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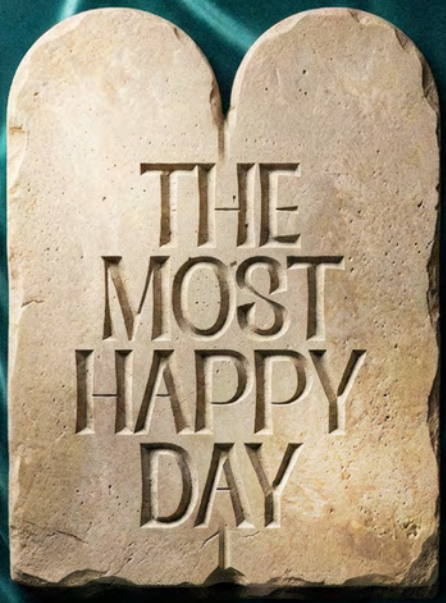

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Margalit and Joseph Saka	Sofie and Moshe Nakkach

May they be zocheh to build a bayis ne'eman b'Yisrael
filled with Torah, simcha, bracha, and shalom.

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Email: info@TorasAvigdor.org | Telephone: 732.844.3670 | Address: 1273a 46th Street Brooklyn NY 11219

SHAVUOS

WITH

RAV AVIGDOR MILLER ZT"L

BASED ON HIS BOOKS, TAPES & WRITINGS OF TALMIDIM

THE MOST HAPPY DAY

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Part I. The Greatest Gift

A Day of Happiness

I remember when I was learning in Slabodka that it was the *minhag* of the yeshivas in Europe that Shavuos was the happiest day of the year; there was a wild excitement, even more than Simchas Torah. And I use the word "*minhag*" deliberately because we were trained for that; we were prepared for the day by our *rebbeim*. And so it wasn't a wildness of *hefkeirus* — in some places you see that on Simchas Torah; frivolity, even drunkenness. No, that's nothing. In Slabodka on Shavuos we became wild with excitement, with gratitude and *ahavas Hashem*. I remember it well; it was something unique, more than any other day of the year.

Now, it doesn't mean that there weren't other days that had their own special outpouring of emotions. Rosh Hashana was *tziternesh*, a trembling at Yom Hadin. And *Neilah*? Ooh ah! It was tremendous in the Slabodka Yeshiva. Everybody was weeping and shouting; you would think they would raise the ceiling from the noise. It was something indescribable; they went *arois fun de keilim.*

And so there were other special days, special emotions, yes, but Shavuos was the *happiest* — a great *simcha* of love of Hashem. And that's something we should study because it wasn't just something that happened that way.

TYH: For What?

And we begin with a question: What is the most fundamental *chiyuv* that a person is obliged to do in this world? It's a good question. If you never thought about that, you have a right to be concerned. Fundamentally, what are you here to do?

And the answer is in the Chovos Halevavos, in Shaar Habechina. He says that gratitude to Hashem, that's the most fundamental of all *chiyuvim.* That's what it says, טוֹב לְהוֹדוֹת לַה' - *It's good to say thank You to Hashem* (Tehillim 92:2). Because the rule is that when a word is placed at the beginning of a *possuk*, it's put there to emphasize that word. And so we're expected to read this *possuk* like this: טוֹב – *Do you know what the true good is, what true success and happiness is?* לְהוֹדוֹת לַה' – *Undertaking a career of thanking Hashem.* That's the main function of our lives! Unfortunately, it's ignored by many in the *frum* world, but the most important method of achieving *shleimus* is through expression of our gratitude to Hashem.

But just to say "Thank You, Hashem" without thinking, without knowing what you're thanking for — that's not the Chovos Halevavos. And so he enumerates there very many of the *chasdei Hashem* that we have to keep in mind for which we have to be grateful — a long list. It's not complete, of course, but it's a list that whets the mind's appetite, so you should at least understand how big of a *chiyuv* it actually is.

And when he finishes enumerating all the things, he finally says, "*Hagedolah* – But the greatest of all the benefits that Hashem bestowed upon us, which means the one that requires the greatest amount of gratitude, is the Torah and the *nissim*."

Number One on the List

Now, the *nissim*, how that comes in here, is a question that has been explained before and I won't take the time now to repeat it. But the Torah is the number one of the two. That is the greatest of all the *chasdei Hashem*, the one that requires from us the greatest attitude of gratitude. The greatest outpouring of emotion, of appreciation, is reserved for the Torah.

Now, everyone here is of course loyal to the Torah; we try to practice, to keep everything. But we're learning now a different subject. We're not talking now about doing the *mitzvos*, or even learning the Torah; we're talking about the great joy of *possessing* the Torah. *It's the greatest duty of every man and woman, boy and girl, to feel as keenly as possible the happiness of having the Torah!*

Why We Went Into Exile

How much? So the Gemara in Nedarim (81a) discusses a *possuk* about the *Churban Bayis Rishon*. In Yirmiyahu (9:11) it states, עַל מָה אָבְדָה הָאָרֶץ – *Why did the land go lost?* Why did we lose Eretz Yisroel? And the Gemara says that it was a big puzzle. It was something they couldn't figure out. דָּבָר זֶה נִשְׁאַל לַנְּבִיאִים – *They asked the Nevi'im*, וְלֹא פֵּרְשׁוּהוּ – *but even they couldn't explain it.*

Now, we find that a little bit strange because it seems to us any one of us could explain that. Ask a little boy in *cheder*, he knows right away. He'll tell you. His *morah* in kindergarten, with her great wisdom, told him that it was because they worshipped idols and because they shed innocent blood; other terrible sins too. And how can we blame the Beis Yaakov teacher? Even scholarly people have been bamboozled into believing that the generations in the times of the first Sanctuary, the *Bayis Rishon*, were sinful and wicked people.

A Generation of Tzaddikim

No. We must know that we are under a delusion if we think that the people were so rebellious that they deserved to lose Eretz Yisroel. Rabi Yochanan, you have to know, was an authority. He was the *Rabban shel Kol Yisroel* in his time, and if he says something, you can rely on him. And he says like this: טוֹבָה צִפּוֹרְנָן שֶׁל רִאשׁוֹנִים – *The fingernail of the generation at the time of the first Churban is better*, מִכְּרֵיסוֹ שֶׁל אַחֲרוֹנִים – *than the belly of the following generation* (Yoma 9b).

You know, a belly is full of organs. The fingernail has no organs. The fingernail of that generation at the end of *Bayis Rishon*, the lowest element, was better than the belly — it means better than the best generations — in the second Beis Hamikdash. And so in Yirmiyah's time you can be certain that the people were more loyal to the Torah than they are in Lakewood today; even more than in Me'ah Shearim or in Bnei Brak or anywhere else.

The Unanswered Question

And therefore the question is a legitimate question. עַל מָה אָבְדָה הָאָרֶץ – *Why did the land go lost?* And *Nevi'im* didn't know what to say. The *Nevi'im*?! The *Nevi'im* who were busy criticizing the people all the time? The *Nevi'im* who looked with a magnifying glass? They didn't see with their own eyes; they saw things that were רַע בְּעֵינֵי ה'. But if it was in our eyes, *einei bnei adam*, it wouldn't be *ra* at all. Only that they looked with a magnifying glass, and the smallest things they found to be serious. And even they, with their magnifying glass, לֹא פֵּרְשׁוּהוּ – *they couldn't explain it.*

So they asked the *Chachomim*. Sometimes a *chacham* is *adif m'Navi* (Bava Basra 12a). He's better; he can see things that even a prophet can't. But לֹא פֵּרְשׁוּהוּ – *they couldn't explain it either.* They didn't know why the land was destroyed. They looked, they investigated, they studied the words of the *tochacha*, they researched, but they couldn't find in the behavior of the people something that justified the *Churban.*

And so everyone was at a loss until a *nevuah* came. עַד שֶׁפֵּרְשׁוּ הקב"ה בְּעַצְמוֹ – *The only One Who could answer the question was Hakadosh Baruch Hu alone.* And what did He answer? עַל עָזְבָם אֶת תּוֹרָתִי – *Because they forsook My Torah.*

Now, that's a queer answer. If that's what they did, if they forsook the Torah, then why wasn't this said by the *Nevi'im* and the *Chachomim*? Something so straightforward, so blatant, you don't need a *nevuah* for.

Forgetting the Blessing

So the Gemara says, you know what it means 'they forsook My Torah'? שֶׁלֹּא בֵּרְכוּ בַּתּוֹרָה תְּחִלָּה – *It means they didn't make a bracha when they began learning Torah every day.*

But even that is not a sufficient answer it seems. Because the *bracha* on the Torah most *poskim* say is *d'Oraisa* and so it certainly is a big sin to forget *birchas haTorah*. If you eat bread without making a *bracha* first, it's less of a sin than learning Torah without a *bracha*. הַמּוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ is very important but it's *d'Rabanan*; it's a smaller sin than not making a *bracha* on the Torah. Let's say you want to learn in the morning before you come to the *beis hakenesses*, so you have to make a *birchas haTorah*. And it's *d'Oraisa*; it's very *chomur*.

So the question is if they weren't saying the *bracha* why didn't the *Chachomim* and *Nevi'im* say that? They weren't making a *bracha* on the Torah?! That's a very serious accusation! The *Nevi'im* and the *Chachomim* would have known that.

Not Appreciating the Blessing

So Rabbeinu Yonah says they *did* make a *bracha* on the Torah. Of course they did. They said the words of the *bracha*, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ, but they didn't understand the greatness of the gift of the Torah that they should *really* be happy with it. It's like people today; when you make a *bracha* on a piece of bread, you don't think about what the bread is. Bread is life. Bread turns into every good thing that we need. Bread becomes our hair and our eyes. And it's transformed in miraculous ways, miraculous processes. But what do we do? We make a *bracha* without thinking; we say the words but we don't appreciate the bread. It's a sin. It's ingratitude.

But a *bracha* on the Torah without appreciating is much worse, because the greater the gift, the greater the gratitude required. If someone gives you a million dollars, would you merely say "thank you" and be finished? So if you're a *shoteh*, or if you're two years old and you don't understand the value of money, maybe yes. But if you're a sane person — let's say someone came in now and called you out of here; he says he has a message for you. So you walk outside and he tells you that the Governor sent him to find you; he wants to tell you that you won the million dollar sweepstakes. He would have to bring along some smelling salts because you would stagger. No question. You might fall down from great happiness. And as soon as you recovered, I suspect you'd do a jig, a dance right outside on Ocean Parkway.

But nobody will do a jig if he doesn't appreciate money. If he thinks a million dollars means a million toothpicks, what's there to jig about? And that, Rabbeinu Yonah says, was the big sin of that generation. They made a *bracha*, yes. And they appreciated the Torah, yes; but not as much as they should have. And so when they said *birchas haTorah* it wasn't said with the gratitude befitting such a gift.

That's how Rabbeinu Yonah explains the words of the Gemara, שֶׁלֹּא בֵּרְכוּ בַּתּוֹרָה תְּחִלָּה. It means that when they said the words they had *kavanah*, the *peirush hamilos* they understood, but they didn't appreciate enough the gift of the Torah. Their hearts didn't swell with pride, their minds didn't overflow with gratitude, in proportion to the great gift they were thanking for. And Hakadosh Baruch Hu wasn't satisfied: "It means you don't understand how vast is this treasure that I'm giving you."

The Final Answer

Now, Rabbeinu Nissim, that's the Ran, when he quotes this explanation of Rabbeinu Yonah he says that "these words are רָאוּי לְמִי שֶׁאֱמָרָם – they're befitting coming from such a great man as he was." He approves of Rabbeinu Yonah's answer.

And so now we know; we can quite confidently say — it's a good lineup after all; Rabbeinu Yonah, Rabbeinu Nissim — why the land went lost. Why were we sent into Golus? Because we didn't spend time thinking about and appreciating this great gift of the Torah. Because it's not only the outward expressions that Hashem looks for; He looks also at what's inside your head, your emotions. That's what Yeshaya Hanavi said. בְּפִיו וּבִשְׂפָתָיו כִּבְּדוּנִי – *They honored Me with their words*, וְלִבּוֹ רִחַק מִמֶּנִּי – *but their minds are far away* (Yeshayahu 29:13).

The Avodah of Shavuos

Hashem is not satisfied with the minimum. Just like at Har Sinai, when you accepted the Torah with a fiery enthusiasm, Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, "מִי יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְבָבָם זֶה לְיִרְאָה אוֹתִי... כָּל הַיָּמִים – *the same heart you had at Har Sinai, that's what I want always* (Devarim 5:26). I want the same enthusiasm. I don't want cold Jews who keep the Torah. I want fiery *na'aseh v'nishma* Jews, and it should be forever. And any reduction in the heat of that *Kabolas haTorah*, I'm not satisfied. It's too big of a gift for that."

Now, Shavuos is a time to think about that more than other days. Although every day you should make the *bracha* with some idea of what it implies, Shavuos is a special occasion to study the most important of all subjects — the subject of appreciating that great gift that Hakadosh Baruch Hu gave to us. That's how it becomes the most happy day on the Jewish calendar.

Part II. The Gift of Eternity

Many Happinesses

Now, if we would make an attempt to speak about what the happiness of the Torah is, we would never go home because there's so much. Just the *zechus* of looking in the Torah, of learning those words is a very great merit. It's a merit just to say the words in the Chumash. Any kind of Torah is a big merit — we'll soon see how big it is.

Also the *zechus* of *mitzvos*. Any mitzvah. Every mitzvah means you lived successfully, no question about it. And each mitzvah is *arichus yamim*; like it says when you send away the mother bird before you take her nestlings and the eggs, it says וְהַאֲרַכְתָּ יָמִים – *you'll have long life because of that mitzvah* (Devarim 22:7). So the Gemara says if a little mitzvah like that that's so easy to fulfill, and the Torah gives you a length of days, then all the other *mitzvos* which are not so easy, surely (Chullin 142a). So the *mitzvos* are *arichus yamim*. When people live according to the laws of the Torah, they'll certainly live longer.

And we live more happily in this world because of the Torah, no question about that. When you live with the regimen of the Torah, you're guaranteed against many misfortunes. Torah is constructed for the purpose of reinforcing a man's life, giving him a wholesome and healthy lifestyle; *Torah u'mitzvos* mean *shalom* and good health. There's no question that fulfilling the Torah is the best plan for a man's wellbeing in this world.

The Foundation of Har Sinai

And so there are a lot of things included in the gift of the Torah, and we'll talk about some of them later. But there's something that comes before that, something that encompasses all of the benefits of the Torah.

The most fundamental happiness of Shavuos is the understanding that at Har Sinai we became the Am Yisroel. It was that day that we were separated forever from the rest of mankind to be the Am Hashem.

The Gemara in Mesichta Shabbos (89a) asks a question: why is it called Har Sinai? Now, we know it's called Har Sinai because that's its name, but the *Chachomim* understood that it's not random; there's a hint there in the name Sinai — it's telling us something. And the Gemara says that it's related to the word שִׂנְאָה, hatred. מַאי הַר סִינַי – *Why is it Har Sinai?* הַר שֶׁיָּרְדָה שִׂנְאָה לְאֻמּוֹת הָעוֹלָם עָלָיו – *Because it's the mountain that caused a hatred to come down to the gentile nations*; a hatred came down to the world.

When Hashem Hates...

So you have some *seforim* which misinterpret this. They say it means that when the Torah was given, a hatred against Jews developed in the world — antisemitism. But that's not what the *ma'amar* is saying. It could be it's true, because when they accepted the Torah they accepted the yoke of the hostility of the nations, and they knew that throughout their history they would have to contend with various enemies; some who wielded the sword and some the pen. But in *pashtus* that's not what the *ma'amar* is saying. You have to look in Rashi; he explains it. He says that when the Torah was given, a *sinah* came down *against* the nations. That's the plain meaning, that from Shavuos and on, Hakadosh Baruch Hu is not pleased anymore with the nations of the world. They weren't *mekabel* the Torah and from then on they went down.

At Har Sinai there was a big change in the history of the world. Now, most people have never heard this but you should hear it now. Up until Matan Torah, all the nations were equal; we're all Bnei Noach, all the same. That's why when Avraham Avinu wanted to practice hospitality and he saw people coming whom he suspected of being idolaters — they worshipped even the dust of their feet — nevertheless, there was no difference to him. He ran out to greet them. He prostrated himself on the ground and begged them to eat with him, to rest by him. He went to all the limits that he could to show them hospitality. But after Matan Torah, we don't find such a thing. After the Torah was given, no more. To fellow Jews, yes, but to everyone else, no more.

What happened to cause that change?

The answer is, up until Matan Torah all the nations were in Hashem's good graces. We were all the descendants of Noach, all one big universal family, and so it was considered a proper practice of kindliness to go out of your way for your fellow man. Even to slaughter an ox for each guest, like Avraham did, to do the most extreme, lavish hospitality in order to entertain his guests. Because as great as Avraham was, to a certain extent all of man was his equal.

But after Matan Torah, no more! *Lo sichaneim — lo titein lahem matnas chinam* (Avodah Zarah 20a). A tremendous change! You can't give a gentile a gift of friendship, of equality; you can't even praise him too much: *lo titein lahem chein* (*ibid.*). Because at Har Sinai the nations of the world descended; they fell down and became lower, and the Am Yisroel ascended. Up until then, we weren't Yisroel, but what happened on that first Shavuos was a revolution; the whole world turned upside down. We became Yisroel!

We actually became *geirim* at Har Sinai and now we are a separate people; we're chosen from all the nations. By receiving the Torah, first of all we all became Yisroel. Before Matan Torah, even the *Avos* were called Bnei Noach. The nation became *geirim* at Sinai. The Gemara says that (Kerisus 9a). We all became *geirim* at Sinai. And we became Bnei Yisroel. That's the first *chiyuv* upon us, to rejoice in the fact that we belong to the Am haTorah. A real rejoicing! By receiving the Torah, first of all we all became Yisroel.

Chosen for Love

That's what Hashem said at Har Sinai. וְהִייתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים – "*And you will become now for Me a special treasure from all the nations*" (Shemos 19:5). "I'm going to do something now," said Hashem, "that's going to change the nature of the entire people. When you stand at Har Sinai and you say, *'na'aseh v'nishma,'* I'm going to make you into an Am Segulah, an exceptional type of people, something way above the nations of the world."

That's why *Akdamos* portrays how the nations of the world propose that we should go along with them and we'll share together with them the greatness that they promise us. But we say to them, "No matter what

you'll give us, רְבוּתְכוֹן מָה חֲשִׁיבָא קָבֵל הַהִיא שְׁבַחְתָּא, it's nothing compared to the greatness that Hashem already gave us at Har Sinai when He chose us."

But not only chosen. Har Sinai means that in the entire huge universe there is nothing that Hashem is as interested in and loves as much as Am Yisroel. That's what the Mishnah says, that at Har Sinai, Hakadosh Baruch Hu married us with the Torah (Taanis 26b). At Har Sinai, Hashem chose us to be His bride forever, the only one He'll ever love.

Now, you might think, is that fair? Is it democratic? That's not our problem to answer. We didn't do it; Hashem is the One Who chose us. It's up to Him. And when He gave us the Torah that's what He did; it was a demonstration that we are the Am Yisroel now.

Chosen For Happiness

And therefore it's a great obligation in *avodas Hashem* to think how fortunate we are that we have the Torah — אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים. Ay yay yay! He chose us! He chose us from all the nations! That's the obligation of a Jew more than any other thing, to think what a great gift he received from Hakadosh Baruch Hu; the happiness of knowing that he's included in the Klal Yisroel. That's what's expected of you when you say that blessing every day.

Men and women, boys and girls, everyone should be happy at all times. שִׂמְחוּ צַדִּיקִים בַּה' – *You tzaddikim, rejoice in Hashem* (Tehillim 97:12). *Tzaddikim* means the Jewish people, *frum* Jews. You're a plain Jew who does *mitzvos*? Even a plain person, an *am ha'aretz*, as long as he keeps and doesn't rebel against the Torah, he could rejoice all the days of his life. All of Williamsburg. All of Boro Park. All the *frum* Jews in Flatbush, in Eretz Yisroel, wherever you have *frum* Jews, we tell them שִׂמְחוּ צַדִּיקִים בַּה'. Because of what happened on Shavuos 3,000 years ago, a Jew can never be sad.

Of course sometimes he's sad because he wants to be a better Jew; that's all right. But never be sad because other people have more money or other people have more pleasures in the world. That's nothing. It's all nothing if you are the one who has been chosen by Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He put us on a level far above the rest of the world. That's enough to make us extremely happy at all times.

And that's the first *chiyuv* upon us, to rejoice in the fact that we belong to the Am haTorah. A real rejoicing! The entire Torah is to us a gift more precious than any kind of wealth or happiness that could be found in this world. And that's your function; you have to be happy in this world, happy that you're a Yisroel.

Chosen for Eternity

But there's a second thing. Because what does it mean to be a Yisroel? Just to be chosen? Okay, very good, it's a happiness to be elected. After all, who is the happiest man in the world today? President Bush. He's sitting on top of the world. He was chosen as the head of the most important country for four years. He's intoxicated with happiness while poor Gore just can't bear to see it slip out of his hands by such a small amount. You cannot estimate the extent of Bush's delirium of joy of being elected; you have no idea how Bush's blood is boiling with joy and *simcha*.

And why not? We would be the same way. Suppose you were elected President, you with your *payos*. So you're ready now to go into the White House and you'll bang up *mezuzos* on all the doors, you'll *kasher* the kitchen. Wonderful. You'll be a *tzaddik*, yes. But still, you'll be delirious at the fact that you were chosen President.

Trump is Temporary

But you have to know that being a Yisroel means you were chosen for something much, much greater. You know why? Because everything else is temporary. The time will come when even the best President will go down into the dust. He will be *yoreid la'afar*; that's all, he's finished. And even though there might be statues and monuments, the statues can't speak for them. They're not here anymore; they became dust. And so Bush, after some time he will pass away. He won't live forever. One day he'll retire back to his ranch in Texas and he'll die there and it's all over. They'll put his body into the ground. Finished. No more Bush.

A Yisroel, however, lives forever. Because by receiving the Torah and becoming Yisroel, all the promises that Hakadosh Baruch Hu made to the Bnei Yisroel are promised to him, too. And the biggest promise is Olam Haba! At Har Sinai, when we became Yisroel, everyone received an entrance card: כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא – *Every Jew is given a ticket to Olam Haba* (Sanhedrin 90a). That's why in the *bracha* on the Torah you

say, חַיֵּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ – *You planted everlasting life among us.* Because it was then, when You gave us the Torah, that we acquired Olam Haba.

Now, Avraham and the *kadmonim* before Matan Torah they also got Olam Haba, but they earned it not because of Yisroel; they earned it with a very great merit. Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yehudah, they earned it because they were very great people. But after Matan Torah, even though you're not great, just a plain Jew that goes along with the *derech haTorah*, you're promised כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

That's Shavuos, *pashut sheb'pashut.* No *chiddushim* here. When the Torah was given, every one of us was given a ticket: "You're entitled to Olam Haba." That's the biggest of all possible gifts that He could give. חַיֵּי עוֹלָם נָטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ, everlasting life! All the great happiness with all the pleasures, unlimited and forever and ever and ever, that's yours because you received the Torah and became Yisroel.

Part III. The Gift of Love

The Authentic Yisroel

Now, this privilege that we acquired at Har Sinai when we became the Am Yisroel is not something abstract, something that we can't put our finger on. We only attained it because תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹות חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים אוֹתָנוּ לִמַּדְתָּ – *You began teaching us the Torah u'mitzvos at Har Sinai.* It means that to acquire the title "Yisroel" and all of its attendant greatness requires a commitment to live on a higher plane, to be a *naaseh v'nishma Yid.* To be Yisroel, you have to live like Yisroel.

You know there's a certain fraudulent religion, one of our imitators, that claims to be Yisroel. They want to say that all the promises of the Torah belong to them. And that's why the Pope will tell you — if you're ever unfortunate enough to get an opportunity to talk to him — that he represents the true "Israel." Of course, it's one big *sheker*, a big joke, because Yisroel means Torah, and *mitzvos*, *chukim* and *mishpatim*, and the Pope himself eats *chazir* and he wears *shaatnez*, although it's openly forbidden. He shaves with a razorblade.

You know, up till 1870, once a year the Jews of Rome had to visit the Pope to show their homage, their loyalty to him. It was a ceremony, a display of subservience that they were forced to do. Every year, they

came to the Pope carrying a *sefer Torah* and he would receive them. And then he would turn away and say in Latin, "They have the law but they don't understand it."

And then the Pope went to his lunch to eat pork. *He* understands. The Pope who ate pork on Yom Kippur, he knows what the law is. We don't understand the law. He knows.

Easy Come, Easy Go

The answer is they want to be Israel and to have the promises of Israel, but still to sell Christianity. And if they're going to be required to keep the Torah, the *goyim* aren't interested. So they invented a system where all you had to do was sign on the dotted line and say, "I believe *b'emunah sheleimah* in Yoshka." You don't have to keep anything, but if you don't accept him, you're damned to Gehenom.

Even Avraham Avinu is there, they say. Avraham Avinu was in Gehenom all the centuries waiting for this fellow, JC, to come along and save him from Gehenom. Moshe Rabbeinu too. That's what they say openly. Everybody is in Gehenom; they're waiting there all these thousands of years until he comes along and he's going to redeem them. Because no matter how good you are — even if you kept everything and you're the biggest *tzaddik* and you never did a thing that's bad in this world — you won't go to Gan Eden unless you believe in him.

Christian Gimmicks

And if you accept him, then even if you're a criminal, a drunkard, even if you're an adulterer or a murderer, the minute that you say, "I believe in so-and-so," you are saved. There's a writer, DeHaan, a well known Christian writer and he explains that. Without any Torah and any *mitzvos* you are now a candidate to go to the kingdom of heaven. But if you won't say that, nothing will help; no matter how righteous you lived, you are sentenced forever in Gehenom.

That's the doctrine. It's a built-in gimmick to sell Christianity, to get members, and this garbage has been accepted by a great part of humanity. Because it's easy; no more Har Sinai required! You can imagine yourself chosen and still do whatever you want.

But the Jews, they didn't buy it. Because we already stood at Har Sinai and we know that when we became Hashem's nation, it came along with *Torah u'mitzvos chukim u'mishpatim.* It came along with a Torah.

Obligations of Ahavah

But not like people think, it's obligations and rules and prohibitions. Oh no. It's an expression of Hashem's greatest love. When Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim and brought us to Har Sinai, He said to us, "I love you, Yisroel, and therefore I'm going to take you now to be My *kallah*. And I'm going to give you the very, very great gift, a *chasunah* gift of the Torah."

The *mitzvos*, all the *aseis* and all the *lavs*, are expressions of great love that Hashem showed us. That's what we say in *Ma'ariv*, אַהֲבַת עוֹלָם בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמְּךָ אָהַבְתָּ – *Hashem, You loved Your people with an everlasting love.* And right away it explains what this love is: תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹות חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים אוֹתָנוּ לִמַּדְתָּ –*You taught us the Torah and the mitzvos, the laws and the statutes.* Hashem says, "Because I love you with an *ahavas olam*, an everlasting love, that's why I'm going to give you the Torah."

Everybody knows that when a *chosson* loves a *kallah*, he buys jewelry for her. Now, he's not doing it merely to show off. He gives her gifts to show that he appreciates her. He gives her a diamond because he wants to say, "You're a diamond to me." That's why she runs right away to the jeweler to ask, "How much is this diamond worth?" She wants to know how much he loves her.

Now, just like that diamond is a symbol of love, the Torah is our diamond. The *Torah u'mitzvos chukim u'mishpatim*, those were the wedding gifts, the *sivlonos*, to the Am Yisroel. That's the אַהֲבָה רַבָּה, the great "love" that Hashem showed us. I'm going to give them jewelry to show how much I love them. *Torah u'mitzvos chukim u'mishpatim. Ay-yay-yay*! The *mitzvos*, all the *aseis* and all the *lavs*, are expressions of great love that Hashem showed us.

Jewels for the Jews

Now, when the *kallah* gets an expensive diamond ring, she doesn't put it, let's say, on a chair and forget about it. A special gift like that she guards — it's too important to her. And she's happy whenever she has a chance to display it, to wear it, to show it to others. Even if she's not wearing it right now, sometimes she'll go to the box where she keeps

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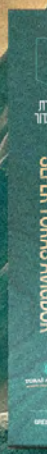

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it and she'll admire it. She'll show it to her friends. Because to her it's a symbol of her *chosson*'s love.

And therefore when you have an opportunity to do a mitzvah, it's not only an obligation; it's a sign of His love for us. And we want to show Hashem that we appreciate Your signs of love. That's why we're very careful with the *mitzvos*; it's a happiness for us to fulfill what You gave us because each one is a different piece of jewelry, a distinct ornament.

The Maalah of a Mitzvah

You know, a mitzvah is a tremendous thing. The fact that you put on *tefillin* makes you a different person. You're changing your nature, you're changing your mind, you're changing your *neshamah*, you're gaining in perfection.

And a mitzvah means reward, too. Reward is a big thing! We're not going to disdain and look down on reward! Oh no! Don't think it's nothing. Even more than reward; הָעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוָה אַחַת, קוֹנֶה לוֹ פְּרַקְלִיט אֶחָד – *when a person does a mitzvah, he acquires a malach that will speak for him* (Avos 4:11). If you fulfill the mitzvah of *mezuzah*, or the mitzvah of *birkas hamazon*, the mitzvah of *krias shema*, the mitzvah of *sukkah*, of *shofar*, you dropped some money in the *tzedakah* box, or you sat down to learn for five minutes, you're creating actual living beings that will speak up on your behalf. So a mitzvah is a tremendous accomplishment.

The Privilege of a Mitzvah

But we're not talking about that now. It's true but now we're saying something else. Even if a mitzvah didn't change you and even if there was no reward for a mitzvah; even if a mitzvah didn't create a *malach* that will speak up for you forever — just to be commanded, to be chosen, that already makes life worth living.

What a privilege it is to keep Shabbos! It's a privilege when you can wear *tzitzis* or put on *tefillin*! It's a privilege when you put a *sheitel* on your head! It's a privilege when you can honor your father or mother!

So you'll say a Japanese can also honor his parents. But that's nothing yet because he's not commanded. גָּדוֹל הַמְּצֻוֶּה וְעוֹשֶׂה – *It's greatness to be commanded* (Kiddushin 31a). Because when you're commanded, it shows that Hashem loves you.

What a great privilege to have a *mezuzah* on your door! You pass by a *mezuzah*, it's an ornament, a special gift that Hashem gave to the Am Yisroel. And every mitzvah, that's what it is. It's another badge of honor.

Covered With Badges

It's like the man who was chosen by the king for all the honors, all the regalia, so he wears all of his badges and he's proud. This obligation and that obligation, each one is another jewel. This mitzvah is a sapphire, this one a ruby, an emerald. One mitzvah is gold with diamond inlays set into it. Six hundred and thirteen of them, and then hundreds more of *dinim* that are *d'Rabanans*! How can they even fit on you? You have to pin some to your pants and your hatband because there are so many; every mitzvah is another piece of jewelry that is pinned on you by the Creator of the world.

And they're medals that should be envied by all the peoples of the earth, because no matter how they will try, they cannot get it. Suppose a gentile decides from now on he'll eat kosher. Or he wants to put up a *mezuzah* or wear *tzitzis*. It's not a badge; it's an imitation. If you look closely, you'll see it's not the genuine one that the king bestows. People can make things that look like the royal insignia, but they have no right to wear them — unless he converts; unless he joins this exclusive society.

And so when we're getting ready for Shavuos it means we're getting ready to demonstrate to Hakadosh Baruch Hu that we appreciate this jewelry, this tremendous gift of diamonds and pearls and rubies that He gave us. We're so happy that He made us obligated with the Torah because the *mitzvos* are a sign of His love.

Jewels on the Shelf

And so when you pass by and see a *Shas* on the shelf — you're in the shul and you're running out after Shacharis to catch the train, but you stop for a few seconds and look at the bindings. Ah, Mesichta Brachos! A fine piece of jewelry for our nation. Shabbos! Ah-ah-ah! It's a gold necklace studded with precious diamonds.

When you see a *Shas* on the shelf, you have to know how to look at it. That *Shas* is a symbol of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's greatest love for us. That's how you should look at the Talmud or a set of *Mishnayos*. They are ornaments for our nation.

Not only a Shas; the *Rishonim* are ornaments too. We're so happy that He gave us these things. He gave us the *Teshuvos HaRashba*. He gave us the Rambam and Rabbeinu Yonah. And also the *Gedolei Achronim*. They made us even more wealthy. Here you have the *Shach*, you have the *Taz*, you have the *Magen Avraham*. The Am Yisroel has hanging from its ears, the *Ketzos Hachoshen* and the *Nesivos*. All kinds of beauties, kinds of ornaments. Hanging over our necks is Chovos Halevavos, the Rambam, the Rif, Emunos V'deios, all the great *chibburim*. What a beautiful nation we are, bedecked with jewels from our *Chosson*!

The Seforim Shtieb

That's why every Jewish house has shelves and shelves of *seforim*. Whether you learn or not, the *seforim* show your appreciation for that great gift that Hashem gave us. That's why every young couple that begins to feather its nest after marriage should have an ambition to line the walls of their home with bookshelves of *seforim*. That should be your dream house! If your wife wants drapes, okay, nothing wrong with drapes; you can buy her drapes at the five and ten, too. But that's not the beauty of a home — a beautiful home is where the walls are covered with shelves of *seforim*. It should be the showcase of pride in your home.

I always say that even if you're never going to open it, it's worth all the money in the world to have a big *Shas* — buy the biggest one you could find and display it in your home. The *Shas*, the *seforim*, should be placed in the most prominent place in the home. When you walk into a Jewish home, it shouldn't be the chandelier or the curtains that you see. It should be a big *Shas*, shelves and shelves of *seforim* should be showcased in your living room. The *seforim shrank*, that's the glory of our nation.

So in case your wife tells you, "Look, Chaim, you used this *sefer* only once, or maybe you never even used it yet. So why did we spend so much money on the *seforim*?" So tell her, "Chana'le, just to have these ornaments on the shelf, that's our pride. These are the jewels that make us a happy nation."

Part IV. The Gift of Torah

Studying the Gift

We're going to spend a few minutes now speaking about the best way, the most important way, of showing our gratitude for the gift of Torah. And that's the subject of *studying* the Torah. Because it's a wonderful thing to have a *Shas* on your bookshelf, to display it the way a *kallah* is proud to display the jewelry her *chosson* gave her, but that's only the beginning.

Because what does it mean you appreciate the Torah? Here's a Gemara. It's closed; it stays on the shelf.

"Oh, but don't You see how happy I was on Shavuos? Of course I appreciate it to no end," he says.

So Hashem says, "What do you mean, 'I appreciate it'? Open it up!" Appreciation means you have the desire to make use of it. If somebody gives you a gift and you never use the gift, he's disappointed. So Hashem said, "Open up the Gemara; that's called appreciating it."

And therefore, Shavuos includes both things. Fundamentally, it's *hakoras hatov* and happiness for the giving of the Torah, but the *hakoras hatov* requires that we should utilize that gift. And so it's *learning* Torah, that's the number one happiness of Shavuos, the number one way of showing appreciation for the gift of the Torah.

All Night With The Satmerer Rav

That's why there's an old *minhag* to stay up on Shavuos night learning Torah. Now, it's not a *mitzvah min haTorah*. It's not even a *takanas Chachomim*. But the Am Yisroel does it. Of course, if someone is ill, physically weak, then I'm not saying anything. I'm not telling you to stay up all night if you have any *chashoshos*, any suspicions, about your health. But the idea is we want to show that learning Torah is so important that we can't even go to sleep.

A long time ago, when the old Satmerer Rav was still alive, I went to visit him. I was supposed to do something, a job, for him — I was the one who composed the first New York Times advertisement against the Zionists. I was the one to compose it, so I went in to ask him to give me a *bracha* that I should succeed. I was up all night writing that article.

Over and over again, I went over it. All night I was up because it was important!

And so on the night before we're going to accept the Torah, we want to show how important it is, how much we appreciate it, so we stay up all night learning — at least I *hope* you're learning. Because included in the great gift of Torah that Hashem gave us is the tremendous privilege that we are allowed to study His words, His thoughts. That's what we say in the *bracha*, נָתַן לָנוּ תּוֹרָתוֹ – it's His Torah, His thoughts, His attitudes. And it's תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת, those are the only true attitudes in the universe. And nothing in the world, even *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim*, is bigger than that.

Greater than Riches

Let me explain that. There are two *pessukim*. One says, וְכָל חֶפְצֶיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָהּ – *all of your desirable things cannot equal to the Torah* (Mishlei 3:15). All the things that people love in this world — people love wealth, they love honor, they love pleasure, they love their wives, their children — it's nothing compared to the Torah.

Here's a millionaire — a true story — a multimillionaire who's going from one of his places where he has a big business to another place, a big business, and he has a minute in between. That minute in between, he takes a *sefer* and learns. And he knows that those few words are worth more than all his property that he has. כָּל חֶפְצֶיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָהּ – *Whatever he has is not equal*, לְדָבָר אֶחָד מִן הַתּוֹרָה – *to that one mishnah he learned* (Yerushalmi, Peah 1:1). Nothing is more desirable than the Torah.

Greater than a Spouse

A yeshiva *bochur* once told me he was going out with a girl and she heard something like that, so she said to him, "I won't play second fiddle to a Gemara." He came and told me this story.

I told him, "If that's so, then drop that *shidduch*." Because she doesn't understand. A wife *is* second fiddle to a Gemara. And, by the way, a husband is second fiddle to the Torah too. Same thing. Because כָּל חֶפְצֶיךָ לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָהּ – *everything in the world, everything you love, is subservient to the Torah.mishnah*

Greater than Mitzvos

But there's another *possuk*, וְכָל חֲפָצַיִם לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָהּ; instead of "your desires," it says, "all desirable things" (*ibid.* 8:11). It means even things that Hashem desires, לֹא יִשְׁווּ בָהּ, cannot compare to the Torah. What does that mean that Torah is greater than all of the things that "Hashem desires"? It means that even all the *mitzvos* of the Torah cannot compare *l'davar echad min haTorah*, to one word of Torah learning (Yerushalmi, *ibid.*).

A tremendous statement! Even as we say the words it's hard to believe. All the *mitzvos* of the Torah are not as important as one statement or one word of learning Torah. Of course, it's with a condition — it's only if you're learning in order to be an *oved Hashem*, to study His words. You have to learn Torah *lishmah*. That's why even little children, you have to remind them, "My little boy, you're learning בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים, and you're able to say the *possuk* very well. Excellent! I'm so proud of you! But remember, you're learning because Hakadosh Baruch Hu commanded us to learn Torah. We're doing His service."

But once you add that intention, so one line of Torah is more important than all the *mitzvos* put together. It's astonishing! Not only is one word of Torah study greater than all the things you desire in this world — wealth and happiness, *nachas*, long years — but it's greater than all the *mitzvos* in the world; *tefillin* and *mezuzos* and *tzitzis* and *matzah* and *korban pesach*, all the obligations of the Torah cannot compare to *davar echad*, one word of the Torah. יְקָרָה הִיא מִפְּנִינִים – *The Torah is more important than the diamonds and pearls and sapphires of mitzvos.*

One Line of Greatness

It means when you sit down and open a Gemara, it's such a tremendous happiness, such a great achievement, that it outdoes, it far outdoes all the good things together. When you're sitting down to learn one line of the Gemara, it's considered better than all the *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim* that Hakadosh Baruch Hu could give you to do.

I know that's a very difficult idea for us to accept. It's very far away from our ideals today because we're far from *emes*. We think maybe it's just propaganda — I'm just trying to convince you to come to the Torah

classes here.[1] But actually it's one hundred percent *emes*. To sit and learn a line of Gemara is better than all the *mitzvos*.

1. I'll tell you what goes on here (April 1982). Sunday night at 8:30 there's a shiur in Shev Shemaytsa. Sunday morning 8:00 we learn Mesichta Makkos, 9:30 Mesichta Sanhedrin and 10:30 Nedarim. At 5:00 in the afternoon we learn Mesichta Bava Basra. We're finishing Bava Basra and soon we'll begin the third perek of Yevamos on Sunday afternoon. Between Mincha and Maariv Sundays, Mishnah Berurah, second and third cheilek.

   On Monday morning 9:30 we learn Mesichta Kesubos, sixth perek. 10:30 Minchas Chinuch. Monday night Mesichta Menachos, first perek, followed by Yerushalmi Shekalim for 25 minutes. Tuesday morning 9:30 is Bava Basra. 10:30 Ketzos Hachoshen. Tuesday night Yevamos, the sixth perek, followed by Hilchos Pesach in Mishnah Berurah. Wednesday morning 9:30 Mesichta Bava Kama followed by Minchas Chinuch. Wednesday night Yevamos, the fourth perek.

   Thursday morning Mesichta Brachos. We're finishing Brachos and soon beginning Rosh Hashana. 10:30 Mesichta Kerisus. Friday morning 9:30 Kesubos, the first perek, 10:30 Tur and Beis Yosef Choshen Mishpat, Hilchos Nizkei Mamon. Shabbos morning at a quarter to eight Mesichta Kesubos, the third perek. And Shabbos after Mincha we're learning Tur and Beis Yosef Even Ha'ezer. Shabbos afternoon before Mincha we learn Aggadeta Mesichta Sanhedrin.

   Ladies too. The Thursday night lecture is also an opportunity — an hour and a half to sit and be bored. Everybody is welcome to come. It costs no money and ladies are welcome. You could even put your question on pieces of paper like anybody else. On Friday nights during the winter, we have Chovos Halevavos; women are welcome. On Saturday afternoon, another opportunity; every Shabbos afternoon, the Aggadeta shiur in Ein Yankev for men and women. Then if you want to come Sunday nights at 7:30 Rabbi Nass lectures to the ladies downstairs on Jewish history; a glorious opportunity – every Sunday in the year without fail. So ladies too have plenty of opportunities to become real Beis Yaakov seminary intensive course graduates here.

Greater Than Life Itself

Of course, if you have to do a mitzvah and you're sitting in front of the Gemara, you have to stop learning to do the mitzvah. Just like you have to stop learning to save a Jewish life, and still the Gemara says, גְּדוֹלָה תַּלְמוּד תּוֹרָה יוֹתֵר מֵהַצָּלַת נְפָשׁוֹת – *learning Torah is more important than saving lives* (Megillah 16b). Certainly you have to stop learning for *hatzalas nefashos*, certainly. You have to stop Torah for *kiddush levanah* too. But still, the time that you were busy with that is deducted from your Torah perfection, and when Hakadosh Baruch Hu *doesn't* send such a mitzvah to a Jew and allows him to study the Torah in peace, he's more fortunate.

Now you'll ask, how can that be? If I have to stop, how can it be that I don't get the same perfection? So fifty-nine years ago I asked this question to one of my *rebbes*, Reb Avrohom *zichrono livracha.* Now what he said I won't tell you now — ask me afterwards — but that's the fact; the *mitzvos* of the Torah are not as great a privilege as the mitzvah of studying Torah. It can't be helped; Torah is too important.

And that's why the *halacha* is that if there's a mitzvah to be done and someone offers to do it and you yourself are able to learn Torah in that same time, so let him do it and you choose to learn Torah instead. Because the greatest gift given to mankind is perfection in the Torah; you're putting into your mind the *machshavos* of the Borei Olam, and that's the greatest of all achievements, to think like Hakadosh Baruch Hu thinks. When you think like Hakadosh Baruch Hu thinks, that's the greatest perfection of a person; it's the most tremendous change you can make in yourself.

Toras Nashim

Now, how do women do that? Women encourage their husbands to learn Torah. They say, "Chaim, go to the *shiur*," "Chaim, go to the yeshiva." נָשִׁים בְּמַאי קָא זָכְיָן – *How do women achieve that greatness?* בְּאַתְנוֹיֵי גַּבְרֵיהוּ בֵּי רַבָּנַן – *They encourage their husbands to learn* (Brachos 17a). She says, "Go out of the house, go to the *beis hamedrash*."

Also, בְּאַקְרוֹיֵי בְּנַיָּהוּ לְבֵי כְּנִישְׁתָּא – *she sends her children off to the cheder*, and when they come home, too, she encourages them more to learn more.

They come back from the yeshiva: "Mommy, but we learned all day long."

"Never mind. Take a Chumash and sit down and review the Chumash here. Get in the habit of learning by yourself."

And the children sit at night and they learn. They get into the habit. כָּל בַּיִת שֶׁנִּשְׁמָעִים בּוֹ דִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה בַּלַּיְלָה – A *house where you hear divrei Torah at night,* שׁוּב אֵינוֹ נֶחֱרָב – *that house can't be destroyed* (Eiruvin 18b). It's a blessed house. It's forever.

A Full Partner

And she's blessed even more than the house because she gets one hundred percent credit in all the Torah that is learned. You know, in the olden times everybody knew that. That's why women up till a hundred years ago strove to marry *bnei Torah.* You went in small towns in the stores, women stood in the stores alone and the husbands were sitting in the *beis hamedrash* all day long. There were very many *eidims* on *kest* in the small towns. That's how it used to be.

Every *beis hamedrash* was like a yeshiva because the women tried their best that the husbands should be *lamdanim.* And every woman knew that she is going to go to Gan Eden holding onto her husband's *kapoteh.* That's how they used to say. It's not a joke! She knew that she would go to Gan Eden with her husband's merit of his Torah.

וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד – A husband and a wife are not two people. They're two parts of a personality. Consider your face; it gets credit from what your feet walked. If your feet walk in a good place, your face remains intact. If your feet walk where there is traffic, your face won't remain intact. And so the wife, when she urges her husband to go and learn, and does other things to facilitate his learning, so she has a full partnership in all of his Torah. And that's going to be the greatest happiness.

Torah in the Kitchen

Besides, I passed through a kitchen once. The entrance was through the kitchen and so I had to walk through the kitchen. The woman of the house was busy cooking. I looked at the kitchen table. There was a Rambam open with her glasses where she was keeping the place. She was learning Rambam!

So why can't you? A lot of women can learn Rambam. Women can't learn accounting? Women can't learn complicated subjects? Why can't they learn *lashon kodesh*? They can learn Rambam. A woman can learn *Kuzari* if she has time — of course, a woman shouldn't have any time; a woman should have a kitchen full of babies and she should be busy all day with them. That's the biggest kind of learning! If a woman is raising children, that's her *Mesichta Brachos*, *Mesichta Shabbos*, *Mesichta Pesachim*, *Mesichta Eiruvin*. That's everything. That's her *Shas*. You can give away a *Shas* anytime for a family — a family is worth more than a *Shas*. Her children, that's a glorious library of Torah.

The Torah of Gratitude

And so learning on Shavuos is not only for the mitzvah itself. It's an expression of gratitude, of happiness, of appreciation for the gift of Torah. And it's for after Shavuos too. If you have a minute to learn, to learn one word of Torah, just one word, it's worth everything; it's more than all of your possessions, all your properties. But it's also a great expression of gratitude. And so even though you're a busy man making a living, whenever you have a chance, you go back to your learning, even for a few minutes.

Sometimes you can learn more than a few minutes. You can learn Torah in your lunch hour. You can learn in your evenings. There are *shiurim* you can attend. Sometimes you even have hours and hours; on Shabbos, Friday night, *motzei Shabbos*. Some people don't work on Sundays. Then there's Yom Tov and Chol Hamoed, all kinds of opportunities. And the man who knows what Shavuos is, he understands that he's busy with millions and millions of pounds of diamonds. אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָנוּ תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת! That's the gift of all gifts!

Part V. Appreciating the Gift

Lift Off

And so we come back now to what we began with, the tremendous *simcha* that Shavuos was in the yeshivas. You know, the Jewish calendar is studded with happy days, but Shavuos was exceptional; it was the happiest day of the year because that was the day we became the Am

Yisroel, the day we were lifted up above, way way above, the nations of the world to become the forever nation.

And it happened by means of Matan Torah, by means of *Torah u'mitzvos*. That's our greatness! That's our pride, our happiness! אַשְׁרֵינוּ מַה טּוֹב חֶלְקֵנוּ – *How lucky we are and how good is our lot*, וּמַה יָּפָה יְרֻשָּׁתֵנוּ – *and how beautiful is our inheritance*. Ooh ah! You can drink down those words again and again and you become intoxicated with happiness.

Intellectual Intoxication

Now, we understand that it's hard to be intoxicated with happiness all our lives. Human beings have a problem with their emotions and it's not easy to maintain that high level of excitement all the time. And therefore we shouldn't blame anybody. You see that the *Nevi'im* and the *Chachomim* during *Bayis Rishon* couldn't blame the people either; only Hakadosh Baruch Hu saw. עַד שֶׁבָּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא וּפֵרְשָׁה - *He saw that they should have done better*, אֲשֶׁר לֹא בֵּרְכוּ בַּתּוֹרָה תְּחִלָּה - *that they weren't thanking enough*; they didn't understand enough the happiness of having a Torah.

It means that Hashem demands more from us. Such a gift requires more, much more, than even the *Nevi'im* and *Chachomim* could imagine. It's not easy even to comprehend such an ideal but that's what the Gemara tells us. Hakadosh Baruch Hu said, "It's good but I'm not satisfied yet."

Living Up to Being a Yisroel

And that's an important lesson for us; a great nation has to live up to its greatness. And included in that is an obligation to enjoy this privilege that we have a Torah and to enjoy even more the privilege that we can learn the Torah. It's an infinite happiness, a tremendous joy to have the Torah. And even though it's not easy to maintain such a level of excitement forever but all the generations that studied this lesson, שֶׁלֹּא בֵּרְכוּ בַּתּוֹרָה תְּחִלָּה, and made a tremendous effort — like we're making now, tonight — to try and recapture some of that excitement, they succeeded to a great extent.

And so at least from time to time we must remind ourselves. Try to work on it; spend time reviewing the ideas we said tonight. And although, as I said, it's not easy to maintain such a high degree of awareness always, but we must understand at least intellectually.

Joyful Meditations

It's a very important obligation to spend time in our lives meditating, understanding what we have; you have to think about it all from time to time. For instance, when you say, "אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים," so once in a while think about what you're saying. "You chose us, Hashem. You made us Yisroel at Har Sinai and because of that, because of the *Torah u'mitzvos*, we are given a guarantee, כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, without any exception, will be in Olam Haba with You forever and ever."

And so the great happiness of having a Torah — whether you learn the Torah or don't learn the Torah enough — everyone in Am Yisroel is expected to think thoroughly about this subject. That's the primary obligation of a Jew, to thank Hakadosh Baruch Hu that he's a Jew.

And we have to do it until we become *actually* happy, actually filled with joy that we are Jews, and we should feel that there's nothing in the world as great as being a Jew! And you should look down on all the inhabitants, *kol yoshvei tevel*; all of them are *k'mar m'dli*. They're like nothing compared to you. You are recognized by the King of the world as His chosen ones forever because He gave you His Torah, a gift that has no equal among all the prizes and all the treasures of this world. *Mah yafah yerushaseinu!*

A Day for Gratitude

And Shavuos, that's the time to think about that more than other days. It's a life program to study how great it is, how fortunate it is that we have a Torah — everyone in Am Yisroel is expected to think thoroughly about this subject — but Shavuos is the day most set aside for the great happiness of having a Torah. At least once a year when the time comes, don't be *masiach daas* from that: How fortunate we became when we stood at the foot of Har Sinai and received the Torah. Because what did Hashem say at that time? וְהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים – "*You, the whole nation, will be for Me a special treasure from all the nations*" (Shemos 19:5).

And so this is the day, more than any other day, to review once more these great ideals and understand the happiness that Shavuos means for us. That's the plain truth; it's not *drush*. Shavuos means the infinite happiness and excitement of וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ – *And you will be for Me a Kingdom of Kohanim and a Holy Nation* (*ibid.* 6).

And so as we're approaching Matan Torah now, that's what has to be most on our minds. Other things, smaller things, cheese blintzes, cheese cakes, very good but that's not what we're thinking about. Our *machshavos* are focused on one thing: "Hakadosh Baruch Hu, we're so grateful to You, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר בָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וְנָתַן לָנוּ אֶת תּוֹרָתוֹ, for choosing us by giving us the Torah. We're so happy with the Torah, and we're going to show You that we're going to receive the Torah again with the greatest enthusiasm."

And that's why it's the happiest day of the year; because Shavuos is the time of הַבּוֹחֵר בְּעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה, when Hashem expressed His great love for the Am Yisroel by giving us the gift of *Torah u'mitzvos*!

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Let's Get Practical

Rejoicing with the Torah

Shavuos is when Hakadosh Baruch Hu lifted us above the nations of the world to be His people, and lovingly gifted us with His most precious treasure — His Torah.

This week, *bli neder*, I will try my best to recite *birchas haTorah* each morning with a renewed excitement. And I will concretize my feelings of *simcha* and gratitude by learning at least five more minutes each day, thereby increasing my engagement with the loftiest of all pursuits.

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Everything Simply Stopped

It once happened that everything simply stopped: When Hashem gave the Torah, no bird squawked. No winged creature flew. No cow mooed. The *ofanim* didn't soar. The *seraphim* didn't say, "*Kadosh kadosh...*" The sea didn't sway. People didn't speak. Rather, the world was completely silent, and a voice rang out: "*I am Hashem, your God....*" (*Shemos Rabbah* 29:9) It sounds like the *Midrash* is saying that when Hashem gave the Torah everything had to be quiet in order that He could say, "I am Hashem, your God...." It seems as if silence was required so Hashem's voice could be heard.

But the truth is the exact opposite. Hashem's message is always loud and clear. His presence fills and dominates the world. But we're so preoccupied that we don't even notice what's in front of our eyes. This is why we don't see Hashem! This may be compared to a great and wonderful king who invites one of his subjects to meet with him in the royal palace. The subject has never been there before. There are many other people in the palace as well, all serving the king. There are musicians, sages, advisers, etc.

The subject arrives and enters the palace. The first thing he hears is beautiful music playing on one side of the hall. He stops there to listen for a moment. He hardly manages to pull himself away from the enchanting music when he sees a great sage on the other side of the hall, expounding amazing words of wisdom. He is riveted by the lecture. And then he notices the magnificent works of art hanging on the walls... The subject gets so involved with what's going on all around him that he doesn't even notice the king, who's sitting there in the middle of the hall, waiting for him. The visitor could spend hours taking in all the beauty of the palace and never even gaze upon the glorious countenance of the king himself. But the king is fond of this man and wants to converse with him. What does the king do? He announces, "Silence, everyone! Stop what you're doing and go home." Suddenly everything is quiet, and the overwhelming beauty and glory of the king fill the palace.

"*The whole earth is full of His glory*" (*Yeshayahu* 6:3) - Hashem's overwhelming beauty always fills the earth, from one end to the other. But the world is such a fascinating place. People go to and fro and instead of noticing Hashem's greatness, they're drawn in by the beauty of all the things they see, by physical pleasures, etc. Hashem's world deters us from noticing Him. We live in a wonderful world of skies, oceans, great mountains and forests. Hashem's magnificent world was created so we would point to it and say, "This is absolutely astounding. Who created all this?"

It is like the king in the above allegory. His orchestra played beautiful music for him, all in his honor, but visitors to his palace became so enthralled by the music, they forgot the king was even there. For this reason, when Hashem wanted to talk to us and give us the Torah, He brought the whole world to a halt. Everything was silent. Then the great Voice issued forth: "*I am Hashem, your God!*"

This is *Shabbos Kodesh* -a day of absolute cessation. All the bustle and confusion of the world stops. While on weekdays a person runs around attending to his physical needs, on Shabbos everything stops and is silent. When everything ceases, when "everyone goes home," what's left? Hashem. This is Shabbos: the day when the Jewish people are alone with Hashem - there is nothing besides Him. That's why we were given Shabbos: so we would have a day on which to find HaKadosh Baruch Hu!

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Adapted by R' Y. Levy from Nefesh Shimshon, Shabbos Kodesh, Rav Shimshon Pincus, Feldheim

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שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך

QUESTION

Is it true that as we get further away from Matan Torah, from the original Shavuos, that the generations deteriorate and we can't accomplish what the earliest generations accomplished?

ANSWER

Is this process a necessary one, that we deteriorate from generation to generation?

Let me explain to you: there are two general tendencies, two currents in Jewish history, in world history. One is that there is a general deterioration; because the further we go away from Har Sinai, the weaker the impression becomes. A hundred years ago, they were closer to Har Sinai. The impression was stronger. A hundred years ago, they were closer to Rabi Akiva. A hundred years ago, they were closer to the Gra. The Gra was just yesterday a hundred years ago. They still remembered the Gra. Chasidishe Jews a hundred years ago still remembered the *talmidim* of the Baal Shem Tov. And therefore, the further we go away from our ancient models, certainly it weakens.

But you must know, individuals don't have to follow that trend. That's only a general trend, but if it's an individual, that's different. An individual can work himself up to extreme greatness if he wants to. The world is still open for man to become great. Men and women can become great today as they became great in the days of old. Even in Duluth, even in San Francisco, if a boy is living there, a Jewish boy, and he decides to choose the ways of Hashem, he can become great. How great? There's no limit to his greatness. That's one of the *ikrei emunah*. He can become a *tzaddik* like Moshe Rabbeinu. That's stated in the Rambam (Teshuvah 5:2). Everybody could do it.

It doesn't mean it's easy. By no means it's easy. Of course, if you're next to Moshe Rabbeinu, it's easy to be a big *tzaddik*. If you're far away from him, it's not easy. But today it's still an open opportunity for anybody who wishes to choose the *derech* of virtue, he can become very great.

June 1987

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