the festival that celebrates that revelation, is a fitting time to focus on reinforcing our faith.

5. **Ibid. Vol. III, p. 65 – Shavuot is the natural opportunity to strengthen our faith.**

During these days in which we celebrate the Revelation at Sinai, it is essential to awaken in ourselves this idea, for the opportunity to receive this influence occurs during this time. Just as one must see himself as if he left Egypt [the entire Passover Seder was instituted in order to stimulate these feelings], likewise it is vital to relive the extraordinary Revelation at Sinai.

בימים אלו של זמן מתן תורתנו, יש להתעורר על אותם ענינים, שסגולת השפעתם לדורות היא בימים אלו. וכשם שחייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים, וכדי לעורר רגש זה הרי נקבע ונתקן כל סדר ליל פסח, כך חייב האדם להחיות בו את המעמד הנשגב – מעמד הר סיני.

PART D. CREATING A UNIQUE JEWISH IDENTITY

When approaching the celebration of the Torah that is the hallmark of Shavuot, it is important to recognize that the Torah is far more than merely another subject (or group of subjects) to be studied. The Torah is an incredibly potent force that has the power to change a person’s identity and elevate him on all levels – spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 68b – Torah makes all the difference.**

On the day of Shavuot Rav Yosef would say: “Make me a [fancy meal of] a three-year-old calf.” He would say, “Were it not for this day, how many Yosefs are there in the marketplace?”

רב יוסף ביומא דעצרתא אמר עבדי לי עגלא תלתא אמר אי לא האי יומא דקא גרים כמה יוסף איכא בשוקא.

[Without the Torah, which was given on Shavuot, he would be indistinguishable from every other person in the world].

2. **Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, Ohr Yechezkel, p.9 – The study and practice of Torah gives one a distinguished and elevated identity – this is reason to celebrate.**

Rav Yosef explained that he merited his positive attributes and great stature only through receiving the Torah. Without this, it would not have been possible to reach such a level. For without receiving the Torah there would be no qualitative difference between individuals – everyone would stand on the same level. Therefore, Rav Yosef proclaimed on the eve of Shavuot that he wanted to enjoy a special meal from a fine three-year-old-calf; only in the merit of Shavuot is there a difference between a “Yosef” and a “Rav Yosef.”

שאמר רב יוסף שלכל מעלתו וגדולתו זכה רק בשביל יום קבלת התורה. ומבלעדי זאת לא יתכן כלל אפשרות לזכיה, כי ללא קבלת התורה אין הפרש כלל בין האנשים כולם, והכל עומדים בדרגה אחת, ולכן אמר רב יוסף בערב שבועות שיעשו לו עגלא תלתא שרק בזכות ההוא יומא יש הבדל בין יוסף לבין רב יוסף.

God implanted a tremendous potency in the act of Torah study itself. When a person studies the Torah and invests effort in understanding it, the Torah exerts a powerful influence over him and causes him to rise to higher spiritual levels.

3. **Letters of the Chazon Ish, Vol. 1 Ch. 37 – Toiling in Torah study brings a person to exalted levels of spiritual awareness and understanding.**

The primary ability of the Torah to bring a person to an exalted state and to the recognition of his mission in the world comes from toiling in Torah. The more a person exerts himself [in Torah study], the more he severs the bonds of the evil inclination and comes to despise the empty pleasures [of this world]. His soul will desire feelings of sanctity, the delight of wisdom, and the sweetness of purity of heart, and he will recognize that a human being is not just flesh and blood ...

ועיקר סגלת התורה להביא את האדם לרוממות עלאה ולהכיר חובתו בעולמו באה ע"י עמלה של תורה. וכל שהאדם מוסיף ביגיעתו מנתק בזה חבלי היצר וממאס בתענוגי ההבלים ונפשו משתוקקת לרגשי קדש ועונג החכמה ומתק טהרת הלב, וההכרה שלא בשר ודם האדם...

In every generation, the great Torah sages have also been known as the generation's paragons of piety and virtue. Stories abound that highlight their extreme purity of character and demonstrate that they reached almost superhuman levels of saintliness. We can understand this as an illustration of the profound impact of Torah on a person who studies it. It should come as no surprise that the people who excel the most in their mastery of Torah study have always been the same people who excelled in perfecting their own characters.

The great Torah sage Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan, the Chofetz Chaim, once testified before a judge on a certain subject. The attorney who was arguing the case wanted to make sure that the judge would give the Chofetz Chaim's testimony the credence it deserved, so he decided to tell the judge a little about the Chofetz Chaim's character. "Your honor," the attorney said, "I have heard that this rabbi is a man of unparalleled virtue. In fact, I heard that he

once witnessed a thief stealing some property from his home and immediately began to chase after the thief, shouting, 'I forgive you! I forgive you!' Rather than being concerned about his own financial loss, he wanted to make sure that the thief who stole from him didn't incur a sin."

"I find that story impossible to believe," the judge scoffed derisively. "No human being could be capable of such an action!"

"Your honor," the attorney replied solemnly, "even if this story is not true, the mere fact that I heard it should attest to the rabbi's greatness of character. After all, no one would even make up such a story about you or me."

PART E. THE MITZVOT WERE GIVEN TO PERFECT INDIVIDUALS AND THE WORLD

There are two dimensions to the Torah, each of which parallels and complements the other. The mere study of the Torah is an activity that purifies, refines, and elevates any human being who engages in it. We study Torah for the sake of its knowledge, but we also study Torah to familiarize ourselves with its precepts, so that we will be able to observe them. And observance of the mitzvot that are found in the Torah is also our path to perfection – of ourselves and of the world.

1. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Bereishit 9:27 – The Torah is God's wisdom that must be applied to life's changing situations to make this world into His kingdom.

These spiritual pursuits ... are meant to lead to proper action, to the right response to the ever-changing conditions of life, in order "to prepare the world for the kingdom of God," as we put it in our daily prayers.

It's not merely a coincidence that the Torah is our guide to perfection. The very purpose of the Torah and its commandments is just that – for us to achieve perfection of our bodies and souls.

2. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed), Vol. III: 27 – Perfecting the soul and the body.

The purpose of the entire Torah is twofold: perfecting the soul and perfecting the body. Perfecting the soul means that a person will attain correct worldviews as much as possible ... perfecting the body means perfecting one's relationships with others.

כוונת כל התורה שני דברים, והם תקינות הנפש ותקינות הגוף. תקינות הנפש תהיה בכך שתושגנה להמון דעות נכונות כפי יכולתם.... תקינות הגוף תהיה בתקינות מצבי חייהם אלה עם אלה.

3. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, end of Hilchot Temurah (The Laws of Temurah) – The mitzvot are God's instructions and advice for living and improving our character.

And all these matters [the mitzvot] are to [help us to] overcome our negative inclinations and to correct our traits; and most laws of the Torah are instructions from afar, from the Great Adviser [to help us] to correct our character traits and straighten our ways.

וכל אלו הדברים כדי לכוף את יצריו ולתקן דעותיו ורוב דיני התורה אינן אלא עצות מרחוק מגדול העצה לתקן הדעות וליישר כל המעשים.

How are the mitzvot a guide to perfection? The following Midrash reveals the answer.

4. Midrash Rabbah, Bereishit 44:1 – Mitzvot refine humanity.

What does it matter to God if an animal is slaughtered by cutting its neck through the spine or the throat?

[The answer is] “The commandments were given only in order to refine humanity.”

וכי מה איכפת ליה להקב"ה למי ששוחט מן הצואר או מי ששוחט מן העורף?

היו לא נתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהם את הבריות.

Anyone who has achieved spiritual growth through the Torah and mitzvot will attest to the fact that the greatest sense of fulfillment a person can attain in life comes from growth and achievement in the spiritual realm. This idea is yet another of the allusions of the Two Loaves offering brought in the Temple on Shavuot.

5. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Strive for Truth, Vol. IV, pp. 31-32 – Focus on spiritual growth verses materialistic stagnation.

On this day [Shavuot] we bring to God a “New Offering” of two wheaten loaves. This is called a “New Offering” because it is the first offering brought from the new wheat crop. There is also a deeper reason. This offering celebrates our attainment of the spiritual level known as “receiving the Torah,” and every spiritual attainment is completely new – a new world in fact – compared to the level previously attained. In the world of materialism nothing is really new. Gratifying one physical desire is very much like gratifying another. The pleasure soon wanes and the chase is on for something “new,” but the result is always the same. A surfeit of physical pleasure eventually causes revulsion and a reduction of enjoyment all around. But achievements of the spirit never pall. The sweetness felt in the study of Torah and the inward service of God is constant. This is the greatest and most convincing proof of the truth of our spiritual heritage.

PART F. INFUSING THE PHYSICAL WORLD WITH SPIRITUALITY

We understand, then, that the Torah and mitzvot are extraordinary vehicles for self-perfection. This understanding sheds tremendous light on another issue: the very purpose of the Torah, which is intrinsically connected to the very purpose of this world. By giving us the Torah, God created, as it were, a means of manifesting the sanctity and spirituality of His Presence in this world. The Torah and mitzvot bring the Divine into the mundane, and also have the converse effect; by observing the mitzvot, we elevate the mundane world, transforming it into a vehicle for spirituality.

1. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88b-89a – When Moshe ascended to Heaven to receive the Torah, the angels opposed giving it to him, but he contended that the Torah’s commandments were designed specifically to be observed on earth.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi taught: When Moshe ascended to Heaven [to receive the Torah], the ministering angels said to the Holy One, Blessed is He, “Master of the Universe, why is the child of a woman among us?” He said to them, “He has come to receive the Torah.” They said to him, “This precious hidden treasure, which You have concealed for 974 generations, You wish to give to flesh and blood? What is man that You remember him, and a human being that You recall him? God, our Master, how mighty is Your

ואמר ר' יהושע בן לוי: בשעה שעלה משה למרום אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מה לילוד אשה בינינו? אמר להן: לקבל תורה בא. אמרו לפניו: חמודה גנוזה שגנוזה לך תשע מאות ושבעים וארבעה דורות קודם שנברא העולם, אתה מבקש ליתנה לבשר ודם? “מה אנוש כי תזכרנו ובן אדם כי תפקדנו ה' אדונינו מה אדיר שמך בכל הארץ אשר תנה הודך על השמים.”

Name throughout the land; place Your glory in the Heavens!”

God said to Moshe, “Answer them!” . . .

[Moshe] said, “Master of the Universe, what does the Torah say?”

[God responded,] “It says, ‘I am the Lord, your God, who took you out of Egypt.’”

[Moshe said to the angels:] “Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should you receive the Torah?”

Again [he asked God,] “What does it say?”

[God said,] “You shall not recognize the gods of others.”

[Moshe said to the angels,] “Do you live amongst the nations who worship idols?”

Again, “What does it say?”

“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”

“Do you engage in labor that you would be required to rest from? What else does it say?”

“Honor your father and mother.”

“Do you have a father and a mother? What else does it say?”

“You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal.”

“Is there jealousy among you (that can lead to murder)? Do any of you have an evil inclination?”

The angels immediately conceded to God ...

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: החזיר להן תשובה! וכו'. אמר לפניו: רבונו של עולם, תורה שאתה נותן לי מה כתיב בה "אנכי ה' אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים" אמר להן: למצרים ירדתם? לפרעה השתעבדתם? תורה למה תהא לכם?

שוב מה כתיב בה "לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים" - בין עמים אתם שרויין שעובדין עבודת גלולים?

שוב מה כתיב בה:

"זכור את יום השבת לקדשו" - כלום אתם עושים מלאכה שאתם צריכין שבות? ... שוב מה כתיב בה?

"כבד את אביך ואת אמך"

- אב ואם יש לכם? שוב מה כתיב בה

"לא תרצח לא תנאף לא תגנוב" - קנאה יש ביניכם? יצר הרע יש ביניכם?

מיד הודו לו להקדוש ברוך הוא...

In this passage, the Talmud teaches us that the angels contended that the Torah belongs in Heaven and should not be given to man. Moshe refuted them on the basis of the fact that the mitzvot of the Torah are not applicable to angels. The mitzvot of the Torah were designed for the physical world, and they are uniquely applicable to human beings, with their material nature.

2. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, p. 128 – The purpose of the Torah is to transform the material world into a vessel for spirituality.**

Moshe proved to the angels that ... the main purpose of the creation of the Torah was for it to be given to human beings on earth, since it is specifically the physical acts of the mitzvot that increase God's honor, and His Throne of Glory is built by them ...

This is the greatness of man. He can transform his body, which by nature is far from the light of God's "face," into a vessel through which the light of God will shine when man uses it to perform God's Will by observing Torah and mitzvot ...

הוכיח משה למלאכים ש... עיקר מטרת בריאת התורה היא כדי שתנתן לבני אדם שבארץ והטעם הוא כי דוקא מעשי המצוות הגשמיים מרבים כבוד ה' ומהם נבנה כסא הכבוד ...

זוהי הגדלות של האדם שהוא יכול להפוך את הגוף החשוך שבטבעו הוא רחוק מאור פני ה' לכלי שבו יזרח אור ה' בהשתמשו בו לעשיית רצונו ית' בקיום תורה ומצוות...

We see that man has the ability to bring about a new creation, i.e., to turn his physical body into a tool to help him achieve pure spirituality ...

נמצא שבכחו של האדם לברוא בריאה חדשה דהיינו להפוך את הגוף החומרי לכלי עזר לרוחניות המהורה...

Thus, the Torah's applicability to our mundane, physical lives is not merely a tangential aspect of the Torah. Rather, it is the *entire essence* of the Torah. The entire purpose of the Torah is to enable man to achieve great spiritual heights – by bringing Godliness, as it were, into the material world.

3. **Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, *Twerski on Spirituality*, p. 10 – Spirituality does not mean divorcing oneself from the physical world; it means leading a normal, material life that is suffused with spirituality.**

Spirituality is not withdrawing from society and isolating oneself as a recluse, eating the bare minimum to remain alive and sleeping on the ground, spending the entire day in prayer and meditation. During the time of the Second Temple there was a sect of Essenes who separated themselves from society to devote themselves totally to prayer and study of Torah. They rejected anything that provided physical gratification, and they therefore abstained from eating meat, drinking wine, and getting married.

This is not the type of spirituality the Torah advocates. We are permitted to eat meat and drink wine judiciously, and we are required to marry and have family lives. We should work and engage in commerce. In short, we are to lead normal lives, but all the activities of normal living should be within the scope of spirituality.

PART G. TORAH IS GIVEN ANEW EACH SHAVUOT

Our appreciation of Shavuot would be lacking a very important dimension if we did not make mention of one more, exceedingly important, point. Shavuot is not merely a day that commemorates a significant event in the past. It is more than that: it is the day when that very event recurs and is recreated every single year. There is tremendous spiritual potential inherent in each of our festivals; the same spiritual forces that were present thousands of years ago, on these very dates, return every year at the same time.

1. **Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Strive for Truth*, Vol. IV, p. 49 – Listening for Matan Torah today.**

Each Shavuot ... we spiritually arrive at that same point of sanctity experienced by our forefathers at Mount Sinai. It is once again, in a real sense, "The time of the Giving of our Torah," and we are invited to accept it anew, as they did 3,300 years ago.

On Shavuot we have to work in order to receive the Torah. We have to struggle to acquire it in our hearts. We have to appreciate its truths as unchangeable verities ... the nation still harbored lingering doubts ... Only when they heard God's voice at Sinai was doubt replaced by absolute certainty. So too, when we learn Torah today and especially at Shavuot time, can we, if we wish, still hear that same voice.

2. **Rabbi Shalom Brezovsky, *Nesivos Shalom*, Moadim, Vol. II, p. 334 – The Torah was given in the past, but the ability to receive it occurs each year on Shavuot.**

It is written in the holy books that just as the Torah is eternal, the ability to receive the Torah

איתא בספה"ק דכשם שהתורה הק' היא נצחית, כך קבלת התורה היא נצחית, שבכל שנה ושנה יש ביום

is eternal. Each and every year on Shavuot our ability to receive the Torah is renewed. This is what we recite in our prayers and in Kiddush: "The time of the Giving of our Torah." This does not mean merely that we have a festival that reminds us that God gave us the Torah in the past. Rather, each and every year on Shavuot is again the time of the Giving of the Torah.

הזה קבלת התורה מחודשת. וזה שאנו אומרים בתפלה ובקידוש זמן מתן תורתנו, אין פירושו שנקבע כעין זכר ליום שבו נתן לנו הקב"ה את התורה בעבר, אלא בכל שנה ושנה החג הק' הזה הוא זמן מתן תורתנו האידנא.

In truth, although the spiritual potential of the day of Ma'amad Har Sinai is at its most potent on Shavuot, which is the actual day when the Torah was given, the Giving of the Torah was meant to be a continuous process, one that takes place every day, in every generation. Whenever a person studies the Torah and becomes involved in it, it is as if he is reliving the Revelation at Sinai.

3. **Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol.III, p. 169 – The Giving of the Torah is eternal and continuous.**

The Giving of the Torah at Sinai is eternal and continuous. In the words of the Midrash: "A person must see himself as if he personally received the Torah at Sinai, as it is written, 'On this day you have become a nation'" (Devarim 27:9). The deliverance of the Torah was not a one-time occurrence; rather it influences us daily.

In the words of the Nefesh HaChaim: "When a person is involved and attached properly to the Torah, it brings joy just like when it was given at Sinai, like it says in the Zohar: 'One who is engaged in Torah is as if he receives the Torah at Sinai each day, as the Torah writes: On this day you have become a nation ...'" One who makes an effort in Torah is as if he stands each day on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

נתינת התורה בסיני נצחית היא ונמשכת כל הזמן, וכך אמרו: "חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו מקבל תורה מסיני שנא' (דברים כז, ט) היום הזה נהיית לעם" (פסיקתא זוטא פר' ואתחנן), הרי שנתנת התורה לא היתה חד פעמית... אלא היא מושפעת עלינו בכל יום.

וכך כתב בנפש החיים (שער ד פי"ד): "...ובכל עת שהאדם עוסק ומתדבק בה כראוי, הדברים שמחים כנתינתן מסיני, כמש"כ בזוהר (ריש פ' חוקת) מאן דאשתדל באורייתא כאילו קאים כל יומא על טורא דסיני לקבל אורייתא הה"ד היום הזה נהיית לעם" וכו' – מי שמשתדל בתורה כאילו עומד כל יום על הר סיני לקבל תורה.

4. **Ibid. Vol. III, pp. 180-181 – On any day one can merit the influence from Mount Sinai.**

We can appreciate the teaching of our Sages: "On this day Israel came to the desert of Sinai..." (Rashi, Shemot 19:1). It would have been more fitting for the verse to state: "On *that* day," why write: "On *this* day"? Rather, to teach that the words of Torah should be new to you as if they had been given today.

In practice, whenever one studies Torah in the appropriate manner he receives inspiration from God, similar to the atmosphere which prevailed at Sinai. For this reason the Torah states "On *this* day" – just like the day they came to the desert of Sinai.

מוסברים היטב דברי חז"ל (שמות יט, א, ברש"י) "ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני... לא היה צריך לכתוב אלא ביום ההוא, מהו ביום הזה, שיהיו דברי תורה חדשים עליך כאילו היום ניתנו."

דהיינו, כי בכל עת שאדם לומד את התורה כראוי מקבל שפע חדש מאת השי"ת ממש כבעת נתינת התורה בסיני, לכן תמיד הוא ביום הזה, כאותו היום שבאו למדבר סיני.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ✧ The entire world was created for the sake of the Torah. If the Jews had not accepted the Torah on Mount Sinai, the world would have ceased to exist.
- ✧ At Mount Sinai, the Jews declared, “We will do and we will listen,” meaning that they committed themselves to keeping the Torah and observing God’s commandments even before they knew what those commandments were. By doing so, they reached an exalted level of spirituality where they recognized that the world and everything in it is meant to be subjugated to God’s Will.
- ✧ At Mount Sinai, God revealed Himself publicly to the entire Jewish nation and announced that Moshe would be His messenger. This revelation became the basis and foundation of the Jewish people’s faith throughout the generations.
- ✧ Torah study is an immensely potent force that has the ability to reshape a person’s very identity.
- ✧ Furthermore, Torah and mitzvot are our path to perfection, both physical and spiritual. God gave us the mitzvot so that we can achieve perfection through their observance.
- ✧ God created the Torah for the purpose of giving it to human beings, who would study it and observe its commandments in the physical world. In this way, our world – the world of the material – is elevated and infused with spirituality, which gives our lives meaning and purpose.
- ✧ Shavuot is more than just a commemoration of a great historical event. Every year on Shavuot, we relive the experience of Matan Torah. Furthermore, Matan Torah is an ongoing, eternal process; through Torah study, we can tap into the immense spiritual bounty of Matan Torah every day of our lives.

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT ARE THE THEMES OF THE HOLIDAY OF SHAVUOT?

We can identify four distinct themes of the holiday of Shavuot. First of all, Shavuot represents the conclusion of the Counting of the Omer and the culmination of the process of personal growth that it entails. Secondly, Shavuot marks the beginning of the new harvest and the first opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of bikurim. Thirdly, Shavuot is the day on which God judges the world and determines how much fruit will be produced by the trees during the coming year. The fourth theme of Shavuot, and the one that is perhaps the most overarching, is its status as the day on which the Torah was given.

WHY IS MA’AMAD HAR SINAI MONUMENTAL IN JEWISH HISTORY?

Ma’amad Har Sinai was the event at which the Jewish people received the Torah, which became their guiding force for all generations. The Torah is the purpose of existence both of the world itself and of the Jewish people. Furthermore, the Jewish people’s declaration of “*Na’aseh v’Nishma*” (“We will do and we will listen”) both earned them eternal merit and shaped their national character for all generations. Their unconditional submission to God’s Will elevated them to a spiritual level comparable to that of angels, and all future generations of Jews have drawn from that declaration the inner strength to serve God in spite of daunting obstacles.

HOW IS THE IMPACT OF MA'AMAD HAR SINAI ETERNAL AND CONTINUOUS?

Torah study and mitzvah observance have defined Jewish identity throughout the generations. Furthermore, the study of Torah sustains the Jewish people and the entire world.

WHY IS MA'AMAD HAR SINAI THE FOUNDATION OF JEWISH BELIEF?

Ma'amad Har Sinai was a unique event, unparalleled in all of history. At Mount Sinai, the entire Jewish nation, numbering about 2.5 million souls, witnessed God revealing Himself and appointing Moshe as His messenger. Together, all of the Jewish people were eyewitnesses to the Revelation; they *saw* God and His dominion over them with their own eyes. By appointing Moshe as His messenger in front of the entire nation, God gave credence to Moshe's prophecy so that the validity of his words could never be questioned.

Jewish faith is not based on miracles and wonders, which can be distorted or questioned. Rather, it is based on a tangible experience shared by an entire nation.

HOW IS SHAVUOT ESSENTIAL TO ESTABLISHING OUR JEWISH IDENTITY?

On Shavuot, God gives us the opportunity to re-experience the spiritual forces that were present at the time of the Giving of the Torah thousands of years ago. Every year on Shavuot, we can experience the Giving of the Torah anew, tapping into the forces that shaped our people's national spiritual identity.

Shavuot brings home to us the importance of the Torah to the world as a whole and the Jewish nation in particular. On Shavuot, we recall how the Torah shapes us as a people and how our ancestors committed themselves to it, wholly and unconditionally.

WHAT ROLE DO THE MITZVOT PLAY IN ACTUALIZING OUR MISSION?

God gave us the mitzvot in order for us to perfect ourselves. The manifold instructions that He laid down for all of our worldly activities serve to make us into better, more perfect human beings. By observing His mitzvot, we become spiritual beings, bringing God, as it were, into the physical world.

**This class was prepared by Rabbi David Sedley
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