

Shavuot

We are the Torah

One would think that the holiday of *Shavuot*, marking the day on which our people really became Jews with the acceptance of the *Torah*, would be marked with many ceremonies. Yet the day or two on which it is observed in Israel and the *diaspora* is filled with little pageantry. The answer, to my mind, is because the *Torah* as an object is not that important in Judaism. What we are supposed to do is internalize the *Torah*, to become its manifestation; not worship it as an object outside ourselves and then feel we have done our duty. As Rava said: "*Kama tipsha'i sh'ar inshay d'kaimay mikamei Sefer Torah v'lo Kaimey mikamei gavrah rabbah.*" "How foolish are the people who stand up before *Torah* scroll; but not before a great person." (*Makkot 22b.*)

That the *Torah* was not meant to be idolized but implemented is apparent from the fact that a *Torah* scroll can be sold and the proceeds used to rescue captives or to get married. Moshe Rabbeinu, when he came down with the first set of *Ten Commandments*, broke them. How could he break something given to him by God? The answer is that the tablets had no intrinsic holiness. They were holy only to the degree that they could change the people so that they would want to live good and decent lives. The purpose for studying the *Torah* is to make us want to do what we should do, to become the carriers of our faith. *Shavuot* stresses this fact by not having many symbols. The *Torah* should transform us so that we become the living example of its teachings. And that is the reason why many synagogues conduct all-night study sessions on this holiday.

Shavuot, Ketubah, and Inner Feelings

We recite *Yizkor* on the second day of *Shavuot*. Why should it be that we should say *Yizkor* on this holiday? This holiday has no major symbols as does *Succos* or *Pesach*. There is no *lulav*, *esrog*, *succah*, *seder*, or *matzoh*. What is it that really personifies this holiday and makes it a fit holiday to remember those who have left us?

The rabbis say that *Shavuot* is the holiday of the marriage of G-d to

the Jewish people. It is the holiday of the covenant. It is the holiday of relationships. On this holiday G-d gave us the *Torah*, which is our *ketubah*, our marriage contract with G-d. We remember this marriage between G-d and the Jewish people every day when we put on *tephillin*: the seven windings on the arm symbolize the seven marriage blessings; the straps on our head symbolize the wedding veil; and we put the straps around our finger and say, "I will marry you forever in kindness and truth..." *Shavuot* is a holiday in which we remember the relationship that the Jewish people have with G-d.

That's why there is no outward symbolism on this holiday because, like all relationships, it is the inner feelings that count. It is not the outer show but the inner feelings which matter. When the inner feeling is gone, then no matter what the outside props, the relationship cracks and dies. That's why it is interesting to note that the same word for "coffin" in Hebrew is the same word for the Ark in which we keep the *Torah*. If the *Torah* is kept only in the Ark and not carried in our hearts, if it is not carried as a living document which shapes and molds our lives, then it is dead. Nothing can preserve a relationship if the inner feelings are gone, if they have been destroyed by abuse or disrespect or neglect.

This idea is emphasized by the beautiful *Medrash* which says that when Moshe came down the mountain with the first set of the *Ten Commandments* and confronted the Jewish people worshipping the golden calf, the letters flew off. The spirit of Judaism left and all Moshe was left with was a piece of rock which became too heavy, and he had to drop it. The *ketubah* was not good. The *ketubah* cannot ensure the marriage. It is the inner feelings which count, and *Shavuot* is the holiday of the inner feelings. Who can describe the wonderful inner feelings of a mother who sees her child take his first steps, or parents attending a graduation seeing their child receive his diploma. Judaism is a religion of relationships. It teaches us that it is the love and concern for each other which allows us to overcome all obstacles. It was the love and concern of our parents which allows us and still allows us to overcome the many trials and tribulations of life.

Light, Water, Tears, and Joy

In a few moments we will be saying *yizkor*. We will remember those who have gone before us. We will remember those who made it possible for us to be here today, who made it possible for us to be Jews. Today also we read the *Book of Ruth*. We read how Ruth was the great-grandmother of David HaMelech. She came from a people who were known for their cruelty, who would not even give strangers bread and water when our people crossed the desert. They were a people who even hired a sorcerer, Bilam, to curse the Jewish people. They did not ask Bilam to bring them up to the standards of the Jewish people: they just asked that Bilam curse the Jewish people, to bring them down below their standards. Yet, she was the epitome of kindness. She was, according to the rabbis, the daughter of the king of Moab, but she chose to go with her impoverished mother-in-law, after her husband died, to a strange land to help her. She came with Naomi to Judah and she married an older man, Boaz, and was blessed with a son. When she was married to Boaz, all the community attended her wedding and they blessed her. "May G-d make you as Rachel and Leah who, together, built the House of Israel." Why did they give her this particular blessing? Why did they want her to have the qualities of Rachel and Leah?

Shavuos also celebrates something else. According to the rabbis, it was on *Shavuos* that the seven commandments of Noah were given to all the peoples of the world. The name "Ruth" also hints at this. If you take the numbered value of the letters of Ruth's name, you come up with 606, and if you add the seven commandments of Noah to her name, you come up with 613 commandments. Noah came out of the ark the first time at the end of the month of *Iyar*. After he brought out all of the animals, he made a sacrifice to G-d in the month of *Sivan*. G-d then gave him the seven commandments of Noah and showed him a rainbow. Why did G-d show him a rainbow? What is a rainbow? A rainbow is nothing more than water and light, light that is refracted through the water. A rainbow represents life. Light and joy, water and tears. Tears are inevitable in life. Unfortunately, we are all born with a genetic disease; we are all going to die. We all are born with certain hormones, and these hormones shoot off at differ-

ent periods in life, aging us in the process. Scientists have done experiments and have come to the conclusion that we are pre-programmed to die, our cells can only reproduce so many times and then they stop reproducing. They have found that the maximum that a human being can live is about 120 years, which is exactly what our tradition says. Even if a person had no disease whatsoever, he will only live to be 120 years old because his cells would not reproduce any more. Disease and death are inevitable. Tears are built into life. It is inevitable that those we love the most are going to be taken from us. The rabbis say that the person whose loss we feel the keenest is our spouse. We mourn a whole year for our parents because we owe them so much. We have to show them gratitude because they have given us so much. We were born helpless. They nurtured us and made us what we are today, but the keenest loss is felt for a spouse. The rabbis teach that there are only really 7 relatives for which we are considered a mourner. We may feel the loss of others very keenly, but only 7 relatives do we actually mourn. They are a spouse, a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a son, and a daughter. We know that there are tears in life, but there is still also a lot of joy in life, and we can feel that joy. The light, the joy must be refracted through the tears. But life can still bring us happiness and joy like the rainbow.

Ruth had such a hard time. The rabbis say that when she and Naomi came to Israel, they did not even have enough money to buy shoes. They had to walk barefoot. Naomi, before she and her husband went into exile, was a rich woman. The rabbis say that her husband took her into exile because he did not want to share his wealth with the poor of Bethlehem when famine struck. He thought that he would make it big in a foreign country, but as has many times happened with the Jewish people, we make it big but then we have to lose everything or are forced to move. Circumstances change. We see this has happened in our day many times to our people in different countries. Our people have had to start all over again but, yet, there are joy and happiness. Ruth's life was hard and difficult but she did have happiness at the end. She did receive the blessing of being like Rachel and Leah. What was this blessing of being like Rachel and Leah? We know that Rachel was a very sensitive human being. In order to feel life's joy, you have to be sensitive. Rachel had known that it was

possible that her father would trick Yaacov and bring Leah to the *chupa* instead of herself. So she had arranged with Yaacov to give him special signals so that when she would come to the *chupa* heavily veiled, Yaacov could determine whether it was she or somebody else. When she saw that her sister was being brought to the *chupa* and would be totally embarrassed if Yaacov would reject her, she could not stand it so she gave her sister the special signals. Yaacov then thought that she was really Rachel. Rachel did not want to cause her sister this terrible pain and embarrassment which would also perhaps cause her never to be able to marry in the future. Rachel was sensitive to the pain of others.

Every person must be sensitive to the pain of others, especially to the pain of their own children. We have to discipline them sometimes, but we must be sensitive to their strengths as well as their weaknesses and we must always help them develop their strengths. Not everybody is blessed with great talents, but everybody is blessed with some talent, and every child has handicaps. There is no such thing as a normal child. A normal child means a perfect child. Some children can sing well, some can run well, some are students, some have leadership ability, some are mechanical, etc. It is important for the parent to be sensitive to each child to bring out their strengths and not to dwell on their weaknesses. Every child must acquire a minimal amount of skill, even in the areas of their weaknesses, but a child should concentrate on his strengths. A parent should be sensitive to a child's strengths. If a child cannot be an athlete, a parent shouldn't force him to be an athlete, but if he is a good orator, let him develop his oratory ability. If a child really cannot study, if a child really does not have the stick-to-it-iveness or the IQ to study, but he has a sweet personality and knows how to interact with people, let his parents help him develop those types of skills. We have to be sensitive to everyone. Rachel was such a sensitive human being, and Ruth was blessed by those at her wedding that she should have the sensitivity of Rachel.

"Leah" stands for "perseverance." After all, when she married Yaacov, she knew that Yaacov did not love her and probably did not even want her. But Yaacov had children with her and grew to love her. She persevered and, in spite of her handicaps (the rabbis say that she had watery eyes, and it was difficult for her to see), she was able to win her husband's

love. She reared upstanding children. She had shed many tears in her life, but she had overcome the sorrows. We must persevere and if we will persevere, we will be able to overcome everything and be able to feel life's joys in spite of the tears. In fact, those whom we love the most and who give us the greatest joy also cause us the greatest amount of tears when they die. But they leave us beautiful memories. These memories are the beautiful hues of color that we see through the tears. They leave us the light that we can still see through the tears. This is very important to remember.

Throughout Jewish history, too, many tears have been shed because of all the terrible things that have happened to our people, yet Judaism is beautiful and wonderful because it gives us such happiness. It makes us such sensitive people with such strength. It gives us the perseverance that we know that we must have in order to be successful. We need this perseverance, this light in order to laugh, in order to have wonderful relationships. Leah eventually had a wonderful relationship with Yaacov. We must persevere. We cannot give up on others as individuals or on our traditions because if we do, then we will not see the light through the tears, the inevitable tears.

I am reminded of the story they tell of a rabbi in South Bend who went to visit a Holocaust survivor who claimed that he was an atheist but he came to shul all the time. He was sick, very sick. Everyone knew that this was his last illness. He was not going to get well. The rabbi had come to console him. He said, "You know, Rabbi, I want to be cremated like my first wife and my children and my parents. No Jewish tradition for me. I am not interested in a coffin or *sheva* or *shloshim*. All I want is that I should be cremated like my wife and children and parents." The rabbi was shocked and said, "How can you do such a thing? How can you destroy your dignity as a human being by having your body treated like a bunch of garbage that is incinerated? You have dignity. You have new children. You have another wife. You should give them the opportunity to mourn you correctly and properly. There should be dignity and respect shown to you even after you are gone." The man said, "What do you mean dignity and respect? I'll tell you about my village that I came from in Poland. I'll tell you about my rabbi whose name was Moshe Yitzchak Rosenbaum. I'll tell

you about him. The Nazis made all the members of my village come and slap his face and spit on him before they took us away to be shot. Then they shot him in front of us. Is that respect for *Torah*? Is that the way you treat a saint like Moshe Yitzchak Rosenbaum, a great man, a wonderful man. We all slapped his face and spit on him and then we were all taken to be shot and later burned. I saw this. I managed to run away but I saw this with my own eyes. Is this what you call dignity and respect? Let me be cremated like they were. I do not want anything to do with the Jewish customs of death any more. If those things could happen to a sainted rabbi, a man like that who not only was killed in such a demeaning way but who also lost all his family leaving no descendents then I can have no faith any more in our traditions."

The rabbi looked at him and said, "You are wrong." The man said, "What do you mean I am wrong?" The rabbi said, "The man's name was not Moshe Yitzchak Rosenbaum. It was Moshe Yaacov Rosenbaum, and he was my grandfather. You were not the only one who hid. My mother also hid. Through the tears there comes the light, and the light leaves behind beautiful memories. My mother whose mother's name was Leah Rosenbaum remembers her father's house well. She does not remember his death all the time but she remembers all the time the beautiful *Shabboses*, the beautiful lectures he gave, the love that he showered on them and all the family, the kisses, caresses, and hugs. The Jewish tradition will continue. Yes, there will be tears. There may be many tears, but there will still be beautiful hues that can be seen through it all. It is important that we realize that. The man stood up, looked at the rabbi, and he said, "Bury me according to the Jewish tradition." After he died, his children said *kaddish* for him and his children set *shiva* for him and his children came, as you are doing today, on *Pesach* and *Shavuos* and *Succos* and *Yom Kippur* to say *yizkor* for him. The Jewish tradition did continue for that man's family. His children also make *shabbos* to keep all the holidays. There are always going to be tears in the world, but our Jewish tradition allows us also to feel the joy. We can only have the joy if the light of *Torah* and our traditions shines through these tears.

Today we are facing a spiritual holocaust in America. So many young people will not be able to see the light and feel that joy and will feel help-

less and hopeless. Let us hope and pray that this will not happen to our children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren, but that when the time comes for our passing, they will realize the importance of the Jewish tradition, not only just the traditions dealing with death, but the traditions dealing with enhancing life so that they will be able to feel the joy that we all feel in our hearts. The light that shines through the tears. Life really has many, many happy and joyful moments in spite of the tears. If we are sensitive and persevere, we will feel these joyful moments. We have the strength to try to make life better so that, eventually, the world will be redeemed from death, and the *Mashiach* will come. Amen.

Women, Potentiality, and the Wings of Eagles

We have just read the *Ten Commandments*. It is interesting to note that in the *Torah* portion *Yisro*, in the introduction to the *Ten Commandments*, it says, "And Moshe went up to G-d and G-d called to him from the mountain saying, 'So you should say to the House of Jacob and you should tell them to the Sons of Israel'." The rabbis say that this means that the *Torah* was given first to the women before it could be given to the men. If the women would accept the *Torah*, the Jewish people would keep the *Torah* forever. If the women would not accept the *Torah*, then the Jewish people would never keep it. The men would never be able or even want to keep the *Torah*. The rabbis say that it was because of the moral courage of the women that the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt. The woman did not worship the golden calf and, later, the women did not listen to the discouraging words of the spies who told the Jewish people that they should not go up to the land of Israel. Throughout Jewish history it has always been true that when the women wanted to keep Judaism then Judaism flourished and was strong, but when the women gave up on Judaism, then Judaism fell apart.

That is exactly what happened in America when the immigrant generation came to America. They did not educate their daughters properly, and their daughters gave up on Judaism. In Europe life was hard and boys were only educated until they became bar mitzvah. In Europe they went to *cheder* 10 hours a day from the time they were three, but the girls were only given, at most, a few years of education or were educated only at

home. When the immigrants came to this country, they tried this same system here. They gave their girls a very scanty Jewish education. When their girls went to public school, they learned there how people were supposed to worship G-d. Those public schools were actually protestant schools, even though prayers may not have been said in them, although in many schools, prayers were said. The women conceived of their own Judaism in protestant terms rather than in Jewish terms. In my opinion, the rebirth of orthodoxy in American can be attributed to the founding of Stern College. Once the women decided to keep Judaism then Judaism started to flourish again. Judaism gives women a lot of power. In a traditional Jewish home, the woman controls the finances and the sex while the man gets an *aliyah*, not a bad trade, according to the rabbis. G-d told Moshe, "Make sure you give the *Torah* to the women to see if they will accept it because if the women will not accept it, forget about giving it to the men. The *Torah* then goes on to tell us, "And you saw what I did to Egypt, and I have lifted you on the wing of eagles and I have brought you to me." It is interesting to note that the image used here, "I brought you on the wings of eagles" is of a non-*kosher* bird. The eagle has all four signs of a non-*kosher* bird. The signs which mark a non-*kosher* bird are different from those of all mammals or fish. Mammals have to chew their cud and have split hooves to be used and fish have to have scales and fins. But what makes *kosher* birds is much more complicated. Nevertheless, G-d brought us out of Egypt metaphorically on the wings of eagles. G-d uses the image of an eagle to teach us about our potential. G-d was going to cause us to soar up, to reach unprecedented religious heights, even though right now we were immersed in the idolatry of Egypt. We can overcome. Even those things which normally pull us down, they are now going to lift us up.

The *Torah* then continues, "And now if you will listen to My voice and you will observe My covenant, you will be to Me a treasure among all the nations of the land." In other words, we should consider ourselves privileged Jews. It is such a wonderful thing to be a Jew. If we consider it a wonderful privilege to be a Jew, then G-d is going to give us the *Ten Commandments*, and we shall become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This means that Judaism is not supposed to be just the concern of a few priests, but we are to be a holy people. When the *Torah* says, "You

should be a kingdom of priests," it means that we should be holy in secular affairs, too. Judaism should permeate everything we do. There is no such thing as a Judaism which is only concerned about rituals. That's why the *Torah* says we should be a holy nation, which means that we should conduct all our affairs, even community affairs, according to the laws of the *Torah*.

Unfortunately, in our day there are some Jews on the right and on the left who really do not want to be holy. They do not want to have both their spiritual and physical lives governed by the *Ten Commandments*. Judaism is just not spiritual. It is a combination of the spiritual and the physical. The *Torah* continues by saying, "These words you shall speak to the Sons of Israel." Before the Jewish people could even receive the *Ten Commandments*, there were some pre-conditions: one, that the woman had to be considered; two, that we had to realize that the reason G-d took us out of Egypt was because we were worthy, that we had potential; three, that G-d can cause us to soar even on the wings of eagles. He can cause those things which in the past has brought us down to now raise us up. G-d is expecting great things from us. He wants us to serve Him with any talents we have, even secular talents. Each of us has different talents. That is why later on the rabbis disagree as to what part of the *Ten Commandments* the people heard. Some rabbis say that the Jewish people heard all the *Ten Commandments* from G-d, that they heard every word of the *Ten Commandments*. Other rabbis say, no, they heard only the first two of the *Ten Commandments*. That is why the first two commandments are in the singular form "I" because G-d gave these two personally. Other rabbis say, no, that all the Jewish people heard was just the first word *Anochee* of the first commandment and other rabbis even go so far as to say all the people heard was a sound. They had an intimation of G-d, but they were not really sure exactly what that sound said. Why were there so many opinions? Because the rabbis teach that everyone approaches G-d with his own abilities.

The majority of Jews could hear all the *Ten Commandments*. Some, though, could only hear the first two commandments about social justice. They couldn't hear anything else. Others could only hear that there is a mystical being, a G-d, in the world to whom they can turn. Others only had an intimation that there is a G-d in the world, but they weren't sure what

He would demand of them. All these different groups of people exist to this day. The rabbis are telling these groups that G-d is counting on them and that they are expected within their abilities and perceptions to help Him perfect this world. Also, those who applied fewer than the full *Ten Commandments* can rise to apply even more if they'll study *Torah*. G-d expects us to rise in our understanding.

We all know that if a teacher expects very little from her students, that is exactly what she is going to get. Good teachers motivate their students to get the best out of them. The mark of a good teacher is not that that teacher is a very dynamic lecturer, but that he can bring out the best in his students. This is, of course, what G-d is telling us here. Before we can receive the *Ten Commandments*, we have to realize that G-d can bring the best out of us. We can rise to grater and greater understanding, each one of us according to our ability. Some of us will reach an understanding of all the *Ten Commandments*. Others, initially, only some of them. But we can all rise on the wings of eagles to a higher and higher understanding. We can all eventually understand all the *Ten Commandments*.

I am reminded of a story they tell about a teacher who on the very first day of class was given a list of her students with a number opposite each student's name--175,160,155,145,149,163. She was so pleased to see that she had gotten an advanced class, a class of brilliant students with high IQ's. She decided that from then on she was going to give this class a lot of extra material. She was going to teach them with enthusiasm. She was going to go on special field trips. She was going to challenge them every way possible, and her students responded. They liked being challenged, not over-challenged, but just a little bit beyond their grasp. When they met these challenges, they felt so proud. She worked so hard, but at the end of the semester she was so very gratified. On the Iowa test all her class did superbly. They did better than any class she had ever had before. On the last day of class she went to her principal and said, "Thank you very much for giving me this class of brilliant students, for giving me this honors class. I really accomplished a lot and I really feel good about it." The principal looked at her and said, "What are you talking about? I didn't give you any honors class." She said, "But the first day when you gave me the list you also had put a number by their name. Wasn't that their IQ?"

The principal said, "No, we don't hand out the IQ numbers of the students to the teachers. The numbers were their locker number.

The children, though, had responded. G-d, too, is calling us. He is saying to us, "Don't worry that you were slaves in Egypt or slaves to certain life styles now. I can lift you up. I will lift you up on the wings of eagles. I will lift you up even with those things which normally would have pulled you down. The eagle is going to pull you up. I am going to help you. You can live a good life, a decent life." Let us all hope and pray that we will always present the Torah to our daughters and our sons and the whole adult community this way, that we will challenge them to do better because we care. If we expect much from them, we will get much from them if we give them the right tools, if we teach with enthusiasm and if we lift them up on the wings of eagles. Let's all hope and pray that we will do so in order that that our people will truly be learned and filled with *mitzvahs* so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.