

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

SHAVUOT

The Reality of Torah Beyond the Pragmatic

The Festival of Shavuot, shorn of any ritualistic symbols and particular observances, beckons us to come face-to-face with the reality of Torah and nothing else. We are therefore obliged to ask: What ought to be our relationship with Torah? Is it one of intellection and study, understanding her many complexities? Is it purely pragmatic, teaching us how to lead a sanctified life according to Gd's Will? Does her study purge us of our moral coarseness and purify our personalities? Can Torah be that sole path that enables us to apprehend the great mysteries of the cosmos and help us navigate through life's many challenges? Or perhaps, it is all of these, each in its own measure as it speaks to the individual Jew in his own unique capacity.

In whichever way we choose to incorporate the Torah into our everyday, we will only succeed if we can appreciate Torah as something more than an act of study - important and fundamental as that is. In an incredible oration, Rav Soloveitchik proposed the following understanding of the essence of our relationship with Torah.

When Yehoshua was poised to conquer the Land, HaShem assures him that he will succeed in vanquishing the inhabitants of Canaan. He then commands Yehoshua with these stern and uncompromising words: "The book of the Torah shall not depart from your mouth; rather you should contemplate it day and night - V'HAGITA BO YOMAM VALAILA - so that you will observe to do all that is written in it..." (Yehoshua 1:8) The question is clear. How was Yehoshua to wage war and defeat the many enemies while constantly immersed in Torah - day and night? What exactly was Gd expecting from Yehoshua with this command of V'HAGITA BO?

The Rav explains that the expression V'HAGITA BO does not refer to the analytical study of Torah. Rather, it speaks to the heart, not the mind. It conveys the love, the deep emotional attachment one must have for Torah. It declares that Torah is the one treasure that is to be cherished above all else, the primary and central reality in our lives. It depicts Torah as that great romance, passionately inviting man to fashion a life of moral and spiritual excellence. In short, to contemplate the Torah means to experience her as Gd's daughter - a living essence. It means to ontically bond with her and feel her presence always, day-in and day-out. *For more on this amazing relationship, see the Rav's essay in Shiurei Harav, pp. 181-185.*

It was King David, avers the Rav, who developed this idea of V'HAGITA BO YOMAM VALAILA. Simply read his magnificent chapter 119 in T'hilim which glorifies the Torah in its multifarious manifestations. There we are told that Torah is "a lamp for my feet and a light for my path" (v.105). There we are struck and deeply moved by the poignancy of the verse, "Had the Torah not been my delight, I should have perished in my affliction" (v.92). Indeed, whether in the daylight of our successes or the dark nights of our defeats, Torah accompanies us even as we cling to her. When we prevail and prosper, Torah is there; when we suffer anxieties, loneliness and boredom, Torah integrates into our very existential reality to uplift our spirits and inspire our resolve.

This, then, is what HaShem commanded Yehoshua on the eve of his conquest V'HAGITA BO YOMAM VALAILA! "Obey this directive, Yehoshua, make Torah a part of you, and you will succeed in all your ventures."

The Rav finds proof for this understanding in the blessing that we recite every morning over the Torah. The bracha is not LILMOD TORAH - to learn Torah, but LA'ASOK B'DIVREI TORAH - to be involved with, engrossed and absorbed in, totally engaged with - the Torah. At the beginning of each day, we pray that

Torah be our friend and companion, and in so doing, we declare our love for her and our absolute devotion to all she embodies. (Rabbeinu Bachye as quoted in Siddur Koren Mesores HaRav, p. 8)

If this understanding needs any additional confirmation, note what immediately follows this BIRKAT HATORAH. V'HA'AREV NA - "Please, Lord, our Gd, make the words of Your Torah sweet in our mouths and in the mouths of Your People, the house of Israel..." Torah is not only to be digested by the mind, but even more - it is to be pleasantly - sweetly and lovingly - imbibed, consumed and assimilated into our entire very being.

Shavuot is the holiday that challenges us to reframe the concept of Torah as something far more than an intellectual pursuit. With no other religious symbols to distract our attention, we confront the majesty of Torah in all her wondrous spiritual colors and fragrances. We are drawn to her glowing sanctity and entranced by her supernal wisdom. In a word, on each Shavuot, we fall in love with Torah all over again.

There is a beautiful Chassidic interpretation of the famous response of the Jewish People when asked whether they wished to accept the Torah. They declared: LA'ASEH V'NISHMA, "we will do and listen" (Sh'mot 24:7). The homiletic take: If

you wish to hear - to listen and experience - the voice of Gd, to feel, as the Rav so often confesses, "the breath of eternity on your face", then do - unpack the Torah and allow her to suffuse and saturate your entire life. Only through such a supreme endeavor, can we enjoy all the astonishing benefits that Torah can bestow upon each of us.

And finally, as we engage in this holy activity, we are gifted with something quite extraordinary. As the Rav put it so beautifully, when you keep your rendezvous with Torah, there is always someone else who trails behind the Torah, namely the Sh'china - Gd! The Almighty, disguised as Mother Sh'china never separates Herself from Her daughter. She accompanies Her daughter, the Torah, and is present wherever Her princess happens to be (Family Redeemed, pp. 176-178).

May this Shavuot be that ecstatic spiritual moment when, in committing to Torah as V'HAGIT BO, we joyfully experience the awesome Presence of the Almighty Himself. 🙌