

Receiving Torah on Shavuot—What and How

Rabbi Lauren Tuchman

Introduction:

Shavuot is the second of the three major pilgrimage festivals. Originally a harvest festival, it was the time when our ancestors would *aliyah l'regel*—literally “go up on foot”—to make an offering of their first fruits in the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Temple’s destruction, when bringing first fruits was no longer possible, rabbinic Judaism was compelled to transform Shavuot into *z'man matan Torateinu*—the time of the giving of our Torah.

Shavuot became the endpoint to our annual spiritual journey – beginning with Pesach, through the seven weeks counting the *omer*, and concluding with the collective experience of revelation at Mt. Sinai – paralleling the physical journey our ancestors took from *Mitzrayim* to Sinai. Just as they received revelation, we too receive Torah every year.

Our ancestors proclaimed as the mountain shook, “We will do and we will understand,” entering into a *brit* that bound all of us to living out Torah in the most humane and ethical way possible. In the aftermath of the founding of Medinat Yisrael in 1948, these questions took upon new-found urgency and depth. Who received Torah? Who is Torah for? And what does it mean to do and then to hear/understand?

As you learn the next few sources, think about how these ideas apply to the Jewish people classically and contemporarily. How do we continue to live out and honor our *brit* in an ever-changing geopolitical reality?

Source 1: Shmot/Exodus 19:1-9

בחדש השלישי לצאת בני־ישראל מארץ מצרים ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני:

ויסעו מרפידים ויבאו מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן־שם ישראל נגד ההר:

ומשה עלה אל־האלהים ויקרא אליו יהוה מן־ההר לאמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל:

אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על־כנפי נשרים ואבא אתכם אלי:

ועתה אם־שמוע תשמעו בקולי ושמרתם את־בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל־העמים כי־לי כל־הארץ:

ואתם תהיו־לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל־בני ישראל:

ויבא משה ויקרא לזקני העם וישם לפניהם את כל־הדברים האלה אשר צוהו יהוה:

ויענו כל־העם יחדו ויאמרו כל אשר־דבר יהוה נעשה וישב משה את־דברי העם אל־יהוה:

ויאמר יהוה אל־משה הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך וגם־בך יאמינו לעולם ויגד משה את־דברי העם אל־יהוה:

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, and Moses went up to God. יהוה called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a dominion of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall

speak to the children of Israel.” Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that יהוה had commanded him. All those assembled answered as one, saying, “All that יהוה has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the people’s words to יהוה, And יהוה said to Moses, “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear/understand when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.” Then Moses reported the people’s words to יהוה,

Questions for discussion on Source 1:

1. G-d tells the people that if they keep the brit, they will be a treasured possession. What does this mean to you? How do you relate to the classic idea of Covenant in today’s world?
2. What does it mean to be given this path of Torah as a treasure? What in Torah learning is particularly valuable to you and the Jewish people today?
3. At the same time, G-d says the whole earth is Mine. How do we square these complementary and often conflicting ideas—universalism vs. particularism? Can you be a Jewish universalist without identifying as part of the particular tribe of Israel?

Source 2: Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3:1

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יי, חֲנָם נִמְכַּרְתֶּם וְגו' (ישעיה נב, ג). לְמַעַן הִקִּים אוֹתָךְ וְגו', שֶׁלֹּא אַחֲזַר בְּדַבָּר שֶׁנִּשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבוֹתֵיכֶם. וְלֹא אֶתְכֶם לְבַדְכֶם, אֲלֵא אֶף הַדּוֹרוֹת הָעַתִּידִין לְבֹא, הֵיוּ שָׁם בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה. אָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בֶּר נַחֲמָנִי, לְמַה כְּתִיב: כִּי אֵת אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁנוּ פֹה וְגו' וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנוּ פֹה. לְפִי שֶׁהַנְּשָׁמוֹת הֵיוּ שָׁם וְעַדִּין גּוֹף לֹא נִבְרָא, לְכַךְ לֹא כְּתִיב בְּהֵן עֲמִידָה.

For thus says the Lord, ‘You were sold for free, [and you shall be redeemed for no money].’ (Deut. 29:12:) “In order to establish you today as God’s people...,” so that I would not go back on the word that I swore to your ancestors. Deut. 29:13), “And not only with you [have I made this covenant and this oath].” But rather the generations that have yet to come were also there at that time, as stated (in vs. 14), “But with those who are [standing (*md*)] here with us [today... and with those who are not here with us today].” R. Abahu said in the name of R. Samuel bar Nahmani, “Why does it say, ‘those who are [standing (*md*)] here [...]; and those who are not here’ (without using the word, standing)? Because all the souls were there, [even] when [their] bodies had still not been created. It is for that reason [their] existence (literally, standing, rt.: *md*) is not stated here.

Questions for discussion on Source 2:

Midrash Tanchuma, a famed collection of rabbinic *midrashim* introduces us to the oft-repeated idea that all of us across time and space were present at Sinai, that the brit made with our ancestors wasn’t for them alone but extends across all generations that ever were and ever will be.

1. How do you relate to this idea as part of the Jewish people and do you believe that it is incumbent upon Jews to support the State of Israel? If so, how so?
2. Does this idea resonate to you and the Jews you know (e.g. parents, siblings, children, grandchildren, friends) and if not, why not?
3. How might an expanded understanding of *brit* help us formulate our own responsibilities vis-à-vis the Torah that we teach and live out, not only as it impacts Jews but crucially, as it impacts others?
4. How can we expand the understanding to include what the State of Israel is meant to be to world Jewry given the values written in its Declaration of Independence and what is happening today in the Israeli government?

Source 3: Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah 13:16

מִזְרֶק אֶחָד קָסֶף (במדבר ז, יט), קָנְגַד הַתּוֹרָה הַמְשׁוּלָה בַּיַּיִן, שְׁנַאֲמַר (משלי ט, ה): וּשְׁתוּ בַּיַּיִן מִסִּכְתִּי. וּלְפִי שְׁדֵרְךָ הַיַּיִן לַשְּׂתוּת בְּמִזְרֶק, כָּמָה דְּתִימָא (עמוס ו, ו): הַשְּׂתִים בְּמִזְרְקֵי יַיִן, לְכָר הִבִּיא מִזְרֶק, (במדבר ז, יט): שְׁבַעִים שֶׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ, לָמָּה, קָשִׁם שְׁיִין חֲשָׁבוּנוּ שְׁבַעִים, כִּי יֵשׁ שְׁבַעִים פָּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה

"One silver basin" was brought as a symbol of the Torah which has been likened to wine, as it says: "And drink of the wine which I have mingled." (Mishlei 9:5) Now because it is customary to drink wine in a basin, you may gather from the text, "that drink wine in bowls" (Amos 6:6) -- he on that account, brought a basin. "Of seventy shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary" (Numbers 7:13). Why? As the numerical value of *yayin* (wine) is seventy, so there are seventy modes of expounding the Torah.

Questions for discussion on Source 3:

1. What does 70 faces mean here and why is this source likening Torah to wine?
2. What application can we make to the people of Israel and the demography of the Jewish state?
3. If the Torah has 70 faces, which "faces" or "voices" are missing and need to be heard to be able to reveal Torah in its fullest?
4. How does this concept apply to the State of Israel today and to the nature of the American Jewish community?

Source 4: We All Stood Together by Merle Feld

(This poem can be found on Ritualwell.org).

for Rachel Adler

My brother and I were at Sinai
He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down

And then
As time passes
The particulars

The hard data
The who what when where why
Slip away from me
And all I'm left with is
The feeling

But feelings are just sounds
The vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard
After all he's got a record of it
Consonant after consonant after consonant

If we remembered it together
We could recreate holy time
Sparks flying

Closing food for thought on Source 4:

In her powerful poem, Jewish feminist, spiritual thinker, and writer Merle Feld notes that Torah is incomplete. Women's voices are absent and even more, women's experiences are erased. The work is never complete to ensure all experiences and voices are acknowledged. May this poem be a call to all of us to continue the work of claiming and reclaiming our place in Torah as we live a *Torat emet* and a *Torat chesed*—a life-giving Torah, a Torah of kindness and truth. And, may the insights of this poem be applied to the real State of Israel as we ask, who is missing there from governance and who needs to be at the table but is not in the Knesset?