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Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bamidbar

Thoughts For Shavuos: I am "One Yosef" Because of the Power of Torah

There is a commonly-quoted Gemara (Pesachim 68b) that says: "Every year on the day of Shavuos, Rav Yosef would say to his servants, 'Prepare for me a third-born calf.' Rav Yosef explained the reason for this lavish celebration as follows: 'If this day had not caused me to learn Torah and thereby become

spiritually elevated, how many 'Yosefs' are there in the market place—and I would have been indistinguishable from them!" The simple reading of this passage is that the Amora Rav Yosef is commenting that if not for Matan Torah and his personal Torah learning, he would be "just another Joe" (and he therefore celebrated the occasion of Shavuos by asking his servants to prepare his favorite dish).

Virtually every year on Shavuos, Rav Ruderman would say that the Gemara means something deeper than that. "How many 'Yosefs' are there in the market place" does not mean "I would be just another 'Joe'". Rather, it means "there would be so many of me—I myself would be so many different types of people." In other words, I would be all over the map, I would be so conflicted without the unifying force of Torah. That which gives unity and focus to my life and makes me into a unified person with unwavering direction is the Torah. Without Torah, I would be so many Joes—A Joe Six Pack, a Joe Ravens fan, a Joe this, a Joe that. I would be all over the place. This, in essence, is what the Yom Tov of Shavuos is all about. It is a time to appreciate what Torah does for us.

On Shavuos we read the Megillah of Rus. Rus is not a Tale of Two Cities, but it is rather a Tale of Two People. Here we have two sisters—the same gene pool, the same upbringing, the same environment—Orpah and Rus. And yet, Rus went in one direction and made a decision which shaped her whole life thereafter. She became the Matriarch of Klal Yisrael, the great-grandmother of Dovid HaMelech. Orpah went on a different path.

What separated Rus and Orpah? Why did Rus choose what she chose and Orpah chose an entirely different path in life? Rav Moshe Schwab, zt"l, said that Orpah viewed the life that Rus was about to choose as involving too much mesiras nefesh (martyrdom and self-sacrifice). She was not willing to make that sacrifice. She felt it would be too hard of a life. She returned to what she perceived would be an easier life. Rus on the other hand was willing to make that which at the time seemed like a difficult choice. In the end, beyond the initial brief period of time, it turned out to not involve mesiras nefesh at all. It was a much more noble life. It was a much more rewarding life, and a life that was so much better in the end. That is what we need to tell ourselves all the time. A life of Yiddishkeit sometimes seems more difficult, but it is so much more rewarding in the end. Not only in the World to Come, but in This World as well. We have purpose to our lives. Our lives are so much richer than those who do not have Torah. People make this mistake. They think a Torah observant life style is so difficult, involves giving so much up, and forgoing so much fun and so many pleasures.

That is the difference between Rus and Orpah. Orpah thought she was giving so much up. Therefore, she did not make that decision. Rus recognized that she may be engaged in something

difficult for the moment, but in the end, it was going to be rewarding.

L'Havdil – look at athletes. Look at the sacrifices they make. I hate to make this comparison, but look at Michael Phelps. He spent more time in a swimming pool than most of us spend in a Beis Medrash. He wound up winning more Gold Medals than anyone in the history of the Olympics. So, in the end he looks back and thinks, “Sure, it was a sacrifice—all those years of training and practice—but it paid off. In the end, it was all worth it!” He is glad that he made that sacrifice. L'Havdil, that is the way we can look at the sacrifice and mesiras nefesh we make for commitment to Torah learning and for living a Torah observant life style.

The same dialog appears in the Hagadah. The Wicked Son asks, “What is this Avodah – for you!” The Rasha says, “I see what you are doing, but I am not willing to make that sacrifice.” Look at the answer given to the Wicked son in the Torah's narration of that dialog (Shemos 12:26-27): “And when your children say to you: What does this Avodah (ceremony) mean to you? You shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the L-rd who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, for He struck the Egyptians, but our homes, He spared...’”

Our answer to him is, “Yes, it is a sacrifice, but look what happened in the end! In the end, we were saved. The first Korban (sacrifice) that Klal Yisrael brought—the Korban Pesach—was the key to our salvation. That became the prototype of all future Korbonos: Yes, it is a “sacrifice” in the beginning, but in the end, “es bateinu hi'tzeel” (our houses were saved). That is the answer to the Rasha.

The Mishna (Avos 6:4) says “This is the way of Torah: Bread with salt you shall consume, and water in measured amounts you shall drink, you shall sleep on the ground, and live a life of pain, and (yet) toil in Torah.” The way to acquire Torah involves deprivation and hardship. It is tough. But the Mishna concludes: “If you do this, ‘Happy are you and it will be good for you.’ (Tehillim 128:2) Happy are you in this world, and it will be good for you in the World to Come.”

Why does the Mishna need to say “If you do this?” The Mishna just mentioned what was involved in acquisition of Torah. Why repeat “If you do this?” The answer is that after hearing the deprivation and hardship involved in acquiring Torah, it would be quite easy to dismiss the effort – “Who needs that?” The Mishna continues – Yes, I know it sounds tough, but IF YOU DO THIS... Just try it! If you try it, do you know what the result will be? Happy are you, and it will be good for you! Everything in life that involves sacrifice is worth the hard work. If there is no hard work, it is not worth it. That is also the way it is with Torah. IF YOU DO THIS, if you just try it, you will find out that it will make you happy in This World, and it will be good for you in the World to Come.

This is what Rav Yosef is saying. Where would I be and where would we all be without the Torah? This is the approach that we need to think about before Shavuot. Yes, it is sometimes hard to be a Jew. Yes, it is a life which involves some sacrifice, but look at the end. Look at that first Korban that Klal Yisrael brought. Es Bateinu Hi'tzil—as a result of that, we were saved. That is the sacrifice that, in the end, is the source of our salvation.

A Peculiar Verb Is Used to Command the Census Taking Sefer Bamidbar begins with the counting of Klal Yisrael: “Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families, according to their fathers' household, by number of the names, every male according to their head count.” (Bamidbar 1:2) Indeed, this is how the sefer begins, and then again, all the way at the end of Sefer Bamidbar – in Parshas Pinchas – it ends the description of the forty-year sojourn in the Midbar with another counting of Klal Yisrael. In Talmudic literature, Sefer Bamidbar is referred to as “Chomesh haPekudim” (the Chumash of the Counts). Even in non-Jewish nomenclature, this fourth book of the Torah is called the Book of Numbers, because it begins and ends with these counts. Rashi here quotes the famous teaching of Chazal: “Because of their dearness to Him, He counts them constantly. When they left Mitzraim, He counted them; after the Eigel Hazahav, He counted them to learn how many were lost; and when He had his Divine Presence descend upon them, He counted them: The Mishkan was erected on the first of Nissan, and therefore He counted them on the first of Iyar.”

The constant counting demonstrates that the Holy One Blessed be He loves Klal Yisrael. On the other hand, we see something that, at first glance, would seem contradictory: There is a tremendous danger involved in the counting of the Jewish people. We see this all the way back in Parshas Ki Sisa. The pasuk there says: “When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them.” (Shemos 30:12). Counting Klal Yisrael introduces the risk of triggering a plague. In fact, in the days of Dovid HaMelech, when Dovid HaMelech counted the Jewish people, there was a tremendous plague. Seventy thousand people from Klal Yisrael died (Shmuel II 24:15).

So, which is it? Is counting something we should do because it shows our endearment to the Ribono shel Olam, and because it demonstrates His love for us? Or is counting something that runs a terrible risk of plague?

The answer is – it depends how the count is conducted. The key to how to count is found in the second pasuk in this week's parsha. “Se'u es rosh kol adas Bnei Yisrael.” This expression (se'u es rosh) is a very peculiar way of expressing counting. There are numerous ways in Hebrew to verbalize counting.

Options include Sefor (samech fay reish); Menei (mem nun hay); and many other ways to say 'Count'. The most peculiar way to say 'Count' is "Se'u es rosh," which literally means "lift up the heads." Why then, of all expressions that we might use, does the Torah use the expression "Se'u es rosh"?

The answer is that the expression "Se'u es rosh" is the key to avoiding the downside of counting. The downside of counting is that by counting a mass of people, the importance of each individual can be lost. When someone takes a census and counts 600,000 people, it minimizes the importance and dignity of each individual in that conglomerate. The Torah wants to warn us that we may have 600,000 people, but each one of those people is a person by himself and has a distinct significance, which should never be forgotten.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, ob"m, the former Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, quotes a very famous economic treatise that was written by the Scottish author and journalist, Charles Mackay, in 1841. The name of the treatise was Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds. The author documents the great danger that exists in crowds. Aside from the loss of individual identity ever present in crowds, the presence of a crowd generates a "herd mentality." When everyone starts doing something, everyone in the crowd gets wrapped into it. The example he talks about was the "Tulip mania".

What was the "Tulip mania"? In Holland, one tulip bulb was worth literally a fortune. People got wrapped up in the exquisiteness of tulips, and it became the greatest thing since sliced bread. Therefore, tulips became the hottest commodity on the market and people would spend fortunes of money for one tulip bulb. This went on until suddenly someone woke up and said, "Hey guys – we are talking about a flower!"

Therefore you can go into Trader Joe's tomorrow morning and buy a dozen tulips for four dollars!

The same thing once happened in South Africa, when people went crazy about ostrich feathers. They became the rage. However, we don't need to go back into the 1700s or the 1800s. Just think back to the "Tech Bubble" of the 1990s. How do such things happen? They happen because of a "herd mentality" – people get so wrapped up in what everyone else is doing that they lose their own perspectives.

The danger of the masses is a double danger. When we look at a crowd, we do not give proper respect to the individual members of the crowd as individuals. The people become just "numbers". (There was once even a commercial that stated: "In our bank you are not just a number.") That is one danger of being part of the masses. The other danger is that people themselves lose their ability to think individually. "Everyone is buying tulips – I am going to buy tulips. Everybody is buying ostrich feathers – I am going to buy ostrich feathers." That is not the way a Jew needs to operate.

An amazingly insightful Gemara says (Berochos 58a) "Someone who sees the masses of Israel should recite the blessing: 'Baruch Chacham HaRazim'". We invoke praise of the Almighty, who looks at this large mass of people and knows exactly what is within the heart of every single one of them. He knows that every person is different, and every person has his own personality. Every person has his own secrets. Only the Ribono shel Olam knows what those secrets are!

When we see a mass of people, all we see is a mass of people. We get carried away by the crowds and don't see the individuals. The Almighty sees every individual in that mass of humanity and He knows all their secrets! This is the idea of Se'u Es Rosh – Lift each head and never forget the importance of the head of each individual person.

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Showering on Yom Tov by

Rabbi Chaim Jachter Volume 18, Halachah (2008/5769)

Those who reside in relatively affluent communities are accustomed to showering on a regular basis, something that was unheard of in pre-modern times. For many years there has been discussion whether showering is permitted on Yom Tov nowadays in light of this change in hygiene habits. We shall examine the traditional prohibition to bathe on Yom Tov and see whether this prohibition still applies even in contemporary times.

Background Information – MiToch, Shaveh LeChol Nefesh and Gezeirat Balanim

Three basic concepts must be clarified at first. The first is the debate between Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel regarding the law of "MiToch." The Torah (Shemot 12:16) permits certain work on Yom Tov such as cooking, transferring fire and carrying in a public domain for the sake of Ochel Nefesh (food preparation).

Beit Shamai limits this permission to food preparation while Beit Hillel expand it to any Yom Tov need.

For example, the Mishnah (Beitzah 1:5) records that Beit Shamai does not permit carrying a child, Lulav or Sefer Torah (Torah scroll) in a public domain on Yom Tov while Beit Hillel does permit such carrying on holidays. The Gemara (Beitzah 12a) explains that Beit Hillel believes that "MiToch Shehutrah Hotza'ah LeTzorech Hutrah Nami Shelo LeTzorech", "just as the Torah permits carrying for the sake of food preparation it permits carrying for any Yom Tov need", while Beit Shamai rejects this expansion. This concept is commonly referred to as "MiToch" and applies to other labors permitted on Yom Tov. The Halachah follows the opinion of Beit Hillel (Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 518:1).

Even Beit Hillel agree, however, that the Torah permits labor on Yom Tov only for activities that are “Shaveh LeChol Nefesh,” something that is enjoyed by most people and not something that’s exotic used by only a small minority of individuals. An example of such “exotic” behavior presented by the Gemara (Ketubot 7a) is making incense, which is prohibited on Yom Tov (Shulchan Aruch O.C. 511:4). There occasionally arises some debate whether to define an activity as Shaveh LeChol Nefesh. For example, the Acharonim discussed whether smoking is Shaveh L’chol Nefesh (see Biur Halacha 511:4 s.v. Ein Osin and the chapter in the forthcoming third volume of Gray Matter where it is explained that today smoking is prohibited due to health concerns).

The third background concept is the Gezeirat HaBalanim, the “bathhouse decree.” Rambam (Hilchot Shabbat 22:2) presents the issue succinctly:

“Why did the Rabbis forbid entering a bathhouse on Shabbat? Because of the bathhouse attendants who would heat water on Shabbat and claim it was heated before Shabbat (if the water was heated on Shabbat one can not benefit from the heated water as one cannot benefit from work done on his behalf on Shabbat).”

Heating Water for Bathing Purposes on Yom Tov

The Mishnah (Beitzah 2:5) presents a debate between Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai as to whether one may heat water for washing one’s hands, face, and feet on Yom Tov. Predictably, Beit Shamai forbids this due to its rejection of the idea of “MiToch” and Beit Hillel permits this activity since they subscribe to the idea of “MiToch.”

Interestingly, even Beit Hillel agrees that one may not heat water for one’s entire body on Yom Tov. Rishonim debate the reason for this. Tosafot (Beitzah 21b s.v. Lo Yeicham) explain that bathing one’s entire body is not Shaveh LeChol Nefesh as it is “fit for only finicky individuals.” Rambam (Hilchot Yom Tov 1:16) believes that it is included in the Gezeirat HaBalanim, though it appears unusual to extend this edict to Yom Tov where one is permitted to engage in many labors necessary for Yom Tov. Ramban (Shabbat 40a s.v. Ha Ditnan), however, explains that since some Halachic concerns apply to bathing on Yom Tov as well, such as the worry that one may come to squeeze water (Sechitah) from one’s hair or towel, the edict applies to Yom Tov as well.

There are two major differences between these two approaches. According to Tosafot, heating water for bathing on Yom Tov constitutes a Torah level prohibition whereas according to the Rambam it is only a rabbinic prohibition. Moreover, according to Tosafot this prohibition is subject to change as the category of Shaveh L’chol Nefesh varies in accordance with the habits of each particular generation, whereas the Gezeirat Habalanim is not subject to change, as the

edicts of Chazal apply even when their reasons do not (Beitzah 5a).

This is quite ironic as normally we are stricter regarding a Torah law than a rabbinic requirement. However, it emerges in this case that there is more room for leniency with a Torah law than a rabbinic law. Thus, according to Tosafot it would appear to be permitted to bathe one’s entire body on Yom Tov since such bathing has become Shaveh L’chol Nefesh in our times. According to the Rambam, however, the prohibition remains in effect.

The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 511:1-2) clearly considers the Rambam’s approach. Rav Yosef Karo permits bathing one’s entire body on Yom Tov if the water was heated before Yom Tov, if the bathing is not done in a bathhouse. The Rama forbids bathing even outside the bathhouse. Mishnah Berurah (511:18) explains that the Gezeirat Habalanim forbids bathing on Yom Tov to the full extent as Shabbat, whether or not the bathing occurs in a bathhouse.

Accordingly, the prohibition to bathe one’s entire on Yom Tov applies even today, since both the Shulchan Aruch and Rama consider the Rambam’s opinion. Indeed, most Rabbanim today forbid bathing one’s entire body on Yom Tov.

For example, Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata 14:7, does not permit bathing on Yom Tov even though in footnote 21 he considers the fact that bathing today has become Shaveh LeChol Nefesh. Similarly, Yalkut Yosef (5:Moadim p.482) does not offer blanket permission to bathe nowadays despite the greatly increased frequency of bathing.

Moreover, bathing is problematic today even for Sephardic Jews who follow Rav Karo, as one’s insures that the water used for bathing was heated before Yom Tov by shutting off the boiler before Yom Tov. Most families would not want to do this, since hot water available for washing one’s hands and face would not be available for the entire Yom Tov if the valve is turned off before Yom Tov.

Possible Exceptions to the Prohibition

There is, though, possible flexibility regarding the application of the Gezeirat Habalanim. The primary area of leniency is presented in the context of women immersing in a Mikveh on Shabbat and Yom Tov evenings. Two major eighteenth century Poskim, Teshuvot Noda Bi’yehudah (O.C. 24) and Teshuvot Chacham Tzvi (number 11) forbid immersing in a Mikveh whose water is heated even before Shabbat or Yom Tov. They permitted immersion only in lukewarm water, which the Aruch Hashulchan (O.C. 326:3) defines as water that people do not commonly regard as warm, even though the water is still a bit warm (for further discussion, see Shemirat Shabbat Kehilchata 14:1 footnote 3). These authorities believe that the edict was issued only in regard to hot water and not lukewarm water (although Beit Meir to Yoreh Deah 197 who believes it applies even if the water is only lukewarm).

Nonetheless, by the nineteenth century Teshuvot Divrei Chaim (O.C. 2:26) notes common practice is for women to immerse even on Shabbat and Yom Tov evenings in fully heated Mikva'ot, as approved by the leading rabbinical authorities. Two reasons are offered to justify this practice. Rav Akiva Eiger (commenting on Shulchan Aruch 307:5 and cited in Bi'ur Halacha 326:1 s.v. B'mayim) permits bathing in hot water even on Shabbat (if the water was heated prior to Shabbat) in case of great discomfort. He believes that the edict was not intended to apply in such circumstances. Since women find it very difficult to immerse even in lukewarm water, the edict does not apply. A second reason is that since the immersion is for the sake of Mitzvah, the Gezeirah was not issued in case of Mitzvah.

Application to Showering on Yom Tov

One may combine the three lenient approaches regarding Mikveh, to showering on Yom Tov. If one is bathed in sweat on Yom Tov (such as from dancing in a hot room on Simchat Torah) then it is permitted to shower in lukewarm water. In such a situation one is in great discomfort which interferes with the Mitzvah of rejoicing on Yom Tov and therefore is justified in bathing in lukewarm water on Yom Tov. Indeed, Rav Yosef Adler reports that Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik permits showering on Yom Tov in at least such circumstances even if the water is heated on Yom Tov, since today bathing has become Shaveh L'chol Nefesh. Rav Hershel Schachter told me that he would also permit showers in at least such circumstances on Yom Tov.

However, in such a situation one must take care to avoid squeezing water from one's hair or towel. One must also avoid using bar soap (Mishnah Berurah 326:30) and removing hair or loose nails or skin.

Yom Tov Sheini

One should not distinguish between the first day of Yom Tov and the second day of Yom Tov (for those who do not merit living in Eretz Yisrael) in this regard and rule more leniently for the second day since it is only a rabbinic obligation. The Aruch Hashulchan (O.C. 511:11) rejects such an approach as degrading to Yom Tov Sheini, a day whose dignity Chazal strove mightily to preserve (Shabbat 23a).

Conclusion Showering and bathing on Yom Tov remains forbidden except for exceptional circumstances.

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Torah Study Is Not Like Calculus

By Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss - 3 Sivan 5782 – June 2, 2022

As we make final preparations for Shavuot, including a fervent desire to come away from the Yom Tov with a renewed commitment to the “learning” of Torah, we need to understand a unique aspect about Torah study. In the sixth perek of Pirkei Avos we are taught HaTorah niknis b'mem ches devorim – The

Torah is acquired through 48 qualities. The Rachmastrivka Rebbe, shlit"ta, asks why the Mishna did not state more directly, Konin haTorah b'mem ches devorim – One should acquire the Torah with 48 tools? He answers with a comparison to a Gemara in Kedushin which says, Ha'isha niknas, a wife is acquired. There also, the Gemara poses the question why doesn't it say, Konin es haisha – one should acquire a woman, and the Gemara answers that this language would imply that she can be acquired even against her will. So too, concludes the Rebbe, HaTorah niknis conveys that the Torah can only be acquired if the Torah itself is agreeable to mesh with the person who is studying it, and the conditions to be compatible with the Torah are the 48 traits mentioned in the Mishna.

This is an anomaly for when it comes to acquiring Torah knowledge, one of the 48 traits is a lev tov, a kind heart. Now, one doesn't need a kind heart to study calculus or learn a new language. But, if one wants to truly absorb the Torah, one needs to have a character makeup that the Torah agrees to join with. This is the meaning of the famous Talmudic adage, Derech erez kodma l'Torah, developing a refined character has to precede a Torah career. Or, as the Mishna puts it in the third perek of Pirkei Avos, “Im ein derech erez, ein Torah – Without proper behavior there can be no Torah success.” As the Rav explains on this Mishna, if one's dealings with their fellow man are not pleasant, eventually they will forget their Torah knowledge. This explains why sometimes the very bright and promising boy in yeshiva, with an acute mind for Talmudic didactics and who asks the best questions in class, never amounts to anything. This is because the boy in question is not well behaved and the Torah shuns a person who does not practice the ways of mentchlichkeit.

In a telling posuk in Devarim, it says, Lo meirubchem mikol ha'amim – I did not choose you, because you were the largest of all the nations – ki atem ha'm'at mikol ha'amim – because to the contrary you were the smallest of all the nations. The simple understanding of this verse is that selections many times are made based upon what most people do. The most popular car is a Camry, so let me buy one. That's the restaurant that everyone goes to, so let's go there. Hashem says, “That is not why I chose you.”

However, Rashi cites a different interpretation from a Gemara in Chullin. There the Gemara explains that I (Hashem) chose you because you do not aggrandize yourselves. Rather, you practice humility. Thus, we see that Hashem chose us because we have the noble character trait of being humble. This is also a prerequisite for successful Torah study. This is why when Hashem gave the Torah, He shunned the majestic Mt. Carmel and the towering Mt. Tavor and gave the Torah instead on the lowly Mt. Sinai. So too, He gave the Torah through the agency of Moshe Rabbeinu, about whom the Torah testifies, “He was the most humble of all men.” It is therefore imperative that

when we send our children for a Torah education, we make sure that their yeshiva has a solid curriculum of mussar study, that they will be well grounded in mentchlich behavior, for it is only then that they will have a hope of becoming true talmidei chachamim. Likewise, it goes without saying that if a husband is a brute at home to his wife, no matter how smart he is, his Torah ambitions are doomed to failure.

When we think this Shavuos about the revelation at Sinai, let's remember that the Torah was given surprisingly in the midst of billowing smoke and blackness. This is strange since the Torah is the True Light of the world. But, the Tosfos HaRosh says that since the Bnai Yisrael would sin with the heinous crime of the golden calf, they weren't able to enjoy the true radiance of the Torah. So, as we make new commitments to Torah study this Shavuos, let's also make a renewed effort to refine our behavior and in that merit may we be blessed with great Torah success, good health, and everything wonderful.

To receive a weekly cassette tape or CD directly from Rabbi Weiss, please write to Rabbi Moshe Meir Weiss, P.O. Box 658 Lakewood, New Jersey 08701 or contact him at RMMWSI@aol.com. Attend Rabbi Weiss's weekly shiur at Rabbi Rotberg's Shul in Toms River, Wednesday nights at 9:15 or join via zoom by going to zoom.com and entering meeting code 7189163100, or more simply by going to ZoomDaf.com. Rabbi Weiss's Daf Yomi shiurim can be heard LIVE at 2 Valley Stream, Lakewood, New Jersey Sunday thru Thursday at 8 pm and motzoi Shabbos at 9:15 pm, or by joining on the zoom using the same method as the Chumash shiur.

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Birchas HaTorah-A Blessing In Disguise

Rabbi Chaim Binyomin Kaye

Shavuos is the Yom Tov that celebrates the giving of the Torah. The Torah is the essence of the Jewish nation, and learning it is considered by our Sages to be the greatest mitzva.¹ Every morning we recite "Birchas HaTorah", the blessings on the Torah. It is said that the way a person recites his Birchas HaTorah in the morning affects his Torah learning throughout the day. The Shulchan Aruch states that a person must be very careful in fulfilling the mitzva of Birchas HaTorah.² The Mishna Berura explains that this means a person should be wary not to learn before he has recited these brachos; and that he should say them with gratitude to Hashem for giving us His Torah. It would seem then, that Shavuos is a most appropriate time for us to show our gratitude for the Torah by saying Birchas HaTorah in the appropriate manner. Ironically, it is precisely on this day that many people don't say Birchas HaTorah themselves, but rather listen to someone else's brachos, because they have stayed up all night learning.³

Let us now examine the nature of Birchas HaTorah. By analysing why we recite Birchas HaTorah, we will not only

gain greater insight into this special bracha; we will also come to a greater appreciation of the Torah itself.

All the brachos we recite are rabbinically ordained; with the exception of Birchas HaMazon, Grace after eating bread which is a Torah commandment. Many authorities, however, are of the opinion that the recitation of Birchas HaTorah is also a Torah commandment.

There are, essentially, three categories of brachos:

a) Birchos hamitzvos - blessings we recite before performing a mitzva, for example; 'al netillas yadayim' when washing for bread, or, 'lehani'ach tefillin' before putting on tefillin.

b) Birchos hanehenin - blessings we recite before partaking in certain physical pleasures such as eating and drinking, for example; 'hamotzi lechem min ha'aretz' before eating bread.

c) Birchos hashevach vehoda'ah - blessings of praise and thanksgiving, for example; the bracha we say when hearing thunder, or, 'shehecheyanu' which we say on joyous occasions.

Birchas HaTorah seems to fall into the category of birchas hamitzvos as it is a bracha we say prior to fulfilling the mitzva of learning Torah. This assumption, however, raises several difficulties.

Firstly, why do we say more than one bracha on the Torah? There is a dispute as to how many brachos we say in Birchas HaTorah. Some consider it to be two brachos: 'la'asok bedivrei Torah', and 'asher bachar banu'. Others say there are three brachos, as they consider the bracha of 'la'asok' to be two brachos, with 'veha'arev na' being the additional bracha. Everyone agrees however that we say more than one bracha. If Birchas HaTorah is one of the birchos hamitzvos, why should it differ to all other mitzvos where only one bracha is recited?

Secondly, given that women are exempt from the mitzva of learning Torah, there is a dispute between Rav Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, and the Rema, as to whether women may recite a bracha when fulfilling a mitzva they are exempt from.⁴ For example, if a woman chooses to shake lulav, may she make the bracha 'al netillas lulav'?

Rav Yosef rules she may not, as she cannot say, "who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to..." because she is not commanded to do it. The Rema, however, states that she may make the brachos, as the statement of "commanded us" can refer to the Jewish nation as a whole, even though it does not refer to women specifically. In the laws of Birchas HaTorah, however, the Shulchan Aruch rules that women do say these brachos.⁵ If Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hamitzva, how can Rav Yosef permit women to say these brachos, contrary to his ruling on all other mitzvos?

Thirdly, if we consider Birchas HaTorah as birchas hamitzvos, we will have difficulty in understanding the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch that even though Torah must not be learned prior to the recitation of Birchas HaTorah, this is only if the words of Torah are said verbally. Thinking thoughts of Torah,

on the other hand, is permissible. 6 If Birchas HaTorah is a blessing on the mitzva of Torah study, we seem to be at a loss to explain this. The mitzva of studying Torah is fulfilled both by speaking and by thinking. Why then should we not recite a bracha over thoughts of Torah?

In his commentary to Shulchan Aruch, the Vilna Gaon states that Birchas HaTorah are in fact birchas hamitzvos. He also raises the last two questions that we asked on the Shulchan Aruch, (how can women say these brachos, and why do Torah thoughts not require Birchas HaTorah), and disagrees with both of these rulings. He says, that women should not say Birchas HaTorah according to the general ruling of the Shulchan Aruch,⁷ and that even thinking Torah thoughts requires a bracha. 8

From a response of the Rashba we can see that he too considers Birchas haTorah to be birchos hamitzvos. He was asked why we only make a bracha before studying Torah and not afterwards. He answered that learning Torah is a mitzva and we only make brachos before performing a mitzva, not afterwards. 9 There are those who seem to understand Birchas HaTorah not as birchas hamitzva, but rather as one of the other two categories of brachos. The Ramban has a listing of mitzvos that differs from the Rambam's list of mitzvos. The Ramban writes there that we are commanded to thank Hashem every time we learn Torah for the great goodness He has done to us for giving us His Torah, and informing us the way of life that is pleasing to Him through which we shall inherit the World to Come. Just as we have been commanded to bless Him after eating, we have been commanded with this blessing. 10

It seems from his words that the bracha on Torah study isn't on the mitzva of learning, but rather for the fact that we received the Torah. This would seem to be from the category of birchos hoda'ah rather than birchos hamitzvos. In his summation he compares Birchas HaTorah to bentching after eating bread. His comparison could be understood to say that just as Birchas HaMazon is a bracha which we are commanded to recite by the Torah, so too is Birchas HaTorah. It is possible, however, he means to point out that just as bentching is a birchas hoda'ah, so too is Birchas HaTorah a birchas hoda'ah, not a birchas hamitzva.

If we are correct in assuming that the Ramban considers Birchas HaTorah to be a birchas hoda'ah rather than a birchas hamitzva, we may offer an answer to the second question; 'how can women say Birchas HaTorah?' If the Shulchan Aruch considers Birchas HaTorah as a birchas hoda'ah, then there is no reason why women should not say it. The Shulchan Aruch only restricted them from saying birchos hamitzvos from which they are exempt, as they can not say "and commanded us." This reason does not apply to birchos hoda'ah. The Minchas Chinuch suggests this on his own accord, without quoting the Ramban. 11 He, however, points out that the beginning of the

first bracha, "Who has sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us to toil in the word of Torah", implies that it is a birchas hamitzva. He therefore goes on to say that possibly the first bracha is a birchas hamitzva. However the second bracha is a birchas hoda'ah. He concludes that according to this, women should only say the second bracha. This is not apparent from the words of the Shulchan Aruch. According to this we may understand why more than one bracha is made (question number one), the reason being that the first one is a birchas hamitzva, and the second one is a birchas hoda'ah. The third question, 'why don't we say Birchas HaTorah on Torah thought', still remains unanswered.

The Steipler Gaon suggests that Birchas HaTorah, besides being a birchas hamitzva, might also be from the category of birchas hanehenin. 12 Learning Torah gives a person great pleasure as it says, "The orders of Hashem are upright, gladdening the heart." "...They are more desirable than gold, - than even much fine gold; Sweeter than honey, - than drippings from the combs." 13 It is for this reason that a person on Tisha b'Av, or, who is mourning is forbidden to study Torah. 14 Since a person derives pleasure from his Torah study, it is possible to say that the brachos on Torah are birchos hanehenin. He points out that from the words of the first bracha, "Who has sanctified us with His mitzvos..." it seems that it is a birchas hamitzva. He concludes, therefore, that the first bracha is indeed a birchas hamitzva, whereas the second one is a birchas hanehenin.

This is a similar approach to that of the Minchas Chinuch stated above. According to this approach, we can answer why women can say Birchas HaTorah. Even though they are exempt from the mitzva of learning, they too get pleasure from Torah when they learn and they may therefore say the bracha. This is a reason for women to say the second bracha, but not the first, as the Steipler also says. This is also a reason to recite the two brachos; one on the mitzva, and one on the pleasure. It does not, however, answer why no bracha is said on thinking in learning, as through thought, too, a person gets pleasure 15.

It is told that every year on the yahrtzeit of the Chazon Ish, the Steipler, who was the Chazon Ish's brother-in-law, gave a shiur in the Kollel Chazon Ish in Bnei Brak. 16 One year he mentioned in the shiur the idea that the second bracha in Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hanehenin. One of the Kollel men present asked if this was contrary to what the Gemara states in Tractate Brachos. 17 The Gemara discusses the brachos of bentching after eating and Birchas HaTorah before learning. The Gemara asks if we should say a bracha after learning just as we do after eating. It answers that we cannot compare one to the other. With eating, because the person had pleasure, we understand why a bracha should be made afterwards. This is not the case with learning. This seems to disprove the Steipler's theory. The Steipler answered that it was a good question that

required further study. No further answer is quoted from the Steipler. It is noted, however, that this very question was asked over a century ago to the Sochachover Rebbe, the author of the Eglei Tal.

He answered that a person does derive pleasure from learning Torah, however, in order to necessitate a bracha after something, the benefit must still be felt after its completion. This is true with eating, where a person feels satisfied even after having eaten. This is not the case with learning Torah, where the pleasure is only during the learning and not afterwards. Therefore, even though the pleasure gained may necessitate a bracha prior to learning, it does not do so afterwards. This is the meaning of the Gemara in Brachos.

Concerning question number one, as to why we make more than one bracha, the Levush offers an original answer. He claims that the first bracha is a bracha acharona (a bracha made after something) for yesterday's learning, whereas the second bracha is the bracha recited before today's learning. 18 He explains that even though it would have been more appropriate for the bracha acharona to have been said yesterday when one finished his learning for the day, it is not possible to do so. A bracha acharona is said only when one has finished that which requires a bracha. One bentshes when one has finished his meal, and plans to stop eating for now. With Torah study this is impossible, as a person has to learn as much as is possible for him. The obligation to learn is constant, and even when lying in bed at night a person should think thoughts of Torah. It is therefore impossible to say that a person has finished his learning for the day until he actually falls asleep. The first opportunity for him to make this bracha is the next morning. Therefore, upon awakening, he makes a bracha acharona on yesterday's learning and a bracha rishona for today.

In the footnotes on the Levush, it is brought that someone questioned the validity of making a bracha acharona the following day. He argues that surely this case is no different to a case where one forgot to bentsh after his meal and remembered a few hours later. The halacha is that he lost his opportunity to bentsh as the food had already been digested. All the more so here, where a new day had arrived, so surely it's too late to make a bracha acharona. The Levush was not at all flustered by this argument. He answered, "You wanted to compare this to bentsching after the food has been digested. It appears to me that they are not comparable at all. For after digestion, there is no remnant from that meal; not even its taste, but here, what digestion has taken place? If you compare forgetting to digestion, does a person forget overnight what he had learned the previous day? Since the benefit of the learning remains, and no 'digestion' of the knowledge gained, has taken place, a bracha acharona may be said even the following day."

We have mentioned three reasons as to why we say two brachos on the Torah; namely that one is on the mitzva and the

other is either on the pleasure gained from the learning or thanking Hashem for giving us His Torah. Another approach is that one is a bracha acharona and one a bracha rishona. We should note, however, that those answers don't hold true according to the Vilna Gaon, as his opinion is that both brachos are on the mitzva of studying Torah. We need, therefore, another reason why, unlike other mitzvos, more than one bracha is made on this mitzva. An explanation of this is offered in the name of Rabbeinu Yona.

He says that if Birchas HaTorah is considered to be three separate brachos, as explained above, then they correspond to the three levels of Torah: Chumash, Mishna and Gemara. We thank Hashem individually for each one of these special gifts. If the brachos are considered to be two, then we are thanking Hashem for both Torah shebichsav (the Written Law) and Torah she'ba'al peh (the Oral Law). 19

We have not yet answered the third question. Why does the Shulchan Aruch rule that no bracha is required when thinking Torah, as even through thought the mitzva of Torah study is fulfilled? The answer to this may be found in a question that the Minchas Chinuch asks on the Vilna Gaon's opinion that Birchas HaTorah is said over thinking thoughts of Torah 20. The Minchas Chinuch points out that we don't make a bracha on bittul chometz. The Beis Yosef says the reason for this is that even though it is a mitzva, we don't make brachos on mitzvos fulfilled merely by thought. 21 Many answers are offered to explain the ruling of the Vilna Gaon. This may, however, be the very reason that the Shulchan Aruch rules that no bracha is made on thoughts of Torah. May our analysis of Birchas HaTorah enhance its daily recital, and may Hashem grant us the opportunity to fulfil the mitzva of learning Torah and to enjoy the sweetness of its words.

Footnotes 1 Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam, the study of Torah is equivalent to all the other mitzvos combined, Peah 1:1. 2 Orach Chaim 47:1. 3 If one doesn't sleep he does not recite Birchas HaTorah, Mishna Berura 47:28. 4 Orach Chaim 17:2 5 Ibid 47:14. 6 Ibid 47:4. 7 Biur HaGra 47:14. 8 Ibid, 47:4 9 7:540. One might ask then, why is a bracha recited after Krias HaTorah, reading the Torah, in Shul? The Rashba answers that this bracha is not on the mitzva, but rather on a takanas Chachamim (Rabbinical enactment)-Krias HaTorah was instituted by Moshe and Ezra and we do recite brachos on takanos Chachamim, similar to the brachos recited after the reading of Hallel and Megilla. 10 Mitzva 15. 11 Mitzva 430. 12 Kehillas Ya'akov Brachos, 14. 13 Tehillim 19 14 Orach Chaim 554:1 15 The Steipler is not the first to suggest this. The idea that Birchas HaTorah is on the pleasure of learning is stated clearly in the Levush. The Levush also says that one is on the mitzva and one for the hana'ah. See below with note 14. 16 Orchos Rabbeinu HaKehillas Yaakov. 17 Brachos 21a. 18 Even though we have just quoted the Gemara that says that we

do not require a bracha acharona after learning as we do after eating bread, this only means that there is no Torah requirement to do so, but rabbinically the Levush holds that there is. We should also note that the Rashba, quoted above, explained that there is no bracha acharona, as we don't make brachos after mitzvos. This is because he explains that Birchas HaTorah is a birchas hamitzva. The Levush, however, understands that Birchas HaTorah is also a birchas hanehenin, accordingly a bracha acharona is definitely appropriate. 19 Possibly the bracha of 'la'asok' (to toil in Torah) is for the Torah she'ba'al peh which requires much toil, and 'asher bachar banu' for the Torah shebichsav (as it says "and gave us His Torah"). 20 Mitzva 430 21 Orach Chaim 432.

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The Time at Which to Daven maariv on the Second Night of Shavuot (2020) Rav Hershel Schachter

<http://torahweb.org/torah/docs/rsch/RavSchachter-Corona-32-May-21-2020.pdf>

The Maharil cites the custom of German Jewry in his time to daven Maariv at the start of the second day of Yom Tov only after Tzeis Hakochavim (the halachic evening). The reason for this practice is to avoid a situation where the women would begin preparing for the evening meal while it is still the first day of Yom Tov, anticipating the return of the men from Shul. Should the meal not actually begin until after sunset, this would essentially be preparing on the first day for the second, which is forbidden. Not all communities follow this custom.

For those communities who do not follow the aforementioned custom of the Maharil, one who davens maariv early on the second night of Yom Tov must be careful not to begin preparations for the second day of Yom Tov while it is still the first day of Yom Tov (i.e. before Tzeis HaKochavim). However, if one accepts to begin the second day of Yom Tov early, immediately after the Plag HaMincha (which is 1¼ halachic hours before sunset) as many do in the summer months, it is permitted to prepare in the early afternoon of that day for a meal later in the same day - provided that the food will be eaten before sunset - since it is still technically considered the first day of Yom Tov. Accepting the second day of Yom Tov early does not transform the current day (the first day of Yom Tov) into the second day of Yom Tov.

On the first night of Shavuot, we follow the opinion that Yom Tov should not begin until after Tzeis Hakochavim in order to ensure that all 49 days of Sefiras Ha'Omer are considered "complete" and counted in their entirety. There are differing practices whether this refers to starting maariv after Tzeis HaKochavim or simply reciting kiddush at home after Tzeis

HaKochavim. The Knesses HaGedolah contends that on the second night of Shavuot, we should also wait until after Tzeis Hakochavim before beginning Yom Tov, however, the Pri Megadim argues that this is not necessary since the days of Sefiras Ha'Omer have already been completed.

When accepting Shabbos or Yom Tov early, it is recommended to eat a k'zayis of bread after Tzeis HaKochavim, in order to fulfill the mitzvah of eating the Yom Tov meal on the actual day of Shabbos or Yom Tov (see the Mishnah Berurah 267:5). This year, since we will be making an Eruv Tavshilin on Thursday, one can certainly cook and prepare on Friday for the second day of Yom Tov which is also Shabbos. When accepting Shabbos and Yom Tov early, one should be careful not to begin the meal once it is within a half hour of the time for reciting the evening Shema (i.e. Tzeis Hakochavim). If one davened Maariv already (after Plag HaMincha) according to some opinions it would be permitted to begin the meal even within a half hour of Tzeis Hakochavim. However, since this is a matter of significant dispute it is preferable to avoid this situation and begin the meal earlier. In order to fulfill saying the Shema together with the blessings in its ideal time (after Tzeis Hakochavim) when making early Shabbos or early Yom Tov, some have the practice to recite only the Shemoneh Esrei of Maariv following Plag HaMincha, and the Shema with its blessings (and Sefiras Ha'Omer) only later, after Tzeis HaKochavim. Since one has already davened the Shemoneh Esrei of Maariv, it is permitted to begin the Shabbos or Yom Tov meal, provided that there is more than a half hour before Tzeis HaKochavim. [Often, the Shul calendar gives a time for Tzeis HaKochavim which includes extra time for Tosefes Shabbos. With respect to this law of not beginning a meal within half an hour of Tzeis HaKochavim, we should ignore that extra amount of tosefes and only calculate based on the actual time of Tzeis HaKochavim. Regarding the true time of Tzeis HaKochavim, there are varying opinions.]

OU TORAH TIDBITS 5780

READING FOR SHAVUOT MEGILAT RUTH

Many communities read Megilat Ruth on Shavuot morning before Torah reading. (Outside of Israel it is read on the second day). Some communities read it in the afternoon (before Mincha). A recent trend in Vatikin (pre-sun-rise) minyanim (in Israel) is to read it before davening. While some feel that it is not ideal to do so, it has become a popular practice because of the time saved for people who are quite tired and appreciate the earlier ending time of Shavuot morning davening.

When read from a kosher megila (Minhag Yerushalayim), the reading is preceded by the brachot ...AL MIKRA MEGILA and SHE'HE'CHE- YANU. Read from a book, no brachot are

recited. Various reasons combine to make Ruth a perfect reading for Shavuot. The text itself tells us that its story takes place at the time of the "cutting of the wheat". Shavuot is Chag HaKatzir. One of the major purposes of the Book of Ruth is to show us the lineage of David HaMelech and the Davidic line. Tradition tells us that David HaMelech died (and was born) on Shavuot.

Perhaps most significantly, the story of Ruth is the inspiring story of Kabbalat aTorah on an individual level, just as Shavuot is the commemoration of Kabbalat HaTorah on a national level. All of Israel were like converts at Sinai. This matches nicely that the Torah reading comes from Parshat Yitro, another example of a personal Kabbalat HaTorah. Ruth is the story of CHESED, acts of kindness. The Torah begins and ends with G-d's acts of kindness - clothing Adam and Chava on the one side and burying Moshe on the other.

Akdamut On Shavuot morning, after the Kohen is called to the Torah, before his bracha and before the reading begins, it is the Ash-kenazic custom to responsively recite a 90-line poem praising G-d, His Torah and His People. Written by Rabbi Meir of Worms (one of Rashi's teachers), it conveys the spirit of love of G-d and Judaism even under the adverse conditions of the Crusades. Rabbi Meir's son was killed by Crusaders and he himself died soon after a "forced debate" with the Christian clergy of his town. The poem celebrates Torah. Each line of Akdamut ends with the syllable TA, TAV-ALEF, last and first letters of the Alef- Bet. Some see this as a reminder of the nature of the Torah itself - as soon as we complete reading or learning the Torah, we immediately begin it again.

Sfaradim do not read Akdamut, but they have the custom of reading a poem called the KETUBA, composed by Rabbi Yosef Najara, celebrating the marriage, so to speak, of G-d and Bnei Yisrael, or the Torah and Bnei Yisrael. They read the KETUBA when the Ark is opened, before the Torahs are taken out. Torah Reading From the first of two Torahs on Shavuot morning, we read from Parshat Yitro, the account of Ma'amad Har Sinai and Matan Torah, from Sh'mot 19 & 20, a total of 48 p'sukim. The reading is divided among 5 Aliyot, as on all Yom Tov days (that don't fall on Shabbat - which Shavuot never does).

The reading begins with the famous pasuk: "In the third month from the Exodus, on THIS day, they (Bnei Yisrael) came to Midbar Sinai." Rashi's two comments on "THIS day" are: [1] it was Rosh Chodesh Sivan that the People arrived at Sinai, and [2] the Torah uses the term THIS DAY (BaYom HaZeh) rather than THAT DAY (BaYom HaHu) to teach us that Matan Torah should not be thought of as a "once upon a time, a long time ago" experience, but rather "words of Torah should be fresh in our eyes as if we received them today." This is such an important concept that it bears constant repeating, attention, and effort to internalize. Especially when there are so

many detractors who proclaim the Torah and its Mitzvot as antiquated, out-dated, and irrelevant, we must be enthusiastic proponents of the opposite view. EITZ CHAYIM HL... Torah is the living, fresh, vibrant, complete source of the way of life that allows us to live in this world TODAY and to invest everything we do and are with spirituality and value.

This idea is the Shavuot counterpart of Pesach's B'CHOL DOR VADOR... in every generation a person has to see himself as if he came out of Egypt. [Could the Torah's being described as a Living Tree also contribute towards the custom of adorning the shul and home with tree branches?]

The second pasuk is no less famous. VAYICHAN SHAM YISRAEL... Israel, as one being with one heart and a singular purpose, camped opposite the mount. The unparalleled experience of Jewish Unity that gave standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai its everlasting significance, becomes one of our special goals of Jewish Life. This helps explain the DAYEINU couplet: Had You brought us to Har Sinai and not given us the Torah, we would still have reason to thank You.

Aseret HaDibrot is read in the "upper notes", TAAMEI ELYON, even according to Minhag Yerushalayim (which uses TAAMEI HATACHTON for Parshat Yitro and Va'etchanan). TAAMEI ELYON presents the text as separate commandments - with fanfare and flair - rather than as p'sukim - like all of the Torah - which is the way we hear it with TAAMEI TACHTON.

Maftir (in the second Torah) is the Musaf of Shavuot from Parshat Pinchas (Bamidbar 28:26-31).

Haftara is Yechezkel's first chapter and his most vivid and esoteric vision. The level and type of prophecy attained by the Jews at Sinai has been compared to the visions of Yechezkel.

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Shavuot Thoughts

Rabbi Berel Wein

Here in Israel Shavuot is a one day holiday. Since many stay up all night on Shavuot and therefore spend a great deal of the Shavuot day sleeping off the night's study session, the day really whizzes by. This really does not allow for much true contemplation of the holiday and its intended message and long lasting influence upon us. We all know that Shavuot marks the granting of the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai, though the biblical names for Shavuot which appear in the Torah itself do not specifically reflect this truth. The reality of the holiday is not easily absorbed within us in so short a period of time as one day. After all we savor Pesach but it takes a week to do so and the same is true for Succot which lasts eight days. When I lived in the United States the second day of Shavuot was one of my favorite days of the year. I appreciated the wisdom of Jewish tradition in extending the holidays for a

day for Jews living in the Diaspora. But living now in Israel with its one day holiday of Shavuot has forced me to consider the import of the holiday in a less leisurely manner than before. There is no second day of Shavuot here but the aftermath of Shavuot nevertheless can and should wield an influence upon us our attitudes, behavior and beliefs. If it does not, the holiday itself passing in a blur, loses its sense of importance and relevance and becomes a wasted opportunity.

Dealing with the Torah is not a one time situation. Perhaps this is the reason behind the Torah itself not emphasizing Shavuot as the anniversary of its being granted to the Jewish people on Sinai 3382 years ago. Torah is "our life and the length of our days." It really therefore has no anniversary or commemorative day for it is the constant factor in the life of Jews. It is a continuous guide and challenge in our everyday life, always demanding and probing into our innermost thoughts and outward behavior and lifestyle. It does not allow for vacations and negligence, societal correctness and sloppy thinking. Our teacher Moshe stated in his famous psalm that life itself passses by us as in a blur, much like the holiday of Shavuot does. Without focus and purpose, dedication and fortitude, life itself resembles a lost opportunity. Therefore Shavuot's message truly lies in its aftermath and not so much in its one day of commemoration. In Temple times Shavuot so to speak was extended for another week to allow the holiday offerings of individuals to be brought upon the Temple's altar. There was a conscious effort by Torah law to impress upon the Jews the continuity of Shavuot with the deep understanding that out of all of the holidays of the year it was the one that never quite ended for it was and is the source of "our lives and the length of our days." Shavuot is only one day out of 365 days but its true commemoration extends to the other 364 days of the year as well.

I have often remarked that Shavuot is the forgotten holiday for many Jews in the Diaspora. Its almost complete disappearance from Jewish life outside of the observant Orthodox community has become the symbol of the ravages of assimilation, intermarriage and alienation that plague the modern Jew who has little self-identity and abysmal ignorance of Torah and its values. Here in Israel all Israelis are aware of Shavuot, even those who only honor it in its breach. So the Torah and its influence is still a vital part of Jewish life here. The study of Torah and Jewish subjects of interest and worth on the night of Shavuot here cuts across all lines and groupings in Israeli society. Secular and religious, Charedi and Reform, synagogues and community centers, all have all night learning sessions on the night of Shavuot. So Torah has an effect upon all here, naturally in varying degrees of knowledge and attitude. In the Diaspora Shavuot is simply ignored by many Jews and thus it cannot have any continuity in the lives and value systems of those Jews. It is difficult to see how this situation can be

materially changed in the near future. Yet Shavuot has always somehow been able to produce its magic on the people of Israel. We should therefore be most grateful that the Lord has extended to us a year long and eternal Shavuot.

<https://www.shemaisrael.com/yomtov/shavuos/rus.htm>
From the Jewish Observer December 2001

THE BOOK OF RUS - AN ODE TO THE "ORDINARY" LIFE

Rabbi Yisroel Greenwald

[Rabbi Greenwald serves as a dayan on the Melbourne beis din.]

THE HUMBLE GARB OF GREATNESS

Other works of the Prophets describe miracles, prophecies, and great historical events. The Sefer Rus, however, is a celebration of the ordinary. The emotions and pathos of the story - the loss of loved ones, isolation, obstinately pursuing an ideal, and resilience - are universal. On its pages unfold a familiar life: one of turmoil and tranquility, degradation and triumph. But to fully appreciate the true beauty of this story one must be attuned to its delicate nuances. There is a gentle theme that runs through it: an ordinary life can be sublimated and become extraordinary by absorbing the spirit of G-dliness and Torah.

The heroes of this saga are not only the nation's leaders and scholars, but also its common folk. We find Naomi, bereaved of both her husband and children, express the pain and anguish of her tormented soul. "Do not call me Naomi - pleasant one - call me Mara 'the embittered one,' for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."1 Being a portion of Torah and therefore deserving of study, we learn from here that one is permitted to cry out in pain. The Torah allows for the expression of human emotion.

But her next sentence demonstrates her noble Jewish spirit, when she accepts her decree as being from Hashem.

We read about people going about their daily business. From these passages the sages derived the halachic basis of certain legal transactions2. We see menial labourers toiling in the fields, harvesting the crops. But instead of coarse language, we hear them greet each other with the name of Hashem on their lips3. The story bursts forth with acts of kindness. We see a mutually-loving and loyal relationship between mother and daughter-in-law; the dignified and respectful manner in which Boaz dispenses charity to his poor relatives; and the kindness of Rus, to both her mother-in-law and later to Boaz, by choosing him over much younger suitors. The townsfolk did not merely mumble a Mazel Tov when they entered a simcha (as is so

often done today!). Upon Boaz's betrothal to Rus, the townsfolk present at the ceremony recited this lengthy, original rendition:

All the people at the gate and the elders answered, "We are witnesses! May Hashem make the woman who is entering your house be like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephras and establish a name [for yourself] in Beis Lechem. And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda - through the offspring which G-d will grant you by this young woman."⁴

Similarly, after Rus bore a son, a woman said to Naomi: "Blessed is Hashem, Who has not denied you a redeemer today! May his name be established in Israel. He will revive your soul and sustain your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, gave birth to him."⁵

These acts of kindness may not seem to be of earth shattering import, but besides the warm feeling that a reader has upon reading them, more importantly, these minute acts of compassion were deemed worthy of inclusion in the Divine script.

This itself is one of the lessons of Rus. Imagine you lived in the time of Rus and lived in Boaz's neighbourhood. And a relative of your's from Yerushalayim dropped in for a visit. He asks you, "What's new in town?" Would you reply, "You know what! Boaz invited a poor woman to eat together with him, and he gave her some toasted grain!" To us this is a Jewish behavioural norm: neither extraordinary nor newsworthy. Yet the Torah describes this, and other acts, in detail to demonstrate that if we live our day-to-day, mundane lives according to the Torah, it is of monumental importance. Shmuel Hanavi penned this seemingly minor detail in the book of Rus to impress upon us that every small act of kindness and decency is worthy of inclusion in the eternal Torah and is infinitely precious before Hashem.

Rabbi Yitzchak said, "The Torah teaches us [by detailing the kindness of Boaz to Rus] that when a person does a mitzvah [such as an act of kindness and charity to one's fellow man], he should do it with a fully joyous heart. For if Boaz had known that Hashem would write about him, 'He handed her parched grain, and she ate was satisfied and left over' ⁶, he would have fed her fattened calves."

Rabbi Levi said, "In the past, a person would do a mitzvah and the prophet would write it. Now that there are no prophets, when a person performs a mitzvah who writes it? Now, Eliyahu the prophet and Mashiach chronicle [the deeds of men of all generations] and Hashem signs it."⁷ At times we may feel that our uneventful lives do not amount to much. But just as Boaz and Rus's seemingly insignificant acts of kindness planted the seeds which later heralded the birth of King David and, ultimately, Mashiach, so too, each of us in our small way, in

our private lives, are also rectifying the world and bringing it closer the ultimate redemption.

Naomi's life clearly illustrates this point. Naomi viewed herself as utterly useless and empty.⁸ But as the tale of Rus reveals, Naomi, whose name means sweet, fully lived up to her name. Naomi's character was so sweet and attractive, Rus was drawn to her like a magnet. The verses make clear that Rus's willingness to convert to Judaism was not based on her intellectual assessment of the truths of Judaism alone. Rather it was Naomi's persona that Rus found so compellingly appealing.

When Naomi attempted to dissuade Rus from following her, Rus adamantly replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May Hashem do this to me - and more! - if anything but death separates me from you!"⁹

It was not merely Hashem and the Jewish people that Rus wished to embrace. Rus wanted to bond with Naomi's G-d and Naomi's people. So while Naomi lamented, "Hashem has set me empty," her life was far from it. The fact is, it was Naomi who orchestrated Rus's conversion and marriage, which directly led to the birth of the ancestor of Mashiach.

After the birth of Rus's son, Oved, Naomi took the child, held it in her bosom and became his nurse. Then the neighbourhood woman came and joyously proclaimed, "A son is born to Naomi!"¹⁰ Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen states a principle that whatever is written in the Torah is true, not only in the narrative sense, in that those comments were actually made, but is actually intrinsically true. The cunning remarks of Lavan and the crude scoffing of Pharaoh could not have been recorded by the holy Torah had their statements not been intrinsically true. Therefore, if the Torah writes that the people said Naomi was the mother of Oved, then that is the actual truth. The Torah also deemed Naomi his true mother.

CHILDREN OF A SPIRITUAL KIND

While Naomi's motherhood can be attributed to her raising the young Oved, it can be understood on a deeper level as well. A childless person lives on a different plane, a more spiritual dimension, than most. While everyone knows the fruit of one's spiritual labor is reserved for the World to Come, many are blessed with a foretaste of those sweet fruits even in this life. And those fruits are one's children. As we find the Torah likens offspring to the fruits of the vine and the olive.¹¹ Those precious fruits link us to our sense of eternity and provide a tangible intimation of the rewards awaiting us in the next world. One who lacks children lacks the physical support system that was designed to make the Divine service a naturally joyous experience.¹² On the contrary, it is not surprising to find Naomi's bitter, self deprecating sentiments echoed by anyone faced with similar life circumstances:

Rabbi Yehuda said, When a person leaves this world without children he cries from pain and anguish.

But the Midrash continues:

Hashem comforts him and says, "My child, why do you cry? Is it because you did not bear fruit in this world? Your fruit is greater than children." He asks, "Ribbono Shel Olam, what fruit did I bear?" Hashem replies, "Your good deeds are your offspring."¹³

Because the physically childless perform their life mission under superhuman conditions, their reward likewise transcends the physical world.

Precisely because this thought is so difficult to internalise, it is a recurring theme in the words of the Yeshayahu Hanavi:

Let not the barren one say, "Behold I am a shrivelled tree." For thus says Hashem to the barren ones... who choose what I desire and grasp my covenant tightly. "In My house and within My walls I will give them a place of honour and renown, which is better than sons and daughters; eternal renown I will give them, which will never be ended."¹⁴

"Sing out O barren one, who has not given birth; break out into glad song and be jubilant, O one who had no labor pains, for the children of the desolate wife outnumber the children of the populated wife" says Hashem.¹⁵

The Chasam Sofer explains that these verses demonstrate that there are two distinct types of children: physical and spiritual.¹⁶ Whereas the barren may not have physical children, they are by no means childless. Parents who are physically childless bring down souls from heaven just as their friends who push strollers do. These spiritual children are created through their parents' steadfast service to Hashem, despite their constant indescribable pain and humiliation. Such souls are so lofty they cannot be contained in a corporeal form, which is why the prophet says they are "better than sons and daughters" - they are greater than their physical counterparts. Each such spiritual child, says the Chasam Sofer, "equals tens of thousands of physical children born with flesh and blood."

In yet another vision, Yeshayahu Hanavi depicts a scene from the time of the future redemption, which at first glance defies comprehension:

And you will say in your heart, "Who has begotten these? For I have been bereaved and alone, an exile and a wanderer - so who has reared these? Behold, I have been left by myself; where are these from?"

For thus says Hashem: "Behold I will raise My hand towards nations, and will hoist My banner towards peoples, and they will bring your children in their arms, and your daughters will be carried on their shoulders... Then you will know that I am Hashem, and those who put their hope in Me shall not be ashamed."¹⁷

Is it possible that a mother can be unaware that she bore children?

The Shomer Emunim writes that these verses deal with the spiritual children discussed above. "When, unfortunately, one is a companion to pain and misfortune - owing to childlessness or any other trying circumstance - this is often accompanied with feelings of inadequacy and a sense of lacking any constructive accomplishments in life. One may feel hopeless, broken, unnecessary and useless. Even one's prayers, Torah study, and good deeds begin to feel hollow and appear pitifully meagre."

But what one may fail to see, explains the Shomer Emunim, is that "for every pain which passes over a Jewish soul, especially at times when one feels disconnected to Hashem and as if He is neglecting him, and yet one accepts this without complaint or anger against Hashem - and all the more so if it is accepted with a slight amount of love and joy - this creates a glory to Hashem of the highest magnitude. In fact, the simplest person at the lowest spiritual level can accomplish more under these circumstances than the service of a great tzaddik. Many 'lost souls' that have not found rectification since the beginning of creation, are now rectified through this supreme level of faith."

"When Mashiach comes, Hashem will reveal to them the myriad children they created. They will stream to such a person from all sides of the earth, just as children come to embrace their beloved parents after a long separation. He will stand agape with wonder looking at these beautiful creations, 'Who has begotten me these? I was bereaved and alone. They certainly cannot be mine.' But he or she will be considered the true parents of these thousands of souls."¹⁸

The book of Rus describes a natural world, as seen through the limited eyesight of mortal men. In that world, Naomi thought she lived a bitter and wasted life. But little did she know that from the vantagepoint of heaven, a dimension that transcends all physical laws, she actually was the grandmother of the king of Israel.

LIFE BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

The story of Rus does not speak about angels or prophets who reveal any earth-shattering events. Nor do Boaz and Rus declare the royal destiny of their future son. The heavenly curtains descend and veil any inkling to the goings on of the heavenly realms. Instead, the backdrop of the book of Rus presents a familiar slice of Jewish life. It details seemingly ordinary daily activities, from the labourers' greeting to the townsfolk blessings. It is this limited vantagepoint of man, not the infinite view of G-d, which the perspective of the book of Rus is based. From a human point of view, life is often dry and ordinary or - as was the case with Naomi - sometimes even dark.

Perhaps it is precisely for this reason the book of Rus is read on Shavuot. On this day we merited to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, through a miraculous revelation amidst thunder and lightning. But from that moment on, we can no longer seek Hashem amidst the fire of miracles, the thunderous sounds of

prophecy, or the whirlwind of momentous historical events. For the most part, it is in the quiet, day-to-day life, where we can find our personal pathways to Hashem.¹⁹

When Hashem spoke directly to the Jewish nation on Mount Sinai, they felt a rapture so intense that it caused their souls to momentarily depart from their bodies.²⁰ They epitomised a state known as d'veikus - the ultimate blissful experience of connecting with the Divine. Achieving d'veikus is one of life's primary goals; as the Mesillas Yesharim writes, "all of one's actions should be motivated to drawing near to the Blessed One, until he is pulled to Him as is metal to a magnet."²¹

If so, should not the thrust of our efforts be spent seeking those activities that provide immediate spiritual satisfaction? Isn't spending hours upon hours in sublime meditation the path which leads to true d'veikus? In truth, however, humbly serving Hashem in an ordinary fashion in an ordinary world, through the voluminous minutiae of halacha, is what breaks the barriers that stand between us and our Creator. This is what leads to d'veikus.²²

THE DANGERS OF D'VEIKUS

To achieve d'veikus is one of the highest aims of Divine service. But as the book of Rus points out, it can also be a potentially dangerous weapon. The ecstatic experience of d'veikus can also take the form of shochad - bribery - against our Divine obligations. For example, one immersed in Torah study may find it so pleasurable, that he is tempted to look in a sefer during chazaras hashatz, something prohibited by Halacha. In such a case, the d'veikus generated from the love of Torah results in its own defect. (Needless to say, this example was not intended as an excuse to disdain one seen possessing this relatively minor flaw. One who possesses the love of Torah to the extent that he has such a temptation itself attests to his spiritual stature. If only this author merited having such evil inclinations...)

At times, performing Hashem's will requires foregoing the act most conducive for d'veikus: Music during sefira may be quite uplifting and inspiring, but if halacha forbids it, then adherence to halacha is the true service of Hashem.

The dangers of d'veikus was actualised in one of the most tragic figures in the story of Rus: Orpah. After the death of her husband, she began following Naomi back to the land of Israel, presumably contemplating embracing Judaism. At that historic moment, she stood at the threshold of eternity. But while Rus remained adamant in remaining with Naomi, Orpah returned home.

The prophet concludes her life story here. One would imagine that this precious soul who came so close to Judaism, would devote the remainder of her life to goodness, serving Hashem faithfully as a righteous gentile. But the sages relate the sad end of her saga: the day she parted from Naomi she plunged from

the heights of spiritual greatness to the lowest depths of moral depravity.

Perhaps her erratic behaviour can be understood in the following light. As anyone who merited the experience can testify, being in the close presence of a spiritually elevated person is one of the greatest pleasures in life. When one enters his proximity, sometimes one feels like having stepped into an elevator since within moments one feels like one is being lifted effortlessly to dizzying heights.²³ But therein lurks a hidden danger, which can be termed the Geichazi syndrome.²⁴ Being in constant contact with a holy person risks becoming an intoxicating experience. The vicarious spiritual contentment of living through one's rebbe can sometimes blanket any feelings of inadequacy for one's personal failings.

Orpah experienced the joy of a Jewish life. She appreciated the true love of a Jewish husband, the pleasantness of a Shabbos table, and felt inseparably drawn to her mother-in-law's holy personality. She fell short committing herself to the responsibilities that Judaism entails. But her brief encounter with Judaism gave her a taste of d'veikus. Merely subscribing to the seven Noahide laws now appeared to her dry and spiritually unfulfilling. She wanted a quick fix, the spiritual "high" which only Judaism can give. As she could no longer get it through holiness, she attempted to duplicate the ecstasy by throwing herself into the excesses of depravity.

In the secular world, the search for spirituality has become a popular trend. But "spirituality" does not necessarily mean to them what it means to us. To them, it may represent the nadir of hedonistic pleasure seeking. The Hollywood pop star who goes to Kabbala classes wants the best of both worlds: to retain all the pleasures this world has to offer, together with the ecstasy that only spirituality can provide. Kabbala is the perfect forum for connecting with G-d on your own terms: no commitment, no responsibility, just an exhilarating soul-soaring thrill ride.

THE MEANING OF RUS

What is the significance of the name Rus? R' Yochanan said: For she merited that David descended from her, who "sated" the Holy One, Blessed be He, with songs and praises.²⁵ Rav Dan Segal asked, What did Rus do in particular to be deserving of bearing a descendant who was capable of satiating Hashem? He answered that it was in merit of her determination to cling to Hashem, despite all the obstacles that stood in her path. Naomi attempted to dissuade her to return home; she had no marriage prospects awaiting her; no promising future to look forward to. But she stood steadfast despite all odds.²⁶ Serving Hashem in the face of insurmountable difficulties is the greatest human quality, and in that merit Rus bore a David. Her act of devotion without the aid of d'veikus, brought into the world the sweet singer of Israel, who satiated his Creator with his sublime songs of d'veikus to Hashem.

1 Rus 1:20 2 Ibid., 4:7, Bava Metzia 47a. 3 Rus 2:4. 4 Ibid., 4:11-12 5 Ibid., 4:14-15. 6 Rus 2:14 7 Midrash Rabba, Vayikra 34:8 8 See Rus 1:21. 9 Rus 1:16-17 10 Rus 4:17 11 Tehillim 128:3 12 See Devarim 14:26, 16:14. 13 Midrash Tanchuma, Noach 14 Yeshayahu 56:3-5 15 Ibid. 54:1. 16 Nidda 13b 17 Yeshayahu 49:21-23 18 Shomer Emunim p 79. 19 See Melachim 1, 19:11-12. 20 Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:6 21 End of chapter one. The Torah was given to us so we can experience the d'veikus of Sinai in our daily lives. In a certain respect, the Torah gives one the ability to recreate the Sinai experience on an even higher level. On Mount Sinai, "my soul departed when He spoke" (Shir Hashirim 5:7). The Torah enjoins us to achieve d'veikus and still be connected to one's physical body! It is told that certain great chasidic masters had no difficulty in attaining a state of d'veikus that made soul soar back to heaven. The Torah's obligation of v'chai bahem dictated otherwise; one must live the precepts of the Torah, not die as a result of them. They therefore had the difficult task of reigning in their souls from leaving their bodies. 22 See Nefesh Hachaim, 4:1. 23 Naturally only a sensitive soul would be attuned to this sensation. Someone one brought the secular author, Franz Kafka, to a tisch of the Belzer rebbe zt'l. Widely recognized as one of the greatest chassidic Rabbis in prewar Europe, even the Nazis referred to him as the Vunder Rabbiner, the 'wonder rabbi.' When Franz Kafka left the tisch he remarked to his companion that it was no more inspirational to him than if he had witnessed a tribal ceremony. 24 Geichazi was the disciple and shamash of the prophet Eliyahu. Though he merited a closer relationship to his master than his other students, his behaviour was the most contemptible. 25 Brachos, 7b. The name Rus is related to the Hebrew word for sated, ravah. 26 Rus 1:18.