



Shavuot: A holiday to celebrate Torah

RABBI DOVID GOLDMAN

Exodus 19:1-20:23 and Numbers 28:26-28:31

Have you ever noticed how the supermarkets tend to display matzo around Chanukah time? They seem to be suggesting we celebrate one holiday with the traditions of another. Interestingly, the Talmud raises a similar question: What if someone wanted to celebrate Passover, Shavuot or Sukkot with the traditions of Yom Kippur - by fasting all day?

The Talmud discusses this question following two curious verses in the Torah: One says to the Jewish people that the holidays are "for you" while another says they are "for God." Which is it, the rabbis ask?

In the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer it is a choice: The holiday makes sense one way or the other - either as all "for you," to celebrate with a festive meal, maybe a nap, etc., or all for God - in prayer and study and, perhaps, fasting.

Rabbi Yehoshua takes a different approach. He understands the verses to teach that the day should be divided - half "for you" and half "for God." This, in fact, is the conclusion and we must celebrate with eating and drinking.

The Talmud informs us that even Rabbi Eliezer, who would allow us to fast, has an exception: Shavuot. "Everyone agrees," the Talmud says, "that Shavuot must include a celebration 'for you.'"

What distinguishes Shavuot from all the other holidays? Why would Rabbi Eliezer allow us to fast on Passover but not Shavuot? The Talmud leaves us with this: "Because it is the day the Torah was given" - no additional explanation offered.

Many of the commentaries give an explanation that has been and continues to be sorely lacking from the average education of most of our children. It is perhaps the most important truth every one of us should sense as we grow up and absorb into our hearts and share with others: The Torah is given to you for your own benefit. The Torah is not about doing for anyone else, listening to God, being religious, pious or giving. The Torah is an exquisite and unfathomable gift to you to celebrate with your whole being.

Rabbi Eliezer knew that if we were to spend Shavuot exclusively "on God's terms," we would make a horrible mistake. If we spent the day in prayer and study and devotion to God without thinking of ourselves, we would imagine that the Torah was more for God than for us. We would think the Torah is here because God wants us to make sacrifices for some greater good when it is in fact nothing of the sort.

What every single Jew must know about God's giving us the Torah is that it is given as a loving gift of infinite value that we can appreciate and love and celebrate. It is delicious and exhilarating and breathtaking and fiercely logical and just and absolutely all-encompassing. It is the best thing that could possibly happen to you. Please do not think that Judaism is something you owe God or the needy or your people or future generations or whomever. It is for you.

It is true that the Torah offers us a vision of good that transcends ourselves and that we should strive to give and not think of receiving. But our people continues to celebrate the Torah after 3,318 years because it is the best thing on Earth - not because we're doing God a favor. If this is a surprise to you, taste the Torah - it is, in the words of King David, "Sweeter than honey and the drippings of the combs."

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