

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY SERIES

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*



Special Shavuos Edition

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Shavuos Edition

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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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1. Appreciating the Declaration of Naaseh V'nishmah

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that a Sadducee (heretic) observed Rava engrossed in Torah study to such a degree that he was not aware that his hand was wedged under his foot – thus causing it to bleed. The heretic said to Rava, “You impulsive people! Just as in the past your mouth spoke before your ears listened, you are behaving in a similar impulsive manner – not thinking about the consequences of your behavior.” Initially at Sinai when G'd offered the Torah to the Jewish people their response was *Naaseh V'nishmah* (we will do and we will listen). They had accepted the Torah unequivocally – regardless of the extent of the obligation. The Sadducee had criticized our ancestors at Sinai for behaving irresponsibly by accepting something upon themselves even though they were not aware of the degree of obligation it entailed. Rava responded, “The Jewish people accepted G'd's Torah with a pure and trusting heart because one who loves another assumes that the one he loves would not burden him with more than he can assume. Therefore, we accepted His Torah unequivocally because of our faith and trust in Him.”

As it is written in *Mishlei* (Proverbs), “The innocence of the just will guide them but the corruption of the faithless will despoil them.” Rava was able to immerse himself in his Torah study, to the point that he was oblivious to his surroundings, because of his trust in G'd. Rava understood that G'd would not allow any harm to come to him when he was engaged in Torah study. However, the Sadducee, on the other hand, who did not have a trusting heart or faith in Hashem, would not merit G'd's protection.

What causes one to be trusting in G'd? Contrastingly, what causes one to be suspicious of Him? Human beings naturally have many needs and thus feel insecure because of their concern that they may not be able to fulfill them. It is when one focuses on his own needs

and insecurities that he becomes suspicious. Whereas, one whose heart is filled with love for G'd does not focus on himself but rather on Hashem. The Jewish people at Sinai had an unusual level of love for Hashem because of their understanding of what they meant to him. Therefore, they had no concern that their needs would not be addressed. It is comparable to a child who has always been provided for by his father without fail. That child will not be concerned that his father will stop providing. When one knows that Hashem has provided for him – even in the most unusual circumstances- that person will not suspect that Hashem will offer him anything that would be beyond his capacity.

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that one merits Torah through Divine Assistance. In order to merit Divine Assistance one must have a relationship with Hashem, which comes about through trust. If one is distracted while studying Torah because of his concern for his material needs, he is failing in an area, which is fundamental to the acquisition of Torah. The Jewish people only merited the Torah because of their unswerving faith in Hashem. If we are to be the proper receptacle to receive the Torah at a special level, we must have that unconditional trust and faith in Hashem.

Rava's level of immersion in Torah had a semblance of the Jews at Sinai because of his trust in Hashem. He was not concerned that his needs would not be fulfilled. It is because of that unswerving faith/trust and that Rava merited an advanced level of Divine Assistance. Contrary to the Sadducee's claim that the Jewish people impulsively declared their acceptance of the Torah with *Naaseh V'nishmah*, it was their level of trust that caused them to accept the Torah unequivocally.

2. Understanding Choice Within the Context of Torah

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* states, “Reb Elazar says, “When the Jewish people said *Naaseh V'nishma* (we will do and we will listen) a heavenly voice

was heard saying, “Who revealed this secret to my children? It is an expression used only by the angels!” As it is alluded to in *Tehillim (Psalms)*, “Bless Hashem O His angels; mighty in strength who do His bidding to obey the voice of His word.” Meaning, the angel first does the Word of G’d and then listens. Similarly, the Jewish people expressed themselves as angels because of the advanced level of spirituality that they had achieved at Sinai. Thus, we see that the Jewish people assumed the posture of *malachim* (angels) at Sinai through their own free will.

Throughout the Torah when the various levels of obligation are delineated, it is stated in the following order: *Chukim* (Statutes), *Mishpatim* (Commandments), and *Mitzvos*. *Chukim (Statutes)* are laws that are not able to be understood within a rational context (such as dietary laws, Red Heifer (parah dumah), prohibition of wool and linen, etc.). *Mishpatim* are rational laws (such as those pertaining to stealing, murder, charity etc.). The Torah introduces different classifications of obligations in this specific order to communicate that even when one performs a so-called “rational” mitzvah, in essence it is being observed as a *Chok*. The fundamental principle of Torah is *Chok*. Meaning the Jew accepts the Torah only because it is the Will of G’d. In essence this is the equivalent of “*Naaseh V’nishmah*.” The only reason the Jewish people merited the Torah and became the nation of G’d was that they accepted it unequivocally without any need to understand its extent or rational value. The significance of the Torah to the Jewish people was only to do the will of G’d.

The Jews at Sinai established themselves as angels. Just as an angel’s function is only to do the Will of G’d without any other motive or personal benefit, identically the Jews at Sinai assumed that level.

We say in the *kiddusha*, “We will sanctify Your Name in this world, just as they (the *malachim*) sanctify it in heaven above.” What relevance do the Jewish people have to the manner in which the angels sanctify the Name of G’d? Since the Jewish people at Sinai accepted the Torah with the declaration of *Naaseh V’nishmah*, they assumed the status of *malachim*. The only people who are qualified to sanctify G’d’s Name as it is done in heaven is the Jewish people because they possess the innate characteristic of angels.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt'l, in his work *Nefesh HaChaim*, cites the Zohar which says that the angels in heaven cannot say *shirah* (the praises of G’d) until the Jewish people from below have said their *kiddusha (shirah)*. The Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin* states, “The

tzaddik (devoutly righteous person) is greater than the *malach*.” Although the angel has greater understanding of G’d, the tzaddik is greater because when he does the Will of G’d it is only through his free choice – which is not the case with the angel (who does not have free choice). The angel was created to perform only the way G’d willed him to function. The Jewish people at Sinai – with the declaration of *naaseh v’nishmah* chose through their own volition to accept G’d’s Torah. Thus, the angels in heaven must wait to sing G’d’s *shirah* until the Jewish people (who are angels at a more advanced level) have sung theirs.

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that one of the reasons Jerusalem was destroyed was because the Jewish people disgraced the “*malachei Elokim* – the angels of G’d.” The Gemara tells us that the *malachei Elokim* is referring to the Torah sages. Rebbe Yishmael tells us that there are 13 methods through which the written law can be interpreted. It is only through this methodology that the interpretation of Torah is considered accurately the Word of G’d. Any other interpretation, which is not limited to these parameters, has no relevance to the divine. Despite the breadth and depth of proficiency of the Torah sage (and the genius that he may possess), he understands that he is bound by a specific structure of interpretation – regardless of his own ability to see it differently. Thus, the Torah sage assumes the posture of the *malach* – who is bound by the Word of G’d.

Acher (Alisha ben Avuya – the rebbe of Reb Meir) was a Torah sage that had reached a unique level of Torah knowledge; however, he became a heretic. The Gemara explains that the reason for this is that he had “an impurity in his heart.” Acher had studied Greek writings, which have a sensual appeal and created a conflict that ultimately caused him to process information differently. He was a man of unlimited ability who wanted to go beyond the parameters that were set by the Torah. He rebelled against the concept of limitation – thus giving up his posture of *malach*. A *malach* functions within the context of what he was created to do. Similarly, a Jew, despite his ability to do differently must live within the limits that are set by the Torah. The Jew must do the Will of G’d only because it is His Will and not because of his rational understanding.

The Maharal of Prague asks, “If the Jewish people had already accepted the Torah at Sinai with the declaration of *Naaseh V’nishmah* why was it necessary for G’d to hold a mountain over their heads to compel them to accept the Torah? The Maharal answers that it is true that the Jewish people had said *Naaseh V’nishmah*; however,

the mountain over their heads was to demonstrate to them that they must accept the Torah because it is the Will of G'd regardless of their own preference.

The world was created only for the sake of the Jewish people who are referred to as "*Reishis* – the first/chosen" – as the Torah it referred to as "*Reishis*." The setting for the giving of Torah at Sinai was one of obligation because G'd was communicating to them that in order to have relevance to the Torah, one must assume the posture of an angel. Just as the angel functions as he does only because G'd Wills it to be so, similarly the Jewish people must accept the Torah because G'd Wills it to be so. Therefore, if the Jew is able to perform within a similar context to that in which the Torah was given at Sinai, (that there is no choice but to do the Will of G'd), he can achieve a level that is even greater than the angel because he has the choice to do otherwise.

3. *The Human Mind Vis-à-vis G'dliness*

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that when Moshe ascended to heaven (to receive the Torah) the angels said to G'd, "Master of the Universe, why is there a mere mortal among us?" G'd responded, "He came to receive the Torah." The angels said to G'd, "This precious treasure that has been hidden away for 974 generations before creation, are you giving it to a mere mortal? What is the value of this undeveloped being that he is even worth of being remembered? Give Your glory to heaven." G'd spoke to Moshe saying, "Answer them." Moshe then responded and refuted the angels' claim by saying, "The Torah states, 'I am the Lord your G'd who has taken you out of Egypt' – were you ever in Egypt? The Torah says, 'You shall honor you father and mother – do you have a father and mother?'" Moshe provided the angels with many examples, which confirmed the fact that the Torah was intended for man and does not have relevance to the heavenly body of angels. Thus, Moshe acquired the Torah for the Jewish people. Why was it necessary for Moshe to respond to the angels' claim when the question was directed to G'd Himself? G'd could have responded to them directly.

The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia* tells us that Rebbe Eliezer, the Chachamim (rabbis) and Rebbe Yehoshua debated the status of an earthenware oven that had become contaminated and subsequently severed into parts. The contamination of an earthenware vessel can be removed only if that vessel is broken and thus loses its status as a vessel. The question was if that vessel that was broken were to be reassembled, would it contain the

original contamination or would it be considered a new vessel, which is uncontaminated. Rebbe Eliezer's position was that the reassembled oven is considered spiritually pure; however, the majority of his colleagues disagreed and ruled that it was spiritually contaminated. After a lengthy exchange between Rebbe Eliezer and the Chachamim, a *Bas Kol* (Heavenly Voice) declared, "The law is according to Rebbe Eliezer." Rebbe Yehoshua stood up and said, "*Lo ba shamayim he* – Torah is not in heaven!" Meaning, the definitive legal rulings of Torah were given to man to decide and not G'd. Thus, the declaration of the *Bas Kol* was irrelevant. It is not that the human mind has greater understanding (G'd forbid) than the Divine Mind; but rather, when the Torah was given at Sinai it was given to be processed and elucidated with the human intellect of the Jew – (within the context of the 13 methods of interpretation).

It was necessary for Moshe to participate in the acquisition of Torah through his response to the angels in order to establish the principle of "*Lo ba shamayim he* – Torah is not in heaven!" The way Torah is acquired is through human initiative. For example, the Vilna Gaon zt'l shared with his closest disciples that although angels were made available to him to reveal the hidden secrets of the Torah, he was not interested. He rejected the offer from the angels. The Vilna Gaon said that if he has the capacity and ability to derive from the Torah the information that would be transmitted to him by the angels, he preferred to use his own initiative to bring that about. This is based on the principle of "*Lo ba shamayim he*." Torah was given to the Jewish people to toil and understand through their own initiative and intellect.

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that if a person toils sufficiently in Torah he will come upon its truth. Although the human mind processes the Torah with its own intellect; nevertheless, one succeeds only through Divine Assistance.

Chazal tell us that at Sinai, G'd brought down heaven to earth. Why was this necessary? He could have remained in heaven and communicated the Torah from there. What is the symbolism of bringing heaven to earth? Before the sin of Adam, physical existence was meant to accommodate G'd's Presence and the purity of the world was at such a level that it was able to contain G'd's Presence (no less than heaven could). However, because of the sin of Adam he had introduced a level of spiritual contamination into existence that made it unfit for the Divine Presence. It was only later when the Jewish people were commanded to build the Mishkan that G'd's Presence

was accommodated in their midst. The Mishkan was a microcosm that was symbolic of all existence. G'd's entering into that location was a semblance of the initial intent of Creation. When the Torah was given at Sinai, the Jewish people were reinstated to the state of pre-sin of Adam. Thus, G'd's Presence was able to descend again into this existence. This was the symbolism of G'd's bringing heaven to earth at Sinai.

Initially, before the sin, the extent of Adam's grasp was touching upon the unlimited. As Chazal tell us before the sin, Adam was able to see from one end of world to the other. He had a level of clarity that there was nothing occluded from his understanding. Thus, the mind of man initially was the mechanism used to process spirituality. The intent of creation was that Torah should not be in heaven because of man's special ability.

The way one acquires Torah is only through toiling and applying oneself on a continuous basis. We pray to G'd, "Give us a portion in Your Torah." It is true G'd gives us our portion of Torah however to be worthy of that acquisition is only through our own efforts.

4. The Innate Characteristic of G'd

The Torah tells us that the Levym were designated to redeem the *Bechorim* (The First Born). **"Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Behold! I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel, in place of every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine.'**" After this process was completed the Levym were designated to assist the Kohanim (Priests) as the officiants of G'd. The First Born were originally designated by G'd to be His officiants (as Kohanim); however, because of their involvement with the *Chet HaEgil* (The Sin of the Golden Calf) they were disqualified. Since the Levym were not tainted with the impurity of idolatry, they retained that special relationship with G'd.

Why was the First Born initially more qualified to be the Kohen? What is the innate characteristic of the *Bechor* (First Born) that makes him special? The Torah states that on the Festival of Shavuot one must begin bringing the first of the newly ripened fruits (*Bekurim* – from the same word as *Bechorim*) to the Temple Mount for G'd to be given to the Kohen. At the Temple Mount, the *Bekurim* must be given to the Kohen. At the time of the ceremony (the *Bekurim*), the one who brings the new fruits must declare his gratitude to G'd for the land that was given to bring forth this produce. Subsequently he

prostrated himself in order to negate himself in the presence of G'd.

Rabbeinu Bachya, in his introduction to the Portion of *Ki Savo* (where the Mitzvah of *Bikurim* is mentioned), explains that this process involves bringing the new fruits that are *Reishis* (*first*), to the location that is *Reishis* (*The Temple Mount – which is the most special location*), for G'd who is the *Reishis Kol* (Beginning of everything). Then it is given to the Kohen (who is *Reishis because he was chosen to be the officiant of G'd*). Rabbeinu Bachya is saying that there is a single thread, which weaves through the entire *Bikurim* ritual that reflects the concept of *Reishis*.

The Torah is revealing to us that anything, which reflects the characteristic of *Reishis*, has an innate holiness and special status because it possesses the innate characteristic of G'd - who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that has a commonality with G'd can be associated with Him. The *Bechor* (the First Born) innately shares the characteristic of being *the* first, since he is the first child to open his mother's womb. Thus sharing this innate characteristic of G'd (of being first) allows him to have a special relationship with Him. However, because the *Bechorim* became tainted with the *Chet HaEgil* they no longer qualified to have that special relationship. The Levym, on the other hand, who were unique because they were the only ones who did not succumb to the *Chet HaEgil*, assumed the status of *Reishis* (unique/ one of kind). Thus, they assumed the characteristic of G'd which is unique and one of a kind-qualifying them to be the officiants.

The Midrash tells us that the letters of the word "*B'Heboram*" are the same letters as Avraham. The Maharal of Prague explains that the word "*B'Heboram*" which means, "And He (G'd) created them (existence)" has the same letters as Avraham to indicate that Avraham himself is the beginning of a new existence within creation. The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Avraham was the first human being to refer to G'd as "*Adni* (*Master*)." The commentators point out that although Adam had referred to G'd as "*Adni* (*Master*)" it was only because he was the handiwork of G'd that he recognized G'd as the Master. Avraham, on the other hand, was born into a pagan world where G'd's existence was unknown; despite this, he was able to recognize G'd as the Master. According to this understanding, Avraham also possesses a uniqueness- being the first human to recognize G'd's existence- *Reishis*. This is why G'd refers

to Avraham as, “My beloved” because he possessed this commonality with G’d.

Reb Meir Simcha z’tl cites a verse that refers to Avraham as the “*Navone*” (Perceptive and insightful one) and to Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe as “*Chacham*” (One who is a repository of knowledge). Reb Meir Simcha z’tl explains that Avraham is referred to as *Navone* because he was able to perceive G’d’s Omnipotence despite the lack of His obvious presence. However, Yitzchok and Yaakov were initially made aware of G’d’s Presence through the teaching of their father and were only able to advance themselves spiritually because of that previous foundation. Therefore, they are referred to as “*Chacham*.”

After Avraham defeated the four kings, Malki Tzedek (Shem, the son of Noach who is referred to as Kohen) came to offer Avraham bread and wine to restore his strength after the battle. Malki Tzedek then blessed Avraham. At this moment, the Midrash tells us that G’d transferred the *Kahuna* status (the Priesthood) from the other descendents of Shem to the descendents of Avraham. Avraham merited this new status of Kohen because he possessed the characteristic of *Reishis*. He was the only human being in all existence who was willing to die for the sake of G’d and proclaim His Omnipotence.

5. What is the Essence of the Jewish People?

The Torah states, “**You (the Jewish people) shall be holy because I your G’d am holy.**” The *Yalkut* explains an application of this concept is found in the verse stated in the Book of Devarim “And you are attached to G’d.” Yirmiyah the Prophet says, “Just as one’s belt is attached to one’s waist so too are the Jewish people attached to G’d.” The *Yalkut* continues, “G’d said to the Jewish people, “I am not like the mortal king who does not permit his subjects to carry his name (which would be punishable by death). You (the Jewish people) carry my Name.” The *Midrash* continues to discuss the various ways G’d is identified and how the Jewish people are identified in a similar manner. For example, G’d is referred to as *Elokim* (an appellation for G’d) and G’d called the Jewish people by His appellation. As it is stated in the verse in *Tehillim* (Psalms), “I have said that you (the Jewish people) are *Elokim*.” G’d is called *Chacham* (wise) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Chachamim*. G’d is referred to as *Dodi* (Beloved) and He refers to the Jewish people as beloved. G’d is identified as *Chassid* (scrupulously Pious) and He refers to His people as the scrupulously pious. G’d is referred to as *Kadosh* (holy)

and He refers to the Jewish people as *Kadoshim* (holy). What is the significance of identifying the Jewish people with the many appellations of G’d Himself?

Tana d’vei Eliyahu (teachings of Eliyahu the Prophet) states that every Jew must say, “When will my accomplishments be comparable to the accomplishments of my forbearers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?” Some commentators explain the reason one must aspire to the accomplishments of nothing less than our forefathers (and not to people of lesser dimension) is that one must set his goals at the most advanced level in order to go farther. However, we are able to explain this passage of the *Tana d’vei Eliyahu* differently.

The Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos* tells us that Jewish people possess three innate qualities: they are merciful, have shame and perform acts of loving-kindness. These qualities exist within the Jew because they are passed down to us from Avraham our Patriarch. The Jewish people are the spiritual heirs of their forefathers and thus possess the innate characteristics and qualities exemplified by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They are part of our spiritual gene pool. The spiritual potential of the Jew goes beyond ordinary limits only because of his relevance to his forbearers. It is only because the Jew descends from the holy Patriarchs that he has unlimited spiritual potential. Therefore, one must aspire to the accomplishments of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov because his potential in this regard is defined by their accomplishments. One cannot achieve the same level as our Patriarchs; nevertheless one must aspire to it because we are a semblance of who they were.

The Jewish people may think that they are no different from any other nation. To this G’d says that the Jewish people are truly unique. He identifies them with many of His own appellations (Wise, Pious, Beloved, Holy, etc.). Since G’d identifies the Jew as such, it is evident that the Jew possesses these inherent qualities and characteristics. He possesses a semblance of G’d’s Wisdom because G’d chooses to refer to the Jew as *Chacham*.

The Jew must understand and appreciate who he is. If the Jew is able to value and understand his intrinsic ability, he will be able to appreciate his potential.

At Sinai when G’d identified the Jewish people as “My kingly, priestly and holy people,” after they had said, “*Naaseh V’nishmah* – we will do and we will listen,” He was revealing to them that they are inherently kingly,

priestly and holy. It was only because they possessed the potential for these qualities that they were able to accept the Torah unequivocally with the declaration of “*Naaseh V'nishmah.*”

G'd commands the entire Jewish people, saying, “You must be holy, because I am holy.” This is to communicate to every Jew that he has relevance to G'd's holiness because of his unique commonality with Him. How does one hone and appreciate these special characteristics? The tool that was gifted to us for this specific purpose is the Torah itself. It is through the study of Torah that one is able to achieve and appreciate his potential.

6. Discerning Between the Sinai Experience and Purim

The Torah states, “**They stood at the foot of the mountain.**” The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos explains that when the Torah states, “They stood under the mountain (*tachtis ha hahar*)” it does not mean “at the foot of the mountain” but rather “under the mountain.” Meaning, that G'd held the mountain over their heads “like a barrel and He said to them: If you accept the Torah you will live; however, if you do not, there you will be buried.” The Gemara continues, “Because of the manner in which the Jews accepted the Torah – under duress and coercion – it is to be made known that qualitatively speaking, the Jews should not have the same degree of culpability as the one who accepts the Torah wholeheartedly.” Raba however state, “Nevertheless at the time of Achashveirosh (Purim) the Jewish people reaffirmed their acceptance of the Torah. It was an acceptance out of love. As it is stated in the Megillah of Esther - ‘They fulfilled it and accepted it upon themselves.’” Seemingly, the need for the Jewish people to reaffirm their acceptance of the Torah at the time of Purim seems to be difficult.

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us that if one is coerced to relinquish/accept something but is compensated for his compliance, it is considered a valid transaction. At Sinai G'd had told the Jewish people that if they accept the Torah, the world would continue and they would have their lives. Despite the fact they were coerced to accept, the Jewish people were compensated for their acceptance – with their lives/existence. Thus, it is a valid transaction and there is no need for a future reaffirmation of the original acceptance. If this is so, then why does the Gemara tell us that because of the circumstance of coercion at Sinai, the Jews have a lesser degree of

culpability? What was the value of the reaffirmation of Purim, which was out of love?

The experience of Sinai/the time of our accepting of our Torah was in fact a valid transaction. However, qualitatively speaking it was not the same had they accepted the Torah out of love. The Gemara states, “If one performs a mitzvah for its own sake (l'shmah – proper intent) the Torah acts as a life potion – and he will merit having long days (eternal share in the World to Come). However if one performs a mitzvah not for its own sake but rather in a “left-handed” manner (with an awkwardness) the Torah acts as a death potion.” Although the experience at Sinai had value, because the Jewish people were compensated with their lives, qualitatively speaking it does not represent the ultimate life potion. (However, the Jewish people definitely merited a share in the world to come).

When the Jewish people reaffirmed their commitment to the Torah out of love on Purim, their mitzvah involvement assumed a more advanced level of value. It was only after they had seen the miracle of Purim- that the decree of Haman that every Jewish man women and child be annihilated was overturned at the last moment, did they reaffirm their acceptance of Torah out of love. When the Jewish people understood and appreciated the love that G'd had for them, and did not allow them to go into oblivion, they accepted the Torah out of love. The Jewish people thus became greater beneficiaries of their accomplishments in Torah.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the Second Temple (which came after the event of Purim), prophecy ended. During the time of the Second Temple, the Jewish people relied on tradition as the basis for the authenticity of the Torah. This was the Oral and Written Law being Divine. Prior to this period, the divinity of the Oral Law was unquestioned because of the existence of prophecy. However, during the Second Temple Period the Sadducees (a sect of Jews) denied the authenticity of the Oral Law. This posed a threat to the Jewish people because the entire Torah could have been undermined. It was only now (after the reaffirmation of the Torah) that the Torah assumed a new level of value, that it came under attack.

When one fulfills the mitzvos out of love and not as a burden, qualitatively speaking he is a greater beneficiary of his accomplishments. However if one only fulfills the mitzvos as a burden to be dispensed with, then

he will not merit the proper level of spirituality that was meant to be.

7. *The Essence of Shavuos*

There is some degree of symbolism associated with each of the Holidays/Festivals. On Rosh Hashanah we blow the Shofar, which reminds G'd of the merit of the Akeidah (the binding of Yitzchak) and thus silences of satan's prosecution of the Jewish people. On Yom Kippur we repent and afflict ourselves by assuming the posture of heavenly angels accepting upon ourselves the five areas of deprivation. On Succos we commemorate the Clouds of Glory that protected us for forty years in the desert, with the Succah. We also take the four species, which symbolize the four segments of the Jewish people being united as one. On Pesach (Passover), we partake of the Pascal lamb and we eat matzah symbolizing the transition from bondage to freedom. However, regarding the Festival of Shavuos, "the time of the giving of our Torah" there is no symbolism whatsoever associated with this important day. It is customary to study Torah the entire night of Shavuos; however, this is only a custom and not a law. A Jew is obligated to study Torah every available moment throughout the year.

One is obligated to count the days of the Omer (Sefiras Ha'Omer) from Pesach to Shavuos. One counts forty-nine days concluding with the fiftieth, which is Shavuos – the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Chinuch explains the philosophical aspect and understanding of the counting of the Sefira. He writes, "The counting of Sefira is from the time of the exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. We count in anticipation of that special moment which takes place 50 days from the time we begin counting. Just as the slave, who works in the sun longs and thirsts for the moment that he will have the relief of the shade, so too is our counting towards the giving of the Torah at Sinai." Thus, Shavuos cannot be commemorated through a symbol. The essence of the Festival is the "feeling" of being privileged to be taken as G'd's people through the receiving of the Torah. This can only be experienced by the individual who truly values his Jewishness and his relationship with G'd. This is the value and importance of the counting of the Sefira to Shavuos.

We say in our morning prayers, "Fortunate are we because of our good portion! How pleasant is our lot and how beautiful is our inheritance!" These statements are more than mere words. A Jew should feel fortunate and privileged to have been chosen from among all of the

nations of the world to be G'd's people – the people who were given the Torah. The Mishna in Tractate Shabbos states, "All Jewish people are considered princes." The Torah refers to the Jewish people as "A kingly, priestly, and holy people." This feeling of being privileged should be experienced as a reality by every Jew.

On Succos we dwell in the succah to commemorate the reality of being protected by the Clouds of Glory. On Pesach we eat the matzah to commemorate the reality of leaving Egypt in haste. The reality of Shavuos is the sense and feeling of being privileged. That reality is one that exists on an individual basis and cannot be symbolized. Each person will experience the anticipation and excitement of receiving the Torah to the extent of his own capacity to internalize the reality of being chosen to receive G'd's "most prized possession."

The only way a Jew could truly experience his Judaism is through the Torah itself. The pride of feeling special as a Jew comes not from wearing Jewish symbols or participating in political/humanitarian causes; but rather, it is from immersing oneself and actualizing the Torah itself. The blessing recited on the Torah states, "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G'd, King of the universe, Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah..." Our privileged status from among the nations of the world is indicated by the fact that G'd gave us, and no other nation, His Torah. Shavuos is a time of experiencing the privileged feeling of being taken as G'd's people through His Torah.

The festival of Succos is a seven-day holiday. The day that follows the seven-day period of Succos is (Shemini) Atzeres. The Gemara tells us that although Shemini Atzeres is juxtaposed to the Festival of Succos, which seems to indicate that it is an extension of the holiday, it is considered an independent festival. On Shemini Atzeres we no longer dwell in the succah or take the four species. The Yalkut explains that in fact Shemini Atzeres should have been celebrated fifty days after Succos- similar to Shavuos following Pesach. However if that were the case Shemini Atzeres would fall out in the middle of winter and cause hardship for the Jew to return to Jerusalem in order to visit the Temple. G'd had mercy on the Jewish people and allowed us to celebrate (Shemini) Atzeres immediately after Succos, since we were already in Jerusalem. After sitting in the succah for seven days commemorating being protected and surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, we celebrate an additional day with G'd – (Shemini Atzeres). Shavuos is also referred to by the Torah as "Atzeres" which means to

“hold back.” Chazal tell us that after seven days of Succos, G’d says to the Jewish people, “Please remain with Me an additional day because the parting for Me is difficult.” “Atzeres” reflects G’d’s love and desire to have an intimate relationship with the Jewish people.

If G’d wants to keep the Jew close to Him on “Atzeres” – on Shavuos should we not all feel privileged? If one is able to internalize and experience the privilege of being a Jew and performing mitzvos similar to the slave who anticipates the moment that he will be relieved by the shade, then one will be able to experience the essence of Shavuos. No symbol can encapsulate that feeling.

8. Tues

Prior to receiving the Torah at Sinai, the Torah states, **“They journeyed from Rephidim and arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the Wilderness; and Israel encamped (*vayichan*) there, opposite the mountain.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the Torah uses the term “*vayichan* – encamped” in the singular form rather than the plural to indicate that the Jewish people gathered opposite the mountain like a single person with a “single heart.” The Jewish people were united in a manner that reflected the unity of G’d. Establishing this commonality with G’d was a prerequisite to receiving the Torah.

The Torah tells us that in order to be taken out of Egypt the Jewish people needed to circumcise themselves and slaughter the Pascal lamb/goat. The goat was one of the deities worshiped by the Egyptians. The Midrash tells us that on the Shabbos before Passover, the Jewish people had gathered the goats that were to be brought as the sacrifice four days in advance to have them checked to be free of any blemish. When the Egyptians had entered the homes of the Jewish people and seen that the goat (their deity) was tied to