Points to Ponder

Shavuos 5779

**Preparing for Torah - Rav Yechiel Yitzchak Perr Shlita** noted that while Torah has a lot of Chochama (wisdom) in it, the Chochma is not the totality of Torah. Torah wants something more from us. It was us. Torah wants our commitments, our deepest striving and our desires. Hashem wants us the way we are even if we are not “the best.” But he wants us to commit ourselves to Him. That is what love is -- He wants us.

**The name Shavuos** - It is interesting that the name Shavuos refers both to weeks and to oaths. What is the connection? **Rav Bernard Weinberger ztl** notes that the Talmud (Shevuos 21b) notes that we are sworn from Har Sinai to keep the word of Hashem. In addition, Hashem is sworn not to change us or make us into a Temurah and exchange us for a different nation. Hence, the double name -- for the 2 oaths from Har Sinai that this holiday commemorates.

**אקדמות Akdamus –** One of the defining moments of the early morning davening on Shavuos day is the recitation of Akdamus. Why are we introducing the leining of Matan Torah with a human construction – a long poem? **Rav Michael Taubes Shlita** suggested that now that we have prepared for, and received the Torah, we receive an opportunity and an obligation in properly interpreting it and perpetuating it. We also are accepting the responsibility to adhere to its lofty standards. After the poetic descriptions of the greatness of Hashem and the songs of his Malachim, which we do not always get, we turn to a description of the Jewish nation and their (our) commitment to serve and praise Hashem despite the world’s attempt to dissuade us from doing so. This trip – from things so other-worldly and making them relevant in THIS world, is the power of Torah in general, and a theme that runs through the holiday of Shavuos.

**בשבועותיכם Your Shavuos (Bamidbar 28:26) –** In the Maftir of Shavuos we note that we offer a new Mincha to Hashem on our Shavuos. Why is Shavuos referred to as ours (i.e. in the plural)? **Rav Shabsi Rosenthal Shlita** suggested that when one does an accounting from an outside firm, the audit is sterile and the numbers recorded and generated. However, when one is the CEO or CFO of a business, the accounting becomes a personal experience to know how one is doing. The same is true when one counts Sefirah. It is a personal experience for each person to know how one is doing and where one’s personal progress is. When we culminate, with Shavuos, we can individually experience the holiday in a totally different place and on a high.

I**t will be a Mikra Kodesh to you (VaYikra 23:21)** - Why does the Torah specify that it will be “to you” only in regard to Shmini Atzeres and Shavuos? **Rav Gifter ztl.** explained that when it comes to Shavuos which celebrates Matan Torah a person might think that the proper thing to do is to be as separate from Olam HaZeh as possible -- therefore the Torah says no. In fact, Torah was brought into this world at this time in order for one to find Torah guidance even in issues of the Guf. The same is true for Shimini Atzeres -- lest one think that after the Yamim Tovim one needs to be ascetic, it is not so.

**מעשה מרכבה (הפטרה ליום א   Maaseh Merkava –** The Haftorah of the first day of Shavuos describes the composition and workings of the heavenly throne and the Malachim who surround it. The concepts are ones that are far from human comprehension. One concept is the idea that the Malachim of the Merkava have a single straight leg. **Rashi** notes that a Malach does not need joints because he is always standing – he gives up his growth for the growth of the will of Hashem. **Rav Pam ztl.** likened the Rebbe to a Malach meaning that in order to be successful at his task, he sometimes becomes an Oimed in his own spiritual growth or so it seems. However, when the Rebbe considers the opportunity to grow from his Talmidim’s questions and experiences, he too, discovers a growth within himself as well as the inspiration to go even further. Part of the Matan Torah experience is the recognition that our Mechanchim and Morot are real angels in our midst.

**כפה עליהם הר כגיגית He held the mountain over their heads –** It seems odd that the Torah needed to be forced onto the people since they said “Naaseh V’Nishma”. However, the **Midrash Tanchuma (Noach)** explains that the forcing was on accepting the Torah She’Baal Peh. The people readily accepted Torah She’b’Ksav. **Rav Asher Weiss Shlita** explains that at Maamad Har Sinai the experience was so majestic that the people were experiencing Hashem like the Malachim do – and they did so willingly – putting Naaseh first which earned them 2 crowns (See Shabbos 88a). Rav Asher adds that Hashem lifted the mountain because he wanted the people to know that the Torah was not another gift like the spoils of Mitzayim or the Mon – it was a responsibility and a covenant that they still accepted willingly and with love and joy. **Rav Yonasan Sacks Shlita** added that the ultimate beauty of the Jewish nation is that we serve Hashem with love like servants who serve without the desire to receive reward. This relationship was solidified on Shavuos at the time of Matan Torah.

**Megillas Rus –** In a famous midrash, the Gemara(Bava Basra 91b) notes that the reason why this Megillah was written. After all, it contains no rules of Tumah and Tahara and no nuances in Halacha. Rather, says the Gemara, it was written to tell us what the reward for Gemillas Chessed is. **Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht ztl.** would ask us that if this is indeed the theme, what is the Chessed of Orpah? After all, she is promised Chessed from Naomi? Rav Goldvicht would then recognize that the Gemara rewards her for the 40 steps she took with Naomi, with 40 days that Goliath  was terrorizing the Jewish nation. Why is this a reward? Rav Goldvicht would remind us that Chessed has a negative side to it. That negative side comes out when the person appears as though the Chessed is selfless but the Chessed is really self-serving. Initially it appears as Chessed, and is strong – but then it is seen as Chessed Shel Tumah and is open to rejection.

**Naomi told her to wash and dress up (3:3-4)** - How could Naomi have told Rus to act in a manner that was so opposite the rules of Tzniyus? **Rav Shimon Schwab ztl.** suggested that Naomi knew that the messianic line was destined to come from this union but that it would need to correct the sin of Yehuda whose child Peretz still has the stain of the circumstances of his conception in his lineage. By sending Rus to Boaz, the descendant of Peretz, who would not act as Yehuda did, Naomi was “correcting” the effect of the sin and setting the stage proper.

**I heard and my innards shuddered (Chabakuk 3:16- second day Haftara) - Rav Pam ztl** noted that the slav brought in the midbar was also sent to supply Talmidei Chachamim with their needs. Once it happened that Rava did not his Slav and when he asked a child about it, the child cited this Possuk which Rava discovered, meant that his lot of Slav only came in the merit of his Rebbe and father in law Rav Chisda and that Rav Chisda had died (See Yoma 75b). Rav Pam noted that not only does a Rebbe make the Talmid, a God-fearing Jew, he also sustains him with his physical needs. It goes without saying that one needs a tremendous amount of respect, awe, thanks and praise for the Rebbe who give his student his entire being .

**Yizkor - Rav Schachter Shlita** would often remind us that Yizkor is not recited on Yom Tov because that is when the Shuls are full and that is the best time for an appeal. Rather, on the last day of a Chag, the coffers of the Tzedaka arms of a community were often bare and when we read the Possuk of Ish K’Matnas Yado, it is a reminder to give tzedaka. We have introduced the concept of Yizkor in the days of the Baalei HaTosafos in order to have the giving serve as a Zechus for one’s parents who raised the child with proper attitudes and values regarding sharing assets. We have those not reciting Yizkor leave in order to not let anyone think that the reason some are not davening is because s/he doesn’t believe in the power of prayer.

**Some Questions for your Yom Tov table:**

 1)     The mitzvah of counting the Omer requires one to begin counting the days from the 2nd day of Pesach until the day before Shavuos, which is the 49th day. If one continues counting beyond that point (e.g. with Shavuos being the 50th day), does he violate the Torah prohibition (Devorim 4:2) against adding to the mitzvos?

2)     Rashi writes (19:3) that Hashem instructed Moshe to speak the words He was about to tell him to the women in a soft, calm manner and to the men with a harsh and threatening demeanor. In what way did Moshe do so, as a quick perusal of the following verses seems to indicate that there was no difference in the message given to each, nor are there any intimidating words that inspire fear, and lest one answer that Moshe relayed additional ideas – gentle for the women and sharp for the men – Rashi (19:6) writes that Hashem concluded by commanding Moshe not to add or subtract a word from those written here?

3)     The Medrash (Sifri V’zos HaBeracha 2) relates that before giving the Torah to the Jews, Hashem first offered it to the other nations of the world. Each of them asked what is written in it, to which Hashem responded with the single mitzvah which would be most difficult for the people of that nation to observe. Not surprisingly, they all declined. The Jewish people told Moshe (Shemos 19:8) that everything that Hashem has spoken, na’aseh – we will do. Had they instead asked the same question as the other nations, which mitzvah would have been deemed the most difficult for **them** and presented to **them** to determine the sincerity of their willingness to accept the Torah?

4)     The Gemara in Avodah Zara (2b) relates that before giving the Torah to the Jews, Hashem first presented it to the other nations of the world, all of whom refused to accept it. How could He offer the Torah to them when He promised our forefathers that He would give the Torah and the land of Israel, which goes together with the Torah, to their descendants, and what would have happened had one of the other nations actually chosen to accept the offer?

5)     The Gemara in Shabbos (87a) states that Moshe deduced from 19:10 that he should add an additional day of preparations for the giving of the Torah, which ended up being given on Shabbos. The Gemara in Avodah Zara (3a) teaches that Hashem created the universe on condition that the Jewish people accept the Torah on the 6th day of the week, and if they didn’t, He would return the universe to its pre-Creation state of nothingness. Although they accepted the Torah, how was the condition fulfilled when they didn’t receive the Torah until Shabbos because Moshe added a day to their preparations?

6)     The Gemara in Shabbos (88a) states that when the Jewish people were encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai, Hashem lifted the mountain above them like a barrel and threatened them that if they won’t accept the Torah, sham t’hei kevuraschem – there will be your burial place. The Gemara continues to say that although the Jewish people accepted the Torah, they were able to argue that they shouldn’t be punished for any sins they would commit because they were forced to do so under duress. The Gemara concludes that this changed in the times of the Purim miracle, when they willingly confirmed their acceptance of the Torah. How could they be punished with the destruction of the first Temple if at that point they hadn’t reaccepted the Torah and weren’t held responsible for their sins?

7)     The Medrash (Tehillim 8) states that when the angels objected to the giving of the Torah to mere mortals, they were reminded of the fact that they had violated the prohibition (23:19) against eating meat and milk together when they were guests of Avrohom (Bereishis 18:8). As the meat and milk dishes weren’t cooked together, in what way did the angels transgress a Biblical prohibition?

8)     The Gemara in Shabbos (86b) states that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai on Shabbos, and the Gemara there (87b) also records that the Exodus from Egypt occurred on a Thursday. How can Shavuos be celebrated as the holiday of the giving of the Torah on the 50th day of the Omer when according to the above, the Torah was received on the 51st day of the Omer?

9)     The Gemara in Shabbos (88b) states that each time that the Jewish people heard Hashem say one of the 10 Commandments, their souls left them and He had to miraculously revive them in order to continue. According to the opinion in Niddah (61b) that a person who has died is exempt from performing all mitzvos even after he is revived, were the Jews of that generation required to observe the mitzvos after the completion of the 10 Commandments, and if so on what basis?

10)  Rashi writes (20:1) that Hashem initially said all of the Aseres HaDibros (Ten Commandments) simultaneously, and then stated each one individually because the human ear isn’t capable of understanding two things said at the same time. What was Hashem’s purpose in initially stating the Aseres HaDibros in an incomprehensible manner?

11)  Rashi (20:1) writes that upon hearing each of the 10 Commandments, the Jewish people responded to each positive commandment hen – yes – and lav – no – to each negative one. What did they respond to the mitzvah of Shabbos, about which Rashi writes (20:8) that Hashem said both the positive commandment of zachor – remember – and the negative mitzvah of shamor – safeguard – at the same time?

12)  The Gemara in Nedorim (8a) rules that an oath taken by a person to fulfill a mitzvah has no effect because the person was already sworn to keep all of the mitzvos at Mount Sinai, and an oath cannot take effect in the place of a preexisting oath. If the acceptance of the Jews at Mount Sinai of the Torah is legally considered an oath, why isn’t a person who violates any of the mitzvos punished with lashes for violating the prohibition (20:7) against making a false oath?

13)  Parshas Re’eh contains the mitzvah to ascend to the Beis HaMikdash three times annually on the festivals of Pesach, Shavuos, and Sukkos. In the present day, when there is no Temple, is there still a concept of ascending as close as possible to the Temple Mount on these festivals, and if so, must one actually see the floor of the Temple Mount when doing so?