

THE UNTOUCHABLES

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

A unique aspect of the holiday of Shavuot struck me as I was explaining the customs of the holidays to some beginners. They began to review the various holiday laws with me. "OK," began one young man. "So on Pesach you've got the matzah, and the mitzvah of telling the story of the Exodus." "Correct," I nodded. "And on Sukkot you've got the lulav, esrog and eating the entire holiday in a sukkah right." Again I gave an approving nod and smiled. The student continued. "And what special observance does the Torah tell us to do on Shavuot?" I hesitated. Sacrifices aside, what special mitzvah observance do we do to commemorate the receiving of the Torah?

I was reluctant to respond with, "we stay up all night and learn" or "we eat cheesecake at the holiday meal," --beautiful customs that are in no way comparable to the level of a Torah-ordained command. In fact, the Torah tells us in Parshas Re'eh how we celebrate the holiday. "You shall count seven weeks for yourselves...Then you shall observe the holiday of Shavuot for Hashem. You shall rejoice before Hashem, your son your daughter, your servant your maidservant, the Levite in your cities, the proselyte, the orphan and the widow who are among you" (Deuteronomy 16:13-15).

Why is there no physical act in commemoration of the Yom Tov? There is no Torah-prescribed requirement to blow Shofar, read a special Torah portion (the reading of the 10 Commandments is Rabbinically ordained), or special ritual to commemorate the event. There is only all-inclusive rejoicing. Why is joy the only way to celebrate? And why is every type of citizen mentioned? Aren't the poor and rich, widowed and orphaned included in every command? My grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, passed away 13 years ago. At the end of the shloshim period of mourning, his student, Rabbi Yitzchok Chinn, Rabbi of Gemilas Chesed Congregation of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, eulogized him. He related the following story:

Reb Yaakov spent his summers at in Camp Ohr Shraga in Ellenville, NY. One summer, a young boy asked Reb Yaakov a most difficult question, "Rebbe," he inquired, "where is my neshama (soul)?" Reb Yaakov turned to the boy and asked him, "Where is your arm?" The boy stuck out his arm. "Good!" said Reb Yaakov. "I want you to shake it." The boy began to shake his arm up and down. Reb Yaakov smiled, "Good, now shake your other arm." The boy began flapping his arms. "Wonderful! Now show me your leg." The boy lifted his foot. "Now shake it!" While flapping his arms, the boy shook his leg. Then Reb Yaakov smiled. "Now your other leg!" The boy began to jump and shake and rock and sway. And as he watched the youngster move with every part of his very essence, Reb Yaakov gave him a tremendous smile and exclaimed, "That is your neshama!"

The only way to commemorate the receiving of the Torah is to celebrate the receipt of our nation's soul. We cannot celebrate the soul with a physical commemoration. The soul of the nation celebrates by shaking every one of its parts: poor or rich, wealthy or poor, free or slave, son or daughter with unmitigated joy. The only way to capture the essence of our very being and our gratitude for the gift that infused us with boundless spirituality is through a rejoicing that permeates every part of the Jewish body; its arms, legs, and torso --- The Torah. The observance is not relegated to eating an item, telling a story, hearing a shofar or sitting in a booth. Like the Torah we received, the celebration encompasses every aspect of our lives. And that is done thorough joyous simcha.

Dedicated by Ruth and Lionel Fisch in honor of the birth of their granddaughter Jillian Emily Fisch to their children Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Fisch

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