



Bikkurim From Nishmat

In Honor of
JEANIE AND JAY SCHOTTENSTEIN
And in Celebration of Nishmat's 25th Anniversary

Jerusalem 2015

In this volume, all Tanach translations are either from
Machon Mamre or Soncino (D. Mandel);
the Talmud translations are from Soncino (I. Epstein).
Slight modifications have been made for style and nuance.

Design and Pagination: Studio HaMaabada

Table of Contents

1.	Laws of Shavuot Rabbi Da'vid Sperling	5
Part I – Receiving the Torah		
2.	Women and Shavuot Rabbanit Chana Henkin, Dean	9
3.	Na'aseh v'Nishma, We Will Do and We Will Understand Rabbi Yehuda Henkin	11
4.	I Was There, Standing at Sinai Rabbanit Noa Lau	14
5.	Thoughts for Shavout Rachelle Sprecher Fraenkel	17
6.	Is There a Mitzvah to Remember Matan Torah? Rabbanit Gilla Rosen	20
7.	In the Beginning There was Prophecy Rabbi Shay Nave	23
8.	“Hear O Israel”: What Must We Hear? Michal Efrati	26
9.	Strengthening our Relationship with Hashemh Dr. Karen Kirshenbaum	30
10.	The Chosen People Rabbi Re'em HaCohen	33
11.	Ingesting Torah Adi Bitter	36

Part II – Megillat Ruth

12. The Megillah of Hessed 39
Rabbi Chaim Navon

13. Betrothal and Marriage in the Book of Ruth 42
Dr. Tova Ganzel

14. The Book of Ruth Needs Manoah:
The Death of Arrogance, The Birth of Compassion 45
Ayala Friedman

15. Between the Festival of Shavuot and Megillat Ruth 51
Rabbi David Sabato

16. Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven
and Acceptance of the “Other” 56
Rabbanit Chana Henkin, Dean

17. Shavuot – An Agricultural Festival with Dual Significance
and the Book of Ruth 62
Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun

18. Megillat Ruth and the Gift of Leadership 75
Debbie Zimmerman



1

Laws of Shavuot

◦ RABBI DA'VID SPERLING

1. Morning Prayers For Those Who Stayed Awake All Night

Time of The Blessings: Those who stay awake through the night should wash their hands after the first light (*amud ha'shachar*) and say the blessings on *Torah* learning.

Washing of the Hands: The Shulchan Aruch writes: If one was awake all night, it is questionable whether he needs to wash his hands in the morning in order to pray and remove the impurity from their hands. The Ashkanazi Rem" a adds: Therefore, one should wash them without a blessing" (Orach Chaim 4,13). Therefore, those who stay awake should wash their hands three times, as is done daily, and preferably hear the blessing from someone who slept and answer *amen*.

Alternatively, Ashkanazim may recite both blessings of *al netilat yadayim* and *asher yatzar* following use of the bathroom. Sephardim do not say the blessing *al netilat yadayim* even after using the bathroom.

Tallit: One who wore *tzitzit* all night does not recite the *tzitzit* blessing in the morning. Instead, the blessing on the full *tallit*, or alternately, the blessing can be heard from one who slept through the night. (Some Sephardim do recite the blessing on *tzitzit* that



RABBI DA'VID
SPERLING

teaches Halachah
and coordinates
Halachic Studies
at Nishmat.

were worn all night, while holding the *tzitzit* strings during the blessing). (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim*, 8,16)

The Blessings “Elokai Neshamah” and “HaMa’avir Shainah: Sephardim recite all the morning blessings, including *Elokai neshamah* and *hama’avir shainah*, other than *asher yatzar* (unless they used the bathroom) and *al netilat yadayim*.

It is preferable that Ashkanazim hear the blessings of *Elokai neshamah* and *hama’avir shainah* from one who slept or from a Sephardi. If this is not possible, these two blessings should not be recited (*Orach Chaim* 46, *Mishna Brurah* 24). [Some rule that one can say both these blessings – *Aruch HaShulchan* 46, 13]. Those who rule according to *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* (Chabad and many Chassidim) say the blessing *hama’avir shainah*.

The Blessing HaNoten Laya’ef Koach: The blessing *hanoten laya’efkoach* (*He who gives strength to the weary*) is recited, even if one is tired (*Orach Chaim* 46, *Mishna Brurah* 22).

The Blessing Over Torah Learning: Sephardim recite *birkat ha’torah* as is done daily. For Ashkanazim, it is preferable to hear the blessings over *Torah* learning from someone who slept or from a Sephardi, following which one should learn the brief selections of *Torah* learning (found in the *Siddur* immediately after the *birkat ha’Torah*). If it is not possible to hear the blessings from another person, one should then recite the blessings oneself (See *Aruch HaShulchan* 47, 23, and the *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* 47,7). [The *Mishnah Brurah* (47,(28)) holds that one should, in such a case, not say the blessings oneself, but instead have intent to fulfill their obligation with the praises found in the blessing “*ahavah rabah*” (before the *Shema*) and then learn *Torah* immediately following prayers.]

Even one who remains awake all night, so long as one slept in bed on Erev Shavuot during the day for at least a half hour—the blessings over

Torah learning are still to be recited in the morning (*Mishna Brurah*, *ibid*). Alternately, if one had intent when reciting these blessings the morning before the festival, that they would apply for only one day, then one may recite the blessings over *Torah* learning even after being awake throughout the following night (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch Yalkut Yosef* 47,9).

If One Slept Briefly During The Night: If one had a “proper sleep” during the night, then all the blessings are recited as done daily. There is debate as to what constitutes a “proper sleep” (see *Orach Chaim* 4,16, *Biur Halacha* “Da’vid”). If one slept half an hour in one stretch, one can rely on this to say the blessings.

2. Eating On The Festival

Before The Morning Service: The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that from half an hour before the first light (*amud ha’shachar*), it is forbidden to eat more than the measure of an egg (*Shulchan Aruch* 89, 3). This limitation applies to men but not women (Rav S.Z. Aurbach zt”l, quoted in *Nishmat Avraham, Orach Haim*, 55). However, from first light (*amud ha’shachar*) it is forbidden even for women to eat food of any quantity until one has prayed. One may drink water, and the custom is to permit tea and coffee, even with milk and sugar. One who is sick or weak should consult a halachic authority.

Following the Morning Service: It is forbidden to eat or drink before *Kiddush*. Those walking to the *Kotel* should organize wine [at least a full *revi’it* for the person reciting the *Kiddush*, and cake [at least a *kezayit* for each person], to enable one to drink or snack during the return from the *Kotel*).

The Yom Tov Meal: One should make a meal with two loaves of *challah* and eat a *Yom Tov* meal, and not rely on the cake eaten at *Kiddush*.

3. When Yom Tov Falls After Shabbat

Se’udah Shlishit: One should try one’s best to eat the third *Shabbat* meal (*se’udah shlishit*) early, in order to have an appetite for the *Yom Tov* meal at

night (*Shulchan Aruch* 527,1). If this was not possible, one should eat only a small meal with bread before sunset.

Preparations for Shavuot: It is forbidden to do any preparations for *Yom Tov* before the end of *Shabbat*, including washing dishes, setting the table, and the like.

Havdalah: In the evening service we add *v'todiainu*, and add *havdalah* to *Kiddush* for Festivals which fall on *Motza'ei Shabbat*, as is printed in the *Siddur* or *Machzor*.

Halachic Times for 5775:

	JERUSALEM	NEW YORK
Candle Lighting for Shabbat (Bamidbar)	18:58	7:54 PM
One should eat the Third Shabbat Meal before:	16:05	4:32 PM
Candle Lighting For Yom Tov, not before:	20:15	9:02 PM
Amud HaShachar (First Light):	3:51	3:51 AM
Tallit	4:40	3:23 AM
Dawn ("Netz")	5:37	5:33 AM
Midday	12:36	12:52 PM
Mincha Gedolah	13:11	13:29 PM
Sunset	19:39	8:12 PM
Yom Tov Ends	20:16	9:03 PM



Women and Shavuot

◦ RABBANIT CHANA HENKIN

Shavuot is unique amongst the holidays. It appears in the Torah without a calendar date; without *mitzvah* such as *matzah*, *shofar*, or *succah* to define the religious essence of the day; and without a historical reference. The absence of a historical reference is particularly startling in light of the festival's occurring on the anniversary of *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah according to one of two views in the Talmud (while the alternative view places *Matan Torah* on the day following Shavuot). The Rabbis, on the other hand, associated the festival with *Matan Torah*, both in the Midrash and in the language and content of the prayers; and thus, through the ages, there emerged customs associating Shavuot with the giving of the Torah, including the Torah reading *Bachodesh Hashlishi* (Shemot 19, 1), the denotation in the Shmonch Esreh of *zman Matan Toratenu* (the time of Giving of our Torah), the Ashkenazi *Akadamot* prayer and various *piyutim*, liturgical poems, and traditions including dairy foods, decorating the synagogue with greens, and night-long learning or reciting of the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* learning, mentioned by the *Shela*"h in Prague in the sixteenth century. In sum, despite the Torah's choice not to associate Shavuot with *Giving of the Torah*, throughout the ages, that association came to define Shavuot.

Rabbi Efrayim of Lunshitz, Poland, the 17th century author of the *Kli Yakar* commentary, explained that the Torah did not mark *Matan Torah* because while the giving of the Torah occurred on the 6th of Sivan—*kabbalat haTorah*, receiving the Torah can't be



RABBANIT
CHANA HENKIN

The Founder and
Dean of Nishmat.

restricted to a particular day. Rather, it is an on-going enterprise that occurs when a Jew sits and is *amel baTorah*, toils over Torah. I would like to expand on this distinction.

This separation of **giving** and **receiving** implies that God's giving the Torah is no guarantee that it will be received. Receiving the Torah is a personal enterprise, involving intellectual, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, as well as the readiness to persevere. Sometimes the struggle is to master content, sometimes to organize material (like Rabbi Akiva who, according to the Sages, in the Bet Midrash was like a harvester who placed the different grains he gathered into one sack; but upon his return home, separated the wheat into one pile, the barley into another, the rye into another, as he organized the Torah he had studied in his mind), and sometimes it is a struggle with ideas. From my experience, sometimes it can simply be a struggle to remain in one's seat and persist until material is fully comprehended.

Growing up, when I would look in at the magic of a Bet Midrash, I knew that great men who had died long ago were alive inside. I knew that if you could enter the Bet Midrash, you could speak and even debate with them. You could discourse with R. Akiva and R. Yishmael; with Abbaye and Rava; with Rambam and Rabbenu Tam.

But, for generations, this *kabbalat haTorah*, this participation in the struggle to understand God's word, was not for women. Today, as I sit in the Bet Midrash, engaged in a conversation with the Nodah B'Yehuda and the Chatam Sofer—I marvel at the new reality in which women are not merely *yoshvot Bet Hamidrash*, dwellers in the Bet Midrash and participants in *amal HaTorah*, the toil that leads to receiving the Torah; women are today **enriching** the corpus of Torah knowledge with the fruit of their toil. *Blessed is God who has brought us to this day.*



Na'aseh v'Nishma, We Will Do and We Will Understand

◦ RABBI YEHUDA HENKIN

וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה וַיְסַפֵּר לָעָם אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי ה' וְאֵת כָּל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וַיַּעַן
כָּל הָעָם קוֹל אֶחָד וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה. וַיִּכְתֹּב
מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי ה' וַיִּשְׁכַּם בְּבֹקֶר וַיְבִן מִזְבֵּחַ תַּחַת הָהָר וּשְׁתֵּים
עָשָׂר מִצְבָּחַ לְשִׁנִּים עָשׂוּר שְׁבָטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל... וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא
בְּיַד הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע. (שמות כד, ג-ד,
ז)

Moshe came and told the people all of haShem's words and all the laws, and the people answered as one voice and said "we will do all the things haShem said" Moshe wrote all the words of haShem. He got up early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, with the twelve tribes of Israel... He took the book of the covenant and read it to the people, and they said, "We will do and we will hear everything haShem said" (Exodux 24, 3-4, 7)

One must ask: What does *Na'aseh v'nishma, We will do and we will hear*, mean? Does hearing, of necessity, not precede doing? Moreover, twice before declaring *Na'aseh v'nishma* the people said simply *Na'aseh, We will do* (*Shemot* 19:8, 24:3). Why did they only now add *and we will hear*?

Also, *and we will hear* is superfluous. Obviously, if they agreed to do, they also agreed to hear what it is that they should do.

These questions, however, assume that *to hear* means *to listen*. In fact, however, the verb for hearing (*sh-m-'a*) often means "to understand". In *Bereishit* (42:23), we read: *They didn't know that*



RABBI YEHUDA
HENKIN

a Posek Halacha,
senior member of
the Nishmat faculty,
author of Responsa
Bnei Banim, and
halachik supervisor
of the Nishmat
Yoatzot Halacha
English Website.

Yosef heard, because the interpreter was between them, meaning his brothers didn't know that Yosef **understood** Hebrew. You will be beset by a faraway nation *whose language you will not hear* (*Devarim* 28:49), means you will not **understand** their language. And **Hear, Israel, haShem is our God, haShem is one**" (*Devarim* 6:4) involves much more than simply listening; according to Ramban (*Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 1, 7), there is an obligation to **comprehend** what *haShem is one* means.

Rather, *na'aseh v'nishma* means "we will do and we will **understand.**" Israel pledged both to observe the Torah and to study it. The Sages praised the people for putting practice first, but also for making it preliminary to the learning that they pledged would follow.

The Formula Used in the Talmud

בשעה שהקדימו ישראל נעשה לנשמע באו ששים ריבוא של מלאכי השרת,
לכל אחד ואחד מישראל קשרו שני כתרים, אחד כנגד נעשה ואחד כנגד
נשמע... באותה שעה קרא להם הקדוש ברוך הוא: בני בכורי ישראל (שבת פח
ע"א – פט ע"ב).

When Israel declared 'Na'aseh v'nishma', six hundred thousand angels came and placed upon each person of Israel two crowns, one representing 'na'aseh' and one representing 'nishmah'...At that moment, the Holy One Blessed Be He called out to them: My firstborn son, Israel. (Talmud Shabbat 88b-89a)

to introduce praises of Israel, "*besha'ah shehikdimu Yisrael na'aseh lenishma...*" can mean either "when Israel placed *na'aseh* ahead of *nishma*" i.e., Israel made the observance primary, or "when Israel made *na'aseh* a preliminary to *nishma*," i.e., they placed the emphasis on study and understanding. What is the meaning of God's praise for Israel, *My firstborn son*? A first-born son receives a double portion of the inheritance (*Devarim* 21:8); the point is that while other religions require observance by the laity but not study, Israel committed itself both to observe and **to study**.

Why did Israel twice say *na'aseh, we will do*, and add "and we will understand" only the third time? The first two times, Moshe transmitted God's words orally:

Moshe called the elders of the people and presented them all these things which haShem commanded him. (Shemot 19:7).

Moshe came and told the people” (24:3).

The third time, however:

Moshe wrote all the words of haShem...He took the book of the covenant and read to the people (24:7)

Moshe brought them the Torah in writing. Now the people had the text, and they could copy it and take it home, study it, and try to comprehend it. That is why they responded, *...and we will understand.*

This explains a remarkable feature of the Torah’s account. The first two responses stress the unanimity of the people:

The whole people answered together and said, ‘We will do...’ (19:8).

...The whole people answered as one voice and said, ‘We will do...’(24:3).

The third statement, *We will do and we will understand*, on the other hand is introduced simply by *They said*. Were they less than unanimous in promising to study?

The answer is that when it comes to observance, all Jews are alike. The ignoramus and the scholar are equally bound by the *mitzvot*: therefore, Israel unanimously pledged *we will do*.

But there is no uniformity in understanding. Each person learns at his own pace, and fathoms the Torah according to his abilities, interests, and the time he has available. Israel could not say *We will do and we will understand* in one voice, because Torah study embraces many voices.



I Was There, Standing at Sinai

◦ RABBANIT NOA LAU

The verse that opens the description of Revelation at Sinai, immediately upon Moshe's ascent of the mountain, includes a reference to all sectors of the nation:

So shall you say to the House of Jacob, and tell the Children of Israel. (Shemot 19:3)

And as our Sages learn in the *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Parshat Yitro*:

So shall you say to the House of Jacob – these are the women; and tell the Children of Israel – these are the men.

This simple assertion seeks to include the women and men as equals in the experience of Revelation. According to this opinion, we stood there, as one, and heard the commandments spoken by God. Together, too, we were frightened by the 'sight of the sounds', and we asked Moshe to speak to us but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (Shemot 20:15)

As opposed to this inclusive declaration, the Torah writes in Devarim that after our fright at the 'sight of the sounds', God turned to Moshe and instructed him:

Go say to them: Return to your tents; and as for you, stand here by Me. (Devarim 5:26-27)

RABBANIT NOA
LAU

Yoetzet Halacha,
Assistant Dean
of Nishmat and
Coordinator of
Nishmat's Keren
Ariel Yoetzet
Halacha Program.

Our Sages derive two ideas from this verse. The first is that at the moment of Revelation, the men separated from the women. Thus the men, and only they, were present to receive the Ten Commandments.

The second is that after Revelation, everyone returned to their tents, which is to say, to their wives, and Moshe alone remained separate from his wife, cleaving to the *Shechina*H. Both of these ideas appear in the following *baraita* (Yevamot 62a):

Moshe did three things of his own initiative, and his view coincided with that of the Omnipresent: He separated from his wife, and he broke the tablets, and he added one day [before Revelation].

How did he support his act of separating from his wife? He said: If the Torah said regarding Israel—with whom the *Shechina* spoke only for a moment, and for whom a definite time [limit of hearing God speak] was fixed— *Do not approach a woman* (Shemot 19:15), how much more so to me, who am liable to be spoken to at any moment and for whom no time has been fixed?

... And his view coincided with that of God's, as it is said (Devarim 5:26-27): Go say to them: Return to your tents; and as for you, stand here by Me...

To the *darshan*, it is clear that Israel refers to the men, and that the women are not included. The conclusion that arises from this reading of the text is hard for us, the women. Did we not stand at the foot of the mount? Did our eyes not 'see the sounds'? Are we not included in the covenant?

Two voices emerge here: an inclusive voice and an exclusive voice.

The exclusive voice sees woman as an essentially different being from man, with no portion in the world of Torah, but steeped, rather, in the world of home and motherhood, excluded from the masculine religious experience.

However, this is not the only possible reading. Is it not possible that the men and the women returned together to their tents after they experienced this unique and awesome Revelation? I prefer to hear the inclusive voice that sees women as equal partners in the establishment of the covenant with God at Sinai.

The poet Zelda, born into a Chabad family, expresses this voice in a poem describing her feelings with regard to Revelation at Sinai: (literal translation from the Hebrew original)

*I shall not float in the expanse, cut adrift of restraint
Lest a cloud swallow the fine line in my heart
That separates good from bad
I have no existence, stripped of the lightning and thunder
That I heard at Sinai.*

Zelda sees herself as included in the experience of Mount Sinai; it is essential to her personality. She is part of the whole nation, waiting there at the foot of the mountain. 'I have no existence, stripped of the lightning and thunder that I heard at Sinai,' she says. The experience at the Mountain delineates a way of life for her, an approach to the *mitzvot*, and even, perhaps, an approach to the education of children. Mount Sinai anchors her and creates a space for her in the world, keeping her from being cut adrift with no handholds.

It has always been clear to me that I, too, stood there, along with Zelda and with all of Israel – those who are with us today, and those who are with us no longer. The feeling of belonging to Torah and to the daily renewal of the covenant at Mount Sinai is what motivates me to delve deeply into Torah, to study it, and to try to bequeath it to our daughters for all eternity.



Thoughts for Shavuot

◦ RACHELLE SPRECHER FRAENKEL

As Shavuot approaches, I am pondering the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the Divine Name, and the corresponding, severe prohibition against *hilul Hashem*, desecrating the Divine Name.

We commonly use the term ‘Hashem’, meaning ‘the Name’, to signify God. A person, however, cannot desecrate God. But when it comes to God’s Name, His reputation in the world, or His effect upon human beings—that can be elevated or stained.

Desecration of God’s Name can range across a broad spectrum of contexts: from military defeat and Israel’s exile amongst the nations, to a momentary lack of courtesy by a young girl in a skirt or a man in a *kippah*, to rabbis accused of harassment. The possibilities for *kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of God’s name, are equally diverse, as the slogan at Ben Gurion airport “*Abroad we are all ambassadors*” reminds us; and as we are reminded from time to time by Israeli rescue delegations sent to disaster-stricken areas.

Within the span between the cleanliness of a *Talmid Hacham*’s clothes, on the one hand, and the readiness to give our lives rather than commit a serious transgression on the other, lies our own responsibility to be a living testimony to the fact that His seal is truth and that His is a Torah of *hesed*, a Torah of life.



RACHELLE
SPRECHER
FRAENKEL

Yoetzet Halacha,
teaches Talmud
and Halacha at
Nishmat.

The sense that *Kiddush Hashem* and *Hilul Hashem* result from how the impact our actions have upon others may jar somewhat in terms of authenticity. It is in vogue today to wish to live “our own truth” and not put on a façade. However, responsibility comes with the territory. To pretend that my actions carry no meaning beyond my small personal circle exhibits, at best, a great deal of naïveté.

“And you shall love the Lord your God” – let the Divine Name become beloved through you. If one studies Scripture and Mishnah and ministers to Torah scholars, and is honest in business and speaks pleasantly to others, what do people say about him? “Happy is his father who taught him Torah; happy is his teacher who taught him Torah; woe unto those who have not studied Torah. For this man has studied the Torah, look how fine his ways are, how righteous his deeds! Of him Scripture says: *“And He said unto me: You are My servant, Israel, in, whom I will be glorified.”*”

But one who studies Scripture and Mishnah and ministers to Torah scholars, but is dishonest in business and discourteous in his relations with people, what do people say about him? “Woe unto him who studied the Torah; woe unto his father who taught him Torah; woe unto his teacher who taught him Torah! For this man has studied the Torah, and look how corrupt are his deeds, how ugly his ways; of him Scripture says: *“In that men said of them: These are the people of the Lord, and are gone forth out of His land.”*” (Yoma 86a)

Am Yisrael represents God’s Name in the world to non-Jews. This view is, in fact, expressed many times in Tanach. On our own internal, Jewish stage, God’s Name is represented by anyone identified with Torah, to one degree or another.

The State of Israel has placed us, once again, in the public eye, in an almost-Biblical arena, but in a renewed light. Historical examples of unfettered corruption of the powerful abound, and our long exile is full of examples of the righteousness of the weak. But now, after 2,000 years of exile, we Jews are faced with the ultimate test of *kiddush Hashem*: Can we remain strong, standing firm among the nations, adopting a non-apologetic stance to defending ourselves, while at the same time striving for a just and good society,

one that sanctifies God's name both internally and to the world? A society that makes us proud, and inspires us as Torah Jews? These are my thoughts as the holiday of *Matan Torah* approaches.



Is There a Mitzvah to Remember Matan Torah?

◦ RABBANIT GILLA ROSEN

The mitzvah to remember the exodus from Egypt is central to our religious experience as Jews. There is even a mitzvah to remember on Succot our sojourn in the desert. Surely there should be a mitzvah to remember Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah! . And yet, that is not so clear. Shavuot is not explicitly tied in the Torah to Matan Torah. A verse in the Book of Dvarim seems to instruct us not to forget *Matan Torah*, but Maimonides does not include such a mitzvah in his Sefer Hamitzvot, his compendium which lists the 613 Mitzvot that, according to his count, are explicit in the written Torah (though Nahmanides does include such a mitzvah in his Emendations to Maimonides' work).

The verse in Dvarim reads:

רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך
ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיידך והודעתם לבניידך ולבני בניידך. יום אשר
עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחרב באמר ה' אלי הקהל לי את העם ואשמעם
את דברי אשר ילמדון ליראה אתי כל הימים אשר הם חיים על האדמה
ואת בנייהם ולמדון. (דברים ד, ט-י)

But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children;

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble the people for Me, and I will

RABBANIT GILLA
ROSEN

Yoetzet Halacha,
head of Yakar
Institutions, and
teaches Talmud at
Nishmat.

let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.

Nahmanides reads this verse as an injunction against forgetting the *experience* of Matan Torah, because our communal hearing of God's voice serves as a cornerstone for our belief in the authority of the mitzvot.

The second *mitzvah* is not to forget the Revelation at Sinai or to let it slip from our minds. Rather, our eyes and hearts must be turned to it at all times. Thus it is written (Devarim 4:9-10 "But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children: the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb..."). The intention here is a very important one – for had the Torah's words been transmitted to us solely through the Prophet, of blessed memory, even were his prophecy verified to us through signs and wonders, nonetheless should there one day arise another prophet or dreamer of dreams and command us to do the opposite of the Torah's instruction, giving a sign or proof, then the Torah would be understood as the second prophet says, or we would have doubts in our heart about it. But since the interpretation of the Torah comes to us [directly] from the Almighty's mouth to our ears, and our eyes behold that there is no intermediary, we will deny anyone who differs or casts doubt, and declare him false. No sign can help him, no proof shall save him from our hands – for we know and bear witness to his falseness and folly. (Ramban's glosses to Rambam's *Book of the Commandments*, omitted negative commandments).

The Sages of the Talmud, however, read the verses in Dvarim as a general injunction not to forget the *content* of Matan Torah – the Torah itself – rather than the *experience*. For example,

רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי משום רבי מאיר אומר: כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו, שנאמר (דברים ד') 'רק השמר לך ושמור נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך'. (מסכת אבות פרק ג משנה ח)

Rabbi Dostai son of Rabbi Yannai, in the name of Rabbi Meir, said: One who forgets [even] one detail from his Mishnah, the Torah considers him as if he warrants death, as it says (Devarim 4) Only take care, and

guard your life greatly, lest you forget the matters that your eyes saw.
 (Pirkei Avot Chapter 3, Mishnah 8)

Maimonides seems to understand that this Rabbinic commentary is not a homiletic elaboration on the verse in Dvarim but rather the essence of the commandment. It is Torah itself, rather than the experience of Matan Torah, that must not be forgotten.

Thus, there is no positive mitzvah to remember Matan Torah, and at best, according to Nachmanides, a prohibition to forget it. The latter is far less active and soul-stirring than a positive commandment to remember and to commemorate the event. Why is this?

I would like to suggest two possible understandings. The first involves the nature of the commandment to remember. When the Torah commands us to remember an event, the Torah is directing us not only to think about the event but to commemorate it verbally, as in Kiddush, which serves as our remembrance of God's creating the world in six days; and to relive it, as we do during the Seder or when sitting in the Succah. An event which can have no authentic parallel in our lives cannot be "remembered". (See, for instance, Netivot Shalom on Succot for further discussion of this idea.) The experience of redemption from Egypt, for example, has living parallels today. However, Matan Torah was a unique experience in the history of mankind. It must not be forgotten but it cannot be truly remembered by us, as Revelation at Sinai can have no parallel at any time afterwards.

Alternately, one might say just the opposite. We are not commanded to remember Matan Torah because we are continuously engaged in receiving the Torah. All of our Torah is a continuation of that moment at Sinai. A grandparent teaching a grandchild and a parent teaching a child reenact Matan Torah (See Berachot 21b). Furthermore, our *chiddushim* (unique insights) are the products of our individual souls' experiences at Mount Sinai. (See Exodus Rabbah 28:6). Thus we say in the daily Torah blessings that we recite in the Shacharit prayer, ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה, *Blessed are you, God, who gives the Torah. God gave Torah to us at Sinai, but continues to give the Torah to us today. How do we receive the Torah today? We have only to come and learn.*



In the Beginning There was Prophecy

◦ RABBI SHAY NAVE

The festival of Shavuot is also known as *The Festival of the Giving of the Torah*, but this title can be misleading and confusing. We tend to understand the word Torah to refer to something specific and defined: books, learning, intellect, the *bet midrash*, and so on. But is that the Torah we received at Shavuot?

A far more accurate name for this day, in my opinion, would be *The Day of the Revelation at Sinai*, rather than *The Day of the Giving of the Torah*. The *peshat*, straightforward meaning, of the texts discloses a very different picture from our usual definition of Torah.

In Shemot chapters 19-20, the Torah describes the preparations for the Revelation at Sinai and the Revelation itself. These verses convey a sense of awe on the part of the people, exaltedness and holiness – in a word, **prophecy**. At Sinai, each and every Jew was granted an intimate and direct encounter with the Divine presence.

The Sages of the Talmud, basing themselves on the *peshat*, deduce that *I am the Lord your God* and *You shall have no other god before Me* were both heard directly from God (Makkot 24a). That is to say, the first two commandments were heard by every Jew from the Almighty Himself. Hence, in the first two commandments, God addresses the people in first person, saying, *I am* the Lord ... and *You shall have no other gods before Me ...*, whereas the remainder



RABBI SHAY
NAVE

head of first-year
Israeli students at
Nishmat.

of the commandments refer to God in the third person, for example: For in six days *the Lord* made the heavens and the earth ... and not *I* made the heaven etc.

During the Exodus from Egypt, all of Israel witnessed the miracles, the ten plagues, the splitting of the sea, and the manna. Did the people, though, know and recognize the Being who was behind all of this? Possibly, rumors abounded – speculation and traditions may have come into play; yet, other than Moshe and Aharon, and perhaps Miriam, the exact identity of their redeemer remained unknown. We might compare this to a person who leaves gifts anonymously for another. Does the recipient know and recognize the benefactor? This only becomes possible once they have actually met. Thus too, it is only in the first commandment, when God comes to the people and tells them, *I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt*, that they finally know and understand who and what this Redeemer is.

Rambam writes in *Moreh Nevuchim* (Part II, end of chapter 32; chapter 33):

At the Sinaitic Revelation, all witnessed the great fire and heard the dreadful thunderings that caused such an extraordinary terror; but only those who were able were prophetically inspired – and even then, each one only according to his capacity ...

... What emerges from the verses and from the words of the sages is that at this Revelation, the Jews only heard one single sound, from which Moshe and all of Israel inferred [the first two commandments]: I am the Lord and You shall have no other, after Moshe transformed the sound into intelligible words for them.

According to Rambam, the words recorded in the Torah in the Ten Commandments are Moshe's words. The division into letters and words was carried out by the master of all prophets; nonetheless, each and every Jew personally experienced the encounter with God. What is the theme of the first two commandments? Faith and the unity of God's name. Each and every Jew perceived the unique, infinite Divine presence; but the exact, detailed wording was only grasped by a few, in Rambam's view.

At Sinai, God sought to elevate the entire people to the level of prophecy, but the nation was not ready for such a lofty Revelation, and appealed to Moshe:

And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the sound of the shofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away. And they said to Moses, Speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die. (Shemot 20, 15-16)

The people drew back from the Divine, wishing to appoint Moshe as their mediator. They felt threatened by this intimacy with God; and the consequence of their withdrawal was the sin of the golden calf, the need for a second set of tablets, and so on—with its concomitant advantages and disadvantages.

In Summation:

Shavuot is the festival of the giving of the Torah, but the meaning of the word, 'Torah' differs from our everyday usage. Shavuot returns us to a primal point, to the beginning of prophecy, to an intimacy from which we distanced ourselves, and it distanced itself from us. Shavuot reminds us of the magnitude of God's love and appreciation for us, and how great is the challenge of cleaving to the Divine. On Shavuot, too, we experience to a limited degree the loss of the great, intimate, stirring prophetic experience that has passed from the world.

The Torah study in which we engage is a substitute for direct encounter. We brought upon ourselves the *hastarat panim*, the hiding of God's face, and now what is left is for us to scrutinize time and again the ancient letter that our Beloved left for us; and thus we turn the Torah this way and that, delve into it, inhale its scent – and recall, and long for, that forgotten point of beginning.



“Hear O Israel”: What Must We Hear?

◦ MICHAL EFRATI

The first of the Ten Commandments is: “*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...*”

We understand how we can fulfill the other nine commandments – either by not transgressing the prohibitions (idolatry, murder, theft, and so on) or by obeying the positive commandments, to keep the Sabbath and honor our parents. But with regard to the first commandment, the question begs: How can we fulfill a commandment that lacks, as it does, any instruction to either act or refrain from acting?

We might posit that “*I am the Lord, your God*” is not an actual commandment, but rather a declarative statement, the basis for the nine commandments to follow: it is because “*I am the Lord*” that you must have no other gods, nor take My name in vain, and you must keep the Sabbath, and so on. Yet, I believe that we can discover a practical expression for the first commandment, and that this practical expression is to be found in the reading of the Shema.

“*Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.*” This one, brief sentence has become a symbol of Jewish faith, and indeed of the Jewish people through the ages. It accompanies our awaking in the morning and our retiring at night; it ushers a Jewish baby boy into this world, and escorts the dying Jew from it. Even the State of Israel decided long ago for its radio broadcasts to open each morning with the words *Shema Yisrael!*

MICHAL EFRATI

a 2nd-year fellow
in Nishmat's
Keren Ariel
Yoetzet Halacha
Program and
a Ra"mit at
Midreshet Ein
Hanatziv.

Why? What makes this statement so special? What message does it bear that is so powerful that it has become a symbol?

I will quote a number of interpretations, and then offer my own insight:

Rashi to Devarim 6:4, The Lord our God, the Lord is One

The Lord who is now our God and not the God of the other nations, He will at some future time be the one God, as it is written (Tzefaniah 3:9) "For then I will turn to the peoples a pure language that they may all call upon the name of the Lord," and it is further written (Zechariah 14:9) "On that day shall the Lord be one and His name one."

According to Rashi, the sentence is chronological. *The Lord our God* reflects the contemporary situation, while *the Lord is one* holds the future. The message of the *Shema Yisrael* declaration is that we aspire that all mankind will come to believe in God, and we strive for a universal unity of faith.

Rashbam to Devarim 6:4: The Lord our God

Hashem alone is our God, we have no other god besides Him. And thus, too, in Chronicles, "But as for us, the Lord is our God, and we have not forsaken Him." The meaning of this verse is: You worship golden calves, but for us, Hashem is our God and we have not forsaken him as the house of Yerovam did.

In Rashbam's view, the emphasis is on God's exclusivity, with an inward emphasis towards the people of Israel. What is important is that God be the sole deity for us, regardless of what occurs in other nations.

Or Hahayyim to Devarim 4:6: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God etc.

The reason for the doubling of the word The Lord, instead of simply writing The Lord our God is one, is because it refers to two aspects of

the Divine: one in which He is our God and the other in which He is one. This means that we accept his Divinity over us, and even if many deities existed, we would still only choose Hashem as our God – because of love of the good, the effective and the pleasing. Moreover, we love He who is one; there is no other God beside Him in the world. This [second] reason suffices [on its own] for us to commit and subjugate ourselves to Him and his commandments, even if the reasons for our choosing him as our God did not exist.

For the Or Hahayyim, the verse reflects two issues of equal importance, both reasons for accepting the yoke of Heaven. Firstly, He is our God – we chose Him because He is good; and this goodness means that we would have chosen Him even had there been other deities. The second is that He is one and singular, and there are not, in fact, other deities to choose from. Thus, neither part of the statement is less important than the other.

Sifre, cited in brief in Meshech Hochma to Devarim 6:4, Hear O Israel

Why does it say Israel? Because it is written, Speak to the children of Israel. It is not written, Speak to the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather, ‘Speak to the children of Israel.’ God’s Revelation was granted to our father Jacob’s children in the merit of his everpresent concern Woe is me, might chaff come from me, as it did from my forebears? From Abraham came Yishmael, and from Isaac came Esav my brother! When Jacob was dying, he assembled his sons ... and said to them: Do you have in your hearts any ambivalence regarding He Who Spoke and Created the World? They proclaimed to him: ‘Hear O Israel!’ Just as there is no ambivalence in your heart regarding He Who Spoke and Created the World, so too there is none in ours; indeed ‘The Lord our God the Lord is One!’

The Sages of the Sifre Midrash interpreted the words *Hear O Israel* as an assertion made by Jacob’s sons to their father. On his deathbed, when Jacob gathered his sons, they made a public declaration: Hear O Israel, our

father, we all believe in God! According to the Sifre, what distinguishes the sons of Israel is that they believe in God and publicize his name, and likewise, it is the Jewish people who unify the name of the Lord.

We have seen various interpretations and emphases. Is the focus upon the oneness of God? Or perhaps upon His being **our** God? Or perhaps both? Or perhaps on the uniqueness and excellence of Israel? What is the *Shema Yisrael's* primary message that has transformed the *Shema* into something so fundamental for the Jew?

To me, the *Shema's* quality lies precisely in the lack of resolution between differing meanings, for this preserves its relevance to each era, generation, situation, and person.

Sometimes the focus will be on the word *one*, on God being one and no more: for the Jewish people find themselves among nations who believe in multiple gods, but we challenge such beliefs with the declaration: *The Lord is One!*

Sometimes we emphasize the word *our* God. This one God is ours, not others'. There are many who would claim the singularity of their own god; and all claim that their god, their truth, are the one and only god and one and only truth. To them we declare: We have our own truth, and your beliefs are irrelevant to us!

Sometimes Jews will proclaim the word *Hashem, the Lord*, when loyalty to God is challenged.

And sometimes we will cry, whisper or utter the words, *Hear O Israel!*

Which generation are we? What is the word that we need to place in bold lettering? What are the messages we need to stress?

I don't know. And perhaps the point is not the generation's interpretation of the verse, but rather that of each individual. Each of us can ask: What is meaningful for me? What message do I want to bring to the world? One thing is certain: the answer is to be found in the words, *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.*



Strengthening our Relationship with Hashem

◦ DR. KAREN KIRSHENBAUM

An unusual word occurs in the Torah's description of the covenant between Israel and God:

You האמרת the Lord this day to be your God... and the Lord האמירך this day to be a special people. (Devarim 26: 17-18)

What does this singular word, “האמרת,” mean?

Rashi explains האמיר – separated and differentiated because of [their] importance, praised. That is to say that God separated the people of Israel from all the peoples, and the people of Israel differentiated God from foreign gods.

Onkelos translates – “God, blessed be He, חטב this day those who would have [Him as] his God... and God חטב this day those He would have as a beloved nation.”

What is the meaning of the word חטב? Some explain it based on the word לחטוב [to hew], which resembles in meaning the word לכרות [to cut] – just as one hews and cuts wood, so does one cut [establish] a covenant between Israel and God.

Jastrow, in his dictionary, explains חטב as “falling in love,” from the Arabic root HTV, meaning “to propose marriage.”

Rav Baruch Epstein in his commentary *Torah Temimah*, explains the word האמיר in the context of the *Mishna* in tractate *Yevamot*: “עשה בה מאמר” [He made a declaration of betrothal] – that is to say that a man betrothed his [dead and childless brother's widow, who is to be his] wife in a levirate marriage.

DR. KAREN
KIRSHENBAUM

holds a PhD in Talmud. She is the author of 'Furniture of the Home in the Mishnah' recently published by Bar-Ilan University Press, and teaches Mishnah at Nishmat and other venues.

According to all the opinions, a kind of marriage covenant has been established between God and the people of Israel. After the partners, as it were, have chosen each other from all others, and have praised and lauded each other, they “marry” and became absolutely obligated to each other.

As is well known, newlyweds initially experience great enthusiasm for each other; but if they fail to work on strengthening their connection, it is liable to wane after a while. A couple that wants to raise itself above the mundane requires, first of all, an awareness that each partner must work to keep the flame of passion alive, and must be willing to try to grow closer and to strengthen their connection. This holds true in our connection to God too.

Prior to the festival of *Matan Torah*, we examine our marriage connection to God and contemplate how we can fix and improve it, repenting and worshipping God with passion rather than from habit. As we learn from the declaration of *vidui maasrot* [the declaration of having properly distributed *allteruma* and *maaser* produce by the appointed time] in the parsha of Ki Tavo (Devarim 26:13), “*I did not stray from your commandments, and I did not forget...*” The Gerer Rebbe, in his commentary, *Sfat Emet*, explains, “I did not violate the commandments, and I did not forget You who commanded me to keep them, for I did not keep the commandments from habit.” That is to say that I did not keep the commandments routinely, but rather out of enthusiasm. When the commandments seem new to you, you observe them enthusiastically.

Parshat Nitzavim is always read before *Rosh Hashanah*, and the idea of return recurs as a motif in the parshah:

...And you will return to your heart... And you will return to the Lord your God... and God will return your exiles [those who return] and will have mercy on you and return and gather you... and you will return and listen to the voice of God... for God will return to rejoice over you in goodness... for you will return to the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul.

The root שׁוּב [return] indicates movement. We are always in motion! We must be sure that our movement is in the right direction, truly moving toward God, constituting true repentance [return] for the sake of heaven. We cannot tread water. We are always moving, even when we are not aware of the fact! As Hillel

the Elder declared in *Pirkei Avot* 1:13, “*He who does not increase, decreases.*” A person who does not continue studying, forgets what he or she has learned. This person continues to be active, but is actively forgetting. Either we learn all the time, or we forget all the time. There are no plateaus. We either move forward in our fear of heaven or we fall back!

In our Torah learning in the seminary, we recognize this same movement, indicating motivation, dynamism and progress. Before the festival, we are required to consider our connection with God, to return to Him, and to renew and sharpen our covenant with Him so that we can merit the fulfillment the words of the verse (Hoshea 2: 22-23), “*And I will betroth you [to me] forever... and I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you will know the Lord*” and the verse (Yeshayahu 62:5), “*As the groom rejoices over the bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*”

With blessings for a happy Shavuot!



10

The Chosen People

◦ RABBI RE'EM HACHOHEN

The drought hit Israel hard. For three years, not a drop had fallen, as foretold by the prophet. In the third year, Eliahu summoned all Israel, and the prophets of the Ba'al, to Mt. Carmel. There, on the mount, fire came down from heaven and consumed Eliahu's altar, along with his offering, its wood and stones, and the water he had poured around the altar. The nation was unable to remain impassive in the face of such astonishing revelation, and Eliahu rose against the prophets of Ba'al and slaughtered them all in the Kishon river. Eliahu built his altar from twelve stones, corresponding to the twelve tribes of the sons of Yaakov, as a prerequisite to revelation.

Eliahu's altar was not the first altar to be built in this way: In Parshat Mishpatim, we read about the second part of Revelation on Mt. Sinai. Just as Eliahu did in his time, Moshe erected an altar of twelve stones, *for the twelve tribes of Israel* (Shemot 24, 4), brought offerings upon it, and established a covenant between the people and God. After bringing the offerings and establishing the covenant, Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai for a second time. Moshe built the altar and established the covenant *before* ascending the mountain, and in so doing, he gave expression to a profound principle: The relationship between humanity and God is dependent on human deeds, and these deeds constitute a covenant – which is to say, mutual action between the two sides. A covenant is a voluntary undertaking, and each side can violate it. This is precisely Eliahu's claim: *I have been very zealous for God, Lord of Hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned your covenant.* The



RABBI RE'EM
HACHOHEN

Rosh Yeshiva of
Yeshivat Otniel,
and teaches
Jewish Thought at
Nishmat.

relationship that Eliahu describes is a voluntary one, a covenantal relationship, and his claim is that Israel has abandoned its side of the agreement, *and I am left all alone*.

These words of Eliahu's are not said on Mt. Carmel; his complaint about the abandonment of the covenant is spoken on Mt. Horev, in the place where God revealed Himself to the People so many years prior. In answer to Eliahu's complaint, God brings him out and stands him on the mountain, *before God*, and there, God passes before him in wind, earthquake, fire, and a still, small voice. This situation, in which a prophet stands before God on Mt. Horev and God reveals Himself to him in these ways, reminds us, and Eliahu himself, of a similar situation – that of the first revelation on Mt. Sinai, the revelation described in our Parshah: *And it was on the third day in the morning that there was thunder and lightning, and thick cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the shofar, exceedingly loud*. These words demand clarification: Why does God remind Eliahu of the first revelation at Sinai? How does that revelation constitute an answer to his complaint?

If we compare the description of Revelation in our Parshah (Chapter 19) to the one in the following Parshah (Chapter 24), we will see that while resembling each other in many ways, they differ fundamentally. Both descriptions feature an altar, and in both places, Moshe ascends the mountain and God descends toward him, but the order of events is different: in the revelation described in Chapter 24, as we have seen, human beings act prior to revelation, and Moshe ascends the mountain before God reveals Himself to him in the cloud: *And Moshe ascended the mountain, and the mountain was covered in cloud*. This order of events teaches us, as we have seen, that humanity has an independent and central role in establishing a relationship with God – a relationship that expresses a covenantal partnership. However, in the Revelation described in Chapter 19, none of this exists: God is revealed in thunder and lightning, the people are afraid and remain in the camp, and Moshe is called to the mountain only after God has revealed Himself to him. The entire unfolding of events emphasizes the nullity of humanity and the omnipotence of God, creating a completely different kind of connection. In this type of connection, there is no mutual relationship between the two sides, but rather the choosing of one,

weaker, side by the other – a choice completely unconnected to the actions or will of the weaker side.

When Eliahu claims before God that he alone remains faithful, and that the people chose to violate the covenant and to abandon all connection with God, God reminds him that beyond the kind of relationship described in Chapter 24, there is an additional relationship model. The connection between Am Yisrael and God is made up of two different, and even contradictory, relationship models: On the one hand, there is a covenant entered into by two sides that can be violated. On the other hand, there is the relationship that was expressed in the first Revelation – that of God's fundamental choice of Am Yisrael, independent of the people's action or will. Even if you function and operate under the assumption of autonomy and freedom of choice on a daily basis, God tells Eliahu, do not forget that a connection that cannot be breached exists between us. This connection exists above and beyond the depths to which humanity can sink and the extent to which humanity can deteriorate. It is a connection based on God's fundamental choice of Am Yisrael. *He who chose us from among all the nations, and gave us His Torah.*



11

Ingesting Torah

◦ ADI BITTER

The custom of staying up to learn on *Shavuot* night is widespread today. Many synagogues have *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* programs, with speakers and learning options for congregants of every age, through the night. Learning on *Shavuot* night is a custom, not a law, first mentioned in the Zohar (*Introduction to Zohar*, folio 8a). It appears that in earlier centuries, only the Kabbalists were involved in this learning. By the 16th century, however, Rabbi Chaim Vital speaks of it as a more widespread custom (*Sha'ar Hakavanot, Drushei Chag Hashavuot, Drush Aleph*).

The earliest sources mention the practice in preparation for receiving the Torah from G-d. In theory, this is admirable. In practice, however, many find it challenging to retain anything they learn that night, and they end up sleeping all day as well. Would it not make more sense to get a good night's sleep and spend productive hours learning during the day? Each person will choose what is most meaningful for them personally. However, the following are some thoughts on the value of learning on *Shavuot* night, despite the fact that the Torah learned then might not be retained.

ADI BITTER

Yoetzet Halacha,
teaches Talmud at
Nishmat.

The Talmud (*Tamid* 32b) states that one who studies Torah at night merits the *Shekhinah's* presence while learning, as the verse in *Eichah* (2:19) implies:

קומי רוני בלילה לראש אשמורות, שפכי כמים לבך נוכח פני ה'

*Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the watches;
pour out thy heart like water before the face of the L-rd. (JPS
translation).*

Rambam (Maimonides) cites this verse as well when he asserts the value of learning Torah at night (*Hilbot Talmud Torah*, 3:13). Often, the study of Torah can be an intellectual exercise. Rambam, following the sages of the Talmud, brings instead an emotionally evocative verse to support learning Torah at night. He and they speak to the emotional component of learning – the fact that the learning, regardless of the technical content, is a means of building our emotional relationship with G-d.

A common experience can highlight the reality that ambiance can sometimes leave a more lasting impression than actual content. When a couple goes out on a date at a nice restaurant, they presumably enjoy the meal. Months down the line, however, the value of that date lies not in the quality of the food, but rather in their choice to make time in their schedules to spend time alone together, to invest in their relationship and their commitment to each other. The date was significant in fostering emotional intimacy through conversation, with the restaurant setting conducive to creating that type of intimacy. Their enjoyment of the food was presumably short-lived, but the experience left a far more meaningful mark.

Learning on *Shavuot* night is a date with G-d, as it were. We sit in an environment conducive to fostering the emotional component of our relationship with Him. As we ingest G-d's Torah, we certainly enjoy it. Though the content may not be retained, we recognize that long after the cognitive impression of what we learned is gone, the emotional intimacy with G-d lingers. We have invested in the relationship by choosing to stay awake learning and have become closer to G-d through that investment. That emotional connection prepares us for receiving the Torah. Learning Torah cannot be an intellectual exercise alone, as service of G-d would be problematic without a relationship with Him. On *Shavuot* night, we become ripe for receiving the Torah and committing ourselves anew to the lifestyle commanded by His laws.

A verse in *Tehillim* (40:9) epitomizes this notion:

לעשות רצונך אלקי חפצתי, ותורתך בתוך מעי

I delight to do Thy will, O my G-d; yea, Thy law is in my inmost parts.
(JPS translation).

The Psalmist correlates between the intense desire to do G-d's will and the internalization of the Torah. The "inmost parts," the מעיים, are literally intestines. As in the experience of eating, we taste the food itself, but it then becomes part and parcel of our being, as our body digests it and uses it as building blocks. Lastly, the experience of eating, when done mindfully in the proper ambiance, provides far more than the calorie count of the food.

As we prepare for *Shavuot*, regardless of whether each of us has the luxury or the desire to stay awake learning at night, the message embodied by the custom is relevant to all. May we be blessed with the ability to ingest and internalize the Torah that we learn, and benefit from the encounter on all its levels - fueling our minds and our souls as we commit ourselves to fostering a meaningful relationship with G-d and a resolve to walk in His ways.



12 The Megillah of Hese

◦ RABBI CHAIM NAVON

The Book of Ruth is filled with *hesed*. From the outset, Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, “*The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me*” (Ruth 1:8). The rest of the *megillah* concentrates on the great *hesed* shown by Boaz to Ruth (and to Naomi).

Precisely what kind of *hesed* is referred to here, though? Today, many would argue that the responsibility for social welfare should lie solely with the state; but there is no state in the Book of Ruth. This, of course, is not necessarily a value statement, simply historical fact. Yet the heroes of the Book of Ruth do not seem particularly to be lacking a state – and that, unquestionably, is a value statement.

The events in the *megillah* occur “*in the days when the judges ruled*” (Ruth 1:1). The Book of Judges twice mentions the absence of a strong king: “*In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes*” (Shoftim 17:6, 21:25). But, notwithstanding that it deals with the ancestors of King David, in the Book of Ruth no one seems to particularly feel the want of a sovereign; and certainly no impression is given that under such circumstances an uncouth, uncontrolled lawlessness reigns in Israel.

Yet, while the *hesed* in the Book of Ruth is not of a national and collective nature, neither is it individualistic and private. The mutual aid is not given on an arbitrary, individual basis, with a



RABBI CHAIM
NAVON

director of the
Dr. Monique C.
Katz Beit Midrash
Hevratl at Nishmat
rabbi of Kehillat
Shimshoni in
Modi'in and also
teaches in other
institutions.

random donor helping random needy people. What we have here differs from this model. In Naomi's words, her daughters-in-law do *hese*, "with the dead and with me," referring to the warm, nurturing relationship between them and their husbands, and with her, too.

Likewise, Boaz, who must come to Ruth's aid, is not helping some anonymous pauper. The book specifically indicates that Boaz is "a man of wealth, of the family of Elimelech" (Ruth 2:1). When Ruth asks Boaz to marry her, he replies immediately: "Although it is true that I am your close kinsman, there is a kinsman closer than I." (Ruth 3:12). The aid given – the act of "redeeming" – is derived from family relations and a sense of belonging, and the option to do so must therefore first be offered to a closer relative. Though initially willing, that relative ultimately steps back, passing the right of redemption to Boaz.

The Book of Ruth presents to us a community of *hese*, Beit Lechem, in the days when the judges ruled. In this community, no one is left to die in poverty. The community remembers well the injunction, "Charity begins at home." The poor gather from their neighbors' fields and find their sustenance there. Community members offer mutual aid and assistance, on the basis of the bonds existing between them and within converging circles of family ties.

In his book *Created Equal*, Dr. Joshua Berman notes that the Torah's complex socio-economic mechanism of *shemita* and *yovel* is not conducted through a centralized management system. Rather, the community itself oversees the return of lands to their owners. In contrast with other ancient Near East societies, the Torah weakens the centralized power of the sovereign and increases the power of the community. In "the house of slavery," Egypt, all lands belonged to Pharaoh (Bereshit chapter 47), and this was a common practice in many ancient Near East lands. The Book of Ruth describes the alternative: an independent, proud community of farmer-landowners, helping each other and supporting the less fortunate.

With the development of the welfare state in the modern world, free communities have increasingly abdicated responsibility for the burden of *hese* and mutual aid, supposing that the state will provide. In practice, however, the state's ability is limited in scope: state bureaucrats cannot necessarily ascertain who genuinely needs the help, and cannot always grant the type of help needed, as this might transcend the financial realm. No state institution, for example, could have helped Ruth to find a mate.

The challenge that lies before us today is one of reviving communities – and in this sense, too. Can we restore the former Jewish custom of placing all *hesed* activities in the hands of local community volunteers? Can we restore the recognition that a community is obligated to provide for its needy? I do not know whether we can succeed in these aims, but from the Book of Ruth I learn how vital this challenge is.



Betrothal and Marriage in the Book of Ruth

◦ DR. TOVA GANZEL

We can reconstruct an accepted process of betrothal—an established set of circumstances and order of events— from both the Biblical narrative and from Midrashic sources and traditional commentators. These are presented as follows by a contemporary scholar, Robert Alter:¹ The future bridegroom typically travels to a foreign country, where he meets a “maiden.” This bride is found beside the well, as the daughter of so-and-so; and the maiden (or maidens) runs home to break the news of the stranger’s arrival. The excitement generated by this encounter is demonstrated by the verbs *maber* (hurry) and *rutz* (run). Finally – and, in most cases, following an invitation to dine with the family – the betrothal between stranger and maiden is approved.

Of course, each betrothal has its own distinctive flavor, reflecting the particular relationship between the two partners. Both the anticipated narrative components and the distinctive flavor of Yithak and Rivka’s relationship are reflected in the encounter between Avraham’s servant and Rivka at the well in Aram-Naharaim (Bereshit 24:10-66). Yitzhak is notably absent from the scene, the sole case where not the groom, but rather his agent, meets the maiden at the well. Interestingly, this is the only Biblical narrative where the maiden herself draws water from the well without the aid of either the prospective groom or his agent. Rivka’s initiative at



DR. TOVA
GANZEL

graduate of the
first class of Keren
Ariel at Nishmat.
She heads the
Midrasha for
Women at Bar
Ilan University.

1 The Art of Biblical Narrative, New York, 1981.

the well, as well as the passivity expressed by Yitzhak's absence, both foretells events-to-come in their relationship in later years.

Yaakov's encounter with Rachel at the well (Bereshit 29:1-20) likewise anticipates the flavor of their married life. Yaakov arrives bearing only his staff, without gifts. This well is located outside the village, anticipating the life he and his wives will lead beside his flocks. The terse questions and answers in this encounter with the young shepherds foreshadow the occasions during his life when he will need to act hastily and forcefully.

Another example is Moshe who, in Shemot 2:15-21, flees to Midian and meets the seven daughters of Reuel at the well. Zipporah is barely noticeable at this juncture; she is simply one of the seven maidens at the well. Here too Zipporah's early posture reflects her later role vis-à-vis Moshe, when the Torah shares little information about Zipporah or about her place at Moshe's side. In contrast to this stands Reuel; his prominent role in the initial encounter is repeated in the later interactions between Moshe and Jethro.

These comparisons highlight the process of betrothal in the Book of Ruth:

The first encounter between Ruth and Boaz takes place in the field, where she is collecting the remains of the harvest (Chapter 2). Boaz inquires, "*Whose maiden is this?*" Ruth is the leading character; a heroine, not a hero. Her native land is Moab, and the "foreign soil" on which she is meeting her future mate, likewise near a well, is the land of Judah. Boaz mistakes her for a "maiden," but in truth she is a widow.

These details converge to demand extraordinary courage from Ruth. Ruth is a woman alone, no one runs to greet her, she has no father to inform of the news, and the meeting takes place in a foreign land. The hardship of the circumstances highlight Ruth's strength of character and the *hesed* that runs as a thread through Ruth and Boaz's relationship, on both their parts.

Boaz tells Ruth, during their first encounter in the field:

May the Lord will reward your endeavor, and may your compensation be complete from the Lord, God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. (Ruth 2:12)

Boaz's ability to relate to Ruth, and his generosity, reflect not only the recognition that Ruth's actions deserve reward by God, but also the standard that he believes God demands of him. Their betrothal signifies the choice of a life of *hesed* by both partners.



The Book of Ruth Needs Manoah: The Death of Arrogance, The Birth of Compassion

◦ AYALA FRIEDMAN

The Book of Ruth opens with the deaths of members of the Elimelech family, in the days when the judges ruled; and it ends in redemption and the birth of the progenitor of the Davidic dynasty. It is, therefore, a transitional link between two eras: one about to end, and one just beginning.

The Sages express this idea of transitional link in a cameo, describing Ruth as entering Bet Lehem on the day that Boaz's wife was buried:

... On that day, Boaz's wife died, and all the townsfolk gathered together to pay their respects. While all were engaged with this, Ruth came in with Naomi: this one departs and that one arrives.... (Ruth Rabbah Chapter 3)

The Sages, in Midrash Ruth Rabbah, attempted to identify the judges in whose days the seeds for the Davidic dynasty were sown. Noting that the word “judges” occurs in the plural, they considered the judges who ruled together, such as Barak and Devorah, or Shamgar and Ehud. The Talmud Bavli (Bava Batra 91a), on the other hand, held that Boaz of the Book of Ruth was none other than the judge Ivtzan from Bet Lehem, and it was during his day that the story took place. The interpretation in the Talmud was subsequently adopted by Rashi, Radak and Ralbag in their respective commentaries to Shoftim,



AYALA
FRIEDMAN

PhD candidate
in Tanach at Bar
Ilan University and
teaches Tanach
at Nishmat and
elsewhere.

Ivtzan Equals Boaz: What Does This Teach Us?

Ivtzan is mentioned in Judges Chapter 12. Not much is told about him, except that he sired an impressively large family:

And he had thirty sons, and thirty daughters, whom he sent abroad, and took in thirty daughters from abroad for his sons. And he judged Israel for seven years. (Shoftim 12:9)

Apparently Ivtzan of Beit Lehem was one of the town's notables and was a man of means who was able to raise sixty children. Apparently his large family enjoyed extensive social connections, for he married off all his sons and daughters in his lifetime. Thus Rada"k writes:

... In recording the marriages of his sons and daughters, the narrative wishes to inform us of his great success in that he married them all off in his lifetime...

Ralba"g, in line with the Midrash in the Talmud, explains the identification of Boaz with Ivtzan as follows:

And because Boaz seems, from context, to have been a judge in Israel, and moreover he hailed from Bet Lehem, which no other judge did, our rabbis determined that Ivtzan and Boaz are one. And this is correct. (Ralbag to Shoftim 12:8).

Our Sages went on to ask what the identification of these two men as one and the same personality represents:

Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rav: Ivtzan is Boaz. What does this statement come to teach us?

And now the Talmud cites a very odd tale:

Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, *"And he [Ivtzan] had thirty sons, and thirty daughters, whom he sent abroad, and took in thirty daughters from abroad for his sons. And he judged Israel seven years."*

In the case of each, he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law; but to not one of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, “Whereby will the barren mule repay me?”

Therefore, all these children died in his lifetime.

It is [regarding such a case as] this that people say: “Of what use to you was having sixty children? Have just one who is more agile than sixty!”

According to this interpretation, this Ivtzan is our elderly Boaz, back in his youth. The successful judge Ivtzan, the Midrash tells us, lost all of his children, and his joy turned to grief. When we meet him in the Book of Ruth, he is in his “second phase”: old and wealthy, but without children. And all of this came upon him because, having made a hundred and twenty wedding feasts as a young man (two for each child: perhaps the engagement party, and the wedding), he failed to invite the childless Manoah, who was later to father Shimshon, to a single celebration. Ivtzan coldly calculated that Manoah, since he was childless, could never reciprocate Ivtzan’s invitation. An invitation to Manoah would not yield any profit. Ivtzan condemned Manoah to suffer, alongside his childlessness, the added indignity of social marginalization.

Manoah was not counted; lacking children, he was considered as a dead person – like a *manoah*, literally, a deceased individual.

But nothing lasts forever, and the wheel turns again. Radak identifies the one agile son of the Midrash, who is superior to sixty, with Shimshon, son of Manoah. True, Ivtzan had numerous children, but they left no mark, neither in life nor in death. In contrast, Manoah’s only son saved Israel through both his life and his death. Therefore, let not a man who has many children gaze haughtily upon one who has none.

Rashbam, in his commentary to Bava Batra, offers a different understanding of the Midrash’s comparison between one son and sixty. He takes it as referring to Boaz’s earlier days as Ivtzan, and his later life as Ruth’s redeemer:

Have just one who is more agile than sixty – this is Oved, fruit of the union between Boaz and Ruth, and from him was descended David, King of Israel.

According to this Talmudic reconstruction, the Book of Ruth emerges not only out of the ruins of Elimelech’s family, but also those of Ivtzan. Ivtzan is Elimelech’s “twin” from the perspective of the Midrash in terms of parsimony,

and Naomi's "twin" in terms of bereavement. The two prosperous families from the era of the judges were, in their latter years, on the verge of extinction, due to selfishness. Elimelech abandoned responsibility for his impoverished fellow townsfolk during the famine, closing his eyes to their distress; while Ivtzan abandoned responsibility for the plight of Manoah, his neighbor.

My daughter, shall I not seek a resting-place for you?

Manoah's presence in the Midrash stems from the juxtaposition of the two contrasting stories of Ivtzan and Manoah in Shoftim (Chapters 12 and 13), as Radak notes. However, Manoah's appearance there may also be related to the word *manoah*, i.e. resting-place or home, spoken by Naomi to Ruth her daughter-in-law:

My daughter, shall I not seek a resting-place for you, that it may be well with you? (Ruth 3:1)

A breadwinning husband, particularly in Biblical times when women did not work outside the home, provides for the family a place of calm and restfulness as Naomi said earlier:

May the Lord grant you that you will find rest [menuhah], each of you in the home of her husband. (Ruth 1:9)

Ruth's *manoah*, i.e., resting-place, turns out to be none other than Boaz, the man who, through hard times, has been transformed from Ivtzan to a kind of 'Manoah' himself, a man destitute of children. And so it happens that Boaz meets a young widow in his fields, and she is childless just as he is.

In a departure from the birth-and-marriage factory of Ivtzan, the Book of Ruth presents the effort involved in rehabilitation and in the attempt to bear a single son for Naomi, through Ruth-rehabilitation that would not have been possible had Boaz not learned from his trials.

Ivtzan, who in his youth neglected to invited Manoah to one hundred and twenty festive meals for his children, in his twilight years proffered to Ruth

the humble yet filling meal of his reapers. Boaz's empathy was awakened after hearing of Ruth's kindnesses to her mother-in-law. Their shared meal led to the breakdown of the barriers separating the prosperous aristocrat, and the foreign, indigent and inexperienced maiden. From the encounter between the two, during which Ruth made her presence felt in his field, with in the strength of her soul – from this emerged redemption for both the poor woman and the wealthy man.

The rabbinic description of Boaz as the rectified reincarnation of Ivtzan exposes the chief moral blight in the era of the judges: that each tribe focused on its own narrow patch of heaven, blind to the distress of its neighbors. The men of Gevah in Binyamin abandoned the man of Beit Lehem and his concubine to the wolves of the street. Thus the Book of Shoftim ends with the brutal death of a nameless concubine and a tribe that reached the brink of extinction. This is the culmination of the creeping process of privatization of society, that began back at the death of Yehoshua, who was buried north of the “mountain of Ga'ash”:

And what is the mountain of “Ga'ash”? Israel were too preoccupied [*nitgaashu*] to pay proper respects to Yehoshua following his death. At that time Eretz Yisrael was being parceled out, and they became unduly absorbed in the parcelization. All Israel were occupied with their tasks: one with his field, another with his vineyard, another with his olives, and still another with quarrying stones. They therefore neglected to pay respects to Yehoshua after his death, and so the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to shake up the world upon its inhabitants. (Preamble to Ruth Rabbah, 2)

As mentioned, the Sages depict Ruth entering Bet Lehem as the entire community was caught up in mourning the death of Boaz's wife. This stands in stark contrast to the days following the death of Yehoshua, when his death was hardly noticed while all were caught up in their own affairs. This communal mourning marks the beginning of the redemption.

With the deaths of his children, according to the Sages, Ivtzan's selfishness died too. With the death of Boaz's wife, the apathy of the townsfolk died too. Thus, during the Period of the Judges, a spark was kindled that would lead later to redemption. In this spirit, the Talmud Yerushalmi, Ketuvot Chapter 1, writes:

Moshe established the seven days of feasting and the seven days of mourning, but established no such rule for the widow.

Though you say he established no such law for the widow, we learn that a benediction is required [at her wedding ceremony] from Boaz, as it says:

And Boaz took ten men of the elders of the town... (Ruth 4:2)

R. Lazar of the school of Rabbi Yossi said: From here we learn that the bridegroom's blessing requires a minyan.

R. Yuda bar Pazi said: This applies not only in the case of a never-married man marrying a maiden, but also when a widower marries a widow. We learn this from Boaz and Ruth, who were both widowed.

The Midrash describes Boaz's sensitivity to Ruth, stemming from the deep identification of a widower with a widow, but also of the rich with the poor. Boaz, through small gestures, a protective attitude and a handful of barley to satisfy a weary soul, shaped a new language of caring and appreciation; a language that could cause a genuine transformation and bring a fresh wind to blow in the world.

The Book of Ruth begins, if so, with the death of the arrogance and parsimony that characterized the era of the Judges, traits that led to cruelty, alienation and a land without *manoah*, rest. In their place were born new encounters and conversations flowing from seeing the other, seeing the good, from compassion and sensitivity. Without these seeds of unity, Israel's future might not have been.

And if you will it, it is no legend.



Between the Festival of Shavuot and Megillat Ruth

◦ RABBI DAVID SABATO

One of the more widely-known reasons given for reading Megillat Ruth on Shavuot is brought by the *Abudraham*: “On Shavuot, it is the tradition to read Megillat Ruth because it says ‘*At the beginning of the barley harvest...*’ and it [Shavuot] is [during] the time of the harvest.”

This explanation appears purely technical, we read on Shavuot because of the association in time of year. I believe there is greater meaning in the link between the harvest season and Shavuot, and the events described in the Megillah.

The first encounter between Boaz and Ruth, in Boaz’s field, reads:

And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, Let me now go to the field, and glean stalks of grain after him in whose eyes I shall find favor. And she said to her, Go, my daughter. (Ruth 2:2)

Here, Ruth is called “Ruth the Moabite,” emphasizing her status as foreigner in Beit Lehem. Lacking alternatives, she initiates the plan to go to the field to glean grain. There emerges a gloomy picture of two widows, lacking all economic support, who must turn to the charitable institutions of the period, namely the mitzvah to leave gifts for the poor in the field, and in particular, the mitzvah of *leket*, leaving fallen stalks for the poor to gather. The mitzva of *leket* appears for the first time in parshat Kedoshim, in Vayikra 19:9-10:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not complete the reaping of the corner of your field, neither shall you gather the gleaning of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard,



RABBI DAVID
SABATO

a PhD candidate in Talmud at Hebrew University, and teaches Tanach and Talmud at Nishmat, Hebrew University, and elsewhere.

neither shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.

Here we have two parallel sets of *mitzvot*, one in the field and one in the vineyard. Their goal is spelled out in the verses: to leave part of the harvest for the poor. But why in the corner of the field, and why the fallen stalks of grain? Aside from critical aid to the poor and to the stranger, this mitzvah has an additional goal, which emerges from its repetition in the portion relating to the festivals in Vayikra 23:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not complete the reaping of the corner of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor, and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.

The repetition is strange, first because the *mitzvot* of setting aside part of the harvest for the poor are not concerned with the festivals; and second, they are an almost identical rendition of the earlier verses in Chapter 19. The repetition appears to be aimed at underlining a different aspect of the mitzvah. The section begins with these words:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, "When you come into the land which I give to you, and reap its harvest, you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the Cohen."

The harvest season is, in fact, "bookended" by two *mitzvot*. The *mitzvah* of the *omer*, the sheaf of first-harvested grains brought to the Temple, opens the harvest. The *mitzvah* of *leket* completes the harvest cycle: "*And when you reap the harvest... you shall not **complete** the reaping of the corner of your field.*" Presenting the first-grains to God acknowledges that He is the One who grants us the crop. Leaving the final section of the field and the last stalks for the poor loosens our grip on our property, enabling one to realize that he is, in fact, only a trustee for his property. The field-owner does not hand over charity; rather the poor have the right to enter the field and take what is rightfully theirs.

As the story of Ruth unfolds, these *mitzvot* come to life before our eyes. The harvest-period in Megillat Ruth is identical with the harvest-period described in Vayikrah, the period of counting of the Omer. Thus, we read at the end of Chapter 1:

Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, with her, who returned out of the field of Moab – and they came to Bet Lehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

while Chapter 2 ends with

“...the end of the barley harvest and of the wheat harvest.”

Following Ruth’s arrival in his field, Boaz came to his field, apparently to supervise the harvest. He asked his foreman

Whose maiden is this?

The foreman describes Ruth as a Moabite, quoting her:

And the foreman who supervised the reapers answered and said: “It is the Moabite maiden who came back with Naomi from the field of Moab; and she said: ‘Let me glean, please, and gather after the reapers among the sheaves’. She came, and has continued from morning until now, scarcely spending any time in the hut.

The foreman emphasizes her foreignness. He implies that her gleaning violates the *halachah* entitling the poor to glean single stalks; Ruth, in his opinion, is attempting to gather whole sheaves rather than individual stalks. He describes Ruth as gleaning continuously, without pause; perhaps seeking to point out her greed. Boaz, the wealthy landowner, is at the top of the social ladder, followed by his foreman and then by the workers. The young women gleaners are at the bottom of the social ladder, with Ruth even lower than them, for she is new and a foreigner.

Boaz’s reaction is the reverse of the harsh criticism of his foreman:

Then said Boaz to Ruth: “Do you not hear, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither pass from hence, but abide here fast by my young

women. Let your eyes be on the field that they reap, and go after them; have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.”

From atop the hierarchy, Boaz turns directly to Ruth, on the bottom rung of the social ladder. He addresses Ruth by name, without mention of her birthplace or foreignness. He calls her “*my daughter*,” as Naomi did earlier. Evidently Boaz interprets Ruth’s behavior differently than his foreman did: Ruth works incessantly not because of greed but rather because of discomfort with her place as a foreigner. Boaz emphasizes the appropriateness of her activity: she will glean with the other young women, and she will drink with the other workers. Boaz also understands that Ruth would make an easy victim for abuse by the workers in the open field. Indeed, in Tanach, the field is the most common arena for rape (see Devarim 22:27). Boaz therefore orders the workers to keep their distance, and assures Ruth that he has done so.

Ruth herself is astonished by the recognition and the kindness:

Then she fell on her face, and bowed down to the ground, and said to him: “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take cognizance of me, seeing that I am a foreigner?”

Boaz’s response stands in contrast with the foreman’s description:

And Boaz answered and said to her: “It has fully been told me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you left your father and your mother, and the land of your birthplace, and came to a people that you knew not before. May the Lord reward your work, and may your reward be complete from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Boaz emphasizes her selflessness and the difficulty of leaving of home and birthplace for a foreign land. He recognizes her kindness and her religious faith. He doesn’t pass the responsibility for her reward to God, but sees it as his duty as well to reward her and to alleviate her alienation or even social ostracism. At meal-time, Boaz calls Ruth and breaks the loaf of bread himself to give Ruth a generous portion. Following the ways of the patriarch Abraham,

Boaz spoke initially only of drinking, but in practice, brought Ruth the very meal he himself was eating.

Hence, two very different ways of observing the *mitzvot* regarding the portions of the poor are sketched out in the Megillah. The first is expressed in the words of the foreman, suspicious and hostile toward a stranger in the field. The second is brought to light by Boaz, who turns his field, along with the *mitzvah* of gifts to the poor, into instruments of religious consciousness and social sensitivity. The wealthy land-owner Boaz was capable of loosening his grip on his possessions, perceiving the poor as human beings like himself, and seeing himself as a *shaliach*, as God's emissary, to offer solace and support.

I would like to suggest that this is the attitude that the Sages strove to inculcate by instituting the reading of Megillat Ruth on Shavuot, the Harvest Festival.



Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven and Acceptance of the “Other”

◦ RABBANIT CHANA HENKIN

I. Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven

On a daily basis, in the *kriat Shema*, we accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven. We try to have *kavanna*, proper intention, when reciting these verses of the Shema. Yet, what precisely is the nature of this yoke, for the sake of which we are mustering all our powers of intention? To understand this, we can read the Book of Ruth.

Three times Naomi tried to send her daughters-in-law back to Moab, so that they would not join Am Yisrael.

In her first address, Naomi’s words were infused with the sense that the world is an orderly place where the good are rewarded. Go back to Moab, she tells her daughters-in-law; there you will have a good life. God compensates the righteous, and He will deal generously with you in Moab:

Go, return each of you to her mother’s home; may the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead, and with me. May the Lord grant you that you may find respite, each of you in the home of her husband...

Naomi speaks of a mother, a home, kindness, respite—and, most importantly, a husband. Yet neither Orpah nor Ruth were persuaded to return to Moab. Perhaps they did not share Naomi’s optimism regarding the happiness awaiting them in Moab; or

RABBANIT
CHANA HENKIN
Founder and
Dean of Nishmat.

perhaps both wanted the more meaningful life they had found with Naomi.

In Naomi's second appeal, hopelessness and despair replace her previous optimism:

Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If there was indeed hope, I would be with a man tonight and bear sons; Would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you, for them, chain yourselves without husbands? No, my daughters; for it is more bitter for me than you, for the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.

In this second address, there is no husband and no hope; there is only old age, involuntary singlehood, and bitterness. In place of a God who rewards, there is a God who brings only disaster. Naomi asks her daughters-in-law whether they anticipate that she will bear new husbands for them. Are we to imagine that the two young women actually expect Naomi to provide them with new husbands? Or is Naomi's question her way of portraying the bitter reality awaiting two Moabite widows in Eretz Yisrael? They will be socially ostracized, and no man of Beit Lehem will agree to marry them. Once they grasp that they have no other way out of their predicament, they will turn their eyes to Naomi, but she will be too old and no longer fertile. At that point, they will find themselves marginalized in society, two invisible, childless Moabite widows, their lives at a dead end.

It was at this point that Orpah realized the futility of going to Eretz Yisrael, and she returned to her people and her god. Ruth, by contrast, warned Naomi not to attempt to convince her:

Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you will go, I will go; and where you will lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your God is my God. Where you will die, will I die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me, and more also, for only death will part me from you.

Ruth said in an offended tone: “What are you asking of me? Do you wish me to wet my finger, hold it up to check which way the wind is blowing, and then adjust my convictions to match whatever fate awaits me in Eretz Yisrael? You wish me to believe in God if things go well, but if they go badly, I should return to a pagan life in Moab? Heaven forbid I should consider such a thing. Leave me be! Wherever you will go [= in the future] I will go; where you will lodge [= in the future] I will lodge; where you will die [= in the future], I will die. Why? Because your people *are* my people (= already, in the present), and your God *is* my God (= already, in the present).” The verse relates the implications of Ruth’s decision to remain with her mother-in-law in future tense, but her convictions appear in present tense.

Ruth and Naomi both assume that life after Ruth’s joining Am Yisrael will be bitter and harsh. We can certainly understand a person who does not remain indifferent to personal interests, who is unwilling to deliberately choose a bitter fate. But we must gaze in wonderment at the strength of character of a unique individual who is capable of forgoing her personal hopes and dreams for the sake of accepting the yoke of Heaven? From Ruth, we learn to willingly accept from God not only “the good,” in the words of Job, but – if necessary, Heaven forbid – also “the bad.” This is acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.

II. “Otherness”

Many times, I have had the privilege of accompanying a convert through the conversion process. After the immersion in the *mikveh* – and after I have asked the convert to pour me a glass of wine to drink a *l’chaim* together and to share some cake – I usually ask: “Tell me, please, what were you thinking when asked by the *bet din*, while you were standing in the water before your immersion: ‘Do you truly want to take on yourself the burden of the *mitzvot*? So long as you are not Jewish, you have can believe in God without the incessant demands of *mitzvot*.’” I ask her: “Did you have any doubts at that moment?” She invariably replies: “On the contrary, that was the moment I was longing for!” Upon hearing these words, the prayer invariably arises in my heart: May Am Yisrael accept you as you have accepted God and us.

Naomi's grim prophecy regarding "otherness" was fulfilled upon the two widows' arrival in Beit Lehem. The entire time that Ruth was in Moab or travelling along the way, the Tanach referred to her by her first name alone. It is only upon arrival in Bet Lehem that her foreignness and otherness became agonizingly apparent:

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law...

In Moab, she was simply "Ruth," a person with a place in the social landscape. Upon arrival in Bet Lehem, Ruth became a "Moabite" – an outsider and "other."

I believe it is generally assumed that immediately upon the entry of the two women into Bet Lehem, Providence sent Ruth directly to Boaz's field. But that is not the impression given by the verses. The two women were hungry; that was why Ruth volunteered to go gather in the field. When Ruth finally came upon Boaz's field, and subsequently returned to her mother-in-law with her hands full, Naomi inquired of her: Why **today**, of all days, were you fortunate enough to come home with a full stomach and carrying an *ephah* of barley?

*And her mother-in-law said to her, Where have you gleaned **today**? And where have you worked? Blessed is he who took notice of you. And she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, The man's name with whom I worked **today** is Boaz.*

We may infer that before Providence brought her to Boaz's field, Ruth probably suffered a protracted period of hunger and invisibility at the margins of society ("she said to him, *Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, seeing that I am a **foreigner**?*")

In the face of bereavement, poverty, alienation and life on the social margins, along came a moment of healing and comfort in Boaz's field, when at last she is no longer viewed as an outsider and a stranger. The Book of Ruth makes us privy to Ruth's reaction to this redemptive moment:

Then she said, Let me find favor in your sight, my lord; for you have comforted me...

What precisely is it that comforted Ruth? Boaz's first words to Ruth promised her sustenance, and for this she fell on her face and thanked him; yet these words reflect no comfort:

Then said Boaz to Ruth, Do you not hear, my daughter? Do not go to glean in another field, nor go away from here, but stay here close to my maidens;

Let your eyes be on the field that they reap, and go after them; have I not charged the young men that they shall not touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels, and drink of that which the young men have drawn.

Ruth continued, and asked about her "otherness":

"...she said to him, Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, seeing that I am a foreigner?"

It was Boaz's reply here that comforted the young destitute widow; and his inspiring words should serve as an example for us today in accepting the convert, the penitent and the new immigrant:

And Boaz answered and said to her, It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before. May the Lord recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under Whose wings you have come to take refuge.

Boaz tells Ruth: You are not a foreigner, you are not invisible, your actions have been noticed and are receiving their due desert. You left your father and mother and the land of your birth, just as our patriarch Avraham did. You are therefore truly part of Am Yisrael. Furthermore, what you received from me

is not a momentary act of generosity, but, in fact, the **reward** for your good deeds.

These uplifting words by Boaz herald Ruth's approaching redemption. They also present us with a challenge as relevant today as ever: Are we, too, prepared to incorporate into our midst – fully as one of our own – those who join Am Yisrael? If so, we are worthy spiritual descendents of Ruth and Boaz.



Shavuot - An Agricultural Festival With Dual Significance and the Book of Ruth

◦ RABBI YOEL BIN-NUN

I. Shavuot in the Peshat – an Agricultural Festival

Shavuot seems to be another instance of the dual meaning of our festivals: it is, on the one hand, a harvest festival of first-fruits; and on the other, the historical *Time of the Giving of the Torah*. There is no trace of this duality, however, in the Torah. The Torah's references to this festival relate wholly to the festival of weeks/harvest/first-fruits, an agricultural festival of the Land of Israel; while the *Time of the Giving of the Torah* receives no explicit mention anywhere in the Torah, only in Talmudic literature.

Here is how Shavuot is presented in the various biblical sections dealing with the festivals:

And the Feast of Harvest, the first fruits of your labors, which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering, which is at the end of the year, when you have gathered in your labors from the field. (Shemot 23:16)

And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end. (Shemot 34:22)

To the next day after the seventh sabbath shall you count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord. You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two

RABBI YOEL BIN-NUN

pioneer in the revolution in Tanach study in Israel. He teaches Tanach at Nishmat and elsewhere.

tenth deals; they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the first fruits to the Lord. (Vayikrah 23:16-17)

Also in the day of the first-fruits, when you bring a new meal offering to the Lord, in your feast of weeks, you shall have a holy gathering; you shall do no labor. (Bamidbar 28:26)

Seven weeks shall you count; begin to number the seven weeks from such time as you begin to put the sickle to the grain. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give according as the Lord your God has blessed you. (Devarim 16:9-10)

Similarly, the vast majority of the new *peshat* commentators hold Shavuot to be exclusively an agricultural festival, a festival of joy and thanksgiving to God for the wheat harvest in Eretz Yisrael.¹

Not only that, but according to the Talmudic passage (Shabbat 86b-88a), it is far from clear that the date on which Shavuot falls is indeed identical with the date on which the Torah was given. The Tannaim were in dispute as to whether the Torah was given on the 6th or 7th of Sivan (Shabbat 86b), and whether it was given on the fiftieth or fifty-first day after the Exodus from Egypt (Shabbat 87b-88a).²

1 The most contemporary prominent scholar on these topics is the late Rabbi Mordechai Breuer; see his book *Pirkei Moadot*, Jerusalem 5756, pp. 376-378, and the same ideas in his new book *Pirkei Mikraot*, Alon Shvut 5769, p. 219. Rabbi Breuer posits that the Torah deliberately hid the date of the giving of the Torah. I agree with his premise, but I offer a different explanation as to why this is so. In my view, this hiding established the “giving of the Torah” as a one-time event for all generations, and not as a festival recurring on an annual basis; and this, indeed, is what emerges from the way in which it is portrayed in *Devarim*: we have a duty to observe and remember the day of the revelation at Horev, with all it signifies (*Devarim* 4:9-15, and 32-36; 5:22-23, and more). The Sages, on the other hand, held the opposite view, identifying Shavuot with “the giving of the Torah,” while inferring the date of the giving of the Torah from textual clues. The Sages wanted, on the contrary, to celebrate this “festival of the giving of the Torah” down the generations, and every year to revive something of the revelation at Sinai; while the Torah preferred the principle that this revelation was unique and unparalleled, never to be repeated in the future.

2 The majority of opinions in the sugya (with the exception of the Baal Seder Olam) lean to the view that the children of Israel left Egypt on a Thursday, and the day on which the

Supposedly, then, the festival of Shavuot stands alone as a nature-based agricultural festival of Eretz Yisrael, bearing no historical significance whatsoever; and any linkage of *Time of the Giving of the Torah* to the agricultural festival of Shavuot appears only in Talmudic literature, where the Sages interpret the verses describing the Sinaitic Revelation in a manner that causes it to become synchronous with the festival. Seemingly, the Sages here adopted the Torah's own policy with regard to the two other festivals, Pesach and Sukkot, inasmuch as it ascribes to them a historical significance along with the agricultural one.

Truth be told, however, even the Talmud's creating this connection was not at all a simple matter, as evidenced by the transformation that occurred in the Torah reading of Shavuot. According to Mishnaic law (Megillah 4:5), the correct reading for Shavuot is the passage in Devarim that begins "*Seven weeks shall you count for yourself*" (Devarim 16:9-12). The Shemot passage describing the Revelation of Sinai is not mentioned in the Mishnah.

But the Gemara (Megillah 31a) does refer to the custom in place today, citing it as the viewpoint of "others":

On Shavuot, we read "*Seven weeks*" and for the haftarah, from Habakuk. According to others, we read "*In the third month*," and for the haftarah, the account of the Divine Chariot [from Yehezkel]. Nowadays [i.e. in Babylonia] when we keep two days [of festival], we follow both courses, but in the reverse order.

The Gemara's statement clearly shows that it never occurred to the Sages to cancel the original Shavuot Torah reading from Devarim; rather, in the Diaspora the festival was celebrated over the course of two days, leading to the custom (still in place today) to read both "*Seven weeks ...*" and "*In the third month ...*" (the Sinaitic Revelation), where the order of readings follows the order of appearance in the Torah: on the first day "*In the third month*" from Shemot, and on the second, "*Seven weeks*" from Devarim. We find the Amoraim ruling this way in many places – finding a practice that complies with all opinions, and avoiding rejecting one of the talmudic opinions if a solution can be found that covers both views.

Ten Commandments were given over, including "*Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy*," was Shabbat. This reckoning means that fifty-one days passed between Exodus and Sinai.

What happened, however, was that the diaspora Jews who returned to live in Eretz Yisrael³ continued their practice to read “*In the third month*” from Shemot on the first day, together with the haftarah from Yehezkel, though a second day of *Yom Tov* was not kept in Eretz Yisrael. Thus it came about that the original, primary Torah reading for Shavuot, “*Seven weeks shall you count for yourself*” is no longer read in Eretz Yisrael at all. Ironically enough, only on the second day of *Yom Tov* in the Diaspora is the primary, agricultural reading focusing on Eretz Yisrael still maintained.

Moreover, the notion of Shavuot being associated with the Sinaitic Revelation – the thunder, the lightning and the sound of the shofar, exceedingly loud – and with Yehezkel’s vision of the Divine Chariot, became consolidated at this time. Paradoxically, upon returning to our land, we completely abandoned the original agricultural Torah reading for Shavuot, and our entire religious, collective and personal awareness became channeled on this day into commemorating the Revelation at Sinai.

As will be explained below, the only reminder left of the original conceptual fabric of the Shavuot festival, corresponding to the original, older Torah reading as laid out in the Mishna, is the book of Ruth.

II. The Historical Significance of the Festival in Devarim

In light of the above, we are all the more surprised to discover inside the original Torah reading a different historical significance – the commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt (implied also, in more subtle form, in Vayikrah, in the festivals section). We begin with the more obvious verses, from Devarim:

Seven weeks shall you count; begin to number the seven weeks from such time as you begin to put the sickle to the grain. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with a tribute of a freewill offering

3 The original, ancient customs of Eretz Yisrael, like its prayer nusachim (liturgical traditions), containing piyutim (liturgical poems) and Torah readings following the order of the three-and-a-half year cycle, largely remained in the Cairo Geniza. The customs of Eretz Yisrael of recent generations comprise immigrants practices from Spain, Babylon and others. The Jerusalem Ashkenazi custom is based on that of the Vilna Gaon, the majority of whose students came to Israel on his instruction.

of your hand, which you shall give according as the Lord your God has blessed you.

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite who is inside your gates, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are among you in the place which the Lord your God has chosen to place His name there. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall observe and do these statutes. (Devarim 16:9-12)

The verse, “*And you shall **remember** that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall **observe and do ...**”*, reminding us so much of the *Zachor* and *Shamor* of Shabbat, explicitly refers to remembering the slavery as a basis for the obligation to observe the festival’s laws. This is unique to Shavuot – **it is not found with reference to any other festival!** This verse explains the reason for the requirement to include the poor and the stranger in the extensive celebrations of the harvest and first-fruits, and inserts the Exodus’s central idea – to remember the poor and the stranger – into the agricultural thanksgiving festival for the early harvest. This obligation is not an integral part of the agricultural festival; it does not arise directly from the abundance of the God-given blessing of the land, but is rather based on the inhabitants’ historical memory as a slave nation who departed Egypt with no fields or crops.

True, the actual obligation to include the poor and unfortunate in the joy of festival is not unique to Shavuot, reappearing as it does in the verses that follow, which deal with Sukkot (Devarim 9:14). Indeed, this requirement applies, in principle, to all festivals, and for this reason, the Rambam codified it in *Hilchot Yom Tov* (6:18). as a general halacha, playing down, as it would appear, any special emphasis on Shavuot:

And when one eats and drinks [on Yom Tov], he must give food to the stranger, the orphan and the widow together with other unfortunates. One who locks the door to his courtyard and eats and drinks with his sons and wife, not giving sustenance and drink to the poor and downcast, is experiencing the joy not of a mitzvah but of his own belly. About such a person it is written: “[*They shall not offer wine offerings to the Lord, nor shall they be pleasing to Him*]; *their sacrifices shall be to them as the bread of mourners; all who eat of it shall*

be polluted; for their bread shall be for their hunger only; [it shall not come into the house of the Lord]”⁴ (Hoshea 9:4), and this joy is a disgrace to him, as it is written: “Behold, I will rebuke your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, the dung of your solemn feasts; and you will be taken away with it.” (Malachi 2:3)

Notwithstanding, the slavery in Egypt as the basis for this obligation is only explicitly mentioned with reference to Shavuot; it is specifically the Shavuot festival that is the source of this halacha. In addition, the verses concerning Shavuot parallel the first of the Ten Commandments (as per the accepted interpretation):

I am the Lord your God, who have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Shemot 20, 2)

*And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite who is inside your gates, and the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are among you, in the place which the Lord your God has chosen to place His name there. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall observe and do **these statutes**. (Devarim 16:11-12)*

This parallel shows how the opening line of the Ten Commandments is interpreted by the Torah as being a reference to the Shavuot festival, and in the original Torah reading mentioned in the Mishnah, no less. It also indicates that the words “*and you shall observe and do these statutes*” refers to all the commandments given on Sinai. According to this, the primary subject matter of the Sinaitic Revelation clearly reappears in the Torah in the Devarim passage about Shavuot; and, hence, we see now that the dual significance of Shavuot, being also “the time of the giving of the Torah,” is grounded in the Torah, not only in midrashic sources.

⁴ Because they keep their “bread to themselves,” their offering can not be brought in the House of the Lord and will not be accepted – this is Rambam’s wonderful derash (homiletical explanation) on this verse; it does not follow the peshat, which is referring to an *unclean* sacrifice.

If this is true, then why are these verses, unmistakably linking the historical giving of the Torah with the agricultural festival of Shavuot as they do, not known to all?

According to our explanation above, these verses were pushed into the margins after the original Devarim reading for Shavuot was replaced by the Shemot reading about the Revelation at Sinai. Furthermore, it should be noted that these verses posit the Exodus as the basis for the equality of all Israelites, all of whom had been slaves and together left the house of bondage. This is the source of the obligation to observe Shabbat together with the slave, maidservant and stranger (and even the beast) – “*In order that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you*” (Devarim 5:14), as well as to share the joy of Shavuot (especially!) with the servant, and also the Levite and stranger, orphan and widow. Because these concepts are today considered universal values⁵, many people find it challenging to hear in these ideas in particular the Divine word within the Torah.⁶

Had Moshe mentioned here instead the “*observe and do*” of the thunder, lightning and shofar blast, “*The day when you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb*” (Devarim 4:10), we all would be aware, no doubt, of the explicit juxtaposition of Sinai with Shavuot in Devarim; but Moshe chose to include the two meanings of Shavuot within the duty to take

5 These universal values have their origin in modern Protestant liberalism, which in turn drew them from the Biblical idea of creation of all humans equally “in the image of God” (Bereshit, 1:27, 5:1-2, and 9:6). Thus, their true origin lies in the creation of the world and of humankind, and not in the Exodus from Egypt, which is unique to Am Israel. At the same time, the modern idea of the liberation of slaves *was* inspired by the Exodus from Egypt (“Let my people go!”), and this too was transformed into a universal idea.

6 This is especially difficult for those for whom universal ideas, even those of Biblical origin – and perhaps especially those – sound foreign to them, and for whom God’s word can only be heard in the particular. Rabbi A. I. Kook responded to this narrow standpoint as follows: “... Only above the soul that is rich with love of others, and love of humanity, can love of the nation rise in all its noble pride and its greatness, both spiritual and practical. The narrowness of sight that causes one to view anything lying beyond the perimeter of the singular nation... as ugliness and impurity alone – that is one of the more terrible darkness, causing utter devastation to all spiritual good, for whose light every refined soul yearns.” (Shemonah Kvatzim, Jerusalem, 5759, Orot Ha-Kodesh 4, Jerusalem 5755, p. 105).

care of the weak and the unfortunate derived from the first of the Ten Commandments, and not in the description of the actual Revelation.⁷

III. Historical Significance of the Festival in Vayikrah

In the section on festivals in the book of Vayikrah (chapter 23), we find a similar emphasis with respect to the fiftieth day, the day of the first-fruits, in the obligation to leave something over from the harvest for the poor and the stranger – a duty that is also based on the Exodus from Egypt:

To the next day after the seventh sabbath shall you count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord... And you shall proclaim on the same day, that it may be a holy assembly to you; you shall do no labor in it; it shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not make clean riddance up to the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleanings of your harvest; to the poor, and to the stranger you shall leave them; I am the Lord your God.

The entire final verse has already appeared earlier on (Vayikrah 19:9-10), alongside the prohibitions relating to the vineyard. That is its primary citation; the repetition here serves only to highlight the significance of the harvest festival i.e. the day of the first-fruits, as a festival holding additional historical significance, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, as we saw in Devarim.

Still we must ask: the duty to leave gleanings for the poor and the stranger – the *peah* (corner of the field) and *leket* (fallen stalks) – is an unequivocally agricultural mitzvah, that applies to the “*harvest of your land*”: in which case, why would we even consider it to be an expression of the Exodus from Egypt?

⁷ Contrary to what many religious people thought in ancient times, in the Torah and Neviim, concern for law and justice, the stranger, the orphan and the widow, are the foundation and gateway to true service of God; see Yeshayahu 1:58, Amos 8, and more.

Here, we encounter a fundamental principle of the Torah. When the Torah speaks of the obligation to leave over produce for the poor and the stranger, it is not referring to *tzedakah* (charity) but to *tzedek* (justice)! The Torah is not asking the field's owner to generously make a (relatively small, albeit) sacrifice from his harvest; rather, it is establishing the *peah* and *leket* and all agricultural gifts to the poor as **being included within the rights of the poor and the stranger. This portion of the crop does not actually belong to the landowner, for the God of Israel, who brought the children of Israel out of the Egyptian bondage (where no one owned fields), He allocated fields in Eretz Yisrael for ownership and property, and He deducted from it gifts to the poor, peah and leket (as well as teruma and maaser tithes for the priests and Levites⁸) and gave them to the needy. The owner doing no favor, nor exhibiting generosity here; when he gives these gifts to poor, he is simply repaying his debt; if he does not, he is actually stealing the poor's rightful portion.**

It is inconceivable for such an outlook to emerge from the natural creation of the world, that gave rise to fields and crops in the world; for under the natural protocol, the field and crops are the owner's, and what remains is to petition him for charity, which depends on the kindness of his heart. Indeed, in the

8 The *maaser* given to the Levites (Bamidbar chapter 18) is based precisely on this fact, that the Levites' *maaser* (= a tenth of the produce – called by our Sages “*Maaser Rishon*,” the “First Tithe,” following the sequence of the tithe-taking) has never truly belonged to the landowner. He grows it for the Levite, since it is part of Levi's inheritance in Eretz Yisrael, in exchange for his service, for he is dedicated to the service of the tent of meeting – “*But the tithes of the people of Israel, which they offer as an offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites to inherit; therefore I have said to them, Among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance.*” (Bamidbar 18:24). Therefore, the Levite is also required to relate to the tithe exactly as to normal produce – “*as the produce of the threshing floor and of the winepress*” (ibid. verse 30) and to eat it anywhere (ibid., verse 31), but first to take the tithe for the priest – “*an offering for the Lord [= the *terumat maaser*], a *maaser* of the *maaser* [tenth of the tenth]” (ibid., verse 26). There is no logic in requiring the landowner to give the priests a *terumah* twice over. The only reason why he has to tithe both his own crop and the Levite's *maaser* is because the *maaser* belongs to the Levite and has been left in the grower's hands for safekeeping.*

In Devarim, where the usual Tabernacle and Temple routines are not in full effect due to the war over the Land (Devarim 12:8-9) and to the remoteness from the one Temple (ibid., 21; 14:24), the Levi has no fixed *maaser* as his portion in the Land inheritance, and is therefore classified in the category of the exceedingly poor, and is always listed along with the “stranger, orphan, widow” (Devarim 12:12; 12:18-19; 14:29; 16:11-12; 26:13).

context of the selection of Avraham, it says: “*and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment*” (Bereshit 18:19). Only under the rubric of the historical and miraculous Exodus from Egypt can transferring a part of the owner’s rights to the poor and the stranger be considered just.

Hence, this obligation marks the harvest/first-fruits festival as belonging not solely to the agricultural, land of Israel, natural, “solar” dimension, but also to the historical, miraculous, “lunar” dimension, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

The day of the first-fruits, fifty days after Pesach, represents, therefore, firstly the end of the period of the Omer counting – the climax of the process of the “early harvest,” which commences with the reaping of the Omer barley offering and ends in bringing “*a new meal-offering to the Lord.*” But the Exodus from Egypt is also implied in the verses about the Omer and first-fruits, both in the duty to leave the poor and the stranger the *peah* and *leket*, and in the words “*I am the Lord your God*” that explain this duty.

IV. The Book of Ruth

All of the above indicates that Shavuot’s historical significance is to be found, more than in the festival’s Torah reading as practiced today, in the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is in line with the original Torah reading and the duty to remember, specifically at this land of Israel harvest festival, the stranger and the widow. Ruth is both “*a stranger (convert) ... and a widow*”, our duty towards whom the Torah highlights most strongly on Shavuot, stemming from the Exodus and the First Commandment.

Moreover, the *megillah* explicitly compares Ruth the “Moabite” (from Lot’s lineage) to our father Avraham, in the words of Boaz, the man of valor who was the only one to correctly grasp the story of Ruth.⁹

9 It is clear from the *megillah* that the story of Ruth the “Moabite” caused a storm of controversy in Beit Lehem Yehudah. All the inhabitants spoke about her, about “the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the field of Moab” (Ruth 2:6); yet the fact that Naomi and Ruth sat alone, with no financial means, eating from the *leket*, proves that no one dared to

Ruth initially introduces herself to Boaz as a foreigner:¹⁰

Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, seeing that I am a foreigner? Ruth 2:10)

But Boaz, in his reply, insists that Ruth is not in the least a foreigner, and in recounting the process she has undergone, he uses expressions reminiscent of the founding narrative of Avraham Avinu:

And Boaz answered and said to her, It has been fully told to me, all that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband; and how you have left your father and your mother, and the land of your birth, and have come to a people which you did not know before.

The Lord will recompense your work, and a full reward shall be given to you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge. (Ruth 2:11-12).

Subsequently, the elders of Bethlehem who sat in the gate ratified this for all eternity:

bring them to his or her home – “lest I harm my own inheritance” (ibid. 4:6). The *megillah*’s emphasis on the word “Moabite” also proves this point. Boaz was the only one who thought and acted differently. If there were others who admired Ruth’s wonderful choice to accompany Naomi, apparently they did not dare do a thing.

10 In the entire Tanach, only two individuals are described as leaving their family and homeland in order to follow after the Lord: Our father Avram/Avraham, and Ruth the “Moabite”! Ruth’s response to Boaz is interesting: initially she said she was a “foreigner,”; and after his reply, she called herself “your slave,” and was, moreover, undeserving of such of a status, according to her words. In the next phase, in the threshing floor, in asking him to redeem her, she described herself as “Ruth your maidservant...” (Ruth 3:9), but Boaz alone thought otherwise: “for the whole city of my people knows that you are a worthy woman” (ibid. verse 11). Boaz praised her, moreover, noting “because you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich” (ibid. verse 10), for every young man of quality would want her, in his opinion, and she was doing him a great kindness by requesting redemption from an old man like him who was Elimelech’s age.

... The Lord make the woman that has come into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel... May your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Judah... (Ruth 4:11-12)

Thus, it is specifically in the Book of Ruth that we find the strictest correlation between two things: on the one hand, the field in Eretz Yisrael with its mitzvot of *leket* and gifts to the poor – and especially to the stranger/convert-widow; and on the other hand, the historical founding narrative of both Avraham and Ruth, and the profound significance, both individual and collective, of the “redeeming of the land” in Israel according to the “redemption laws”¹¹ –

11 The family “redemption laws” were probably earlier and more extensive than specified in the Torah. Ramban understood this when he interpreted the story of Yehuda and Tamar (Bereshit 38:8) as an broader example of *yibum* (Levirate marriage), something that was “one of the Torah’s major secrets in the course of human history”, and is referred to as the “redemption” of the woman whose husband died childless, with the family now at risk of being entirely discontinued. Hence, wrote Ramban, before the giving of the Torah, “they used to marry the wife of the departed to the brother, father or other relative,” but the Torah went to the extreme in strict prohibitions against immoral sexual relations, and limited *yibum* to the brother alone. What is more, the Torah allowed the woman to free herself from this obligation through the *halitza* ritual. Nonetheless, relatives not forbidden by virtue of the sexual immorality laws remained obligated to the redemption of a woman who was bereaved. It is also possible that *yibum* is an obligation, and is independent of her will, while redemption does depend on her; but as soon as she wants to be redeemed, the redeemers must do it, unless they articulate a reason to refuse before the elders, as the “redeemer” did before Boaz. Another hint to the “redemption laws,” the content of which we do not actually know, appears in the *megillab* with respect to the redemption of the field through a redemption sale. This entails selling to a relative, according to the degree of closeness. But therein lies the difficulty – what does “*Naomi... is selling a parcel of land*” (Ruth 4:3) mean? What are Naomi’s rights in Elimelech’s fields? After all, according to the Sages’ rulings (Bava Batra 111b), a woman has no inheritance rights in the property of her dead husband, and the closest redeeming relative inherits the property without any “redemption”! I would like to suggest that the anonymous redeemer, who is a closer relative to Mahlon and Ruth than Boaz, worked in Elimelech’s field, both per the family custom and in his role as the legal owner of the rights to inheritance; and he certainly did not leave the field fallow, as this causes damage to neighboring fields by spreading weeds. However, even in this situation, the redemption laws require, in similar fashion to the obligation to redeem a field or person sold to another family – that “...the closest related redeemer shall come and redeem the sale of his brother” (Vayikra 25:25); for “*After he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brothers may redeem him...*” (Vayikra 25:48). As soon as someone from the family demanded “redemption,” i.e. “*to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance*” (Ruth 4:5), there is a duty to redeem together both the wife of the departed and his field; and thus redeem both human and land, family and inheritance, and to estab-

in order “to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance.” (Ruth 4:11-12) To phrase this parallel even more succinctly, the essence of the concept of “redemption” is “to restore the name of *Am Yisrael* on its inheritance” by virtue of Avraham, and of Ruth, the “mother of kings.”¹²

lish offspring for a family that had been discontinued, with the property that is redeemed. Since the redeemer refused to take Ruth, according to “redemption laws” that were kept “*in former times in Israel*” (Ruth 4:7), he also lost the field that was rightfully his as the successor and redeemer, and that he was already living on and working on for his sustenance. On the overt level, this was a family punishment, similar to the degradation involved in the *halitza* (Devarim 25:9-10), for refusing to redeem Ruth “the wife of Mahlon” (Ruth 4:5). On the covert level, this was a more universal penalty for wronging “a stranger... and a widow” (Shemot 22:20). He had done grave harm to Naomi and to Ruth the “Moabite,” who must necessarily eat from the *leket* while the redeemer lived off Elimelech’s field; and, at the same time, he was “guarding ‘his’ inheritance” (as he put it) so as not to “harm it” through a “Moabite” (Ruth 4:6). For this reason, the megillah also kept the name of the redeemer hidden.

12 Following the term used by Rabbi Elazar, Bava Batra 81b; and see the book *Ima Shel Malchut* (Mother of Kings) by Y. Bachrach, Jerusalem 5729.



Megillat Ruth and the Gift of Leadership

◦ DEBBIE ZIMMERMAN

Megillat Ruth opens against a chronological backdrop, “*Vayehi b’yemei shefot hashoftim*,” which is typically translated “And it was in the days that the judges judged,” i.e., the time period of the Book of Shoftim, judges or leaders.

The Book of Shoftim describes the time period between the leadership of Yehoshua and the Book of Samuel, when the first kings of Israel were anointed. Named for the leaders of the period, known as Judges, the book describes the steady descent into a crisis of leadership. As the book progresses, the efficacy of leadership regresses. The book opens with the moral, capable leadership of Otniel ben Knaz and Ehud ben Gera, but ends with Shimshon, a powerful warrior, but a flawed personality who was his own worst enemy, who never led, and who was eventually turned in by his own people to the enemy Philistines.

The leaders grow steadily worse throughout the book, the salvation of Israel becomes ever more fleeting, and the People of Israel become progressively more divided on a path towards anarchy. The book’s finale relates two of the most troubling Biblical episodes, displaying a total breakdown of the social and religious order, on both individual and collective levels. The mantra is a line repeated 4 times with little change: “*In those days, there was no king in Israel, a man would do what was right in his eyes.*”

During my first year’s teaching at Nishmat, my students and I studied these stories. One of my students exclaimed, “This is so depressing! How can the people ever change a situation like this? How can they ever rise from such a low point?”



DEBBIE
ZIMMERMAN

teaches Tanach
at Nishmat and
is a tour guide in
the Western Wall
Tunnels.

The books of Ruth provides a key to the answer.

The background characters in the book of Ruth, most notably Elimelech, exemplify the problems of the period of the Judges. The book's first verse reads, "*It was in the days when the judges judged, and there was a famine in the land, and a man from Beit Lechem in Judah went to live in the fields of Moav, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife Naomi...*" Chazal explain that Elimelech and his sons were wealthy men, wealthy enough to support their community through the famine. Instead they moved to Moav. This, according to Chazal, is why they died. (T.B. Bava Batra 91a)

This might explain why they moved to Moav, a place where charity and kindness were not part of the culture. The Book of Devarim tells us that the People of Israel are prohibited from marrying Ammonites and Moabites "*because they did not meet you with bread and water on the journey when you left Egypt.*" (23, 4) The Talmud (Yevamot 99b) states that three traits exemplify Israel: "the merciful, the humble, and those who perform acts of kindness (*gomlei chassadim*)." The parsimony of Moav is incongruous with the traits that make the People of Israel who they are, and so the two are not meant to mix.

In contrast to Elimelech, his sons, and the people of Moav, Ruth the Moabite defies the stereotype and exemplifies charity and kindness. After Naomi's two sons died, her daughters-in-law were left with the choice to go back to their homes and their people or follow their destitute mother-in-law to a place and a people they did not know. Naomi had nothing to give them, "*Why would you go with me? I have no more children in my womb who can be husbands for you.*" Without money or husband, there was no way to build a family or a future. Orpa turned away, but "*Ruth cleaved to her,*" following Naomi into a destitute life as social outcasts.

When they returned, the women of Beit Lechem stared in wonderment at Naomi— this once wealthy woman who lost everything— but did not lift a finger to help. Perhaps they believed, as Naomi herself did, that her station was a punishment from God for abandoning her people in time of need. Ruth, a Moabite, a stranger, was left to gather grain in the fields amongst the poor, returning from long days in the sun to share her meager sustenance with Naomi. Her generosity went unnoticed by everyone except Boaz. And just as Ruth sacrificed her social status to provide for Naomi, Boaz did the same in taking Ruth under his wing and eventually marrying her. Ruth's outsider

status as a Moabite could have ended his position as a respected elder of the community, but he put his interests aside to provide for Ruth.

Elimelech and his sons, Ploni Almoni, the judges as the gate, the men in the field, the women of Beit Lechem—they all represent the failures of the period of the Judges. As individuals and as groups they were unwilling to give of themselves, to act on behalf of the marginalized, and to show mercy for those who most needed it.

Out of this dreary panorama, Boaz and Ruth emerged. While others averted their eyes and pretended obliviousness from the other's pain and need, Ruth and Boaz reached deep inside themselves to give unconditionally to alleviate that pain and need. All the while, with the utmost devotion to God, to their people, and to a high level of moral conduct.

They sacrificed because no one else was there to do the work, and something had to be done. The Book of Judges ends with the mantra *"In those days there was no king, every man did as he saw fit."* Here were two people who did not do "as they saw fit," but instead they saw what was *unfit*, social wrongs that needed to be made right, and they did what was right. They took control of the situation, they righted the wrongs.

This is the message of Ruth. As Rabbi Zeira tells us:

"This *megillah* does not have impurity or purity, prohibitions or commandments, and it was only written to teach you how great is the reward for those who do acts of kindness and charity (*gomlei chassadim*)." (Midrash Ruth Rabba 2, 14)