



GUIDED LEARNING



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The Evolution of Shavuot in the Eyes of Rabbi Sacks

In this guided learning, we will study some of Rabbi Sacks' teachings on Shavuot, alongside Rabbinic teachings, to understand how our connection with the Torah on a national level has developed throughout history

Rabbi Sacks identifies several themes of the holiday of Shavuot in his essay *The Greatest Gift*, including the historical development of the central themes of Shavuot. Rabbi Sacks summarizes this evolution in our understanding of Shavuot in the following way:

Shavuot Reframed



Life is lived forward but understood only backward, in retrospect. It was in the aftermath of the two great historical catastrophes, the Babylonian conquest and the failed rebellion against Rome, that the nature of Jewish history became clear. *The law did not exist for the sake of the land.* It was the other way round: *the land existed for the sake of the law.* It was in order that the Israelites should create a sacred society of justice and compassion that G-d gave Israel the land. You do not need a territorial base to encounter G-d in the private recesses of the soul, but you do need a land to create a society in which the Divine Presence is real in the public square.

It was only when they lost the land but knew they still had the Torah that Jews fully realized that this is what Shavuot had been about from the very beginning.

The Greatest Gift

Points to Ponder:

- ▶ What was the highest level of religious experience before the destruction of the *Batei HaMikdash*?
- ▶ What lessons are to be learned from exilic Judaism and how are they reflected in the holiday of Shavuot?

In this guided learning, we will explore some Rabbinic sources that describe this process of reframing Judaism around the value of Torah study and the role it has played in the evolution of Jewish civilization, together with some excerpts from the writings of Rabbi Sacks, helping us to understand how the Jewish people became known as the People of the Book.

KING DAVID REIMAGINED

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 30a-b

אמר ר' יודן לרבי תלמודיך ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, הודיעני ה' קצאי. אמר לו: גזרה היא מלפני שאין מודיעין קצו של בשר ודם... "ואדעה מה תדל אני" □ אמר לו: בשבת תמות...

David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, in how long will I die? G-d said to him: It is decreed before Me that I do not reveal the end of the life of flesh and blood... Again he requested: on what day of the week will I die? He said to him: You will die on Shabbat...

כל יומא דשבתא הנה תיב וגריס כולי יומא. ההוא יומא דבעי למינח נפשיה, קם מלאך המנות קמיה ולא יכיל ליה, דלא הנה פסק פומיה מגירסא. אמר: מאי אעביד ליה? הנה ליה בוסתנא אחורי ביתיה, אתא מלאך המנות סליק ובחיש באילני. נפק למיחזי. הנה סליק בדרגא, איפחית דרגא מתותיה, אישתיק נח נפשיה.

What did David do? Every Shabbat he would sit and learn all day to protect himself from the Angel of Death. On that day on which David was supposed to die, the Angel of Death stood before him and was unable to overcome him because his mouth did not pause from study. The Angel of Death said: What shall I do to him? David had a garden [*bustana*] behind his house; the Angel of Death came, climbed, and shook the trees. David went out to see. As he climbed the stair, the stair broke beneath him. He was startled and was silent, interrupted his studies for a moment, and died.

Points to Ponder:

- ▶ What is our previous image of King David? How is it different from the King David we meet in this story?
- ▶ How is this new image of King David another expression of the evolution of the themes of Shavuot?

Simple though it is, this story tells us what had changed in Jewish life.



For the rabbis, David was no longer primarily the military hero, victor of Israel's greatest battles, or the astute politician, or even the man who initiated the plan to build the Temple.

He had become a sage. The battles he fights are in the mind. His home has become a house of study.

David had become a new kind of symbol for an old-new people that no longer predicated itself on a land, a king, an army, a Temple, sacrifices and a priesthood, but lived instead in synagogues, schools and academies. So long as the Jewish people never stops studying, the story intimated, the Angel of Death has no power over it. Jews had become, in the most profound sense, people of the book, of Shavuot, of Sinai. Theophrastus, a pupil of Aristotle, called them "a nation of philosophers."

The Greatest Gift



THE WORLD'S FIRST UNIVERSAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

Talmud Bavli, Bava Batra 21a

דאָמער רב יהודה אָמַר רב בָּרַם זָכור אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ לטוב ויהושע בן גמלא שמו שאִלמלאּ הוא נשׁתכח תורה מישראל שבתחלה מי שיש לו אב מלמדו תורה מי שאין לו אב לא היה למד תורה מאי דרוש ולמדתם אתם ולמדתם אתם

If not for Yehoshua ben Gamla, the Torah would have been forgotten from the Jewish people. Initially, whoever had a father would have his father teach him Torah, and whoever did not have a father would not learn Torah at all.

התקינו שיהו מושיבין מלמדי תינוקות בירושלים ... ונעדיין מי שיש לו אב היה מעלו ומלמדו מי שאין לו אב לא היה עולה ולמד התקינו שיהו מושיבין בכל פלך ופלך ומכניסין אותו כבו שש עשרה כבו שבע עשרה

When the Sages saw that not everyone was capable of teaching their children and Torah study was declining, they instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in Jerusalem... But still, whoever had a father, his father went up with him to Jerusalem and had him taught, but whoever did not have a father, he did not go up and learn. Therefore, the Sages instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in one city in each and every region [pelech]. And they brought the students in at the age of sixteen and at the age of seventeen.

ומי שהיה רבו כועס עליו מבעיט בו ויצא עד שבא יהושע בן גמלא ותיקו שיהו מושיבין מלמדי תינוקות בכל מדינה ומדינה ובכל עיר ועיר ומכניסין אותו כבו שש כבו שבע

But as the students were old and had not yet had any formal education, a student whose teacher grew angry at him would rebel against him and leave. Yehoshua ben Gamla came and instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be

established in each and every province and in each and every town, and they would bring the children to learn at the age of six and at the age of seven.

Points to Ponder:

- ▶ Why is it important that all children receive an education?
- ▶ What impact has this had on Jewish history?



This was the first system of its kind in the world. The Talmud also contains the world's first regulations about teacher provision and class size. As H.G. Wells noted in his *Outline of History*, "The Jewish religion, because it was a literature-sustained religion, led to the first efforts to provide elementary education for all children in the community."

...Throughout the ages, Jewish communities made education their first priority. The fees of poorer children, and sometimes the salaries of teachers, were paid for by the community...

These values had been part of Judaism from the beginning. In Genesis, G-d says of Abraham, "For I have chosen him, so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the L-rd..." (Gen. 18:19). Abraham was chosen to be a father and a teacher. In two of the key passages of Jewish faith, the first and second paragraphs of the Shema, Moses placed education at the heart of Jewish life: "Teach them [these words] repeatedly to your children, speaking of them when you sit at home and when you travel on the way, when you lie down and when you rise" (Deut. 6:7). But it took crisis – defeat and exile – to bring this value back to the fore...

In their darkest moments Jews rediscovered this ancient truth. It was the Giving of the Torah at Sinai on the first Shavuot that proved to be the gift of eternity.

The Greatest Gift

CONCLUSION

In these sources, we have seen how the Jewish passion for Torah study is a result of the journey through history the Jewish people has taken, from Sinai, to the creation of a Biblical society in *Eretz Yisrael* based on Torah law, through thousands of years of exile and persecution, until today, where we have more institutions of Torah study and more students of Torah, in Israel and the Diaspora, than any previous generation. The Jewish people has continuously affirmed it is deserving of the title "The People of the Book."