

DOING IT EVERY DAY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Shavuot is the commemoration, the celebration, of the receipt of the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Other holidays have unique Mitzvos associated with them -- from Matzah on Passover, to the Sukkah, Lulav and Esrog on Sukkot. Rosh HaShanah has a mitzvah to hear the Shofar, and Yom Kippur, to fast. The various external symbols help to focus our attention, and enhance our excitement and happiness. Each year, when we sit in a sukkah, or in front of a seder plate, we feel a special joy. But on Shavuot, we have no 'externals' -- only Torah.

Shavuot is called "Chag Ha'Atzeres" -- usually translated "festival of the gathering." The Taamei Minhagim explains that on all other holidays, there are two types of service: to refrain from work, and to do the special commandments of the day. But there is no mitzvah unique to Shavuot. Of course, it is customary to spend extra time learning Torah on Shavuot, especially on the first night, but that mitzvah is hardly unique to the holiday -- "v'higisa bo yomam v'layla", you shall study it day and night, applies every day! The Taamei Minhagim points out that one meaning of the word "atzeres" is a cessation, a stopping -- and thus the name is appropriate. This is a holiday not for adding new observances, but for stopping, reflecting upon what we have.

Our joy at the holiday of Shavuot comes not from any new sign, any special practice, but simply from stepping back for a moment, and contemplating the Torah which we study all year long.

I remember picking up a modern book -- I think it was called "Life 101," which is indeed a book by Peter McWilliams (so I discovered at an on-line bookstore). The introduction begins approximately as follows: "we are all travelling on a big blue spaceship, and none of us has the instruction manual." Of course, that was all I needed to see -- the author has it all wrong.

First of all, it isn't the blue spaceship which concerns us, but the bodies we pilot as individuals -- we are less concerned with steering the planet than in finding our own courses through life. And concerning the manual, the Torah is called "Torat Chayim," instructions for life. We want to grow spiritually, we want to come closer to G-d, and G-d provided us with His ultimate handbook! That is what we hold in our hands -- "the meaning of life!" The Torah doesn't just tell us how to find some ethereal "spiritual peace;" it imbues daily life with meaning and purpose.

On my way to the office yesterday, while making a left turn, I noticed the man in the first car waiting at the red light. He had a book up on the steering wheel -- he was learning! Of course I could be mistaken, but, in the abstract, this is the image of a person who truly appreciates what we have. If we

understood what Torah is, we would spend every spare moment grabbing another thought, another Mishnah, another line of text -- something more to inspire and fill our lives.

Let us use this holiday to step back, to feel the wonder of Torah, to experience a joy still deeper and more profound than that which we feel at each year's Pesach Seder...