Yom Yerushalayim and Shavuot Edition

inside!
A special Aseret HaDibrot section, with 10 refreshing thoughts
a fun Jerusalem Quiz for all the family
and a Shavuot wordsearch for kids!
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HAMIZRACHI
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The six days from June 5 to June 10, 1967 are without parallel in the story of human warfare. The sensational speed and brevity of the war, the sudden and startling drastic twists, its seemingly supernatural features, the remarkable reunification of Jerusalem, and the totally unforeseen new political reality created both in the Middle East and throughout the world, were all extraordinary.

Prior to 1967, who had ever heard of a full-scale war measured in days? We had the Hundred Years’ War, the Eighty Years’ War, the Thirty Years’ War, as well as wars measured in years and months. Where in the annals of human history had anyone heard of a major regional war involving multiple countries beginning and ending in less than a week?

Under imminent attack from six Arab armies and facing a threat of annihilation, Israeli army chaplains were sent to public parks to prepare funeral grounds for the expected death toll of as many as 100,000.

Incredibly, less than a week later, Israel had not only survived with less than 800 casualties but had almost tripled in land size and returned to many of its ancient historical and Biblical lands. Incredibly, and after multiple pleas to the Jordanians not to attack, their unexpected entry into the war precipitated the Jewish people’s return to the holy and ancient city of Jerusalem, the Kotel and the Temple Mount for the first time in almost 2,000 years.

The sovereign return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem was a spiritual and political seismic shift of epic proportions.

Here’s why.

In 1948, so soon after the ovens of Auschwitz, a stateless, wandering people had founded a State and had been restored to their historic national homeland. Evoking Yechezkel’s dry bones’ prophecy, the collective physical body of the Jewish people had been resurrected. In 1967 though, Israel would receive her soul.

She began to tap into her spiritual destiny – Jerusalem. She was no longer just physically surviving but spiritually thriving. Israel without Jerusalem is to the Jewish people like a body without a soul. Jerusalem without Israel is like a soul without a body. Together, Israel and Jerusalem are one. Physical and spiritual, heaven and earth, national and religious, secular and sacred, fate and destiny, surviving and thriving, particular and universal are all woven into one holistic whole. So much of what had been lost had now been reclaimed.

The great Biblical prophets had predicted both the return to Israel and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in scores of ancient prophecies – an integral part of the Messianic drama and the Jewish people’s historic mission. In six short days, they touched on the essence of their existence and caught a glimpse of the end of the story.

As the Chief of Staff, Yitzchak Rabin was given the honor of naming the war. He captured the enormity of these events in the name he chose. Among the titles proposed were the War of the Daring, the War of Salvation and the War of the Sons of Light. Remarkably though, Rabin chose The Six-Day War, as it seemed to him to evoke the six days of creation.

It was the dawn of a new era.

It totally transformed how the Jewish people viewed themselves and shifted something deep within their psyche.

In June of 1967, the country had around 2.5 millions Jews. A crippling economy, social challenges and military threats caused many to leave Israel. The joke of the time was, “Will the last one left at Lod Airport please turn off the lights.” Over these six days everything changed. Large waves of aliyah began pouring in from all over the world. For the first time, tens

Continued on page 4
of thousands of Jews living comfortably throughout the Western world began moving in droves to Israel. The spiritually oppressed Jews of the Soviet Union, whose Jewish identity and pride had been squashed, would somehow find the courage to stand up for their Jewishness and rebel against the Communist regime and the KGB. This, in turn, sparked a deep sense of shared fate and common destiny that gripped the nation. Under the slogan “Let My People Go,” Jews around the world galvanized to fight for their brethren and eventually led to over a million Russian Olim arriving in Israel after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Not only was Israel’s spirit lifted but so was the search for its soul. I believe one can trace the beginning of the return of tens if not hundreds of thousands to their religious and spiritual roots – and the flourishing of educational and outreach organizations of the Baal Teshuva movement in Israel and all over the Jewish world – directly to the transformative power of these six days. The Jewish soul was stirred with an other-worldly fire and fervor.

**Incredible Timing**

The timing on the Jewish calendar of the war could barely have been more spiritually precise and prescient.

The day that Jerusalem, the Kotel and the Temple Mount returned to Jewish sovereign control, the 28th of Iyar, Yom Yerushalayim, was **exactly one week before Shavuot**. The war ended a few days later at the beginning of the month of Sivan, **the very same time** 3,000 years before that the Children of Israel went out of the Land of Mitzrayim, on that day (Rosh Chodesh) they came to the wilderness of Sinai.

It was there they encamped before Mount Sinai, “as one man with one heart,” standing with a singular unity and anticipation to receive the Torah. On that day, Moshe ascended the mountain and initiated a six-day spiritual preparation period before receiving the Torah six days later. Just like in those days, so too at this time had they ascended the Mountain of G-d, Mount Moriah in Jerusalem. Now they were ready for a remarkable and unforgettable re-receiving of the Torah.

**A Night To Remember**

Many people say that this night was the most memorable of their entire lives, etched into their consciousness forever. It was the first Shavuot to take place at the Western Wall, the Kotel HaMa’aravi, under a Jewish government and with the protection of Jewish soldiers for the first time in almost two millennia. A mind boggling 200,000 Jews from all over Israel, almost 10% of the country’s Jewish population, made their way through the ancient alleyways of the Old City to gather together at the small but recently cleared plaza at the foot of the Wall. This was the first time since the year 70 C.E. that individual Jews no longer came as foreigners to someone else’s Jerusalem, but returned as rightful custodians to the heart of their national and spiritual home. These 200,000 people, emissaries and shlichim of Klal Yisrael, experienced a rendezvous with destiny at that Matan Torah with a sense of dignity and redemptive spirit that had not been experienced for generations.

After the original six days of creation, the verse concludes with an unusual phrase – “it was evening and it was morning, the sixth day” with the definite article emphasizing something unique about this day. Our Sages say that this alludes to the 6th of Sivan, the future date of Matan Torah, the day that would give the essential Divine purpose to the physical creation. So too, in our time, the return to Jerusalem and the close proximity to Shavuot gave the Six-Day War its ultimate spiritual meaning.

The Jewish people and the Torah world today are not only surviving but thriving, almost as never before. Israel has over nine million civilians with 6.7 million Jews, the largest amount of Jews ever to live in the Land of Israel. Jerusalem is Israel’s largest city with a population of 900,000 and is home to the largest concentration of shuls, yeshivot and Torah learning centers in the world. There is arguably more Torah learning in the Jewish world today than at any other time in history.

So much of this was precipitated by the Divine grace and favor the Almighty shone upon us during those modern Six Days of Creation. May we deeply appreciate and continue to be worthy of such monumental blessings.

**Yom Yerushalayim and Chag Shavuot Sameach!**

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1. Yechezkel 37.
3. Shemot Chapter 19:1: “In the third month (Sivan) after the children of Israel went out of the Land of Mitzrayim, on that day (Rosh Chodesh) they came to the wilderness of Sinai.”
4. Rashi on Shemot 19:2 quoting the Mechilta.
5. Perhaps with the exception of the time of the Bar Kochba rebellion from 132 to 135 C.E. when Roman control had been temporarily removed, although Jerusalem remained in ruins.

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**Rabbi Doron Perez** is Chief Executive of the Mizrahi World Movement
Rav Yosef, on Shavuot, would request that a choice calf was prepared [for feasting]. He would say “were it not for that day of causation, how many Yosef’s would there be in the marketplace?” (Pesachim 68b)

A n enigmatic segment of Gemara indeed. Rashi explains it to mean that Rav Yosef was expressing gratitude for the fact of the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. For were it not to be, he would have said “were it not for that day of causation, how many ‘Joes’ would there be in the marketplace.”

I was talking with my father in the early days of Covid-19 isolation and I mentioned how one of the many realisations that this time period brought to bear, was how the most important relationships are with our immediate family members. My father pondered this for a moment and added, “and how the most important relationship of all, is with oneself.”

With many a quiet Shabbat on my hands, I had much time to unpack the wisdom in my father’s words. For many people, time spent alone can be frightening. Viktor Frankl, the renowned Auschwitz survivor and father of Logotherapy, spoke of a condition that he labelled Sunday Neurosis. He defined it as “that kind of depression which affects people who become aware of the lack of content in their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest.”

Sigmund Freud deemed the ‘will to pleasure’ as the central driving force of humanity. Alfred Adler argued with his teacher and posited instead that it was the ‘will to power.’ Frankl, who pioneered the third Viennese school of psychotherapy, argued with his predecessors (both of whom happened to be Jewish) asserting that it was rather the ‘will to meaning’ that propelled human behaviour. While much ink has been spilled on these conflicting understandings of humanity, in Frankl’s identification of Sunday Neurosis he found the flaw in both the Freudian and Adlerian worldview. We may rise the ranks of social hierarchy and indulge our every whim, but there comes a Sunday in our lives – a point in time when we are forced to face ourselves, stripped of anyone to call us by our titles and separated from the things from which we derive pleasure – and this is a moment of truth. A moment in which our feeling of worthiness is contingent not on what we have, but on who we are.

One whose life is driven by power or pleasure will suffer through these Sundays, yearning for the workweek when the fleshpots re-open and the hierarchy is reinstated. By contrast, those whose lives are meaning-centric will relish these ‘Sundays’ – the precious moments in which one can bask in the existential wholesomeness that is the reward of a life saturated with purpose.

Shavuot, a day which is metaphorically associated with Sunday, occurring seven full weeks after מָחֳרַת הַשַּׁבָּת, is the day that makes the Sundays in our life replete with meaning. Rav Yosef recognised this truism in his statement – without Shavuot, without the Torah which provides our lives with endless meaning and purpose, we’d just be another Joe in the marketplace. We’d be without real purpose, chasing the dollar and whatever power and pleasure come with its purchase.

Shavuot is the day that forever enabled the flourishing of our relationship with the most important person we know, our own self.
Hashem has blessed me with the great privilege of being able to spend my days learning and davening at Yeshivat HaKotel, overlooking Har HaBayit. I am often asked about what this feels like. I would like to answer within the context of Yom Yerushalayim.

Having recently celebrated Yom HaAtzmaut, which commemorates the miraculous founding, survival, and thriving of the State of Israel, many wonder why we need a second holiday just three weeks later.

I believe there are two answers to this question. The first lies in a full appreciation of the 1967 salvation and the second in the full appreciation of the significance of Yerushalayim and the Kotel/Har HaBayit.

The 1967 Salvation

Military experts see the 1967 victory as possibly the most miraculous one in modern history. Through a combination of a number of amazing coincidences, Israel went from digging tens of thousands of graves in public parks to vanquishing those threatening to annihilate it in a matter of six days. It was a “veNahafoch hu” rivaled only by Purim.

Yerushalayim

In 1949, Israel’s Chief Rabbinate sanctioned saying Hallel on Yom HaAtzmaut without a bracha mainly because (the Old City of) Yerushalayim was not included in The State of Israel. Throughout our exile, Jews davened not just for a return to Israel, but LeShana HaBa’a BiYerushalayim. They yearned not just for our national home, but also for the core of our religious identity.

Jews maintained their identity in dozens of different cultural milieus because they saw Yerushalayim not just as part of an illustrious past, but as part of their immediate future.

When Natan Sharansky was convicted of treason against “Mother Russia,” he was asked by the court to sum up his defense arguments. Sharansky responded: “I have nothing to say to this court, but to the People of Israel and to my wife I say: Next year in Jerusalem.”

In contrast to say, the Parthenon in Greece, which was once an ancient temple and is now just a tourist site, Har HaBayit and the Kotel have always remained holy sites that we sought to rebuild. Though less holy than Har HaBayit, the Kotel was never usurped by any other religion and remains a pristine remnant of the past we envision in our future.

In 1967, when we returned to the Kotel and the Kotel returned to us, we knew Hashem was inviting us to a full reinstatement of our relationship with Him.

Thus the Chief Rabbinate sanctioned saying Hallel with a bracha.

What We Yearn For

On Yom Yerushalayim, we celebrate not only Yerushalayim, the Kotel’s return to us and our return to it, but also what it symbolizes about us as the Jewish people. When celebrating, let us make sure we reflect not only on what Hashem did for us, but also what we need to respond by strengthening our relationship with Him and meriting the continuation of this glorious Geula process.

On Yom Yerushalayim, we reflect on the full religious import of the State of Israel – the completion of our teshuva process that will fully repair our relationship with Hashem and culminate in the eventual rebuilding of the Beit Mikdash.

This is what learning and davening daily opposite the Kotel is all about.

You wake up every morning in full view of Hashem’s benevolence to us and the miracles He performed on our behalf.

You wake up every morning to the miraculous return of our people to our past.

You wake up every morning to the fruition of Jewish history.

On Yom Yerushalayim, we celebrate not only Yerushalayim, but the Kotel’s return to us and our return to it, but also what it symbolizes about us as the Jewish people. When celebrating, let us make sure we reflect not only on what Hashem did for us, but also what we need to respond by strengthening our relationship with Him and meriting the continuation of this glorious Geula process.

1 For a brief review of these miraculous coincidences, I highly recommend this Mizrachi video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i3uIz7hoSs&tl=4s.

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This year, Yom Yerushalayim 5780, is not the first year we’re celebrating the establishment of our holy city in the wake of plague, still socially distant one from the other and mourning the loss of hundreds who have died in Israel, and hundreds of thousands worldwide. Over 3,000 years ago, the very first “Yom Yerushalayim” was celebrated by David HaMelech as he purchased Har HaBayit from foreign hands under similar circumstances.1

David had enjoined of his nephew-general, Yoav, to conduct a national census, only to be reprimanded by the prophet Gad for such a pretentious initiative. Though immediately regretting and admitting his sin, David was given a choice of subsequent punishments: seven years of famine,2 three years of military unrest, or three days of plague. David chose the latter, recognizing that though famine and war may be overcome through human strategy, plagues/viruses are beyond man’s control (and it takes months to create a vaccine)! David appreciated that he was meant to demonstrate submission and vulnerability, cognizant of Hashem’s power and simultaneously, compassion.

The plague killed 70,000 people as the destructive angel approached Yerushalayim with the intention of causing more casualties. At that point, Hashem commanded the angel to wait by the threshing floor of Aravna the Jebusite, directly north of David’s palace in Ir David. When David saw the angel, he pleaded before Hashem on behalf of the people: “Lo, I have sinned, and I have done iniquitously; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray You, be against me, and against my father’s house” (Shmuel Bet 24:17).

Gad immediately commanded David to build an altar on Aravna’s threshing floor. David understood his act of sacrifice was necessary to end the plague, but it was insufficient. He insisted on purchasing the land and sacrificial supplies to demonstrate his commitment. His investment paid off as Hashem answered him through revelation,3 confirming “This is the house of Hashem, and this is the altar of burnt-offering for Israel” (ibid. 22:1).

Although this story explains the selection of the location for the Beit HaMikdash, it is written with numerous parallels to another story of sacrifice; one that took place at the very same location in the hills of Moriah – the story of Akeidat Yitzchak. In both stories:

1. Someone builds an altar and sacrifices a burnt-offering.
2. It is G-d who chooses the site of the altar: He sends Avraham to the land of Moriah, and David to Aravna’s threshing floor.
3. Avraham and David rise early in the morning.
4. An angel of G-d is involved in preventing the expected continuation. In Akeidat Yitzchak, it is the angel himself who stops Avraham: “And the angel of the Lord... ‘Avraham, Avraham... Lay not your hand...’” (Bereishit 22:11-12). For David HaMelech, it is G-d who stops the angel, using similar wording: “And when the angel stretched out his hand... ‘It is enough; now stay your hand’” (Shmuel II 22:16).

As we read David’s story of personal sacrifice to save the people of Israel, we are reminded of the paradigmatic sacrifice of Avraham – sacrificing his son for the G-d of Israel. In both stories, Hashem commanded the sacrifice in the same place – Har HaBayit, Yerushalayim. As Avraham Avinu proclaimed: “And Avraham called the name of that place ‘Hashem shall see,’” as it is said to this day: ‘In the mount where Hashem is seen’ (Bereishit 22:14).

Avraham recognized that Yerushalayim was Divinely selected as a place where Hashem awaits our sacrifices and submissions for eternity, our commitment to follow His word with humility. Avraham also recognized that if we are willing to come to Yerushalayim with a mindset of devotion to G-d and to Am Yisrael, we will merit Divine revelation there as well. David revisits Avraham’s story of sacrifice, underscoring the Divine message of Yerushalayim – if we properly express our religious and national devotion, we will merit revelation and salvation.

1 See Shmuel II, 24.
2 In Divrei HaYamim I 21:10-12, three years of famine.
3 Based on account in Divrei HaYamim I 21:26-30.

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Keviut of the Yom Tov of Shavuot

There are two *parshiot* in the Torah that mention *Sefirat HaOmer*, and there is a significant difference between them. In *Parshat Emor*, the Torah says, "You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Rest Day ... you shall count 50 days" (Vayikra 23:15-16). In *Parshat Re'eh*, we read, "Seven weeks you shall count for yourself" (Devarim 16:9).

Rav Soloveitchik noted an additional distinction between these two *parshiot*, aside from whether the unit of time to be counted is days or weeks. They also differ in terms of whether the *mitzvah* is directed to *Bnei Yisrael* in the singular or in the plural form. We can understand this in light of a Beraita cited in the Gemara (Menachot 65b), which appears more fully both in the *Sifra* (Emor) and in the *Sifrei Re'eh*: "Seven weeks you shall count for yourself" – in *Beit Din HaGadol*. And from where do we derive [the obligation of *sefirah*] on each individual? The Torah states, “You shall count for yourselves” – [the *sefirah* must be performed] by each and every individual.

The basis of this *drasha* is a rule quoted in the name of the Vilna Gaon (Divrei Eliyahu, p. 94). Whenever a *mitzvah* is repeated in the Torah, once in the singular and once in the plural, the singular form is addressed to *Klal Yisrael* as a whole, while the plural form devolves upon the individual. In the case of *Sefirat HaOmer*, the *Beit Din HaGadol*, which represents *Klal Yisrael* as a whole, fulfills the obligation upon the *single* unit of *Klal Yisrael* when it counts the seven weeks from Pesach until Shavuot.

The purpose of this *sefirah* is to be *kovea* (establish) the correct day of the Yom Tov of Shavuot. As such, it is part of the more general *mitzvah* of *keviat haLuach* (establishing the calendar), which is the responsibility of the *Sanhedrin*. A second aspect of the *mitzvah*, reflected in its being repeated in the plural form, is directed to each and every individual, who should engage in a count of days during this time.

Based on this analysis, the Rav explained why the Torah calls the Yom Tov by the name שבועות – the “Festival of Weeks” – and not כה שניים – the “Holiday of the 50th Day.” It is because the component of *sefirah* that is *kovea* the Yom Tov is not the counting of days by each individual, but rather the counting of *weeks*, which *Beit Din* performs as part of their mandate to take responsibility for *keviat haLuach*.

The *Rambam* (Hilchot Temidin U’Mussafin 7:24) includes the counting of days and weeks in the *mitzvah* d’oraita of *sefirah*, even nowadays. If, as we have seen, the *sefirah* of weeks is a *mitzvah* on the *Beit Din HaGadol*, how could that *sefirah* be *d’oraita* nowadays, when we lack the presence of a *Beit Din HaGadol*?

Rav Soloveitchik explained (Shiurim LeZecher Abba Mari z”l, pp. 129-131, 137-139; Kovetz Chiddushei Torah, pp. 52-56) that when the *Rambam* holds that *Kiddush haChodesh* requires the authorization of the *Sanhedrin* (Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh 153; Hilchot Kiddush HaChodesh 5:1-2), it is not in their capacity as the Supreme Court of the Jewish people, rendering the final legal decision on any halachic question. The Rav explained that *Kiddush haChodesh* does not necessarily involve a complicated *psak halacha*, requiring the greatest legal minds of the Jewish nation. The necessity of the involvement of the *Sanhedrin* here is due to its second role – its decision represents the majority opinion of the Jewish nation. In this sense, the *Sanhedrin* fills a role akin to that of the Congress in the United States.

The Rav elaborated by explaining that the responsibility of *keviat haLuach* ultimately rests upon the entity of *Klal Yisrael*. When there is a *Beit Din HaGadol*, it performs this task as the representative of *Klal Yisrael*. Accordingly, we understand that when the *Beit Din HaGadol* ceases to exist, the responsibility of *keviat haLuach* shifts back to *Klal Yisrael*. This is the basis of the *d’oraita* obligation, according to the *Rambam*, to count days and weeks. The counting of weeks by *Klal Yisrael* accomplishes the *keviat Yom Tov* of Shavuot even in the absence of a *Beit Din HaGadol*. [See Eretz HaTzvi, pp. 9-14, 231.]

Adapted from Rav Schachter on the Moadim.

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Cheri Tannenbaum
A Pidyon HaBen in Isolation

I was asked an interesting question about a one-month-old baby and his mother who were both infected with Corona and in isolation. The baby is a firstborn and therefore must be redeemed by a Kohen (Pidyon HaBen). According to the instructions of the authorities, a Kohen would not be allowed to come near their home – not even near their door. They asked me how they could do a Pidyon HaBen without a Kohen, with just the father, mother and baby present.

The Torah states that the Kohanim must be given "matnot kehuna" (presents of priesthood – one of which is the firstborn males, which then belong to the Kohen unless they are redeemed). It uses the language: "And he shall give the Kohen the foreleg..." (Devarim 18:3).

The Sifrei expounds (Devarim, Shoftim 165): "And he shall give the Kohen – to the Kohen himself."

Ostensibly, we might have understood this to mean that the Kohen himself must enjoy the gift. However, some Sages have understood this to mean that one cannot give these presents through a messenger, but that “he” must hand them to the Kohen. This is what the Rema rules (Yoreh Deah 305:10) in the name of the Rivash (131): “The father cannot redeem his son from the Kohen through a messenger.”

Despite the Rema’s ruling, it seems it is possible to perform a Pidyon HaBen through a messenger, using the father’s money:

1. Most of the Acharonim disagreed with the Rema in his interpretation of the Rivash. According to their opinion, the Rivash himself admitted that one can redeem via a messenger.

2. The wording of the beracha for the Pidyon is וְעַל פִּדְיוֹן הַבֵּן – “concerning redeeming the first born.” It is clear (according to the Rambam and the Ran), that for mitzvot upon which you recite the blessing the word לעל “concerning,” it is permissible to send a messenger to do the mitzvah for you.

3. When the money belongs to the father (and not to the messenger), many Acharonim are of the opinion that everyone – even the Rema – agrees it can be done through a messenger. This is because the messenger is not fulfilling the mitzvah of Pidyon HaBen for the father, but simply delivering the father’s money to the Kohen. Therefore, in the case where it is the father's money, the messenger can also say the corresponding statements and do the handing over.

4. When the messenger simply transfers the father’s money to the Kohen, but the father is the one who recites the text of the Pidyon, it is the father doing all of the actions of the Pidyon. This scenario is even better than the previous one.1

Another option is for the father to meet the Kohen elsewhere and redeem his son, without the baby being present. If however, the father cannot physically meet the Kohen – because he too is in isolation or otherwise – one can do the Pidyon via Zoom:

1. The ceremonial verbal conversation with the Kohen can certainly be done via Zoom. This is not an integral part of the Pidyon. It was instituted by the Geonim and is a verification that the baby needs to be redeemed.

2. Next, the father says the berachot (“Al Pidyon HaBen” and “Shehechiyanu”), and pays the Kohen the money. But how?

a. The father puts the special coins in an agreed-upon place, beforehand. The Kohen takes them before the Pidyon, having the intention that they are not his yet. The Kohen places them on his table and only after the father makes the blessing does he raise the money and acquire it.

b. A second possibility is that the Kohen sells his own special coins, or something worth that amount, to the father - via someone else. Then the Kohen is given the coins back, immediately after the berachot, enabling the father to use them for the Pidyon HaBen.

c. The third option is for another Jew, not from the father’s family, to bring the coins (or something worth that amount) to the Kohen, immediately after the berachot are recited.

3. After the Pidyon, the Kohen makes ברה פיר רוקס on a cup of wine, in his home, and those hearing him via Zoom should answer Amen. The custom of the Kohen making the beracha was either to give honor to the Kohen (Panim Meirot 2:99), or to publicize the event.

1. Rabbi Akiva Eiger on the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 305; Hafla’ah – Ketubot 74a; Avnei Miluim 38:5, etc.

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When the Torah describes Bnei Yisrael’s arrival at the place where they would receive the Torah, it mentions the word “desert” three times: “In the third month of Bnei Yisrael’s departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived at the desert of Sinai. They journeyed from Refidim, and they arrived at the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain.”

Why the seemingly superfluous emphasis? The desert is a place of emptiness and lack, an expanse uncontrolled by human hand. In such a place, a person feels his deficiency and his complete dependence on G-d. In the desert, it is clear that without G-d’s help he cannot survive. For 40 years, Bnei Yisrael traveled in the desert and experienced the clearest, most powerful way, utter dependence on G-d to provide all of their basic needs: water, food, and protection from dangers such as snakes and scorpions. This sense of dependence constitutes the basis for the connection between G-d and Am Yisrael, and the obligation to fulfill His commandments.

This sense of dependence could be a technical matter, i.e. when a person understands that G-d gives him his needs, he must commit to fulfilling His commandments. However, it seems there is much more to it than that. A person who lives in the desert lives with a different awareness than one who lives elsewhere. As our Sages expressed it: “And G-d spoke to Moshe in Midbar Sinait” – Anyone who does not make himself like an uninhabited (hefker) desert, cannot acquire wisdom and Torah. Thus the verse states that G-d spoke to Moshe BeMidbar Sinait.”

Our Sages explained the repetition of the word midbar by teaching us that we are not just talking about a physical location, but also an awareness and a consciousness. What is this “desert” consciousness? Our Sages defined it as hefker – ownerless, uninhabited and abandoned. One can also define it as a consciousness of lack.

Lack or deficiency (be it in the desert or in other situations) opens up a person to the understanding that nothing can be taken for granted; that even our most basic needs depend on the kindness of Heaven. This, in turn, builds the character trait of humility: the ability to recognize that which is lacking, the deficiencies and weaknesses, and the understanding and willingness to accept that someone else can fill that void. The one who fills that lack can be G-d or any other person who can give us whatever we are lacking.

Humility is the basis for all interpersonal communication and for all learning, but it is especially important for learning Torah and for connecting to G-d. G-d’s Kingship in this world can only exist when humans are not haughty, when they make space in their hearts and in their world for the presence of G-d. As Yeshayahu said: “And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and G-d alone shall be exalted on that day.”

Am Yisrael’s journey through the desert was the basis for accepting the Torah with feelings of humility and dependence on G-d. Since then, every year we celebrate Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah, and at the same time, we read the weekly Torah portion of Bemidbar. This parasha reminds us of the journey Am Yisrael went through in the desert – a voyage to the shores of humility, to a dependence on G-d and an inner connection with Him.

This year, we are once again accepting the Torah, albeit during difficult circumstances in which the whole world is dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic. During this time, the awareness of that which we lack – existentially, health wise, and financially – traverses nations and borders, encompassing the entire world. Let us find our humility once again and enhance our awareness of our dependence on the Almighty.
On the eve of Yom Yerushalayim, come take a fascinating journey with me of the poet Naomi Shemer’s celebrated song, "Jerusalem of Gold," and let’s explore the wealth of Jewish sources from which Shemer drew her inspiration.

Please keep in mind that this song was first released at the Yom HaAtzmaut celebrations that year, some three weeks before the Six-Day War, a time of great anxiety for the people living in Israel. Am Yisrael was genuinely fearful of Abdul Nasser who had closed the Straits of Tiran and threatened to wipe out Israel. With that, when you closely examine Shemer’s lyrics, one cannot but feel that this song was prophetically inspired, drawing from Biblical sources and envisioning Jerusalem’s reunification as promised by our prophets.

The mountain air is clear as wine
And the scent of pines
Is carried on the breeze of twilight
With the sound of bells
And in the slumber of tree and stone
Captured in her dream
The city that sits solitary
And in its midst is a wall

Jerusalem of gold
And of copper, and of light
Behold I am a violin
for all your songs

How the cisterns have dried
The market-place is empty
And no one frequents
the Temple Mount
In the Old City
And in the caves in the mountain
Winds are howling
And no one descends
to the Dead Sea
By way of Jericho.

Jerusalem of gold...
I was first exposed to this educational exercise when I participated in a father-son learning session at my youngest son’s school. We were instructed to look up these sources, and identify these hints within the song. It was a very exciting educational experience. I invite you to engage in the same exercise – you’ll find it exhilarating and renew your own connection with Jerusalem. To add depth to your educational experience, I suggest that you and your child/children look up the actual sources as they appear in the footnotes.

The song contains an endearing expression of love for Israel and for Jerusalem, with a burning desire to renew the connection of the nation and its history, to Jerusalem, its capital city.

The same message is brought home in a wonderful Chassidic tale, which tells of a chassid who made aliyah to Eretz Yisrael and made his home in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, he was unable to acclimatize to the difficult living conditions and decided to return to Poland. Before returning though, he went to seek a blessing from the tzaddik, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Vorka, who lived in Jerusalem.

The chassid explained to Rabbi Simcha Bunim his reasons for leaving the Land. The tzaddik sighed deeply and said, “I pity you. It seems you did not find favor in the eyes of Yerushalayim, for if you had found favor in her eyes, she would have found favor in yours.” The message found its mark, and the chassid changed his mind and remained in Yerushalayim.

Similarly, Rav Yehuda Halevi writes at the end of his epic work, HaKuzari:

The redemption for the city will come when they desire it with a full heart and yearn for it. When that complete yearning finally comes, the Land will want the people and the stones will ask for the people to settle within them, as it is written “You will arise and have compassion on Zion (Jerusalem), for it is time to show favor to her; the appointed time has come. For your people love every stone in her walls and cherish even the dust in her streets” (Psalms 102:13-14).

When speaking of those amazing six days 53 years ago, we sometimes get caught up in the stories of the brave soldiers. But if we ask those soldiers, they would tell us they cannot explain the military success and in retrospect, they see the war was already won before they even stepped onto the battlefield. The war was won in the hearts of the Jewish people, and the soldiers just sealed the deal.

By studying the song, the timing of its launch and its aftermath, we can really see how Yerushalayim's unification was a result of this reciprocal relationship of love.

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1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJws5yNc1-U
2 Tehillim 126:1.
3 Eicha 1:1.
4 Nedarim 50a.
5 Yeshayahu 60:17.
6 Yeshayahu 60:1.
7 Yechezkel 26:13.
8 A verse from Rabbi Yehuda Halevi's piyut "זִכְרָי עַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם".
9 Eicha 1:1.
10 Yirmiyahu 26:18.
11 Shir HaShirim 2:14.
12 Shabbat 88a, from יַעֲקֹב וּרְאוּ פַי.
13 Menachot 29b, fromประעה שלמה מושך.
14 Bereishit 32:11.
15 Bereishit 25:23.
16 Divrei HaYamim 1, 15:19-25.
17 Yeshayahu 6:6-7.
18 Tehillim 137:6.
19 Nechemia 4:14.
20 Yeshayahu 54:12.

Adapted from the original Hebrew article, published by Arutz-7 in celebration of the 50th celebration of Yom Yerushalayim.

Elie Lederman is co-founder of Haboydem social clothing shops in Jerusalem and chairman of Habayit Shel Benji, home and guidance center for lone combat soldiers, located in Ra’anana.
The initial verse of the book of Ruth draws our attention to the book’s negative setting. Its inaugural word, vayehi (an onomatopoeic word that sounds like a lament), tends to introduce a calamity. This phrase is immediately followed by a second vayehi, introducing a famine, which is also a dependable indicator of Divine displeasure and Israel’s disobedience.

The full phrase vayehi bimay (and it was in the days of) may further hint at the adverse setting of the book, drawing our attention to the absence of monarchy. This exact phrase appears four additional times in Tanach, always prefacing a negative time-period. However, in every other case, the phrase vayehi bimay precedes the introduction of a king. The replacement of a king with this vague judging of the judges highlights the absence of monarchic leadership, a key factor that foments chaos during this period.

Who are these judges and whom are they judging? Commenting on the double language, the Gemara (Bava Batra 15b) treats the noun as the object of the infinitive, suggesting that the judges are being judged by the people. This is both a comment on the rebelliousness of the people, who do not accept the judges’ authority, and a negative assessment of the judges, who deserve judgment. The Gemara characterizes the judges in the following anecdote: a judge reprimands a supplicant with an idiom intended to direct him to cease his sining, “Take out the splinter from between your teeth!” The litigant’s insolent response, “Take out the beam from between your eyes,” is a reference to more egregious sins committed by the judge himself. The society depicted by this interpretive reading is chaotic, lacking a viable judicial infrastructure. Not only do the people disrespect the judges, refusing to heed their instructions, but the judges themselves are not worthy of respect!

Ibn Ezra offers a similar reading, but with a twist. He posits that the double language indicates that G-d judged the judges at this time, and it was due to the poor conduct of the judges that G-d brought a famine upon the land. Ibn Ezra’s approach has a syntactical advantage, in that he explains the connection between the opening phrase, “And it was in the days of the judging of the judges,” and the next sentence, “And there was a famine in the land.” Moreover, he provides a theological justification for the famine, which is introduced in the narrative with no causal explanation.

Malbim addresses the vague description of the time-period. He maintains that during the period of the Book of Ruth, there is no central leadership. Instead, this is a period between the authoritative judges, when anyone who wished to rule seized control, and unauthorized judges proliferated throughout the land, doing as they pleased. As we know from the end of the Book of Judges, lack of central leadership generates chaos, the collapse of the religious and social order. Malbim thereby resolves the question of the vague description of the time-period and simultaneously depicts this era’s social turmoil.

This opening verse focuses our attention on the problem of leadership at the opening of the Book of Ruth. The backdrop of this book recalls the chaotic leadership of the end of the period of the judges, which lacks monarchy. The solution for this era appears at the end of the Book of Ruth, which concludes with the birth of David, the founder of a dynasty of Judean kings.

1 This essay has been adapted (with permission from the publisher) from Yael Ziegler, From Alienation to Monarchy (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015).
2 This word seems to comprise two expressions of moaning: vai and hee (commensurate with the better-known expression ‘oy vey’).
3 Megillah 10b; Ruth Rabbah, Petichta 7; Genesis Rabbah 42:3; Leviticus Rabbah 11:7; Esther Rabbah, Petichta 11.
4 See, e.g., Leviticus 26:18–20; Deuteronomy 11:16–17. The Targum on Ruth 1:1 notes explicitly that this famine is a punishment.
5 Genesis 14:1; Isaiah 7:1; Jeremiah 1:3; Esther 1:1. A Midrash displays its customary literary sensitivity by noting that all five of these verses have this opening in common (Ruth Rabbah, Petichta 7).
6 Note the refrain that bemoans the absence of monarchy in the final tumultuous chapters of the book of Judges (17:6, 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).
My soul is inextricably bonded with the soul of Yerushalayim. I was born immediately after the great victory in the Six-Day War and my parents started packing their cases, making their way to Eretz Yisrael, and calling their baby “Yemima,” in honor of the Yamim, the days, the six wondrous days in which Yerushalayim was liberated.

Since that day, I have two mothers: I run excitedly to my mother to tell of my joys and disappointments, to the Kotel I pour out my deepest thoughts and feelings... and I part with a kiss. From these two strong women, I received a blessing when I was dressed in my bridal gown and they were looking at me, fortified walls, bestowing unlimited power upon me. To them, I brought my babies for a blessing, and my grandchildren too – “boys and girls playing in her streets.”

For two months now I haven’t been able to visit them: Ima and the Kotel. I cannot kiss them. I’m showing them the children from afar, “from atop the peak of Mount Scopus,” seeing them on Zoom.

And it is only during these two months that I now understand that this towering woman, this liberated one, this Wall, is so desperate for love. Not only for health, for the food we leave her by the door, but for love! After all, it was she who gave love and strength to all of us, who encouraged us and prayed for us. Who thought she would be waiting for her beloved to return to her?

Like a queen whose king and sons and sons-in-law traveled to a foreign land. People came and told her, “Your sons are coming!” She said, “What do I care?” Let my daughters-in-law rejoice!” When her sons-in-law came, they told her: “Your sons-in-law are here!” She said, “What do I care? Let my daughters rejoice!” Then they told her, “The king, your husband, is coming!” To which she replied, “That is complete joy!”

So it will be when the Prophets will come and say to Yerushalayim: “Your sons are coming from afar!” (Yeshayahu 60) and she says to them, “What do I care?” “And your daughters will be raised at their side.” (Ibid.) “What do I care?” But when they told her, “Behold your King is coming to you, righteous and victorious” (Zechariah 9), she said, “That is complete joy!” And at the same time, she says, “... my soul will rejoice in my G-d!” (Shir HaShirim Rabbah, 1:2).

In this amazing Midrash, Yerushalayim is depicted as a very mature woman – with sons and daughters-in-law she has cared for – and all are sure that the thing that will cause her the greatest happiness is when they come back to her and tell her about everything that happened to them during their long absence. But this liberated woman gives them a great surprise. She explains to them that while they are sure the reunion with them is the peak of joy, for her, the joys of motherhood and grandmotherhood cannot in any way replace the champion who walked with her in her youth.

“I have adjured you, my daughters,” she will say to us, “if you see my beloved, what will you tell him?” That I am strong and happy and I have wonderful sons and daughters, sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and on my walls, they have appointed guards all day and all night so I should not fall sick, but I am sick. “I am love-sick,” until my husband returns to the palace.

Perhaps, when we cared so much for Ima, we were caring for ourselves, so that we would have a wall of protection around us... and did we forget Ima?

Only once do Chazal describe a chupa of someone whose partner had left her. Amram returns to his wife Yocheved and their children, Miriam and Aharon, dance around them at their chupa, playing stringed instruments (Shemot Rabbah).

And in these unusual times, Corona days, I find myself praying a different prayer for you, Yerushalayim... “If I forget you,” I promise you that when I see you flooded in true and complete joy, loved like you knew how to love us, I will be a bridesmaid for you... “Yerushalayim of gold and of copper and of light, I am a violin for all of your songs.”

Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi is a popular Israeli teacher, speaker and writer.
Shavuot and Matan Torah

When the Torah wishes to inform us of the ‘historical’ reason for a holiday, it certainly knows how to do so. Take for example the two other pilgrimage holidays – Chag HaMatzot and Sukkot: even though these holidays, as Shavuot, are first presented in Shemot 23:14-17 from their ‘agricultural’ perspective, in other instances, the Torah informs us of their historical perspectives as well.1

Therefore, it is simply baffling that the Torah, in each of the five instances2 when it discusses Shavuot, presents the holiday solely from its agricultural aspect, and never even once mentions any connection to the events of Matan Torah!

Should we conclude that it is only coincidental that Shavuot falls out on the same date as Matan Torah? Would that explain why Chumash makes no connection at all between that event and our grain harvest holiday in the Land of Israel?

To answer this question, we must first take issue with our original assumption that the Biblical date of Matan Torah indeed coincides with the holiday of Shavuot.

When the Torah wishes to inform us of the precise date of a certain event, it certainly knows how to do so.3 However, in regard to Matan Torah, the Torah is quite vague. Note how that story begins: “In the third month of Bnei Yisrael’s departure from Egypt, on this day, they came to Midbar Sinai.”4

Even if we assume Bnei Yisrael arrived on the first day of the month,5 the lack of a clear chronology in the subsequent events makes it impossible to determine precisely how many days transpire between their arrival at Har Sinai and Matan Torah.

Indeed, the Midrash6 calculates that the Torah must have been given on either the sixth or seventh day of Sivan, yet the Torah itself never explicitly mentions that date, even though it has ample opportunities to do so! Furthermore, we never find a specific mitzvah whose explicit purpose is to commemorate that date or event.7

To answer this question, we must consider a fundamental difference between the very nature of two monumental events in our history, i.e. the Exodus and Matan Torah.

One could suggest that the Torah’s deliberate obfuscation of the date of Matan Torah may suggest that we should not treat it as a historically bound event. Instead, the Torah wants one to feel as though the Torah has just been given each and every day. This concept is reflected by the famous Rashi on 19:1: “… it should have been written: ‘on that day.’ Why does the pasuk say: ‘on this day’? This comes to teach us that the words of the Torah should be considered new to you, as though they were given today!”8

In other words, we should not view Matan Torah as a one-time event. Rather, every generation must feel as though G-d’s words were spoken directly to them, no less than they were to the first generation. Hence, a celebration of its anniversary as a singular moment in our history might diminish from its eternal meta-historical dimension.

In contrast, the Exodus – the birth of our nation – was, and should remain, a one-time event in our history. As such, it becomes an event that must be constantly remembered, but not necessarily relived.

So why do we commemorate Matan Torah on Shavuot? In this regard, we find a beautiful balance between our oral and written traditions. Even though the Torah’s obfuscation of this event may reflect the inherent danger of its commemoration, our oral tradition could not possibly totally neglect its anniversary.

Therefore, unlike Passover eve, when we gather at the Seder to ‘retell’ the story of the Exodus, on the evening of Shavuot, we ‘relive’ that experience by engaging in Torah study, a most appropriate expression of our gratitude for G-d’s most precious gift.

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag is an internationally acclaimed Tanach scholar and online Jewish education pioneer

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1 See Shemot 12:17 and Vayikra 23:43.
4 Shemot 19:1.
5 See Rashi 19:1, ”b’ym hazaeh.”
6 Shabbat 86b.
7 In Devarim 4:9-11 we are instructed never to forget what happened on that day, but there is no commemorative action.
8 See Rashi Shemot 19:1.
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Michael Steinmetz

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There are moments that make Jerusalem feel like no other place on earth; when you feel yourself lifted beyond time and space and embraced, as it were, by zero’ot olam, the arms of eternity.

There is no other place in the world where this happens. I want to share with you three such moments that changed my life.

The first took place in 1969. I had come to study in Israel following the completion of my first degree, and was standing on the newly rebuilt Hebrew University campus on Mount Scopus. The sun began to set, bathing the whole landscape in a Divine radiance.

As I found myself looking down on the Temple Mount, I recalled the famous story at the end of Masechet Makkot, when Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues are looking down at the ruins of the Temple and see a fox walking through the place that was once the Holy of Holies. As the Rabbis wept, Rabbi Akiva smiled and laughed, and when asked how he could, Rabbi Akiva retold the two interlinked prophecies of Uriah – who foresaw the day when Jerusalem would be ruined – and Zecharia – who saw the day it would be rebuilt.

Said Rabbi Akiva, until he saw the first prophecy fulfilled, he knew the second would one day also come true. I remember standing at almost that exact spot and being overwhelmed with emotion.

For almost 2,000 years, Jews had waited for that moment, and ours was the generation that lived to see Jerusalem reunited and rebuilt. We saw the realization of Zecharia’s prophecy 24 centuries ago.

We had lived to see in person what our greatest prophets could only see in a vision.

And I was struck by a question.

If only Rabbi Akiva had known how long it would take, would he still have believed? Rabbi Akiva, a supporter of Bar Kochba, thought the rebellion would succeed and believed the Temple would be rebuilt in his lifetime. If Rabbi Akiva had seen the devastation, persecution and hatred that occurred as a result of the rebellion and after, would he have still believed? The answer is of course he would, because that is what Jews did all through the generations.

No people ever loved a city more. We saw Jerusalem destroyed twice, besieged 23 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, and yet in all those years, wherever Jews lived, they never ceased to pray for Jerusalem, face Jerusalem, speak the language of Jerusalem, remember it at every wedding, in every home they built, and at the high points of the Jewish year.

I ask myself, how could Jews believe so much in a city they had been exiled from for so long? The answer, of course, is very powerful and is contained in two words in the story of Ya’akov. Recall, the brothers return home and show Ya’akov the blood-stained coat of Yosef. Realizing Yosef has gone, Ya’akov weeps, and when the brothers move to comfort him we are told, Ya’akov “refused to be comforted.” Why? There are, after all, laws in Judaism about the limits of grief; there is no such thing as a bereavement for which grief is endless. The answer is that Ya’akov had not yet given up hope that Yosef was still alive. To refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope.

That is what Jews did with Jerusalem. They remembered the promise that Am Yisrael had made by the waters of Babylon, ע Auschwitz והשלמה תשמר ימי, “If I forget Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning.” We never forgot Jerusalem. We were never comforted. We never gave up hope that one day we would return and because of that Jews never felt separated from Jerusalem.

And when it happened, in 1967, my Jewish identity was transformed when the world heard, והatitis בקבריא, “The Temple Mount is in our hands.” Those three words changed a generation. That
was my first moment: that no love was ever as strong as between the Jews and Jerusalem.

The second happened on Jerusalem Day a few years ago. Standing on the streets of the city, I watched as youngsters from around the world, waving Israeli flags, sang and danced with a joy that was overwhelming. As I watched the celebrations, I was overcome with emotion because suddenly I had a vision of the 1.5 million children who were killed in the Shoah. Not because of anything they had done, but because of anything their parents had done, but because their grandparents happened to be Jews.

I remembered how 26 centuries ago, the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the Jewish people reduced to a valley of dry bones. G-d asked shall these bones live, and Ezekiel saw them come together, take on flesh, and begin to breathe and live again. G-d promised Ezekiel he would open his peoples’ graves and bring them back to the Land.

I remembered the first reference to Israel outside the Bible on the Merneptah Stele, a block of granite engraved by Merneptah IV, successor to Ramses II, thought by many to have been the Egyptian Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus.

It was an obituary, Israel is laid waste, her seed is no more.

I thought how some of the greatest empires the world has ever known – Egypt of the pharaohs, Assyria, Babylon, the Alexandrian Empire, the Roman Empire, the medieval empires of Christianity and Islam all the way to the Third Reich and the Soviet Union – were the superpowers of their day that bestrode the narrow world like a colossus, seemingly invulnerable in their time. And yet each tried to write the obituary of the Jewish people, and whilst they have been consigned to history, our people can still stand and sing Am Yisrael Chai. That was my second epiphany: the knowledge that what I was seeing on that day in Jerusalem was א---------, a collective people being bought back from death to life.

The third moment happened in early 1991. Having come to Israel prior to becoming Chief Rabbi, Elaine and I found ourselves in the middle of the First Gulf War. Towards the end of the war, one late Shabbat afternoon, we were staying in Yemin Moshe when we heard beautiful music coming from one of the houses a few doors away. We went to see what was happening and found a group of Romanian Jews – a choir – who had just made aliya that week. Soon it seemed as though all the residents of Yemin Moshe had been drawn to the sound, people who had come to Jerusalem from all four corners of the world: America, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Eastern Europe and Arab lands.

26 centuries ago, the prophet Jeremiah said that a time would come when we would not thank G-d for bringing us out of the land of Egypt, but rather for bringing our people together from all the lands of the earth. This second exodus, Jeremiah described, would be even more miraculous than the first. We lived to see this day, when Jews from 103 countries speaking 82 languages came to Israel to build not just their lives but the Jewish homeland. After generations, it was Jerusalem that brought Jews together from all over the world as one people, in one voice, singing one song.

Whenever Jews remember Jerusalem, something good comes of it. Whenever they forget Jerusalem, bad things happen.

So long as Jews remembered Jerusalem, we knew we were still on a journey, one in which the Jewish people has been on ever since the first syllables of recorded time: “Leave your land, your birthplace and your father’s house”). That is what every one of those people in Yemin Moshe that afternoon had done.

That was my third moment: never has a city had such power over a people's imagination.

Never did G-d love a people more and never were a people more loyal than our ancestors who endured 20 centuries of exile and persecution so that their children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren could come home to Jerusalem, ירושלים (the holy city), the home of the Jewish heart.

When we visit Jerusalem today and see a place of such beauty it takes your breath away. Jerusalem is the place where all the prayers of all the Jews across all the centuries and from all the continents meet and take flight on their way to Heaven. It is the place where you feel brushed by the wings of the Shechina, the Divine Presence.

We have had the privilege to be born in a generation that has seen Jerusalem reunited and rebuilt. We have seen the Jewish people come home.

Today, G-d is calling on us all to be Guardians of Zion. Never has this been more important. We must all stand up for the one home our people has ever known and the one city our people has loved more than any other. We are all שגרירים מאׅרדכי ישראל (ambassadors for the State of Israel) and we must all make Israel’s case in a world that sometimes fails to see the beauty we know is here. Let us all take on that task. With G-d’s help, we will succeed. And we pray that the world make its peace with Israel so that Israel and Israel’s G-d can bring peace to the world.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth
With Lag BaOmer behind us and Shavuot drawing near, it is traditional to think about the importance and impact of this shortest of the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar year. Here in Israel, we are blessed that Shavuot is not a forgotten holiday. The advertisements of the dairy companies for their holiday wares alone guarantee some sort of public awareness of this holy day. Unfortunately, in the Diaspora, with the exception of the devotedly observant community, Shavuot is a forgotten holiday.

As a lawyer in Chicago many years ago, I remember that I attempted to obtain a new date for a trial in which I was representing my client and the Jewish judge, a scion of a great Eastern European rabbinic family, asked me the reason for my request. I told him that the original trial date was to fall on Shavuot and as such, I would not be able to attend court that day. He sneered at me: “Counselor, there is no such Jewish holiday!” So great is the alienation and assimilation of much of Diaspora Jewry, that his ignorant opinion will find many echoes in secular Jewish society. Of all of the holidays, Shavuot has no distinguishing **mitzvot** or rituals attached to it and is so short that it lacks the “glamour” of the Pesach Seder or the **sukkah** or the **shofar**. Yet, it is Shavuot that is the backbone of all Jewish life and vitality.

According to Jewish tradition and the Talmud, Shavuot marks the anniversary date of the Revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah to the people of Israel. The Torah itself phrases it thus: “Today you have become a nation!” Jewish nationality is founded upon our shared experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai. This is the import of Saadia Gaon’s famous statement that “our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah.” Shavuot is the uniquely Jewish holiday. It does not represent the universal ideal of freedom as does Pesach, nor is it a harbinger of all human happiness, prosperity and bountiful harvest, all of which characterize Sukkot. It stands in splendid isolation as a uniquely Jewish event that attests to our role in society and civilization, as the people who accepted the Torah when others refused.

It is therefore difficult to be assimilated and celebrate Shavuot. Shavuot prevents assimilation by reminding us of the event baked deep into the DNA of the Jewish people – the Revelation at Sinai. Shavuot is therefore not just a commemoration of a historical date but rather a challenge of defining Jewish nationhood and how it relates to each and every one of us. Because of this challenging aspect of the holiday, it is easy (though painful) to understand why Shavuot just does not exist for so many Jews. It is much easier on one’s mind and conscience to simply ignore and then even deny its existence.

There are certain questions that have remained constant in Jewish life over the millennia. “Who is a Jew?” “Why be Jewish?” “Why marry Jewish?” and “Why all of the fuss, anger, hatred and jealousy in the world over the Jews?” are some of these basic ones. Ignoring Shavuot and what it represents allows for seemingly easy answers and evasions of these questions. But all of those answers have never yet been able to stand the test of time and circumstance. Forgetting Shavuot has always led to dire spiritual personal and national consequences. The great Rabbi Yosef celebrated Shavuot with great enthusiasm, saying, “If it were not for this day of Shavuot, I would not feel chosen and unique, for many Yosefs can be found in the market square.”

This is certainly true of the Jewish people generally. If it were not for Shavuot we would not be a special people, let alone “a light unto the nations of the world.” Shavuot becomes our reason for existence, the justification of our intense role in the development of a better and more civilized world. Shavuot, therefore, demands some sort of mental and spiritual preparation to be truly appreciated. Since we still have some time until its arrival, now would be a good time to start thinking about it and its personal relevance to one’s life and family.

**Rabbi Berel Wein** is Senior Rabbi of Beit Knesset HaNassi in Jerusalem and Director of the Destiny Foundation.
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IF I FORGET YOU, JERUSALEM
The HaMizrachi Jerusalem Quiz!

How well do you know Yerushalayim? Here are 28 questions in honor of our newest Chag, on the 28th of Iyar!

BY RABBI STEWART WEISS

1. The name Yerushalayim is a combination of which two words?
2. The Midrash says that Jerusalem has 70 names. Which names of Jerusalem are also the names of neighborhoods in the city?
3. Jerusalem is situated in the Biblical portion of which of the 12 Tribes?
4. What other tribe’s portion included the Beit HaMikdash? Why did they merit this distinction?
5. Who built the current walls around Jerusalem?
6. King David conquered the city from what ancient tribe?
7. Who built the First and Second Temples?
8. Approximately how many square kilometers is the Old City?
9. Who destroyed the First and Second Temples?
10. After the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews were allowed to enter Jerusalem on only one day of the year. What was that day?
11. In what year did Jews first come to Jerusalem?
12. In what year did the Moslems first come to Jerusalem?
13. After the Roman Empire collapsed, many other peoples controlled Jerusalem; how many can you name?
14. What were the first neighborhoods built outside the walls of the Old City?

15. Between 1948 and 1967, what was the crossing point between East and West Jerusalem?

16. When Jordan occupied East Jerusalem in 1950, how many countries recognized their authority?

17. Since the Six-Day War, eight new neighborhoods (the “Ring” neighborhoods) have been added to Jerusalem. What are they?

18. When was Jerusalem declared the capital of the modern State of Israel, and by whom?

19. Where was the original seat of government?

20. All branches of the government are in Jerusalem, except two. Which are they?

21. How long is the term of the Mayor of Jerusalem?

22. There have been 10 mayors in Jerusalem since the State was established. How many can you name?

23. What are the four quarters of the Old City of Jerusalem?

24. What are the names of the eight gates that lead into the Old City?

25. How many synagogues, churches and mosques are in Jerusalem?

26. How many times is “Jerusalem” mentioned in the Torah; in the New Testament; in the Koran?

27. Name two of the most-recited songs/prayers about Jerusalem?

28. How does the Menorah in the Beit HaMikdash – Israel’s national symbol – differ from the Chanukiah we use on Chanukah?

**ANSWERS**

1. (Hashem) “Yireh” – “G-d will be seen,” given by Avraham to the site after the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:14); and “Shalem” (Salem/Complete), the original name of the city of King Melchizedek (based on Genesis 14:18).
2. Talpiot, Ir David (City of David), Neve Tzedek (Oasis of Justice, Jeremiah 31:22) are neighborhoods and names of the city.
3. Yehuda.
4. Binyamin. He alone among the brothers did not participate in the abduction and sale of Yosef.
5. Saleiman the Magnificent, 1538.
6. The Jebusites.
7. Shlomo HaMelech built the first; Ezra and Nechemia the second.
8. Less than one square kilometer!
9. Babylonia destroyed the first Temple, Rome the second.
10. Tisha B’Av, the 9th day of Av (when both Temples were destroyed).
11. The 10th century BCE.
12. 638 CE.
13. Byzantines, Persians, Muslims, Turks, Crusaders, Tatars, Mamluks, Ottoman Empire, British Mandate.
14. Mishkenot Sha’ananim (1860); German Colony, Meah Shearim, Nachalat Shiva, Abu Tor, Yemin Moshe, Mamilla.
15. The Mandelbaum Gate.
16. Two, the United Kingdom and Pakistan.
19. Tel Aviv.
20. The Ministry of Defense, located in the “Kirya” of Tel Aviv, and the Ministry of Agriculture, in Rishon LeZion.
21. Five years.
24. Jaffa, Lion, Damascus (Shechem), New, Zion, Dung, Tanner’s and Flowers Gates. (The Eastern Gate is blocked).
25. Approximately 1300, 160 and 75, respectively.
26. 660, 146 and 0, respectively.
27. “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav,” Naomi Shemer wrote the original song for the Israeli Song Festival, held on May 15, 1967, the night after Israel’s 19th Independence Day. She chose the then-unknown Shuli Natan to sing the song. And “Im Eshkachech Yerushalayim,” from Psalm 137, said at every Jewish wedding (others say it at Brit/circumcision ceremonies as well) and is also a popular song.
28. The Menorah had 7 branches; the Chanukia has 8 branches (plus the Shamash/helper candle).
Our Sages point out the similarities between the Jewish people receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai and marriage.

We commemorate the Giving of the Torah on Shavuot. On Purim, the Jewish people accepted the Torah a second time. Why was it necessary for the Torah to be given a second time? One explanation is that the Jewish people's experience at Mount Sinai was so awe-inspiring that when they accepted the Torah, figuratively marrying G-d, they did so without having the free will to choose to accept the Torah.¹

The experience was so overwhelming one might say the marriage was forced upon them.² Who could possibly experience the miracles of leaving Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea as they did and not accept the Torah?

However, the events that led to the salvation of the Jewish people at the time of Purim were not dramatic in that sense. There was nothing overtly supernatural about them. At every step of the Purim story, it was possible to view the story as a natural progression of events. Each event followed as a logical consequence of what had happened before it. Thus on Purim, the Jewish people accepted the Torah with the understanding they were free to choose an alternative natural explanation of the events they had experienced. They had the freedom to reject their faith that G-d guides the world. In their state of freedom, they chose to accept G-d and his Torah.

This choice, taken freely, is a choice for eternity.

Something analogous often takes place in a marriage. When couples marry, they are often in a euphoria similar to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. They are overwhelmed by the powerful emotions they feel. They dream their vision of a shared future, the extraordinary promise of their life together.

Living together, they quickly learn their dreams are not identical. At times, this is more wonderful than what they dreamed of.

However, some couples find their attempts to build a fulfilling marriage bring them to difficulties and even to crisis.

Precisely at that time, a unique opportunity exists to rebuild their relationship on the basis of what they have learned. Both partners must change to become a successful spouse. They must readjust their dreams to their new reality and learn to express their aspirations within the realistic context of the marriage. Some couples find this very difficult to do but many succeed in rebuilding their marriage, recrafting it on the basis of the wisdom they have learned. They then experience their new relationship literally like a second marriage. Their ‘first’ marriage, before the crisis, was a product of their dreams.

Their ‘second’ marriage is a tribute to their work, their wisdom, and their successful efforts to build a marriage deeply satisfying to both of them.

1 Shabbat 88a.
2 Maharal, Netzach Yisrael, Chapter 11; see also Introduction to Ohr Chadash.

Adapted from To Build and to Bond, published by Mizrachi Press.

Rabbi Moshe Berliner is an author, M.S.W. and therapist specializing in family and marriage.
A few years ago, in an elevator of all places, I witnessed a remarkably effective “elevator pitch” for a Torah lifestyle.

It was Thursday evening and I was visiting a family member on the eighth floor of Maimonides Hospital in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn, New York. In the lobby, I boarded the elevator, which was filled with individuals comprising a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. One floor up, several people disembarked from the elevator, and two women walked in – an Oriental nurse and an Orthodox woman, a regular volunteer for the local Bikur Cholim. They walked in mid-conversation, with the nurse finishing a description of her plans for Saturday and Sunday. She then turned to the volunteer and asked her, “So, what are you doing this weekend?”

The frum woman responded with a 100-watt smile and said, “You know, the nicest thing about being Jewish is our Shabbat. For 25 hours, I get to turn off my cell phone and email. I just enjoy my husband and children, unwind from the week – and try my best to get closer to G-d.” The elevator bell rang for her floor and she exited with the nurse. As we rode up the next few floors, all of us still on the elevator heard her say to her friend, “You can’t imagine how much I look forward to Shabbat all week long.”

Silence reigned as we rode up the next few floors, but it was quite evident that her words had had a powerful impact on all those who heard it. In fact, as the only Orthodox Jew remaining in the elevator, I got a few meaningful glances from the other passengers who were obviously mulling over her words.

My friends, that was about as close to a perfect elevator pitch for a Torah lifestyle as I have ever seen or heard. Judging from the looks of my fellow elevator-riders, they were envious of the serenity in the woman’s voice as she described her Shabbat experience.

If I may take a page from the elevator pitch philosophy, my 30-second response to the question of how to effectively deal with the colossal challenges of the Internet and technology would be that we need to improve the quality of our home life. If our children had feelings for Shabbat similar to those of the woman in the elevator, fewer of them would be populating hangouts and abusing substances.

About 12 years ago, a frum woman living in Yerushalayim sent me a fascinating dissertation she had prepared for her post-graduate schooling. In it, she explored her theory that there was a direct correlation between how children enjoyed Shabbat in their homes and how connected they felt to G-d.

Analysis of the data collected in her study revealed a stunning correlation between the two components of her study. Those with positive Shabbat experiences were more spiritual and observed mitzvot more regularly. Most of them reported that they planned on sending their children to the types of schools they attended and wanted to parent their children the way they were raised. Conversely, the girls who reported stress at home were far more disconnected spiritually and more inclined to reject the values of their parents. And these patterns were consistent in girls attending v and modern Orthodox seminaries.

So while our attention may be focused on the external challenges we face in today’s environment, we may be better served turning inward and improving the quality of our home lives. In fact, I strongly feel that ... sorry, it’s the eighth floor. Gotta go.

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz, Founding Dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam of Monsey, is an educator, author and child safety advocate.
As Shavuot approaches and as a representative of the Torah in the world, I began pondering the mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, sanctifying the Divine Name, and the corresponding prohibition against Chilul Hashem, desecrating the Divine Name.

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

Desecration of G-d’s Name can range across a broad spectrum of contexts: from military defeat for the IDF and Israel’s exile amongst the nations, through a momentary lack of courtesy by a young girl in a skirt or a man in a kippah, to rabbis accused of harassment.

The possibilities for Kiddush Hashem, the sanctification of G-d’s name, are equally diverse, as the slogan at Ben-Gurion Airport – “Abroad We Are All Ambassadors” – reminds us; or as we see from time to time when Israeli rescue delegations rush to disaster-stricken areas.

Within the span between the cleanliness of a Talmid Chacham’s clothes, and the readiness to give our lives rather than commit a serious transgression, lies our own responsibility to be a living testimony to the fact His seal is truth and His Torah is a Torah of chesed (kindness), a Torah of life.

The sense that Kiddush Hashem and Chilul Hashem result from how the impact our actions have upon others may jar somewhat in terms of authenticity.

It is in vogue today to wish to live “our own truth” and not put on a façade. However, responsibility comes with the territory. To pretend that my actions carry no meaning beyond my small personal circle exhibits, at best, a great deal of naïveté.

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

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

Am Yisrael represents G-d’s Name in the world to non-Jews. This view is expressed many times in Tanach.

On our own internal, Jewish stage, G-d’s Name is represented by anyone identified with Torah, to one degree or another.

And once again, the State of Israel has placed us in the public eye, in an almost Biblical arena, but in a renewed light.

Now, after 2,000 years of exile, we Jews are faced with the ultimate test of Kiddush Hashem: can we remain strong, standing firm among the nations, adopting a non-apologetic stance to defending ourselves, while at the same time striving for a just and good society, one that sanctifies G-d’s name both internally and to the world? A society that makes us proud, and inspires us as Torah Jews?

Rabbanit Rachelle Fraenkel teaches Torah at midrashot in Israel
Why should I believe that the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Sinai?

Your children are thinking about this question. I regularly asked my students to write their questions about Judaism and nearly all asked this. We cannot be afraid to engage them in discussion about this critical question and Shavuot is the perfect time to do so.

And then, of course, the war began. My Rabbi, Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, zt”l, asked the question this way: “Can a reasonable person believe that G-d gave the Torah at Sinai?” He answered that there have been hundreds of religions in world history that claim to have had a Divine revelation and that the only religion with a reasonable story even worth considering as truth is Judaism.

Every religion other than Judaism relates that a god appeared to one individual. That person then related the story to others. Judaism is the only religion that claims that G-d revealed Himself to the entire nation: “Behold I will come to you [Moshe] in the thick of the cloud so that the nation will hear when I speak to you, and in you, they will trust forever” (Exodus 19:9).

This uniqueness makes the Jewish story one that a reasonable person can consider embracing. Why would any thinking person accept someone else’s claim that G-d appeared to him alone? In fact, this is why many faiths resorted to violence to spread their doctrines. People just didn’t believe it!

But a story like ours, in which G-d appeared to all the people, must be taken seriously, because if a story like this can be made up, why didn’t anyone else in the history of the world create a similar one? If you were creating your own religion, wouldn’t it be advantageous – and more realistic and believable – to claim the Divine Power appeared to more than one person?

So why is Judaism the only religion to even attempt to make the claim that the Divine Power spoke to more than one person? Is it reasonable to suggest that the Jews were the only ones clever enough to recognize the benefits of such a claim? The only reasonable conclusion is that it is impossible to make such a claim unless it is true. If one attempts to falsely claim a revelation occurred in front of many people, it can easily be disproved or contradicted.

Judaism not only claims that G-d spoke to more than one person, but that He spoke to a few million people! All it would have taken was one of those millions of “eyewitnesses” to come forward with the truth or to relate different details about the supposed revelation, and the foundation of the religion would collapse. This is one strong reason to accept and celebrate the story of the Divine Revelation at Sinai.

There are many other differences between Judaism and all other religions. For example, most religious texts include prophecies. However, all of these predictions relate to events which could likely occur through the natural and normal course of history. Despite this, none of those prophecies have come true.

The Torah outlines a seemingly ridiculous prophecy – which has come true in our time! It relates that the Jews will forsake G-d and will be dispersed to the four corners of the Earth where they will experience terrible persecution. While they are gone from Israel, nothing will grow in the Land. But then they will return to their Land from all around the world and they will regrow and rebuild it. It’s an absurd prophecy. A small and powerless nation will be dispersed throughout the world without a common spoken language, land or culture, and will survive and return to its homeland thousands of years later? Yet, we have seen this “ridiculous” prophecy come true.

We sinned, were dispersed, were persecuted terribly, the Land remained desolate, and we have now returned to Israel from all four corners of the Earth and have built it into a flourishing, fully modernized and technologically advanced country.

Is it conceivable that a human being wrote this thousands of years ago and happened to get it right? This should strengthen our belief in the Divine origin of the Torah and the Revelation at Sinai.

These two points provide a strong and reasonable basis for us to accept and embrace the story of G-d giving the Jewish people the Torah at Sinai and so Shavuot is the perfect time to discuss them with our children.

Rabbi Dov Lipman is a former MK and the author of seven books about Judaism and Israel
Three Reasons to Rejoice on Yom Yerushalayim

First of all, we are not just celebrating the liberation of Yerushalayim. We are also celebrating Tel Aviv and Netanya. Anyone who was here during the period before the Six-Day War can verify that. The entire existence of the young State of Israel was in danger in 1967. Our 19-year-old State survived, grew several times, and returned to its biblical lands.

Second, because the dream has been fulfilled. Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate, once said that Yerushalayim connects us to one another in a way that is difficult to explain. When a Jew visits Yerushalayim for the first time, he says, “This is not the first time.” He has returned home. A friend of mine, an immigrant from Ethiopia, told me years ago how every time she and her brothers saw a stork flying in the sky during their childhood in Addis Ababa, they used to shout: “Stork, stork, how is Yerushalayim?” Natan Sharansky once told how when he and his friends were accused of betraying “Mother Russia,” they were asked by the court to summarize their arguments. Sharansky responded, “I have nothing to say to this court, but to the people of Israel and my wife I say: next year in Yerushalayim.” We are living a 2,000-year-old prophecy that is coming true day by day.

And third, and most importantly, we are happy today because of the enormity of our contemporary challenge. We won the lottery, and now, what do we do with the winnings? Our mission is to turn all this energy, all the weeks and longings and prayers of thousands of years, into tachles – purpose. That the Yerushalayim of Heaven and Yerushalayim of Earth will combine. That this place will indeed exemplify an alternative culture for the whole world.

We are on our way. After the paratroopers entered the Old City in 1967, Chana Zemer, Editor of the secular, left-leaning newspaper “Davar,” wrote: “Redeemer. For 2,000 years, 80 generations, Jews turned to the East – Shacharit, Mincha and Arvit. For thousands of years, the national memory a Jew is born with, the same way he is born with his organs, has not blurred. All the verses are now being resurrected before our eyes.”

We must never forget that our great-great-grandparents did not imagine they would have to pay property taxes in Yerushalayim, sit in traffic there and quarrel and argue about the character of the city. We won.

Whose Land?

We are used to hearing about “our right to the Land.” In politicians’ speeches on Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, we hear repeatedly that Israel is our country. On the other hand, Parashat Behar says, “But the Land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the Land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.” This phrase, “strangers resident” sounds familiar. Avraham Avinu also presents himself as “a resident stranger among you.” And many years later, when we already had sovereignty, King David convenes the people for prayer in Jerusalem, saying, “For we are sojourners with You, mere transients like our fathers.”

Why not just say we own this Land? Why continue to always feel a little strange about it? Why didn’t Avraham Avinu and King David speak as confidently as the politicians do nowadays?

Many commentators explain that the Land will be ours... if we deserve it. Depending on our behavior. Like a safe with a code, the Land of Israel has an entry code. There is certain conduct it requires from us. Certainly, it is our place in the world, and there is no doubt we need to fight those who try to erase that affinity. But it must be with a sense of humility – of “I wish we would be worthy,” rather than a powerful sense of “We deserve it.” Or as Rav Chanan Porat used to say, “We shouldn’t talk about our right to the Land. We should talk about our duty to the Land.”
A Thought for Shavuot

Why is the Torah a gift? Rabbi Shimshon Pinkus explains: "If a man looks like he’s wearing a good watch, we’ll ask where he bought it. But if a poor man has a $5 million diamond in his hands, we won’t ask ‘Where did you buy it?’, but rather, ‘Who gave it to you?’ because he couldn’t have bought it himself.

The Holy Torah is a gift. As much as we learn and do good deeds, its gift to us is always free. One thing is required of us: the desire to have it. To want the gift! Our job on Shavuot is to want the Torah, to think about it. A person will only give his friend a precious diamond if he knows he will keep it and appreciate it. He will not give the diamond if the recipient is just going to play with it in the sand.

Each and every year, when it comes to Shavuot, it is as though G-d is traveling the world, asking each of us: Do you want to receive the Torah? Do you? And we answer: ‘Yes, we will do and we will hear.’ Although we are limited, we will be affected by the Torah on Shavuot... if we really want to be.”

Passing It On

On a recent flight from the United States to Israel, I suddenly paid attention to the routine security question: “Has anyone given you anything to pass on to someone else?”

I said no, but the truth is that someone did give me something to pass on. During our visit, we were privileged to meet Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky, 95, Head of the Philadelphia Yeshiva, one of America’s most prominent spiritual leaders. At the end of the fascinating conversation with him and his wife, Rabbanit Tammy, we asked what the Rabbi’s message was to the public in Israel. Rabbi Kamenetzky immediately replied: “Now? My message to the public, not only in Israel, is that we have left Egypt, we have discarded slavery for freedom, and Matan Torah is fast approaching. One has to ask oneself if he remembers Shavuot is nearing, whether he recalls receiving the Torah, and how is he preparing for the Torah and moving toward that goal.”

There. I’ve passed it on. Now it’s your turn.

Your Torah

Everyone reading these words has their own fingerprints. Different, unique, singular. No one has the same fingerprints as anyone else. Just as – Rav Kook explains – our connection to the Torah is singular and unique, creating a light that only we can create. On Shavuot, when we receive the Torah again, we may think that our part of the story is not so critical. After all, there are about 14 million Jews in the world, and some of them are really smart and righteous, so why are we so important?

Rav Kook addresses that very question: “The renewed light of the Torah’s connection to this soul is not like the light born of its connection to another soul. And if it does, it increases the Torah correctly in its study.” That is, every soul that studies Torah magnifies the light in the world, and only that soul – your soul – can create its special light.

You can’t copy homework and it’s not enough to let others learn.

You have to find your own special light that only you can shine upon the world.
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The Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments, are read publicly three times a year: twice in the weekly Torah reading (in the portions of Yitro and VaEtchanan), and once again on the first day of Shavuot. While volumes have been written about them, HaMizrachi would like to offer you some refreshing thoughts and ideas related to each of the 10.
The first Commandment, it would seem, is hardly a commandment at all! Unlike all the other commandments – which contain either a Do or a Don’t – Anochi Hashem Elokecha is a blunt statement of fact: I, Hashem, am your G-d.

An essential truth is being presented here, even before the enumeration of the Do’s and Don’ts: All the mitzvot which follow – not just the other nine in this list, but every one of the 613 mitzvot, emanate from a Supreme and Divine source, G-d, who has the power to both dictate and enforce them. Without this ‘preamble,’ we might mistakenly consider these rules as the “10 Suggestions,” rather than immutable, eternal, mandatory foundation-stones of our belief system.

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It is, leHavdil, akin to the policeman who first shows his badge and establishes his credentials prior to stating or administering the law.

This truth is reinforced and amplified by the adjoining statement that G-d took us out of Egypt, indicating that G-d accompanies us throughout history, and intervenes if and when the occasion is called for. Had He stated it was He who created the universe, we might have mistakenly thought that nature and history were set into motion at the beginning of time and left on their own to play out, in a sense leaving humanity to its own devices. Instead, we are assured that human events are inextricably interwoven with the Divine will, vigilant and transcendent, activated at the Almighty’s discretion.

All this is embodied within the name Anochi, and illustrated with a dramatic Midrash.

When Kayin kills Hevel, he is confronted by G-d and castigated for his crime. Hevel, however, plea-bargains. “HaShomer achi Anochi,” he says. Though usually understood as a question, it can also be interpreted as a statement. “The guardian of my brother – and indeed, of all life – is Anochi!” argued Kayin. “If Hevel is dead, then clearly You, Anochi, the arbiter of all Creation, wanted it to be that way!”

Of course, though G-d-Anochi does indeed have sway over life and death, He also grants freedom of choice to humanity, a freedom which Kayin abused, and ultimately must atone for.

But why the somewhat unusual term, Anochi? Would not Ani have served the same purpose? What does this particular name imply?

Numerous commentators have addressed this question. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says that Anochi connotes love; i.e. all of the dibrot are for the benefit of Am Yisrael and demonstrate G-d’s unending affection for His people. Rav Nechemia, however, states that Anochi is a statement of power and authority, as in Isaiah 45:12: “I, Anochi, made the Earth and placed Mankind upon it, My hands spread out the Heavens and brought the planets into existence.” Others see Anochi in terms of fear and trepidation, citing the story of the bechora, the birthright, wherein Ya’akov – disguised as Eisav and fearful of being found out – says, “Anochi Eisav bechora,” whereas Eisav merely states, “Ani Eisav.” Lekach Tov connects Anochi to G-d’s ability to forgive us when we err and comfort us when we suffer, as well as assuring us of Divine assistance, as in Bereishit 46:4: “Anochi will descend with you to Egypt and Anochi will bring you back up.” Lekach Tov sums up all this when he quotes Jeremiah 29:23: “I, Anochi, am the One who knows, and I bear witness.”

In short, G-d is watching.

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1 “Anochi, Anochi hu menachemchem,” Isaiah 51:12.

Rabbis Stewart Weiss is director of the Jewish Outreach Center of Ra’anana and the father of Staff Sgt. Ari Weiss z”l, who fell in a fire-fight with Hamas terrorists in 2002.
Connecting Heaven and Earth

“Y

ou shall have no other gods before Me, you shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the Earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them, nor serve them…”

As we know, the very first dibur of the Aseret HaDibrot declares that “I am the L-rd your G-d.” Having established that, it seems superfluous to elaborate. If we truly believe in G-d, why would we contemplate other gods?

Towards the end of Sefer Yehoshua, the retiring leader seems to be giving the nation a choice. Extraordinarily, Yehoshua appears to be offering them a ‘way out’ of their covenant with G-d:

“And now fear the L-rd, and serve Him in sincerity and in truth; and remove the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt, and serve the L-rd. And if it displeases you to serve the L-rd, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods that your fathers served on the other side of the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell, but as for me and my household, we shall serve the L-rd.”

(Yehoshua 24:14-15)

Yehoshua himself clearly states what he intends to do, but the people must apparently decide for themselves.

Yehoshua’s words are particularly challenging in light of verses to the contrary: “Neither with you only do I make this covenant and this oath; but with him that stands here with us this day before the L-rd our G-d, and also with him that is not here with us this day” (Devarim 29:13-14).

“But what enters your mind shall not come about, what you say, ‘Let us be like the nations, like the families of the lands, to serve wood and stone.’ As I live, says the L-rd G-d, surely with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with poured out fury, will I reign over you And I shall take you out of the peoples, and I shall gather you from the lands in which you were scattered, with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm and with poured out fury” (Yechezkel 20:32-34).

Both the above are unequivocal in stressing the eternal covenant between Am Yisrael and the Almighty. So how are we to understand the words of Yehoshua to the masses?

Both Malbim and Alshich suggest that indeed Yehoshua was not offering the nation a ‘way out.’ Our covenant with the Almighty is unquestionably eternal.

What disturbed Yehoshua was the popular notion that one can live in two worlds simultaneously. He pleads for truth and sincerity while implying that the people at the time, despite publicly declaring allegiance to G-d, still worshipped idols privately.

In his final words to the nation, Yehoshua is emphasizing the need for “Real Judaism.” This does not mean detaching kodesh from chol, it actually requires bringing kodesh into chol. We need to be part of this world, but we need to do so through the ways of the Torah. In an ideal scenario there is no kodesh and chol; one who is driven by their belief in G-d will perform everything in a Jewish way, mitzvot and mundane matters alike.

With this in mind, let us return to our initial question. The first Commandment declares that the L-rd G-d brought us out of Egypt. The second Commandment is there to elaborate – to explain how we must transform that belief into reality through true commitment. There can be no other gods, for nothing can take precedence over our religious beliefs. If we are to live our Judaism to the full, we will need to internalize that we cannot live in two worlds simultaneously.

This message is underlined somewhat by the words that follow, beautifully explained by my rabbi and mentor, Rabbi Yitzchak Bernstein z”l:

“אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל – in Heaven above – in matters of Heaven, aspire, dream, never be content.

אֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתַָּחַת – in the Earth beneath, in matters of this world, be content with what you have, do what you need to do, in order to to reach the Heaven above.

This is our mandate to live Jewish life to the full.
The Severity of Vain and False Oaths

The prominence of many of the *dibrot* in our tradition, such as Shabbat and honoring parents, means that others receive less attention, for example the third one: “You shall not take the name of the L-rd your G-d in vain; for the L-rd will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.”¹ The Torah’s terminology here suggests we should take this commandment quite seriously. The unusual phrase “ki lo yenakeh Hashem” attributes a particular severity to the sin of vain oaths. The Torah also relates to false oaths as a significant transgression, referring to them as a chillul Hashem.

“And you shall not swear by My name falsely so that you profane the name of your G-d: I am the L-rd.”²

Our prophetic books further reveal the severity of oaths. The people of Yavesh Gilead are killed due to their ignoring a communal oath to fight against the tribe of Binyamin.³ Shaul wanted to kill his son Yehonatan for violating an oath not to eat until the battle with the Pelish-tim was finished.⁴ Shaul’s descendants are put to death because the house of Shaul violated an old oath from the time of Yehoshua not to harm the Gibeonites.⁵

Talmudic tradition adds further evidence.⁶ A sinner does not receive lashes for verbal crimes (*lav she’ain bo ma’aseh*) with a few solitary exceptions, one of them being vain or false oaths. Another Gemara⁷ states that it is particularly difficult to achieve atonement for violation of this Commandment. What makes these sins so problematic?

On a most basic level, oaths involve the name of G-d and someone who takes a vain or false oath demeans the reverence required towards the Master of the Universe. Two of our classic Biblical commentators add more layers to this iniquity. Chizkuni⁸ points out that whereas a thief can easily compensate for his crime by returning the stolen item, a person who makes a vain oath cannot pay back the victim. Although his point is true, it would seem that many sins resemble vain oaths in this regard and it remains unclear why this transgression receives such harsh treatment.

Secondly, Ibn Ezra notes the foolishness of this crime. The adulterer and the thief procure pleasure in their sins while the murderer and the bearer of false witness avenge themselves upon their enemies. What enjoyment is achieved by making vain or false oaths? No overwhelming temptation leads individuals to such sins but rather a simple lack of care and concern regarding the substance of their speech.

I imagine that acts of murder or adultery, two death penalty crimes, are more grievous than violations of *lo tisa*. At the same time, certain aspects of vain and false oaths make them particularly problematic. They cannot easily be undone, they quickly turn into constant failings, and they do not emerge out of strong temptations.

May attention to this *dibra* help us grow more sensitive to the content and mode of our speech.

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¹ Shemot 20:7.
² Vayikra 19:12.
³ Shoftim 21.
⁴ Shmuel Alef 14.
⁵ Shmuel Bet 21.
⁶ Shavuot 21a.
⁷ Commentary on Shemot 20:7.
⁸ Commentary on Shemot 20:7.

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau is a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Orayta
Transcending Physical Restriction

By observing the Shabbat as a day of rest, the Jew testifies to G-d’s creation of the world. The Talmud attests to the great reward that will come to those who observe the Shabbat:1

Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi, ‘Anyone who delights in the Shabbat is given a portion with no boundaries as it says, “then you will delight in G-d, and I will mount you astride the heights of the world.”’2… Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba said that Rabbi Yochanan said, ‘Anyone who observes Shabbat in accordance with its laws will be forgiven for his sins even if he worshipped idols like the generation of Enosh as it says, ‘Praiseworthy is the man who does this and the person who grasps it tightly, who guards the Shabbat against desecrating it.’3 Don’t read machalelo, ‘desecrating,’ but rather machul-lo, ‘he is forgiven.’”

This passage raises several questions. Why does the Talmud specifically mention the generation of Enosh? Why is delighting in the Shabbat so important? Why is the reward of a “portion with no boundaries” promised for observing the Shabbat?

The people of Enosh’s generation worshipped idols because they believed that G-d had created the world and then left it in the care of other gods and supernatural forces. However, they still kept Shabbat as a commemoration of G-d’s creation of the world in six days and His resting on the seventh. According to the Zohar, they believed that an angel called Shabbtai had been granted dominion over the world. The name Shabbtai is closely linked to the word Shabbat. However, its letters can be rearranged so that it becomes either “Ei Shabbat” or “Oy Shabbat,” meaning either “Shabbat should not exist” or “woe for the Shabbat.” The generation of Enosh believed that Shabbat, as controlled by the angel Shabbtai, involved pain and sorrow; Shabbat observance had nothing to do with joy and rapture.

In response, the Rabbis instructed Bnei Yisrael to delight in the Shabbat, and be happy in the observance of this holy day. By doing so, the Jews would show their appreciation of G-d, who created the world and continues to govern it, and thwart the beliefs of those who maintained that Shabbtai or any other god or power rules the world and determines the nature of the Shabbat. The Talmud also affirms that keeping the Shabbat is tantamount to observing the whole Torah. So even if one worshipped idols like the generation of Enosh, by keeping the Shabbat “in accordance with its laws,” he can demonstrate his rejection of that doctrine and be forgiven.

Why are Bnei Yisrael awarded “a portion with no boundaries” for Shabbat observance? The promise of such reward is great, but it is also vague. Rabbi Yehonatan Eybeshitz, the great leader of the German communities in Wandsbek Altona and Hamburg in the 18th century, explains that had G-d revealed the specific reward for Shabbat observance, the nations might have suspected Bnei Yisrael of observing the Shabbat in order to gain the reward. For this reason, the Talmud declares that the Torah did not reveal the exact reward for Shabbat observance to the nations of the world.

This reward for observing Shabbat with happiness and receiving “a portion with no boundaries” correlates to Eretz Yisrael, a Land that is also described as “the portion with no boundaries.” The Land of Israel has been called “the land of the deer (skin)” because despite its small size, it miraculously expands like a deer-skin, which is elastic, and can hold as many Jews as necessary. Also, the Torah was given to Bnei Yisrael at Mount Sinai on a Shabbat, and after Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah and agreed to observe Shabbat, they were privileged to receive Eretz Yisrael as well.

While it is difficult to make sense of the strange circumstances we have all dealt with over the last few months, we should never lose sight of the fact that we are privileged to be a nation who has been graced with the three Divine gifts of Shabbat, Torah and Eretz Yisrael, all of which allow us to transcend to spiritual heights and enjoy a “portion with no boundaries” even while being physically constricted in isolation.

1 Shabbat 118a, b.
2 Yeshayahu 58:14.
3 Ibid 56:2.
4 Daniel 11:41.
5 Gittin 57a.
6 Shabbat 86b.

Adapted from Rabbi Hammer’s book Derash Yehonatan.

Rabbi Shalom Hammer serves as a senior lecturer for the IDF’s Jewish Identity Branch, and is the founder of Makom Meshutaf.
Midway through the Aseret HaDibrot, we are commanded to honor our father and mother. The traditional breakdown of the Ten Commandments is five and five – the first five define our relationship with G-d, and the second set of five gives boundaries for our relationship with our fellow man. Kibud Horim would fit well in the second five but strangely is found among the first.

In Masechet Kiddushin, the Rabbis explain there are three partners in the creation of every child – father, mother, and G-d. When one honors their parents, G-d considers it as if He too is honored. Similarly, when a child says Kaddish for a deceased parent, bestowing posthumous filial honor, one does not mention the loss at all. Instead, by publicly praising G-d, the child affirms the teachings and legacy of the parent.

The Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people at the moment of our birth as a nation. Our continued existence is dependent on the unbroken transmission of that moment – in other words, mesorah. Chasdei Crescas (Spanish Philosopher, 14th century) explains that this mitzvah’s importance is linked to the fact that parental authority is the primary basis for mesorah. The successful transmission is dependent on each child’s respect for the human links of the chain of tradition.

The first two decades of the 21st-century have been a time of rapid and intense advancement. Leaders are characterized by their ability to be ‘forward thinkers’ and to embrace innovation. Recently, the global quarantine due to the Covid-19 pandemic has forced certain types of progress and innovation to come to a halt as unemployment rates soar and businesses shut. Those who several months ago looked to their future with great excitement are now putting plans on hold and have more questions than answers. In Judaism, when we seek answers to these looming questions, we look to the Torah and we look to mesorah, specifically, our parents and grandparents. We look backward in order to move forward. Though chidush or thoughtful innovation is a hallmark of Torah life, it is always with an eye, and more than just a nod to tradition.

For many, this time at home has brought an opportunity for deep introspection. Social media posts, blogs and even YouTube videos encourage people who are stuck at home to ‘take stock of what’s really important.’ Gratitude is suddenly trending, and people are realizing how much they have to be grateful for. The Sefer HaChinuch explains that the reason we must honor our parents is the tremendous debt of gratitude we owe them. Typically, we fulfill this commandment through physical acts. We rise when our parents enter the room, we run to pour them a glass of water. With social distancing, these aspects of Kibud Av VaEm are unlikely. However, phones and video conferencing allow us to continue to show gratitude and respect by frequently calling and being present, even if not physically close. As an added benefit, showing gratitude to others is a proven way to increase happiness, feelings of connection and even fostering optimism, all of which are important during this uneasy time.

However, for some, the crisis has presented a tremendous challenge in the fulfillment of kibud horim. The time-honored tradition of reciting mourner’s kaddish with a minyan has been shuttered along with our synagogues. It is a painful proposition for children in the year of mourning to consider a lapse of months without saying kaddish. Additionally, many are missing yahrzeit for their parents. Mourners have looked to poskim and communal leaders for innovative solutions. Though a minyan requires 10 men to be physically together, recent Rabbinic rulings allow for the recitation of kaddish in a virtual minyan. Many have ruled against it, but have offered alternative solutions for those who want to honor their parents with the recitation of kaddish.

In Judaism, innovation and tradition are not mutually exclusive. Perhaps the reason why Kibud Horim was included in the first five dibrot was to drive this point home. Respect for our parents (and grandparents) ensures that our advancement will always be rooted in tradition.

As the world cautiously looks towards reopening, we hope the lessons we are learning will not be lost. May we have deep gratitude for those who have paved our way and may this respect and admiration lead to a deeper appreciation of the Divine.

Parents, G-d and Gratitude
The Covid-19 epidemic is presenting the world with situations that have not been faced in decades.

A potentially fatal infectious disease is spreading throughout the globe and we are as yet unable to prevent it via vaccination or treatment other than supportive care. This transfers classic halachic discussions regarding plagues in the past from the realm of the theoretical to the practical.

Modern medicine has not yet given us a solution to the pandemic, but it has given us the knowledge at this point to understand the method of disease spread.

The primary mechanism is a droplet, meaning that virus particles contained in bodily fluids sprayed via a sneeze or cough will infect another person if it reaches their respiratory tract via their mouth or nose.

The virus can live on surfaces as well, but will only infect another via hands bringing it to the mouth or nose. This knowledge leads to the importance of the implementation of public health interventions such as maintaining a physical distance between people (keeping them too far apart for the droplets to reach), wearing masks (reduces the distance of droplet spread and minimizing contact between the hand and the mouth) and hygienic measures such as hand washing.

As the disease rapidly spread around the world, even more drastic measures needed to be implemented to slow down the process including the closure of schools, businesses and general lockdown.

Some of these measures protect us, but many of them are also for the protection of spreading the disease to others. In this manner, the pandemic leads us all to be cognizant of our obligations to others and the concept of the commandments Bein Adam leChavero (between one person and another).

Tradition holds that the Ten Commandments, the receiving of which we celebrate on the holiday of Shavuot, were divided equally between two tablets, five commandments on one and five on the other. The five on one side are commandments between Man and G-d and the other are the commandments between Man and Man. The Mechiltah of Rabbi Yishmael on Yitro points out the symmetry between the commandments. Lining up commandments 1-5 with commandments 6 – 10 puts "lo tirzach" – do not murder, parallel with the first commandment “I am the Lord your G-d.” In this Midrashic explanation, one who murders a human who was created in G-d’s image diminishes the image of G-d.

For the vast majority, murder seems far-fetched. Perhaps, for this reason, our Sages give day-to-day circumstances where we might touch upon this prohibition. For example, the Talmud (Baba Metzia 58b) states, “One who embarrasses his fellow in public, it is as if he has committed murder.” Thus improper use of the tongue via hurtful speech produces something within the spectrum of the prohibition of murder.

Improper use of the tongue is listed as a direct commandment in the verse found in Vayikra 19:17: לَا קַל רָכִיל. One explanation of the first clause is that it contains the prohibition of gossip and the second clause is an obligation to save others. There is no vav joining the two causes of the verse, so it is possible that they reflect two separate commandments.

On the other hand, they do share the same verse, and thus commentators such as the Netziv, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, finds a connection between them. He uses the juxtaposition to point out that if there is a need to share information to save others then one is permitted to do so. Thus, in the context of Corona, it would be halachically proper to report someone who is endangering others by violating the terms of quarantine.

While praying for this pandemic to end, and for the speedy recovery of all those infected, let us think for a few minutes about our tongues, our hands and our obligations to others. Both literally and metaphorically, let us frequently wash our hands and cover our mouths, using them not to hurt others but to help them.

Dr. Deena Zimmerman is pediatrician and Director of yoatzot.org, a website for women’s health and halacha.
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Clinton and the Entertainment Culture

When I was a child, there was a family hour on television during which America’s parents knew their children could join them and not see anything they deemed inappropriate. Today, at most any hour on television, children can see a wide array of violations of the values of the seventh and several other commandments.

During the 1990s, all this went over a tipping point, and parents in Connecticut began to complain to me, their Senator, that they felt as if they were in competition with the entertainment culture to raise their children. And they were losing.

I agreed with them, but I also believed that America’s Constitution and laws guaranteed freedom of expression and promised a limited role for government in the private lives of the American people, so it was hard to legislate this threat away.

But I had my voice and what might be called the Senate pulpit from which to speak. I joined with like-minded Democrats and Republicans in arguing that the entertainment culture was having a bad effect on the values of our children and therefore on our country. We called on the entertainment industry to self-regulate to protect our children. We introduced legislation that would compel the entertainment industry to adopt better rating codes. The Seventh Commandment was never explicitly mentioned in the advocacy or our legislative proposals, but its values were definitely under attack by the entertainment industry, and we and a lot of America’s parents were fighting back.

Then, in the summer of 1998, it became clear that President Clinton had been involved in a sexual relationship with a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. I was an early and strong supporter of Bill Clinton’s and proud of all that he was accomplishing as President, so his offensive behavior was truly heart-breaking to me.

Surely, President Clinton’s conduct had disrespected his wife and undermined the sanctity of their marriage. But it was private behavior, wasn’t it? And didn’t he continue to receive high approval ratings in public opinion polls for the job he was doing as President?

In the end, I decided I had to speak out because there is no such thing as private conduct when you are President. Everything you do will probably become public, and because you are the most powerful person in the country, whatever you do will influence behavior throughout the country. That is even more true today in the age of social media, but it is a lesson that can be learned from history as well – including Biblical history.

In the Bible, the higher you go, the more demanding the standard to which your behavior is held, because of the greater impact your behavior, good or bad, has on your people. Perhaps that is the reason the Kings of Israel were commanded to have their own Torah Scroll, which they were to carry with them at all times. The King was not the last word. The Torah was.

King Saul lost his kingship because he failed to fully carry out the stern instructions G-d gave him through the prophet Samuel about the eradication of the Amalekites. In powerful and poignant words, Samuel chastised Saul: “Though you be little in your own sight, are you not head of the Tribes of Israel?... Wherefore, then, did you not hearken to the voice of the L-rd?”

I called on the President to accept full responsibility for what he had done and to apologize to the country. Whether it seemed fair or not, presidents did not have a right to privacy because their private behavior, once publicized, has enormous societal consequences. That loss of privacy is one of the costs that comes with all the opportunities and benefits of occupying America’s most powerful position.

A week later, the President convened an interfaith gathering of clergy in the White House, at which he movingly took responsibility for his actions, and asked for forgiveness.

Ultimately, President Clinton, like all of us, will be judged by a hopefully merciful G-d, but in the meantime, each of us must continue to strive to realize in our lives the values of the Ten Commandments, including the Seventh.

Adapted from With Liberty and Justice from OU Press/Maggid, by Senator Joe Lieberman with Rabbi Ari Kahn

Senator Joe Lieberman is an American politician who served as a United States Senator from 1989 to 2013
The prohibition of stealing seems obvious at first glance. What new idea can we learn from this seemingly obvious emphasis?

When we look at the legal form this law takes and infer the philosophical underpinnings of the law from that form, we can understand something that can change the way we evaluate our actions and those of the people around us.

What is ownership? How is ownership effected? The simple answer would be that when something is in my possession, physically (in my hands, or within a place that belongs to me, such as a house or a car, etc.) — it is mine, and when it is not in my possession, physically — it isn’t. However, this is not entirely true, as we don’t always have our possessions in our hands. For example, if I lend a neighbor a book, a hammer, a chair, etc. — has it ceased being mine? When I give the bank my money for safekeeping, has it switched owners? Of course not!

The Torah discusses the level of liability and responsibility these individuals have towards the objects entrusted to them by the owners, but the object is still — at its core — an object which belongs to the owner.

This is an important point because it saves the person now holding the object from being a thief. In other words, since the owner intends to temporarily detach himself from ownership by giving the object to someone else, and that someone else does not intend on stealing the object for himself but rather to eventually return it to the owner — this is a lawful act, which is not prohibited in any way.

However, a thief is considered as committing a prohibition for precisely this reason: his intent. Since the thief intends to remove the object from the possession of its owner, and the owner does not intend to give it to him (because if he did, it would be lending or selling) — he is a thief.

What this shows is that ownership is not primarily about a given state of affairs, or even about an action taken at a specific time. One could own an object even if it is on another continent, a different time zone, and in the hands of another person. The difference between someone who has borrowed an object and someone who has stolen it is mostly this: the intent they have when the object comes into their care.

Throughout our lives, we are sometimes quick to judge others according to their actions. We erroneously believe that the external result of their actions is sufficient for us to render some sort of judgment.

These Corona times offer several good examples of why this is wrong. If one were to say: “I know someone who hasn’t visited his parents in months,” we might think this individual was not a good son or daughter. This is certainly a valid conclusion, but it is only one of several we could infer from this information. I think we all understand that in current circumstances, such information would not imply a lack of respect for parents, but rather an attempt to ensure their safety.

While the action — or in this case the non-action — of both the caring child and the neglecting child is the same, the intent is what really matters.

And this is what we learn from the prohibition to steal: intent is a pivotal factor, and our judgment of the things happening around us must always take this into account. And since, more often than not, the exact extent of a person’s intent is unknown to us, perhaps we should be more modest in our clear-cut evaluations of others. Before we jump to conclusions, let us try and judge people favorably and meritoriously, as we would like them to judge us too.

Rabbi Yoni Rosensweig is a community Rabbi of the Netzach Menashe community in Beit Shemesh and the author of several books.
At a highlight moment in the Chag of Shavuot, we stand for the reading of the Aseret HaDibrot, recalling the experience of hearing the commandments directly from G-d at Mt. Sinai on the first Shavuot in history. One of the unique features of the 9th commandment, לֹא תַעֲנֶה בְּרֵעֲךָ עֵד שָׁקֶר – you shall not bear false witness against your fellow,¹ is that among all the dibrot it is the only one that doesn’t seem to apply to most people, nor at most times. Each person deals independently with their faith in G-d and the oneness of G-d, and their relationship to G-d’s name. The same goes for the observance of Shabbat, the respect shown to parents, avoiding murder, adultery, theft and coveting that which belongs to others. But this particular commandment seems only applicable in the context of a court, and only for one who comes to offer testimony. Does it have a greater meaning for our day-to-day lives?

A relevant insight may be gained from a linkage made by the Meiri² in his analysis of the Aseret HaDibrot. Noting that the commandments did not simply appear in list form but were rather broken up into sets of five over two tablets, he suggests they are meant to parallel one another. The first commandment matches the sixth in theme, the second matches the seventh, and so on. Thus, Shabbat and לא תעננה are paired with one another.

How so? Observance of Shabbat is a personal testimony of the belief that G-d created the universe. Thus both commandments require truth in characterizing our relationship with – and what we know of the actions of – the ‘other’ (whether that other is G-d or a human being). Seen in this light, לא תעננה is more than a juridical mitzvah. It applies beyond courtroom proceedings and directly to our perceptions and evaluations of the actions of those around us.

The Talmud Yerushalmi³ notes a subtle change in wording between the manner in which this commandment is phrased in Shemot and how it appears when the 10 commandments are listed in Sefer Devarim.⁴ In Shemot, the commandment specifies a prohibition against false (“sheker”) testimony. In Devarim, the Torah instructs us not to offer testimony in vain (“shav”). Those two terms are not quite synonymous; the former involves attesting to something untrue. The latter seems to include the unnecessary as well. Well aware of the difference, the Yerushalmi states that these two terms were spoken concurrently at Sinai (“bedibbur echad ne’emru”). They are meant to go hand in hand, despite their seeming alternate foci. What is the message the Gemara is sharing with us?

By linking the notions advanced by the Meiri and the Talmud Yerushalmi, I believe one can garner a more global view of the mitzvah of לא תעננה. Of course, one must speak honestly in court. The entire judicial system depends upon the ability to gather truthfully stated evidence and evaluate its relevance and implications. And that is the direct meaning of this commandment. But judgment is not limited to the courts of justice. We engage in judgment all the time and are required to do so as discerning people. One cannot responsibly walk through life believing that all behavior (and all people in the ways in which they conduct themselves) are equally good. And yet at the same time, it is all too easy to come to conclusions about others based on insufficient and inaccurate evidence. We may overhear a snippet of conversation, witness actions out of context and without a full picture of the life of the other, or accept a rumor. And just like that, we come to form an opinion of them and their character. We so easily accept the ‘testimony’ of such false witnesses.

The Yerushalmi equated testimony in vain with that which is false. Judging others when we don’t need to form an opinion can be just as destructive as an outright lie. But our world is now learning an important lesson, as social distancing has limited our ability to interact with others. In its way, Covid-19 is opening our eyes to realize that we never really knew quite what was happening in someone else’s world from the outside. Perhaps we would do best to learn the lesson of the penultimate commandment, and cease forming unnecessary opinions at all.

2. Beit HaBechira, Introduction to the Talmud Bavli.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is Assistant Dean and a teacher at Yeshivat Orayta
Modern economy is based on desire. The desire of the sellers, to increase their wealth, and the desire of the buyers for something they don’t have, or to replace old with new, etc. Indeed, without desire, the economy has no leg to stand on.

Of course though, there is no clear cut definition of what is permitted to desire and what not. The Torah does not oppose the possession of property or that people should be financially successful. Our forefathers were very wealthy and we do not find a puritan stance anywhere at all in the Torah. Furthermore, if people didn’t have the drive for more, and to attain and obtain better and bigger goals, many of the world’s greatest discoveries would never have been discovered! And we would be stuck in the same place as many underdeveloped countries today.

That’s not all. Even Torah study and other life treasures would be affected. The prohibition to covet does not just apply to monetary matters, but to other things too, such as someone else’s wife. Similarly in the world of the mind and the spirit - some of the revelations in academia, research and Torah learning also stem from the internal desire to find better and more truthful arguments, ideas or proofs, and to share them with the masses. Hence, if it would be forbidden to desire such things as well, we would simply be eradicating the powers that drive the world.

Therefore, we find ourselves having to strike a balance between our G-d-given trait of wanting to move the world forward and make it a better place, and the unequivocal directive of “You shall not covet.”

This is a lesson we have been learning now, during the Coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, we have learned to make do with much less than we were used to beforehand, while on the other, we are faced with the stark reality of a collapsing economy, in which people are not only not able to but have even lost the will to buy new things. And on a third hand, our relationship to various products and activities has undergone a certain distillation, with it suddenly becoming clear to us how much we were falsely dependent on certain needs and items.

What else are these times teaching us? First and foremost, we need to remind ourselves that what is truly important is who we are – what good deeds we do for others, what injustice we fight against, and how much we are prepared to exert ourselves in the pursuit of peace. This moral and ethical stance is more important than any material achievement, scientific development or personal wealth.

Secondly, the impetus for things we want must be need, even when it’s to do with our welfare or convenience. It is so important not to build our needs around what our neighbors have, and to want to have more than they do. A person’s motives must come from within, and not from a comparison between what he has and what the other person has.

And thirdly, we have learned that we also need to consider the damage the entire consumer-oriented existence does to us all. We can certainly say that much of the spread of this virus was a result of people’s concern for themselves, without thinking whether and how their behavior could affect others. Indeed, once we began to consider our surroundings – both human and global – there was much greater success in fighting the virus.

Above all, this is about shaping society. A society that bases itself on “you shall not covet” builds its values on a different plane. A society like this is constantly educating itself “not to look at the pitcher but at what is in it,” and always striving for a life of internal content rather than external superficiality. Its advertising and sales are aimed at real needs and benefits rather than targeting the darker emotions in the consumer.

This type of society behaves modestly, for example, not holding grandiose weddings and giving the couple the chance to study for a year instead, with no financial worries. A society like this strives for justice and chessed, and everything anathema to desire – concession and giving to others, from an open-hearted perspective noticing and catering to genuine needs.

The main benchmark for such a society is the constant concern that the benefits of economic development are divided equally, and that it should be justice and charity that drives resource distribution rather than greed and desire.

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Writing about Jerusalem during these Corona times is not a very good idea. If on normal days the gap between the “State of Jerusalem” and the “State of Tel Aviv” is large, these distances have now increased seven-fold.

The city with the highest number of Corona patients in Israel versus the city with almost no Corona patients. The city whose inhabitants are fighting to return to pray at the Kotel and in shuls versus the city begging to be allowed to surf in the sea and relax in theaters. These cities have never been as far apart socially and spiritually as they are today.

Jerusalem’s sanctity stems from two sources, one being that it is the home of the Shechina. And this is why, according to the Rambam – in contrast to the Land of Israel as a whole – the sanctity of Jerusalem and the Temple did not expire even after the exile to Babylon: “Why do I say that in the Temple and in Jerusalem the initial holiness is eternal. The sanctity of the rest of Israel for shvi’it and ma’asrot, and so on is not yet eternal. Because the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem come from the Shechina and the Shechina is not idle.” In other words, the sanctity of Jerusalem is inherently religious. It is where G-d chose to rest His Divine Presence.

But Jerusalem has another component too, as Shlomo said in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple: “Ever since I brought My people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city among all the tribes of Israel for building a House where My name might abide; but I have chosen David to rule My people Israel.” The two parts of the verse seem unconnected. In the first part, G-d says He has not chosen a city to house His home since the day of the Exodus, and in the second part He says He chose David to be king. What is the connection?

The Zohar answers that when G-d wants to build His house, He first decides who will be the leader of His people and only then decides to build His house. That is, Jerusalem is not just a place for the Shechina to dwell. It is also where the political leadership of Am Yisrael must be. It is only when this leadership is functioning properly that G-d wants to build His house there. Indeed, Jerusalem is not only the site of the Temple, but it is also the location of the palaces of David and Solomon.

David’s decision to relocate the capital of his kingdom from Hebron to Jerusalem was not easy. His support center was in the Judean tribe centered around Hebron. A king wants to be surrounded by his family and previous acquaintances. Going and building a new and unfamiliar city located on the border of Judea and Benjamin is both adventurous and frightening. David makes this decision mainly for one reason. He understands that if he wants to be a King of all Israel, or as the Zohar says roeh tov, a “good shepherd,” he can’t remain a man of one sector. He must show all tribes that he does indeed want to belong to everyone. Jerusalem is the place that marks David’s decision to give up tribalism and become one State.

We should note that this Israel-wide decision is also what made Jerusalem the place of the Temple, the place where G-d would rest. One who analyzes the Shemoneh Esrei prayer can really discern the confusion in understanding what Jerusalem really is. We start with the words “to Jerusalem Your city may You return with mercy and dwell,” a blessing for a return of the Shechina to Jerusalem, of building the Beit HaMikdash. Immediately after, we add: “and the throne of David, Your servant may You speedily establish therein,” a blessing to return the kingdom to Jerusalem.

There is a need to connect the concepts. One depends on the other. If we want Jerusalem’s sanctity to become a value shared by all the Jewish people, it must also pass through the recognition that G-d’s leadership today is also part of the new Kingdom of Israel. The route that runs from the Knesset to the Kotel, where we dance during the Yom Yerushalayim parade each year, is capable of forming the bond between the holy Jerusalem and Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom. Between the State of Jerusalem and the State of Tel Aviv.

1 Sotah 12a.
Bow to the Glory of Yerushalayim

The very first time we find explicit mention of Har HaMoriah in the Torah is when Avraham goes there to perform Akeidat Yitzchak. Avraham actually ended up performing two acts there: he bowed and he brought a korban. Since that moment, every time we go up to Har HaMoriah, we are commanded to perform these two acts. Today there is unfortunately no Mikdash and no kohen, so we pray to return to the way things were, in Mussaf of the Shalosh Regalim.

The hishtachavaya (bowing) in the Beit haMikdash has two parts. One aspect is hoda’a, thanking G-d for all of the good He has done for us. The second is bakasha, asking G-d to provide what we still lack. Today, when we no longer have the privilege to bow in the Beit HaMikdash, we find these two aspects of hishtachavaya in several places. For example, in two different places in the tefillah: on the one hand, we bow as we say “Modim anachnu lach,” thanking G-d for our lives, souls, and all of the daily miracles, wonders and kindnesses He performs for us; on the other, we have a hishtachavaya referred to as nefilat apayim, through which we ask G-d to show us mercy, accept our prayers, and save us for the sake of His Name.

We find these two aspects once more when we shake the lulav during Hallel on Sukkot. When one shakes the lulav, he must bow forward a little. We shake and bow once as we say דא אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוּ לַהֲדֹם רַגְלָיו, “Give thanks to G-d for He is good, for His kindness lasts forever” – hoda’a – and once as we say, אנא י་ 맞ישועו ואנו, “Please, G-d, save now” – bakasha.

The fact that these two aspects of hishtachavaya appear in so many places is a sign of their great importance. Chazal tell us that every gevula, individual or communal, is only in the merit of hishtachavaya: Avraham merited to return from Har HaMoriah, Geulat Mitzrayim was only in the merit of hishtachavaya; the Torah was given, Chanah was remembered, future exiles will be ingathered and the Beit HaMikdash will be built and the dead will come back to life only in the merit of hishtachavaya.

As we approach Yom Yerushalayim, we must recognize G-d’s kindness and give thanks, but at the same time we must beseech G-d for the future, במז יִקֵּם קֶנון יִמְסֹרֵךְ על נַפְתָּלִים, “Build Your house as it once was and establish Your Temple upon its foundation.” It is not enough just to give abundant thanks – the Mishnah teaches that we silence one who says, “Mo’adim Modim” (Berachot 5:3).

However, in order for our bakasha of venerating our nation to be accepted, we must show we are deserving. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to remember – today more than ever – that what makes Yerushalayim so special is that it is the place where Hashem, our L-rd, and bow to His holy mountain – that what makes Yerushalayim so holy is that Hashem, our L-rd, and bow to His holy mountain.

On the eve of the Six-Day War, the Jerusalem Municipality, together with the chevra kadisha, prepared tens of thousands of coffins in the event that they would need to bury a large number of casualties in a short period of time. In His abundant mercy, G-d ensured that these coffins would be used to build sukkot in Yerushalayim. If you are united, G-d says, I will sit you all together in a sukkat shalom. Every one of those burial coffins was turned into wood of life.

Yom Yerushalayim always falls one week before Kabbalat HaTorah, one week before אָנָּא ה׳ הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא, “Please, G-d, save now.” If we elevate Yerushalayim and establish it as our top priority, achieving that which Yerushalayim requires of us and demands of us, we will merit not only to return to the Kotel, but to once again ascend the mountain itself, Har HaMoriah.

1 Hilchot Be’echirah 1:1.

Summarized by a student of Rabbi Goldwicht.

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht, a prominent Israeli scholar and educator, is a Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University’s Mazer School of Talmudic Studies.
When I was in first grade, I watched a classic Israeli children's show, in which they offered an educational prediction: in another 10 years there'll be no need for teachers, and all students will study from computers. At the time, that prophecy made a great impression on me. But that prophecy didn't come true, and hopefully, it never will.

Not one decade has passed, but four, and education is still impossible without teachers. As we are seeing before our very eyes, when trying to swap teachers for computers, the results are not that great.

Current distance learning is only half the problem. The Israeli Education Ministry has been experimenting with distance learning during emergencies for a few years now, but differently from how the teachers are using it today. In the early days of this Corona crisis, the MoE suggested a concentrated program: recording lessons to be broadcast to children all over the country. That was an abject failure. Almost no-one tuned in.

Through trial and error, teachers and principals have learned that there is no alternative to individual teachers facing the students he or she knows. That's how we've reached the improvised solution of Zoom learning. At least the teacher sees the students, which is much better than nothing.

Nevertheless, perhaps we can extract something good here: children are learning from real teachers and not from knowledge bases. It's certainly possible and worthwhile to use knowledge bases, even computerized ones. But they will never replace human teachers.

Why not? Because knowledge is accumulated in databases while wisdom is accumulated in human beings.

The Rambam spoke of wisdom as a level of human perfection. A person who remembers a lot of facts is not a wiser person or a more complete one. Our Sages called such a person: "an ass bearing books." This is knowledge, not wisdom, and for that, all one really needs is Google. But when you look for wisdom, Rabbi Google won't help you much.

They tell of a woman who came to a Rabbi on Erev Pesach to ask him whether she could use milk to fulfil the mitzvah of the four cups of wine. The Rabbi wrote her a generous check, and she left his house happy and crying. The Rabbi’s son asked his father: "Abba, why did you give her money?" "Because son, if she wanted to drink milk on Seder Night, it means that not only doesn't she have money to buy wine, she doesn't have money for meat either."

I'd challenge Rabbi Google to come up with that solution.

It's not just the Rabbi’s sensitivity, which is certainly an important attribute. I'm talking about the knowledge accumulated through life's experiences – the ability to take a question about Seder Night and intuitively connect it to human nature, to familiarity with the laws of meat and milk, and to a sensitive heart. Data is a collection of informative details; wisdom is a human trait, and it is only possible to absorb it from connecting with human beings.

Researchers Tamar and Oz Almog recently published a book about the failures of our universities. Among other things, they recommend putting a much stronger emphasis on online learning. However, they also agree that online courses can only replace certain aspects of teaching.

There is a kind of online course called a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course). They put the best lecturer in the world in front of a camera, and the result is supposed to be the best course in the world. The problem is that it doesn't work. The dropout rate from these classes is close to 90%, and among the few who stay till the end, many of them fail the exams. The companies that produce these MOOCs are now focusing on vocational courses, which are much shorter and goal-specific. In other words, you can watch the best lecturer in the world and gain a lot of knowledge, but you won't glean much wisdom.

Because of this, I dare to bet that even in another 1,000 years, our descendants will still be learning from human teachers. It could be that they'll learn engineering from advanced AI programs, but they'll still learn Torah, wisdom and poetry from real human beings.

Even in another 1,000 years, young children will sit and gaze admiringly at their wise teachers. Because just as we need air, light and love, we also need wisdom, and wisdom is only found in wise people. Information can be learnt, but wisdom is infectious. And here the heart sighs: when will our children be able to catch this beloved "virus" again?
UNITY OF A NATION

In the midst of the Corona pandemic – perhaps because of it – something amazing happened. For the first time in almost 20 years, a national unity government was formed. Yes, there were many complications and machinations along the way, and the final formulation is challenging enough to make almost everyone unhappy. At AIPAC we used to say that if both Left and Right were not happy with us, we had done something right. The same principle holds true here. There is something unique about a coalition that includes both the Charedi and Labor parties and has agreed to both annex the West Bank and hand the ministerial portfolios of housing and economy to the Left.

There were many articles exploring why Benny Ganz, who had numbers on his side, and why Bibi Netanyahu, who had time on his side, agreed to a unity government. Each had both personal and political reasons, and each negotiated fiercely for what was primary in his own mind. However, I believe that at some point both men also realized that unity was necessary for a country engaged in an unprecedented fight against a viral pandemic. These men didn’t need to unite because only together could they wisely and thoughtfully design the perfect strategy for containment and exit; but rather because Israeli citizens were simply exhausted – by isolation, by anxiety, by uncertainty – and ending the political struggle with a unified government was a way to positively resolve at least one distressing national issue.

The idea of unity during these challenging times was not only aspirational but also inspirational for many. Israeli citizens came together – as one nation – to help one another. Medical students in the north visited chronically ill patients to ensure they got the psychological and medical support they needed during their extended isolations; whole neighborhoods participated in baking goods for local health care workers; singers and entertainers offered their talents free online to massive Zoom audiences; people who still had jobs gave their government-issued checks to those less fortunate. There was a real sense of all of us being in this together, that only with a unified stance will we continue to remain strong in the face of this invisible enemy.

Unity extended beyond just the Jewish citizens of Israel. The Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority have been cooperating fully throughout this pandemic. The Israelis transferred critical medical supplies to the Palestinians and invited them in to help in East Jerusalem. There were frequently scheduled meetings between the Israelis and the Palestinians not only about health issues but economic concerns, as well, as the Israeli and Palestinian economies are intertwined in significant ways. A joint “war room” was even established.

The one weakness in terms of achdut – unity – was the rise in animosity directed at the Charedi population. Yes, the community did not respond quickly enough to social distancing rules, and there were some very bad Charedi players, but in general, as soon as it was understood, the overwhelming number of Charedim took the health directives very seriously. They were the ones paying the price for their delayed response, with over 75% of the cases in Jerusalem and close to 50% of all cases coming from their own community. With limited access to the internet and media, their slow responses, while frustrating, are understandable. And the reminder message sent by this community to all of us – that we need to worry about our souls as much as our bodies, is not a trivial one.

As we come to the holiday of Shavuot – after multiple layered counting: the omer with its own sadness, and our Corona counts where we also lost too many – we need to remember its critical message of unity. Moshe comes to Bnei Yisrael to offer G-d’s Torah and “all the nation answered together.” It was because of this unity that we were given the miracle of the Torah. Thousands of years later we united again after a different miracle – the 1967 war. On the Shavuot of 1967, every demographic was represented as they visited the Kotel: “kibbutz members and soldiers rubbing shoulders with Neturei Karta” reported the Jerusalem Post. After our own war against Corona, we need to remember the import of our unity – it may be complicated and difficult, even frustrating – but it is a critical element to strengthening both the nation and the country of Israel.

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Many sefarim refer to Shavuot as being a closure to Pesach. Following the liberation from the long bondage in Egypt, the Israelites were instructed to count 49 days of Sefirat HaOmer, during which they were to refine their character traits to enable them to receive the Torah. Indeed, when G-d commissioned Moshe to liberate the Israelites from enslavement, He said, “When you take the nation out of Egypt, you shall worship G-d on this mountain.”

Many of the mitzvot we do are designated as a memorial to the Exodus from Egypt. Every Friday night in the kiddush, we say that Shabbat commemorates the Exodus. All the festivals relate to the Exodus, as do the daily Tzitzit and Tefillin, Pidyon HaBen, and Birkat HaMazon. I had often wondered why there was a constant need to remember the Exodus. It is more than an Independence Day. The latter is celebrated by a parade, fireworks, picnics and patriotic speeches. Whoever heard of a seven-day independence celebration, for which one must clean the house thoroughly, virtually sterilize the kitchen, avoid chametz and eat matzah for a whole week?

The answer came from a patient of mine newly recovered from a long history of drug addiction. I could not allow him to return to New York, because he was certain to contact his drug-addicted buddies and relapse, so I prevailed on him to remain in Pittsburgh for an extended period of time.

As it drew closer to Pesach, he asked permission to return to New York to attend his father’s Seder. When he returned to Pittsburgh after Pesach, he related that when his father began reciting the Haggadah, “Avadim hayinu leParo beMitzrayim” – We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, he interrupted him, saying, “Abba, can you say that you yourself were ever a slave? Your ancestors were slaves to Pharaoh, but you personally were not a slave. I can tell you what it means to be a slave. All those years I was addicted to drugs, I was a slave. I had no freedom. I had to do whatever the drugs demanded. I did things I never thought I was capable of doing, but I had no choice. Drugs were a cruel taskmaster, but today I am free.”

When he related this to me, it became clear why we must constantly refer to the Exodus. Just as one can be a slave to a despotic ruler like Pharaoh, one can be a slave to alcohol or drugs, to gambling, food, sex, shopping, spending, hoarding, texting or anything else. When a person loses one’s freedom to choose, one is a slave.

Referring to the Ten Commandments, the Torah says they were, “chorut al haLuchot” – inscribed on the tablets. Inasmuch as there are no vowel markings in the Torah, this phrase can also be read as “cherut al haLuachot” which means “freedom on the tablets.” Inspired by this, I wrote a commentary on the Haggadah, “From Bondage to Freedom.” The Haggadah can thus be a guide to true personal freedom.

A human being is a physical body and has many inborn traits, some of which can be very pressing. Without Torah, man is what science refers to as homo sapiens, a simian (baboon) with many bodily drives. A baboon does not have free choice and must do as its body demands. The Torah provides cherut, freedom of choice, which may frustrate the body’s demands. Hence freedom from a despotic taskmaster does not assure man true freedom.

A person may be subject to animalistic greed, anger, and many other bodily drives. These can be every bit as tyrannical as a cruel despot. Adopting the teachings of the Torah gives man true freedom. Pesach liberated the Israelites from enslavement to Pharaoh and Shavuot liberated them from the tyranny of their animal body.

Shavuot and Pesach are inextricably bound together.
At the end of Moshe’s life, before taking leave of his people, Moshe saw fit to teach the generation of Israelites who would soon enter the Land of Israel. This new generation must hear G-d’s laws too. Therefore, we are not surprised to find material from the four earlier Books of the Torah repeated in the fifth book.

Let us compare the Fourth Commandment as it appears in Shemot and in Devarim.

In Shemot, the rationale for Shabbat is Creation: Shabbat is a testament to our belief in the Creation and the Creator. On the other hand, in Devarim, the Shabbat is commanded as a reminder of our enslavement in Egypt, and of our liberation by G-d’s Hand. This is no mere explanatory comment; here are two vastly different, potentially contradictory reasons for the observance of Shabbat.

In reality, the two different rationales for Shabbat do not contradict one another. Rather, they teach the same law from two different vantage points. The formulation in Shemot states: “For in six days G-d made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore G-d blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it.” There is one thing missing here – namely, Man. Why should humankind keep Shabbat? Moreover, if Shabbat exists simply because G-d created, this law should be universal, and not apply only to members of the Covenant, to Jews alone. This Commandment is theocentric, reflecting G-d’s perspective. The seventh day is holy because G-d created for six days and then desisted from creating. This is echoed in the verse in Bereishit, uttered at the very dawn of Creation: “And G-d blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because on it, He rested from all His work which G-d created to make.” The fact that G-d blessed the seventh day and sanctified it does not necessarily affect Man; only when Man is commanded to keep that day in a similar or imitative fashion is he brought into the frame, into G-d’s frame of reference, as it were.

On the other hand, the rationale for Shabbat as stated in Devarim is of a totally different order, drawn from a totally different sphere. We were enslaved, and G-d rescued us. “And remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt and that the Almighty your G-d brought you out from there with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm; therefore, the Almighty your G-d commanded you to keep the Shabbat day.” This formulation is homocentric. The former slaves are addressed in a particularly compelling way: as slaves, they had no freedom. Now, as free men and women, they are free every day. They have been given all seven days of the week to pursue their individuality, and with this Commandment, G-d asks that they put aside work nor slavery. It was this generation that left Egypt would certainly have no trouble embracing the idea that one day each week should be a day of rest. Therefore, the generation that left Egypt, the generation of liberated slaves that stood at Sinai, was taught about the other reason for Shabbat: this day is hallowed because it was taught by G-d, simultaneously, at Sinai. Yet each was recorded, emphasized, at different junctures in the history of the Jewish people. The generation that left Egypt would certainly have no trouble embracing the idea that one day each week should be a day of rest. Therefore, the generation that left Egypt, the generation of liberated slaves that stood at Sinai, was taught about the other reason for Shabbat: this day is hallowed because of Creation, and by emulating G-d and keeping the Shabbat we forge a powerful, holy relationship with Him.

The generation that stood poised to enter the Land of Israel knew neither work nor slavery. It was this generation that needed to hear about the human side of Shabbat. They had to be taught that the seventh day is not exclusively Divine in nature. The human and social implications of Shabbat would not have been intuitively understood by those who were sustained by miracles for 40 years.

The two rationales are not contradictory; one speaks from G-d’s perspective, teaching us that the seventh day is holy and unique. The other speaks from the human perspective, requiring Man to rest as well. Had it not been for the first rationale, Man would be able to choose his own day of rest; each and every day would be an equally valid candidate, and no one day would have religious superiority over the others. On the other hand, with only the first formulation, Man would remain outside the picture; he would have no part in the sanctity of the seventh day just as he was not a party to Creation.

Both of these perspectives were taught by G-d, simultaneously, at Sinai. Yet each was recorded, emphasized, at different junctures in the history of the Jewish people. The generation that left Egypt would certainly have no trouble embracing the idea that one day each week should be a day of rest. Therefore, the generation that left Egypt, the generation of liberated slaves that stood at Sinai, was taught about the other reason for Shabbat: this day is hallowed because of Creation, and by emulating G-d and keeping the Shabbat we forge a powerful, holy relationship with Him.

The generation that stood poised to enter the Land of Israel knew neither work nor slavery. It was this generation that needed to hear about the human side of Shabbat. They had to be taught that the seventh day is not exclusively Divine in nature. The human and social implications of Shabbat would not have been intuitively understood by those who were sustained by miracles for 40 years.

1 Bereishit 2:3.

Adapted from Echoes of Eden Sefer Devarim, from OU Press/Geffen

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How does Ruth the Moabitite ultimately gain acceptance within the Jewish people, and even become the mother of royalty? Ruth is the Moabitite wife of Machlon, son of Elimelech and Naomi, who left Israel during a famine to find sustenance in Moav. Elimelech and his two sons have died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law alone. Naomi decides it’s time to go home and the three women begin the journey. On the way, Naomi implores her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to go back to their families and begin new lives, since she is bereft and penniless and can offer nothing but a bleak future. Orpah reluctantly agrees to remain in Moav. Ruth, however, insists on accompanying her mother-in-law on her journey. In doing so, Ruth not only leaves her home and family but also explicitly accepts Naomi’s G-d: “Your nation is my nation and your G-d is my G-d.”

When Ruth and Naomi return, they are hardly embraced. The townspeople can’t even believe it’s Naomi when they see her, and they utterly ignore the young Moabitite woman who came back with her. When Ruth goes to pick up leftover wheat amongst the destitute in the fields of Boaz, the farmhands see simply a nameless “Moabitite girl who returned with Naomi from the fields of Moab” when Boaz inquires as to her identity. But Boaz looks at her differently; alone among the Jews of Beit Lechem, Boaz is kind to Ruth, and her expression of surprise shows how rare that reaction was! When she asks him why he is kind to her, when after all she is a stranger, he responds: “I have heard all that you have done for your mother-in-law after your husband died; you left your father and your mother and your birthplace to move to a nation that you never knew before.”

What made Boaz see Ruth differently? The name “Boaz” combines two Hebrew words, and it means “in him, is strength.” To everyone else, Ruth is the appendage of a family who abandoned the homeland when times were tough and comes from a nation we are told to have nothing to do with. Boaz has the strength to see the parallel in Ruth to another individual who came from an idol-worshipping family from a strange land, and he hints at it in the words he chooses as he comforts Ruth.

Those words Boaz chooses are so reminiscent of G-d’s command to Avraham in Bereishit 12: “Go forth from your land, your birthplace, and the home of your father, to the Land that I will show you.” Ruth is portrayed as a second Avraham – willing to leave her homeland and family and move to the Land of Israel. Avraham is known as the father of all converts, recognizing G-d in a pagan world. Ruth, too, accepts G-d as part of her journey. We know Avraham as the paragon of lovingkindness and the ultimate host, seeking out guests and hurrying to make them comfortable. Ruth is so incredibly kind to her mother-in-law, insisting on accompanying her back home, and then seeking out food for her when they return to Beit Lechem penniless. Avraham was willing to sacrifice Yitzchak to follow G-d’s command; Ruth is willing to sacrifice her own future as well, as she insists on going back with Naomi even after Naomi makes it abundantly clear that if she joins her, she will unlikely remarry – and therefore never have children.

So many generations after Avraham, we are reminded that each of us, man and woman, can be Avraham – making the conscious choice to follow G-d, and exemplifying Avraham’s trait of kindness and caring, which of course is really G-d’s trait – קֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד (Exodus 34).

We read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot, the day on which we all renew our acceptance of the Torah each year, rededicating ourselves to G-d and to the Torah and its values. May we follow the example of Avraham and Ruth – of sincere dedication to G-d and sensitivity and kindness to all those around us.

1 Ruth 1:16.
2 Ibid 2:6,11.
The bikurim (first fruits) were brought by farmers in ancient Israel to be placed near the altar in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on Shavuot. Bereishit 31:51.

On Shavuot, the first offering from the new wheat crop, the "Shtei HaLechem" (the two loaves), was brought in the Temple.

Katzir is Hebrew for "cut grain" and "harvest."

On the night of Shavuot (the first night of Shavuot in the Diaspora), it is traditional for Jews to stay up and learn Torah – a centuries-old custom known as Tikkun Leil Shavuot.
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