

A Taste of Text: Source based learning for Shabbat

*This weekly sheet is brought to you by **Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman** of the **New West End United Synagogue** in conjunction with **Shapell's/Darché Noam***

SHAVUOT

DVAR TORAH: WHY IS SHAVUOT CALLED ATZERET?

The author of the Kedushat Levi, Harav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov, זצ"ל (1740-1809) writes that when he was visiting Lithuania he was asked why the Mishnah refers to Shavuot as "Atzeret" (see, for example, Sheviit 2:1, Chagigah 2:4, Menachot 3:6). The Torah itself refers only to the eighth day of Sukkot (Vayikra 23:36) and the seventh day of Pesach (Devarim 16:8) as "Atzeret," but not so to Shavuot; so why does the Mishnah consistently refer to Shavuot as Atzeret?

He gave three answers, and this is his third, based on a principle laid down by the Ramban. The Ramban (Emunah Uvitachon Chapter 19) observes that people's inspiration and excitement about avodat Hashem, service of G-d, often dissipates, flickers out. People have intense emotional experiences yet find themselves unaffected. They are left the same after the experience as they were before it.

The solution to this problem is to connect the inspiration with something concrete, with a "vessel" that can contain the emotions and inspiration. This strategy, says the Ramban, is communicated by a verse in Shir Hashirim: "אם תעירו ואם תעוררו את האהבה עד שתחפץ" whose straightforward translation is "If you awaken and if you arouse the love, until you desire" (Shir Hashirim 2:7). The root of "שתחפץ" is חפץ, usually translated as "want" or "desire"; but it is used in rabbinic literature to mean "object" (a desired thing). For instance, "אדם מוכר חפץ לחבירו" means "A man sells an object to his friend" (Berachot 5a). With this meaning, the verse teaches us that if one is aroused with love or fear of Hashem, he should "connect it with a חפץ," connect it with some concrete good act. That will prevent the inspiration from dissipating. One who has intense religious feelings should right away do a mitzvah – some concrete act – to hold on to them.

The Kedushat Levi explained that the People of Israel experienced this difficulty at Mount Sinai. At Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah, Israel's powerful feelings of love of G-d were aroused. They felt intense awe and fear of G-d, as the mountain trembled and they saw thunder and lightning, darkness and the Divine cloud, and heard the sound of the shofar. Hashem didn't want those feelings to disappear, so He gave Israel one mitzvah before giving the Torah in order to create a חפץ, something concrete that would enable those intense emotions and arousal to become lasting. He gave them the mitzvah of staying off the mountain until the final shofar blast (Shemot 19:12-13); that would become the "vessel" to contain all of the powerful emotions and inspiration of Matan Torah, making them an eternal component of Israel's emotional make-up.

That explains why Chazal chose the name "Atzeret" for Shavuot. עצרת is related to word "לעצור", to stop, to hold back, referring to the mitzvah Hashem gave them not to go on to Mount Sinai until the very end of Matan Torah. That mitzvah became the concrete container that enabled Israel's internal experience at Mount Sinai to stick with them for all generations.

That mitzvah was extremely difficult to keep. Israel was full of intense longing for the Divine Presence and was drawn to the source of Revelation. Stopping themselves from coming too close was an act of great spiritual self-control (see Shem Mishmuel, Shavuot 5671). That became the great vessel, the חפץ that preserved the emotional intensity of Matan Torah.

SOURCE GUIDE: “I WILL ALSO DO MY PART”

A statement by Rabbi Berechyah in Midrash Rabbah on Ruth serves as an overview on the entire book of Ruth, gives us an insight into the greatness of the main characters, and teaches an important message. This source guide is built on the explanation of that Midrash that appears in Harav Yosef Lipovitz, זצ"ל's Nachalat Yosef commentary on the Book of Ruth. (Rav Lipovitz, born in 1889, was a student of Harav Moshe Mordechai Epstein, זצ"ל, in the Slobodka Yeshiva and of Harav Chaim Heller, זצ"ל, in Berlin. After his aliyah he became involved in Torah education in Tel Aviv, both formally in the school system and informally in the restaurant that he and his wife ran. He passed away in 1966.)

A. One Missing Point in the Book of Ruth

Everything in the Book of Ruth leads up to the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, and the birth of their son Oved, who became the ancestor of David Hamelech and the Mashiach. But there was one crucial detail – a technicality – that might have prevented the marriage. Someone was closer in line to Naomi's family and therefore had priority over Boaz to redeem the family's fields and marry Ruth. When Ruth, directed by Naomi, encounters Boaz with the request to redeem and marry, Boaz responds as follows:

<p>1. Ruth 3:11-13 (11) Now, my daughter, do not be afraid. All that you say I will do for you. For the entire nation knows that you are a woman of valor. (12) Now, even though I truly am a redeemer, but there is a redeemer who is a closer relation than I am. (13) Stay for the night, and, in the morning, if he redeems you, all will be fine. But if he does not want to redeem you I will redeem you, by the Life of G-d. Lie down until the morning.</p>	<p>רות ג:יא-יג (יא) ועתה בתי אל תיראי כל אשר תאמרי אעשה לך כי יודע כל שער עמי כי אשת חיל את. (יב) ועתה כי אמנם כי גאל אנכי וגם יש גאל קרוב ממני. (יג) ליני הלילה והיה בבקר אם יגאלך טוב יגאל ואם לא יחפץ לגאלך וגאלתיך אנכי חי ה' שכבי עד הבקר.</p>
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Boaz makes it clear that he doesn't find any flaw with Ruth herself – she is an אשת חיל, a woman of valor. He is not making some excuse to push her off. But his own moral sense and the halachot of redemption do not allow him to ignore the redeemer who is first in line, Ploni Almoni. Boaz assures Ruth that on the very next morning, if the other man does not want to redeem her, Boaz will. This is a new development in the story that is a potential snag in Naomi's plan coming to fruition. Where is the other redeemer? What will he say when asked to redeem Ruth? Here is what happens the next morning:

<p>2. Ruth 4:1, 6 (1) Boaz ascended to the gate and sat there. And behold the redeemer Boaz spoke of passed by, and Boaz said, Turn aside and sit here Ploni Almoni," and he turned aside and sat ... (6) The redeemer said, "I am not able to redeem lest I destroy my inheritance. You redeem instead of me for I cannot redeem."</p>	<p>רות ד:א,ו (א) ובעז עלה השער וישב שם והנה הגאל עבר אשר דבר בעז ויאמר סורה שבה פה פלני אלמני ויסר וישב ... (ו) ויאמר הגאל לא אוכל לגאל לי פן אשחית את נחלתי גאל לך אתה את גאלתי כי לא אוכל לגאל.</p>
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It was not obvious that this would take place. See the following Midrash:

<p>3. Ruth Rabbah 7:8 "Boaz ascended to the gate and sat there, and behold the redeemer Boaz had spoken about passed by" (Ruth 4:1). Was he standing behind the gate? Said Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachman: Even if he was on the other side of the world the Holy One, blessed be He, would have flown him and brought him there, in order that the beloved righteous man shouldn't sit and be pained instead of at ease. Said Rabbi Berechyah – thus expounded two of the world's great men, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua: Boaz did his part, Ruth did her part, Naomi did her part; and the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I will also do my part."</p>	<p>רות רבה ז:ח "ובועז עלה השער וישב שם והנה הגואל עובר אשר דבר בעז" (רות ד:א). מה לאחורי תרעא הוה קאים? א"ר שמואל בר נחמן: אפילו היה בסוף העולם הטיסו הקב"ה והביאו לשם כדי שלא יהא אותו צדיק יושב ומצטער מתוך ישובו. אמר רבי ברכיה כך דרשו שני גדולי עולם רבי אליעזר ור' יהושע: בעז עשה את שלו, ורות עשתה את שלה, ונעמי עשתה את שלה. אמר הקב"ה, "אף אני אעשה את שלי."</p>
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Chazal note how Hashem employed special Divine Providence at this point in the Megillah. Finding and dealing with Ploni Almoni might have taken days, months, or years; but Hashem made sure he was there, on time, the morning after Ruth's request. Rabbi Berechyah's comment serves as a bird's eye view on the entire Megillah, summarizing the greatness of its three main characters and how Hashem added the finishing touch.

“Naomi did all she could” – Naomi's character drew Ruth to leave everything behind and follow her to the Land of Israel. Chazal explain how her name, נעמי, alludes to her character, “שהיו מעשיה נאים ונעימים”, “her actions were beautiful and pleasant” (Ruth Rabbah 2:5). Naomi could have ended her life in Moav, discontinuing her family line. But she chose to suffer the embarrassment of the return to the Land of Israel and Beit Lechem in Yehudah. There she would attempt to rebuild her family and right the wrong caused by her and Elimelech's escape to Moav. She did whatever she could, guiding the righteous Ruth to connect with the righteous Boaz (when their child Oved was born in the end of the Megillah, all the women said, “וילד בן לנעמי” – “Naomi gave birth to a child”). On that morning, Naomi had already done all she could.

“Ruth did all she could” – She gave up her past and her future and followed Naomi. She went from Moabite princess to a poor woman collecting fallen grain in others' fields. She then gave up her honor as a woman and followed Naomi's instructions to the tee that night in the threshing floor. Throughout the Megillah she is selfless, as Boaz notes: “Your later kindness (marrying Boaz instead of a young man) is greater than your earlier kindness (following the elderly Naomi to Israel).” Ruth had also done all she could.

“Boaz did all he could” – Boaz's love of people and his respect for people were extreme. We witness the kindness he showed to Ruth, a Moabite convert, how he blessed her in the threshing floor instead of cursing her; and how he spent time measuring out barley for Naomi as morning approached, so Ruth “should not go empty-handed to her mother-in-law,” even though every moment could mean the shame of exposure. We also see the energy with which he dealt with the redemption, gathering the elders the very next morning so he could redeem Ruth. Boaz had done all he could, but needed Divine assistance.

Hashem saw three great people doing whatever they could, taking their chesed and love to the utmost. He saw the Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz triad relating with mutual chesed and working together to rebuild the ruins of one of the most distinguished families of the tribe of Yehudah. Naomi drew along Ruth, and Ruth followed Naomi. Ruth shows chesed to Naomi and Boaz shows chesed to Ruth. Ruth follows Naomi's directions and Boaz fulfills Ruth's requests. But they all need Divine assistance. They need Ploni Almoni to show up. Then Hashem said, **“I will also do whatever I can.** If Ploni Almoni was on the other side of the world,” says Hashem, “I will fly him here for these tsaddikim. I will make sure the marriage of Boaz and Ruth takes place.”

SHAVUOT: SANCTIFYING THE PHYSICAL BY RABBI ARYEH FELDMAN

The Gemara (Pesachim 68b) quotes a statement about Shavuot that seems counter-intuitive. Even though the Tannaim Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua differ about the proper way to spend Yom Tov - should it be one dimensional, either “totally devoted to Hashem,” to prayer and learning, or “totally devoted to your selves” through celebration, eating and drinking (Rabbi Eliezer) or split half-and-half (Rabbi Yehoshua)? – the Amora Rabbi Elazar says that the dispute does not apply to Shavuot. Rabbi Elazar says that both Tannaim agree that Shavuot should include physical celebration, because “it is the day that the Torah was given.”

It seems like the exact opposite should be true. We would have thought that the Yom Tov connected with the giving of the Torah should be devoted to non-stop Torah learning. Doesn't the Mishnah (Pirkei Avot 6:4) teach us that the way to acquire Torah is: “Eat bread with salt, drink a measure of water, sleep on the ground, and toil in Torah”? Don't people who immerse themselves in physical pleasures compromise their ability to connect with the Torah? Shouldn't Shavuot be a day of retracting from physicality?

The answer lies in the aggadic passage in the Gemara (Shabbat 88b) that records Moshe's debate with the angels about whether the Torah should be brought down to the world or not. The angels objected to the holy Torah being brought down to earth, saying to Hashem, "How can You take your precious Torah that preceded the world and give it to flesh and blood?" Hashem turned to Moshe and asked him to respond to the angels, but he was afraid – "They'll burn me with the vapor of their mouths." Hashem told Moshe to hold on to the Throne of Glory, and Moshe responded: "The Torah says to honor parents; are you angels born of flesh and blood? Do you have parents to honor? The Torah says 'I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of Egypt' – Were you taken out of Egypt?" The angels were forced to concede and the Torah was given.

What were the angels thinking? Wasn't Moshe so obviously correct? The angels' claim was that since the words of the Torah can be understood on a lofty, angelic level, and the physical world is too lowly for the sublime Torah; the Torah should remain in Heaven. Why, then, did Moshe win the debate? Moshe claimed that fulfilling all levels of the Torah is not only possible in this physical world, but necessary. Hashem gave the Torah to Israel so they can elevate the physical world. The Torah must be given to people of flesh and blood, living in this physical world.

This connects with an amazing passage in the Talmud Yerushalmi, as explained by the Maharal. Rabbi Yonatan (quoted by Rabbi Shmuel son of Nachman in Yerushalmi Taanit 4:8) says that before the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, Hashem was, so to speak, holding on to two hand-breaths of the Luchot, the two Tablets; Moshe was holding on to two handbreadths; and there were two in the middle. When the Jews sinned Hashem pulled the Luchot back, because He didn't want to give the Torah; but Moshe, so to speak, managed to pull the Luchot out of Hashem's hands! The message of the Midrash, says the Maharal (Tiferet Yisrael Chapter 48), is that we, so to speak, have more of a claim on the Torah than Hashem does. The Torah brings perfection into the world. The world needs perfecting, whereas Hashem is already perfect. So the Torah is needed more on earth than in Heaven because it is only here that it can be actualized.

On the day of the Giving of the Torah we celebrate the Torah's descent to the physical world – where it belongs. Only here can the Torah elevate this physical world and connect it to the Ribbono shel Olam, the Master of the World. The Torah is in our world so we can put it into action.

Rabbi Elazar's statement now makes sense. On Shavuot, the day of the Giving of the Torah, we must celebrate the Torah's entry into the physical world through a physical celebration. We celebrate as people of flesh and blood because that is why we were given the Torah – as Moshe convinced the angels. Our mission is to actualize Torah, to take all of our physical needs and elevate them through avodat Hashem, service of G-d. On Shavuot we physically celebrate how Torah connects to our complete beings.

שבת שלום ומבורך והג שמח

*This publication is compiled by the staff and Rabbonim at **Shapells/Yeshivat Darché Noam** for men and **Midreshet Rachel v'Chaya Seminary** for women in Jerusalem. Find out more about the **married couples' programme** and the **Pathways Israel** and **Pathways Plus** programmes offered at www.darchenoam.org +972-2-651-1178, 5 Beit Hakerem Street, Jerusalem.*

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