

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Shavuot  
May 30-31, 2020 \*\*\* Sivan 7-8, 5680

What is Shavuot

[https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/609663/jewish/What-Is-Shavuot-Shavuot.htm](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/609663/jewish/What-Is-Shavuot-Shavuot.htm)

The holiday of Shavuot is a two-day holiday, beginning at sundown of the 5th of Sivan and lasting until nightfall of the 7th of Sivan (May 28–30, 2020). In Israel it is a one-day holiday, ending at nightfall of the 6th of Sivan.

The word Shavuot (or Shavuot) means “weeks.” It celebrates the completion of the seven-week Omer counting period between Passover and Shavuot.

The Torah was given by G-d to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai on Shavuot more than 3,300 years ago. Every year on the holiday of Shavuot we renew our acceptance of G-d’s gift, and G-d “re-gives” the Torah.

The giving of the Torah was a far-reaching spiritual event—one that touched the essence of the Jewish soul for all times. Our sages have compared it to a wedding between G-d and the Jewish people. Shavuot also means “oaths,” for on this day G-d swore eternal devotion to us, and we in turn pledged everlasting loyalty to Him.

The Festival Has Five Names

**Shavuot**—The word Shavuot means “weeks.” It marks the completion of the seven-week Omer counting period between Passover and Shavuot.

**Yom HaBikkurim**—“The day of First Fruits.” Shavuot is also the celebration of the wheat harvest and the ripening of the first fruits, which is the reason for this name as well as the following one.

**Chag HaKatzir**—The “Harvest Festival.”

**Atzeret**—In the Talmud, Shavuot is also called Atzeret, which means “The Stoppage,” a reference to the prohibition against work on this holiday.

**Zeman Matan Torateinu**—In the holiday prayer service, we refer to it as the “Time of the Giving of Our Torah.”

Why It Is Customary to Eat Dairy on Shavuot

On the holiday of Shavuot, a two-loaf bread offering was brought in the Temple. To commemorate this, we eat two meals on Shavuot—first a dairy meal, and then, after a short break, we eat the traditional holiday meat meal.

With the giving of the Torah, the Jews became obligated to observe the kosher laws. As the Torah was given on Shabbat, no cattle could be slaughtered nor could utensils be koshered, and thus on that day they ate dairy.

The Torah is likened to nourishing milk. Also, the Hebrew word for milk is chalav, and when the numerical values of each of the letters in the word chalav are added together—8 + 30 + 2—the total is 40. Forty is the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai when receiving the Torah.

When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, the angels urged G-d to reconsider His decision to

give His most precious Torah to earthly beings. “Bestow Your majesty upon the heavens . . . What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:5–7) One of the reasons why the angels’ request went unheeded is because of the Jews’ meticulous adherence to the laws of the Torah—including the kosher laws. Not so the angels, who when visiting Abraham consumed butter and milk together with meat (Genesis 18:8). On Shavuot we therefore eat dairy products and then take a break before eating meat—in order to demonstrate our commitment to this mitzvah.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

A Life of Vertical and Horizontal Responsibility:

Shavuot During the Coronavirus Pandemic by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Shavuot-shiur-5780-RLS-1.pdf>

**What I wanted** to do with this shiur is to talk about the Coronavirus. Because Torah gets very interesting when you relate them to the things that are constantly changing. Now, as the Chief Rabbi has already said, the Coronavirus pandemic has enforced a situation that seems to be exactly the opposite of the situation at Mount Sinai. We have three indications of that in the Torah, pretty explicitly. Number one, the famous line at the beginning of Chapter 19 of Shemot, just before the Giving of the Torah, where it says “vayichan-sham Yisrael negged hahar.” (Ex. 19:2). The Torah uses the singular form: “and Israel encamped (in the singular) there opposite the mountain”. The famous words of Chazal, echoed by Rashi “k’ish echad b’lev echad”, explain that the singular form of the verb is used because they encamped together as though they were “One person with one mind”. That enormous sense of unity.

**The second**, a pretty explicit statement of this, is when Moshe Rabbeinu proposes to the people what God is proposing. “Vaya’anu chol-ha’am yachdav.” (Ex. 19:8). “And all the people answered together and said, ‘All that God has said we will do.’” The “yachad” (unity) there is explicitly in the verse, in verse eight of this chapter. And then after the revelation, in chapter 24, when Moshe Rabbeinu repeats the terms of the Torah, “vaya’anu kol-ha’am kol echad”. (Ex. 24:3) “All the people answered with one voice.” Now, these are pretty unique statements of unity, and all three of them are about the giving of the Torah. What we have here are three statements of people coming together. The question is, where do we find the opposite of isolation, of tragedy, of bad things happening, with people being left alone? And the answer is that we find this in Megillat Ruth, in the Megillah that we read on Shavuot, of the story of Ruth. Let's just remind ourselves at how that story begins.

**It begins** with five hammer blows of tragedy. First of all, the first verse tells us, Vayehi bimei shfot hashoftim... (Ruth 1:1) And it came to pass, at the time when the Judges judged, that there was a famine in the land. Now, a famine in those days was pretty much as severe as an epidemic in our time. Because without freezers and fridges and supermarkets, a famine was a life-threatening condition. So, the first hammer blow there is a famine. Secondly, a man from Bet Lechem, together with his wife and two sons, went

to live in the country of Moab. Now, here we have a double tragedy. There's a famine, specifically in Bet-Lechem in Israel. Bet-Lechem means the House of Bread. Of all places where you would not wish to have a famine, Bethlehem is that.

**Then** the man goes, but does not go the way Avraham went, to Egypt, or to Gerar, he goes to Moab. Moab was Israel's enemy. Here is a family forced out of their own land, out of their own home, to go to the country of their enemies. Then comes the next blow.

Elimelech, this man himself, Naomi's husband, dies and she is left a widow. Then comes the fourth blow. Her two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Moabite women were not exactly welcome in Israel, because the Moabites, as we have said, were Israel's enemies. (Of course, in the end, one of them turns out to be an exceptional human being.) That is the fourth tragedy. And then comes the fifth tragedy, that Machlon and Chilyon, Naomi's two sons, died also. Now you have Naomi left a childless widow and her two daughters-in-law also left as childless widows. Three childless widows, and you cannot get more vulnerable than that in biblical society because they had absolutely no one to support them.

**We then read** of how Naomi hears that there's again food available in her own land and she decides to go back. Her two daughters-in-law initially accompany her. She says, "Please, don't. There's nothing for you here. I can't give you any more children. Go back and get married." Of course Orpah does go back. Ruth refuses and goes with her. She then returns to Israel. People of the town, the people she knew not that long ago, come and they look at her and they say, "Can this be Naomi? She has been so shattered by tragedy." The people hardly recognise her. And then she replies, "Don't call me Naomi (i.e. pleasant one), call me Mara, (i.e. bitter one), because God has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune on me." That is point number one. We now have a point of contact with a very tragic episode which left three women exceptionally vulnerable. And one in particular, Naomi, completely isolated, completely devastated.

**Then we move** to the end of the Megillah. At the end of the Megillah we know what has happened. Boaz, a kinsmen of Naomi, has taken Ruth as a wife, and repurchased the family properties. They now have a child, a son, and all the women of the town come and surround them and say, "Praise be to the Lord who has not left you without a guardian redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel." Everyone is rejoicing with Naomi, who now has a grandchild. Boaz has a wife and a child. Ruth has a husband and a child. The ultimate blessing, the final coup de theatre at the end of the Megillah, is that the child that they have called Oved is the grandfather of David Hamelech, the greatest King of Israel. We have a situation in which in the space of four chapters, our story has moved from isolation and devastation to one of rejoicing, and, indeed, a kind of renewal of life for all concerned.

**The second** question is: what brings about this change? The answer is very interesting. There is a Midrash Rabbah that says "Amar Rabbi Zeira", "Rabbi Zeira said", "Megillah Zu", "this scroll," "ein ba lo tuma velo taharah, velo issur velo heiter. "It contains no laws of any consequence. Not pure, impure, permitted, forbidden." "Velamar nichtavah?" "Why was it written?" "Lelamedechah kamah s'char tov legomli chassidim" "To teach how great is the reward of those who do acts of kindness." (Rut Rabbah 2:14)

**The story of Ruth** is the supreme story of kindness in Tanach. The word itself appears three times in the megillah. But most importantly, it is Ruth's kindness in staying with Naomi despite all of Naomi's protestations, and Boaz' kindness in really realising what it would take to redeem this family from tragedy. Those two acts of kindness are the reason why the story that begins in tragedy ends in joy. That is the power of chessed, to redeem tragedy and bring joy where there was sadness and hope where there was despair.

**Obviously** the question that we ask ourselves is why Ruth is read on Shavuot. There's no obvious connection between Ruth and Shavuot. The two standard explanations are that, number one, it has to do with the time of the year. Ruth is set bimei k'tzir cheitim, at the time of the wheat harvest. And Shavuot takes place at the time of the wheat harvest. Or, number two, that Ruth became a convert. "Where you go, I go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people." And the Israelites, as it were, became converts at Mount Sinai because the essence of conversion is kabbalat hamitzvot, acceptance of the commands, and that's what the Israelites did at Sinai. Maybe it has to do with time of the year, or maybe it has to do with Ruth's conversion.

**However**, I want to suggest to a different answer. An answer put forward by none other than Moses Maimonides in The Guide For the Perplexed. The Guide For the Perplexed is the greatest work of Jewish philosophy, and it's a big work. It consists of three books, and it's a very lengthy work. Right at the end, (book three has 54 chapters, and right at the end in chapter 53 of book three) in the penultimate chapter, the Rambam devotes one third of that chapter to defining what is chessed, what is loving kindness? The Rambam says chessed means doing good for people in a way that they have no claim on you. It's not justice, it's not tzedakah, it's chessed. You have no claim, but nonetheless, we do good to somebody that is chessed, going beyond anything the law requires.

**In chapter 54**, we begin to understand why the Rambam has taken all this time to tell us the meaning of chessed. In book four, chapter 54, the closing chapter of the Guide, he quotes Jeremiah, who says, "Koh amar Hashem", Thus says God, "Al yithallel chacham bechochmato...", "Let the wise not boast of his wisdom, nor the strong hero of his strength, or the rich person of his wealth." "Ki im bezot yithallel hamithallel". But only boast of this, "haskel veyado'a oti." "Think hard, meditate hard, and know Me." "Ki Ani Hashem." "That I am God." (Jer. 9:22) This is a very Rambam sort of idea, that the highest thing in life is to develop an intellectual understanding of God.

**But Jeremiah** doesn't stop there. He goes on and says, "Haskel veyado'a oti, ki Ani Hashem oseh chessed mishpat utzedakah ba'aretz" . "I" says God, "do loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth." "Ki v'eileh chafatzti n'oom Hashem". Because these are what I desire,' says God." The Rambam says, (to paraphrase), "I may have been giving you the impression that the most important thing in life is to intellectually understand what God is. But actually, the most important thing in life is to do acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness." It is the kind of people we become and the kind of virtues we embody, that are what the Torah are all about. And since Ruth is the Book of chessed in Tanach, maybe that is why we read it on Shavuot. Because the Rambam tells us that the whole purpose of Torah culminates in this ability to do acts of loving-kindness to other people. Thus far, the Rambam.

**However**, I want to suggest something else as well and take it just a little bit further. We know what happened at Mount Sinai. The Israelites made a covenant with God. He would be their God and they would be His people. But at key moments in Tanach, critical moments, we find another phrase altogether. Listen very carefully. Here is Moshe Rabbeinu, here is Moses, speaking in the Book of Devarim. "Veyadata ki Hashem Elokecha hu haElokim Hakel hane'eman shomer habit ve'hachessed", "You shall know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps" "Habit ve'hachessed," "the covenant and the loving-kindness" (Deut. 7:9). He says it again a few verses later. "Vehaya eikev tish'me'un et hamishpatim ha'eleh ushmartem ve'asitem otam v'shamar Hashem Elokecha lecha et habit v'et hachessed". "God will keep the covenant and the loving kindness." (Deut. 7:12). When King Solomon dedicated the Temple, he uttered the following prayer. "Hashem Elokei Yisrael, ein kemocha Elokim bashamayim mima'al ve'al ha'aretz mitachat...", "There is no one like you, God, in the heavens above or the earth below." "shomer habit ve'hachessed", "keeping the covenant and the loving-kindness" (I Kings 8:23). And likewise, Nehemiah, when he renews the covenant as the people come back from Babylon. He says, "Hakel hagadol hagibor v'hanora", "The great, mighty, and awesome God," "shomer habit ve'hachessed". "He who keeps the covenant and the loving-kindness." (Neh. 9:32)

**That's** a really puzzling phrase, "shomer habit ve'hachessed", the covenant and the loving-kindness. If you look, for instance, at the Jewish Publication Society translation, they just translate 'covenant'. Because the chessed is included in the covenant. If you look at the New International version, which is a very good non-Jewish translation, habit ve'hachessed is translated as, "The covenant of love." But of course it doesn't mean that, it means "covenant and love." Everyone had a problem in understanding what else God does for the Jewish people other than make a covenant with them on Shavuot, at Mount Sinai. But if you think about it, the answer's really quite simple. A covenant is what sociologists and anthropologists call reciprocal altruism. You do this for me. I will do this for you. "You serve Me," says God, "and I will protect you." Covenant is always reciprocal and neutral. But that is terribly vulnerable, because what happens if we don't keep the covenant? The covenant is then rendered null and void.

**The covenant** is not enough. And that's what Moses was saying, that's what King Solomon was saying, that is what Nehemiah was saying. God does not just make a covenant with us. He has a relationship of chessed with us. An unconditional love, which is translated into deeds of kindness to us. The covenant is conditional, but chessed is unconditional. That is exactly what the Rambam meant when it said chessed means doing something for somebody who has no claim on us. There's nothing reciprocal.

**And maybe** ultimately that is what the Book of Ruth is there to show us. The Book of Ruth is the Book of chessed. We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what the book is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had for Naomi and Boaz had for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another. Coming back to where we are in the Coronavirus crisis, the short answer is that just as in the Book of Ruth, tragedy and loneliness and isolation are healed by acts

of lovingkindness, so have the isolation of so many of us been healed by acts of loving-kindness, acts of neighbourliness, people being in touch, helping us, getting things for us, phoning us up, connecting us by Zoom, showing that they care about us. Those acts of kindness have humanised and lightened our want. Chessed has a redemptive quality, that it transforms tragedy into some form of celebration and despair into some powerful form of hope. Let what Ruth did for Naomi and Boaz did for Ruth be with us in the months ahead, as we try and help those who have been so terribly isolated these last weeks and months. And may we remember that, as well as giving us a covenant at Mount Sinai, God gave us a bond of love that is unbreakable. He will never abandon us, let us never abandoned Him.

### **Chag Sameach, and Shavuot Sameach. Be well.**

(To watch this shiur which was followed by a shiur from Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, please visit [www.RabbiSacks.org](http://www.RabbiSacks.org).)

#### [Ruth's Torah Matters Now by Amy Kalmanofsky](http://www.jtsa.edu/ruths-torah-matters-now?utm_term=ADP&utm_campaign=The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On+Software&utm_medium=email&cm_mmc=Act-On%20Software-_-email-_-The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS-_-ADP)

[http://www.jtsa.edu/ruths-torah-matters-now?utm\\_term=ADP&utm\\_campaign=The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS&utm\\_content=email&utm\\_source=Act-On+Software&utm\\_medium=email&cm\\_mmc=Act-On%20Software-\\_-email-\\_-The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS-\\_-ADP](http://www.jtsa.edu/ruths-torah-matters-now?utm_term=ADP&utm_campaign=The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On+Software&utm_medium=email&cm_mmc=Act-On%20Software-_-email-_-The%20Most%20Human%20Book%20of%20the%20Bible%3A%20Torah%20from%20JTS-_-ADP)

Like every Jewish holiday, Shavuot has seasonal and historical components. It celebrates the gifts of Torah and of the spring harvest. Both bounties manifest God's glory, sustain Israel, and are captured masterfully by our liturgy.

On the first day of Shavuot, we read Exodus 19-20, which describes the revelation at Sinai and the giving of the ten commandments. On the second day, we have the tradition of reading the book of Ruth. Ruth captures both the Torah and harvest themes of the holiday. Set during the barley harvest, the book plays with the tropes of emptiness and fullness and tells a story that carries humans and the land from a state of infertility to fertility. Also, the Rabbis understood Ruth's pledge to follow Naomi and accept her people and God to be a statement of faith and an act of religious conversion. By committing to Naomi, Ruth the Moabite accepts God's Torah (Ruth Rabbah 2:22), as Israel did at Sinai. I have always loved the book of Ruth. I love it for its literary craft and elegance. I also love it for its peculiarities—the fact that God is not an active character in the book and that humans—particularly *female* humans—take center stage. I love it for presenting a hero who, as a female Moabite, is as *Other* as anyone can be in the Torah's universe. I have always loved Ruth, but this year, I read Ruth in the context of Shavuot and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I love it even more. In my reading, Ruth offers a profound Torah that speaks to us now. It is the Torah that comes from human relationships. It is the Torah of human connectedness.

Of all the books in the Bible, Ruth is the most human. God does not speak or act in the book and is mentioned only in passing. Human dialogue is central in Ruth more than in any other biblical book. At its heart, Ruth is a story about human relationships, and more importantly, about human relatedness. Its story shows how when human beings commit to and are kind to one another, bounty ensues.

The most famous moment of human connectedness is Ruth's declaration to Naomi that wherever Naomi goes, Ruth will follow, and that Naomi's people and God will both be Ruth's, too (Ruth 1:16-17).

This certainly is a powerful moment of human commitment and connection. But there are many more in this remarkable book that each provide unique inspiration.

There is the moment when Naomi first leaves Moab with her two widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, and demands that they return to their mothers. Distraught, they both weep and refuse to leave Naomi's side (Ruth 1:8-10).

There is the moment when Naomi again begs Ruth and Orpah to return home to start over again with new husbands. This time, weeping and heartbroken, Orpah kisses her mother-in-law farewell and heads home while Ruth clings to Naomi (Ruth 1:14).

There is the moment when Boaz finds Ruth gleaning in his field and insists that she continue to do so, promising her protection (Ruth 2:8-9) and insisting that she eat and drink among his harvesters (Ruth 2:14).

There is the moment when Ruth returns to Naomi after gleaning in Boaz's field and offers her what she has gleaned as well as a portion of the food that was offered to her (Ruth 2:17-18).

There is the moment when Boaz withholds himself from Ruth in order to approach a more appropriate kinsman to marry her yet promises to marry her should the kinsman refuse (Ruth 3:11-13).

There is the moment that Boaz negotiates with the kinsman on Ruth's behalf (Ruth 4.3-6).

There is the moment when the townspeople witness Boaz's commitment to Ruth and welcome her into his house as if she were one of the biblical foremothers Rachel, Leah, or Tamar (Ruth 4:11-12).

There is the moment when the women of Bethlehem bless Naomi and declare Ruth to be better to her than seven sons (Ruth 4:15).

There is the moment when Naomi places Ruth's child to her breast and fully accepts the child and his mother into her family (Ruth 4:16-17).

There are many other moments of human connectedness that are the substance of Ruth's Torah. These moments reveal how human acts of kindness, loyalty, and love bring blessings. From these acts, great bounty is reaped.

This Torah, Ruth's Torah, is so evident and vital now during the pandemic. In this strange reality of "virtual" or "remote" connection (a reality that I'm currently living as I write), we value human connectedness even more and long for a world when we can be together and, most importantly, a world where we can cling like Ruth to those we love and do myriad acts of kindness.

When that moment comes and we can return to the world rich with human connection, we will live out Ruth's Torah fully and reap great bounty from it. (Amy Kalmanofsky is the Dean of Albert A. List College of Jewish Studies; Blanche and Romie Shapiro Associate Professor of Bible at JTS)

Shavuot and Mother's Day by Dr. Joshua Kulp (Rosh Yeshiva, Conservative Yeshiva)  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ir6lkszBzkl4CwjczcPjyq3EykYnxAOaQKlcyg-yU/edit>

When I was younger, and I would forget to call my mother on Mother's Day, and someone would call me out for my neglect, I would respond, "Every day is Mother's Day." Of course, there is some truth to this—children should thank their mothers (and fathers) every day. On the other hand, we all know how that works out in reality. Below, I want to suggest an analogy between Shavuot and Mother's Day.

For about 1500 years, Shavuot has been associated with the Revelation on Sinai. On Shavuot, we read the Ten Commandments. In the liturgy, we call Shavuot, "the time of the giving of the Torah." But there are two Torah in Israel, the Written Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and the Oral Torah. It is fairly easy to identify the Written Torah—these are the Five Books of Moses from which we read at least four times a week. But Jews are not primarily "people of the Torah." Our religious lives feel very little like the religious lives of the main characters of the Torah. We do not sacrifice animals, nor does the concept of ritual purity and impurity play a large role in our lives. Our financial lives, our inheritance laws, our penal systems, operate in ways very different from those prescribed by the Torah. Rather Jews are people of the Oral Torah, the non-written book that was not written down until a much later period. But when was the Oral Torah given? Are we celebrating it also on Shavuot?

We read in rabbinic literature that two "Torot" were given to Israel. The earliest such example is a tannaitic midrash on Bamidbar, "These are the statutes, and the judgments and the instructions (Torot)": "The statutes"—these are the midrashoth, "the judgments," these are the laws; "the Torah"—this teaches that two Torah were given to Israel, one in writing and one by mouth." According to this ideology, the Oral Torah was already given to Moses on Sinai and it is as old, as Divine and as authoritative as the Written Torah. As such, Shavuot should be the day on which we celebrate the Oral Torah as well.

But anyone who studies rabbinic literature, immediately senses that this statement does not accord well with the nature of rabbinic literature. One reads the Mishnah and the Talmud gets the sense that while sometimes rabbis are transmitting received traditions, much of the time they are arguing based on their own logic. The Oral Law, despite the ideological statements made occasionally by rabbis, does not seem to go back to Sinai. Rather, the Oral Law is the living, breathing, changing, amorphous relationship between Jews, their received texts, their intellect, their traditions, and ultimately, their perception of Divinity. Every single day the Oral Law is adapted to the conditions in which Jews find themselves (a process we have witnessed acutely over the last few months). It is the open-ended tradition which we build every time we study Talmud, every time we adapt the Talmud's rules to our changing lives. It is also uniquely Jewish, sharing its DNA, if you will, with the body of Jews that have lived over the past three thousand years, changing with them as they have moved all around the globe and adapted their ways to the ways of those living around them. The Written Torah was given in the desert so that it would be available to the whole world, Jew and non-Jew alike. The Oral Torah was developed, as its name indicates, in the mouths of Jews and as such, it is the beating heart of the Jewish people.

Shavuot is Mother's Day—the one day we celebrate the giving of the Torah on Sinai. It is the day we single out to appreciate this gift. But just as we honor our parents every day, we celebrate the Oral Torah every day, every time we study its words, pray or observe

one of the mitzvot. It is a gift inspired by the Written Torah but a gift the Jewish people, and especially its leaders and teachers have been giving itself for as long as we have been around.

D'var Haftarah: The Angel's Legs and Prayer by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein  
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ir6lkszBzkl4CwjczcPjyq3EykvYnxAOaQKlCysg-yU/edit>

Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot serves as one of the fundamental metaphors of the Jewish mystical tradition. In this vision, Ezekiel sees four heavenly creatures whose form was, at once, human together with other characteristics which are bound to strike the reader as bizarre. Ezekiel describes their manner of standing this way: "the legs of each were [fused into] a single rigid leg (regel yisharah)". (verse 1:7)

Rashi gives two interpretations of what this might have looked like. In the first, he describes the legs of the creature as "directed one toward the other". Rabbi Joseph Kara (12th century France), interpreted this to mean that the feet of these creatures faced in all directions so that like their faces, their feet also faced in all directions. According to Rashi's second interpretation "regel yisharah", literally "straight leggedness" means that these divine creatures "did not have joints in their knees and were therefore incapable of sitting or lying down."

The Talmud (Berachot 10b) contends with an ancillary question. How many legs did each of these creatures have? Did they have one leg or two legs? On this question there is no clear answer but the following passage allows us to infer an answer: "And Rabbi Yose the son of Rabbi Hanina said in the name of Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov: 'One who prays [the Amidah] should align his legs [emulating the posture of the divine creatures], as it is written: 'and their legs were a straight leg.'" Rashi, in his commentary to this Talmudic passage, interprets this to mean that when a person recites the Amidah, their legs should appear as if they are "one leg." R. Jacob ben Asher, (14th century) explains that one should position one foot alongside the other foot while praying. (Tur Orach Hayim 95) This physical posture causes us to emulate the angels when we pray, offering us the opportunity to allow our prayers to soar heavenward. The Hafetz Hayim, Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen, explained it this way: "since we are speaking with God, it is necessary for a person to remove all bodily thoughts from one's heart and to try as best one can to be like an angel." (Mishnah Berurah Orach Hayim 95:1) Ezekiel's prophecy then becomes not only a model for the mystical tradition but also a model for our every day communion with God.

### Mass Revelation at Sinai

An Argument for the truth of Judaism by Rabbi Lawrence Hajoiff

[https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mass-revelation-at-sinai/?](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mass-revelation-at-sinai/?utm_source=mjl_maropost&utm_campaign=MJL&utm_medium=email&mpweb=1161-19762-45437)

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Ask most Jews—layperson and scholar alike—what happened on Mount Sinai, and the response is usually something to the effect of "Moses was given the Ten Commandments."

## Heston as Moses

I have often wondered whether this mistake comes from Cecil B. DeMille's epic movie *The Ten Commandments*. If you remember, Charlton Heston, with brown robe and staff in hand, makes his way up the mountain and reappears, not too long after, with that "spiritual glow" only old Charlton could have after having a conversation with the Supreme Creator of the Universe.

The Torah's version however is distinctly different. In a number of places, the Torah mentions that it wasn't only Moses who heard God speak. The entire Jewish people—man, woman, and child—experienced a direct communication from God at Mount Sinai. "Moses called all of Israel and said to them: 'Hear, O Israel, the decrees and the ordinances that I speak in your ears today—learn them, and be careful to perform them. The Lord your God sealed a covenant with us at Horev [Mount Sinai]. Not with our forefathers did God seal this covenant, but with us—we who are here, all of us alive today. Face to face did God speak with you on the mountain from amid the fire.' (Deuteronomy 5:1-4)"

The question you may be asking yourself is: What's the difference? So what if only Moses heard God speak at Sinai, or whether it was three million men, women, and children?

The issue has relevance for two areas:

- 1) Believability
- 2) Responsibility

## The Power of Mass Revelation

Let's begin with believability. No other religion sect or cult, from the beginning of time until the present day, has even made the claim that the Torah makes: that more than one person heard God give them their divine mission here on earth.

Whether it be Guru Nanak (Sikhism), Siddhartha Gautama (Buddhism), Mohammad (Islam), Joseph Smith (The Mormons) they all "heard" God tell them that they were the "chosen" to deliver God's message when they were alone. They then spent the rest of their lives convincing others that God had actually spoken the true gospel to them.

Judaism has never taken such a claim seriously.

If I told you right now that last night God spoke to me, and anointed me as His chosen prophet here on earth, and abiding by my word would give you access to the world to come, would you believe me? You may think not, but if you look at the birth of every religion, people have accepted such claims of authenticity.

But not Judaism. Our claim does not come from one man, or fifty men, or even a thousand. It comes from an entire nation hearing God speaking to them, and that same God appointing Moses as their prophet and giving them the Torah en masse.

Let me give you another analogy.

Imagine for a moment that you read in the paper this morning that a tradition has been passed down claiming that one hundred years ago, in San Francisco, gold trees covered the landscape for one day, and this incredible phenomenon was witnessed by three million people. Would you believe it? I would assume not. Why? Because even though you were not alive then, if such a wondrous event were to have occurred, you and everybody else would have heard about it.

How could such an event have occurred without anybody ever having mentioned it? If I told you that the story is false, and only one person, my Aunt Sheila, saw a single gold tree appear in her back yard, could you ever deny it? Who knows? There were no witnesses.

### **The Jewish Claim**

We the Jewish people make such a claim: Millions heard God speak. How could such a claim ever be accepted if it did not occur? At what point in history could any person ever come forward and say, “Hey, Jews your ancestors heard God speak!”

Our national response would have been: “I think we would have heard about it had it really occurred.”

This is true whether it happened a hundred, five hundred, or three thousand years ago. The claim is too strong—which may explain why no other religion has ever even attempted to make such a claim of the truth.

If you’re suspicious of this argument, and feel as though such a claim could be made by any person in history at any time, you’re not alone. The Torah itself is worried about charlatans coming along and making false claims about having spoken to God.

“Ask now regarding the early days that preceded you, from the day that God created man on earth, and from one end of the heaven to the other end of the heaven: Has there ever been anything like this great thing, or has anything like it ever been heard? Have a people ever heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire as you have heard, and survived? Or has any god ever miraculously come to take for himself a nation from amidst a nation, with challenges, with signs, with wonders, with war, with a strong hand, and with greatly awesome deeds, such as Hashem your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is God!

There is none other beside Him (Deuteronomy 4:32-35).”

What’s incredible about these words is that God is saying: “If you ever find anybody who makes such a claim that they also heard God speak to them, then our claim is obsolete.” Let’s say for a moment that the Torah is just a cute collection of stories written down by humans, with one of those stories being that this book is written by God. Who in their right mind would ever be foolish enough to add that if this claim is made again, the original claim is obsolete? If the human authors fooled so many people, what makes them think that in a few years somebody else wouldn’t come along and do the same, thereby making their original claim worthless?

### **Revelation Implies Responsibility**

Now we have another issue to negotiate: responsibility. If the Torah has no divine imprint, then I, as a Jew, have no metaphysical responsibility to perform its laws. Why should I? If the Torah, however, was given by God to the Jewish people, then I as a Jew am responsible to uphold its laws and precepts as I am best able. If God gave it to us, it must be true.

Interestingly, for thousands of years it was accepted in every biblical religion and culture that God, indeed, gave the Torah to the Jewish people. It is only in the last several hundred years that people began claiming that the Torah was really written by humans. For many Jews, this has directly impacted the sense of what responsibility to God’s commandments means and entails, and unfortunately, for these

Jews, mitzvah observance has taken on much less significance because the commandments are not seen as deriving from a God-given Torah.

What Did Ezekiel See- Shavuot Special Issue  
Edited by Salvador Litvak, the Accidental Talmudist

<https://www.accidentaltalmudist.org/table-for-five/2020/05/27/what-did-ezekiel-see-shavuot-special-issue/>

*Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was in the midst of the community of exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened, and I saw visions of God.*

–Shavuot Haftarah, Ezekiel 1:1

Rabbi Pinchas Winston, Thirtysix.org

It is called the “Ma’aseh Merkavah” in Hebrew, the “Act of the Chariot.” But what is it, divine plans for the ultimate ride? It is the basis of the most esoteric knowledge: Kabbalah, the mystical teachings of Torah. But why do we read this particular and somewhat confusing Haftarah on Shavuot?

True, the giving of the Torah was the most esoteric moment in human history.

Nevertheless, why focus on something so “heavenly” when the point of Shavuot is that Moses brought the Torah down to Earth?

There are several answers, but one of them is exactly this. Moses did bring the Torah down from Heaven for man to live by on Earth, but lest we forget just how mystical Torah is, we read something very Kabbalistic after the Torah reading on this day to remind us. It is supposed to make us recall that, as understandable as Torah may seem to us, we merely scratch the surface of its heavenly wisdom.

We have to keep in mind that Torah knowledge has four levels: Simple, Hints, Exegetical, and Kabbalah. In Hebrew they are Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod, and when the first letters of each Hebrew word are combined, they spell the word “Pardes,” or “Orchard.” But not just any orchard. An intellectual one, the ultimate one. If the word “Paradise” sounds a lot like the word “Pardes,” it’s because the latter was the former, back in the Garden of Eden. The Torah, therefore, is meant to be our path back “home.”

Miriam Yerushalmi, CEO of SANE, author of Reaching New Heights

Tradition has it that on the night of Shavuot—the holiday of the giving of the Torah—the heavens open up, and if we see them split, our prayers will be granted. Ezekiel saw this and shared his vision with us, in a book so esoteric that it is beyond the average person’s understanding. Yet, it was from his abstruse prophecy that the haftarah on Shavuot was taken. Why these particular verses on this particular day?

At the Giving of Torah, the world was silent, and there was no echo. The Lubavitcher Rebbe teaches a deep message from this. An echo is created when vibrations of a sound wave hit an obstacle and bounce back in the original direction.

We may perform good deeds and kindnesses, yet they don’t seem to “echo”—we don’t see the results of our efforts. The lesson of the missing echo at Mt. Sinai was a personal message from Hashem: Don’t give up! Hashem’s voice did not bounce back, but it did

not disappear: it permeated the entire world. So too our voice or our effort, may not bounce back at us, but it has not disappeared. It is impacting the world. The power of our giving or loving or doing the right thing is absorbed into reality and is affecting the world. We may not be able to comprehend all that we have accomplished, but Hashem does. When Moshiach comes—or on Shavuot—we too may be privileged to share those visions of G-d.

[Rabbi Cheryl Peretz, Associate Dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, AJU](#)

When the Jews were exiled to Babylonia, Ezekiel, a priest in the Temple prior to its destruction, was amongst them. In his wandering, Ezekiel sees a vision of God in remarkable splendor that consecrates his role as a prophet in Israel. In that moment standing by the river, Ezekiel experiences God's presence and understands his mission as God's messenger in the world. He describes in specific detail an encounter that gets so complicated with each layer that the Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1) later cautions against any singular person trying to understand its meaning on his or her own. What is clear, however, is that his description includes images reminiscent of the Tabernacle from the time before the giving of the Torah, a time when each person could see God's presence. Prophecy and revelation are connected and Ezekiel's complex story is intertwined with Shavuot via an important message highlighted in Midrash. The Midrashic work, Tanhuma, teaches that Ezekiel's vision is not unique. He is not the first to experience God's chariot, for 22,000 chariots descended with God on Mount Sinai. Ezekiel's vision is an individual expression of an ancient pattern of prophecy and revelation that is not limited to select Jews in earlier time periods.

Every Jew had and has the potential to see God, to experience God's revelation, to experience God's greatness. That means you and me! Every moment, every experience is a personal invitation to a vision of God. Will we accept the invitation?

[Heftsibah Cohen-Montagu, Arevot Women's Beit Midrash of the Sephardic Educational Center](#)

The Midrash tells that when the heavens opened up for Ezekiel, he saw the visions of God not when he looked up to heaven but when he looked down into the water of the river Chebar. Imagine that moment: in order for the heavenly vision to be reflected, the water of the river must have been clear and still. The prophet's experience in that instant was characterized by vision, clarity, and stillness.

The people of Israel at Mt. Sinai had a totally different experience: a confusing and powerful attack on their senses by fire, smoke, mist, thunder and lightning. But the outstanding element in that experience was the voice: "you heard the voice of words, but you saw no form: only a voice" (Deuteronomy 4:12). The experience was so powerful that the people of Israel saw the voice: their sense of sound and their sense of sight coalesced and the awe of the moment blocked their capability for direct contact, so that they requested Moses to stand between them and God.

The Torah reading and Haftarah for Shavuot present two contrasting experiences of meeting with the Divine: the voice heard by all the nation together at Mt. Sinai and the visions of God revealed to an individual prophet. Each of these two revelations still poses

its challenge today: to fulfill God's word through our actions in the world, and through reflection on symbols and images to deepen our conception of the Divinity which we can never fully perceive.

### Rabbi Scott N. Bolton, Congregation Or Zarua

Ezekiel went back to the same spot on the Canal year after year, since year one of the exile. It was the first year, the fourth month, on the fifth day after the Jews were forcibly settled by the river that it happened. Jeremiah's poetry still gave them hope at that point: "Save me God, and I will be saved. Heal me God and I will be healed."

Some continued to chant Psalms of King David. But Ezekiel was tormented since witnessing what he did. Always the same image returned – the child was standing beside the river washing something – was it a dirty pot or some toy? Children played in Babylonia like they did in Israel. Ezekiel's eyesight was not excellent, but he could make out the soldiers descending. Wiping water away from his eyes, he pushed closer. The current fought him back. Half of his bronze skin glazed from the sun was visible above the water; the river covered his nakedness. And God did not protect the Jewish babe and neither could he. New pharaohs arose that day, again. They drowned him with six hands.

"Did your God turn their hearts to stone?!"

Ezekiel raged at Heaven. "And in the 30th year of his exile, the fourth month and the fifth day..." (Ezekiel 1:1) at that same spot on the river, he received a vision. And God sought to remove his guilt and iniquity but moreover to strengthen and inspire him with fantastic fires beyond those Moses saw at the bush, in a different wilderness.

### Yahrtzeits

Gail Yazersky remembers her father Martin Yazersky on Sunday May 31<sup>st</sup> (Sivan 8).  
Lisa Small remembers her mother Ruby Small (Rivkah Bat Eta Esther) on Sunday May 31<sup>st</sup> (Sivan 8).

Mel Zwillenberg remembers Susan's father Gerald Altman (Yosef Shmuel) on Monday June 1<sup>st</sup> (Sivan 9).