



Shavuot (eve May 30-June 1)

Lesson 7, Series 2

Interestingly, the Torah does not explicitly describe Shavuot as the day of the “Giving of the Torah” only as the completion of the seven weeks of the “Omer count”. **What is so significant about the completion of the seven weeks of the Omer and how does it relate to Matan Torah, Giving of the Torah?**

Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed: Shavuot is the time of the Giving of the Torah. In order to arrive to this day, we count the days from the previous Passover festival, like someone who is waiting for a loved one to arrive and counts the days by the hours. This is the reason for counting the Omer from the day that we left Egypt until the day of the Giving of the Torah, as this was the ultimate purpose of leaving Egypt: **“And I will bring them to Me”** (Exodus 19:4).

Yet even more than a countdown, the days of the Omer are a count-up, as they are relegated to days of introspection and self-refinement in preparation for the momentous occasion of Matan Torah. In fact, the Omer was a barley sacrifice in the Temple. Barley represents our animal soul as barley is animal feed. The way we count the Omer is by following a methodical, 49-step process of self-refinement within the human soul (sefirot) and human experience, working on a specific character trait and sub-trait of that week, i.e. restraint in loving kindness, harmony in loving kindness, etc. We do so through the count of $7 \times 7 = 49$ days until we arrive at the 50th which is Shavuot. It is then that we receive the gift of true freedom -- the ability to transcend our human limitations and touch the divine.

Shavuot, Giving of the Torah, is the marriage between G-d and the Jewish people with the Torah as the Ketubah-marriage contract. We are meant to deepen our marriage with G-d each year as we receive the Torah anew and “renew our vows”. The Torah is called “Torat Chayim”, Torah of life, because our relationship with G-d and Torah is infinite and forever, and continuously alive, growing, and deepening. The **Ten Commandments** are a focal point of the Giving of the Torah, the core essence of Torah. They are therefore the Torah reading on Shavuot. Unlike constitutions which generally outline a set of *Rights*, the Torah outlines a set of *Commandments*-our obligations and responsibilities-to G-d and to our fellow human beings.

Surely a relationship wherein each person is concerned about the other’s needs is going to be more harmonious than one in which each is concerned about what they are entitled to “get” out of the relationship. Of course, many of the obligations in Torah imply rights. For example, your obligation to not steal implies another’s right to his/her property. Your obligation to not kill implies another’s right to life. Torah could have simply told us that we have a right to our property and our life, but instead commands us to respect the property of others and not steal or murder. Generally speaking, we equate *obligations* with a sense of giving and contributing. *Rights*, on the other hand, are associated with taking and entitlement. The Torah wants us to view ourselves as givers rather than takers. G-d wants us to think in terms of what we owe rather than what is owed us; this is a path to a much more harmonious relationship.

Our point is, not to say that we should not be aware of our rights in society. A child brought up sensitive only to what he/she owes and unaware of his/her rights in the world around him/her, will no doubt be taken advantage of by others.

Nevertheless, the primary way we should think and behave, our “default mode” is in terms of our responsibility-what we give, not what we take. At the same time we must not become totally submissive, like a doormat for others to walk all over; we must be tough-skinned and shrewd enough to understand and deal with those who do not think or operate this way. **Indeed much of life is about striking the right balance between the two modes.** So, the count-up of the Omer days is a time of preparation and becoming worthy of marriage and the process of becoming a people, truly committed to Torah.

In summation we present the following directive:

The Lubavitcher Rebbe: “The Alte Rebbe’s Chassidim were always keeping count.” My father took a great liking to the saying, and he commented: “That idea characterizes man/woman’s avodah. The hours must be ‘counted hours’, then the days will be ‘counted days’. When a day passes one should know what he/she has accomplished and what remains yet to be done. In general, one should always see to it that tomorrow should be much better than today.”

Rabbi Israell Baal Shem Tov: No day should be left without a mitzvah, whether it be a minor mitzvah or a major one. This is of great importance; for then one will always know that he/she achieved something that day; that he/she created one angel, and that one angel is now interceding on his/her behalf.

STORY : Once, as a very young child, the Lubavitcher Rebbe took part in a game with his classmates. They took turns climbing a tree, having a competition to see who could climb highest. One by one, they clambered up the trunk and pulled themselves from branch to branch. One by one, they eventually fell, unable to reach the top and claim victory. When the Rebbe’s turn came, he climbed higher and higher, until he reached the uppermost point.

His mother, who was observing from the window, ordered him to come down from his dangerous perch. When the game was over and the children returned home, she asked him: How did you manage to climb so high, outdoing all the others?

The Rebbe answered: The other children would climb up the branches, and would look down to see their progress. Realizing how far off the ground they were, and they would get scared and fall. When I climbed, I looked only up, to the highest branch, to see how far I had still to go. That’s why I didn’t fall.

A Lesson in a Box is culled from Torah Studies and Rosh Chodesh Society classes taught throughout the year at Aleph Learning Institute.

Dear Friend:

It is a Jewish custom to eat a dairy meal on the holiday of Shavuot. The Kaballah teaches that all physical substances represent spiritual forms of energy. In Jewish mysticism, dairy products are associated with the attribute of chesed or love, consequently (Shelah Hakadosh) milk is from the side of chesed. In contrast, meat products reflect the attribute of gevurah, or strength. In addition to color and liquid quality, milk, the food which a mother nurtures her infant, signifies the mother’s opportunity to ingrain within her child’s tender consciousness the truth about sharing: The more you give, the more you receive. The more love you give, the more love you have. The more kindness you bestow, the more you have. Again, a balance of loving kindness and discipline is essential but it should be mostly chesed, “the right hand that brings near” should come before “the left hand that pushes away.”

We have enclosed a few dairy treats for your enjoyment of “Torah & Tea in a Box”. We welcome your support of Aleph to strengthen and enhance our Baltimore Jewish community through Jewish Education. *Blessings to one and all to receive the Torah BSIMCHA UBPNIMIYUS, with Joy and Internalization,*

Sincerely,



Rochel Kaplan