

SHAVU'OS AND BAR MITZVAH: CAUSES FOR CELEBRATION

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

It is well known that when a boy celebrates his thirteenth birthday and when a girl celebrates her twelfth birthday, the birthday celebration is not standard. At these ages, the boy and girl become a Bar and Bas Mitzvah, respectively. They are now obligated to keep all of the Mitzvos of the Torah. The entrance into this new stage in a boy's and girl's life is celebrated. The interesting thing about a Bar and Bas Mitzvah is that we don't find any explicit commandment in the Torah to celebrate this occasion. The Chasam Sofer poses this question in his commentary in Parshas Vayechi. He compares this glaring omission to another omission that we find in the Torah. When one would look in the Torah to see why we celebrate the holiday of Shavu'os, one would find that no association is made between Shavu'os and the giving of the Torah. (See vol. I # 24.) We all know that Shavu'os is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, and it would seem fitting that we celebrate this anniversary on Shavu'os. Yet, the Torah only mentions the bringing of the Omer and the bringing of Bikkurim (first fruits) as reasons for celebration. Why does the Torah not mention any celebration of the anniversary of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah to the nation of Israel?

The Chasam Sofer, when answering his question, sets out some elementary facts. The Bikkurim, first fruits, were brought to Jerusalem at the time of Shavu'os with great fanfare. The Sefer HaChinuch tells us why we have the commandment to set aside the first fruit. Until the time that the crops begin to grow, a farmer may be very worried about the success of his crops. His livelihood depends on these fruits, and waiting to see if they will grow and produce can be nerve-wracking. However, once the fruits have started to grow, and the farmer sees that his work is literally bearing fruits, the farmer is overjoyed. He now knows that his work was not for naught and that he will have an income this year. It is precisely at a time like this that a farmer needs to remember who made his crops successful - Hashem. At the height of his joy, the farmer sets aside the first fruits of his labor upon the command of Hashem. This way, the farmer demonstrates that he is thankful for all the help and the blessings Hashem has bestowed upon him. In this instance, the farmer needs a reminder of how and why he was blessed.

When it comes to the giving of the Torah, we should not need any commandment or any set celebration to remind us of how lucky we are to have the Torah. We should be inspired on our own to be thankful to Hashem for giving us this present, every day. If Hashem had given us a directive to celebrate the anniversary of our receiving the Torah, it would make the celebration obligatory, as is everything else in the Torah. We would be celebrating not necessarily because we truly feel happiness and appreciation for the Torah, but because Hashem told us that we should celebrate.

This is not how Hashem wants us to celebrate our receiving of the Torah. Therefore, the Chasam Sofer says, the bringing of the Bikkurim is connected with the bringing of the Torah. Hashem made the time of bringing the Bikkurim, a time of natural joy for the farmer, and a time in which the farmer remembers Hashem, at the same time as the anniversary of receiving the Torah. The joy and thanks that comes naturally from bringing Bikkurim should cause a spark to be ignited within us, so that we, on our own, express the same joy and thanks for receiving the Torah.

It is, perhaps, for this reason, that no commandments to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah appears in the Torah. A Bar Mitzvah is a time when a young man has the yoke of Torah placed upon his shoulders. While it is indeed a time when a young man might be a bit frightened by the burden he is starting to bear, he should nevertheless be overjoyed by the fact that now he has the opportunity to do Mitzvos and fulfill the command of Hashem. This happiness has to be natural: the young man has to feel it on his own. An artificial happiness, brought on by an obligatory celebration of the fact, is not needed nor desired. The young man at the time of his Bar Mitzvah has to realize how lucky he is to now have received the Torah and to be thankful to Hashem for this gift. This realization has to arise without any stimuli. It has to be self motivated and sincere. It is for this reason that the Torah contains no commandments to celebrate a Bar Mitzvah.

The Chiddushei HaRim notes that Shavu'os is referred to as Z'man Matan Torah - the Time When the Torah Was Given, and not Z'man Kabbalas HaTorah - the Time When the Torah Was Accepted. The reason for this, he writes, is that the giving of the Torah occurred only once, and therefore we can celebrate an anniversary of this occasion. However, we are supposed to be accepting the Torah on a daily basis. We can not celebrate the anniversary of an event that is ongoing, and that occurs daily. As Shavu'os approaches, we should all feel natural feelings of joy that we had the Torah given to us. We should celebrate the fact that we have the opportunity to accept the Torah, just as our forefathers at Sinai, on a daily basis, so that we can strengthen our bond to the Torah and to G-d.