

ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Shavu'os, the holiday on which we commemorate G-d's giving of the Torah to the nation of Israel, begins this year at sunset on May 16, 2002.

The giving of the Torah to the nation of Israel in effect changed the spiritual "status" of the people. We know from Talmudic and Medrashic sources that our forefathers adhered to the precepts contained in the Torah, even though they had not yet been commanded to do such. Once the Torah was given, however, the nation was obliged to follow all of the commandments contained within. There are a number of commentators who liken this transformation to the conversion process. Prior to the giving of the Torah, the members of the nation of Israel were not "Jews," so to speak. There was nothing specific that constituted a distinct Jewish faith.

Yes, the people believed in the One and Only G-d. They saw vividly how He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. However, that belief was the sum and substance of the faith until the Torah was given. However, once the Torah was given, the nation was not merely the nation of Israel; they became the People of the Book, full-fledged Jews who followed all contained in the Torah.

There are two aspects of this pivotal event in the history of the nation of Israel that warrant attention. The Torah, when describing the encampment of the nation by Mt. Sinai prior to the giving of the Torah, alludes to the fact there was a spirit of unity that permeated the entire nation. The nation was like "one man, with one heart." The nation was unified, and brotherly love was abundant. Furthermore, the nation was united in purpose.

The nation stated, "All that G-d says, we will do and we will hear." The nation expressed their willingness to abandon their individual wants, desires, beliefs and practices for that which G-d was to command them. They committed themselves to the Torah unequivocally and unconditionally, and with that commitment they had to suppress their individual proclivities. The nation demonstrated self-sacrifice, evidenced by their devotion to G-d and His Torah at a time when all may not have been logically clear or understood.

Unity in spirit and a suppression of individuality were not only a part of the "conversion" process at the time of the giving of the Torah. The book of Rus (Ruth) is read on Shavu'os as it illustrates that Rus demonstrated these two attributes as part of her conversion process as well. After Rus and her sister-in-law Orpah had lost their respective husbands and were left destitute, their widowed mother-in-law Naomi tried to convince them to return to their homelands. Orpah did just that. Rus,

however, clung to her mother-in-law. The book of Rus writes "the two of them walked together. They walked together with a unity of purpose and a dedication to the service G-d. Rus clearly abandoned the faith of her upbringing in favor of the faith of her mother-in-law. The book of Rus highlights the fact that Rus, in her acceptance of the Torah, was totally united with her mother-in-law, who had lived a life of Torah from birth.

Furthermore, Rus had to withhold her personal feelings, and practice something different from that which she thought she should. Rus grew up in a society steeped in immorality. Once she joined Naomi, it was clear that she had rejected that way of life. When she went to gather food from the field of Naomi's relative Boaz, Boaz noticed her because of the high degree of modesty with which she conducted herself. Yet, Naomi told Rus that she should go to the field of Boaz dressed attractively and perfumed, in the evening, and even be by Boaz's side. These were actions that Rus thought she had abandoned. These were the ways of her homeland, she thought, not of the faith that she now wanted to call her own. Yet Naomi, Rus' mentor and instructor, told her that this is how she was to conduct herself at this time. Naomi understood that this had to happen, that this was part and parcel of Rus' entry into the nation of Israel. Rus suppressed her own gut feelings that Naomi's instructions were wrong and not in accordance with Torah ideals, and followed her teacher. Of course, we know the outcome. Rus ended up becoming the wife of Boaz. Their descendant was King David. Rus followed the instructions of one whom she knew was totally dedicated to the Torah and its ideals, even when it did not appear clear that it was so. Rus showed that she was able to suppress her own personal feelings when it came to following someone who was instructing her in the way of the Torah.

Shavu'os is the time when we are given the opportunity to reaccept the Torah with the same zeal and vigor as originally. We, in our personal acceptance of the Torah, should emulate the nation of Israel when encamped at Mt. Sinai, and Rus as well. Especially in these precarious times, our unity as a nation, united in the service of G-d with unwavering devotion to Him and His Torah, is crucial to our survival. May we all merit to celebrate the receipt of the Torah as a united nation in an Israel that knows only peace.