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Sincerely,

Rabbi Yehoshua Werde  
Director

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# Outline

- » What are we Celebrating?
- » The Names of Shavuos
- » Atzeres
- » Chag Hakatzir - The Harvest Festival
- » Judgment-day for Fruits
- » What Happened at Har Sinai?
- » Uplifting the Person
- » Physical Delights
- » A Loud Voice with No Echo
- » Staying Awake to Study All Night
- » The Power of Sleep
- » Hearing the 10 Commandments
- » Our Children, Our Guarantors
- » Eating Dairy Products
- » The Book of Rus
- » Yahrtzeit of Dovid Hamelech and Baal Shem Tov

# Shavuos

## What are we Celebrating?

Shavuos is a unique festival on the Jewish calendar. It is not celebrated for seven or eight days like Pesach and Sukkos, it doesn't have a distinct mitzvah such as sitting in the sukkah, shaking the lulav and etrog, blowing the shofar, or eating matzah, yet it plays a central role in Yiddishkeit. Shavuos commemorates the giving of the Torah, and, as we will learn, it is a festival rich with minhag, ritual, and significance.

In this booklet, we explore the uniqueness of the festival of Shavuos, what it commemorates, and how its meaning is articulated through various the customs associated with the holiday.

## The Names of Shavuos

The festival of Shavuos is called by multiple names that express the significance of the festival.

In davening, we refer to Shavuos as “Zman Matan Toraseinu” “The Time of the Giving of our Torah” as Shavuos commemorates the day upon which Hashem revealed Himself at Har Sinai and gave us the Torah. For this reason, on Shavuos we read the Aseres Hadibros from the Torah, and we stay up all night studying Torah. However, the day of Shavuos as described in the Torah is not determined by the day on which the Torah was given (even though it almost always ends up falling out on that day). Thus, the most common name for the yom tov, and the primary one used in the Torah, is not for the giving of the Torah, but “Shavuos,” which means “weeks,” from the posuk:

שָׁבְעָה שָׁבְעַת תִּסְפֹּר לָךְ: מִהֲחַל חָרַמְשׁ בְּקִמָּה תִּחַל לְסַפֵּר שָׁבְעָה  
שָׁבְעוֹת: וְעֲשִׂיתָ חַג שָׁבְעוֹת לַה' אֵלֶיךָ...  
...אלקידך...

*You shall count seven weeks for yourselves; from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you shall observe the festival of Shavuos for the Hashem, your G-d...*

It is interesting to note that the Torah does not indicate a specific date for the festival of Shavuos. Shavuos is always celebrated on the 50th day after counting seven complete weeks since the second day of Pesach (when, in the times of the beis hamikdash, “the sickle was put to the standing crop” and the korbon omer was brought).

While Shavuos nowadays normally coincides with the day of matan torah, this need not be the case:

*Shulchan Aruch Admur Hazaken, Orach Chaim 294:1*

בזמן שהיו מקדשין החדשים על פי הראיה היה אפשר להיות גם חודש  
ניסן חסר והיה חג השבועות שהוא יום חמשים לעומר בשבעה בסיון  
ואם היה גם חודש אייר מלא היה חג השבועות שהוא יום חמשים  
לעומר בחמשה בסיון אף שאינו ביום מתן תורה אין בכך כלום  
שהכתוב לא תלה חג הזה ביום מתן תורה ולא בכמה ימים לחודש  
רק בחמשים לעומר אלא שלפי חשבון המסור בידינו לעולם יהיה יום  
חמישים לעומר בששה בסיון שהוא יום מתן תורה.

*In the times when they would sanctify the new month by actual sightings of the new moon (and a month could vary between 29 or 30 days), it was*

*possible for the month of Nissan to be a short month (i.e., 29 days as opposed to 30 days) and Shavuos, which is on the fiftieth day of counting the Omer, would fall out on the seventh of Sivan (a day later), or if the month of Iyar would be a full month (30 days) Shavuos would be on the fiftieth day which would be on the fifth of Sivan, even though it is not the day when the Torah was given (the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan). But that would make no difference, since the Torah does not make the yom tov dependent on the day of the giving of the Torah, or on a particular day of the month, only on the fiftieth of the Omer, which, according to our calculation handed to us by tradition, will always have the fiftieth day of the Omer fall out on the sixth of Sivan, which is the day of Matan Torah.*

Nowadays, if you following the calendar strictly, Shavuos will always fall on the sixth of Sivan—the day of Matan Torah.

However, since the counting is a personal counting (counted by the individual and not by the community), it is possible for Shavuos to be on a different day for certain individuals.

For example, someone who crosses the international date line between Pesach and Shavuos, would complete his seven weeks a day earlier or later than everyone else (depending on the direction in which he crossed the date line, i.e., whether he lost or gained a day) and he would have to celebrate Shavuos on a different day to the rest of the community.

(The International Date Line (IDL) is an imaginary line of longitude on the Earth's surface located at about 180 degrees

east (or west) of the Greenwich Meridian. The date line is shown as an uneven black vertical line in the Time Zone Map and marks the divide where the date changes by one day.)

*Likutei Sichos Vol. 3 Pg. 998*

ווען איינער פארט אריבער דעם פלאץ (קו התאריך) אין מיטן פון די ספירה־טעג, איז וויבאלד אז די מצוה פון ספירת העומר ליגט אויף יעדן יחיד באזונדער, דארף ער ציילן זיין ספירה, לויט דעם חשבון פון זיינע טעג. וואס איז דאך ניט אפהענגיק פון דער ספירה וואס ווערט געציילט דורך עמיצן אנדערש, אויף דעם זייט פון קו התאריך וואו ער איז געקומען...

בנוגע שבת און אנדערע ימים־טובים דארף דער יחיד זיי אפהיטן לויטן חשבון פון די תושבים וואס געפינען זיך אין יעגעם ארט. סאיז ניט קובע צי ביי אים, אריבערגייענדיק דעם קו, איז דער זיבעטער טאג.

אנדערש איז עס אבער ביי ספירת העומר, וואס דארף זיין "לכל אחד ואחד", איז וויבאלד אז די מצוה פון ספירה איז פאר יעדן יחיד באזונדער, איז דאך מובן, אז אויך אין דעם חשבון פון ספירה איז ער ניט אפהענגיק פון דעם חשבון פון א צווייטן, ווארום די מצוה, איז – ער זאל ציילן די טעג וואס דיגען א דורך ביי אים"....

איז דער יום־טוב שבועות ניט פארבונדן מיט א געוויסן טאג פון חודש, נאר מיטן חשבון פון ספירת העומר...

בעת איינער איז אריבערגעפארן דעם קו התאריך אויפן וועג פון מערב צו מזרח, איז דער פינפטער טאג אין סיון ביי אים דער פופציקסטער טאג פון ספירה – יום־טוב שבועות, בנוגע אלע דינים (א חוץ וואס "זמן מתן תורתנו" קען ער ניט זאגן).

*When a person crosses the International Date Line during sefras haomer, since the mitzvah of counting*

*the omer is an individual obligation that rests on every individual independently, he must count following his counting, based on the calculation of his days, which does not depend on the counting of anyone else on the side of the date line that he crossed over to.*

*With regards to Shabbos and other festivals, an individual must follow the calculation of the local residents in the place where he his. Shabbos is not determined by the fact that his seventh day of the week is different. Whereas, with regards to counting the Omer that must be performed “by each and every individual,” since the mitzvah is an individual one, it is understood that the calculation of counting is not dependent on the counting of another person, since the mitzvah is to count the days that pass for him...*

*The yom tov of Shavuos is not connected with a specific day of the month, but with the calculation of counting the Omer...when a person crosses the date line from west to east, the fifth day of the month of Sivan is his 50th day of counting—and is his yom tov of Shavuos with regards to all laws, (except that he does not recite “zman matan toraseinu” [in his tefilos, since in such an instance his date of Shavuos does not correspond with the date of the giving of the Torah]).*



This change in the date of Shavuot (for one who crosses the date line), applies whether or not the person actually counted the Omer (Shavuot is always on the person's 50th day since the second day of Pesach). For this reason, one should try and arrange their travels so as to avoid crossing the date line between Pesach and Shavuot, unless they arrange to return before Shavuot.

It is important to remember that while Shavuot and the giving of the Torah may fall out on different days, conceptually, they are inseparable. The reason for counting the Omer is to anticipate (and count up to) the receiving of the Torah on Shavuot (to commemorate the fact that the Jews counted the days from yetzias mitzrayim until they received the Torah at Har Sinai). Thus, the counting brings out the Yidden's love for Torah, as the Chinuch (13th century) points out:

*Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306*

... לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל... והיא העיקר והסיבה שנאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה בסיני ויקימוה, וכמו שאמר ה' למשה "זה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך, בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה". ... ומפני כן, כי היא כל עקרן של ישראל ובעבורה נאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשינו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד ללבנו, כעבד ישאף צל וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחרות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.

*For the entire essence of the Jewish people is only the Torah, and the heavens and earth and the Jewish people were created for its sake ... and*

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

Thus, the alternate method for determining the date of Shavuos does not undermine the significance of Shavuos in that it celebrates the giving of the Torah.

## **Atzeres**

In numerous places, the Talmud refers to Shavuos by the name “Atzeres” (completion), this is because Shavuos marks the completion of the mitzvah of counting the Omer, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Bardichev (1740–1809) points out:

*Kedushas Levi, Shavuos*

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

לפי שאנו רואים בחוש השכל שכל הימים טובים נקרא שמותן על שם המאורע, דהיינו על שם מצות הנוהגות וכן שאר מועדים מה שאין כן יום שבועות אין נקרא על שם המאורע רק על שם מצות הספירה. והנה צריך להבין מפני מה נקרא יום טוב ההוא על מצוה שעברה. מפני שהוא כמו סיום מצוה... כמו שבאיזה סיום מסכתא אזי גדול מאד השמחה ועושין סעודות גדולות... וזהו גם כן הטעם של החג שבועות שאנו עושין אותו יום טוב על סיום מצות ספירה שזיכה אותנו הבורא ב"ה ועל זה נקרא בשם עצרת.

*I was asked once, while in Lithuania, why the festival of Shavuot is called by the name "Atzeres" ("conclusion"). This name is not used in the Torah except when referring to Shemini Atzeres [the last day of Sukkos]...*

*We understand that all the festivals have names connected to the event that happened on that day. This is true of all the festivals except Shavuot, which is named for the mitzvah of counting [which has already been completed]. We must understand why this festival is named after something that has already happened, [and the answer is] because it is the conclusion of the mitzvah ... similar to the completion (a siyum) of a tractate of Talmud the joy is great and we make big feasts ... this is also the reason for Shavuot – that we make a festival at the conclusion of the mitzvah of counting that Hashem gave to us. For this reason it is called "Atzeres" (conclusion).*

The Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman 1194–1270) points out that Shavuos is called “Atzeres” similar to “Shmini Atzeres” that follows Sukkos. Shavuos is likewise celebrated at the conclusion of Pesach (if you include the counting of the Omer which is bundled together with Pesach):

*Ramban, Vayikra 23:36*

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

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

Perhaps the reason why the festival that celebrates the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, marks the

counting towards, and the anticipation of, the giving of the Torah, instead of the actual event of the giving of the Torah, is because Shavuos is about reliving the giving of the Torah and re-accepting the Torah into our lives, more than it is about commemorating an historic event.

From this perspective, the focus of Shavuos is not to “remember” the giving of the Torah, in the same way that we are commanded to “remember” yetzias Mitzrayim (coincidentally, there is a mitzvah to “remember” the event of Matan Torah, but that mitzvah is not specific to Shavuos) but to accept the Torah into our lives and commit to studying Torah and practicing its laws in the “here and now.”

To this end, Chassidim wish each other in anticipation of Shavuos “kabolas hatorah b’simchah u’b’pnimiyus” - “may you receive the Torah with joy and inner feeling.”

## **Chag Hakatzir - The Harvest Festival**

In addition to celebrating the giving of the Torah, and the completion of the mitzvah to count towards it, Shavuos also serves as a seasonal celebration—the festival of harvesting:

*Shemos 23:16*

וְחַג הַקָּצִיר בְּבוֹרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ.

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

The Torah describes Shavuos as a kind of thanksgiving festival, to thank Hashem at the time of harvest for the good yield. However, this celebration was in no way limited to farmers, as Chazal teach:

ועשית חג שבועות לה' אלקיך. מכלל שנאמר (שמות כג) וחג הקציר בכורי מעשיך, יכול אם יש לך קציר אתה עושה יו"ט, ואם לאו אין אתה עושה יו"ט? תלמוד לומר ועשית חג שבועות לה' אלקיך, בין שיש לו קציר ובין שאין לו קציר, אתה עושה יו"ט.

*“You should make a festival of Shavuos for Hashem, your G-d.” But it says: “The festival of harvesting through the first fruits of your produce.” You might think that only someone who has harvested produce has to celebrate the festival, but someone who has not, does not celebrate the festival. Therefore the posuk teaches, “You should make the festival of Shavuos for Hashem, your G-d”—whether or not you harvested produce.”*

In the days when the Beis Hamikdash stood, Shavuos was the time when Yidden would begin to bring their bikurim (first fruits) (that they harvested) to Yerushalayim, in fulfillment of the posuk:

רֵאשִׁית בְּבוּרֵי אֲדָמָתְךָ תָּבִיא בֵּית ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

*The choicest of the first of your soil you shall bring to the house of the Hashem, your G-d.*

This would begin from Shavuos, when an offering of two loaves of bread would be brought from the first wheat harvest, and would continue through Sukkos.

*Seforno, Vayikra 23:17*

העומר היה בכורי שעורים ואלה היו בכורי קציר חטים ועל שמם נקרא החג "יום הבכורים"

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

### **Judgment-day for Fruits**

Shavuot is also a judgment-day for trees, as the Mishnah says:

*Mishnah, Rosh HaShanah 1:2*

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

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

The Gemarah explains:

*Rosh Hashanah 16a*

מפני מה אמרה תורה הביאו שתי הלחם בעצרת - מפני שעצרת זמן פירות האילן הוא, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: הביאו לפני שתי הלחם בעצרת, כדי שיתברכו לכם פירות האילן.

*Why did the Torah state: Bring the two loaves on Shavuot? Because Shavuot is the time for Judgment on fruits of the tree. Hakadosh Baruch Hu said: "Bring before Me the two loaves on Shavuot so that the fruits of the tree be blessed for you."*

Although wheat is not a fruit of the tree, the bringing of the two loaves propitiates Hashem for a bountiful fruit crop because it is only after this offering is performed that the first fruits (bikurim) which are from fruit trees may be brought.

Rabbi Tzadok of Lublin (1823–1900) provides an alternative explanation for why the wheat offering can affect the fruit of the tree. He explains that Rabbi Yehudah (the source of this statement in the Talmud) is of the view (in Sanhedrin 70b) that the Eitz Hadaas from which Adam Harishon ate was actually a wheat tree (only after the chet was it decreed that wheat would no longer grow on trees, but Adam would have to work the land by the sweat of his brow to produce it from grain). On Shavuos, when the Jews received the Torah at Har Sinai, Adam's sin was rectified and wheat, for that day, is considered like a fruit of the tree to bring blessing to the fruits of all trees for that year

This is why it is customary in many homes and shuls to decorate with flowers, plants, and trees:

*Shulchan Aruch Admur Hazaken, Orach Chaim 294:15*

נוהגין להעמיד אילנות בבית הכנסת ובבתים כדי להזכיר שבצצרת  
נידונין על פירות האילן ויתפללו עליהם:

*It is customary to place trees in the shul and in homes to remember that on Shavuos we are judged about the fruits of the trees, and we should be reminded to daven for them [i.e., it is an opportune time to daven for a good yield of fruit].*

Another reason for decorating with plants and flowers has to do with the giving of the Torah:



*Mishnah Berurah, 294:10*

זכר לשמחת מתן תורה - שהיו שם עשבים סביב הר סיני כדכתיב  
הצאן והבקר אל ירעו וגו'.

*A reminder of the happiness of the giving of the Torah. Because there were plants around Har Sinai, as the posuk states: "The sheep and cattle must not graze..."*

The fact that Hashem instructed the Yidden to not allow their animals to graze from Har Sinai (even though it was in the middle of the wilderness where ordinarily there is no pasture) indicates that there were plants that grew miraculously to decorate Har Sinai in honor of the giving of the Torah. It is likewise befitting for us to do the same in our homes and shuls in honor of the festival that celebrates our receiving of the Torah.

### **What Happened at Har Sinai?**

The revelation at Sinai and its contribution to history is often thought of as the Torah's debut event. However, this is not the case, since the Avos intuited and studied Torah centuries before it was given:

*Kidushin 82a*

מצינו שעשה אברהם אבינו את כל התורה כולה עד שלא ניתנה,  
שנאמ': (בראשית כו) עקב אשר שמע אברהם בקולי וישמור משמרת  
מצותי חוקתי ותורותי.

*We find that Avraham Avinu kept the entire Torah before it was given, as it is written: (Bereishis 26:5)*

*“Because Avraham hearkened to My voice, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My instructions.”*

If Torah was already around and being studied and observed centuries before the giving of the Torah, what then was all the fuss about Matan Torah at Har Sinai?

The Midrash provides an analogy:

*Midrash Tanchuma, Va'era 15*

אמר הקב"ה השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם (תהלים קטו) למה"ד למלך שגזר ואמר בני רומי לא ירדו לסוריא ובני סוריא לא יעלו לרומי, כך כשברא הקב"ה את העולם גזר ואמר השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם כשבקש ליתן את התורה בטל את הגזרה הראשונה ואמר התחתונים יעלו לעליונים והעליונים ירדו לתחתונים ואני המתחיל שנאמר (שמות יט) וירד ה' על הר סיני וגו', וכתוב ואל משה אמר עלה אל ה' (שמות כד).

*Hashem said: “The heavens are heavens of Hashem, but the earth He gave to the children of men” (Tehilim 115:16). What is this comparable to? To a king who issued a decree stating that the inhabitants of Rome should not descend to Syria and the inhabitants of Syria should not ascend to Rome. Similarly, when Hashem created the world, He decreed and said: “The heavens are heavens of Hashem, but the earth He gave to the children of men” When Hashem wished to give the Torah, He annulled the original decree and said: The lower realm shall ascend to the higher realm and the*

*higher realm shall descend to the lower realm, and I will be the one to begin, as the posuk states: “And Hashem descended upon Har Sinai...” (Shemos 19) and the posuk also says “and to Moshe He said: Ascend to Hashem” (Shemos 24).*

More than just an event at which important information was conveyed to mankind, the revelation at Sinai provides the solution to a major theosophical problem. Hashem created a universe with both physical and spiritual realms. There is the world that we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell; and then there is the world of the spiritual, of that which defies limitation, the infinite that cannot be grasped by senses or by any other measuring device known to mankind.

Man, by nature, is not equipped with the tools to process, or even relate to, the Divine. Our intellect is only capable of understanding that which can be defined in finite terms. How then is a finite man supposed to connect to an infinite G-d?

Furthermore, considering that Hashem's purpose for the creation of the world is for us to transform it into a physical abode wherein He can reside, how is it possible for us to accomplish this without the necessary tools to grasp the Divine?

This is the very challenge that the revelation at Sinai solved:

*Toras Menachem 5711 vol. 1, Maamar, Vekibel Hayehudim*

החידוש דמתן תורה לגבי התומ"צ שהיו קודם מתן תורה, הוא שהמצוות של האבות (ובכלל - קודם מתן תורה) היו רק ברוחניות. דנוסף לזה שכו"כ מצוות קיימו רק ברוחניות (כמו תפילין שנזכר בהם יציאת מצרים ואז עדיין לא הי' גלות מצרים), הנה גם בהמצוות שקיימו

בגשמיות, היתה המשכת הקדושה רק ברוחניות ולא בדבר הגשמי שבו קיימו המצוה. כי קודם מתן תורה היתה הגזירה דעליונים לא ירדו למטה ותחתונים לא יעלו למעלה, ולכן לא הי' החיבור דקדושת המצוה (עליונים) עם הדבר הגשמי שבו נעשית המצוה (תחתונים), משא"כ בקיום המצוות שלאחרי מתן תורה, כשבטלה הגזירה והמחיצה שבין עליונים לתחתונים, נעשה החיבור של דבר הגשמי (שבו מקיימים המצוה) עם קדושת המצוה, ועד שבכמה מצוות, נעשה הדבר הגשמי חפצא של מצוה. וע"פ הידוע שהחיבור דשני דברים הפכים הוא על ידי ענין שלמעלה משניהם, מובן, שהחיבור דעליונים ותחתונים שנעשה במתן תורה הוא ע"י שבמתן תורה היתה המשכת אוא"ס שלמעלה מהגדר דמעלה ומטה (עליונים ותחתונים). ומכ"ז מובן, שבהמצוות שלאחרי מתן תורה, ג' ענינים. התחתון [שהרי גם לאחרי מתן תורה, שהדבר הגשמי שבו מקיימים המצוה נעשה חפצא של מצוה, לא נהפך לרוחני ונשאר דבר גשמי], העליון [שהרי גם לאחרי מתן תורה, כשקדושת המצוה נמשכת ונקבעת בהדבר הגשמי, היא ענין רוחני], והביטול של גררי העליון והתחתון, דזה שהעליון והתחתון מתחברים זה עם זה (עם היותם הפכים) הוא ע"י ביטול הגדר שלהם, שנעשה ע"י המשכת אוא"ס שלמעלה משניהם.

*The contribution of the giving of the Torah in comparison to the Torah and mitzvos that existed before the giving of the Torah, is that the mitzvos of the forefathers (and in general, in the time preceding the giving of the Torah) were only spiritual. In addition to the fact that several mitzvos they only observed spiritually (such as tefillin that mentions Yetzias Mitzrayim when the golus in Mitzrayim had yet to occur). Even the mitzvos that they observed physically, the holiness drawn down through the observance of the mitzvah remained on a spiritual*

*level and had no effect on the physical item used to perform the mitzvah. This is before the giving of the Torah, there was a decree that the higher realms may not descend below and the lower realms may not ascend above, and there was therefore no connection between the holiness of the mitzvah (i.e., higher realms) and the physical item with which the mitzvah was performed (i.e., lower realms).*

*Whereas, the fulfillment of mitzvos after the giving of the Torah, when the decree and barrier between higher and lower realms was removed, initiated a connection between the physical object (with which the mitzvah is fulfilled) and the holiness of the mitzvah. To the extent, that for several mitzvos, the physical object is transformed into a “mitzvah object.”*

*Based on the well-known principle that two opposites can be joined by that which is greater than both of them, it is understood, that the connection between higher and lower realms that transpired at the giving of the Torah, happened by way of drawing down Hashem’s infinite light that transcends the concepts of above and below (i.e., higher and lower realms). From this it is understood that there are three distinct elements to the mitzvos that are observed following the giving of the Torah:*

*1) The lower realm [for even subsequent to the*

*giving of the Torah, when the physical object with which a mitzvah is fulfilled can be transformed into a “mitzvah object,” it nevertheless does not transform into a spiritual being, but remains physical.]*

*2) The higher realm [since even after the giving of the Torah, when the holiness of a mitzvah is drawn down and becomes affixed to the physical object, it remains a spiritual concept].*

*3) The nullification of the defining attributes of higher and lower, since the fact that the higher and lower realms connect with one another (even though they are opposites) is because their defining attributes are nullified. This happens when Hashem’s infinite light that is higher than both of them is drawn down.*

To put it simply, at Har Sinai, Hashem “gave” us the Torah. We may have known in advance what the instructions set out in the Torah would be, but until they were actually given to us, we had not yet received our “marching orders.” The difference between the intellectual “concept” of Torah, and the actual “instructing,” “commanding,” or “giving” of the Torah is huge.

Hashem is not defined by any limitations (or, for that matter, by any lack of limitations), certainly not by our limitations; and when Hashem wants a certain goal to be accomplished, no limitation or lack of limitation can get in His way. Therefore, G-d’s instruction for us to “connect” with Him and “grasp” the Divine by observing the mitzvos, in effect

empowers us to be able to “connect with” and “grasp” the infinite by performing a mitzvah, even though, save G-d’s empowerment, we lack the ability on our own to grasp or relate to the Divine.

G-d’s revelation at Sinai was not a revelation of the Torah, par say, but of Hashem revealing Himself, and “putting His weight,” so to speak, behind the Torah.

This revelation broke the barriers, enabling the spiritual to take hold of the physical, and the physical to be elevated to the spiritual through the interface of mitzvos.

Thus, leather could become holy when used in the context of tefillin, and not just while the mitzvah is being performed, but the holiness permeates the leather and makes it holy forever.

Our task, subsequent to the giving of the Torah, is to use Torah and mitzvos to permeate everything in our lives and our entire existence with Elokus—to create a home for Hashem in this world. The ability to achieve this, is the unique contribution of the giving of the Torah on Shavuos.

## **Uplifting the Person**

*Talmud, Pesachim 68b*

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

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

In this statement, Rav Yosef is saying that without the Torah which was given on Shavuos, he would be indistinguishable from every other person in the world.

If the purpose of the Talmud is to point out Rav Yosef's superiority in Torah over the many Yosefs that roam the marketplace, why does the Talmud say "if not for this day" as opposed to "if not for Torah?" Moreover, the concept of Torah study existed before the actual giving of the Torah (as we've seen that Avraham kept the entire Torah before it was given), so, even without "this day," Rav Yosef might still have had the advantage of Torah study. What is unique about "this day?" And how did it set Rav Yosef apart from all the Yosef's in the marketplace?

Rashi explains:

*Rashi, Talmud, ibid*

אי לא האי יומא - שלמדתי תורה ונתרוממתי

*"Were it not for this day"—Because I studied Torah and was uplifted.*

Were it not for the giving of the Torah on Shavuos, Rav Yosef's Torah study would have made little difference in distinguishing him from everyone else (or from the versions of him (the Yosefs) that spend their time engaged in the marketplace). Only because of the unique contribution of the giving of the Torah on Shavuos, Torah study is able to effect the human being and elevate him to a higher spiritual place. This is because the decree against the higher realms descending and the lower realms ascending was annulled at the giving of the Torah.



## Physical Delights

The unique transformation that took place with the giving of the Torah also dictates how Shavuot should be celebrated. The Talmud cites a dispute between the chachomim about how one should spend his time on Yom Tov (in general):

*Pesachim 68b*

כתוב אחד אומר (דברים טז) עצרת לה' אלהיך, וכתוב אחד אומר (במדבר כט) עצרת תהיה לכם. רבי אליעזר סבר: או כולו לה' או כולו לכם. ורבי יהושע סבר: חלקהו, חציו לה' וחציו לכם. (עב"ם סימן) אמר רבי אלעזר: הכל מודים בעצרת דבעינן נמי לכם. מאי טעמא - יום שניתנה בו תורה הוא.

*One posuk states: "There shall be an assembly to Hashem, your G-d" [implying that one should observe the holiday by consecrating himself to Hashem] But one other posuk states "There shall be an assembly for you" [implying that one should observe the holiday by partaking of physical delights. How is this apparent contradiction resolved?] Rabbi Eliezer holds [that the posukim offer two options for observing the holiday]: [by devoting it] either exclusively to G-d, or exclusively to yourselves. But Rabbi Yehoshuah holds [that the requirements in both posukim must be fulfilled as follows]: [Divide the day by devoting] half of it to Hashem and half of it to yourselves.*

*Rabbi Elazar said: All authorities concede in [the case of] Shavuot that we require also "for you" [i.e.,*

*partaking in physical delights]. What is the reason?  
It is the day on which the Torah was given.*

You might think that the day on which the Torah is given is a day to devote solely to Hashem, to the study of Torah and higher pursuits. While there is room for such a sentiment on the other Yomim Tovim, there is unanimous opposition to this when it comes to Shavuos. Why is there a unanimous agreement that the giving of the Torah must be celebrated with physical delights?

Based on what we have established about the unique contribution of the giving of the Torah, it makes sense that Shavuos should be celebrated with physical delights, since the giving of the Torah allowed the spiritual to permeate the physical. Therefore, it follows that our celebration of such a day should not be an entirely spiritual one, but one that involves the physical as well, i.e., with physical delights.

### **A Loud Voice with No Echo**

Yet another symptom of the unique contribution of the giving of the Torah, can be found in the description of events that took place at Sinai. The posuk describes the event at Sinai as follows:

*Devarim 5:18*

אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה דִּבֶּר ה' אֶל כָּל קְהִלְכֶם בְּהַר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ הַעֲנָן וְהָעֲרָפֶל קוֹל גָּדוֹל וְלֹא יָסַף וַיְכַתְּבֶם עַל שְׁנֵי לְחֵת אֲבָנִים וַיִּתֶּנֶם אֵלַי:

*Hashem spoke these words to your entire assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the opaque darkness, with a great voice,*

*which did not cease. And He inscribed them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.*

What is the meaning of “a great voice which did not cease?”  
The Midrash provides three explanations:

*SHemot Rabbah 28*

קול גדול ולא יסף, ר' יוחנן אמר קול א' נחלק לז' קולות והם נחלקים  
לע' לשון, רשב"ל אמר שממנו נתנבאו כל הנביאים שעמדו, רבנן אמרי  
שלא היה לו בת קול

*“With a great voice, which did not cease” Rabbi Yochanan said: one voice split into seven voices which split into seventy languages, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: From this voice, all prophets to come prophesied. The Chachomim taught: The voice did not have an echo.*

The first two interpretations bring out the greatness of the voice, that it broke every language barrier, as well as every time barrier, to last for many generations through all of the prophets whose prophecies extended from this voice. But what does it mean that the voice did not have an echo? How does this bring out the uniqueness of Matan Torah (that there was “a great voice that did not cease”).

Moreover, this interpretation seems to imply the opposite of the literal meaning of the posuk, that the voice was weak and therefore it did not have an echo. How does this explain that it was “a great voice” so much so that it did not cease?

The Rebbe explains the significance of there being no echo:

הד ("בת קול") הוא כדוגמת "אור חוזר": כשמופיע אור ובא למקום שבו נמצא גוף המסתיר ומפריע להמשך מהלך האור – "חוזר האור, הוא נשבר ושב חזרה. כך הוא גם ב"בת קול": כשהקול נתקל בכותל או בגוף אחר המעכב אותו – הרי הוא מהדהד אחור, ודבר זה נקרא (כאן במדרש,) בשם "בת קול". דוגמת כדור הקופץ חזרה כשהוא נתקל בכותל. והתנאי לכל הדוגמאות הניתנות הוא שהכותל או הגוף אינו "סופג" לתוכו את הכדור או את הקול והאור. כאשר אמר הקב"ה: "אנכי הוי' אלקיך" – היה זה ב"קול גדול", שום דבר לא היה מסוגל לעצור את הקול, הקול חדר והקיף את כל העולם, ואף את הדומם. כל דבר קלט ו"ספג" את הקול של "אנכי" (משום שבמתן תורה היה "מעין הגילוי דלעתיד", והרי אז יהא "ונגלה כבוד הוי' וראו כל בשר" – גילוי כבוד הוי' ייקלט ויחדור אפילו לבשר הגשמי), ומשום כך לא היה אפשרות לשום הד (בת קול), לפי הטבע. "לא היה בת קול" – לא משום חולשת הקול, כי אם, אדרבה, משום שהיה "קול גדול" – לכן "ולא יסף", "לא היה לו בת קול".

*An echo is like a "reflective light" when light appears and arrives at a place where there is a body that conceals and disturbs the light from continuing in its path—the light reflects, the beam is broken and the light returns [in the opposite direction]. Similarly, with an echo, when the sound hits a wall or a different body that blocks it, it resounds back. This is called (here in the Midrash) by the name "bas kol" ("echo"). This is analogous to a ball that bounces back when it hits a wall. The condition for all of these examples is that the wall or body does not "absorb" the ball, or the voice, or the light.*

*When Hashem said: “I am the Hashem your G-d” this was with a “great voice,” nothing was able to stop the voice, the voice penetrated and surrounded the entire world, even the inanimate. Everything received and “absorbed” the voice of “Anochi” (since at the giving of the Torah there was a “foretaste of the future messianic era,” when [the prophecy] “and the glory of Hashem will be revealed and all flesh will see” will come to pass—the revelation of Hashem’s glory will be perceived by and penetrate even the physical flesh). For this reason, it was impossible for there to be any echo, according to nature. “There was no echo”—not because of the weakness of the voice, but, on the contrary, because it was “a great voice”—therefore, “it did not cease,” “it did not have an echo.”*

This is yet another example of the revelation at Sinai allowing the spiritual to permeate the physical, and to such a degree that the physical showed absolutely no resistance.

### **Staying Awake to Study All Night**

One of the customs of Shavuos, that we will see is related to this idea, is that we stay up on the night of Shavuos to study Torah. The earliest mention of such a custom is in the Zohar:

*Zohar Vol. 3, 88a*

**חסידים קדמאין לא הוו ניימי בהאי ליליא והוו לעאן באורייתא**

*The early Chassidim would remain awake on this*

*night [of Shavuos] and would study Torah.*

Why do we stay up all night?

The answer to this question is based on a description of the events of the morning of the giving of the Torah, as described in the Midrash:

*Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1:12:2*

הקב"ה הקדים דכתיב ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות בקר וכתיב כי ביום השלישי ירד ה' לעיני כל העם ישנו להם ישראל כל אותו הלילה לפי ששינה של עצרת עריבה והלילה קצרה אמר ר' יודן אפילו פורטענא לא עקץ במ. בא הקדוש ברוך הוא ומצאן ישנים התחיל מעמיד עליהם בקלאנין הה"ד ויהי ביום השלישי בהיות הבקר ויהי קולות וברקים והיה משה מעורר לישראל ומוציאן לאפנתי של מלך מלכי המלכים הקב"ה.

*Hashem came first [to Har Sinai] as the posuk states, "On the third day, in the morning." It also says, "On the third morning Hashem descended before the eyes of the nation." The Jews were sleeping all night, because the sleep of Atzeres is very sweet and the night is short. Rabbi Yuden said that even the fleas did not bite them. Hashem came and found them sleeping. He began to wake them with fanfare, as the posuk says, "On the third day, in the morning, there were sounds and thunder." Moshe woke up the people and brought them out before the King of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu.*

The custom to stay awake is to rectify this mistake that the Yidden made by sleeping in on the morning of the much

anticipated revelation at Sinai. This is why we refer to the staying up and studying of the night of Shavuos as “Tikun Leil Shavuos” which means “to rectify the night of Shavuos,” since we are correcting our ancestor’s mistake.

The Rebbe points out several anomalies in the story of the Midrash that hint to something more deliberate than just “sleeping in”:

*Likutei Sichos Vol. 4 p. 1025*

שזה ששכבו לישון לא הי' ח"ו מצד זה שהסיחו את דעתם ממתן תורה, אלא אדרבה, זה הי' אחד מההכנות שלהם למתן תורה ראי' נוספת לזה היא, מזה שהפרעושים לא עקצו אותם: אם השינה שלהם היתה ח"ו בגלל הסיח דעתם מהתורה, לא הי' עושה הקב"ה נס שהפרעושים לא יפריעו להם בשנתם ולא יעקצו אותם. מזה רואים שאדרבה, שינה זו היתה חלק מההכנות לקבלת התורה

*The fact that they went to sleep was not, heaven forbid, because they were distracted from the impending giving of the Torah, but on the contrary, this was one of their preparations to receive the Torah.*

*Supporting evidence for this is from the fact that the fleas didn't bite them. If their sleep was, heaven forbid, because they got distracted from the Torah, Hashem would not have performed a miracle that the fleas would not disturb them from their sleep by not biting them. From this we see, that, on the contrary, the sleep was part of their preparations for receiving the Torah.*

Why did the Jews think that sleeping was an appropriate preparation for receiving the Torah?

To understand this, it is necessary to explore the difference between the state of the soul as it is trapped within the confines of a body, and when it is set free to ascend to its source above. The Alter Rebbe explains in Tanya:

*Tanya Ch. 37*

היא ירידה גדולה, ובחינת גלות ממש כי גם שיהיה צדיק גמור, עובד ה' ביראה ואהבה רבה בתענוגים לא יגיע למעלות דביקותו בה' בדחילו ורחימו בטרם ירדתו לעולם הזה החומרי, לא מינה ולא מקצתה ואין ערך ודמיון ביניהם כלל, כנודע לכל משכיל, שהגוף אינו יכול לסבול בו'.

*[The neshamah's descent into a body] is indeed a great descent, a veritable exile for the neshamah; for even if it were to become, [in this world,] a perfect tzaddik, serving Hashem with fear and abundant love of delights, it will not attain to the quality of its attachment to Hashem with fear and love that the neshamah experienced prior to its descent into this corporeal world, nor even [to] a fraction of [its earlier fear and love]. In fact, there is no comparison or similarity whatever between them — [between the love and fear of Hashem experienced by a neshamah on earth, and that of the neshamah above]; [for] as is obvious to every intelligent man, the body could not bear etc. [a love and fear of such intensity as the soul experienced above, in the spiritual realms].*



## The Power of Sleep

To a degree, this out-of-body experience that the soul has before it enters the body, it experiences every time the person goes to sleep. As the Midrash describes:

*Bereishis Rabbah 14*

רבי ביסני ורבי אחא ור' יוחנן בשם ר"מ אומרים הנשמה הזו ממלאה את כל הגוף, ובשעה שאדם ישן היא עולה ושואבת לו חיים מלמעלה

*Rabbi Bisni, Rabbi Acha, and Rabbi Yochanan cited in the name of Rabbi Meir: This neshamah fills the entire body, and when a person sleeps, it ascends and draws life from above.*

So lofty is the neshamah's out-of-body experience when it sleeps, that deep kabalistic secrets are revealed to the neshamah while asleep cannot be otherwise explained or comprehended while the person is awake.

This insight helps us understand a seemingly derogatory remark by Rav Sheishes that appears in several places in Shas:

*Yevamos 24b, 91a, 109b, Bava Kama 47b, 65a, 67b, et al.*

אמר רב ששת: אמינא כי ניים ושכיב רב אמר להא שמעתא

*Rav Sheishes said: I say that Rav stated this law when he was dozing and drifting to sleep (otherwise he would never have said it)*

Simply, this is taken to mean that Rav didn't know what he was saying when he made certain Talmudic statements, as if he was sleeping when he made them.

Besides for it being unreasonable to believe that Rav would make “on-the-record” Torah statements that don’t make any sense, it is unbecoming of Rav Sheishes to refer to Rav with such indignation. There must be more to the story that we are missing, as Rabbi Meir Auerbach (1815–1879) points out in the introduction to his work *Imrei Binah*:

*Imrei Binah, Vol. I, Introduction*

“ל שר”ש ידע כי כל דברי רב היו בפלס שקל הקדש לומר ע”פ פנימיות התורה גם הנגלות וידוע מ”ש האר”י ז”ל שענין השינה ברא הקב”ה שיצא ממנו נשמתו ומונח רק קיסטא דחיותא, אז ישיג האדם רזין עילאין אשר אי אפשר לו להשיג בעוד נשמתו כלואה כולה בגופו ור”ש השכיל לדבר ואמר אחרי שאין לו השגה בזה בלי ספק כי ניים ושכב רב ואז השיג דברים אשר אין ביכולת להשיג כשהוא נעור ונשמתו בגופו ואדרבא זה היה כבודו של רב כי שכלו עלה ברוממות השגות אשר נעלה הוא להשיג ולהבין בעוד נשמתו היא בעב הענן מעוטף בגופה לא ח”ו לזלזל בכבודו.

*We can posit that Rav Sheishes knew that all of Rav’s words were (spoken) with utmost caution in weighing that which is holy to explain according to the inner dimension of Torah, even the revealed aspects. It is known that which the Arizal writes that Hashem created the concept of sleep wherein the neshamah departs from the person and only a small remnant of retaining life force remains (in the body, to keep it alive), then a person comprehends the supernal secrets that are impossible to comprehend while his neshamah is [awake and] completely imprisoned within the*

body. Rav Sheishet appreciated this and said that since he didn't understand [what Rav was saying], Rav must have been dosing and drifting to sleep and [in that state] comprehended things that cannot be understood while he was awake and his soul was trapped in his body. On the contrary, he said this in Rav's honour, that his mind ascended to the heights of understanding that lies beyond what can be comprehended when the soul is in "the thickness of the cloud," wrapped in its body; and he did not say this, heaven forbid, to belittle his honor.

We see that when the soul is asleep, it is able to comprehend deep secrets of Torah, that are not comprehensible when the person is awake.

A story to this effect is told by Rabbi Chaim Vital (1543–1620) of his teacher, the Arizal:

*Pri Eitz Chaim, Krias Shema, 16:1 (p. 75d)*

מעשה שהיה ישן מורי ז"ל ונכנס רבי אברהם הלוי ומצאו שהיה מרחש בשפתיו בין כך ובין כך נתעורר הרב אמר לו ומה היה אדוני מרחיש בשנתו אמר לו עסקתי עכשיו בישיבה של מעלה בפרשת בלק ובלעם דברים נפלאים ואמר לו יאמר מעלת כבוד תורתו מהני מילי מעלייתא אמר לו אם הייתי דורש פ' שנים רצופים יומם ולילה מה ששמעתי עתה אינו יכול להשלים

*There was an incident in which my teacher, [the Arizal] was sleeping and Rabbi Avraham HaLevi entered and found that he was moving his lips. After a while, my teacher awoke. [Rabbi Avraham*

said to him: “may my master forgive me for waking him from his slumber.”] Rabbi Avraham asked him: “what was my master mumbling in his sleep?” The Arizal replied: “I was just now engaged in the yeshiva above in parshat Balak and Bilaam, wondrous things.” Rabbi Avraham said to him, “let the loftiness of the honour of his Torah share from these lofty words.” He said to him, “If I were to expound for 80 consecutive years, day and night, that which I just now heard, I would not be able to complete it.”

These episodes shed light into why the Yidden saw it fit to prepare for receiving the Torah by sleeping.

From their perspective, there was no more fitting a state to be in in order to receive the secrets of the Torah.

What then was their mistake? Where did they go wrong? And why must we remain awake to fix their mistake?

The Rebbe explains:

*Likutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1025*

כיון שכל החידוש של מתן תורה היא העבודה של הנשמה בגוף, לכן גם ההכנה לזה היתה צריכה להיות באופן דומה: לא לשכב לישון, להתפשט מהגוף, אלא עבודה עם הגוף.

*Since the entire innovation of the giving of the Torah is the service of the soul within the body, therefore, the preparation for it should have also been in a similar manner, not to lie down to sleep, to*

*escape the body, but to work with the body.*

For this reason, commemorate the receiving of the Torah by staying up and studying Torah on the night of Shavuos, rather than allowing our souls to ascend on high by going to sleep.

## **Hearing the 10 Commandments**

One of the important customs on Shavuos is to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments in shul, as the Midrash relates:

*Pesikta D'rav Kahana 12 (bachodesh hashlishi)*

אמר הקב"ה לישראל בניי, היו קורין את הפרשה הזאת בכל שנה ואני מעלה עליכם כאילו שאתם עומדים לפני הר סיני ומקבלין את התורה.

*Hashem said to the Yidden: My children, read this portion [i.e., the Aseres Hadibros] every year and I will consider it as if you are standing before Har Sinai and receiving the Torah.*

The Rebbe encouraged chassidim to ensure that everyone be present for the reading of the Aseres Hadibros, particularly young children:

*Likkutei Sichos Vol. 28 Pg. 315*

כשם שאמירת עשרת הדברות בפעם הראשונה היתה בנוכחות כל עם ישראל, אנשים נשים וטף, גם הקטני קטנים – כדאי להשתדל אשר בעת קריאת הפרשה הזאת בזמן מ"ת בכל שנה ושנה, כל בני ישראל, גם הקטני קטנים(ות), יהיו בבית הכנסת (לכל הפחות) בעת קריאת עשרת הדברות.

*Just as at the original recital of the Ten Commandments, all Jews were present—men, women, and children, even infants—it is worthwhile to see to it that when this Torah portion is read at the time of the giving of the Torah each year, that all Jews—even infants—should be present in the shul (at least) during the reading of the Ten Commandments.*

### **Our Children, Our Guarantors**

It is important that children are present for the reading of the Aseres Hadibros, because they play a pivotal role in the transmission of the Torah through the ages.

The Midrash describes the negotiations that took place between Hashem and the Jewish people in an attempt to find a suitable guarantor to underwrite the loaning of the Torah to the Jewish people:

*Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:3*

בשעה שעמדו ישראל לקבל התורה אמר להם אני נותן לכם תורתי  
הביאו לי ערבים טובים שתשמרוה ואתננה לכם, אמרו אבותינו עורבים  
אותנו, אמר להם הקב"ה אבותיכם יש לי עליהם...אלא הביאו לי ערבים  
טובים ואני נותנה לכם, אמרו לפני רבש"ע נביאינו ערבין לנו, אמר  
להם יש לי עליהם...אלא הביאו לי ערבים טובים ואתננה לכם, אמרו  
הרי בנינו עורבים אותנו, אמר הקב"ה הא ודאי ערבים טובים על ידיהם  
אתננה לכם.

*When the Jewish People stood to receive the Torah, Hashem said to them: "I am prepared to give you*

*My Torah. Present to Me good guarantors that you will observe the Torah and I shall give it to you.”*

*They said: “The avos are our guarantors.”*

*Hashem said: the avos are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors, and I shall give you the Torah.”*

*They said: “The nevi’im are our guarantors.”*

*Hashem said: “The nevi’im are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors and I shall give you the Torah.”*

*They said: “Indeed, our children will be our guarantors.”*

*Hashem said: “Your children are good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you.”*

## **Eating Dairy Products**

Another widespread mihag on Shavuos, is to partake of milchig foods, for which several reasons have been given:

*Rema, Orach Chaim 294:3*

ונוהגין בכל מקום לאכול מאכלי חלב ביום ראשון של שבועות; ונ”ל הטעם שהוא כמו השני תבשילין שלוקחים בליל פסח, זכר לפסח וזכר לחגיגה, כן אוכלים מאכל חלב ואח”כ מאכל בשר וצריכין להביא עמהם ב’ לחם על השלחן שהוא במקום המזבח, ויש בזה זכרון לבי’

הלהם שהיו מקריבין ביום הבכורים.

*The custom is to eat dairy foods on the first day of Shavuos. It seems to me that the reason for this is like the two cooked dishes that we eat on Pesach as a reminder of the korbon Pesach and Chagigah. So too, on Shavuos, we eat dairy followed by meat, [which requires us to] have two separate loaves of bread on the table [since milk and meat cannot be eaten together], which symbolically represents the Altar. In this way we have a reminder of the Two Loaves of bread that were offered on Shavuos, the day of bikurim.*

Another explanation:

*Mishnah Berurah 494:12*

בעת שעמדו על הר סיני וקבלו התורה [כי בעשרת הדברות נתגלה להם עי"ז כל חלקי התורה כמו שכתב רב סעדיה גאון שבעשרת הדברות כלולה כל התורה] וירדו מן ההר לביתם לא מצאו מה לאכול תיכף כ"א מאכלי חלב כי לבשר צריך הכנה רבה לשחוט בסכין בדוק כאשר צוה ה' ולנקר חוטי החלב והדם ולהדיח ולמלוח ולבשל בכלים חדשים כי הכלים שהיו להם מקודם שבישלו בהם באותו מעל"ע נאסרו להם ע"כ בחרו להם לפי שעה מאכלי חלב ואנו עושין זכר לזה.

*The Yidden stood at Har Sinai and received the Torah [even though they only heard the Aseres Hadibros, these contained within them all the other parts of the Torah, as explained by Rav Saadiah Gaon]. Afterwards, they returned to their homes*



*but were not able to eat meat products immediately because that requires preparation: Shechitah with a knife which is sharp and checked; removal of the sciatic nerve (gid hanashe), forbidden fats, and blood; soaking and salting; and cooking in new pots because all the existing pots had been used in the preceding twenty-four hours for non-kosher food and were therefore forbidden. As such, the Jews chose to eat dairy at that time. We therefore eat dairy in remembrance of this.*

### **The Book of Rus**

While it's not the minhag in Lubavitch, in many shuls, the Book of Rus is read:

*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 490*

ונוהגין לומר רות בשבועות.

*It is customary to read the Book of Rus on Shavuos.*

There are several reasons for this. One reason is (as cited by Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Margalios 1780–1823):

*Shaarei Teshuvah, Orach Chaim 494:2*

הטעם שלפי שדוד המלך ע"ה מת בעצרת והקב"ה ממלא שנותיהם בו ובודאי בעצרת נולד ומגילת רות נכתב לייחס דוד.

*The reason is because Dovid Hamelech died on Shavuos, and Hashem completes the years of the righteous [so that they die on their birthday, and*

*in this way live out their full number of years]. Certainly, then, Dovid Hamelech was born on this day [as well]. The Book of Rus was written to legitimize David's lineage.*

In addition to the technical association with Dovid Hamelech, the story of Rus serves as a powerful example of what it means to accept the Torah. Rus was a Moabite princess who, after her husband passed away, was encouraged to return to her royal home where she would be treated as royalty, but instead, she wholeheartedly chose to embrace Yiddishkeit and a Torah lifestyle, without any selfish motive whatsoever.

This is particularly relevant to Shavuos, when all Jews became like converts at Har Sinai when we accepted to follow Hashem's word without question.

### **Yahrtzeit of Dovid Hamelech and Baal Shem Tov**

Shavuos is also the day on which Dovid Hamelech and the Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760) passed away.

The Rebbe explains that nothing is by chance, and points out in the life-achievements of both of these giants, certain major life-accomplishments that furthered the intended purpose of the giving of the Torah:

*Lekutei Sichos Vol. 8 pg. 21*

העילוי שנפעל במתן תורה, בא אח"כ בגילוי (יותר) ע"י דוד המלך, ואח"כ – יותר בגילוי – ע"י הבעש"ט.

*The contribution that was brought about through the giving of the Torah, was later (further) revealed*

*through Dovid Hamelech, and later—even further revealed—through the Baal Shem Tov.*

Both Dovid Hamelech and the Baal Shem Tov brought about milestone achievements in furthering the aim of Matan Torah. As mentioned earlier, the achievement of Matan Torah was not that now we had the wisdom of the Torah to study, since our forefathers studied and observed the Torah even before it was given. The chief innovation of Matan Torah was empowering the finite world, and us finite beings, to connect with the infinite and even create a home for the infinite within a finite world and within our finite lives.

One of Dovid Hamelech's chief accomplishments was the purchasing of property in Yerushalayim to house the Beis Hamikdash, to create the first permanent physical abode for Hashem in a set geographical location.

Since the time that Moshe built the mishkan in the midbar, the mishkan was stationed in various locations, but it never had a permanent home. Dovid was the one who brought the mishkan to Yerushalayim and gave it its permanent home. The uniqueness of this achievement is in the fact that the finite, physical earth, and the physical structure that was later built by Shlomo Hamelech on that spot, was itself capable of serving as a home for Hashem. To the extent that Shlomo Hamelech remarked:

*Melachim I 8:27*

כִּי הֲאֵמָנָם יֵשֵׁב אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָרֶץ הַזֶּה הַשָּׁמַיִם וְשָׁמַיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא  
יִכְלְלוּךָ אֵף כִּי הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר בְּנִיתִי:

*But will Hashem indeed dwell on the earth? Behold*

*the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You; much less this sanctuary that I have erected.*

Indeed, this unique ability for the finite to house the infinite was made possible in theory by the giving of the Torah, but was given new meaning by Dovid Hamelech, in the sense of actually appointing a physical, geographic location on the Har Habayis in Yerushalayim to serve as this home.

The Baal Shem Tov, who also passed away on Shavuos, further took this concept to a new level. The Baal Shem Tov introduced Chassidus—the idea that a human being could grasp Elokus and relate to Hashem with his intellect and emotions. The Baal Shem Tov revealed the hidden dimension of Torah in a manner that people could understand and relate to. The notion that the finite human mind can comprehend Elokus would make no sense, were it not for the fact that Hashem gave us the Torah, and with it, the ability to use the Torah to grasp the Divine. The Baal Shem Tov acted on this theoretical ability that was made possible by the giving of the Torah, and showed people how to do so practically.

The Baal Shem Tov encouraged the most simple of people to endeavor to make a home for Hashem in their hearts and in their lives. The Baal Shem Tov also introduced and encouraged a renewed anticipation for the coming of Moshiach, when the entire world will become a permanent abode for Elokus, bringing to a final conclusion the goal for which the Torah was given on Shavuos, by way of our study of Torah and performing mitzvos and the impact it has on transforming ourselves and the world.

## Take-aways

- » The festival of Shavuos is not determined by the day of Matan Torah, but by the conclusion of counting 50 days of the omer (this would change the date of Shavuos for a person who crosses the international date line and skips a day or adds a day to the count).
- » Shavuos celebrates the harvest season, and the start of bringing of bikurim to Yerushalayim. It is also the day when the fruits of the tree are judged. For this reason, we decorate our homes and shul with plants (and because Har Sinai was decorated with plants).
- » The primary contribution of Matan Torah was not that we could study Torah (Torah study already existed) but that Hashem empowered us to elevate the physical and infuse it with spirituality (until this point, the finite and infinite could not co-exist). This is why there is unanimous agreement that Shavuos should be celebrated with physical delights.
- » The Yidden slept in on the morning of Matan Torah, expecting the giving of the Torah to be an out-of-body experience. We stay up on the night of Shavuos to fix their mistake, since the purpose of the Torah was be studied and observed by neshamos in bodies (i.e., awake).
- » Other minhagim include eating dairy foods, and reading the Book of Rus for which several reasons are given.