

EAT, DRINK, AND RECEIVE THE TORAH

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This Friday (and Shabbos for those outside of Eretz Yisroel [the Land of Israel]) we will be celebrating the chag [holiday] of Shavuot--the time that we received the Torah from Hashem. It was at this earth-shattering and other-worldly experience that the Bnei Yisroel [Children of Israel] reached the zenith of both our emunah [belief] in Hashem and our understanding of His involvement in the world.

We find three times in the Torah where the emunah of Bnei Yisroel is discussed. The first time was during the enslavement in Mitzrayim [Egypt] when Moshe relayed to them the news of the redemption. The passuk [verse] there states: "Vaya'amen ha'am... ki pakad Hashem es Bnei Yisroel [And the nation believed that Hashem had remembered them] and had seen their affliction.[Shemos 4:31]"

The second time was after we had already left Mitzrayim, at the time of kri'as Yam Suf [the splitting of the Sea of Reeds]. There the passuk states: And the nation feared Hashem va'ya'a'minu [and they believed] in Hashem and Moshe His servant.[14:31]"

The last time was said in regard to Har Sinai. There Hashem said to Moshe: "I will appear to you in the thick cloud in order that the nation will hear when I speak to you and ya'a'minu [they will believe] in you forever.[19:9]"

The Sifsei Chaim brings the Mahara"l who explains that Bnei Yisroel were absorbing the three basic foundations of emunah which he says are the foundations of Judaism.

The first level of emunah is the belief in hashgocho [providence]--Hashem's supervision and guidance of all that transpires in this world. When Moshe told Bnei Yisroel that Hashem had seen their affliction, they understood a very deep but fundamental level in hashgocho. A two hundred and ten year period of unspeakable horrors had passed. Infants were being thrown into the Nile and were being placed into the foundations of buildings and Hashem was doing nothing! At a superficial glance, they would feel that Hashem is not involving Himself in supervising the events of this world. However, Bnei Yisroel understood that Hashem's concealment is also a form of His hashgocho. The good times and the harsh times, reward and punishment, they are all part of Hashem's divine providence. They believed.

The holiday of Succos, which re-enacts the providence and guidance of Hashem enveloping us in His Clouds of Glory as we made our way through the wilderness, represents and is based on this first level of emunah.

The next level of emunah was internalized at the splitting of Yam Suf [the sea of Reeds]. "Va'ya'a'minu [and they believed] in Hashem and Moshe His servant." They gained absolute belief in Hashem's existence. You might ask that if they already believed in Hashem's providence, how could there have existed any doubt in regard to His existence? The answer lies in grasping the depth of their belief in Hashem's being. They now understood that Hashem's existence actually precludes the independent existence of anything else besides Him! His existence is all-encompassing. Everything that seems to exist is totally dependent on Him. His control over everything is total and absolute. That was the level gained at the splitting of Yam Suf. They believed.

The holiday of Pesach, reenacting the miracles of the exodus from Egypt through the splitting of the sea, portraying Hashem's absolute control of 'ain ode milvado' [there is nothing beside Him], represents and is based on this second level of emunah.

The third level of emunah, that of Har Sinai, was that Hashem spoke to man and gave him instructions (Torah is defined as teaching, instruction) as to how to fulfill His divine will. Unlike any other time in history (and unlike any other religion in the world), Hashem didn't reveal His word to an individual or a small group and tell them to spread the word to others. Hashem spoke to each and every member of Klal Yisroel. Every individual reached the lofty prophetic level of 'seeing' the words that were spoken. If we hear a person's voice and recognize it, we are, to a certain degree, sure that it is him. When we see that person, we are absolutely sure. They 'saw' the words of Hashem. It became a tangible reality to them. This was clearly Hashem's instructions of how to lead our lives and how to connect to Him. They believed.

The personal giving of the Torah that is available to every individual on the holiday of Shavuot represents and is based on this third level of emunah.

What was the effect of this prophetic level that every individual attained? The Talmud [Shabbos 88B] reveals that when we heard the words come from Hashem our souls flew from our bodies. Hashem needed to perform t'chias hamaisim [the Revival of the Dead] in order to ready us for His subsequent words. The experience of 'seeing' Hashem's words purified our souls to the point that they could no longer be contained in the container of our earthly bodies. They flew out! The t'chias hamaisim that was performed elevated the physical body to the point that it could once again contain the neshama. Hashem's ensuing words then purified our souls even further. The once-elevated bodies could no longer contain the twice-purified souls. Hashem then elevated them again, thereby allowing the souls to return.

With this we can, perhaps, understand a seemingly strange aspect of Shavuot. There is an argument in the Talmud [Pesachim 68B] in regard to the way that the holidays should be celebrated. Rabi Eliezer maintains that one should either spend the day eating and drinking or the day should be spent sitting and studying. Rabi Yehoshua argues that the day should be divided--half for Hashem (sitting and studying) and half for you (eating and drinking). However, by Shavuot there is no

argument. Even Rabi Eliezer agrees that on the day that the Torah was given, one must also involve themselves in eating and drinking.

The Mahara"l points out that this same concept shows itself in a unique aspect found by the sacrifices brought on Shavuot. Normally, the communal offerings are entirely burnt--no part of it is eaten. Shavuot is the exception as parts of the communal offerings are eaten.

In a similar vein (sorry), the two loaves that are brought on Shavuot are the only offerings that come as chametz {leavened}. This is quite strange as we know that chametz exemplifies the yetzer ha'rah {evil inclination}.

Why are we so involved in the physical specifically on the holiday which represents our spiritual aspirations to fulfill the will of Hashem as He revealed it to us?

Perhaps the answer is contained in what we discussed above. The Torah wasn't meant to pull our souls out of our bodies. It was given to allow us to become complete human beings with the physical being uplifted and purified by our involvement in the spiritual. The Torah doesn't say 'no'. It gives the parameters of how, where and when.

That is how one becomes pure. Not through abstention. On Shavuot one must eat and drink. The sacrifice is eaten. The offering is chametz. People, not angels, received the Torah. May we accept that Torah and be elevated through it.

A good yomtov and a good Shabbos,

Yisroel Ciner

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The author teaches at [Neveh Tzion](#) in Telzstone (near Yerushalayim).
