

# 6.

## Shavuot

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**“Seeing Is Believing,” They Said.  
They Were Wrong.**

*It’s Time to Take an Honest Look at Our Mistakes*



*Dedicated to our chairman,  
Rabbi Moshe Kotlarsky  
as he marks his birthday, Rosh Chodesh Sivan.*

*May he go from strength to strength in good health,  
happiness, nachat, and success in all his endeavors.  
Leorech yomim veshonim tovos.*

## HOLIDAY OVERVIEW

### *Shavuot*

The Torah was given by G-d to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai more than 3300 years ago. Every year, on the holiday of Shavuot, we renew our acceptance of G-d's gift, and G-d "re-gives" the Torah.

The word shavuot means "weeks." This holiday marks the completion of a seven-week counting period that began during Passover.

The Giving of the Torah was a far-reaching spiritual event—one that touched the essence of the Jewish soul for all times. Our sages have compared it to a wedding between G-d and the Jewish people. Shavuot also means "oaths," for on this day G-d swore eternal devotion to us, and we in turn pledged everlasting loyalty to Him.

In ancient times, two wheat loaves would be offered in the Holy Temple. It was also at this time that people would begin to bring bikurim, their first and choicest fruits, to thank G-d for Israel's bounty.

The holiday of Shavuot is a two-day holiday, beginning at sundown of the fifth day of Sivan and lasting until nightfall of the seventh day of Sivan. (In Israel it is a one-day holiday, ending at nightfall of the sixth day of Sivan.)

Women and girls light holiday candles to usher in the holiday on both the first and second evenings of the holiday.

It is customary to stay up all night learning from the Torah on the first night of Shavuot.

All men, women, and children should go to the synagogue on the first day of Shavuot to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments.

As on other holidays, special meals are eaten, and no “work” may be performed.

It is customary to eat dairy foods on Shavuot. Among other reasons, this commemorates the fact that upon receiving the Torah, including the kosher laws,

the Jewish people could not cook meat in their pots, which had yet to be rendered kosher.

On the second day of Shavuot, the Yizkor memorial service is recited.

Some communities read the Book of Ruth publicly, as King David—whose passing occurred on this day—was a descendant of Ruth the Moabite.

## I. THE SCENE AT SINAI

### *The Matan Torah Story*

#### TEXT 1

SHEMOT (EXODUS) 19:9

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה, הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעַבַּת הָעָנָן, בְּעַבּוּר יְשֻׁמֵּעַ  
הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמָהּ וְגַם בְּךָ יֶאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם, וַיְגִד מֹשֶׁה אֶת דְּבַרֵי הָעָם  
אֶל ה':

And G-d said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in the thickness of the cloud in order that the people hear when I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever.” And Moses relayed the words of the people to G-d.

### *We Want to See You!*

#### TEXT 2a

TALMUD TRACTATE SHABBAT, 87A

מה אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה, ומה אמר להם משה לישראל,  
ומה אמרו ישראל למשה, ומה השיב משה לפני הגבורה?  
זו מצות הגבלה.

What did G-d tell Moses, what did Moses relay to the Jews, what was the Jewish reply to Moses, and what did Moses relay to G-d?

This concerns the mitzvah of fencing off the mountain.

#### **Babylonian Talmud**

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

## TEXT 2b

SHEMOT (EXODUS) 19:12

וְהִגַּבְלֹתָ אֶת הָעָם סָבִיב לֵאמֹר, הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם עֲלוֹת בְּהָר וּנְגַע בְּקַצְהוּ,  
כָּל הַנִּגַּע בְּהָר מוֹת יוּמָת:

And you shall set boundaries for the people around the mountain, saying, “Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its edge; whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.”

## TEXT 3

MECHILTA, YITRO 2

מָה אָמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר לְמַקּוֹם? . . . רְצוֹנֵנוּ לְרֹאוֹת אֶת  
מֶלֶכְנוּ! לֹא דוּמָה שׁוֹמְעַ לְרֹאֶה.

What did the Jews tell Moses to relay to G-d? . . . “It is our desire to see our King. How can you compare hearing to seeing?!”

Question—Kiss or Fly?

## TEXT 4a

SHEMOT (EXODUS) 19:10-11

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה, לֵךְ אֶל הָעָם וְקַדְּשֵׁתָם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר,  
וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמֹלֹתָם:  
וְהָיוּ נְכֻנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי, כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לְעֵינֵי כָל הָעָם  
עַל הַר סִינַי:

And G-d said to Moses, “Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow, and they should wash their garments. “And they should be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, G-d will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai.”

## TEXT 4b

IBID., 19:16

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיט הַבִּקָּה, וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וּבְרָקִים וְעָנָן כָּבֵד עַל  
הָהָר וְקוֹל שׁוֹפָר חָזָק מְאֹד, וַיִּחַרְד כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בַּמַּחֲנֶה:

It came to pass on the morning of the third day: there were thunderclaps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a *shofar*, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered.

## TEXT 5a

SHIR HASHIRIM (SONG OF SONGS) 1:2

יִשְׁקֵנִי מִנְשִׁיקוֹת פִּיהוּ, כִּי טוֹבִים דְּדִיךְ מִיָּין:

May He kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.

## TEXT 5b

RASHI, AD LOC.

זה השיר אומרת בפיה, בגלותה ובאלמנותה: מי יתן וישקני המלך שלמה מנשיקות פיהו כמו מאז. לפי שיש מקומות שנושקין על גב היד ועל הכתף, אך אני מתאוה ושוקקת להיותו נוהג עמי כמנהג הראשון, כחתן אל כלה, פה אל פה.

She [the Jewish people] recites this song with her mouth, in her exile and in her widowhood. If only King Solomon would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth as he did in the days of old. In some places they kiss on the back of the hand or on the shoulder, but I desire and wish that he behave toward me as he behaved toward me originally, like a bridegroom to a bride, mouth to mouth.

### Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi)

1040–1105

Most noted biblical and Talmudic commentator. Born in Troyes, France, Rashi studied in the famed *yeshivot* of Mainz and Worms. His commentaries on the Pentateuch and the Talmud, which focus on the straightforward meaning of the text, appear in virtually every edition of the Talmud and Bible.

## TEXT 6a

SHEMOT (EXODUS) 20:15

וְכָל הָעָם רָאִים אֶת הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת הַלְפִידִים, וְאֶת קוֹל הַשּׁוֹפָר וְאֶת  
הַהָר עֹשֵׂן, וַיֵּרֶא הָעָם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרְחוֹק:

And all the people saw the voices and the flames, the sound of the *shofar*, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled, and they stood from afar.



## TEXT 6b

TALMUD TRACTATE SHABBAT, 88B

אמר רב יהושע בן לוי, כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא, יצתה נשמתן של ישראל, שנאמר "נפשי יצאה בדברו". ומאחר שמדיבור ראשון יצתה נשמתן, דיבור שני היאך קיבלו? הוריד טל שעתיד להחיות בו מתים והחיה אותם, שנאמר "גשם נדבות תניף אלקים, נחלתך ונלאה אתה כוננתה".

ואמר רב יהושע בן לוי, כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא, חזרו ישראל לאחוריהן י"ב מיל, והיו מלאכי השרת מדדין אותן.

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said, "The souls of the Jewish people expired at each sentence uttered by G-d, as the verse states, 'My soul went out as He spoke.' If their souls expired at the first commandment, how did they receive the second commandment? G-d revived them with the dew that He will use to resurrect the dead in the messianic era, as the verse states, 'Generous rain You poured down, O G-d; Your heritage, which was weary, You firmed up.'"

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi said further, "With each sentence uttered by G-d, the Jews shrank back a distance of twelve *mil*, and the ministering angels led them back."

## II. VISUAL CONNECTION

### *Hearing Isn't Seeing*

# TEXT 7a

RABBI SHMUEL BORENSTEIN, SHEM MISHMUEL, YITRO 5762

והנה ידוע, שחוש השמיעה וחוש הראיה משונים זה מזה. שחוש השמיעה הוא שהקול בא ומכה על תוף האוזן והוא התקרבות המדבר אל מקבל הדיבור. וחוש הראיה הוא היפוך, שמהרואה יוצאין קוי ראות ומכים על דבר הנראה. . . ועל כן כששמעון שומע קולו של ראובן, הוא התקרבות ראובן לשמעון. אבל כששמעון רואה את ראובן הוא התקרבות שמעון אל ראובן.

It is a popular notion that hearing and seeing are different from one another. Listening occurs when sound vibrations enter and strike the ear, which represents the speaker drawing close to the listener. Seeing is the opposite. Seeing occurs when I project my line of sight onto the item. . . . Therefore, when Simon hears Reuben's voice, Reuben is drawing close to Simon. When Simon sees Reuben, Simon is drawing near to Reuben.

### **Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein** 1855–1926

Chasidic Rebbe. Rabbi Borenstein was born in Poland into a distinguished rabbinic family. His father and primary teacher, Rabbi Avraham—known by the title of his halachic responsa *Avnei Nezer*—was the first Rebbe of Sochatchov, and his maternal grandfather was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgenstern, the Rebbe of Kotzk. In 1910, Rabbi Shmuel succeeded his father as Rebbe of Sochatchov and established a yeshiva there. He is best known for the collection of his Chasidic sermons, *Shem MiShmuel*, which has gained wide popularity.

# TEXT 7b

THE REBBE, RABBI MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON,  
LIKUTEI SICHOT 6, P. 121

ראיה "דערלאנגט" טיפער אין נפש הרואה - און במילא מיט מער געוויסקייט - ווי דאס איז ביי שמיעה. ווען א מענטש זעט מיט די אויגן אז די זאך איז אזוי, וועט אים קיין שום שכל'דיקער אויפקלער ניט איבערצייגן אז די זאך איז אנדערש. ווארום דער בירור פון ראיה ווערט אפגעלייגט אין נפש א סאך טיפער און וודאות'דיקער ווי דער בירור השכל. . . דאקעגן שמיעה דערלאנגט ניט אזוי טיף אין נפש - דאס געהערטע מיטן חוש השמיעה ווערט ניט אזוי שטארק איינגעקריצט אין נפש.

What we see reaches deeper into our soul and is therefore accepted with more conviction than what we hear. When we see something with our own eyes, we know it with a certainty, and no logical argument can convince us that we are wrong because the clarity of sight reaches much deeper and provides much more conviction than clarity gained by logic. . . . Conversely, hearing does not reach as deeply into our soul and is not as indelibly engraved into our soul.

## Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson 1902-1994

The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as "the Lubavitcher Rebbe," or simply as "the Rebbe." Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe's scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.

*Balaam vs. Moses***TEXT 8a**

RASHI, VAYIKRA (LEVITICUS) 1:1

”ויקרא אל משה”. לכל דברות ולכל אמירות ולכל ציוויים קדמה קריאה לשון חיבה, לשון שמלאכי השרת משתמשים בו, שנאמר ”וקרא זה אל זה”, אבל לנביאי אומות העולם נגלה עליהן בלשון עראי וטומאה, שנאמר ”ויקר אלקים אל בלעם”.

Every time G-d communicated with Moses, whether it was a speech, a saying, or a commandment, He first called to Moses by name, which is a communication of affection, as the verse states, “[The ministering angels] call (וקרא) to one another.” However, to the non-Jewish prophets, G-d revealed Himself through expressions denoting coincidence and impurity, as the verse states, “And G-d chanced (ויקר) upon Balaam.”

## Summoned Up vs. Chanced Upon

# TEXT 8b

RABBI SHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI, LIKUTEI TORAH, P. 1A

כי הנה לעיל מיניה כתיב "ולא יכול משה לבוא אל אוהל מועד, כי שכן עליו הענן, וכבוד ה' מלא את המשכן". פירוש שכן עליו הענן הוא, המשכת והשראת אור אין סוף ברוך הוא ממקום עליון ונורא מאד . . . לכן נאמר "ויקרא אל משה", פירוש ענין קריאה זו היינו הארה והשפעה למשה, כדי שעל ידי זה יוכל לעלות ולבוא אל אוהל מועד.

The previous verse states, "Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud rested upon it, and the glory of G-d filled the Tabernacle." A cloud resting upon the Tabernacle denotes a presence of G-d's endless light that stems from a transcendental and awesome place. . . . It therefore states, "And He called to Moses," which means that He empowered Moses to ascend and to enter the Tent of Meeting.

**Rabbi Shneur  
Zalman of Liadi  
(Alter Rebbe)  
1745–1812**

Chasidic rebbe, halachic authority, and founder of the Chabad movement. The Alter Rebbe was born in Liozna, Belarus, and was among the principal students of the Magid of Mezeritch. His numerous works include the *Tanya*, an early classic containing the fundamentals of Chabad Chasidism; and *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, an expanded and reworked code of Jewish law.

## TEXT 8C

RABBI SHMUEL BORENSTEIN, SHEM MISHMUEL, YITRO 5762

"ויקר" הנאמר לבלעם, הוא שהדיבור בא אליו בעודו בפחיתותו . . . אבל "ויקרא" הוא שקראהו להתקרב הלום ולהתעלות לקראת הדיבור.

*Vayikar*, which was said to Balaam, implies that G-d addressed Balaam as he was, in his lowly state . . . not so the *vayikra* that was said to Moses, which was a summons to draw closer to G-d and to be elevated by the prophecy.

## TEXT 9

RASHI, BEREISHIT (GENESIS) 22:4

"ביום השלישי". למה איחר מלהראותו מיד? כדי שלא יאמרו הממו וערבבו פתאום וטרד דעתו, ואילו היה לו שהות להימלך אל לבו לא היה עושה.

Why did G-d delay and not show him the mountain immediately? So that people would not claim that Abraham was prepared to obey G-d in this matter [solely] because G-d confused and confounded him suddenly and deranged his mind; [and that] had he had time to consider it properly, he would not have done it.

### III. TAKE A GOOD LOOK

#### *The Impact of Visuals*

## TEXT 10

RABBI SHMUEL BORNSTEIN, SHEM MISHMUEL, YITRO 5762

ואולי נצמח להם הרצון לזה מן ההגבלה. שהבינו שהם אינם יכולים להתקרב בעצמם, אלא שמצווים ועומדים לעמוד מרחוק. שאלו שעל כל פנים בעמדם שם, תהי' להם נמי בחינת ראייה. שעל כל פנים בראות עיניהם יהיה להם דיבוק בצד מה.

Perhaps the desire to see G-d was prompted by G-d's instruction to fence off the mountain. They understood that they would be unable to stand closer to G-d but would need to stand back at a distance. But they asked that at the very least they be permitted to see G-d. Because seeing G-d would enable them to be at least somewhat attached to G-d.

# TEXT 11

RABBI SHMUEL BORNSTEIN, IBID.

ולפי הדברים האלה יובן מה שבתחילה לא נעו ולא עמדו מרחוק, כי שם לא ראו את הנשמע אלא ששמעו, ולא היה להם דיבוק עדיין, על כל פנים לא נעו ולא עמדו מרחוק אלא חרדו לבד . . . אבל אחר כך, דכתיב "וכל העם רואים את הקולות", ועלו במדרגה לראות את הנשמע והיה להם דיבוק בצד מה, מחמת זה בא שנעו ועמדו מרחוק. כי אפילו לאחר הפרישה, שהיה להם תיקון בצד מה, מכל מקום, במה שהם בשר ודם, אין להם דיבוק אל העליונים.

We can now understand why they did not shrink back and stand at a distance before they received the Ten Commandments. At this point, they were still unable to see; they could only hear. This means that they had not yet established an internal connection with G-d; therefore, they did not shrink back and did not stand at a distance. They merely trembled. . . .

However, the next verse, which reads, "And all the people saw," describes the state of the people after they were elevated to see G-d and thus had formed a connection with G-d. This is why they shrank back and stood from afar. Even after three days of preparation, which conditioned them somewhat for this connection, they, as mere mortals, were unable to withstand their connection with the Supreme.



*Double Warning***TEXT 12**

RABBI SHMUEL BORENSTEIN, IBID.

שירד הקדוש ברוך הוא לסוף דעתם ללמוד היתה, שהרי הציווי הראשון היה קודם שנצטוו על הפרישה, וכנתבאר לעיל, ויבואו לדון דכשנצטוו ועשו פרישה, והם מוכנים לבחינת ראייה, יחשבו שהם ראויים אף להתקרב גם כן, כענין "זיקרא" כנתבאר לעיל, על כן צריכים זירוז בשעת מעשה. אף שהם בבחינת ראייה, הוא רק דיבוק בצד מה באמצעות העיניים, ולא התקרבות לגמרי.

G-d understood that Jews might come to rationalize stepping onto the mountain. Inasmuch as the instruction to fence off the mountain was given prior to the three days of preparation to see G-d, they might rationalize that once they were conditioned to see G-d, they might also be able to draw closer to G-d and stand on the mountain proper. Thus, they needed to be reminded again, just before the Ten Commandments were given, that though they could now see G-d, it was merely a slight connection with G-d, not a complete connection.

### *Four Levels of Connection*

- A. It can feel entirely coincidental and unimportant, as it did to Balaam.
- B. It can be heard, causing fearful trembling, but remaining in place.
- C. It can be seen, as our ancestors saw at Sinai, in which case they were impacted deeply and were thrown back, but still could not get past the fence.
- D. Interacting with G-d as did Moshe, a seamless connection, this is the level of *vayikra*.