

TAKE YOUR PORTION IN TORAH

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

The holiday of Shavuot is "Zman Matan Toraseinu," the time of the giving of our Torah. It is one of the most important holidays of the Jewish year -- yet it is often allowed to pass unnoticed by many Jews.

Unlike Passover or Sukkot, or even the minor Rabbinic holiday of Purim, Shavuot comes with no special observances, no unique Mitzvos to be performed on that day. The "only" thing that sets Shavuot apart is that it is the day when G-d gave the Torah, His most precious gift, to the Jewish people.

Each year, we don't merely revisit or even relive that experience. Kabbalistic sources teach that the unique spiritual powers of each holiday return to this world every year on that same day. On Shavuot, we have a special power to take our portion in Torah, each and every year.

Every year, many of us skip out on this unique opportunity. We deny ourselves the closeness to G-d which is within our grasp. And there is a fascinating Medrash concerning the giving of the Torah, which hints that this isn't an entirely new phenomenon.

There is a verse at the end of the Torah that reads, "Moshe commanded us 'Torah,' the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" [Deut. 33:4]. Jewish sources tell us that everything Moshe taught came directly from G-d, and he delivered it to the people. But although we learn that there are 613 Commandments, the numerical value of "Torah" is merely 611. Is this just a coincidence? Or did Moshe somehow miss out on two Mitzvos?

Looking further into this, there is a strange transition in the language of the Aseres HaDibros, the "Ten Commandments" that G-d delivered to the Jewish People on Mt. Sinai. The first of these Commandments begins "I am HaShem your G-d." Yet the third reads, "You shall not take the Name of HaShem your G-d in vain, for HaShem will not hold guiltless one who takes His Name in vain" [Ex. 20:7]. The first two Commandments speak about G-d in the first person, "I am HaShem," but by the time we reach the third, the reference to G-d is in the third person instead.

The Midrash tells us that this is no accident. Indeed Moshe taught us 611 Commandments, while HaShem himself taught the first two Commandments heard on Sinai! "Rabbi Levi said, two things Israel asked of the Holy One, Blessed be He: that they should see His glory, and they should hear His voice... and the Torah says that 'we heard His voice from within the fire' [Deut. 5:21]. And they did not

have the strength to stand -- since they came to Sinai and He was revealed to them, their souls left them... He returned their souls to them immediately."

Moshe could stand before G-d. Most Jews, as soon as they heard the voice of G-d, immediately died! So the Jewish people begged Moshe that he should speak with G-d and deliver the message to them. G-d knew that this request was appropriate, and the request was granted.

Then, later in the Torah, the Jewish people demanded something else to eat besides the Man, the Manna (Num. 11). Our Sages tell us that the motivation for this request was again the same -- we couldn't handle being so close. This time, however, the request was not appropriate. The Manna provided for the needs of every individual. In fact, our Sages teach that this miraculous food provided perfect nutrition -- it was entirely absorbed into the body, and there was no waste to excrete. It did not harm them, but it confronted them with their incredible closeness to G-d. Again, they demanded more distance.

Today, we are incomprehensibly distant from that level of contact with the Divine. What connection do we still have? We have only our Holy Torah, which we received on Shavuot and continue to receive every year on this Holy Day. This is the only remaining way we have to come close to G-d. How can we skip the opportunity?

Judaism is about learning and growth. When an individual's Judaism isn't progressing, when there isn't increasing closeness to G-d, the only thing in progress is... assimilation. It's a very simple inverse relationship.

This year, let's take advantage of this tremendous opportunity to learn and grow. The ramifications can last not only a lifetime, but an eternity!

A Happy Shavuot and Good Shabbos,

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