

# Shavuot: The Renewal of Torah



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The Torah defines the holiday that we call Shavuot by focusing on the unique sacrifice that is brought on that day. After counting seven weeks from the barley sacrifice brought “on the day after the first day” of Pesach (*korban ha-omer*, Leviticus 23:15), we are commanded to bring a *מִנְחָה נְדִיבָה* (*minhah hadashah*, a new *minhah*) from the wheat harvest (Leviticus 23:17; Numbers 28:26). Despite the general prohibition of bringing leavened bread (*hametz*) onto the Altar (Exodus 23:18; Leviticus 2:11), this *minhah hadashah* consists of two loaves of leavened bread (Leviticus 23:17, תִּמְחֵץ תִּמְחֵץ תִּמְחֵץ).<sup>1</sup>

Why might the Torah refer to the special sacrifice of Shavuot as “new” (נְדִיבָה)? While this *korban* differs from others in some ways, I would like to focus on the connection between “newness” and Shavuot within the rabbinic worldview, which viewed this holiday as a celebration of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. How are we meant to combine the biblical imagery of the “new” *korban* with the idea of the revelation of Torah at Sinai?

At first glance, one might think that Shavuot is celebrating an ancient historical event that took place thousands of years ago. However, when we look at a particular set of rabbinic texts, we understand that the events of Sinai did not stop, and that ultimately we, as

rabbinic Jews, are striving to hear the voice of Sinai anew in our days.

The Talmud Yerushalmi, in Tractate Rosh HaShanah at the end of the fourth chapter, offers an astounding comparison between Rosh HaShanah and Shavuot.<sup>2</sup> First, we are told:

אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא מכיון שנכנסתם  
לדין לפני בראש השנה ויצאתם בשלום מעלה  
אני עליכם כאילו נבראתם בריה חדשה.

The Holy Blessed One said to them [the Jewish people]: since you entered before Me in judgment on Rosh HaShanah and came out in peace, I will treat you as though you have been created anew.

The power of repentance is that we are new people after undergoing the process with sincerity.<sup>3</sup> The Yerushalmi concludes:

אמר להן הקדוש ברוך הוא מכיון שקיבלתם  
עליכם עול תורה מעלה אני עליכם כאילו לא  
חטאתם מימיכם.

1 This essay is based on a *shiur* of Rav Moshe Shapira z”l that appeared in writing in *Afikei Mayyim* on Shavuot and the Omer, #26.

2 This idea is quoted in the *Da’at Zekeinim* of the *Ba’alei ha-Tosafot* on Numbers 28:30.

3 See Rosh HaShanah 16b and Rambam Hilkhos Teshuvah 2:4 for some ideas about how the process of *teshuvah* can change who you are as a person.

The Holy Blessed One said to them [the Jewish people]: since you accepted upon yourself the yoke of Torah, I will treat you as though you never sinned for your entire lives.

This passage presents us with two different ways to stand before God as complete beings (*bishleimut/ בשלמות*). On the Rosh HaShanah that takes place in Tishrei, our individual process of *teshuvah* (repentance) allows us to stand in judgment and receive forgiveness as though we were created again—בריה נבראתם בריה—חדשה. However, on the Rosh HaShanah that takes place in Sivan—the holiday that we call Shavuot—we attain what is perhaps an even higher level of forgiveness, and we are considered as through we have never sinned—כאילו לא חטאתם מימיתכם.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of standing before God as though we have never sinned may help us to understand the *mincha hadashah*. The korban itself is new and different from other sacrifices because it contains hametz. However, the deeper message of this *korban* is that it is meant to renew us. How does learning Torah serve as a tool of renewal?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot (6:2) describes a voice coming from Sinai every day seeking more people to learn Torah:

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי, בכל יום ויום בת קול  
יוצאת מהר חורב ומכרזת ואומרת, אוי להם  
לבריות מעלבונה של תורה.

R' Yehoshua b. Levi said, "Every day a *bat kol* (a prophetic voice) comes from the mountain of Horev (Sinai) and announces, saying, 'Woe to the creations for their contempt of the Torah.'"

Because the Torah appears to be left alone and no one seeks her, she calls out from Sinai and demands that we learn. It is her voice that we seek on Shavuot.

In a simple and profound comment at the beginning of chapter 19 of Exodus, Rashi articulates in just a few words the goal of revelation:

שִׁיחֵיו דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה חֲדָשִׁים עֲלֶיךָ כְּאִלּוּ הַיּוֹם  
נִתְּנָם

That matters of Torah should be new to you as though they were given today<sup>5</sup>

The implication of Rashi's comment, together with the Mishna from Pirkei Avot, is that we are meant to learn the Torah anew every year as though it were just now being given at Sinai. More directly, on Shavuot, we are not simply seeking to learn the Torah that was revealed 3,000 or 300 or thirty or three years ago. We are yearning to hear the reverberations of Sinai today—כְּאִלּוּ הַיּוֹם—נִתְּנָם!

Rav Moshe Shapira z"l, in his *Afikei Mayyim* on Shavuot (p. 217), says as follows:

כְּדָרְךָ שְׂבָאוֹ לְהָרַם סִינֵי בְּאוֹפֵן שֶׁל בְּהַתְּחָ  
דְּשׁוּת, כִּךְ לְדוֹרוֹת צְרִיכִים לְהִתְיַחֵס לְתוֹרָה  
בְּצוּרָה שֶׁל הַתְּחַדְּשׁוֹת וְ"כְּאִלּוּ הַיּוֹם נִתְּנָם"...

Just as they [the Jewish people] came to Mt. Sinai in a manner of renewal, so too for generations we must relate to the Torah in a way of renewal, "as though today it was given..."

Now that we can appreciate the unique service (*avodah*) of Shavuot as an attempt to renew the Torah for our generation, we are left with a difficult question: how does that happen? Allow me to offer three ways in which we make this practice real:

1. At some level, the cycle of Jewish life provides us with this opportunity in an organic, ongoing fashion. We come back to the same passages of the Torah annually and hear them with new ears, with the maturity of another year of life.
2. This year, many of us will be vaccinated, and find it safe enough to return to shul after a year away. We are being offered a new hope that we are coming to the end of this long year inside and at home. Hearing the Ten Commandments read in shul—or outside—will come with a different sweetness and newness this year.
3. There is something more that we must learn to do as a community. There are certain voices that have been excluded from halakhic discourse in particular, and Jewish communal leadership more broadly—from a contemporary Sinai. When we ensure that those voices are

4 See the opening Mishna of Rosh HaShanah that outlines the different Jewish years. In addition, note the Baraita in Megillah 31b that describes the reading of the curses before both the Rosh HaShanah of Tishrei and the Rosh HaShanah of Sivan. The Gemara there concludes: "אטו עצרת ראש השנה היא? אין עצרת נמי ראש השנה היא דתנן ובעצרת על פירות האילן."

5 See Tanhuma (Buber) Shemot 13 and Rashi on Deuteronomy 6:6 (Sifrei Devarim 33) & 26:16 (Tanhuma Ki Tavo 1). Berakhot 63b has a similar theme, but is commenting on Deuteronomy 27:9.

heard, the Torah is renewed for everyone.

We are blessed to live in a time when women's voices are being heard in ways that were not possible even just fifty years ago. Yeshivat Maharat is putting the voices of female rabbis front and center in Jewish life. Doing so is vitally important. But there is more work to be done, both with women, and with other groups whose voices have been silenced over the generations.

The prophetic voice of Sinai calls all Jews—black and white, gay and straight, young and old, men and women—and it is our job to demand that all Jewish voices are part of the ongoing renewal of the Torah.

The Jewish community, in all of its complexity, must learn to hear, listen to, learn from, and grow, even with those people who have been pushed away from the communal table. Only then we can truly stand before God on Shavuot as though none of us ever sinned.

May we all be blessed to continue to learn and love and teach Torah as though it were given today. ❁

