

# SHAVUOT WITH CHOCHMAT NASHIM

DIVREI TORAH  
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Dear Friends--

Welcome to our Shavuot companion 5782! Inside you will find ideas, thoughts and unique looks at Shavuot from women around the world.

Chochmat Nashim knows that Judaism is better when women are heard and seen. We hope you enjoy the divrei Torah and the accompanying images from our Jewish Life Photo Bank.

From Matan Torah to Megillat Ruth, from Bikkurim to King David, Shavuot reminds us of our relationships with each other and our connections to Hashem.

We have selections by women Torah scholars both in English and in Hebrew, this year in two separate companion booklets, for the first time (print either or both, as you prefer).

May these essays enrich your holiday, and spark your own discussions in your celebration of receiving the Torah.

Chochmat Nashim looks forward to continuing to work with you for the sake of a healthy Jewish community, in which Judaism is better because women are heard and seen.

Happy Shavuot! ~ ג'תן תורתנו שמח!

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# MEGILLAT RUTH: ROLE MODELS OF A CHESSED SOCIETY



By Joy Braha

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Long before the emergence of modern social psychology, Hillel succinctly questioned the nature of man's twin desires for dependence and independence: "If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I?" (Pirkei Avot 1:14) Hillel understood the human yearning to stand on one's own, while acknowledging the weakness of a society that does not consider the needs of others. It is this push and pull of dependence and independence that lies at the heart of Megillat Ruth, and where we eventually come to understand that the true rewards lie in the dynamics between the two. Through diverse personalities, Megillat Ruth demonstrates the importance of both relying on and accepting help from others, in order to reach our full potential.

Let us first look at Naomi, whose name translates as "pleasantness." At the opening of the megillah, Naomi falls from grace when she leaves Beit Lechem to settle independently in Moav, where she eventually loses her husband and two sons. After many years, she returns to her people as a widowed pauper. Upon her arrival, she asks that people call her Mara, bitter. Once a wealthy aristocrat who had abandoned the starving dependents of Beit Lechem in their time of need, she now acknowledges that she is returning empty, without heirs or purpose in life.

Naomi has undergone tremendous loss and hardship, but it is her difficulty accepting the help of her daughter-in-law Ruth that highlights the human tendency to suffer in silence. Often, when people experience difficulties and hardships, or are overcome by tremendous sorrow, they find it too shameful, even exhausting, to accept help from others. Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house" (Ruth 1:8). Seeing herself as an encumbrance, Naomi tries to sever her only remaining family and prepares herself for her shameful return to Beit Lechem. Orpah eventually leaves and returns to Moab to rejoin her ancestral culture, but Ruth only sees hope and potential in the life she could live with Naomi. She persists and affirms her dedication to her mother-in-law. She asserts her willingness to experience Naomi's hardships alongside her, demonstrating for us the importance of helping people when they are in need – even if at first they reject or deny the assistance.

Ruth and Naomi's relationship demonstrates how people in a society must offer and accept help from one another, and how the willingness to feel that acute vulnerability eventually brings people closer together. The megillah emphasizes this idea at its very end, when, after Ruth gives birth, it states, "A son is born to Naomi!" (Ruth 4: 16-17) Naomi's willingness to accept the help of her Moabite daughter-in-law during her tremendous time of need and grief is rewarded with a continuation of her lineage and the eventual rise of King David.

With Naomi having accepted the assistance of Ruth, we now turn to Ruth to determine how she might achieve her potential through the acceptance of assistance from another. Upon arrival in Beit Lechem, Ruth understands that her mother-in-law is in no state to worry about their immediate physical need for sustenance, as she had become dependent on Ruth during their journey. Ruth offers to go and glean among the fields, knowing that certain areas of Jewish fields are left for destitute people. Ruth works from morning until evening to gather enough grain for her and Naomi. Her determination catches the attention of Boaz, a relative to Naomi's husband. In the ensuing verses, we witness a conversation that shows how Boaz admires both Ruth's dedication to her mother-in-law and her courage in coming to live in a foreign land among foreign people. Boaz instructs his workers to pull out extra stalks of barley, but also gives an instruction not to embarrass Ruth in any way. This act of hesed by Boaz results in Ruth gathering a large portion of food and she is able to return to Naomi, a proud daughter-in-law.

Ruth's humility in accepting Boaz's assistance progresses their relationship. When Ruth eventually lies down at Boaz's feet, he understands her dedication to redeeming her late husband and father-in-law and knows her strength is worthy of reward. It is at this point the megillah begins to show us Boaz's journey toward using his success and independence to lift both Ruth and Naomi out of destitution and into the fold of society.

The ability to give and receive help is underscored throughout the megillah as an important attribute that strengthens and sustains the Jewish people. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all needed each other to fulfill different potentials. Their combined willingness to do what is right, even though it is difficult, is eventually rewarded and etched into the Jewish tradition forever. To be a thriving member of the Jewish nation we must understand the ways in which we are integrated. We all help each other, and we need to learn to accept help from others, because we are only as strong as our weakest link. The megillah is full of moments of self-actualization, moments when we need to realize that accepting help from someone else is our best hope at living a full and contented life.



## THE CHOSEN PEOPLE, THE PEOPLE OF CHOICES

By Esti Marcus, LCSW

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One of the images of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai comes from the Midrash:

**ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר (שמות יט, יז), אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר מחסיא, מלמד שכפה עליהם הר כגיגית, ואמר להם, אם אתם מקבלים את התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. קבלוה בימי אחשורוש, דכתיב (אסתר ט, כז) "קיימו וקבלו", קיימו מה שקבלו כבר**

When the Israelites stood at the "foot" of the mountain, the Midrash interprets the words literally -- that Israel was standing under the mountain. G-d was holding the mountain above their heads and proclaimed, "If you accept the Torah, good. And if not, the mountain will crush you and here will be your burial ground." This interpretation, however, seems to contradict the fundamental idea of behirah, free will.

I am a clinical social worker and I specialize in trauma. The question of free will comes up frequently in my practice, and resolving this contradiction becomes essential to my work. Although the concept of trauma is complex, with much nuance, the essential principle of healing trauma is predicated upon one core factor: choice.

Trauma occurs when we are overwhelmingly robbed of our ability to make life choices and forced to make survival choices. There are three simple survival choices: fight, flight or freeze. Trauma healing, by contrast, happens when we reconnect to our capacity to make choices, and broaden the range of choice. The need is to move beyond those choices that only ensure survival to those that ensure survival AND help build the life one wants.

Is it even remotely possible that Israel exercised free will while there was a mountain hovering over the people's heads, ready to crush them if they did not "choose" to accept the Torah? And if trauma happens when there is a loss of free will, did the events at Mount Sinai traumatize a nation?

Perhaps we can answer both questions by returning to the original midrash, and its juxtaposition of Mount Sinai and Purim. At first glance, it may seem like the juxtaposition is meant to highlight the contrast between the forced acceptance of the Torah that happened at Mount Sinai (in the year 2448) versus the willing acceptance of the Torah that happened almost a thousand years later, in the time of Purim (3408).

There is a paramount difference in the language describing these two seminal events. In the account of the giving of the Torah, the language used is "na'aseh ve-nishma" -- "We will do and we will listen." In the time of Purim, Megillat Esther states: "kimu ve-kibulu" -- "They established and committed." The midrash concludes that at the time of Purim, Israel committed to what they had already received at Mount Sinai. The text itself indicates the growth and evolution of Israel's relationship to the Torah and the transformation from merely "doing" (na'aseh) to "committing" (kimu).

In other words, the midrash is not contrasting an absence of free will at Mount Sinai with the free will and acceptance at the time of Purim, but is charting the evolution and development of free will in the life cycle of a human being.

The description of the experience at Mount Sinai refers to the stage of free will that human beings experience in their infancy and childhood. In the desert, Israel is referred to as a child:

**ה'לך וקראת באזני ירושלים לאמר כה אמר ה' זכרתי לך חסד נעור'ך אהבת כלולתיך  
(לכתך אחרי במדבר בארץ לא זרועה): (ירמיהו ב:ב)**

G-d remembers the kindness in Israel's infancy when they followed Him into the desert, a land unknown to them (Jeremiah 2:2).

## The Chosen People, The People of Choices (cont.)

Mount Sinai, childhood, refers to the "mountain hovering above" stage, where one's range of choices is very limited. We are born into circumstances and situations that we do not get to choose, and we have very little access to a full range of choices simply because we do not yet have the capacity or ability to implement those choices. Infants are physically unable to forage for food, work for a living, build homes or marriages. We are born completely reliant on our caretakers to make choices for us. As babies, and then children, our range of choices is limited and our brain development matches that capacity. It is why children love fairy tales and those stories from the Torah where there is a clear villain and an equally obvious hero. Anything more nuanced overwhelms children because their brains do not yet have the capacity to process it. Our range of choice is limited to "accept the Torah or die." At that stage, between life and death, there is only one possible choice: to not die.

As we age into early adulthood, our brains develop the capacity for nuanced and abstract thinking and our range of choice therefore becomes more varied and complex. This happens at the same pace that our responsibility develops, as does our ability to exercise a more complex range of choices. Therefore, our free will evolves into a more mature free will, in which we have the capacity to accept and integrate the choices that we make, and commit to a practice that reflects our values and beliefs. In this stage, our range of choice shifts from "accept the Torah or die" to "accept the Torah and live." That is, use the Torah to create a life built from practicing choices that reflect your values and beliefs.

In childhood, we may learn about acts of chesed, kindness and study Avraham's character to learn about how he prioritized the needs of others over his own. When we are children, doing acts of chesed becomes a way of life, a necessity, and the way we learn to emulate G-d. As we grow older and develop an ability for more complex thought, we revisit chesed as a concept and learn when it is necessary to prioritize our own needs and security over others, and we revisit the stories of Avraham. We see that he was much more complex than the childhood accounts suggest, that he was thoughtful about his acts of kindness, and made informed choices. When we mature, we expand our own relationship to chesed, and integrate a more nuanced and personal way of practicing it in our lives.

At Mount Sinai, we were a nation with no name. We were referred to as **העם**, the nation:

**וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹקִים מִרְהַמְחֲנֶה וַיִּתְּצֵבּוּ בְּתַחְתִּית הַהָר**

We accepted what was thrust upon us, in the same way that a newborn accepts what is thrust upon her. At the time of Purim, a thousand years into the nation's development, we have a name. We are Yehudim, Jews. We have a fully developed understanding of our options and a fully realized capacity for free will. At the time of Purim, we choose to revisit the choices that were forced upon us in childhood (at Sinai), and then integrate them into a more mature, nuanced commitment and acceptance of those principles.

This understanding of the Midrash clarifies that Mount Sinai was not traumatizing. It had the potential to have been traumatizing if our relationship had not evolved into the next stage of development. Trauma happens when people get stuck in the stage of development where their range of choices is limited and never evolves into the stage where their range of choices expands and they revisit their previous choices. The essence of trauma healing is not about retelling the traumatic story and remembering what happened when one was robbed of the ability to make free choices, it is about integrating those experiences with the here and now, forming new relationships to them, in which the past integrates with the present, and expanding the range of choices to include options that both ensure survival, so that one does not die, but also ensure that choosing life!



Photo credit: Fruma Landa, Tzipi Blumenthal, Dalia Finkelstein

# WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS

By Sarah C. Rudolph

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Among the central themes of the Book of Ruth is *chesed* – acts of kindness. *Chesed* comes across as a defining virtue of Ruth herself, most notably in her devotion to her deceased husband and to her mother-in-law (1:8). Boaz seems particularly impressed with this trait, as he expresses when they first meet (2:11 – “I have been told of all you did for your mother-in-law.”) and again during Ruth’s late-night visit (3:10 – “Your latest act of *chesed* is greater than your first”).

Malbim, however, points out that there seems to be an act of *chesed* missing from this story. Boaz, who was so taken with Ruth’s kind nature, demonstrates his own generous spirit several times, Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Laws of Gifts to the Poor*, 7:13). Why, then, did Naomi not just appeal to her rich relative Boaz from the beginning? Why send Ruth to collect in his fields like any impoverished stranger? Malbim answers (translation mine):

“She preferred her daughter-in-law bring her bread from the *leket* of the poor to which the Torah gave her rights, and that would be as if she had provided for her from the gift of God at the time of impoverishment, rather than receive *chesed* from a relative whom she had known at the time of her wealth and before whom she was embarrassed to reveal her lack.”

Why would Naomi prefer *leket* to a direct appeal to a relative who would surely have helped her?

I remember, even as a child, being impressed by the genius in certain parenting strategies my parents employed, including in the way they gave me an allowance. My first allowance was 11 cents a week. Why this odd amount? They explained: They wanted me to pocket ten cents, and gave me 11 so I could give a tenth to *tzedakah*, and still have my ten cents. As my allowance increased, the numbers changed, always enabling me to give one-tenth to charity.

From the moment I received my very first “income,” I learned that a tenth of my money was not my own, but already destined for others. I learned to separate *ma’aser* without resentment – whatever the amount, that tenth was never intended to be mine, so why would I resent giving it away?

Malbim’s insight represents this same message, but with regard to the recipient of charity. Namely, the recipients need not be troubled by receiving it. After all, they are not taking from the giver, they are simply gaining access to what *Halacha* (note: consult your preferred halachic authority) had already set aside for them.

We might even see that message as an aspect of the divine genius at the heart of the Torah-mandated gifts to the poor: *leket*, *shich’cha*, and *pe’ah*. All crops, ultimately, are gifts from God, and He determines how to distribute them among the farmer, the *kohen*, the *levi*, and the poor. There is no shame in receiving one’s portion at the direction of its true Owner.

We can understand, then, why Naomi might have balked at asking Boaz for a handout, but felt comfortable collecting *leket* – which was already hers to take.

This insight is also a reminder to those who distribute *tzedakah* to maintain the dignity of the recipients in every way possible, beginning with viewing those funds as already belonging to the recipient.

For that matter, any act of *chesed* fulfills a divine mandate: “Love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18). On some level, every beneficiary of *chesed* is entitled to whatever *chesed* is offered, just as the poor are entitled to *leket* (though gratitude is important as well).

And if it is still hard to benefit from another’s *chesed*, another idea derived from the story of Ruth may help. *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* (5:9) notes that when telling her mother-in-law where she had been gleaning, Ruth emphasized her own action rather than that of her benefactor: “the name of the man with whom I worked today” (2:19), rather than “the man who worked with me today.” Rabbi Yehoshua explains, “More than the owner does for the poor, the poor does for the owner. [Ruth was saying] ‘I performed many actions and many good deeds for him for the one slice of bread he gave me.’” Ruth, the gracious doer of *chesed*, knows all about the benefits of being on the giving side, we do well to take her word for it, and be ready to receive as needed, as well as to give what we can.



# BIKKURIM: AN ANCIENT COMPASSIONATE HALAKHIC CHANGE

By Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein

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Shavuot is known for the giving of The Law, but also for the chesed (lovingkindness) epitomised in the Book of Ruth. Classically, law is often characterised as harsh and unmoving and even unfeeling. However, there is a striking example in the earliest legal code in Judaism that records a compassionate adaptation of a law that is part of the quintessential, ancient Shavuot ritual: the presentation of the Bikkurim/First Fruits to the Temple. This change is instituted because of chesed.

Mishnah Masechet Bikkurim, chapters one and three, are mostly devoted to the details of the bringing of Bikkurim to the Temple. This mitzvah is initially recorded in the Torah (Ex. 24:22, Deut. 26:2-4), and a particular aspect of the ritual performance of it is based on Deut. 26:5-10. This latter passage is familiar to many today, as it is featured in the Maggid section of the Pesach Haggadah. It is a text that succinctly traces our national history from the time we were still only a family, living among pagans, through our move down to Egypt and eventual miraculous redemption from there, to receiving the Torah and journeying in the desert, to eventually settling in the Land of Israel. The Mishnah refers to this passage as Mikra Bikkurim, and it is described as an oral recitation that is made by certain people as part of the Bikkurim ritual.

Not surprisingly, in the hierarchal, non-egalitarian structure of the Temple, the Bikkurim ritual is not performed in the same way by all. The Mishnah lists many details and exceptions, but, generally, the people who are permitted to bring their first fruits and complete the ritual with the Mikra Bikkurim must fulfil two criteria: (1) they completely own the land on which the produce is grown and (2) they must be eligible to have had acquired land during its original distribution, when the Children of Israel entered and conquered the Land of Israel in the post-desert period. Slaves and messengers who bring others' produce to the Temple may bring, but not recite, because they do not fulfill the first criterion. Women and people of indeterminate gender (all of whom can own land) may bring, but may not recite, since they do not fulfill the second criterion (which, according to Rambam, in his commentary on the mishnah here, is learned from interpretations of Num. 26:54-55).

The mitzvah of Bikkurim is a positive command that is time-bound, and therefore women are not obligated in it (see Sefer HaChinuch 91:4 and 606:7). It is curious, therefore, that the mishnah states that female landowners did perform this mitzvah (albeit without the recitation). Of course, this tractate is one that does not have an accompanying Babylonian gemara, so it is possible that our understanding of the methodology as to how the mitzvah was understood over time is lacking (Note that the Jerusalem Talmud Bikkurim 1:5 does explain that a husband should bring the bikkurim from his wife's property and that he does make the recitation).

It is not necessary to try to analyze the "argument from the silence of the Bavli" in order to see that at least one aspect of this law explicitly did evolve, out of compassionate grounds, at an early date, as explained in the Mishnah itself.

There is one type of person who did not originally recite, but the Mishnah explains that the law was adapted in order to accommodate them.

**ביכורים ג': - בראשונה, כל מי שידע לקרות, קורא. וכל מי שאינו יודע לקרות, מקרין אותו. נמנעו מלהביא, התקינו שיהו מקרין את מי שידע ואת מי שאינו יודע.**

Mishnah Bikkurim 3:7 -- Originally, all who knew how to recite, would recite. And all those who did not know how to recite, they read it for him. [According to commentaries, a levite would recite and the one bringing the fruit would repeat after him.] They [those who did not know how] refrained from bringing, they [the contemporary halakhic authorities] decreed that they [the levites] should read for those who knew how and for those who did not know how.

This halakhic change (the halakhic language of "decree"- ת,ק,נ - is used) was clearly instituted at an early date, as it is recorded in the Mishnah itself. It is unusual for the Mishnah to explicitly acknowledge that there was reason for change and that actual change was made. One can therefore take note of it and ask, why? It could have been for the sake of efficiency -- everyone performing the ritual in the same way would be consistent and presumably smoother than if it had not all been done in the same way. Many commentaries assume that it was done so that the ones who did not know how to recite would not feel embarrassed by being singled out in their performing the ritual differently. An early halakhic change was therefore made to compassionately remove the possibility of embarrassment of those who could not perform the ritual without assistance.

The original Eishet Chayil (of Mishle 31) is known to have the "Torah of lovingkindness on her tongue." Ruth, known as the Eishet Chayil of her Shavuot story, continues to exemplify that attribute. It is fitting, then, to uncover a Torah of Lovingkindness in the mishnaic details of the Shavuot mitzvah of Bikkurim as well.

# A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS AND A HOLY NATION

By Aliza Gable Lipkin

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One of the reasons Megillat Ruth is read on Shavuot is Ruth's acceptance of the Torah. Shavuot is the time that Hashem desired to give the Torah to the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai. God said to Moses to tell the Jewish nation:

'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and [how] I bore you on eagles' wings, and I brought you to Me. And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' And all the people replied in unison and said, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do!"

The nation had suffered hundreds of years of persecution until finally witnessing the hand of God performing a myriad of miracles that led to their redemption from Egypt. It was those events that compelled them to declare their complete devotion to God's Torah before even knowing what that would entail.

Ruth's unwavering devotion is likened to the Jewish nation's all-embracing declaration to follow the Torah.

Ruth suffered the death of her husband and selflessly left her people, family, and childhood home behind, and made a lifelong commitment to her bereaved mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth declared, "Wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God." She was signing on to a treacherous journey to a foreign land, with people who were strangers to her, and who had, until then, banned her people from entering their covenant. In addition, the women would be destitute, left to glean in the fields of others to provide for their basic food.

While the story of Ruth is compared to Matan Torah, there is one important difference. Much to the shame of the Jewish nation, shortly after they had enthusiastically pledged their full allegiance to God and His Torah, they committed the egregious sin of the Golden Calf. This violation of the Torah led to Moses' breaking of the first tablets, and only through his pleading and prayers were the people able to receive a measure of forgiveness and the second set of tablets (three months later). The nation never again managed to reach the level of unity and closeness to God that they had attained before the Golden Calf.

Megillat Ruth, by contrast, ends much like a fairytale with a happily-ever-after ending. A "knight in shining armor" character takes notice of Ruth and redeems her. They wed and are the progenitors of King David, whose line will in turn eventually produce the long-awaited messiah.

How is it that Ruth's story concludes so beautifully where the nation of Israel failed so miserably? Granted, the nation miscalculated the time Moses was to descend the mountain, but should that cause such a degradation from complete devotion to God to idol worship? Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the details preceding the nation's declaration of devotion to the Torah, as contrasted with that of Ruth to her mother-in-law.

The nation received a grand promise from God that they would be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," after experiencing various miracles. Yet they declared their obedience to the Almighty only after having both witnessed His power and splendor, and received His great promise for the future. It is no wonder that they fell so far so fast. Their devotion was based on Godly miracles and promises, an allegiance through self-gain. Ruth, however, had been promised nothing, and she had everything to lose. With no prospects of marriage, money, or acceptance, she was motivated strictly by a giving spirit. Ruth cared for and loved her mother-in-law. She felt deeply connected through shared pain and experience, and wanted to provide the emotional and physical support she felt Naomi needed. And that she did. She stayed close by Naomi's side, leaving only to find sustenance. She married an older man, a relative of the family, to continue the family name, and thereby rebuild a legacy for Naomi. It is not too much of stretch to recognize that her actions contained a form of *techiat hameitim*, bringing the dead to life. Is it any wonder that *Mashiach* will come from her?

Reading these two biblical texts -- that of the giving of the Torah and Megillat Ruth -- on Shavuot therefore sends a strong message to the Jewish people. Namely, this is the time we are supposed to receive the Torah. We fell short the first time because we did not fully understand what it meant to keep the Torah. It is not about what we can get out of the Torah that matters, it is what we can give that will make us an "Am Segula Mamlechet Kohanim," a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

# LEAVENED BREAD AND THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

By **Sylia Aboudi**

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As many a yeshiva student can tell you, the first question on a test concerning a Jewish holiday will be its date. The second will almost invariably be the names given to the holiday. Shavuot is most curious in this sense. If one were answering these questions based purely on the text of the Torah, a student would provide three names: Hag Hakatzir, Yom HaBikkurim, and Shavuot. There is a conspicuous absence here: that of Zman Matan Torateinu.

It will surprise some to know that the Torah never actually specifies the date of Matan Torah, nor that Shavuot is in any way related to this pivotal point in Jewish history. In fact, it is through lengthy discussions that the Sages calculate the date of Matan Torah to be either the sixth or seventh of Sivan.

The Torah talks about Shavuot solely from an agricultural perspective. In Sefer Devarim, we read about the offering of the first fruits from the seven distinguished species in the Land of Israel. They place their offering in a basket and present it to the designated kohen and recite the mikra bikkurim (Devarim 26: 5-10). In it, the speaker expresses his gratitude to God, not just for allowing the land to prosper, not just further back to the distribution of the land, or even our liberation from slavery in Egypt, but all the way back to Yaakov's settling in Egypt. It is a meditation on all of the miracles that led to this joyous moment, and we thank Hashem for bringing us to this point so that we may share our portions with the Levi'im, gerim, and our households. Yet here, again, there is no mention of Matan Torah – all the more strange since it is the holiday on which we celebrate the occasion!

To emphasize further the agricultural theme of the holiday, we read that the workers of the land celebrate the beginning of the wheat harvest with a bread offering.

**(ממושבתיכם תביאו לחם תנופה שתים שני עשרונים סלת תהינה חמץ תאפינה בכורים לה: (ויקרא כג:יז)**

Shavuot is the only holiday in the year in which leavened bread, from the choicest wheat flour, is a required offering. It is only after this point that a family could partake in that year's wheat harvest. The use of chametz on Shavuot as part of the offering is extraordinary when we consider that the korbanot minhah, offered throughout the rest of the year, use only unleavened bread!

Based on this departure from the normal wheat offering, we are compelled to explore the symbolism of this korban, the shte halechem. Barley, though it is included in the seven minim of Eretz Yisrael, is known primarily as food for animals. Wheat, however, is a key and ideal food for humans. Rav Yehuda goes so far as to suggest that the eitz hada'at from which the first humans ate was a stalk of wheat, based on the fact that it is only once a human child begins to eat grain that he is able to speak (Berakhot 40:a). Even matzah, the most basic product of wheat flour, involves a partnership between man and God to grow, be processed, and baked. Leavened bread, however, is considered the most advanced form of wheat. Were it not for Divine intervention, we would still be in Egypt, without control of our own time or destinies, eating the poor man's bread. Hametz, therefore, is the beginning of the road on the way to freedom.

In order for a man to reach the moment when he could approach the kohen with his leavened bread, it was necessary for him to have been redeemed by God from Egypt, led to Israel by God, given land by God, been blessed with a bountiful harvest by God, and have the autonomy and time to produce the two loaves from his choicest wheat flour. This is why Rav Hirsch states in his commentary on Vayikra 23:18: "...This bread is hametz, it bears the stamp of social and political freedom and independence. But these were never ours by our own power." By what merit, then, are we allowed to come before the altar with these offerings?

By the merit of our acceptance of God's Torah.

It is no accident that the ultimate product of man's harvest season is presented on the same day when we celebrate the acceptance of Hashem's law as our own. The mitzvah of bikkurim begins only once Bnei Yisrael have conquered their enemies and settled into their land, all of these rewards were laid out in Devarim as conditional upon our acceptance of the Torah.

Why, given the importance of our compliance with the laws of the Torah, is the celebration of Matan Torah never explicitly commanded in the Torah?

We commemorate those things that happened in the past.

Rashi explains in Shemot 19:1: "...the commands of the Torah should be to you each day as something new (not antiquated and something of which you have become tired), as though He had only given them to you for the first time on the day in question."

Matan Torah is always present in the life of a Jew. While the date of 6 Sivan was pivotal in our history as God's nation, there is no need to commemorate that which we relive every single day.



# TORAH U-MADDA: ENRICHING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF MITZVOT

By Vivian Cohen

Vivian Cohen grew up in the Syrian Brooklyn community. She attended the Yeshiva of Flatbush, and is currently studying at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Israel as an Allegra Franco Women's Bet Midrash Israel Scholarship recipient.



What does “accepting the Torah” mean for Jews of the 21st century? As time progresses, the modern world advances, and Jews adapt with the changing times. Although engagement with the modern world may feel like a challenge that distances one from the ideal of “accepting the Torah with no distractions,” on the contrary, it lends itself to an opportunity to use the Torah to guide one’s day to day life.

Indeed, the Torah gives clear guidelines about boundaries with other cultures that need to be maintained. Leviticus 18:1-5 states:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יֹשְׁבֵתֶם בָּהּ לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וְכַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא אֲתֶכֶם שָׁמָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּבְחֻקֵּיהֶם לֹא תֵלַכּוּ: אֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֵת חֻקֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ לִלְכַת בְּהֵם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֵת חֻקֵּי וְאֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֲתֶם הָאָדָם וְחֵי בְהֵם אֲנִי ה'

At first glance, it seems that these verses would support a lifestyle with minimal, if any, connection with the outside world. However, the verses that follow explain that the limitations the Torah places on “becoming like the other nations” are due to the abominations, “to’evot,” with which they occupy themselves, such as forbidden relationships that the text outlines following the above.

Rather than the Torah eliminating all engagements with the outside world, the Torah places boundaries on how far to go with one’s connection to the outside world. One must not sacrifice sticking to Hashem’s Torah and mitzvot, as the text states. In fact, there are plenty of positive engagements with other nations throughout Tanakh: Abraham and Avimelekh, Ruth and Naomi, and Shlomo and leaders of other countries. It is clear from these powerful Jewish leaders that it is permitted, and even more so commendable, that they engaged with others and simultaneously kept to the ways of Hashem. Thus, the Torah does not mandate restricted communication with the world, but it provides an example of how to filter what Jews gain from the outside world.

The Torah is promoting a middle ground, leaving the Jew to filter engagement by extracting the positive and blocking the negative. One simply needs to determine whether the given practice or action would lead to the destruction of a moral or Jewish value, Torah, or mitzvot, or whether there would be a long-term benefit to this communication.

A key way to gain from the outside world is through secular knowledge. As long as one is educated in realms that are moral and do not destroy any Jewish values, this type of knowledge can deepen one’s understanding of humanity and the world in which one lives (See “Torah UMadda Thirty Years Later,” by Elana Stein Hain). For example, psychology expands upon why people function the ways that they do. Moreover, through that understanding, sensitivity towards others is born.

The idea of integrating secular studies with Torah studies was formulated in Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm’s book, Torah UMadda. He explains, among other things, the benefits of merging Torah with secular knowledge. Rabbi Lamm’s insights demonstrate the necessity and benefits of intertwining both the religious and secular world. He says, “The encounter of the worlds within religious individuals and communities. holds the promise of fascinating creativity, of new synthesis, of renewed efforts to grasp elusive insights.”

Jewish history contains a plethora of important Jewish figures who embraced the ideal of combining Torah and secular knowledge. For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, believed in “...not being too intellectually narrow- minded than about shaping an actual dialogue between secular studies and Torah.” Similarly, Rabbi Aharon Lichtentein, exposed his students to “...a rich cultural world with substantial religious meaning, even if that world is not Jewish—he did, without hesitation or compunction” (“Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein and Academic Talmud Study” by Rami Reiner). By creating exposure to secular knowledge, one gains a deeper understanding of humanity, which in turn yields a society of more sensitive, considerate individuals.

Viewing the outside world through a moral filter is necessary. As Rabbi Lamm observed, “Jewish leaders and communities have always engaged in a process of determining (consciously and less so) what aspects of general culture to incorporate, what aspects to reject and what aspects to mediate through a push and pull. . It is this process of determining adoption, adaptation and/or rejection that poses a major question and perhaps a crisis for Modern Orthodox Jews in the 21st century who are rooted in Torah but see truth in Madda as well” (see Reiner). As a Jew of today, “accepting the Torah” goes beyond accepting upon oneself a list of obligations and moral behaviors, it entails the commitment of juggling the benefits and dangers of the culture and values in an evolving world. And through this juggling act, the Jewish people deepen their dedication towards Judaism, Torah, and mitzvot.

## AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN, A FORK IN THE ROAD

By Elke Weiss

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Rabbi Avdimi ben Chama ben Chasa claims that God held the mountain over the heads of the Children of Israel, and said: “If you accept the Torah, well and good, if not, here will be your grave” (Shabbat 88a).

The time of the giving of the Torah, commemorated in the holiday of Shavuot, is described as a marriage between the Jewish people and God, a contract that binds the two together. Contractual law maintains that when parties commit to contracts under duress, the agreements are null and void. Rabbi Avdimi’s description of a Mountain of Damocles, as it were, being held over the Israelites’ heads recasts the people’s response, “We will do and we will listen,” in a sinister light, with the frightened tone of a hostage. How can this be an event to celebrate?!

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains, in “A Stiff-Necked People” (Ki Tisa 5768), that the event is a metaphor for the power that God held over the people. He had just freed them from slavery, after all. How could they have refused to obey a commandment? That is, the mountain holds the people hostage no more than their own experiences with the Divine already do.

Yet, every day, over the course of daily prayers, Jews describe God as He who “chose us from among the nations and gave us the Torah.” This wording suggests gratitude to God, as well as the joy of being loved, and having been chosen. It is not the tone one might expect from a hostage who has no choice.

How, then, can these two opposing views be reconciled? For, to my mind, both are true. Judaism can be the setting in which we feel chosen to receive the Torah as a source of spiritual nourishment, inspiration, and the means to make the world a better place. But Judaism can also be coercive, like the mountain: when it threatens or seems to bully its adherents into compliance, it is all too easy to feel trapped and afraid.

Consider the perspective that the Torah is like a mirror. If it reflects the person who looks into it, then it becomes that person’s choice how to use it. Indeed, the Torah itself makes this point: “See, I have set before you today life and goodness, as well as death and disaster” (Deut. 30:15). A simple understanding of this verse might suggest the division between those who follow the Torah and those who do not, but a deeper explanation is that the Torah has been placed in human hands, and it can be used for good or for evil. Or, for that matter, we can be legalistic and see the Torah as a cage to bind our practices and keep us contained, or we can see it as a relationship, which then provides the basis for our human relationship, such as it is, with the Divine. The choice is in our hands.

The different approaches are evident in the Book of Ruth, read on this same holiday, as well. When Naomi sets off on her way back to the Land of Israel, her daughters-in-law follow her. Naomi tells them both to go home, to try to carve out lives of their own. Orpah heeds her mother-in-law’s urging. She is under no obligation to join Naomi, and she accepts the legalistic framework that sends her home. Who could blame her? She did what was expected of her, within the rules of the society. With the death of her husband, her legal relationship and duty to her husband’s mother ceased, and she owed no more fealty to her.

By dramatic and welcome contrast, Ruth saw her relationship with Naomi not as the legalistic mother-in-law/daughter-in-law obligation, but as a connection and commitment to each other, freely given. The death of Ruth’s husband did not diminish her loyalty to her mother-in-law, and she freely chooses to follow Naomi into the unknown. Ruth accepts the responsibility to care for Naomi whole-heartedly, not because of some social obligation, but out of genuine loyalty and affection. This makes her the heroine in our story, and it is Ruth whom we honor.

Ruth’s story also informs our understanding of the Children of Israel standing at the foot (tahtit) of the mountain (Exodus 19:17), or as the Midrash presents, with the mountain being held over the people’s heads in explicit threat. The connection between Ruth and Naomi began as a formal obligation, yet once it is removed, the younger woman stays with the older one by virtue of that connection, as a matter of love. So too, the connection the Israelites have to God at Mount Sinai is one of obligation – no wonder the Midrash presents it as one of coercion. But over time, that commitment forges a more personal and lasting connection, one of love.

We can stick with observance out of obligation. We can take the legalistic approach. Or we can forge the relationship that will sustain our connection with the Divine. The choice is before us, and the path seems clear.

# THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE FLOWERS AT SINAI

By Rachel Ashkenazi

Rachel Ashkenazi attended Hillel Yeshiva in Ocean Township, New Jersey and Parsons School of Design. She is a current member of the Allegra Franco Women's Bet Midrash. A life-long learner, Rachel has a passion for philosophy, human behavior, business, and the arts.



The flowers, in all their colored splendor, jumped from one place to another. Their vibrancy journeying from fertile land to take root in the most barren of places. To witness and partake of the most awesome moment to ever exist. Their attendance, forever cemented in history, no small part of the story. Their legacy, everlasting and celebrated today still, year after year.

The flowers of Mount Sinai. Lush and sweetly fragrant in the midst of the desolate desert, the least likely place to survive. They, along with animals and other greenery, gathered to proudly stand by to witness the giving of the Torah to the Jewish nation. It is said that at the time of Matan Torah, the desert was flourishing with life and vegetation.

What are we to make of this anomaly? An oasis of life and beauty in the middle of desolation at the time of our meeting with Hashem. Why bring the Children of Israel through the harshest of conditions only to be met with such beauty?

It is precisely the desert barrenness that Bnei Yisrael needed in order to prepare themselves for this awesome moment. The desolation was the exact necessary atmosphere to shed the negative impact of Egypt. To bring us as far as possible from a world of materialism. Bnei Yisrael prepared themselves for weeks and days in this severe environment to merit meeting their creator. The desert put them in the correct frame of mind to connect to who they should be. To strip themselves of any materialism, like their surroundings, to be the barest version of themselves. A hollow vessel eager to be filled with G-d. The desert reflecting their inner state of humility, openness, a readiness to accept.

And then it was time. The desert too had to prepare itself to receive G-d. The flowers and greenery surrounded the mountain in anticipation of this moment. They were, in fact, witness, participant and enabler. They set the stage for this moment, readying the space, giving honor to what was to be. Allowing the Children of Israel to experience this occasion. The gloriousness and sweet scent of the flowers permeated the air, awakening their senses, empowering the people to reach higher and higher levels of spirituality. The most sublime point in Jewish history called for the most beautiful of settings. For G-d and for Bnei Yisrael to be surrounded by beauty, which uplifts and transcends, bringing those who experience it to a sacred, more joyous state.

To be in the magnificence of nature, to gaze at a beautifully designed object, a stunning person, fills humans with awe. It changes one's mood, inspires, lights people from within. The physical world has an impact on people's spiritual selves, people's senses a direct impact on their emotions. How one feels, how one acts. Walking into a beautiful room changes a person's demeanor, people carry themselves just a bit grander. Watching the sun rise, its rays bursting through the clouds humbles humanity. It is nothing short of a spiritual experience.

Nowhere is this more clear than with Bnei Yisrael's journey to Matan Torah. Their inner spiritual state can be traced by looking at their physical surroundings. The interplay between the two drastically different atmospheres highlights how much impact physical surroundings have on people's mental and emotional being.

And we relive this idea today. On Shavuot, we fill our synagogues and homes with fragrant plants and beautiful greenery to remind us of the pleasant smell that filled the world when the Torah was given. Through our senses, we are transported to the time we as a people were closest to G-d. And we bring a piece of that holiness to us today, setting the stage for us to reach a higher inner state in our own lives.

The privilege of creating our external, physical spaces is one that we honor. We beautify our surroundings, we create homes for ourselves and our families to blossom and thrive in. On Shabbat, we set our tables with extra care, delicate linens, fresh flowers, homemade delicacies. On Sukkot, we bring our finest china into our temporary dwellings. We build our physical to build our spiritual.

Herein lies the power of the flowers of Mount Sinai. Their presence a beautiful reminder of the connection between the spaces we inhabit and the spaces living within us. The beautiful spaces calling for perfect harmony.



# CAN YOU REALLY CHANGE, EVEN AFTER FAILURE?

By Gila Ross

Gila is a well-sought after and much loved educator with Seed UK, with over 20 years of experience. Her Power Up! podcast was named number 6 of top Jewish podcasts worldwide. Find her on Instagram @itsgilaross, where she shares daily inspiration.



As we gain self-awareness through our lives, we encounter parts of ourselves that we are not so fond of, whether those parts are part of our personality or a result of our upbringing. Perhaps it's a short fuse, a disposition to see the negative, or a critical inner voice. And we want to change, to become better, different, kinder to ourselves and to others. Doing the inner work of changing ourselves is hard. At some point you may wonder, is it even possible to change our own deep-rooted patterns? It's a question that is particularly important, as the work of changing oneself is hard. To maintain the commitment to do it, we depend on the belief that it can be done. So, can it be done?

It's easy to see the people who stay the same, to count the times we try and fail, to internalize messages like "leopards don't change their spots," but there is one story of transformation that is so stark and so powerful that should give us all hope. Namely, the story of Rachav. Rachav was a prostitute. And yet.

In the second chapter of Sefer Yehoshua, Yehoshua sends spies to Jericho and they go to Rachav, who decides to help them. She hides the men for a time, and before they leave, she begs them to help her by keeping her and her family alive. She then tells them to hide in the mountains for three days. Her signal to them that it was safe to emerge was a scarlet thread. Meanwhile, she sends the king's messengers, who are seeking the spies, on a wild goose chase, giving the spies the time to escape.

The spies report back to Yehoshua that the people of Jericho are scared. He takes advantage of that fear, and the Children of Israel destroy Jericho completely – except that they save Rachav, whose encounter with this people has transformed her. Indeed, Rachav transforms herself completely and, according to Midrash, marries Yehoshua (Megillah 14b). How does she leave her past as a prostitute behind and become the woman who was worthy of marrying the leader of the generation?

Rachav understood how people fail – and how to learn from failure. First, as Rashi explains in his commentary to Bamidbar 15:39: The eye sees, the heart desires, the body sins. That is, a progression of three steps often takes us away from success. Rachav's helping the spies counters these three steps – by welcoming them through a window (corresponding to sight), hiding them amid flax (symbolizing desire, as the raw natural product), and using a rope (woven from flax) to help them reach safety (physical, bodily action, but this time toward salvation).

For 40 years, we are taught, Rachav desired connection. Connection is a fundamental human need (Maharal, Chiddushei Aggados 4:72), from connecting to ourselves, with others, and with G-d. Rachav had allowed her heart and eyes to dictate her actions and to fulfil this deep desire for connection through prostitution.

So what motivated her change? Because of her position in society, she knew the hearts of the rich and prominent people of Jericho. She knew that they knew that the Israelites were coming to capture Jericho and she knew the morale of the country -- that the locals had lost their courage (Malbim, Yehoshua 2:11). She had also heard of the miracles that G-d had done for the Children of Israel, and she understood that it was ripe time to make some changes. Rachav therefore looked at her failures and at what had motivated them. She saw that the desire for connection was what had led her astray.

And this is Rachav's secret to success: she did not try to fight that desire. Instead, she channelled it, that deep fundamental desire for connection, and rerouted it to use it connect to G-d (Mechilta, Yitro). She took the very materials that she had used to be a discreet prostitute (the flax, the rope, her window), and repurposed them in service of G-d, in saving the spies. Her eyes and ears that had led to her failures enabled her to change herself (Rashi, Yehoshua 2:15). (For more on Rachav's story see Water from the Well, by Rebbetzin Holly Pavlov)

So often when we fail, we want to distance ourselves from our failures, to look away and ignore them. The story of Rachav teaches to delve into what motivates a failure, and to channel the energy that drove the failure into transforming ourselves for success. In so doing, we heal ourselves.

# IN THE SHADOWS OF SHMUEL II

By Tziri Lamm

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On Rosh Hashanah, I tentatively began the Shnayim Mikra cycle of learning Parshat HaShavua, dedicating nearly all of my free time on Shabbatot to this study. Energized by the first consistent, intensive commitment to Torah study of my adult life, I then began the new cycle of Nach Yomi with my 14-year-old daughter in January. No matter where we are or how busy things get, we make the time to learn the daily chapter together.

These twin undertakings have renewed my understanding of the verse from Yehoshua (1:8): “Vehagita bo yomam va-laylah,” in that the most transformative part of my learning has been that I now contemplate Torah both day and night – every day and every night. And “what you do every day matters more than what you do once in a while,” according to Gretchen Rubin’s *Secrets of Adulthood*, as discussed in her book, *Happier*. Between listening to podcasts, finding ancillary mefarshim, and – my favorite – finding points of contact between Parsha and Navi, I don’t have much time for any other non-essential hobbies. But I’ve never felt more connected and fulfilled.

Shavuot is the holiday of King David, the star of Shmuel II. He is the “mashiach Hashem,” the “candle of Israel.” Of all the figures of Jewish history, he often feels the most present to me, kept alive through his words that I recite every day. But even a cursory reading of Shmuel II reveals a shadow side of King David’s reign. David’s astonishing achievements and heartbreaking struggles come at the expense of nearly every woman who enters his life.

For example: From the beginning, Michal is a political pawn – traded between Shaul and David, first given as a reward for David’s military achievements, then given to Palti ben Laish after she helps David flee from Shaul’s wrath, only to be returned to David as part of his negotiations with her brother after Shaul’s death. When she criticizes his behavior before the Ark of the Covenant, she is cursed with barrenness. Then, according to the Talmud (Sanhedrin 19b), after Michal adopts and raises her sister Merav’s five sons, they are cruelly ripped from her as part of the macabre appeasement of the Givonim (Shmuel II 21). The text presents the grief and dedication of Ritzpah bat Ayah, but nothing of Michal’s pain and trauma.

Another example: Much ink has been spilled in trying to understand David’s motivation in his interaction with Batsheva, as well as in the attempts to make sense of his repentance and the punishment in its aftermath. But what of Batsheva herself? She is gazed upon at her most vulnerable, and there is no indication that she welcomed the invitation into the palace. In his attempt to conceal his sin, David repeatedly tries to coerce her husband Uriah back into her bed, before ultimately sending him to his death on the battlefield. The verse deliberately mentions Batsheva mourning her husband’s death (Shmuel II, 11:26). But though we hear of David’s intense grief when their infant son falls ill and dies as punishment for his sins, we hear nothing of Batsheva’s pain and trauma.

A third example: Perhaps most tragic is the rape of Tamar. Coveted by her brother, Amnon, and manipulated into lovingly preparing food at his bedside, she begs him first not to violate her and then not to send her away after he has done so. When she walks through the house screaming loudly, she is quieted by her brother Avshalom and sent to live, in devastation, in his home. When David finally hears something, it is only of the events, and not Tamar’s own voice (Shmuel II, 13:21). At every turn, she is silenced. So, though the reader of Shmuel II hears of Tamar’s pain and her trauma, no one in her life does, and she is left to wallow in its wake.

The pain of both Batsheva and Tamar echoes in the violation of David’s ten concubines. We know nothing about them or their lives, but their saga stretches across five chapters. Certain that no one will harm them, David leaves them behind to “guard the house” (Shmuel II 15:17) when he flees before Avshalom. But spurred by his anger at his father for failing to rebuke Amnon (and as Divine punishment for the sin of Batsheva), Avshalom publicly takes advantage of the ten defenseless women (Shmuel II 16:22). They are the collateral damage in David’s missteps, both between man and his fellow man, and between man and God. When he finally wins the war, his first act is to try to care for them, but the damage has been done, and they are forced to live as “living widows” (Shmuel II 20:3). Yes, despite the jarring phrase, we hear nothing of their pain and their trauma.

Thirteen women, thirteen silent voices living in the shadows of Shmuel II.

Learning these stories, especially with my daughter, reminds me why there is a need to say the prayer of “Ve-ha’arev na” each day: Hashem, please make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths. There are parts of Torah that are indeed bitter. Some people take comfort in explaining away these parts, reframing the painful moments. I prefer to sit with the discomfort of our mothers who lived in the shadows. I prefer to give voice to their silent pain, to imagine their perspective. I prefer to show my daughter that, with empathy, we can fix some of these broken parts.

This year, Shavuot rings differently. This year, I have a stake in the celebration of Torah study. Moreover, as I continue to learn, I am listening for both the silent cries and those that went unheeded.

# THE FLEXIBILITY OF A LEADER, THE BARE FACE OF TORAH

By Tikva Blaukopf Schein

Tikva Blaukopf Schein lives in Jerusalem, where she periodically runs Torah-poetry slams, learns, and teaches. She is finishing up her doctoral research at Bar-Ilan University on the threatening nature of laughter in Ancient Jewish and Classical literature.



## FLEXIBILITY IN TORAH

'I can't do this anymore. I'm done.'

Moshe speaks to those he has guided, as a leader, a mother, a spiritual counselor. He's at the end of his life.

'That's it. I can't continue.'

"He spoke to them, I am one hundred and twenty years today. I can't continue going out and coming in, and God has told me 'You won't pass across this Jordan.'" (Devarim 31:2)

Why can't Moshe come in or go out anymore? What has happened to Moshe?

Rashi, leaning on b. Sotah 13b, which interprets this verse to mean that the gates of wisdom were blocked for Moshe, puts aside considerations of military prowess or aging and says it outright: Moshe is no longer able to delve into Torah!

Moshe, who brought his exhausted refugees out of the Pharaonic regime to the physical and spiritual rebirth of Har Sinai. Moshe, who suffered gripes and groans and his people's post-trauma for the sake of God's Torah, who set up his people with an infrastructure of Torah -- he is no longer able to partake of that Torah.

Lacking the flexibility to come and to go, Moshe cannot enact the trademark characteristic of the wandering Jew, the Ivri, to "pass across," to go from one state of being to another. Moshe's flexibility is essential to his ability to lead, to mediate successfully between the mortal and the Divine, and to learn Torah.

When that flexibility of a leader has gone, he's gone too.

## THE MASKS WE WEAR

\Flexibility of movement is coupled with adapting oneself to your audience.

At Exodus 34:29, Moshe descends from Har Sinai with the two slabs of rock, inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Moshe is on the brink of trying for the second time to give these refugees the gift of Torah as an everlasting relationship with God, when suddenly he's alerted to a problem! His presentation is off putting. His face is shining with so much light from his direct interaction with the Divine that no one can approach him ("Moshe was not aware that the skin of his face was glowing from speaking with Him"). In order to accommodate the needs of his audience, Moshe dons a mask when he emerges from talking with God, and doffs it when he returns.

Moshe's success as a leader is born of his flexibility in meeting each interlocutor as they are, whether God, or one of his troubled students. When Moshe becomes stiff and rigid, unable to maintain the relational plasticity required for effective leadership, his days are ended.

We all have several masks we wear interchangeably, for the different parts of our lives. That doesn't mean we live compartmentalized, it means we meet each person in a way conducive to the strongest, healthiest relationship that we can build with that person.

## SHAVUOT AS THE OHEL MOED

What place demands this flexibility of coming and going and this masking/unmasking?



## The Flexibility of a Leader, The Bare Face of Torah (cont.)

For Moshe, it begins at Har Sinai but, I assert, continues to the Ohel Moed. For us, it is learning Torah, our own personal Ohel Moed. And on Shavuot, we have both. Not only do we relive Har Sinai, we also, I assert, experience a subtler interaction with God and with God's Torah. We visit the Ohel Moed. After exchanging masks to immerse ourselves in Torah for a few hours, we then emerge into the post-Shavuot calendrical no-man's land.

In order for our learning to be passed across, internally, externally, we must modulate our light in accordance with the people we meet. There are different types of light – the Torah contains it all – the question is how to filter it through the masks we wear in a way that is palatable to our audience.

Moshe's success as a leader in being able to transmit Torah lies, I believe, in his ability both to visit the Ohel Moed in a flash, and to reach the appropriate filtering veil in accordance with the needs of the people who receive him afterwards.

By reframing Shavuot as a visit to the Ohel Moed, and not only to the revelation of Har Sinai, we can see Torah as a place always accessible to us. Regardless of how much time we spend there, we can find a retreat for the soul, a pilgrimage of respite to the balm of Torah. We also recognize that the Torah itself offers the tools for satisfying individual needs (Moshe talking to God), family needs (Moshe as a parent), and professional or public needs (Moshe as leader, talking to the people).

Masks, and the flexibility to use them, are key to leadership survival – and we are all leaders. They strengthen the light of Torah and its ability to be transmitted successfully.



**CHOCHMAT NASHIM**  
BECAUSE JUDAISM IS BETTER WHEN WOMEN ARE HEARD

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