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YOM TOV TABLE

BS"D
By Mishaal Sionov
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SHAVUOT

**Special Holiday
Double-Sided
Edition!**

Harmonizing Spiritual & Material

The Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 12:11) quotes a dispute relating to the creation of the world. R' Eliezer holds that everything in the heavens was created from the heavens while everything on earth was created from the earth, whereas R' Yehoshua is of the opinion that everything in both heaven and earth was only created from the heavens, and each of them cite their own sources to back their stance on the matter.

I saw a profound insight brought down by R' Yaakov Kamenetzky¹, who suggests that this debate isn't purely academic but holds practical significance as well. This difference of opinion between the two sages can be tracked down to a different, seemingly unrelated dispute in *Beitzah* 15b discussing how to celebrate the Jewish holidays. R' Eliezer says that the Torah offers every Jew a choice between two options: "He can mark the day through festive eating and drinking, or he can immerse himself entirely in the study of Torah." R' Yehoshua maintains, however, that the Torah sets forth for a compromise – half the day for feasting, and the other half for Torah study and prayer.

What is behind this debate on a more fundamental level? Considering the Torah's description of the various *chagim*, we find multiple premises for each. Pesach, commemorating the exodus, our spiritual independence, and the revelation of Hashem's presence in the world, is also characterized in the Torah as a spring festival, generating the new crop's ripening and its promise of material prosperity for Bnei Yisrael. Likewise, Sukkot has two faces; it reminds us of the protection that the Clouds of Glory afforded us in the Wilderness and celebrates the forgiveness we were granted on Yom Kippur, all the while bearing agricultural association as the "Crop-gathering Festival." Shavuot, too, is both when we received the Torah and also a wheat-harvest ceremony. As it turns out, every holiday contains a theme of our physical survival as well as our spiritual purpose.

This duality is what gives rise to the Talmudic debate mentioned above. R' Eliezer sees every Jew as being given a choice in which

aspect of the holiday to celebrate. A person can pick the physical dimension and rejoice with satiating the body, or he can emphasize the spiritual facet via dedicating the day for Torah and *tefillah* – but he cannot mix the two because, as he reasons in the aforementioned Midrash, "all that is in heaven was created from the heaven, and all that is on earth was created from the earth." Since they have distinct origins, the physical and spiritual are to be kept separate when observing the *chag*, too. R' Yehoshua, however, disagrees. Since, in his view, both the earthly and heavenly originate from the same place – the heavens – he maintains that even physical activities have a spiritual dimension that can be brought out to elevate them, and therefore, one can and even must allow both the body and soul to enjoy and celebrate the holiday. The two aren't conflicting; they in fact complement one another.

The Gemara in *Beitzah* interestingly points out that when it comes to Shavuot, all agree that one must accommodate the body in festivity of the holiday; why does this *chag* uniquely lie outside the bounds of the debate above?

Tying everything together, R' Kamenetzky explained insightfully that Shavuot, marking the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, is when G-d introduced the idea of the interdependent relationship existing between the body and soul – that the body actualizes the soul's potential, and the soul perfects and elevates the body. Through the Torah, with its program of serving Boreh Olam within human life, Hashem infused a spiritual facet into the physical, and it is precisely on this holiday and what it represents that one may not exclude material enjoyments, even according to R' Eliezer.

Let us utilize this yom tov to indeed celebrate the beauty of the Torah and its unbelievable approach of charting a new course to heaven through the basest elements of life on earth.

1. Quoted in the Insights to *The Midrash, Artscroll Series*

Counting Up

"Weeks." That's what the name of this holiday translates to. It may seem like an interesting or peculiar title for a *chag* that's only two days long (or one, in Israel), but the teachers of *mussar* and *chassidut* draw from it a powerful takeaway. Reaching the heights and pinnacles of greatness doesn't happen overnight.

To receive a G-dly Torah, or to reach success in one's personal journey, greatness requires patience, time and effort to afford personal growth. We weren't ready to just accept the Torah right away; we needed some time to develop. Be patient with yourself, too. It's okay to be a work-in-progress...

The Dairy Holiday

What is behind the Jewish custom of eating dairy on Shavuot?

R' YY Jacobson shared a beautiful answer. As the Torah describes in the beginning of Shemot, Yocheved hid her newborn baby (soon-to-be-named Moshe) for three months, so that the Egyptians shouldn't grab him and plunge him in the Nile. After three months she couldn't hide him anymore, so she placed him in a basket and left him to float in the Nile, hoping that someone would have compassion and save the boy. And as we know, Batya came to bathe in the Nile, but, noticing the infant, she was overwhelmed with pity and saved him. Little Miriam, a little girl only 6 years of age, watched everything unfold and ran to inquire if the Egyptian princess needed a Jewish wet nurse to nurse the baby, to which she responded in the affirmative. Batya tried having the baby nursed through Egyptian women, but little Moshe refused them all. Of course, Miriam knew exactly who to bring, and in a fabulous turn of events, Moshe was raised in the royal palace while being nursed by his own mother, who was even being paid for her services.

If you trace everything back to the dates, something fascinating comes to light. As we know through tradition, Moshe was born on the 7th of Adar; if you count three months later – Nissan, Iyar, and Sivan – it comes out exactly on what would later become Shavuot. That was when Moshe was saved from death, and that was also when Moshe got to be nursed by his own mother. Thus, we have the custom on Shavuot to enjoy dairy – products that come from milk – to commemorate not only when Moshe brought down the Torah, but also his new lease on life as an infant.

“Happiness does not come from G-d answering our requests, but rather from making the requests. When we seek Hashem, our lives are enriched as a result of the connection we've established with our Creator.” (R' Eli Mansour)

Just Love Them

Did you know that Jews constitute only 0.20% of the global population? For a nation that the media headlines constantly, we ironically do not even make up a quarter of a percent of the worldwide populace. Now, what may be even crazier than that is a mind-boggling statistic: only one in ten American Jews are Orthodox¹.

Sadly, so many of our Jewish brethren are spiritually bankrupt. So many Jews don't know anything about their rich heritage or have a relationship with G-d. How could it be that Hashem's Chosen Nation is losing so many?! How is it that, statistically, 90% of American Jews are unaffiliated?? And even among the 10% practicing religion, how many are true *ovdei Hashem* and authentic about their Jewish identity and connection with Boreh Olam?

Some people like bashing the other side, criticizing the irreligious and disconnected Jews, feeling like they have a holy obligation of judging, faulting, and berating them. Such a perspective is not only unfortunate, but foolish as well. Did we consider that maybe these souls don't know any better and that they weren't lucky enough to be brought up a certain way? And even if they know better, did we consider that maybe their *taavot* and physical desires just overtook them? And even if that wasn't the case, did we consider that maybe their personal and specific experience with religion was a hard, toxic, and painful one? Did we consider that maybe they are not just like *goyim*, but actually have such big and delicate souls that have suffered immense trauma, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually, and that their association with Judaism or orthodoxy arouses agony? Judaism is more than just a religion; it is a big family. How can we just write off or give up on any soul as if it's a worthless shard? These are our brothers and sisters! These souls are fragments of the Divine, and even if they appear spiritually soiled, their value and potential remain inherent.

Our Sages teach that our collective national identity – “Yisrael / ישראל” – is actually an acronym for: **יש שישים ריבוא אותיות לתורה**, which means “there are 600,000 letters in the Torah.” What this means is that every Jewish soul – represented by the number 600,000, which was the number of Jewish adult males that left Egypt as the patriarchs of Am Yisrael – is signified by their very own, unique letter in the Sefer Torah. Much is expounded from this, among which is the idea that, similar to a Torah scroll being invalid and incomplete for missing even a single letter, the Jewish people, too, are at an indescribable loss for even one soul among us being spiritually deserted.

Who, if not us, will take responsibility for our struggling brethren who are distanced from Hashem? Why waste time and potential by being critical of them, and not do everything in our power and beyond to love them and inspire them closer? Yes, it requires patience, creativity, and an endless supply of love and understanding, but the potential return on investment is so vast and incredible. The greatest kindness a person can ever do for parents is to reunite them with their lost children. Are we aware of the priceless gems right beneath our noses? There is so much opportunity – so many struggling and lost children of Hashem that we can leave a positive impact upon! Are we turning over the world to return them to their Father in Heaven, Who long awaits having that connection with His kids? As observant Jews, who are fortunate enough to include Hashem for real in our lives, and who are lucky enough to have a life of Torah, mitzvot, and meaning, it is *our* responsibility to show others the light! We cannot afford to just sit back or mind our own business; as ambassadors of Hashem's infinity, it is on us! It is our duty to reach out to these Jews and inspire them! As we celebrate Shavuot this year, don't only content yourself with committing to learn more Torah; push yourself to bring other Jews to love it as well! *To make a difference in someone's life, you don't have to be perfect. You just have to care...*

1. PewResearch.org