

Minhah Hadashah (מנחה חדשה): The Offering of Novelty



Rabbanit Leah Sarna

Rabbanit Leah Sarna (Maharat '18) is the Associate Director of Education and Director of High School Programs at Drisha Institute.

Nowhere in the Torah are we commanded to commemorate the anniversary of the giving of the Torah; the Torah doesn't know about a time called "The Day of the Giving of the Torah" (*Zeman Matan Torateinu*). Shavuot is scheduled fifty days after the waving of the omer on the second day of Pesach, and it is an agricultural holiday centered around the wheat harvest. Shavuot in the Torah is also referred to as the reaping holiday (יום הביכורים), and the day of first fruits (חג הקציר). We are commanded to celebrate by bringing two loaves of bread (שתי הלחם), as a sacrifice.

The complexities of calling Shavuot "The Day of the Giving of the Torah" are twofold:

First, Shavuot doesn't have a set calendar date. It comes fifty days after the second day of Pesach, but the intervening months, Nissan and Iyyar, could each be twenty-nine or thirty days, depending on the court's decisions and when the new moon was first witnessed. Rosh HaShanah 6b notes this:

תני רב שמעיה: עצרת פעמים ה' פעמים ו'
פעמים ז'

Rav Shamaya taught: Shavuot is sometimes on the fifth of the month, sometimes on the sixth of the month and sometimes on the seventh of the month [of Sivan].

Indeed, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet (שו"ת הריב"ש צו) wrote that Shavuot could not possibly have been *Zeman Matan Torateinu* until after the calendar was set:

אלא, שבזמן הזה, דידיעין בקביעא דירחא, ולעולם ניסן מלא ואייר חסר, כלים חמשים לעומר ביום ו' בסיון, שנתנה בו תורה לדעת רבנן...והרי זה מבואר, שלא היו מקפידין שיבא שבועות לזמן שנתנ' בו תור'.

But today in our times when the months are set and Nissan is always thirty days and Iyyar is always twenty-nine days, the fifty days of the Omer always conclude on the sixth of Sivan which is the day that the Torah was given according to the Rabbis...and therefore it is clear that in the past [before the calendar was set] they were not careful to ensure that Shavuot would fall on the day that the Torah was given.

The second calendrical problem is that the rabbis of the Talmud argue about the date of *Matan Torah*, as they do in Shabbat 86b:

תנו רבנן: בששי בחדש ניתנו עשרת הדברות לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. רבי יוסי אומר: בשבעה בו.

The Sages taught: on the sixth of the month the ten commandments were given to Israel. Rabbi Yossi says: on the seventh of the month.

This debate continues until 88a—over four sides of the page!—and ultimately the Talmud leaves it unresolved. Fascinatingly, there are halakhic ramifications of this debate to the laws of *niddah* (menstrual issues), and in that halakhic corpus we side with Rabbi Yossi to

say that the Torah was given on the seventh of Sivan. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner suggests that this lends extra weight to the second day of Yom Tov in the Diaspora, observed on the seventh of Sivan (מגן אברהם או"ח תצד):

קשה לי היאך אנו אומרים בשבועות יום מתן תורתנו הלא קי"ל כר"י דאמר בז' בסיון נתנה תורה? ...דבא לרמוז לנו י"ט שני של גליות

I find it difficult that we say that Shavuot is the day of our *Matan Torah*—for don't we side with Rabbi Yossi who says that the Torah was given on the seventh day of Sivan?... Possibly this comes to hint to us about the second day of Yom Tov practiced in the Diaspora.

Rabbi Gombiner's attempted meaning-making nonetheless, we still can say with confidence that this all could have been different. Shavuot would have been an agricultural holiday, a time to celebrate sustenance, wheat and bread, and then perhaps we would skip *tachanun* on all the possible days that *Matan Torah* could have fallen out.

Despite the calendrical complexities and possible alternatives, the rabbis concluded that *Zeman Matan Torateinu* deserved a real holiday. Once a year, the Jewish people need to experience the Torah as if it were given *today*. We have to feel a sense of novelty around the Torah.

The Torah commands us on Shavuot to bring a new grain offering. We read in the Haftarah from *Parashat Pinchas*:

וביום הביכורים, בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה לה'—בשבועותיכם: מקרא קודש יהיה לכם, כל מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו.

On the day of your first fruits, your Feast of Weeks, when you bring an offering of new grain to the Lord, you shall observe a sacred occasion.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, in his Torah commentary, the *Kli Yakar* (Leviticus 23:16), writes beautifully on this language of *minha hadashah*—the new grain offering:

סימן ליום מתן תורה כי התורה צריכה להיות חדשה אצל האדם בכל יום כאילו היום קיבלה מהר סיני. ומה שלא נזכר בתורה בפרוש כי יום זה מתן תורה...וטעם...הוא...שעל מתן תורה לא רצה ה' להגביל יום ידוע לפי שצריך האדם שיהיה דומה לו בכל יום ויום מכל ימות השנה כאילו באותו יום קיבלה מהר סיני.

This is a hint to *Matan Torah*, for the Torah needs to be novel to a person each day as if today he received the Torah from Mt. Sinai. And the Torah does not explicitly

mention this day as the day of the giving of the Torah because Hashem did not want to designate one day, for a person needs to feel each and every day of the year as if on that day he received the Torah from Sinai.

We think of the giving of the Torah as an ongoing process. When we recite the daily Torah blessings, we say ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה—"Blessed are you Hashem, Giver of the Torah." Hashem is the Giver of the Torah every day, and every day we are supposed to experience it as new.

What the *Kli Yakar* doesn't mention is that this is exceptionally hard. How many of us find new insights (*hiddushim*) in the Torah every single day? And yet the *Kli Yakar* knows how important the experience of novelty is in the study of Torah. He quotes a Midrash which commands:

שיהיו דברי תורה חדשים עליך ולא נדבר הישן שלבו של אדם קץ בו

That the words of Torah should be new upon you, and not like something old that the heart of man despises.

The Torah needs to feel new because humans by nature are drawn to novelty, and when things start to feel dated, we are drawn to the next new thing. And so we need to work to make the Torah feel new.

We make *hiddushim* in Torah not only for our own pleasure, or to satisfy our own nature. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin writes in *Nefesh HaChayyim* about the power of human novellae:

חידושין אמיתים דאורייתא המתחדשין ע"י האדם. אין ערוך לגודל נוראות נפלאות ענינם ופעולתם למעלה. שכל מלה ומלה פרטית המתחדשת מפי האדם. קב"ה נשיק לה ומעטר לה. ונבנה ממנה עולם חדש בפ"ע.

True *hiddushim* in Torah which are innovated by man, there is no value to the size of their wonder and their effects Above. For each and every word, which is innovated in the mouth of man, the Holy One kisses it and crowns it, and builds from it a new world of its own.

To Rav Chaim, it is not just that *hiddush* makes a difference to people, but it makes a difference to Hashem. Hashem kisses the novelty in the Torah.

While *hiddush* is important, it's not realistic to expect most of us to be able to find it every day. One day a year, on Shavuot, we bring a *minhah hadashah laShem*—an offering of the new to Hashem. We associate that day with the giving of the Torah, so that we have the opportunity, as we recollect and relive

the giving of the Torah, to experience *hiddush*. That opportunity comes with an obligation: we have to actively bring the *minhah hadashah*, the offering of novelty. We have to work for it.

The *minhah hadashah*—the new grain offering—presents a model for experiencing the Torah as novelty. Once a year, in Temple times, right after the new harvest, grain was not just regular grain. It was the fruit of labor, it was a miracle which we could not take for granted, because the rains had fallen in the right times, the soil had done its magic, and we had worked hard to make everything just right so that the grain would grow. And now it is new, fresh, and exciting. That new perspective on grain came with effort, and our experience of *hiddush* in Torah comes with effort as well. It comes with opening a book you have never previously opened. Going to a class on a subject you have never previously explored. A search for new angles and new perspectives, ones that excite and energize.

While Shavuot was not originally *Zeman Matan Torateinu*, the Day of the Giving of the Torah, its forced calendrical confluence today gives the holiday extra meaning. Through our effortful experience of the Torah's novelty we can connect to the novel grain offering, the *minhah hadashah*, of this biblical holiday. ❁

