



Receiving the Torah Anew

Chag *Matan Torah* is the holiday of the Oral Law. Of the Torah Sages of every generation. *Matan Torah* is renewed in every generation, and the day the Torah was given in the past is a day infused with the spiritual energies for the Torah to be given every year. Every year, there is a return to what was, and just as Pesach is the time of freedom every year, so Shavuot is the time ripe for receiving the Torah anew in every generation. When we celebrate Shavuot, we are not celebrating an historical event in the past but the essence of the day that regenerates itself year after year.

The Yerushalmi says,¹ “In all the *korbanot* it is written חטא (sin) and concerning *Atzeret* (Shavuot) it is not written חטא. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* said to them, since you accepted upon yourselves the yoke of Torah, I consider it as if you have never ever sinned.” And the *Korban HaEida*² explains that concerning all *korbanot* it is written, ועשיתם שעיר עיזים אחד לחטאת and concerning *Atzeret* it is not written לחטאת but just שעיר עיזים אחד, and that’s because “every year on *Atzeret* is like the day we stood at *Har Sinai* and received the Torah anew... and therefore there is no חטאת, no sin, on this day.” The regenerative reality of *Kabbalat HaTorah* every year is what allows a person’s sins to be atoned for every year anew. And every time we read the pasuk ונעשה ונשמע דבר ה’,³ there is another, new acceptance of Torah.

For each of us

This annual *Kabbalat HaTorah* is for each and every one of us. Rav Yosef

says,⁴ “Were it not for this day, how many Yosefs would there be in the marketplace?” In other words, thanks to *Matan Torah*, I am different from your regular Yosef, and hence he instituted special foods on Shavuot. But at first glance it is not clear why he says this. After all, if it wasn’t for this day, the entire world wouldn’t exist, not only Rav Yosef. Rather we learn from here that Rav Yosef is not referring to the Giving of the Torah to the entire world, but to his private *Kabbalat HaTorah*, and hence we learn that everyone has their own private *Kabbalat HaTorah*.

Accepting the yoke of Torah

The Yerushalmi cited above stresses that “since you accepted upon yourselves the yoke of Torah, I consider it as if you have never ever sinned.” It is not enough to receive Torah, but one must accept the yoke of Torah. The effort, the challenge, in Torah is the main aspect of the Torah. A person can fulfil the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah* in the smallest amount of time, even with one word, but the crux of the Torah, the life of the Torah, is the yoke of Torah.

We learn all this as an introduction to Torah, as a preparation. The Torah’s command: “And make yourself fit to learn Torah,”⁵ is in itself a difficult, deep and complex instruction and one must learn it profoundly just like any other piece of Torah.

Before the description of *Matan Torah*, the Torah describes the people’s preparation across many verses,⁶ and this section carries eternal lessons. The preparation for Torah is Torah in itself, and it needs to be “on this day.”⁷

There is a need to repeat the exercise

every day and at any time, but there is particular significance in repeating it in the days leading up to Shavuot.

These are the days in which the light of Torah begins to appear, just as at *Har Sinai* the light of the Torah began to sparkle even before then, and therefore we don’t say *Tachanun* on these days, like the *Rishonim* say we don’t say *Tachanun* on Fridays at *Mincha*, because the light of Shabbat already begins to appear before Shabbat actually begins.

The elevated reality of *Chag* and Shabbat begins before the holy days themselves. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us specifically during these days to reinforce our Torah study and the way we prepare for *Matan Torah*.

May we merit receiving the Torah together as a people, and each of us individually, with awe and fear, love and joy.

¹ Rosh Hashanah 4:8

² Rabbi David Frankel, 1704-1762

³ Shemot 24:7

⁴ Pesachim 68b

⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:12

⁶ Shemot 19

⁷ According to the start of the chapter there: “In the third month to the Exodus of Bnei Yisrael from the land of Egypt, they came to the Sinai Desert on this day.”

Rabbi Avraham Shapira זצ"ל served as the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1983 to 1993. He was also the Rosh Yeshiva of *Merkaz HaRav* in Jerusalem. He passed away in 2007.