



Week 6: An Internal Revelation **Sarah Kaufman, Class of 2025**

I never pulled an all-nighter in college. No assignment ever felt urgent enough to sacrifice sleep. Instead, it was Judaism and a return to traditional observance that first drew me to such irresponsible behavior. It was Shavuot in Jerusalem, and I wanted to learn Torah.

Shavuot commemorates *matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah. *B'nei Yisrael* prepared for three days to receive the Torah, but according to the midrash in [Shir Hashirim Rabbah](#), *B'nei Yisrael* overslept the morning that the actual revelation occurred. So, the custom developed to stay up all night, demonstrating our eagerness to re-accept the Torah and also to rectify our ancestors' mistake.

Moreover, Shavuot is a time to show our love of and commitment to Torah. There's a tradition to learn Pirkei Avot in the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, so we can better ourselves and be worthy of *matan Torah*. The advice we learn in Pirkei Avot ranges from how to conduct interpersonal relationships to the importance of God and Torah. Sometimes, however, these ethical aphorisms come in the form of criticism. We read one such critique in the [final chapter of Pirkei Avot](#), traditionally studied in the final days before Shavuot:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: every day a *bat kol* (heavenly voice) goes forth from Mount Horev [another name for Mount Sinai] and makes proclamation and says: "Woe unto humanity for their contempt towards the Torah," for whoever does not occupy himself with the study of Torah is called rebuked.

Among so many statements about the importance and beauty of the Torah, this *mishnah* chastises us for not learning sufficiently. A voice from heaven calls out to us from Sinai telling us to give proper *kavod*, respect, to Torah. Perhaps staying up all night to learn on Shavuot is a response to this critique. We can feel better about ourselves because yes, maybe we've neglected the Torah up to

this moment, but as we grow closer to *matan Torah*, we're about to show God how dedicated we are to it.

But what about the rest of the year? Our *mishnah* isn't about Shavuot. The *bat kol* cries out to us all the time, every day of the year. Why don't we hear it? Perhaps we're too busy with our daily routines, or the noise of modern life drowns out the call. Maybe we think ourselves too sophisticated to recognize the voice. And even if we did hear it, we can't pull all-nighters every night to prove our love of Torah. So, then, how do we respond to this *bat kol* in a more sustainable way?

Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, a leading student of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter of the *mussar* movement, sees the *bat kol* as a metaphor, though we can still attune ourselves to respond properly to it:

It's not that a *bat kol* goes out from Mount Horev, rather in the heart of every Jew a *bat kol* goes out... This is as written "I am asleep but my heart is awake" (Shir Hashirim 5:2), from the depths of the heart roars out, like the roaring of the sea, for the truth. But because "I am asleep," a man does not hear the awakening of the heart... Therefore, when a man wakes up a bit from his slumber, he will hear the *bat kol* of his heart... to believe in God and strengthen in His religion and call out to him" (Chokhma u'Mussar 2:197).

The Chokhma u'Mussar sees the *mishnah's bat kol* as internal. It cries out to us, reminding us to serve God, but too often we are asleep and don't hear it. When we force ourselves to stay awake, he writes, we can hear the *bat kol* inside us. We don't need to stay up all night—instead, we need an internal awakening to attune us to hearing.

What does it mean to think about the mandate to learn Torah as coming from inside of us? Revelation at Sinai was awesome and terrifying for *B'nei Yisrael*. Our ancestors were too overwhelmed by the sights and sounds to properly understand God. We read in Shemot that *B'nei Yisrael ro'im et hakolot*, saw the sounds, at Mount Sinai ([Shemot 20:15](#)). The experience was too intense, and so they begged Moshe to serve as their intermediary. They couldn't understand God's message with all the noise and commotion around them.

In the *mishnah* from Pirkei Avot, there is no loud noise or commotion. It's a lone *bat kol* that comes calling to us. Unlike *B'nei Yisrael* at Har Sinai, we won't be overwhelmed by sights and sounds. The only noise that stops us from hearing the voice of the *bat kol* is from inside of us.

Therefore, we see that we have to make a differentiation between our Torah learning on Shavuot and our learning every other day of the year. When we stay up late on Shavuot, it's out of anticipation and excitement for receiving the Torah. [Ibn Ezra comments:](#)

AND BE READY. Its meaning might be that no person among them should sleep during the night, after the manner of the High Priest on Yom Kippur, as Israel would hear God's voice in the morning.

We stay up late because we're like the High Priest, staying up all night in anticipation of hearing God's voice in the morning. It's a special circumstance, and we don't want to repeat our ancestors' mistake of oversleeping. But the rest of the year, as the Chokhma u'Mussar explains, we must awaken internally and attune ourselves to the *bat kol* inside of us, calling out to draw us closer to the Torah, no matter the hour.

Even if we don't make it to the 5 am Shavuot minyan this year because we just couldn't stay awake any longer, we need not despair. Receiving the Torah is not about how late we stay up one night a year. Instead, our goal should be to listen to our internal *bat kol* and heed the reminder to receive Torah every day of the year.

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