



## The Power of Our Customary Preparations

Unlike Pesach, which has the *mitzvah* of *matzah*, and Sukkot, when we take the Four Species and sit in the *sukkah*, Shavuot has no special *mitzvot*. Rather, five *minhagim* have developed to enhance this *yom tov* (see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494, and Mishna Berura there): 1. Preceding the Torah reading with the reciting of *Akdmut* 2. Eating dairy foods 3. Megillat Rut 4. Decorating the *shul* and home with flowers and trees, and 5. The all-night Torah study, or *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. (These are *minhagim* of the Ashkenazi community for the most part.)

The seriousness with which we approach the practice of these customs illustrates the importance of *minhagim* to the enhancement of the *mitzvot*, as Reb Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor demonstrated when a wealthy businessman from Kovno invited the Rav to his daughter's wedding.

The wedding was to take place on the grounds of the man's lavish home. The Rav wished the man *mazal tov* and informed him that he could not attend. The *minhag* in Kovno was that all weddings took place in the courtyard of the *shul*, and he could not attend a wedding that deviated from the custom of the town. The *baal simcha* dismissed the custom, saying it was not all that important. The Kovno Rav responded by quoting a Midrash that says that *minhagim* are compared to a pile of nuts that will topple if even one is removed from its place. If the Midrash, explained the Rav, was merely telling us that all *minhagim* are jeopardized by trifling with any of them, then any pile of round objects could have been used as an example. Why did the Midrash specifically use nuts? The answer, said Reb Yitzchak Elchanan, is that a nut at times is but a shell with no nut to be found inside, similar to some *minhagim*, which do not appear to be important or significant.

However, tampering even with these customs endangers the entire system.

Perhaps this is why the word *מגדל* contains the same letters as the word *המגן*, “the shield,” because *minhagim* are a shield and enhancement for Torah and Rabbinic laws. Thus, the Vilna Gaon points out that the first letters of the *minhagim* of Shavuot – *Akdmut*, *Chalav*, *Ruth*, *Yerek*, and *Tikkun* – spell out the word *אחרית*, “end.” The proper completion and perpetuation of the Torah, which is called *ראשית*, beginning, is the observance of *minhagim* that *Klal Yisrael* have instituted throughout the generations.

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### Foundations for acquiring Torah

All the *minhagim* of Shavuot bolster and enhance the importance of preparation. *Akdmut* reminds us that before we begin the Torah, a lengthy and poignant preface is needed. Similarly, milk is the food with which animals and man are sustained in the first stages of life, forming the foundation for all that follows. By eating milk products

on Shavuot, we are reminded of the importance of this foundation to future development. The book of Ruth traces the preparation and foundation of the Davidic dynasty and ultimately the *Melech haMashiach*, who will descend from that dynasty. This signifies that the entire goal of the world is already contained in its foundation and preparatory episodes. Trees and fruit and vegetation in general remind us how important it is to toil in the preparatory stages of planting, plowing and fertilizing, and the other preparatory processes essential before any fruit or vegetable can be enjoyed. So too, one must toil in Torah, symbolically planting and plowing, before G-d will bless us with attainment, the fruit of our labors.

Finally, we stay awake learning Torah the entire eve of Shavuot as a *tikkun*, a rectification, for our ancestors. Unfamiliar with the nature of Torah, they thought that a good night's sleep would be the proper way to prepare for the historic moment of Divine revelation the next day. Once we received the Torah, however, we realized that it is the toil and the intense straining of ourselves to the limit of our powers that prepares us to receive the Divine Presence on our Torah attainment.

הזורעים בדמעה – “those who sow with tears,” those who toil in Torah day and night, those who sacrifice with blood and tears to observe Torah in the most difficult circumstances and in the most challenging ways, ברינה יקצורו – “will reap with joyous song.” They will reap the sweetness of Torah understanding and the joys of *mitzvah* observance.

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