

Preparation הכנה

May 2015

Sivan 5775

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion
Route 25A at Nicolls Road
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Visit us on-line at
www.kct.org

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**A Kehillah For Those
Wishing To Participate
In Traditional Religious
Service On Shabbat
And Yom Tov**

**Celebrating the Start
of our
Twenty Second Year!**



Counting The Omer: From Pesach to Shavuot



**Preparing
to
Celebrate
Shavuot
at
Kehillat
Chovevei
Tzion**

*Photos and graphics courtesy of Congregation Emanu-El
in Spokane, WA, the OU and the respective artists*

5775

תיקון ליל שבועות

5775

SCHEDULE
OF
SHAVUOT
AND
SHABBAT
SERVICES

TIKKUN
L'AYL
SHAVUOT

KEHILLAT
CHOVEVEI
TZION

5 SIVAN

SHABBAT BAMIDBAR

FRIDAY-SATURDAY MAY 22-23, 2015

Friday . . .	
Candle Lighting	7:51 PM
Kabbalat Shabbat Services	6:35 PM
Saturday . . .	
Shabbat Services	9:00 AM
Kiddush after Services	

5 SIVAN

EREV SHAVUOT

SATURDAY MAY 23, 2015

** Even though there is no charge for the dinner or lunch,
PLEASE RSVP if you are coming to the dinner and/or
the lunch, to Ritual@KCT.org by Monday, May 18 at 3 PM*

Candle Lighting	8:52 PM
Mincha	7:30 PM
Study Session Aleph	8:00 PM
Ma'ariv	9:00 PM
A Light Dinner	9:15 PM
Study Session Bet	10:00 - 11:30 PM

6 SIVAN

FIRST DAY SHAVUOT

SUNDAY MAY 24, 2015

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Musaf	
Study Session Gimel and Lunch	

The KCT Tradition Renews:

The Annual Shavuot Dairy Lunch and Cheese Cake Kiddush

Mincha / Ma'ariv	7:30 PM
Candle Lighting	7:53 PM

7 SIVAN

SECOND DAY SHAVUOT

MONDAY MAY 25, 2015

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Yizkor and Musaf	
Study Session Dalet	

The KCT Tradition Deepens:

The Internationally Acclaimed KCT Ice Cream Kiddush

Yom Tov ends 8:47 PM

*Celebrating, studying and growing together as a community of the committed, the extended member families of **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion** will again come together this year, for its compelling twenty second year, in its Setauket Beit Midrash for the Shavuot holiday period. The KCT Ritual Committee is delighted to provide you with this compendium for self-study, for family and individual use, in preparation for the upcoming holiday.*

**Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days.
And you shall bring a New Grain Offering to Hashem. Vayikra 23:16**

Chag Sameach !

. . . The Holiday's Biblical Roots



The laws, dates and celebration of the pilgrimage festival of Shavuot are derived primarily from a brief series of biblical statements by HaShem, which evolved by interpretation and exegesis into the *hilchot* that govern the holiday:

“You shall count for yourselves - from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving - seven weeks, they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count, fifty days; And you shall bring a new-meal offering to Hashem” (Vayikra 23:15-16)

“And you shall declare on that very day, that it is a Holy Day unto you. You shall do no manner of work; It is an Eternal Statute, in all your habitations, for all your generations” (Vayikra 23:21)

“You shall count for yourselves seven weeks, from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you will observe the Festival of Shavu'ot for the LORD, your God” (Devarim 16:9-10)

**Shavuot 5775
at
Kehillat Chovevei Tzion**

. . . Counting the Omer



סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

According to the Torah, we are obligated to count the days from Passover to Shavuot. This period is known as the **Counting of the Omer**, an omer being a unit of measure. On the second day of Passover, in the days of the Temple, an omer of barley was cut down and brought to the Temple as an offering. This daily grain offering was referred to as the Omer. ~K~

. . . Tzedakah and Yizkor



Shavuot offers an opportunity for a powerful tzedakah remembrance. The Yizkor donation associated with recalling and sanctifying the memories of departed family members adds to the personally compelling nature of the Yizkor service.

The essence of *Yizkor* is an act of *tzedakah*, a contribution made on behalf of loved ones, of which the *Kodosh Baruchu* takes note, to earn merit for the deceased in His eyes. Our Kehillah has made a significant, ever-growing commitment to *tzedakah* over the years.

We encourage you, as you plan your individual *tzedakot*, for whatever contributions are within your means and family custom, to consider **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion** as a worthy beneficiary of your generosity and support at this time and throughout the year. ~K~

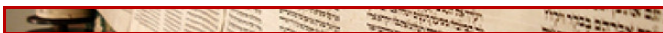
... The KCT Memorial Wall



In the KCT Beit Midrash, the Memorial Wall represents the *Kehillah's* commemoration of our loved ones. Each plaque contains the name of the person recalled, in Hebrew and English, and the date of death in both the secular and Hebrew calendars. *Yahrzeit* lamps at each plaque are lit during the week of the appropriate date and for *Yizkor*. New additions to the Memorial Panel are specially dedicated at the next *Yizkor* service following placement, and each is individually remembered at every *Yizkor* service that follows. Please let us know if you'd like to order a plaque or if you have any questions about the Memorial Wall.

~K~

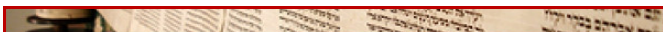
... The Kehillah Remembers



The **Yizkor** service is recited on the morning of the the second day of Shavuot, **Monday, May 25th**. The Kehillah remembers with great fondness and respect all the loved ones whom we have individually lost over the years and those whose names have been inscribed in the Kehillah's Book of Remembrance, which will be available at services. *Yizkor* is at once both a collective experience and an individual one, and is the timeless prayer of personal memory of the Jewish people. *Yizkor* is recited on Yom Kippur, on Shmini Atzeret, and then again on the last day of each of Pesach and Shavuot.

~K~

... Our Shavuot Scholar



Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 5775:

**Scholar-in-Residence:
Rabbi Joseph Topek**

"An American Jewish History Symposium"

"American Jewish history is not necessarily defined by war, but major military conflicts are ways of demarcating periods in American history that were important benchmarks for American Jews in the development of the community and in the formation of an American Jewish identity."



The next installment in the continuing exploration of topics of Jewish ethics, values and perspectives brings us to a broad-based conversation guided by Jewish texts and scholarly thinkers, in areas including conversion, interpersonal relations, and messianic traditions in Jewish literature.

Read about this unique and powerful three day Shavuot Kallah in the special **Tikkun Leyl Shavuot** section of this booklet.

PLEASE note that in order to plan appropriately, it is absolutely necessary that all attendees for the opening dinner on Saturday evening May 23rd, RSVP to Ritual@KCT.org by Monday, May 18th at 3 PM, if not earlier!

~K~

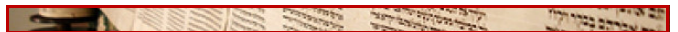
... Preparation Through Study



Drawn from various sources, ancient, historic and modern, the following section of personal study materials is presented by the editors with a view toward stimulating thought, study, discussion, agreement and disagreement, and evaluation approaching and leading into the days of Shavuot.

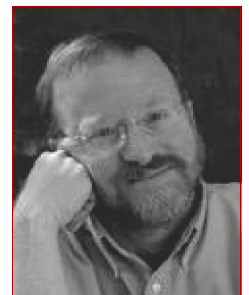
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... During the Omer, Be a Work in Progress



Written by Rabbi Aryeh Ben David, founder in 2006 of Ayeka (Center for Soulful Education) and its director, having previously taught at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, and served as the Rabbinical Educational Consultant for Hillel International.

We are right now in the midst of the journey from Passover to Shavuot. If *Pesach* is our moment of physical courage, *Shavuot* is our moment of spiritual courage. *Shavuot* is an encounter with G-d's presence.



How would you feel if you were told, “Next week you will have the most powerful life-changing spiritual experience of your life?” Would you panic? Would you be excited? Would you be afraid?

Personally, I would be terrified. If the past is any indicator, I might even run away.

I like my life the way it is now. I don't want to shake things up. I like order and stability. Most of all, I like being in control.

I know how I would like to answer the question. I would like to say that I am eager and deeply yearning for the spiritual encounter. I would like to say that I am ready and have the courage to embrace whatever this encounter will expect of me.

But, unfortunately, at the present moment, I am really not there.

Why is that? Maybe it's because I'm still in my year of mourning for my father and, as my kids say, “Abba is a bit off.” Maybe I'm just getting old and losing my youthful passion and exuberance. Maybe it's because I've been through *Shavuot* as an adult more than 30 times, and it's difficult to feel that it is new and life-changing.

As I get older and more stuck in my ways, I try to remember Jimmy.

Ten years ago, I ran a four-day spiritual retreat to the desert. Most of the participants were in their 20s, but during the opening circle of our orientation, I walked a very senior fellow. He took a chair and introduced himself to the group, “Hello. I'm 78 years old. My name is Jimmy. For 78 years, I have hated the name Jimmy and always demanded that people call me James. But I'm a work in progress, and I've decided now to change that. Please call me Jimmy.”

We were all speechless. How can he be a work in progress?! He's 78 years old!

But maybe **life is measured in the degrees that we have the courage to keep growing, not to get stuck or run away.**

The journey from Passover to *Shavuot* is a journey of courage. Every step is a declaration that I am not running away. I am walking the path to the unknown. I am open to the encounter.

Courage has many faces. Battling the inner demons that whisper: “Don't lose control. Guard yourself. Protect your independence” takes mammoth doses of courage.

As we move closer to *Shavuot*, ask yourself, “*Ayeka*, where are you? Are you where you want to be? What do you need to do to get there?.” ~K~

... New Rules



Written by chassidic artist Shoshannah Brombacher, who holds a PhD in the medieval Hebrew poetry of the Amsterdam Sephardic-Portuguese community.

Rabbi Shmuel "Shmelke" Horowitz (1726-1778), known as "Rabbi Shmelke of Nicholsburg," was a very remarkable Chassidic Master. He claimed the biblical prophet Shmuel haNavi as his ancestor, and said that the prophet passed his soul on to him. He was not always a Chassid; in fact, he was originally among the early opponents of Chassidism, until he met the famous Maggid of Mezritch. Later Rabbi Shmelke became the rabbi of Nicholsburg (Mikulov) in Moravia. He is the author of the Torah works *Divre Shmuel*, *Imre Shmuel*, and *Shemen haTov*.



The tombstone of the Chief Rabbi of Moravia

When he was appointed as rabbi in Nicholsburg, the community leaders informed him that they had a special custom: every new rabbi was expected to add a new rule or custom to the chronicles of the community. Rabbi Shmelke smiled and said nothing. As time went by and the new rabbi still

had not contributed anything to the rule-book, the officers of the community began to press him about this; but Rabbi Shmelke continued to procrastinate and make all sorts of excuses. Finally, his secretary took the initiative and placed the book in front of him, open on his desk, an inkwell and a pen neatly next to it.

Reb Shmelke sat down, picked up the pen, and wrote the Ten Commandments.

We know them, but they are always new for us. ~K~

. . . A Childish Understanding of the Torah



Written by Brooklyn chassidic Rabbi Naftali Silberberg.

Rabbi Meir said: When the Jews stood before Sinai to receive the Torah, G-d said to them: "I swear, I will not give you the Torah unless you provide worthy guarantors who will assure that you will observe its laws."



The Jews responded, "Master of the world, our forefathers will be our guarantors!"

"Your guarantors themselves require guarantors!" was G-d's reply.

"Master of the world," the Jews exclaimed, "our prophets will guarantee our observance of the Torah."

"I have grievances against them, too. 'The shepherds have rebelled against Me'," G-d replied. "Bring proper guarantors and only then will I give you the Torah."

As a last resort, the Jews declared, "our children will serve as our guarantors!"

"They truly are worthy guarantors," G-d replied. "Because of them I will give the Torah."

Midrash Rabba, Song of Songs 1:4

The white-bearded sages and the erudite rabbis weren't sufficient to satisfy G-d's "need" for a guarantor. Why? Who can better guarantee the transmission of the Law than the intellectuals, philosophers, and theologians who devote their lives to developing it and teaching its wisdom to myriads of disciples throughout the ages? **Why did G-d prefer the Torah study of the child** whose mind is constantly distracted, moving on to far more important subjects, such as which game to play during recess, the caliber of the snack which his mother packed in his lunch bag, or his plans for summer vacation?

Yet, there is a unique quality exclusive to a child's method of learning, a quality which is appealing to G-d and is the most effective guarantee for the future of the Torah.

One cannot study without questioning. "Why?" "What is the basis for your statement?" and "Why can't it be done differently?" are rudimentary and indispensable phrases for any serious student. However, the child and adult harbor very different intentions when voicing these questions: the adult is doubting the very premise of the idea/law/principle which is being taught, and if the answer is not to his liking, he might altogether reject the teaching. Conversely, **the child has an acute curiosity, but he doesn't doubt that which he is taught; he is aware that his wisdom and knowledge is limited** and therefore accepts what his parent or teacher says. **He asks questions because he wants to understand more, not because he is skeptical of the information he has heard.**

We are commanded to study Torah, and this involves closely examining every word of both the Written and Oral Law. **G-d doesn't want us to blindly accept His teachings, he wants us to use our intellectual skills to analyze, probe, and question.** However, we must never lose sight of the fact that our minds are inherently limited, whereas G-d's wisdom is infinite. We are obligated to question, but at the same time to unquestioningly accept each word of Torah to be the absolute truth. Only this method of study ensures the eternal survival of the Torah, guaranteeing that its teachings won't be forsaken because of doubts which inevitably will arise. After all, that is the nature of intellect—it can always be questioned and doubted.

For those of you who are reading this and are thinking, "how can an adult be expected to blindly accept a religious doctrine?" — that is precisely why G-d didn't accept you to be the guarantor for His Torah . . .

The children aren't the only guarantors of the Torah. **The adult who dedicates himself to the Torah in a childish manner, he too can take credit for ensuring the continuity of the Torah.** ~K~

. . . Sinai for Non-Jews



Written by Rabbi Benjamin Blech, Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and Rabbi Emeritus of the Young Israel in Oceanside.

It isn't only Jews who should be celebrating the holiday of *Shavuot*.

You don't have to be Jewish, nor do you have to be religious, to acknowledge that what happened on Mount Sinai was one of the most important moments in the history of civilization.



Even the reason for the choice of the particular location on which the 10 Commandments were given is meant to emphasize the universality of their message. Why is it, the biblical commentators ask, G-d chose to transmit his moral code on a mountain in the desert rather than to wait until the Jews would come to the holy land of Israel? Precisely for this reason: Israel is a land for the Jews; the desert is ownerless — and hence belongs equally to everyone.

G-d's words weren't intended just for one people. They were meant for the whole world because they represent the key to universal survival.

What makes the message of Sinai so universally relevant and necessary?

Simply put, **it is the idea of law, the concept of "do this" and "do not do that." It is the notion that some things are right and some things are wrong. It is the rejection of cultural relativism that sees some good in everything no matter how heinous because "who is to say that what we think is more correct than what they believe."**

There's no lack of excuses in the liberal lexicon. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. People steal because they are poor. People murder because they feel deprived as a result of the way life has mistreated them. People do all kinds of bad things and we have to be fair before judging them to determine whether they had enough love as a child, whether the guilt may not be theirs but rather the fault of society.

The lyrics of *Gee Officer Krupke* in *West Side Story* brilliantly capture the flavor of this flawed philosophy:

Dear kindly Sergeant Krupke,
You gotta understand,
It's just our bringin' up-ke
That gets us out of hand.
Our mothers all are junkies,
Our fathers all are drunks.
Golly Moses, natcherly we're punks!

God has more faith in mankind than those who claim that people have to be forgiven no matter what because they just can't help being evil.

Everyone has a reason for what they do. Hitler found a way to justify genocide as a means to bring about a superior race. Cultural relativism has to admit that it's possible he was right. And for all we know, as some prominent psychologist dared to suggest, his mother's failure to breast-feed him sufficiently may have caused feelings of love deprivation that of course produced self-hatred, which turned outward, resulted in the need to murder 6 million Jews...

Reasons to commit evil are not the same as justifications.

We are expected to abide by God's rules no matter what, for without them society cannot survive.

Poor people don't necessarily have to turn to crime. Just recently, we watched Oprah Winfrey retire after 25 years. She reviewed her career that began in rural Mississippi, in extreme poverty, followed by her rise to become one of the most powerful and influential women in the world. No matter how disadvantaged, we are granted free will and the opportunity to make our choices in life.

And from the mountaintop of Sinai G-d taught the world that there are absolutes, that there are rules we are expected to abide by no matter what our excuse, because without them society cannot survive.

"Thou shalt not murder" – no matter why you think it doesn't apply to you.

"Thou shalt not commit adultery" – even if your own wife doesn't understand you, the other woman is more beautiful, and besides "who will get hurt, if no one finds out?"

"Thou shalt not steal" – even if with your newfound wealth you become a great philanthropist and have your name plastered on buildings and dedications.

The Decalogue has only 172 words. Not one of them is "except." They are clear and to the point. They are rooted in truth and represent the words of the Creator of the world.

Their power rests in their Divine source. Without them and their moral force, the world would long ago have perished.

The heroine of *Shavuot* is Ruth. It is her book that we read on this holiday. Why was she chosen for this honor?

Even though she was not born a Jewess, she found her way to the truth of that Torah given in the desert intended for all mankind. And that's why she became the ancestress of King David from whom will stem the Messiah – the one who will bring the whole world at long last to accept the gift meant for all that was given at Sinai.

Isn't that reason enough for everybody to rejoice on this holiday? ~K~

. . . Na'aseh v'Nishmah: Faith and Intellect



Written by Rabbi Benjamin Yudin, long-time spiritual leader of Congregation Shomrei Torah in Fairlawn, NJ. His weekly parsha commentary can be heard on radio station WFMU's "JM in the AM"

Our nationhood and redemption started with *emunah*, faith.

It progressed with faith and is perpetuated by faith. When Moshe acquiesced and accepted the mantle of leadership to be the spokesman of *Hashem* to His enslaved nation, the Torah tells us that the people believed Moshe, that he was the messenger to lead their emancipation. The *Medrash* comments that it was not the signs and wonders that Moshe performed that won them over, rather the faith that the one who brought the message of "*pakod yifkod - Hashem will redeem you*" is the true representative of *Hashem*.



Regarding the Jews at *Yam Suf* we are told, "and they had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant" (*Shemos* 14:31.) Finally, at Sinai "*Hashem* said to Moshe, Behold! I come to you in the thickness of the cloud, so that the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will believe in you forever" (*Shemos* 19:9.) Thus, **the revelation at Sinai was predicated on faith and maintains that faith.**

How could the Jewish nation at Sinai not question *Hashem* as to the content of His Torah

prior to accepting it? Unlike all other nations that asked, "What is written in it?", "What are its laws?", "Let us see if we can comply with it?", the Jewish nation responded "*Naaseh v'nishmah - we will do and we will obey*" (*Shemos* 24:7.) A verse from Proverbs (11:3) says, "*tumas yesharim tancheim - the perfect faith of the upright shall lead them*". Rashi understands this to mean **we trusted *Hashem* out of love, and relied on Him that He would not burden us with something we could not do. *Kabolas haTorah* was based on the pure faith of our ancestors, that not only could we observe and follow His Torah but that this is the best possible life for us.**

The Talmud (*Nidah* 70b) asks what should a person do to become rich? Rebe Yehoshua answered that (1) he should invest time in his business, (2) he should conduct his business affairs with integrity and (3) he should pray to *Hashem*, the source of all wealth. The prohibition of charging interest to a Jew is based upon the reality that for all business transactions one needs Divine assistance. Will they be successful, will they and their merchandise find favor in the eyes of the next one? Willy-nilly, the merchant looks heavenward, prays for success in his endeavors. Not so the one who lends on interest, he has taken care of matters himself. He is ensured of his success and profit by stipulating in advance the interest he will take. Such an individual has removed *Hashem* from the equation. The Torah therefore prohibits lending with interest, to bolster and maintain the faith of the businessman.

An earlier question is posed in the above *gemara*. What should a person do to become a scholar? He should spend more time studying in the Yeshiva, spend less time in business, and pray to *Hashem* for wisdom, as He is the source of all wisdom. Regarding wealth it is understandable that one is to pray, as this reinforces the faith and recognition that ultimately it all comes from On High. What role does prayer play with Torah knowledge?

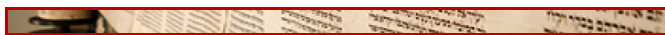
Every morning we are privileged to recite two blessings prior to the recitation of the *Shema*. The first speaks of *Hashem* as the Creator, and His daily renewal of nature. In the second blessing we thank Him for the gift of Torah. In fact, if one is late in coming to Synagogue and did not yet recite *birchas haTorah*, the daily blessings in honor of a Torah, one can satisfy their obligation with this second *beracha* of *Ahava Rabbah* (*Shulchan Aruch Orach*

Chaim 46.) Note, in it we not only ask *Hashem* for Divine assistance "to instill in our hearts the desire to understand and discern, to listen learn and teach, to observe perform and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah in love". We also ask *Hashem* in the merit of our ancestors who trusted in You and to whom You taught the laws of life, be gracious also to us and teach us. As the original *kabolas haTorah* was predicated on *emunah*, so too our personal and communal *kabolas haTorah* is only meaningful if it is coupled with faith. Specifically, we have faith that the Torah speaks to our generation and provides meaning and purpose for life as it did for the generation at Sinai and to all subsequent generation. We Pray to Him daily that we remain steadfast in our faith.

Perhaps this is why we most always read *Parshas Bamidbar* on the *Shabbos* prior to *Shavuot*. While there are no specific *mitzvos* found in this *parsha*, the setting of the desert, and as our Rabbis (*Mechilta*) inform us "**The Torah was only given to those who ate and were nourished by the *mun* - the daily ration of manna that descended from heaven**". *Hashem*, who could have provided them with their gift of *mun* annually, chose to do so daily to bolster their *emunah*. We, their proud descents, are the beneficiaries of their basic training in *emunah*, enabling us to take *Hashem's* Torah and "transform wastelands into Eden" (*Yeshaya* 51:3.)

~K~

. . . The Menu for Shavuot



Written by Rabbi Dr. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor emeritus of The Jewish Theological Seminary (having retired in 2006) and Rabbi Herman Abramovitz Professor of Jewish History. Rabbi Schorsch is a world-renowned expert in German Jewish history.

The menu for the first day of *Shavuot* is customarily restricted to dairy dishes. While a plethora of explanations has been generated to account for the practice, I prefer the most serious one. *Shavuot* commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the governing covenant between God and Israel, the constitution of the Jewish polity. The event marks the adoption of a religious regimen that would



henceforth define the borders of individual and group behavior. That to which the Israelites were formerly entitled is no longer permitted.

In the spirit of that curtailment, we forgo the pleasures of a meat meal. **Our menu becomes a symbol for the meaning of the day.** A dinner of succulent steak would mock the quest for the simple life which is the Torah's ideal. At the outset of creation, God had intended that Adam and Eve's children live as vegetarians. The consumption of meat was not granted till after the flood, a mid-course correction dictated by human depravity. God had set the bar too high. On *Shavuot*, as we accept a roadmap to holiness, we remind ourselves of the ideal. To satisfy our hunger without the taking of animal life ennobles our shared existence.

The essence of the Torah is to eschew doing everything of which we are capable. As the Rabbis put it, **we hallow our lives by giving up a measure of our freedom to act. That is, an effort at self-denial becomes a form of self-enhancement.** A life of excess leads neither to virtue nor holiness. For the Rabbis, the biblical injunction "You shall be holy" means to live apart - (*perushim tiheyu*). A degree of separation from the allurements that engulf us helps to focus the mind on matters of ultimate consequence. Thus we rest one day out of seven for the spiritual renewal that sustains us for the other six. Or we deny ourselves many of God's creatures to impress upon us the right of all animals to inhabit the planet. Nature surely does not exist solely to gratify human need or greed. Reverence for land and life is the attitude that the Torah seeks to engender within us.

An everyday example of this world view that less is more is encapsulated in the rabbinic epigram that **"the salt of wealth is its depletion"**. Counterintuitive, the proposition holds that the way to husband our wealth is not to amass ever more but to share some of it with the unfortunate. Doing well is doing good. And in return, the principal will continue to grow. I have yet to meet a philanthropist impoverished by giving. More generally, Judaism demands of us delayed gratification.

In his final book, *Moses and Monotheism*, published just three months before the outbreak of World War II, Sigmund Freud offered a paean to Judaism as the most spiritual of religions known. The key to that achievement lay in its rejection of immediate gratification.

The religion that began with the prohibition against making an image of its God has developed in the course of centuries more and more into a religion of instinctual renunciation. Not that it demands sexual abstinence; it is content with a considerable restriction of sexual freedom. God, however, becomes completely withdrawn from sexuality and raised to an ideal of ethical perfection. Ethics, however, means restriction of Instinctual gratification. The Prophets did not tire of maintaining that God demands nothing else from his people but a just and virtuous life - that is to say, abstention from the gratification from all impulses that, according to our present-day moral standards, are to be condemned as vicious. And even the exhortation to believe in God seems to recede in comparison with the seriousness of these ethical demands.

Thus while Freud dismissed G-d as an illusion, he could celebrate a religious regimen that sought to elevate the faithful above their senses and lusts. Indeed, sublimation, the art of rerouting our passions for good, was a Jewish discovery. Freud's own highly disciplined lifestyle embodied the ethos, if not the specifics, he attributed to Judaism.

In short, our self-imposed restrictions set us free. To scale the heights we need to focus our energies. The awesome prowess of a world class pianist or tennis player comes only with years of self-denial. Even G-d, according to *Kabbalah*, before creating the cosmos needed to contract within G-d's own self. The intensity that flowed from such concentration filled the void left by G-d's withdrawal.

Even as we scale down our diet on *Shavuot* to ready ourselves for the Torah, we also go without sleep. On the first evening of the festival we gather in small groups to study throughout the night. The moment that commemorates G-d's revelation finds us weary but saturated with Torah. Again the ritual calls for an act that takes us beyond ourselves. To do without attunes us to a quest for holiness predicated on self-transcendence.

And as we ascend, we are met more than halfway by an infusion of holiness from above. Holiness is a reciprocal relationship. According to the Talmud, if we strive to hallow our lives here on earth, we will be bathed with a burst of holiness from

above. A world awash in holiness awaits us, if we but dare to approach it. That super-sensory reality is what Heschel meant to convey in the title to his theological classic *God in Search of Man*. ~K~

. . . Achdamut and Ketubah



This overview of two highly meaningful poetic writings for Shavuot comes to us from a panel of writers of the OU.

From one end of the Diaspora to the other, a need was felt to add components to the Service of *Shavuot*. The components added, "*Akdamut*," "Before I Speak," created in and added throughout the world of Ashkenazic Jewry, and "*Ketubah*," "The Marriage Contract," created in and very popular in the world of Sefardic Jewry, were expressions of the unique conditions existing in those areas of the Exile.

"*Akdamut*" – The Background . . .

Akdamut is a "*piyut*," a religious poem, which was composed during the First Crusade, which began in 1096, as an effort by Christian Europe to recapture the "Holy Land" from the Moslem "infidels" who had seized it. On their way to the Middle East, the Christian knights would, in general, visit terror if not outright destruction upon the Jewish communities which happened to be on their route. It was a time of oppression, of cruelty, of ignorance on the part of the Jews' neighbors. There was absolutely nothing attractive in the dominant culture in Europe at that time.

Nevertheless, the Christians tried to force their religion upon their Jewish neighbors, often at the threat of death. Sometimes, mock "debates" were held, in which Jewish rabbis were forced to participate, knowing that the juries, consisting of church officials, were rigged against them, and that nothing they said would have any effect on their listeners, or upon their own fate. The author of *Akdamut* was the unwilling participant in such a "debate."

This then was the background of *Akdamut*, composed at that time by Rabbi Meir son of Rabbi Yitzchak, who was the "Chazan" of the City of Vermaiza, in Germany. The position "Chazan" is not directly translatable as "Cantor," which is its current meaning, for at that time, there was the additional

connotation of great Talmudic scholarship associated with the position and, indeed, this particular Chazan is supposed to have been one of the teachers of the great Bible and Talmud Commentator, Rashi.

The poem describes the words of the author as he "debated" the truths of Judaism to a hostile audience. But they are disguised for posterity in the Aramaic language, which was not understood by the Christian world or its censors. The author, who died shortly after the "debate," left behind a priceless inheritance for the Jewish People, the piyut of Akdamut. The practice began to chant Akdamut on *Shavuot*, with its characteristic melody, at the beginning of the public reading which includes the "*Aseret HaDibrot*" the Ten Commandments.

"Ketuvah" – The Background . . .

This "piyut," actually a love song, modeled after Shir HaShirim, the Book of the Bible which is a metaphor for the relationship between the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and the People of Israel. The poem takes on the form of a marriage contract between Israel and the Torah, composed by Rabbi Yisrael Najara.

It emerged from the world of Sefardic Jewry, which at that time was radically different from Christian Europe. The Sefardic World, ruled mainly by the Moslems, had many features which were attractive to the Jewish communities which lived among them. The Moslems at that time were world leaders in Poetry, Philosophy, Grammar, Mathematics and many other cultural expressions. This caused a reaction in the Jewish communities, which took the form of an unprecedented focus on such areas as all the branches of culture cited above. The time of the great Jewish Grammarian and Poet, Rabbi Yisrael Najara, was truly a Golden Age, unprecedented in the range of opportunities available to Jews, and taken advantage of by Jews, till the Golden Age of America. ~K~

. . . The Two-Way Mirror



Written by Rabbi Yanki Tauber, the former content editor of the website Chabad.org

Does G-d care if I cheat on my taxes? Am I going to be a better husband/wife/parent if I keep kosher? Are these the same question?

The 613 *mitzvot* of the Torah are commonly divided into two categories: 1) laws that govern the relationship "between man and G-d" - *bein adam la-makom*; and 2) laws that legislate the proper conduct "between man and his fellow" *bein adam la-chavero*. Even the Ten Commandments were inscribed on two separate tablets, one containing commandments such as "I am G-d your G-d" and "Remember the day of Shabbat," and the other proclaiming laws like "Do not kill" and "Do not steal."



But is this division a legitimate one? Let us examine the evidence.

On the one hand, we have the aforementioned two tablets, though one still needs to explain how "honor your father and your mother" ended up on the "between man and G-d" side. On the other hand, we have the famous story the Talmud tells about the prospective convert to Judaism who came to Hillel asking to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. "What is hateful to yourself," said Hillel, "do not do to your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary." But how is putting on *tefillin* a commentary on "Love your fellow"? There's also the statement by the Zohar that the divine instruction, "I am G-d your G-d... You shall have no other gods beside Me," is the essence of all 613 commandments and prohibitions of the Torah. Meaning that helping my neighbor shovel his car out of a snowbank proclaims the oneness of G-d and disavows the existence of any other gods beside Him?

The masters of the mystical wisdom of the Kabbalah insist that, ultimately, there is no essential difference between the Torah's "civil" laws and its so-called "religious" laws. Each *mitzvah*, whether it's visiting the sick or waving a *lulav* on *Sukkot*, is a facilitator of the flow of desire and gratification between G-d and creation -- a flow that sustains all of the created existence and fulfills the divine intent in creating it in the first place. So a crime against G-d, which causes a disruption in the flow, is a crime against all of His creations; and a crime against a fellow creature is also a crime against G-d, for the same reason. **A kindness to a fellow is a kindness to G-d**, as it contributes to the realization of His desire in creation; and a positive "personal" relationship

with G-d has a positive effect on His relationship with creation as a whole and with each and every citizen of His world.

So why did G-d deliver His Torah to us in two tablets? Maybe it's because He wants us to understand that there are two sides to life. **Life is not an uninterrupted spiritual experience, nor is it exclusively a social exercise.** Life means dealing with people, but also conversing with oneself; it means meditating and praying, as well as digging neighbors' cars out of snow banks.

G-d is the absolute oneness, and human life is the endeavor to express His oneness. But true oneness is not uniformity. True oneness tolerates, indeed embraces, various and even opposite particulars. For there is no greater expression of oneness than the ability to see opposites reflected in each other.

So G-d divided the divinely-ordained blueprint for life into a "between man and G-d" column and a "between man and man" column. And then He granted us the ability to see each side reflected in the other. To see a fellow's needs peering out to us from the pages of our prayer book. And to see G-d's face smiling to us from a beggar's mumbled gratitude, from the wonder in a child's question, from a loved one's trusting eyes. ~K~

. . . The Sound of Silence and Hearts of Stone



Written by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer, who teaches at Ohr Sameach in Jerusalem and is the editor of the weekly Torah magazine "OhrNet".

Have you noticed in a car how the radio usually comes on with the engine? Or the first thing you do after starting up is to put on a CD? I never noted this until I recently read a psychologist's report saying that people need a certain amount of background noise to feel relaxed. The theme of the article was that more and more people are not comfortable being "alone". And it's not just in the car: MiniDiscs at home, Muzak in the elevator, Walkmans, Discmans everywhere. All designed to protect us from being alone with no one else and



nothing else around. The report presented data without answering the question why this is so.

It seems that we are less and less at ease with ourselves. I found the article fascinating because discomfort with ourselves is the opposite of the Torah approach. The Torah teaches that in order to build a relationship with G-d we must get to know ourselves. This requires introspection without any distractions. As a Chassidic rabbi put it, "Getting to know yourself better allows you to get to know the world better."

I wonder what conclusions the researcher would have drawn if he had spent time in a Synagogue. Daily we take time out from our decibel-laden lives to pray in near silence. At the most intense moment of our spiritual connection each of us is in a "cocoon of silence" - alone with G-d. Silence is the tool for drawing ourselves closer to G-d in this physical world.

Over 3,300 years ago, on the morning G-d gave the Jewish People the Torah, the entire Creation was silent. All life forms were mute. The sea was completely still. Nothing moved. Not a sound. Pure silence.

And it was from this silence the Torah was given.

Imagine. **Each Jew was forced to look into his heart** and come to terms with himself without the aid of anything external. No palm pilots, no mobile phones, not even a beeper. Just an old-fashioned heart. Because it is from the heart that a person defines what kind of relationship he wants with his Creator. The *Midrash* teaches that on *Shavuot*, the day that G-d gave us the Torah, His voice reverberated with an intensity and a strength that had never before been revealed. That voice was so powerful that it penetrated into the heart of every single person standing at Sinai - and yet not a sound was heard. **G-d spoke to each heart in the most personal way. Each person was chosen by G-d to become the recipient of the Torah, the greatest treasure in the world.**

During the British Mandate, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was forced to appear at a Royal Commission. The commission was convened to discuss why the Jews insisted on praying at the site of the destroyed Temple. Rabbi Kook was asked why the Jewish People make such a fuss over the Western Wall.

"After all," drawled an English officer. "It is just a bunch of rocks one on top of the other." Rabbi Kook replied that "Just as there are hearts which are made of stone, so too there are stones which are made of heart."

Shavuot, the day the Torah was given, is the day when we can choose the nature of our hearts.

Whether they will remain impervious and unresponsive to the silence. Dormant and rocklike. Or if our hearts will serve as the spiritual center of our being. *Shavuot* is the day that we decide if our hearts are going to listen to the silence and unite together with G-d in genuine celebration.

The dictionary defines silence as being the absence of noise. Not so the Torah. The Torah defines silence as being the key to a positive and healthy relationship with G-d and oneself. *Shavuot* is the gateway to an existence above and beyond sound.

~K~

... Why Do the Jewish People Loom So Large on the World Stage?



By Rabbi Aron Moss of Sydney Australia, who edits and manages one of many on-line "Ask the Rabbi" types of websites. Here he replies to a question often on the minds of Jews and non-Jews alike.

The numbers don't add up. Here's a nation that comprises less than 0.2% of the world's population, yet we command so much attention you'd think there were billions of us. That's like a room of two thousand people, with one puny guy sitting in the corner whom everyone wants to talk to (or pick on)!

Answer . . .

Jews do strange things sometimes. One example is the widespread practice of "credit combing."

Many Jews have a habit of combing through the credits at the end of a movie, searching for Jewish names. At each discovery they beam with pride: Look! *Assistant Gaffer.....Mo Goldstein! Catering Consultant.....Beth Cohen!*

This odd practice comes from a very deep place in the Jewish psyche. Jews share a spiritual bond with each other. When we meet Jews anywhere in the world, there is an immediate connection, a kinship, a sense of oneness. We are like one big family.

When Jews are in the news, we take it personally. When Israel is under attack, we feel the pain wherever we are. When a Jew wins a bronze medal in croquet, we all share the victory. And when we see a Jewish name in the movie credits, we get excited.

Maybe other nations do this too. But I don't think so. **This profound sense of connection makes the Jewish nation unique among the peoples of the world.**

This is the reason why statistics cannot apply to the Jewish people. No Jew is merely an individual. We are a collective soul, a part of something bigger than ourselves. We may be a tiny blip on the census, but we don't function according to normal demographic principles. **Our strength is not measured by our numbers, but by our unity.**

The destiny of the Jewish people is to be a strong voice of goodness and morality among the family of nations. **When we unite with our community and commit ourselves to the shared vision of our people, then we are a formidable presence.** Not because we are one billion, but **because we are one.**

~K~

... Shavuot Through "Dry Bones"



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