

# OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHAT BAMIDBAR – SHAVUOT IN ISRAEL • 29 IYAR 5780 MAY 23, 2020 • VOL. 27 NO. 24

## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### The Biggest Shul in the World

*"And the voice of the shofar grew stronger and stronger..." (Shemot 19:19)*

An early memory of mine is standing in shul right at the end of Yom Kippur and having the following fantasy: The person blowing the shofar takes a deep breath and starts to sound the *tekia gedola*, the "great tekia." Stretching his lungs and the length of the shofar blast to the limit, the sound grows louder and louder. Ten seconds pass. Then twenty. Then thirty. The shofar gets louder and louder. A full minute passes. The sound of the shofar is almost deafening. After two full minutes, everyone in the shul realizes that the person playing the shofar is no longer playing the shofar. The shofar is playing him. Louder and louder and louder. The shul starts to vibrate. The dust of ages falls on the *bima* from the chandelier swaying above. The shofar is now playing the shul. The sound has spread outside and cars start to vibrate. The pavement starts to vibrate. The houses, the trees, the earth, the sky, everything is vibrating in sympathy. Everything is sounding this one long *tekia gedola*. Everything in creation is sounding, "Hashem Echad." G-d is One.

The Rambam (Maimonides) says that one should not speculate about the coming of the Mashiach, for no one knows exactly how it will be, until it will be. But if one is allowed a little daydream, this is mine. I had a similar moment of reverie at the Seder this year. Even though the only person who was allowed out onto the streets during the lockdown was Eliyahu HaNavi (Elijah the Prophet), we all went out onto our balconies or

stood by our open windows and sung together: "Ma Nishtanah...Why is this night different?"

Well, this year the answer to that question was a bit of a no-brainer. But, for those few moments I felt, and I'm sure many people felt the same, that the Seder united us all as the Family of Yisrael in a way that no other Seder had ever done. And it didn't stop there. Even during the worst times in the Warsaw ghetto, the shuls and the synagogues never closed. Here we were, with the almost unthinkable situation of no communal prayer. But, in a way, the streets and the courtyards of Jerusalem became the *Batei Knesset*; they became the synagogues. As I stood on my porch, I could hear *Kaddish* coming from this direction, *birkat Kohanim* – the Priestly Blessing – from the other direction, and *Kedusha* – the praise of Hashem that angels utter – coming from a third direction. The shuls hadn't closed. They had just gotten bigger.

*"And the voice of the shofar grew stronger and stronger..." (Shemot 19:19).* There has been much talk that this Corona pandemic presages the coming of Mashiach. I think there may be a mistake here. One of the thirteen principles of a believing Jew is that "Every day I will await him (the Mashiach)." But maybe, if one is allowed to dream a little, on this Shavuot we will hear the great shofar proclaiming from every rooftop and every street and every heart: "Hashem Echad!" "G-d is One!"

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Shabbat 72-78

### Gnat a Mosquito?

*Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "Whatever Hashem created in this world, not one thing was created without a purpose."*

Nothing in Creation is superfluous or "just happens to be there." And not only does everything have a purpose, its purpose is potentially positive in nature. A number of examples are cited in the *gemara*, where seemingly purposeless crawling bugs and flying insects have important specific medicinal qualities. And if nowadays we don't recognize these benefits, it might be best to just admit we don't fully understand the functioning of the forms of matter and energy that are in existence. "He created the fly (*zuv*) for the wasp (*tzirah*)." Rashi explains: If one is stung by a wasp, a fly is ground up and placed there to heal the wound.

In addition to seemingly useless creatures existing for their medicinal benefits, Chazal also teach us that they may also serve as agents for directly meting out Divine punishment. For example, the mosquito can be unleashed to cause great direct distress – aside from its being a disease carrier acting as host for another organism that spreads contagion.

What is an example of an apparently worthless creature serving as Hashem's messenger to serve justice in this world? The infamous Titus, an evil ancient Roman leader and warrior, destroyed the Second Beit Hamikdash. He perpetrated his wickedness from his own free will, and added insult to injury by also *defiling* and *blaspheming* as he carried out the destruction of the holy Sanctuary in Jerusalem. As depicted in the landmark Arch bearing his name in Rome, he stole a variety of holy contents from the Beit Hamikdash to take back to Rome as "souvenirs." On the boat to Rome, Hashem called for a giant wave to sink the ship. Titus then defiantly challenged Hashem to a fight!

Hashem's replied with scorn that He would send the tiniest of His creatures to vanquish Titus. When Titus landed, a mosquito (or gnat) entered his nostril, making its way into his brain. It stayed there for seven years, eating away at Titus' brain and causing him indescribable pain. After his death, his head was cut open, and Rabbi Pinchas ben Aruva was present at the autopsy. He testified that the tiny

mosquito had grown into a substantial bird. (*Gittin 56b*) This true event is a clear example of a seemingly superfluous creature carrying out its Divinely-dictated purpose. (A neurologist in Jerusalem once tried to convince me that this *rasha* was actually suffering from tinnitus – ringing in the ears due to nerve damage. However, after discussing with him the details mentioned in the *gemara* in *Gittin*, I think I managed to convince him otherwise. Or at least he agreed to learn the *gemara* and reconsider his position.)

Speaking of this Italian landmark, a childhood memory has stayed with me that I would like to share with you. As in many newspapers of that time, in our local Washington DC metro newspaper there was a feature called "Ripley's Believe It or Not!" It was a cartoon with a message, supposedly true although surprising to learn. One day I recall seeing a drawing of the Arch and a statement to the effect that "No Jew has ever passed under this Arch." "What!" I thought to myself. "Are Jews not allowed to ever pass through there? Is Rome still so anti-Semitic in the 20th century?" I responded in a manner you might expect from a cynical and incredulous Jewish youth – I asked my Rabbi from *Cheder* how they could publish such a ridiculous claim. My Rabbi answered that, believe it or not, a ban had been proclaimed by the authorities against Jewish passage through the Arch. I inherently believed him as my Torah teacher, who, with my parents, had taught me virtually everything important in life. Nowadays, in the era of Wikipedia, we find, "At an unknown date, a local ban on Jews walking under the Arch was placed on the monument by Rome's Chief Rabbinate. This was rescinded on the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, and at a Chanukah event in 1997 the change was made public." A different Rabbi at the *Cheder* had heard our discussion and offered a different explanation. He said that he was told that there was a religious rule that any Jew who passes under the Arch of Titus automatically is considered as having "converted out" and is no longer a Jew. This second Rabbi claimed that this was the intent of what I saw in the paper. (Readers are invited to share their knowledge and opinions with the author – [Ohr@Ohr.edu](mailto:Ohr@Ohr.edu) or by filling out a contact form at [Ohr.edu](http://Ohr.edu).)

• Shabbat 77b

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# PARSHA OVERVIEW

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The Book of Bamidbar – "In the desert" – begins with G-d commanding Moshe to take a census of all men over age twenty – old enough for service. The count reveals just over 600,000. The *levi'im* are counted separately later on because their service will be unique. They will be responsible for transporting the Mishkan and its furnishings, and assembling them when the nation encamps. The 12 Tribes of Israel, each with its banner, are arranged around the Mishkan in four sections: east, south, west and north. Since Levi is singled out, the tribe of Yosef is split into two tribes, Efraim and Menashe, so there will be four groups of three. When the nation travels, they march in a formation similar to the way they camp.

A formal transfer is made between the first-born and the *levi'im*, whereby the *levi'im* take over the role the first-born would have had serving in the Mishkan if not for the sin of the golden calf. The transfer is made using all the 22,000 surveyed *levi'im* from one month old and up. Only *levi'im* between 30 and 50 will work in the Mishkan. The remaining first-born sons are redeemed with silver, similar to the way we redeem our first-born today. The sons of Levi are divided into the three main families of Gershon, Kehat and Merari (besides the *kohanim* – the special division from Kehat's family). The family of Kehat carried the menorah, the table, the altar and the holy ark. Because of their utmost sanctity, the ark and the altar are covered only by Aharon and his sons, before the *levi'im* prepare them for travel.

## Seven Reasons Why We Read the Megillah of Ruth on Shavuot

1. The events occurred during the harvest season. Shavuot is the "Harvest Festival."
2. Ruth was a convert to Judaism. Conversion is an individual's "*Kabbalat HaTorah*" – "Receiving of the Torah."
3. Ruth the Moabite was permitted to marry Boaz, based on a *drasha* (a teaching of the Oral Law) of the verse, "A Moabite may not marry into the Congregation of Hashem" (Devarim 23:4). This hints at the unity between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.
4. King David was born on Shavuot. The Megillah of Ruth concludes with David's lineage.
5. To teach the greatness of *gemillut chassadim* – acts of loving-kindness.
6. To teach that the Torah is acquired only through affliction and poverty.
7. The name "Ruth" has the numerical value of 606. At Mount Sinai the Jewish People accepted 606 mitzvahs – in addition to the 7 Noachide laws.

**WISHING ALL OUR READERS  
A CHAG SHAVUOT SOMAYACH  
A FESTIVE SHAVUOT HOLIDAY!**

## Questions

1. Why were the Jewish People counted so frequently?
2. What documents did the people bring when they were counted?
3. What determined the color of the tribal flags?
4. What is the difference between an "ot" and a "degel"?
5. How do we see that the Jews in the time of Moshe observed *techum Shabbat* - the prohibition against traveling more than 2,000 *amot* on *Shabbat*?
6. What was the signal for the camp to travel?
7. What was the sum total of the counting of the 12 tribes?
8. Why are Aharon's sons called "sons of Aharon and Moshe"?
9. Who was Nadav's oldest son?
10. Which two people from the Book of Esther does Rashi mention in this week's Parsha?
11. Why did the *levi'im* receive *ma'aser rishon*?
12. Which groups of people were counted from the age of one month?
13. Name the first descendant of Levi in history to be counted as an infant.
14. Who assisted Moshe in counting the *levi'im*?
15. Why did so many people from the tribe of Reuven support Korach in his campaign against Moshe?
16. Why did so many people from the tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun become great Torah scholars?
17. In verse 3:39 the Torah states that the total number of *levi'im* was 22,000. The actual number was 22,300. Why does the Torah seem to ignore 300 *levi'im*?
18. The firstborn males of the Jewish People were redeemed for five *shekalim*. Why five *shekalim*?
19. During what age-span is a man considered at his full strength?
20. As the camp was readying itself for travel, who was in charge of covering the vessels of the *Mishkan* in preparation for transport?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

## Answers

1. 1:1 - They are very dear to G-d.
2. 1:18 - They brought birth records proving their tribal lineage.
3. 2:2 - Each tribe's flag was the color of that tribe's stone in the breastplate of the *kohen gadol*.
4. 2:2 - An "ot" is a flag, i.e., a colored cloth that hangs from a flagpole. A *degel* is a flagpole.
5. 2:2 - G-d commanded them to camp no more than 2,000 *amot* from the *Ohel Moed*. Had they camped farther, it would have been forbidden for them to go to the *Ohel Moed* on *Shabbat*.
6. 2:9 - The cloud over the *Ohel Moed* departed and the *kohanim* sounded the trumpets.
7. 2:32 - 603,550.
8. 3:1 - Since Moshe taught them Torah, its as if he gave birth to them.
9. 3:4 - Nadav had no children.
10. 3:7 - Bigtan and Teresh.
11. 3:8 - Since the *levi'im* served in the *Mishkan* in place of everyone else, they received tithes as "payment."
12. 3:15, 40 - The *levi'im*, and the firstborn of *Bnei Yisrael*.
13. 3:15 - Levi's daughter Yocheved was born while the Jewish People were entering Egypt. She is counted as one of the 70 people who entered Egypt.
14. 3:16 - G-d.
15. 3:29 - The tribe of Reuven was encamped near Korach, and was therefore influenced for the worse. This teaches that one should avoid living near the wicked.
16. 3:38 - The tribes of Yehuda, Yissachar and Zevulun were encamped near Moshe, and were therefore influenced for the good. This teaches that one should seek to live near the righteous.
17. 3:39 - Each *levi* served to redeem a first-born of the Jewish People. Since 300 *levi'im* were themselves firstborn, they themselves needed to be redeemed, and could therefore not redeem others.
18. 3:46 - To atone for the sale of Yosef, Rachels firstborn, who was sold by his brothers for five *shekalim* (20 pieces of silver.)
19. 4:2 - Between the ages of 30 and 50.
20. 4:5 - The *kohanim*.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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## Synonyms in the Hebrew Language

by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

### Old Switcheroo

The Book of Leviticus concludes with a somewhat obscure prohibition known as *temurah* (literally, “replacement”). In a nutshell, this prohibition bans a person from attempting to transfer the holiness of one animal consecrated for sacrificial purposes unto another animal. Should one attempt to effectuate such a transfer of holiness from one animal unto another, then the Torah stipulates that *both* animals become consecrated and must be brought as sacrifices (Lev. 27:10, 27:33). In formulating this prohibition, the Torah uses two different verbs to denote “switching” the holiness between animals: *chalifah* and *temurah*. This article explores the connotations of those two terms and shows how they are not 100 percent synonymous.

Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Algazi (1680-1757) explains that *chalifah* refers to when two people switch animals in a sort of transactionary transfer of holiness, while *temurah* refers to one person switching out one of his animals for another one of his animals.

Rabbi Yehuda Leib Shapira-Frankfurter (1743-1826) – Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch’s great uncle – explains that *chalifah* refers to switching out something worse in favor of something better, while *temurah* refers to switching out something better for something worse. When the Torah forbids transferring holiness from one animal to another, it does so indiscriminately. Meaning, it does not matter whether the second animal is better than the first animal or worse than the first animal – it is always prohibited.

Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1935) follows this basic approach with one slight tweak: He asserts that *chalifah* is a neutral word that refers to both switching out something good in favor of something bad and vice versa, while *temurah* exclusively refers to replacing something good with something bad. He works through a number of Scriptural examples that illustrate this assumption.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) also follows his great-uncle’s understanding of *temurah*, but explains that *chelef/chalifah* technically refers to the act of transporting/transferring something from one place/situation to another – whether or not something else will replace it. For example, the prophet Isaiah foretells of the future vanishing of all idols by using the word *yachalof* to denote their disappearance (Isa. 2:18). With this in mind, Rabbi Hirsch explains that a slaughtering knife is traditionally called a *chalaf* because it “transforms” an animal from a state of living to a state of death. [Others maintain that *chalaf* in the sense of “knife” is derived from the Arabic word *chalaf* (“sharp”), which, in turn, is likely derived from the Hebrew word *charif*, as the r-sound is often interchangeable with the l-sound.]

As Rabbi Hirsch notes, because *chalifah* applies to something which people tend to get rid of and replace with something else, it is the verb used for one who “changes his clothes” (Gen. 35:2, 41:14), and even refers to one’s outer garments themselves (Gen. 41:14, II Sam. 12:20). (In Modern Hebrew, a *chalifah* refers to a gentleman’s “suit.”)

As mentioned above, the Torah stipulates that should one try to transfer holiness from one animal to another, then both the originally-holy animal and the new animal become consecrated. In making this point clear, the Torah uses the term *hamer yamir* – two cognates of *temurah* – and does not repeat the phraseology of *chalifah* like it did earlier when

forbidding the act of *temurah*. Rabbi Hirsch accounts for this by explaining that from the Torah's perspective, once it is forbidden to transfer the holiness of one animal unto another, then any attempt at effectuating such a transfer will always be considered "for the bad." So the Torah only uses cognates of *temurah*, which implies a negative form of switching – replacing something better with something worse – when discussing the halachic outcome of attempting to transfer the holiness. This is because, from the Torah's perspective, such "switching" is always considered undesirable, even if the second animal is technically "better" than the first one.

Rabbi Meir Leibush Weiser (1809-1879), also known as the Malbim, explains that the term *chalifah* focuses on the object(s) that were switched or transferred, while the term *temurah* focuses on the person who facilitates this switch. Essentially, the Malbim's explanation boils down to a classical Yeshivish *cheftza-gavra* (object-person) construct. Both *chalifah* and *temurah* may refer to the same exact event, but *chalifah* focuses on the object of the act of "switching," while *temurah* focuses on the person who made it happen.

The Psalmist reports about the Jews' sin of worshipping the Golden Calf: "And they exchanged (*vayamiru*, a cognate of *temurah*) their glory (i.e. G-d) for the form of a grass-eating ox" (Ps. 106:20). Based on the above, the Malbim explains why the Psalmist uses a cognate of *temurah* instead of a cognate of *chalifah*: The Jews did not *actually* replace G-d with the Golden Calf, because from His perspective He remains unchanged whether or not the Jews worship Him. Thus, from the "object's perspective" there was no change, and so the term *chalifah* is inappropriate. However, from the Jews' perspective they *did* effectuate a change because they effectively switched Him out in favor of another deity (to be the object of their worship). Since from their perspective there was an exchange, a cognate of *temurah* appears in this context.

Turning to the etymology of the words in question, we begin with *temurah* and cognates thereof. Many Hebrew grammarians felt beholden to the trilateral theory of roots, so they explain the root of *temurah* as either MEM-VAV-REISH (Ibn Chayyuj) or MEM-YOD-REISH (Ibn Chayyuj, Ibn Janach, and Radak). On the other hand, other grammarians maintain that Hebrew can have roots that are comprised of less than three letters. On that side of the aisle, Menachem Ibn Saruk maintains that the root of *temurah* and its cognates is simply MEM-REISH.

When Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) elaborates on the root MEM-REISH in *Cheshek Shlomo*, he defines its core meaning as "getting rid of something so that something else can take its place." He finds a bevy of words which use that two-letter string that are related to this idea. For example, *mohar* ("bride price") is given in *exchange* for a woman's maidenhood, *maher* ("quickly", "fast") refers to something which does not remain long in one given situation but constantly *changes*, *mar* ("bitter") refers to a sort of taste that the taste buds reject and seek to *replace* with something more palatable, *morah* ("razor") refers to the implement used to shave one's hair paving the path for a new lot of hair to *replace* those that were cut, and *amirah* ("saying") refers to speech as a vehicle for the *exchange* of idea, especially as proper etiquette demands that the parties involved in a conversation "alternate" their position from being quiet (when it is their turn to listen) to being verbal (when it is their turn to speak).

While most grammarians understand the root of *chalifah* as the trilateral CHET-LAMMED-PEH, Rabbi Pappenheim writes in *Yeriot Shlomo* that *chelef/chalifah* is built on a hybrid of two two-letter roots: CHET-LAMMED ("circle", "round") and ALEPH-PEH ("face," "present"). He thus understands that *chalifah* refers to moving forward from the "present" by pivoting away from the "current situation." This somewhat echoes Rabbi Hirsch's above-mentioned explanation that *chalifah* emphasizes that which one is "getting rid of" without focusing on that which replaces it. This stands in contrast to what Rabbi Pappenheim wrote in *Cheshek Shlomo*, that *temurah* underscores what we would call "out with the old," while *chalifah* focuses on what may be termed "in with the new" (although, Rabbi Pappenheim admits that, in practice, the two words have become essentially interchangeable).

*For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at [rklein@ohr.edu](mailto:rklein@ohr.edu)*

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## Blessing One: As Clear as Day and Night

*“Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who gave the heart understanding to distinguish between day and night.”*

The very first blessing seems to be somewhat oblique. Even though all of the contemporary translations that I found read, “Who gave the heart understanding,” the word used for “heart” is not quite clear. According to some of the commentaries, the word is related to an Aramaic word that actually means “rooster.” If so, the blessing now reads “Who gave the rooster understanding to distinguish between day and night.”

What is so special about a rooster that we recite a blessing over it? G-d granted a special ability for roosters to differentiate between the nighttime and the day. They are able to recognize when the dawn is breaking and they announce it to mankind.

Historically, humans have lived their lives around the daytime. Daylight is a time of clarity. Light represents a time of action and creation. The rooster is announcing to the world that a new day has arrived. It is time to start getting up and begin utilizing the precious time allotted to us. It is a time that will allow us to be productive. Studies are now being published which prove that our constant preoccupation with being “connected” twenty-four hours a day is actually counterproductive. Paradoxically, businesses that expect their staff to be available at all hours have learned – to their surprise – that their employees were generally less productive than other workers who clocked in and out of their jobs at fixed times and were not expected to be “on call” at all hours.

We are expected to rest and sleep at night so that we can start each new day with enthusiasm and verve. This is why the main part of the Temple Service was done during the day, because daylight is given to us so that we can achieve.

However, this explains the blessing’s intent when translating the word in question as “rooster.” What about the standard, accepted translation of the word as “heart”? “Who gave the heart understanding...” What exactly is this great event that is taking place each morning that our hearts are able to discern the difference between day and night? Is it something that is so momentous that we should recite a blessing over it?

Our Rabbis explain that the words “day” and “night” are words that are analogous to good and evil. Good is day. Good is clear. Good is obvious. Night, on the other hand, parallels evil. Darkness is the absence of light. Night removes clarity from the world and leaves us groping in the opacity for meaning and connection to G-d.

The very first blessing reveals to us a fundamental of Jewish belief. G-d has instilled in human beings the ability to differentiate between good and evil, to be innately aware that certain things are obviously good and others are just as obviously evil. The blessing is not referring to subtleties, to actions that are not so easily defined one way or the other. The blessing refers to those actions that are immediately recognizable and definable as either good or evil. This is what is often described as “logical morality.” An example of this is murder. A person may try to convince himself that he had no idea that murder was evil, but the very first blessing – a blessing that is applicable to all mankind – teaches that such a perspective is not true. When it comes to the basics, we are all accountable for our actions.

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# SEASONS THEN AND NOW

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## Shavuot, Day of Judgment on Torah

by Rabbi Chaviv Danesh

The Tolaat Yaakov explains that just as on Rosh Hashana Hashem analyzes and judges a person's deeds, so too on Shavuot does Hashem judge a person on his commitment to mitzvah observance in general, and, more specifically, on *bittul Torah* (Shlah HaKadosh, Masechet Shavuot, Ner Mitzvah 19 in the name of the Tolaat Yaakov). This idea of a yearly judgment regarding both Rosh Hashana and Shavuot needs to be understood. Why does Hashem need to judge a person every year? After all, as long as a person is alive he can lose his good deeds by regretting having done them (see Kiddushin 40b), or rid himself of his bad deeds by doing *teshuva*. If so, wouldn't it make more sense to delay one's judgment until after death? Let us first analyze Rosh Hashana, where this is primarily addressed by the commentaries, and then apply it to Shavuot.

There is a well-known idea that Jewish holidays are not one-time events. Rather, they each have spiritual energies that surface every year with the coming of that holiday. How does this apply to Rosh Hashana? Rosh Hashana was the day on which Adam HaRishon was created, and was given both his first commandment to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge and also the job of working and guarding the land. It was also on this day that Adam HaRishon was given the tools he needed in order to accomplish this goal. He was placed in the ideal environment, given the ideal spouse, and was gifted with the fruits of all the trees – except the Tree of Knowledge – as food. This phenomenon repeats itself every year on Rosh Hashana. It is on this day that Hashem decides each person's jobs and challenges for the year to come. Based on this, Hashem then delegates the tools one needs to fulfill his job. This is precisely why on this day Hashem judges who will live, who will prosper, who will get married, etc.

One of the factors Hashem takes into account when determining one's upcoming year is a person's spiritual stature. For example, Hashem may let a wicked person live out a prosperous year in order to repay him for the good deeds he performed in this world so that he will be left without reward in the World to Come. It says in the Torah: *And He [Hashem] repays His enemies to their faces in order to destroy them* (Devarim 7:10). Similarly, Hashem

may decree that a righteous person should suffer for his transgressions in the upcoming year so that in the World to Come he will have only merits to be rewarded for. The opposite may be true as well. At times, Hashem may decide that a wicked person should suffer for his evil deeds to prompt him to do *teshuva*, while a righteous person should prosper to allow him to continue in his righteous ways.

The amount of spiritual help, or lack thereof, is also determined based on one's spiritual standing. For example, Hashem may give a righteous person more opportunities to further improve himself, while, on the other hand, He may make it harder for the evil person to do *teshuva*. The Gemara says: *In the way that a person wants to go is where he is led* (see Makkot 10b, Rambam, Hilchot Teshuva 6:3, Rashi and Ramban on Shemot 7:3). All these decisions are made by Hashem's detailed, meticulous and mysterious calculations.

Based on the above we can understand why a yearly judgment of one's spiritual stature is needed on Rosh Hashana: the outcome of that judgment helps determine the quality of a person's upcoming year (based on Leshem Shevo V'Achlama and Mishnat Rabbi Aharon, Ma'amarim v'sichot Mussar II p. 179 "Shelosh Sefarim").

Let us now turn to Shavuot.

Like other holidays, Shavuot was not just a one-time event, but rather certain aspects of it occur every year. The commentaries explain that every year on Shavuot Hashem decides how much help one will be given to learn, understand and come up with *chidushei Torah* (see Sefat Emet, Shavuot 5635, 5661 and Machsheves Mussar vol. 1, quoting Rav Shach *zatzal* in the name of Rav Issur Zalman Meltzer *zatzal*). To decide all this, Hashem judges a person's commitment to mitzvah observance to see what is due to him. More specifically, He judges a person on *bittul Torah* because that is most relevant to what is being handed out. Now we can understand the necessity behind the yearly judgment that takes place on Shavuot. It is the outcome of that judgment that determines one's overall success in Torah learning in the future. May we all succeed in sufficiently preparing ourselves for the yearly *mattan Torah* and thereby merit having a favorable judgment as well.



## The “Mitzvah System”

Gregory from Milwaukee, WI wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

*I am taking a class at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, so that I can better understand Judaism. My question for you is this: Why is the mitzvah system (by mitzvah system, I mean the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to observe) considered so important? It has not been my experience that these commandments carry the same significance in other religions as in Judaism. Thank you.*

Dear Gregory,

G-d gave the 613 commandments to our nation at Mount Sinai. They are so important because they are "the King's decrees."

Let me explain with a parable. Imagine that the president calls you to his office and gives you 10 million dollars and a strange gadget. He tells you to take the gadget home, put it by the open window and turn it on every day between four and five in the afternoon, and that it's a matter of national security. He tells you that the 10 million is yours so long as you continue to do your task faithfully every day. You would certainly do it, even though you didn't understand why, because you know that the president has access to special information and technology that you

don't have. You would feel sure that somehow this gadget has some function that, even though you don't understand it, is crucial for national security.

So too, even though we don't understand the ultimate reason for all the commandments, but since G-d Himself told us to do them and told us that they are so important, we certainly believe Him. He took us out of slavery in Egypt and gave us the Land of Israel in order for us to do the commandments. As the Torah says regarding the laws of keeping kosher, we should do the commandments, "Because I am the L-rd your G-d, Who raised you up out of the land of Egypt to be your G-d." (*Leviticus 11:45*)

We are not to "pick and choose," but rather to do *all* the commandments, as G-d said: "You shall observe *all* My statutes and *all* My laws and do them, so that the Land to which I am bringing you to settle upon will not vomit you out." (*Leviticus 20:22*) We see from this verse that our national security in the Land of Israel depends on our observing these laws. Not only that, but they are also our ticket to life in the Next World, as the verse says, "You shall keep My statutes and My laws, which a person will do them and live eternal life through them." (*Leviticus 18:5*)

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Love of the Land, written by RAV MENDEL WEINBACH, zt"l • General Editor: RABBI MOSHE

NEWMAN • Design: RABBI ELIEZER SHAPIRO z"l / DANIEL FREEDMAN

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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*Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman*

## The Message of Torah Distancing

**T**he opening command of this fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar, is to take a census of the nation, as an “*eidah*,” a congregation. The word stems from the word *ya’ed*, meaning destination, and is related to the word *yachad*, together. It thus denotes a community united by a common calling. This uniting mission is, of course, the Torah.

This was given visible expression in the encampment in the desert, where the Tablets (and later a copy of the Written Law) were housed in the Ohel Mo’ed – the Tent of Meeting. This dwelling place of the Torah was the center point around which the people camped. But just as at the time of the Revelation at Sinai, when there were instructions for the people to remain at a distance and separate from Mount Sinai, during their encampments and journeys the people were likewise instructed to keep their distance from the “Camp of the *Shechinah*.” The Dwelling place was a separate center point, around which the Levites camped at a distance. The rest of the people camped at a further distance around.

This “Torah-distancing” was to serve as a constant reminder that the Torah did not emanate *from* the people, but was rather given *to* the people. The Torah is the lofty inviolable ideal, which, by eternal Divine power, draws to itself the people of Israel. But the people can never draw so near to the Torah and stand so close to it as to lay our hands on it and control it.

The sin of the golden calf demonstrates how the Torah clearly did not emanate from the people, and at the same time shows the dangers of a people attempting to take the

Divine into their own hands. The non-sequitur of such blatant betrayal after clear revelation demonstrates that the people were so far removed from the truths and requirements of the Law that it is nigh impossible that the Law emanated from the people. Where all other religious codes emanated from the people, as a product of its spirit and the spirit of the time, the Torah stands alone as the code that was presented *to* the people. *To* a people so distant from its core teachings that it could abandon them in the blink of an eye! Had Torah emanated *from* the people, such immediate and radical departure from it would have made no sense. That would have been akin to the founding fathers of the US establishing a tyrannical dictatorship a month after ratification of the Constitution. Clearly, the Law was presented *to* a resistant people, who had not yet accepted its fundamental teachings.

The wayward act itself was an attempt by the people to make for themselves a divine “Moshe figure” of their own devising – precisely what the Torah is not, and can never be.

But there was one tribe that remained faithful to G-d and His Torah, defending the inviolability of the Torah against the rest of the nation. Thus, the Levites are now appointed as guardians of the Torah. They are to remain apart from the community and are not counted in the census. They have the honorable role of guarding the sanctity of the *mikdash* and of the Torah, symbolized by their encampment between the camp of the *Shechinah* and the camp of Israel.

- *Commentary, Bamidbar; 1:48, 5:1; Shemot 32:1*

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NOTA  
SCHILLER**

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from Sinai



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What Really  
Happened on  
Shavuos?



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DOVID  
GOTTLIEB**

The Jewish  
People and the  
Torah are One



**RABBI  
AKIVA  
TATZ**

Sinai Then  
and Now



**MR  
HARRY  
ROTHENBERG**

The Road to  
Heaven: Lessons  
from Ruth

— **EST**      — **CENTRAL**      — **PACIFIC**

1:45 pm

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4:00 pm

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2:15 pm

3:00 pm

3:45 pm

10:45 am

11:30 am

12:15 pm

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