

SHAVUOS

תשפ"ב

Shavuos is a re-enactment of kabbolas haTorah. But unlike the Seder night on Pesach, we don't pretend we are actually standing on Har Sinai. We are not on that level. But we are asked by Hashem to reaccept the Torah again every year on Shavuos.

When Klal Yisroel reaccept the Torah on Shavuos, it is a major event for the entire creation. Rashi explains why the Torah begins with the word Bereishis when really it should have been another word. Chazal tell us that the world was created for the Torah and for Klal Yisroel who Hashem calls 'reishis'. Chazal tell us that if Klal Yisroel did not accept the Torah on the 6th of Sivan, the world would have reverted to the nothingness and void that existed before creation.

What does this mean?

Hashem didn't just create a world and then figure out what He wanted to do with it. From the beginning, the world had a spiritual purpose, and it had a blueprint call the Torah. The world was intended to be an expression of the Torah as it translated in physical reality. The plan was never that all of humanity would keep the Torah. Only a small group of people would keep the Torah and be chosen to be Hashem's representatives and show the rest of the world that the entire creation has a spiritual purpose.

Hashem waited 2000 years for that individual who would found His chosen nation. Avrohom Ovinu appeared on the scene, and then Yitzchok, but Klal Yisroel didn't start until Yaakov Ovinu – who achieved a level of perfection which made him worthy of giving birth to the shevotim of Klal Yisroel.

The gemara says there were 2000 years of tohu, 2000 years of Torah, and 2000 years of Moshiach. There were the first 2000 years of history where the world was being suspended by chesed – not really justifying its existence until Avrohom came along and discovered Hashem. Then another 2000 years from Avrohom till Ravina and Rav Ashi finish Talmud Bavli. This is the 2000 years of Torah where the Torah became formalized and solidified.

This is not just the history of Klal Yisroel. This is the history of the entire world.

Then we have the last 2000 years when we are waiting for history to reach its end and the arrival of Moshiach.

But the world did not really justify its existence until there was that small group of people out of the entire human population who stood at the foot of Har Sinai 3500 years ago. Hashem said to us that if we accept the Torah at that moment, there will be a justification for the world's existence. If not, I'll start from scratch. And Klal Yisroel said naaseh v'nishmah.

Every year on Shavuos, an amazing thing happens – our acceptance of the Torah is what renews the justification of the existence of the world. The gemara says that the days before Shavuos are a dangerous time to undergo medical procedures. The world is being held in abeyance until we accept the Torah again and there is a danger.

Chazal say unanimously that the Yom Tov of Shavuos must be half physical enjoyment and half avodas Hashem. Why? Shavuos is a special Yom Tov. If it hadn't been for that day of kabbolas haTorah we would just be like all the other Arabs living in the Middle East. We wouldn't be an exalted people. We do something unique on Shavuos. We mix together the body and the neshomo. It is a unique avodoh

that only a Jew can do. Non-Jews approach spirituality as something completely divorced from the physical. They don't get married, and they abstain from all kinds of enjoyment in order to feel spiritual. But a Jew is able to use the enjoyment of the physical world in his avodas Hashem. He can train the body to help his neshomo fulfill its spiritual goals. He doesn't have to deny the world.

The Ramban asks, why do we have 613 mitzvos, most of which can only be done with one's body? Wouldn't it make more sense to have a religion that focuses only on achieving spiritual experiences like davening and fasting and contemplating Hashem and heavenly matters? He explains that a maloch is a neshomo without a body. An animal is a body without a neshomo. A human being is both neshomo and body. If we only focus on our neshomo and deny our body, or if we only focus on the animalistic body and ignore our neshomo, we are denying our unique existence and our unique abilities to incorporate the body into the avodoh of the neshomo. This is why we have all these mitzvos which teach us how to integrate the body with the neshomo.

We are unique on this planet. We tell the world how to achieve spiritual goals within a physical world.

Hashem didn't just spring all this on Klal Yisroel at kabbolas haTorah. He first told Moshe to send a message to Klal Yisroel that they will become Hashem's representatives and a holy nation. But sending messages through Moshe is not enough. All of Klal Yisroel – for at least one time in history, have to hear Hashem speak directly to them when they accept the Torah.

Let us begin the gemara Shabbos to understand kabbolas haTorah a little more deeply.

The gemara says with every word Hashem uttered, the neshomo of every Jew flew out of his body. We have to understand that up to this point, Klal Yisroel have been slaves. Now they are achieving the highest level of nevuah! In order to do this, they needed to go through a rapid process of growth from yetzias mitzrayim until Shavuos.

The first level of nevuah was achieved at kriyas Yam Suf. They saw with total clarity how Hashem runs the entire natural world with reward and punishment with the finest precision. They understood it and were able to point to it with their finger. They reached a level higher than any other novi. How was this? Because usually, nevi'im would get into a trance and their body would stop functioning in order to receive Hashem's communication. Their neshomo would get disconnected from their body. But Klal Yisroel in the Yam Suf were walking through it consciously while experiencing the nevuah!

Now at Har Sinai, when they hear the first word of the Aseres Hadibros, their neshomos automatically leave their bodies and Hashem has to revive them before they hear the next dibroh. It was like techiyas hameisim when Hashem brings the neshomo back into the body. Why is Hashem doing this? Hashem is insisting that they remain conscious with their body and neshomo together when they hear Hashem speaking to them. Hashem wants Klal Yisroel to confront Hashem directly and make a fully conscious acceptance of the Torah.

We cannot bring ourselves to the level of re-enacting this experience of confronting Hashem directly like our ancestors at Har Sinai. Still, every year on Shavuos, we are consciously accepting the Torah upon ourselves again with the body and neshomo fully integrated. We do this because this experience was passed over to us by our fathers and

grandfathers, and Chazal say each of our neshomos were at Sinai too.

The gemara describes the struggle Moshe had with the malochim when he went up to shomayim to bring down the Torah. The malochim complained that human beings are too limited and imperfect to be worthy of receiving the Torah. It has only been 26 generations since the creation of Odom Horishon. Let them develop themselves for a thousand more generations until they achieve the required level of perfection. Then they can receive the Torah!

This is a serious challenge.

Hashem tells Moshe to grasp the kisei hakavod and give the malochim a response. Moshe answers back with the following argument. It says in the Aseres Hadibros that Hashem is the One who took you out of Egypt. Was any maloch in Egypt? It says not to worship idols, not to murder or steal. Does any maloch have any temptation to do any of these aveiros? No. So the Torah isn't for malochim. It is for human beings.

It is a wonderful answer. But it's too obvious. Why does Moshe have to hold on to the kisei hakavod to get it?

The real question the malochim were asking is that the Torah is so vast and so demanding that it is humanly impossible to keep all of it perfectly. 613 mitzvos? With all the thousands of dikdukei halacha that surrounds each one, how can a mere human being with all his taivos and yetzirim live up to such a demanding life? The answer is that it's true. Without any connection to Hashem, it is impossible. But by grasping the kisei hakavod – by connecting to Hashem and bringing Him into your life, Hashem can give you the strength to withstand all the trials and difficulties involved in keeping the Torah.

I tell people who have never experienced Shabbos that on Shabbos, everything stops. I'm completely unavailable to anyone and disconnected from the rest of the world. They think I'm crazy. Keeping away from arayos and keeping Taharas Hamishpocho? How is it possible? And they are right. It isn't possible if you aren't connected to Hashem. The yetzer is too strong. But by being connected to Hashem, you have the ability to surpass your normal limitations and resist temptations. This is what Moshe Rabbeinu answered, but only after Hashem told him to hold on to the kisei hakavod. The world is filled with so much garbage. And when you fill yourself up with all that garbage, you can't stand up to tests and temptations.

This idea translates into many different areas. The world has gone crazy. It doesn't take too much time to realize that it is happening before our eyes. What gives us the ability to stay sane when the rest of the world is going crazy? It is by holding on to the Torah and building yourself in the direction the Torah wants you to develop. It's hard work. But the Torah makes you a more perfect human being.

What does kabbolas haTorah mean in our lives?

The gemara says that the Soton asked Hashem: where is the Torah? Hashem says He has sent it down to Planet Earth. It is no longer here with Me.

The Soton is the yetzer horo. He has succeeded in making most people become obsessed with taivoh. He searched the entire Earth and he couldn't find the Torah. So he went back to shomayim to report that the Torah just isn't there!

Hashem created the entire creation with the Torah, but He gave up the Torah. He gave it to us. It is not controlled by any physical reality.

The Soton went to Moshe and asked him whether he had the Torah. Moshe denied it by saying, "Who am I that Hashem would give me the Torah?" The Soton accused him of lying. Moshe explained that I don't have the Torah. It isn't a possession of mine that I can truly say I have it. It is the most precious thing in the world, how can I claim it's mine?

Hashem responded by saying that because of your humility, the Torah will be called "Toras Moshe". This is the idea behind the story of the tanur shel achnai. The chachomim and Rabbi Eliezer were having a dispute about the tumoh status of a certain type of clay oven after it is broken. The chachomim ruled one way and Rabbi Eliezer ruled differently. Rabbi Eliezer was so convinced he was right that he predicted all kinds of supernatural things will happen in order to prove it. And they happened! The river flowed backward, trees got uprooted and flew away! Even a bas kol rang out from shomayim saying Rabbi Eliezer is correct! But the chachomim stood up and declared the Torah is not in shomayim. Hashem gave it to the chachomim on Earth to decide what the authentic version of the Torah is.

The problem is people take this gemara to say we can make the Torah into whatever we want. Hashem gave us human beings control over it! The Rambam at the beginning of Hilchos Mamrim tells us that the Beis Din Hagadol in Yerusholayim is the final authority for what is Torah. But at the end of the day they are human beings! Maybe they won't do an honest job? Maybe that will have an agenda and will twist the Torah to fit their agenda? No. Hashem guaranteed that Chazal only have one agenda – to try to find the truth about what the Torah says. They will never impose an external agenda on the Torah.

They may not always be successful to arrive at the Torah of Hashem in shomayim, as we see from the gemara. But when we submit our will to the will of Hashem, and we want to find out what He wanted with the Torah, we will arrive at the authentic understanding. This becomes the definitive version of the Torah.

We don't just open up a gemara and start analyzing it on our own to say this is the pshat. We first look at how Rashi understood the gemara and how the Ri and Rabbeinu Tam understood the gemara. Then we develop our own understanding from their vantage point. We don't have the authority to make our own understanding of Torah just from ourselves. Each generation of chachomim submitted themselves to the ones who taught them Torah, and they built their understanding on their foundation. It is a mesorah from generation to generation built on tremendous humility. We use our mind to try to understand the Torah. We only control the Torah if we don't come to it with any personal agendas.