



GROWTH

At The

YOM TOV TABLE

SHAVUOT

Double-Sided!

The Soccer Ball That Changed Lives

There is a remarkable story told about R' Ovadia Yosef that captures not only the brilliance of his Torah scholarship but the extraordinary sensitivity and love he showed toward every Jew — even those whom society had already given up on.

One Shabbat afternoon, a group of teenage boys were playing soccer in a field near the synagogue. They were notorious in the neighborhood. People referred to them as street kids, delinquents, outcasts, and troublemakers. They mocked religion openly and spent their days wandering the streets with little guidance or structure.

As the congregation exited the synagogue after prayers, one of the boys kicked the soccer ball with all his strength. The ball flew directly toward the distinguished R' Ovadia walking outside and struck him hard, knocking his elegant hat onto the ground.

The boys burst into laughter. R' Ovadia calmly bent down, picked up his hat, dusted it off, and placed it back on his head. Then, instead of continuing on his way or rebuking the boys, he turned and slowly began walking toward them. The boys immediately braced themselves for a confrontation. They expected yelling, insults, or at the very least a sharp lecture about respect and proper behavior.

Trying to provoke him further, the boy who had kicked the ball sarcastically called out, "What do you want? Are you here to make kiddush for us?" The other boys laughed loudly, waiting to see the rabbi's reaction.

But when he reached the boy, he did not raise his voice. He simply looked at him with warmth and gently asked: "Did you eat your Shabbat meal today?" The question stunned him.

No one had spoken to him that way before.

Behind the boy's rebellious exterior was a painful reality. His parents were Holocaust survivors who had endured unimaginable suffering and had drifted far from religious observance afterward. Their home lacked not only Shabbat atmosphere, but often basic warmth and stability as well. A proper Shabbat meal was almost unheard of.

And that day, the boy had not eaten at all.

R' Ovadia's face showed no anger whatsoever — only sincere concern. Quietly, the boy admitted that he was hungry.

Without saying another word of criticism, Hacham Ovadia gently placed a hand on his shoulder and invited him home. As they entered the house, the boy was overwhelmed by a scene completely foreign to him. The table was beautifully prepared. The aroma of warm food filled the home. There was singing, peace, dignity, and a palpable sense of holiness in the air.

Hacham Ovadia made kiddush over the wine and personally served the boy a large plate of food. The boy ate quickly and ravenously. When the plate was empty, the rabbi asked softly if he would like more. Embarrassed but still starving, the boy nodded.

Another plate was served. Only much later did the boy discover that the food he had eaten had actually been Hacham Ovadia's own portion. The rabbi himself had remained with little more than bread and a few side dishes.

After the meal, Hacham Ovadia noticed how exhausted the boy looked. Understanding immediately the difficult life he came from, he prepared a clean, freshly made bed and invited him to rest.

The boy fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke after Shabbat had ended, Hacham Ovadia approached him warmly and asked what he planned to do that evening. The boy casually answered that he wanted to go to the movies.

The rabbi opened a drawer, took out some money, and handed it to him. But before the boy left, Hacham Ovadia made one simple request: "Will you come back tomorrow?"

The boy agreed. And he returned. At first, he came back for the food, the warmth, and the small amounts of money the rabbi occasionally gave him. But slowly, something far deeper began to happen.

The boy became drawn to the holiness radiating from Hacham Ovadia. For perhaps the first time in his life, he felt genuinely seen and valued. The rabbi never humiliated him, never judged him, and never gave up on him. Instead, he welcomed him with patience, dignity, and unconditional kindness. Over time, the boy began attending Hacham Ovadia's Torah classes regularly. Eventually, he entered yeshiva and completely transformed his life.

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According to different versions of the story, that same boy later became either a respected dayan (rabbinical judge) after decades serving in the judiciary or a prominent Rosh Kollel leading and teaching Torah to countless students. The street kid whom people had dismissed as hopeless became a great Torah leader — all because one rabbi chose compassion over anger.

As we celebrate Shavuot, this story carries a particularly powerful message. The Torah was not given only through thunder at Sinai

or through intellectual brilliance. It is transmitted through love, patience, warmth, and the ability to recognize the hidden greatness within another person. Sometimes, a single Shabbat meal, a kind word, or a moment of genuine care can change the course of an entire life — and ultimately shape generations to come.

Inspired by (my dear brother-in-law) Natanel Yakubov

Thunder, Fire, and Covenant

There is a famous midrash that teaches us that before we received the Torah, there was a cosmic separation between the Heavenly world and the earth, as it says in Tehillim: "הַשָּׁמַיִם שָׁמְיָם לֵה' וְהָאָרֶץ נְתַן לַבְּנֵי אָדָם". Matan Torah marks the moment that Hashem bridged the two by Himself "coming" to Har Sinai and the Jewish people preparing for 50 days to become worthy of meeting their creator.

In Judaism, we don't believe G-d is confined to one location, so what can it mean that God "came down" to Har Sinai (*Vayered Hashem al Har Sinai*)?

Rav Soleveitchik explains this beautifully. He says that Hashem "revealing" himself means that he made himself accessible to human beings. The infinite Creator made himself "knowable to mortal, finite human beings. This was the introduction of the Creator of the Universe to establishing a relationship with His creations; not as a force to be feared but rather in a presence seeking relationship.

This relationship is reflected immediately when Hashem says "*Anochi Hashem Elokecha* – I am Hashem, your God." This is not a commandment to legislation or obligation, but rather a relation and an establishing connection with us.

The Kuzari comments deeper; he observes that Hashem doesn't introduce himself as the Creator, trying to inspire fear or awe. Rather, he refers to Himself as the One who took us out of Egypt. Judaism is founded on abstract theology; it is to be experienced and lived through on a daily basis. This introduction of Hashem to the Jewish people was to establish a connection with them.

This explains the response of the Jews in the desert, exclaiming "we will do and we will listen." The Talmud describes this as so extraordinary that the angels were amazed by the commitment expressed by the mere humans. On the surface, it seems irrational how Jews can commit to accepting the torah without any hesitation. Yet this may be the whole point. Any relationship can't be built on calculation alone; there is always an element of trust.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains the difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract is to protect each party's interest and is strictly transactional. A covenant, however, is rooted in loyalty and mutual commitment. The Jewish people were not accepting mere obligations but were accepting a relationship with G-d – who took them out of Egypt and expressed commitment to them. Hence, they responded with no hesitation.

Shavuot is a *yom tov* to remind us that holiness is not reserved just to a mountaintop in the desert. It's to show us the covenant from that mountaintop applies to us as a people and how we have a relationship with the creator of the universe. The voice of G-d that thundered from the top of the mountain echoes into our daily lives.

May we merit this Shavuot not only to commemorate Matan Torah but to be renewed with the spirit to respond to the eternal covenant of "I am Hashem, your God" with "we will do and we will listen."

By (my dear friend) Shlomo YamTov

The Voice without Echo

On the sixth of Sivan, over three thousand years ago, the Jewish people stood together at the foot of Har Sinai and experienced the most transformative moment in human history: the giving of the Torah.

At first glance, this raises a question. If our forefathers already studied Torah and observed its teachings before Sinai, what was truly new about Matan Torah?

The answer is that Sinai was not merely the transmission of laws or wisdom. It was a complete change in the nature of creation itself.

Before Sinai, there was a separation between the spiritual and the physical. Holiness could inspire the world, but it could not fully enter and transform physical reality. A mitzvah performed before Sinai elevated the soul, but it could not sanctify the material object through which it was performed. At Sinai, that barrier was removed.

When Hashem descended upon the mountain and Moshe ascended toward Him, Heaven and Earth were joined. From that moment on, physical objects could become vessels of holiness. A coin given to tzedakah, leather fashioned into tefillin, flour baked into matzah — ordinary material objects could now be infused with eternal kedushah.

This is why the voice of Hashem at Sinai is described as a voice "without echo" (Shemot Rabbah 29:9). An echo occurs when sound meets resistance. At Sinai, there was no resistance. The world became fully capable of absorbing the Divine message.

That reality continues today. Sometimes we feel that the values of Torah clash with the world around us. It may seem that holiness is difficult to bring into daily life. Yet Sinai teaches us otherwise. The deepest nature of creation is already aligned with Hashem's will. Any resistance is only temporary and external.

Our task is to reveal what was established at Sinai: that every corner of this physical world can become a dwelling place for holiness. Shavuot reminds us that Torah is not meant to remain in Heaven. It was given so that we can bring it into our homes, our actions, and our everyday lives transforming the ordinary into the sacred.

By (my dear friend) Simcha Kranz