

# חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

## A Digest of Divrei Torah on Shavuos

in honor of our daughter  
Chaya Esther (Estee)  
becoming a בת מצוה

**Rabbi Efrem Goldberg**

Boca Raton Synagogue

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# חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

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Chaya Esther (Estee) becoming a בת מצווה

Introduction	5
Leading an Integrated Torah Life	7
Members of a Covenantal Community	11
Choosing What to Remember	15
Invited Under the Canopy	21
Privileged Lives	27
Cosmic Implications	33
See the Sounds	39
Transformational Torah	45
Investing Our Total Selves	51

## חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו



# Introduction

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו  
*He planted in us eternal life*

**T**hese powerful words appear twice in our prayers. The beracha recited after receiving an aliyah to the Torah includes this recognition, as does the tefilla of Uva L'Tzion, in which we declare:

ברוך הוא אלוקינו שבראנו לכבודו והבדילנו מן התועים ונתן לנו תורת אמת  
 וחיי עולם נטע בתוכנו.

*Blessed is He, our God, who created us for His glory, separated us from those who stray, gave us the Torah of truth and implanted Eternal Life within us.*

We express our profound gratitude that Hashem has given us His Torah, that we have access to His manual for a most meaningful and purposeful life. Chazal (Shabbos 10a) understood the term “chayei olam,” this eternal life that Hashem planted in us, as referring to Torah study. If that is the meaning, why mention both “Toras emes” and “chayei olam”? Aren’t these both references to the same Torah?

The Shulchan Aruch (139:10) explains that the words Toras emes refer to *Torah shebichsav*, the written Torah, and *chayei olam*, planted eternal life, refers to the *Torah sheb’al peh*, the oral Torah. Hashem gave us both His written code, which the world has access to, but He gave only us, the Jewish people, His oral Torah, the secret companion.

The Talmud (Nidda 30b) tells us that in the period of gestation in the womb, Jewish babies spend their time learning Torah with an angel. When we are born, we are tapped on the lip and forget all we learned. If we know at the outset that we will end up forgetting it all, why bother learning that Torah to start with?

Every Jew has inside them a *pintele yid*, a Jewish spark. There is a voice inside us that drives even the most distant Jew to desire to draw close to his or her people, towards Torah and towards Hashem. Where does that

pull come from? Explains Rabbi Soloveitchik, when we learned with the angel, even though we immediately forgot the substance, the impact of the experience remained. The power of Torah is imprinted on our hearts so that when we later learn or observe we are doing something that feels familiar, that is not entirely new to us.

*Chayei olam nata b'socheinu* – Torah, its messages, values, ideas and ideals, are implanted inside each of us. It is who we are and who we are destined to become. Like a planted seed, every Jew is pregnant with possibility, rich with potential, all waiting to be realized and actualized.

I am proud and honored to share this collection of sermons I have been privileged with Hashem's help to deliver at Boca Raton Synagogue during Shavuot over many years. I want to thank my brother-in-law Binyamin Muschel for his help in editing this digest and all of my writings. His contribution extends well beyond commas and spelling and is a source of invaluable feedback, further ideas, references, and much more.

This digest is dedicated in honor of my daughter Estee's Bas Mitzvah. As she enters the age of mitzvos, we celebrate the *chayei olam* in our Chaya Esther (Estee's full name). Estee is naturally kind, compassionate and good. She has a strong moral compass and is always drawn to do the right thing. Her love of Hashem at a young age is remarkable. Estee is smart, capable and mature. By far, her greatest quality is her humility. She is understated, unassuming and gets along with everyone.

May Hashem enable our Estee to fully realize the *chayei olam*, the extraordinary potential that is planted inside of her to achieve great success in all of her endeavors and to give nachas to us, to her family, to our community and most of all, to Hashem.

As we welcome the holiday of Shavuot and each receive the Torah anew, I hope and pray that these Divrei Torah will inspire you to recommit to learn and practice our sacred *Toras emes* and to reimagine the *chayei olam* that is planted inside *you*.

With Torah blessings,

**Rabbi Efram Goldberg**

# Leading an Integrated Torah Life

**SHAVUOS 2007/5767**

**W**e have all heard of the “five-second rule,” the old adage that if you drop food on the floor but pick it up within five seconds, it’s okay to eat it. Indeed, some are machmir and apply a three-second rule, some are meikil and use a ten-second rule, but we have all heard of the dropped food rule. The New York Times had an article a few weeks ago quoting a scientific paper from Clemson University that was both pioneering and hilarious. Accompanied by six graphs, two tables and equations whose terms include bologna and carpet, the paper is a thorough microbiological study of the five-second rule. The researchers found that on surfaces that had been contaminated eight hours earlier, slices of bologna and bread left for five seconds took up from 150 to 8,000 bacteria. Left for a full minute, slices collected about 10 times more. The article concludes that if you drop a piece of food, you should pick it up quickly, take five seconds to recall that just a few bacteria can make you sick, then take a few more to think about where you dropped it and whether or not it’s worth eating.

While the legitimacy of some rules like the five second rule are debated and subject to scientific scrutiny, other rules, like those of the Torah that we celebrate this morning, are nothing short of divine and immutable. Nevertheless, to regard the Torah as simply a book of rules, laws and legislation, and to view the holiday of Shavuos as the celebration of such, is to miss the true profundity and greatness of our sacred gift from Hashem. The Torah is much more than rules and its central role in our lives is more significant than a book.

This morning, we have all recited the Birchos HaTorah, the blessings on learning Torah. We followed up by reading from Torah, Mishna and Gemara to fulfill the mitzvah we just made a beracha on. Normally, when it comes to a beracha on a mitzvah, if I interrupt and go back to the mitzvah later, I must make a new beracha. If I eat a meal in the sukkah, and then I leave the sukkah, when I return and begin another meal, I make a new beracha.

Yet, when it comes to the mitzvah and beracha of learning torah, even if I interrupt my day with some other activity and return to learning later in the day, I don't make a new beracha. Why not? Tosafos explain (Berachos 11b) “*she'eino miya'eish mida'ato, shekol sha'ah chayav lilmod* — because it is never lost from his thought, because at all times he is obligated to learn.” Rav Hutner adds that Tosafos don't just mean that the obligation is constant. Rather, part of learning Torah is “*lilmod al menas la'asos* — learning in order to do”. Thus, a life lived according to the Torah is not a break in *talmud Torah*, but part of the fulfillment of the obligation.

The *Halacha* is that if someone forgot to say Birchas HaTorah but did say *Ahavah Rabbah* before *Shema*, he needn't say Birchas HaTorah. *Ahavah Rabbah* qualifies as Birchas HaTorah. How? The beracha of Ahava Rabbah seems too broad, since it refers not only to learning Torah, but also to fulfilling *mitzvos*.

Again Rav Hutner explains that other *mitzvos* are not a break from *talmud Torah*, but rather are a fulfillment of *lilmod al menas la'asos*.

Rav Hutner's tendency toward breadth goes much further than that. In his *Igeros* (pg. 84), he answers a student who felt like he was split, living a double life — a life of Torah and a secular life centered around a career — and was seeking guidance. Rav Hutner answered with a metaphor: If a person has a home, and in addition he takes up residence in a hotel, he is living a double life. But if the person has a home that has two rooms, he is not living a double life, he is living a broad life. By placing it all under only one roof, there is a broad unity, not a split. “*Bekhol derakhakha da'eihu* — know Him in all your ways.”

A life of Torah must include *reshus*, placing one's second room under the same roof, without which even the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* is itself incomplete. This is why that student's pursuit of a career did not necessitate his making a second Birchas HaTorah. Rav Hutner told this student who is now a professional not to consider his career a distraction. Quite the contrary! Someone who lives a Torah life, and does so as broadly as possible, has the *beracha* of earning a long life.

In many ways, this is the message of Shavuot. When we re-experience the acceptance of the Torah, we aren't only committing to embrace

the scholarship and academic components of Torah. We aren't only dedicating ourselves to study, to learning and to limud HaTorah, though this is a critical pre-requisite. On Shavuos, we are recommitting ourselves each year to living our lives, every aspect and component of it under the guidance and direction of Torah. On Shavuos we acknowledge that our lives are not compartmentalized into sacred and mundane, Torah and secular, but rather we live in many rooms under one roof.

The Gemara in Pesachim (68b) discusses how a person should spend his Yamim Tovim. Rabbi Eliezer maintains that a person should spend his entire day doing the same thing, either "LaHashem" - in spiritual endeavors (Torah study), or "Lochem" (for you) - eating and drinking. Rabbi Yehoshua differs, and holds that a person should divide his day evenly between the two. The Gemara concludes, "All agree that on Shavuos you need also "Lachem," for you, since this is the day that the Torah was given to Yisrael."

The question commonly asked is that logic seemingly would dictate the opposite. On the day the Torah was given, shouldn't all agree that it must be spent with spiritual endeavors?

Rav Moshe explains that the day the Torah was given, one must instill in his heart that Torah is not only relegated to spiritual concerns. Rather, Torah rules over all of a person's dealings. A person must put all physical, mundane and secular matters such as eating and drinking under the domain of the Torah.

Whether or not we accept the five-second rule, may we all successfully accept not only the rules of Torah, but its infinite wisdom in informing and guiding every aspect of our lives.

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

# Members of a Covenantal Community

**SHAVUOS 2010/5770**

God is now following you on Twitter.” Imagine how startling it was to get that email. I looked up from my computer, took a deep breath and felt great pride that I have finally arrived, even Hashem, God Himself is now following me on Twitter. As it turns out, when you have a Twitter account, every time someone signs up to follow your posts, you get an email alerting you. Someone made their username “God” and so the email said “God is now following you on Twitter.”

ויקח ספר הברית ויקרא באזני העם ויאמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע.

*Moshe took the book of the covenant and read it in earshot of the people, and they said, “everything that Hashem has spoken, we will do and we will obey!” (Shemos 24:7)*

In truth, Hashem is following each and every one of us every day of our lives, on Twitter, and in every other way. The seminal moment of Har Sinai in which we declared our intention to obey God’s will, was our moment to “follow” Hashem back.

Today, Shavuos, we celebrate and recreate that decisive moment of kaballas haTorah. What is it exactly that we are marking, that we are seeking to draw from? Why is this day special? Most would answer, Shavuos represents when we received the Torah and became obligated in mitzvos. The problem is that this is not accurate. Most of the Torah and the overwhelming amount of mitzvos were given at different periods in the desert – in *Arvos Moav, Marah*, and each time Moshe came to the *ohel mo'eid*. In fact, at Sinai, at least according to *Rebbe Yishmael*, only ten commandments were given. Six hundred and three were given elsewhere and at other times. Why, then, is *Shavuos* special, what makes it exceptional?

Another question arises from the Haggadah that we read just a short seven weeks ago, where we famously appreciate the independent value

and meaning to the Har Sinai experience, without needing to recognize the Torah being given then. “*Ilu keirvanu lifnei Har Sinai v’lo nassan lanu es haTorah, dayenu*, had Hashem only brought us to Har Sinai and not given us the Torah, *dayenu*, it would have been enough.” How could it possibly have been enough?

More than 35 years ago, a book was written that would turn out to be prophetic. “*A Nation of Strangers*” by Vance Packard noticed already then that America was rapidly becoming splintered. Packard argued that the increasing mobility of the American workforce was destined to have unforeseen and deleterious effects on society. Sadly, he has been proven correct. Today, sociologists describe that we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness in society. Despite social networking that was designed to link people and create bonds, more than four in ten Americans admit to frequent feelings of intense loneliness. There is a longing for belonging and a great desire to be connected.

Rav Chaim Freidlander, in his *Sifsei Chaim*, explains that when we were liberated from Egypt, we were a group of individuals, but we were not a community. Until we arrived at Har Sinai, we were a secular political entity. Only after gathering around that mountain with a shared purpose and collective mission did we achieve peoplehood and become a sacred community.

When we stood at the base of that modest mountain as one entity, one person with one heart, we formed an eternal entity – *Knesses Yisroel*, the people of Israel. Before mitzvos defined us, we created a bond and a link that would transcend barriers and boundaries. When we recite *Birchos HaTorah* in the morning or when we get an aliyah, we say *asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim, v’nassan lanu es Toraso*. Before acknowledging having received the Torah, we recognize having been formed a sacred nation with a divine mission – first, *asher bachar banu* and only then, *v’nassan lanu es Toraso*.

Shavuot is undoubtedly a time for renewed commitment to mitzvah observance. It is unquestionably a time for reinvigorated dedication to Torah study. But first, it is a time to reflect on what it means to be a member of a sacred community. Shavuot mandates us to think how

the community empowers us and how we can empower the community. Shavuot reminds us that *dayenu*, to be a member of a sacred society and purpose-driven nation would have been enough to obligate an expression of gratitude.

### **YIZKOR REFLECTION...**

Momentarily we will recite Yizkor yet again. This Yizkor, the Yizkor of Shavuot, is different from the other times of the year. As physical beings, we are all bound by time and we are bound by space. We have limitations and we are finite. And yet, there is one thing that can help us transcend our physical limitations and connect with others from a different time and in a different place – community. The Midrash tells us every Jewish soul was present at Har Sinai. The Zohar expands on that, adding that even every future convert was there.

When we see our destiny intertwined with that of the Jewish people, when we see our identity formed and forged by that of the community, we can transcend our limitations and connect with every Jewish soul no matter where and when they may have lived.

When we say Yizkor this morning, we are not acknowledging or thinking about people who were part of our past. By experiencing Har Sinai once again and committing to our role in community, we make them very relevant and part of our present. We may speak a different primary language than our grandparents did, we may have different tastes and live in a different culture. Our foods may be prepared unlike theirs were. While there may be so much that divides us, our participation and membership in the greater Jewish community and national destiny binds us in a most palpable and authentic way.

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

# Choosing What to Remember

SHAVUOS 2012/5772

**F**or many people, Memorial Day is the official start of summer. For others, it is a day for barbecues and picnics. Some look forward eagerly to Memorial Day for the Indianapolis 500 race, the Memorial Golf Tournament, fantastic shopping sales, or a great parade through their town. Many look forward to Memorial Day, but sadly, few know when it started or what it is really all about.

רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חייך והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך. יום אשר עמדת לפני יהוה אלהיך בחרב...

*Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from you heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and you children's children – the day that you stood before Hashem, your God at Chorev. (Devarim 4:9)*

As the Jewish people stood on the cusp of entering the promised land, Moshe, in his final days on this earth, exhorted the people to not only remember the mitzvos - the laws, details, ceremonies and rituals. Rather, he emphasized, they would need to remember the experience of Har Sinai itself - the thunder, the lightening, the unforgettable moment of unprecedented and unparalleled divine revelation.

In Pirkei Avos (3:8), Rabbi Dostai bar Yannai shared in the name of Rebbe Meir a seemingly extreme teaching based on this passuk.

כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו מתחייב בנפשו, שנאמר (דברים ד) רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך.

*Whoever forgets any of his Torah learning, is as if he or she is liable for his or her life.*

Understood simply, the Mishna is using hyperbole to emphasize the importance of not being lazy or lackadaisical in our approach to Torah study, to learning, and to growing in life. We cannot become complacent or negligent. If we aspire to grow in Torah we must be diligent, organized, and review constantly. At the simple level, the Mishna is teaching that we are accountable for forgetting because it means we didn't take the necessary steps to review.

I would like to suggest a different understanding of the Mishna. Essentially, the Mishna is calling forgetting a capital crime, *mischayeiv b'nafsho*. Why so harsh a punishment for a totally natural phenomenon? Don't we all forget eventually? Doesn't everyone's memory fail over time?

It is very interesting to observe what people remember and what they forget. To some degree, we all have selective memory. Some people can tell you batting averages or ERA's of their favorite players but they can't recall their kids' birthdays. Some know exactly where they were when major events unfolded yet can't remember what they had for breakfast yesterday.

Scientists explain that the more personal, intimate, and meaningful an event, the deeper it gets embedded in our memory. That which we truly care about, value, and enjoy gets registered and filed more securely than that which we don't. What emerges is there are really two types of forgetfulness. There is forgetfulness that comes from natural memory loss as a result of aging or trauma. And there is the forgetfulness that comes from a memory not truly embedding itself because it wasn't given priority status when it was formed.

It seems to me that we are not accountable for the first type of forgetfulness. Hashem created the human being and designed the aging process. However, the second type, forgetting because we never registered the memory in a way that we would remember, is something that we are accountable for. We are accountable because through that act of forgetting we have essentially declared that it wasn't worth remembering.

What we choose to remember and what we allow ourselves to forget says so much about us. The Mishna is warning that if we allow ourselves to forget the teachings, lessons, and values we are to hold most dear, *mis'chayeiv*

*b'nafsho*, we have forfeited a piece of our very souls. If we allow ourselves to forget and we fail to remember that which sustains and nourishes our souls, *mis'chayeiv b'nafsho*, our souls become starved.

## **YIZKOR REFLECTION...**

The strength of a memory is directly proportional to how important that memory is for us. Momentarily we will recite Yizkor and collectively make a statement about who is important to us through the fact that we choose to remember them.

But today, we don't just remember our loved ones. Today is Memorial Day. Today is not just about the shopping or barbecues or even parades. It is about much more. Memorial Day was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, when flowers were placed on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery.

In 1861, in response to the election of an anti-slavery Republican as President, eleven southern states that were pro-slavery declared their intent to secede from the United States and form the Confederate States of America. The remaining 25 states supported the federal government and after four years of civil war, the Confederacy surrendered and slavery was outlawed everywhere in the nation.

More Americans died in the Civil War than in any other conflict in US history, necessitating the establishment of the country's first national cemeteries. In the late 1860s people in towns and cities across the South and the North began a springtime tradition of paying tribute to the countless fallen soldiers and honoring their memories, and thus began Memorial Day, according to most.

Yale University historian David Blight, however, attributes Memorial Day to a more specific group of people. Recently freed slaves knew the sacrifices the Union soldiers had made for their freedom and decided to honor them. Together with teachers and missionaries, black people in Charleston organized a May Day ceremony covered by national papers.

Blight writes: “African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the War had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution.”

And so, Memorial Day is really about exactly what its name suggests, a day to remember. This morning we remember the thousands of U.S. soldiers who have given their lives to defend our freedoms and to provide security for this magnificent country that has been a better host to the Jewish people than any other country in history. We remember the “Second American Revolution” and the values of civil rights, human freedom, dignity and honor. This morning, as Americans, we honor Memorial Day and all that it represents.

And at the same time, as Torah Jews, we honor a day also dedicated to memory and remembering, the holiday of Shavuot. Moshe’s message as he stood on the banks of the Jordan is as relevant today as it was then. We must not only pass on the laws, the mitzvos and the rules. We must also pass on the memories of the experiences, the feelings, and the emotions. *Shemor nafshecha m’od pen tishkach*, we must individually and collectively exert great effort and energy to make sure our precious Torah is not forgotten. If we do not remain cognizant and aware of our past, *mis’chayeiv b’nafsho*, we threaten our very future.

This past Wednesday, Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu reinstated a practice that was started by David Ben-Gurion and continued by Menachem Begin. They would gather with rabbis, scholars and academics for a weekly Torah study. This week, Bibi and his guests studied the book we read this morning, the book of Rus. Bibi explained: “Ben-Gurion and Begin believed that the Bible should be the heritage of the entire nation – secular and religious, young and old, men and women. The Bible is the foundation of our existence. It unites the Jewish people, as it has throughout the generations. It also serves not only as a foundation but also as a map and compass.”

*Kol ha’shocheiach... mis’chayeiv b’nafsho*, whoever forgets will pay with his life. If we forget who we are, where we come from, the people who came

before us, the lessons they have sought to impart to us, if we forget... then we ourselves are destined to be forgotten.

As we recite Yizkor, let's be a community that remembers. We honor the memory of those whom we never met but who gave their lives for our freedom, and we honor those whom we knew intimately, our loved ones who are no longer here. By cherishing the memories of our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, by holding onto the lessons they have taught us and making sure we do not forget them, we are in fact making sure that we ourselves will never be forgotten.

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

# Invited Under the Canopy

**SHAVUOS 2013/5773**

Orlando may be over 100 degrees in the summer, but a pathetic and disturbing way to avoid the lines and beat the heat has recently made headlines. The New York Post reported this week about a black market service being taken advantage of by wealthy tourists to Disney World in Orlando. While some pay the high fees for the “Fast Pass” allowing them to go to the front of the line, the black-market Dream Tours Guide service provides a disabled person to pose as a family member for a mere \$130 an hour. One woman said she hired a Dream Tours guide to escort her, her husband and their two young children through the park in a motorized scooter with a “handicapped” sign on it. The group was sent straight to an auxiliary entrance at the front of each attraction and didn’t have to wait at all.

ויצא משה את העם לקראת האלהים מן המחנה ויתצבו בתחתית ההר.

*Moshe brought the people forth from the camp toward Hashem, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. (Shemos 19:17)*

The passuk, for accuracy’s sake, should say the people stood at the base of the mountain or next to the mountain, but instead describes the position of the Jewish people when they received the Torah as tachtis ha’har, underneath the mountain. How is that possible?

Rashi highlights the well-known Gemara (Shabbos 88a) which explains:

ויתצבו בתחתית ההר אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.

*“And they gathered under the mountain.” Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa says that this means Hashem overturned the mountain upon them like an inverted barrel, and said to them, “if you accept the Torah, good, but if not, there will be your burial.”*

The image of 2-3 million people all threatened with accepting the Torah or suffering the consequences is certainly dramatic, but hardly inspiring and surely difficult to reconcile with the sentiment and expression that defines the seminal event of receiving the Torah. Didn't we readily and voluntarily accept the Torah when we said *na'aseh v'nishma*? This question bothered Tosafos, who suggest that God's coercion was only intended on being an insurance policy lest we back out of our voluntary commitment.

Rabbi Soloveitchik was also troubled by the coercive component of what should have been the highest religious experience known to man. He therefore suggests in his *Lonely Man of Faith*: "Man feels overpowered and defeated by God even when he appears to be a free agent of his own will." In other words, God's revelation is so great and powerful that even though we have free will, when we see His presence and existence with 20-20 vision, we can't help but be drawn to fulfill God's will.

No matter how you try to reconcile it, the idea that God held the mountain over our heads and forced us to accept His Torah hardly sets the stage for a loving, romantic, passionate, affectionate relationship with the Almighty. In fact, though a widely known and popular understanding, it is an image that is somewhat disheartening and demoralizing.

Thankfully, though not nearly as well known, there is a second interpretation of *va'yisatzvu b'tachtis ha'har*. The *Mechilta D'Rebbe Yishmael* also notes that rather than say we were at the base of the mountain, the *passuk* describes us as positioned under the mountain. However, it suggests that we arrived there in a very different way.

We don't necessarily appreciate this when we read the story, but imagine the conditions in the Sinai desert this time of year. The History Channel actually did an episode on it and suggested it might get as hot as 120 degrees. There was no Fast Pass in the desert and no shameful Dream Tours Guide for hire. The Jewish people must have been melting as they waited for this awesome moment when they would experience the greatest Divine revelation in history. Explains the *Mechilta*,

בתחתית ההר. מלמד שנתלש ההר ממקומו, וקרבו ועמדו תחת ההר, שנאמר

(דברים ד:יא) ותקרבו ותעמדון תחת ההר. עליהם מפורש בקבלה (שיר השירים ב:יד) יונתי בחגוי הסלע.

*"Under the mountain," this teaches that the mountain was pulled up from its place and the people came near and stood under it as it says, "and you came near and stood under the mountain." Of them it is described in Shir Ha'Shirim, "oh my dove that is in the cleft of the rock."*

In great contrast to the more popular interpretation, the Mechilta suggests that the Jewish people were not threatened by the mountain over their head at the moment of Kabbalas haTorah. Instead, they walked under the mountain voluntarily. Why? Because Hashem offered them shade, protection, and shelter, just like the dove protected by the cleft of the rock. According to this earlier Midrash, the moment of Har Sinai is not characterized by coercion, compulsion or a threat. Rather, it is the image of Hashem affectionately shielding us, lovingly shading us, tenderly taking us under His wing to make us feel comfortable and not afraid.

Vayisatzvu b'tachtis ha'har, we were under the mountain. Two legitimate interpretations have emerged for this verse, though somehow we have embraced only one. The message of coercion, forcefulness, and a threatening atmosphere are turning off too many of our young people and frankly too many of us. Sadly, too many people look back at the giving of the Torah dispassionately and see it as the event that brought great limitations and restrictions to their lifestyle and brought a cold, distant, relationship with Hashem. For too many, Har Sinai invokes a Judaism that is about minutia, details, and a lifestyle we were coerced into accepting.

I would like to suggest to you this morning that we need to return to the original, earlier interpretation of the passuk. When it was time to give the Torah, Hashem first affectionately cared for our comfort and our well-being. He was careful to make sure that His Torah wasn't a source of fear, discomfort or uneasiness. He invited us to walk under His mountain rather than hold the mountain threateningly over our heads. Ultimately, Hashem did not water down or hold back from sharing his rigorous expectations of us or from holding us responsible to follow His laws. But, according to the Mechilta, He lovingly welcomed us under His canopy

and established an affectionate relationship first.

As we celebrate Shavuos and the giving of the Torah, this is the moment to reflect on the two interpretations of the passuk and to ask ourselves, which atmosphere are we creating, which environment have we produced? Do we use Torah like a mountain held over the heads of our children, our friends, even the unaffiliated who don't know better?

Or, like Hashem, do we use the Torah to affectionately provide comfort, protection, and establish a loving relationship? Our Shul, and even more importantly our homes, must be inspired by the image of the Mechilta. They must be welcoming recreations of the Sinai experience in which Torah promotes love, concern, and care. Our fidelity to Torah must be unequivocal, our adherence to its laws must be non-negotiable, but they must be predicated on creating an environment that welcomes, loves, and cares about the comfort of all.

### **YIZKOR REFLECTION...**

Rabbi Simon Jacobson, author of “Towards a Meaningful Life” recently shared the following story that happened to him. In March 2011, he visited London and went to Shul on Shabbos. Next to him sat an elderly gentleman who had bags of candies at his place. All the children were lining up in front of him to receive a candy. When each child approached him, the man would embrace them, kiss them on the head and give them candy. Throughout the entire service, the kids were coming to him for a kiss and a candy.

Rabbi Jacobson said he couldn't help but ask the elderly man what inspired this weekly ritual. The man shared with him his story. He had survived the war, but lost his entire family—parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, everybody. Like so many other survivors, he was a lone soul bereft of an entire family that went up in the smoke of Hitler's crematoria. This man was devastated beyond words; a lonely man in a cold and dark world.

As with other survivors, he did not want to marry. He was too broken and depressed. And he felt it was wrong to bring children into such a world, to

subject them to the horrors he experienced. Someone suggested he pay a visit to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. This was in the early 1960's.

He shared his story with the Rebbe and expressed his un-readiness to rebuild. He was just too angry, too sad. The Rebbe asked him that fateful day: What links you to your father and mother, to your brothers and sisters, to your entire family that went up in the smoke of Nazi Germany—what is it that maintains your connection to them? You don't have memorabilia, pictures, or keepsakes. What connects you to them today?

It is one thing, said the Rebbe: it is love. What you have left from them and what you continue to give to them, is love. They may be gone, but your love for them remains. So, said the Rebbe, if you want to remain connected to them—it is through keeping your love toward them alive. The best way to do that is by getting married and having your own children and giving those children, the next generation, all the love in the world. Don't only love your children, love all children and in that way you will continue to connect with your parents, your siblings and your entire family.

The man then turned to Rabbi Jacobson: "I listened to the Rebbe. Here I am, a Zeide. I have children. I have grandchildren. And every child that passes my seat and my life, I give them all the love I can." Rabbi Jacobson noted that those little kinderlach in London would have never guessed what is going through this man's precious and holy heart every time he gave them a lollipop. Giving out candy was his weekly yizkor. He honored his parents by spreading the love he continued to feel for them to others.

When we think about our parents, we don't remember their kafa aleihem har k'gigis, their rules, their lessons, their restrictions and their boundaries. When we think about our parents, grandparents neighbors and friends, we remember their love, their affection, their warm embrace, caring concern, and endless devotion to our comfort and happiness. We honor their memory and pay them tribute when we pass that love forward and, as they did, hold Torah high like a mountain for all those who need to find protection and comfort in its shade.

That old candy man showered love as a form of yizkor. As we recite yizkor, let's pledge to shower love.

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

# Privileged Lives

**SHAVUOS 2014/5774**

**A** month ago, Princeton University freshman Tal Fortgang made headlines when he wrote an article for a student newspaper that went viral. He clearly touched a nerve as his words were picked up by Fox News, the New York Times, and countless other outlets and publications. Some applauded and supported him, but many pushed back, as his article was heavily criticized on blogs and social media.

He began, "There is a phrase that floats around college campuses, Princeton being no exception, that threatens to strike down opinions without regard for their merits, but rather solely on the basis of the person that voiced them. 'Check your privilege,' the saying goes, and I have been reprimanded by it several times this year."

Tal was sick of having his opinions and positions discounted and dismissed because of the perceived privileged background he comes from. He was tired of being told to "check his privilege," by essentially divorcing where he is from from who he is and the opinions he forms.

Taking their suggestion literally, he continues, "So to find out what they are saying, I decided to take their advice. I actually went and checked the origins of my privileged existence, to empathize with those whose underdog stories I can't possibly comprehend. I have unearthed some examples of the privilege with which my family was blessed, and now I think I better understand those who assure me that skin color allowed my family and I to flourish today."

It is what he wrote next that attracted all of the controversy and passion on both sides.

רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך. יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלקיך בחרב באמר ה' אלי הקהל לי את העם ואשמעם את דברי...

*Only guard yourself and guard your soul greatly lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen and lest they move from your heart all the days of your life; and you will make them known to your children and to your children's children, the day you stood before Hashem your God at Chorev... (Devarim 4:9-10)*

In addition to the obligation to learn, remember, observe and protect the mitzvos, the laws and lifestyle we were taught at Sinai, we are also enjoined to remember and hold onto the event itself, to cherish the experience and to safeguard the memory of standing together as one nation in an unprecedented and unparalleled moment of revelation and unity.

Rashi, and according to the Megillas Esther the Rambam, interpret the passuk to be referring to the mitzvos. The Torah is telling us that in perpetuity we must cling to the mitzvos and never forget to fulfill them.

The Ramban, however, in his comments on the Rambam's *Sefer Ha-Mitzvos* (lo sa'aseh, addition #2), says whenever the Torah uses the word *hishameir*, be vigilant, it means to introduce a *lav*, an actual negative commandment. The Ramban therefore counts remembering the revelation at Har Sinai, and making sure we never forget the experience, as a commandment unto itself. In an effort to fulfill this obligation, many have the custom of reciting the verses above as part of the *sheish zechiros*, the 6 remembrances, every morning after davening.

My question for you this morning is simple: Aren't Rashi and the Rambam correct? What is the value of waxing nostalgic, clinging to the memory, longing for the past? Isn't what matters the mitzvos, their fulfillment, and our commitment to live the life that God intends for us? What does the Ramban hoping to achieve when he obligates us to remember Har Sinai? How can I cling to a memory I never actually had?

I would like to suggest to you that two things took place at Har Sinai. First, Hashem charged us with a mission to be a model of how to live in His world. Through His mitzvos we teach the world how to relate to time, food, people, business, agriculture, justice, charity, kindness and so on. At Har Sinai we accepted an awesome responsibility and we took on a sacred and divine duty.

But something else happened as well. Simply being tapped by the Almighty for this responsibility, being chosen for this task, being designated for this purpose, was and is an extraordinary privilege. *L'havdil*, when someone is hired for a prestigious position, when someone is elected for a high office or when someone is selected to carry out a critical mission, they simultaneously feel both the weight of the responsibility as well as the honor and privilege to serve. At Har Sinai, through the mitzvos we were given responsibilities, but also a great privilege.

The Mishna in Avos that we recite daily teaches, *Rebbe Chananya ben Akashya omer, ratza Hakadosh Baruch Hu l'zakos es Yisroel, l'fichach hirbah lahem Torah u'mitzvos ...* The Holy One, Blessed Be He, wanted to bestow merit upon the Jewish people therefore He bestowed a vast Torah with a plethora of mitzvos.

Of course we must safeguard and observe the mitzvos, thereby fulfilling our mission and responsibility. The Ramban critically adds that we must never ever forget what a privilege it is to be a Jew, how fortunate we are, despite all of the challenges, sacrifices and suffering, to be given the blueprint for the world and the manual for living a meaningful life. Never forget the privilege of being tapped for the job, recruited for this position, and charged with this mission.

The responsibility of the mitzvos is one we recognize every single day. On Shavuot, what we are celebrating today is the gift, the privilege, and the extraordinary opportunity of having been sworn in at Har Sinai. Tell your children, says the passuk, how lucky, blessed, and fortunate they are. Remind them to never "check their privilege," but instead to remain keenly and acutely aware of it, always and forever. Never divorce their Judaism from who they are, never set aside where they come from and never strive to transcend their history and heritage.

The Talmud tells us that the very first words we should teach our children when they learn to speak are *Torah tziva lanu Moshe, morasha k'hillas Yaakov*. Torah tziva, Moshe gave us the mitzvos, but *morasha*, he also gave us an inheritance, a birthright and a legacy that are a permanent and inseparable part of who we are.

*Hishameir lecha pen tishkach*, be careful lest you forget, *yom asher amadeta*

*lifnei Hashem Elokecha b'choreiv.* To be a Jew means to forever be aware of where we came from, Har Sinai, the distinction and mission we have, the responsibility and duty, but also the honor and privilege we were born with and we carry always.

After being told so many times to “check his privilege,” Tal Fortgang literally did just that and wrote about his “privileged” background including his grandfather fleeing the Nazis, great aunts and uncles being shot in a mass grave, his grandmother going on a death march, and family immigrating to America with no money, no English and almost no opportunity. Despite it all, through hard work, resilience and perseverance, they attained citizenship, success, and built a beautiful life.

He concludes his article, “I am privileged that values like faith and education were passed along to me. My grandparents played an active role in my parents’ education, and some of my earliest memories included learning the Hebrew alphabet with my Dad... It’s not a matter of white or black, male or female or any other division which we seek, but a matter of the values we pass along, the legacy we leave, that perpetuates ‘privilege.’ And there’s nothing wrong with that... I have checked my privilege. And I apologize for nothing.”

On Shavuot, we check our privilege and we apologize for nothing. We can and should be proud, honored, and deeply grateful for having stood at Har Sinai. Being a Jew is badge of honor, a distinction and privilege, and one that we should never have to hide, be defensive or apologetic about or God forbid check.

## **YIZKOR REFLECTION...**

Tomorrow, June 6<sup>th</sup> is the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day, when allied forces landed in Normandy on the coast of France in the largest seaborne invasion in history, in an effort to push back the Germans in World War II. Most historians see that battle as the turning point in the war that propelled the Allies to victory. Nevertheless, it didn’t come without a very heavy cost. The American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach holds the remains

of 9,383 servicemen and four women. As Americans, it is incumbent on all of us to pause tomorrow to remember the extraordinary sacrifice close to 10,000 people made fighting not only for American freedom but to liberate our Jewish brothers and sisters imprisoned by Germany.

Among the many crosses marking graves are 149 Jewish stars at the graves of the Jewish soldiers who gave their lives fighting in the American army. One Jewish American soldier who did not die in Normandy, though he came very close, was Hal Baumgarten.

Hal was a 19-year-old private from New York. The U.S. military allowed Jews to change their designation on their dog tag from Jewish so that if the Germans captured them, they wouldn't be tortured or killed. In fact, many did so saying they were Christians. Baumgarten chose not to.

He explained, no one knew about the atrocities the Germans were committing against Jews in the concentration camps, but he had seen the newsreel footage of Kristallnacht. He also had seen that when Germany invaded Denmark, Poland and other countries, they made Jews wear the Star of David. Baumgarten said he wanted the Germans to see he was a Jew, "but I had a M-1 rifle." So, instead of taking his Judaism off of his dog tags and "checking his privilege," he proudly drew a Star of David on the back of his flack jacket.

He described that he avoided seasickness on the boat trip across the English Channel because he had some Cadbury chocolate instead of the big breakfasts the other soldiers devoured. When they arrived in Normandy, seasickness was the least of his worries.

A German machine gunner shot down most of the men exiting Baumgarten's boat. There were 30 soldiers in the boat and only two of them, including Hal, survived. He made it to the beach and German machine gunners and snipers kept picking off men to the left and right of him. He lost his upper jaw, he had a hole in the roof of his mouth and shrapnel in his head, but he kept shooting and advancing. He then stepped on a mine-like device that left him with a wound to his left foot. That injury slowed him down and he was straggling behind when machine gunners killed almost every person in the unit he had joined. By then he was nearly unconscious from blood loss so he gave himself a morphine injection. He

woke up hours later, on a pile of dead soldiers. Using a machine gun, he caught the attention of an ambulance crew which transported him back to the beach for evacuation. It was there that German snipers started killing the wounded and Baumgarten suffered his fifth injury, a bullet to his right knee. He believes the Germans would have killed him, but because of the blood, they did not see his Star of David.

Over the years, Baumgarten underwent 23 operations to heal the wounds he suffered in Normandy. He became a doctor and practiced for 40 years helping heal others. As a proud American and privileged Jew, he has shared his story in many schools and at many D-day events.

Please God, we will never be asked to risk our lives by literally wearing our privilege, our Jewish identity on our back like Hal Baumgarten chose to do. However, we are confronted regularly with the invitation and pressure to “check our privilege,” forget where we came from and set aside a significant part of who we are.

The mitzvah to remember Har Sinai is not limited to a historical event but obligates us carry the memory of those that came before us and, with great tenacity and resolve, bequeathed to us our morasha, our heritage and inheritance, the sacred Torah. They are our connection; they are the links in the chain that brings us back to that seminal moment that changed Jewish and human history, when God shared His Torah with us.

Shavuot is incomplete if we don't pause to reflect, remember and express our endless gratitude to our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers and neighbors who took the message of the Ramban to heart and never forgot, never ceased from reminding us, their children, what a privilege it was to stand together at Sinai.

As we say yizkor for them, let us also remember the 149 Jewish soldiers and nearly 10,000 Americans who gave their lives 70 years ago tomorrow in an effort to liberate our ancestors so that they could have the privilege of freedom and so that we could enjoy the privilege that freedom offers us still today.

# Cosmic Implications

## SHAVUOS 2015/5775

In 2007, an employee of a New Jersey Dunkin Donuts named Dustin Hoffmann (not that one) made news when the store was nearly robbed by a serial robber who jumped on the counter grabbing the cash out of the cashiers' register. The twenty-something Hoffmann fought back. Grabbing the man's arm with one hand and a large coffee mug with another, he quickly and repeatedly smashed the crook's head with the mug and successfully thwarted the crime.

When later asked about the incident, Hoffmann said that what galvanized him into action was YouTube: "What was going through my mind at that point," he said, "was that the security tape is either going to show me run away and hide in the office, or whack this guy in the head, so I just grabbed the cup and clocked the guy pretty hard!" He then said, "There are only a few videos like that on YouTube now, so mine's going to be the best. That'll teach this guy!"

We traditionally assume that we read Megillas Rus on Shavuos because the story of Rus describes the paradigmatic convert. Rus made the choice to join the Jewish people and to forge her destiny with ours. She is the model of "opting in" and on the holiday in which we commemorate the mass conversion of our nation at Har Sinai, her story inspires us to embrace our Torah, our tradition and our heritage with great enthusiasm, zeal, and fervor.

Without rejecting that reason, I would like to suggest another one this morning.

Allow me to share with you a beautiful Midrash on the book of Rus:

א"ר יצחק בר מריון, בא הכתוב ללמדך שאם יהא אדם עושה מצוה יהא עושה בלב שלם. שאלו היה ראובן יודע שהב"ה מכתיב לו, וישמע ראובן ויצילהו מידם (בראשית לז: כא), [בכתפן] היה מוליכו לאביו. ואלו היה אהרן יודע שהב"ה מכתיב לו, וגם הנה הוא יוצא לקראתך (שמות ד: יד),

בתופים ובמחולות היה יוצא לקראתו. ואלו היה בעז יודע שהב"ה מכתוב לו, ויצבט לה קלי, עגלים פטומין היה מאכילה.

*The Torah teaches us Derech Eretz, that when a person does a mitzva, he should do it with a happy heart, because if Reuven would have known that God would write about him, "And Reuven heard and saved him (Yosef) from their hands," he would have brought Yosef back to his father carrying him on his shoulders. If Aharon would have known that God would write about him, "Behold he will come out towards you and be happy in his heart," he would have come out with drums and musical instruments (to greet Moshe). If Boaz would have known that God would write about him, "And he picked for her roasted corn," he would have served her fatted calves. ) (Rus Rabbah 5)*

Had he only known... the mic is on, the camera is rolling. Had he only realized that this clip of his life would be shown on YouTube... If they had only realized that the red light was flashing... they would have done so much more.

Asks Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, does the Midrash mean to suggest that these great individuals would have acted differently if they knew the cameras were on them? Are we meant to understand that these most humble, righteous individuals were motivated and driven by their egos such that their conduct would have been altered by the knowledge that their actions would be publicized? How could this be?

Explains Rav Yaakov, the Midrash doesn't mean to imply that that PR would have changed their behavior. It wasn't ego that was the problem. It was the opposite, their extreme humility. These great men thought of themselves as small, insignificant personalities on the great world stage. They saw their behaviors as small acts of kindness, no big deal. They failed to recognize the cosmic impact and large influence our small deeds can have.

If Reuven had indeed brought Yosef back to his father, the entire servitude and exile could have been avoided altogether. When Aharon and Moshe met, the greatest redemption in history was beginning to unfold and Moshe was on perhaps the most important and significant mission any

individual has ever undertaken in Jewish history.

Boaz thought he was giving a little tzedaka, sharing a small amount of food. Little did he know that his interaction with Rus was the beginning of a relationship that would yield the Davidic dynasty and ultimately that will bring Moshiach.

Indeed, Rus and Boaz were truly a match made in Heaven. Rus in her soft-spoken manner did what she thought was a small chesed. She refused to leave her mother-in-law alone and pledged to accompany her. Boaz, rather than looking the other way, embraced the chance at sharing the produce of his field. Together, these two individuals who saw themselves and their actions as pedestrian and inconsequential altered all of human destiny by planting the seeds for Moshiach. Indeed, the Midrash notes how God Himself took notice of their humility and declared, "Boaz did his, and Rus did hers, so too will I do Mine!

Our actions have cosmic implications. The small acts of kindness we engage in can make the biggest difference not only to ourselves, but to all of humanity. In 1963, meteorologist Edward Lorenz introduced what he called the "butterfly effect." He showed that the flapping of a butterfly's wing in Australia can cause a tornado in Kansas, a monsoon in Indonesia, or a hurricane in Boca Raton. Lorenz's thesis is part of a greater theory called chaos theory that essentially believes that small acts can have large outcomes. Chaos theory is applied in mathematics, programming, microbiology, biology, computer science, economics, engineering, finance, philosophy, physics, politics, population dynamics, psychology, robotics, and meteorology.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has applied chaos theory in one more realm. In his book "To Heal a Fractured World," he coined the phrase "chaos theory of virtue," demonstrating how small acts of kindness can have immeasurable consequences on the world.

Boaz and Rus each did one act that changed the world, and so can we. Who knows what opportunity we will be presented with or what chance we will encounter that can literally change the world. The Midrash has one last line and I believe it contains the reason we read Rus on Shavuot –

ר' כהן ור' יהושע דסכנין בשם ר' לוי אמר, לשעבר היה אדם עושה מצוה והנביא כותבה. ועכשיו עושה, מי כותבה? אליהו ומלך המשיח, והב"ה חותם על ידיהם.

*In earlier times when man would do a mitzva, the prophets would record it, now that there are no prophets, who records the mitzvot of man? Eliyahu and the Moshiach; and HaKadosh Baruch Hu stamps it. (Vayikra Rabbah Behar 34)*

On the day that we celebrate the giving of the Torah, Rus reminds us that the Torah is not yet complete. It is a work in progress because we continue to write it through our actions. There is a Megillas Rus and a Megillas Esther and a Parshas Noach and a Sefer Shmuel, but there are new megillos and new parshios and new sefarim being written every day that record our small acts and the ways they have changed the world, even without our knowing. We can become the heroes of tomorrow about whom the next book is written through our small acts of kindness.

A young man in our community recently lost his mother. She was a special woman who raised him herself, who loved learning and growing and who persevered through illness before she could no longer endure. In asking about her background, he shared with me that she wasn't born Jewish and like Rus had converted to Judaism. He is a spiritual person who takes his Judaism seriously and, together with his wife and young son, has a beautiful Jewish home steeped in Jewish values and Jewish law. He told me that in the last days of her life, he sat by her bedside and felt overwhelmed with gratitude for her decision over 55 years ago to become Jewish. That decision not only had a transformational impact on her and on him, but he realized that it would define their family for every generation to come.

My friends, never live your life assuming your choices don't make a difference. Never forfeit the incredible impact each of us can have on this world. Realize that even when we think we are alone, the camera is and our actions have influence and impact in ways we may never learn or appreciate.

## YIZKOR REFLECTION...

What will our children and friends remember about us? What gestures, actions and decisions do we make that will positively influence their lives?

While most of us can't point to a monumental decision of our parents that literally defined our identity, if we take a moment to remember, to think, we can all identify the small and sometimes not so small gestures, sacrifices, and efforts that our parents made which help define who we are. At a funeral just a few hours before Yom Tov, one of our members remembered how as a young boy he was afraid to walk home from the bus stop alone but even more afraid of the embarrassment of his friends seeing him walk home with his mom. Over 30 years later, what he remembers is how his mother crouched down and hid behind the bushes each day for almost two years until the bus pulled away so she could walk him home without him being embarrassed.

As we say Yizkor this morning, think of all the little things that your parents or grandparents did without fanfare or deliberation that actually had large impacts on you and your life and how you treat your spouse and children. Even though they were not aware, let us remember and appreciate and determine to do the same.

I close with an amazing poem by Mary Korzan -

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you hang my first painting on the refrigerator,  
and I wanted to paint another one.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you feed a stray cat,  
and I thought it was good to be kind to animals.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw you make my favorite cake for me,  
and I knew that little things are special things.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I heard you say a prayer,  
and I believed that there was a God to talk to.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I felt you kiss me goodnight,  
and I felt loved.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw tears come from your eyes,  
and I learned that sometimes things hurt,  
but it's alright to cry.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I saw that you cared,  
and I wanted to be everything that I could be.

When you thought I wasn't looking,  
I looked....  
and I wanted to say thanks for all the things  
I saw when you thought I wasn't looking.

# See the Sounds

**SHAVUOS 2016/5776**

**T**hough my children will tell you that it doesn't take much for me to cry, I was struggling to put my finger on exactly what was making me so emotional this past Tuesday night. True, I was sitting at the high school graduation of my oldest child. And yes, it is somewhat traumatic to think about her leaving Boca for Israel and then to College in NY. How often will we see her going forward? Will she make time to talk to us? Will she fill us in on what is happening in her life? But that, too, was not the source of my angst. I sat there trying to reflect and pinpoint exactly what was driving these strong emotions, and with 77 graduates, I had plenty of time to think.

And then it occurred to me. I was so choked up because she wasn't just graduating school; to a certain degree she is graduating our home, graduating being under our roof, under our supervision, under our guidance, and protection, and yes, graduating from the structured environment of our home with its rules and consequences. For eighteen years we have been the boss, we have been in charge, we set the rules. Sure, we had fun and amazing times and experiences. But though not often, like any teenager and her parents, we also battled and struggled over boundaries and limits and expectations.

And now, how will my little girl face the world without me? Will she always know what to do? Will she always make the right decisions? What if someone is bullying her, who will protect her? I am only sharing this reflection because I know it is not mine alone. I imagine many of you can relate to the challenge of having to let go, particularly for the first time. While I am so proud of her graduating school, I am dreading the thought of her graduating our home.

וכל העם ראים את הקולות ואת הלפידים ואת קול השפר ואת ההר עשן וירא  
העם ויגעו ויעמדו מרחק.

*And the entire people saw the thunder and lightning, and the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and when they saw all this they retreated and stood from afar. (Shemos 20:14)*

The Torah's description of Matan Torah, the most seminal moment in human history, a moment that defined not only a nation but gave meaning and purpose to the very creation of the world, is extremely powerful and dynamic, but also perplexing.

The question is obvious to each and every person listening to the Torah reading this morning. What does it mean to “see” sounds, to be *ro'im es ha'kolos*, to see the voice? Since our learning this Shavuot is dedicated to the topic of Kabbalah, I will begin by sharing with you the interpretation of the Zohar which writes, “These sounds were etched into the darkness, cloud and mist and were visible.” The Zohar understands the *passuk* literally: the sounds could be seen.

Though our rational minds dismiss this suggestion as mere mysticism and unrealistic, there is in fact a rare neurological condition called synesthesia which causes the senses to be mixed up and to see sounds as colors. Jan MacKay, a woman with the condition, describes that she sees sneezes as turquoise. “One of my earliest memories is that I could tell the difference between Canadian and American accents because the Canadian accent is more yellow.” Neurologist Richard Cytowic explained, “You know the word anesthesia, which means no sensation, synesthesia means joined sensation, and some people are born with two or more of their senses hooked together so that my voice, for example, is not just something that they hear, but it's also something that they might see.” Though this condition only occurs in one in twenty thousand, it is possible that for the seminal moment of Matan Torah, Hashem wanted to leave an indelible and unforgettable impression and so He caused us all to experience synesthesia so that we literally saw the sounds as the Zohar suggests.

The Kli Yakar comments that they didn't see the sounds as colors, but they actually visualized God's commandments, each letter, word and sentence they were hearing was projected before them. The vocalized words were expressed not only in sound waves, but materialized as physical letters

and words as if projected on a screen. Perhaps Matan Torah was the very first PowerPoint presentation.

The Ibn Ezra interprets the expression “see the sounds” much more metaphorically. We know that in many places in Tanach the expression “to see” is used for something that is intangible or conceptual. *Re’eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom beracha ukelala*, see I place before you today blessings and curses. Seeing is the sense we reference when we seek to convey the powerful impression something makes. In our own vernacular, when we want the person speaking to us to feel heard and validated we say, “I see what you are saying, I see your perspective on this issue.”

The Zohar, Kli Yakar and Ibn Ezra all offer fascinating interpretations, but I would like to suggest something a little different this morning.

Some speakers are talented at communicating ideas. They are well organized, articulate and effectively transmit the information, idea or concept. Yet as successful as these speakers are, their content remains intellectual, cognitive, and abstract. Much more rare and unusual are those speakers that are able to paint a picture with their words. Their message is so compelling and persuasive, the listener not only hears what they are saying, but sees their vision and pictures themselves living the life being described. This information doesn’t remain abstract and theoretical, but is absorbed by the listener such that they can envision themselves transformed and behaving differently.

The giving of the Torah was undoubtedly an educational, pedagogic experience. Laws and rules were communicated and transmitted to a nation that was now bound to observe them. For most people law is dry, sterile, and uninspiring. Law books and statutory codes are for reference only and are grossly unexciting and monotonous. One could easily have mistaken Matan Torah as an information session, an intellectual transmission of the new laws incumbent on the people. Perhaps the Torah is telling us that this description couldn’t be further from the truth.

At that fateful and faithful moment at Sinai, Hashem painted a picture for his people of a purpose-driven life, of an existence that is sacred and sanctified, of a lifestyle that is extraordinarily rewarding and spiritually

satisfying. Perhaps *V'chol ha'am ro'im es ha'kolos* means they didn't hear about 39 categories of forbidden creative labor on Shabbos, they **saw** what a Shabbos is like, they felt the serenity, tranquility and rest that Shabbos provides. They heard the laws of Shabbos but they pictured the Shabbos table filled with family and friends, they smelled the cholent and tasted the chicken soup. At Har Sinai, they didn't just hear about the detailed laws of the prohibition against stealing, they envisioned an ethical society and pictured themselves submitting honest tax returns.

Indeed, Har Sinai is the defining moment of our history not for the laws that we heard but the pictures and the images that we saw and became the vision of a lifestyle that is divinely enriching and elevating.

According to the Ramban, there is a biblical commandment to remember Har Sinai each and every day of our lives. Sinai cannot be something in the past, a piece of history, a part of an ancient record. Har Sinai remains relevant, compelling and real each day when we are *ro'im es hakolos*, when the voice of God spoken that day animates our lives such that it can be seen through us and our homes. Har Sinai is alive when Judaism for us is not a burden but a beracha, not limiting but limitless in its meaning, not a prescription for hardship but for holiness.

*V'chol ha'am ro'im es hakolos*. The entire nation seeing the voice, envisioning the message, and absorbing the sounds, is in many ways the mission of Jewish parenting. If when our children are in our homes and under our roofs we don't just offer *kolos*, the sounds of our voices issuing instructions, criticisms, rules and lessons, but they are *ro'im*, they see a picture of joy, of happiness, of values, and of a lifestyle, they will never truly graduate our homes, but that vision will continue to inspire them for the rest of their lives.

## YIZKOR REFLECTION...

When Yosef is seduced by the wife of Potiphar, after countless attempts in which he resisted, he was about to surrender when in his mind's eye he saw *demus deyukno shel aviv*, he saw an image of his father. Though they hadn't seen each other in many years, at a fateful, critical moment Yaakov continued to appear to Yosef and to influence him. Yaakov hadn't just spoken words but he painted a picture to Yosef of who he could be. When Yosef was far away from Yaakov, he continued to see that picture and it gave him the strength.

*V'chol ha'am ro'im es hakolos* - to not just use words but paint a picture is not just the mission and mandate of parents to children, but it is what makes us as children so connected to our parents, grandparents and loved ones, even when they are gone. We can no longer **touch** them, but we can continue to **feel** their influence and presence. We can no longer **see** them, but their **picture** is ever present on the mantle of our hearts. They can no longer **talk** to us, but we continue to **hear** them constantly.

Bob Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots, gave the commencement speech at the Yeshiva University graduation last month. He got choked up when he spoke about his father, with whom he had studied Torah and Pirkei Avos as a child. I was very moved when Kraft said about his father, "Watching his son deliver the commencement address at Yeshiva would be far more rewarding to him than all of our Super Bowl successes combined."

Many of you heard that speech, which was making the rounds. However, it is unlikely you heard the following amazing story. On February 5, 2012, the Patriots played in the Super Bowl. For a team owner, a trip to the Super Bowl is the pinnacle of football, and maybe in all of American sports.

Kraft invited a sports reporter from the Jerusalem Post to attend the festive events over the weekend and write a travelogue. On the Sunday morning of the big game, the correspondent went with Kraft to shul for Shachris. It was only a few months after Kraft's wife Myra had passed away and Kraft brought all of his grandchildren to davening that morning. When

davening was over, he called his grandchildren around him and told them: You are going to see and experience very special things today, Super Bowl Sunday. You will meet amazing people, attend incredible events, and watch our team play on the world's biggest stage. My dear grandchildren, I want you to know, with everything that will go on, coming to Shul with me while I said kaddish for your grandmother is by far the most important thing you will do today.

Though his father is long gone, the lessons of Pirkei Avos continue to resonate with Robert Kraft, shaping him into the proud Jew, great philanthropist, and supporter of Israel that he is today. And it's those lessons he passed on to his children. As we recite Yizkor we show that we never graduate the homes of our parents and grandparents, even after they are gone, and we pray that we successfully transmit those holy sights and sounds for generations that follow.

# Transformational Torah

**SHAVUOS 2017/5777**

**Y**ou are familiar with the term monogamy and likely have heard of polygamy, but how many of you have heard of sologamy? Sologamy is a growing trend which has recently been featured in the news. Sologamists stop waiting to meet someone else to marry and instead marry themselves. I'm not making this up. They put on a white gown, rent a hall, invite guests, recite a vow, and raise a toast, but they do it all not to celebrate their commitment to or relationship with another, but rather to celebrate their commitment to themselves.

The movement has gone global and companies are trying to capitalize. "Marry Yourself" in Canada offers consulting and wedding photography. There's also IMarriedMe.com, a site that offers sologamy ceremony kits, which includes a wedding band, daily affirmation cards, and vows.

Erika Anderson married herself. She even had a personalized rose-gold bracelet made for that wedding that says, "I choose you." She says that not everyone understood. Her dad back home in the Midwest asked, "Is this for real?" A guy she knew said it sounded narcissistic and pointless. But Erika says that loving yourself, and being yourself, is a good thing. When people ask if she's married, she says yes, and introduces people to her other half. "For so many years, people had been telling me I was a great catch," she says. "I caught myself."

As far as I know, you cannot get benefits on your taxes for marrying yourself, but that can change in our crazy world. Please don't get me wrong. It is very challenging and often painful to be single in a married world. It is hard to be made to feel you can only be happy if you are married and to feel inadequate or inferior for being single. However, sologamy, loving yourself more, is absolutely not the answer.

שלוש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך את פני ה' אלקיך במקום אשר יבחר  
בחג המצות ובחג השבועות ובחג הסוכות ולא יראה את פני ה' ריקם.

Three times a year we ascend to Yerushalayim to see and be seen by the Almighty. Of the shalosh regalim, Shavuos is the shortest by far. One could make the argument that Pesach, which only launches us on the journey towards Shavuos, should be two days and Shavuos instead eight. Shouldn't Shavuos, which celebrates receiving the Torah, the greatest milestone in history, the most seminal event of our people, be the longest holiday? Why is it the shortest?

The Midrash Sifrei (Re'eh 87) quotes Rav Shimon Bar Yochai who gives the following answer:

פסח וחג שאין עונת מלאכה עשה זה ז' וזה ח', עצרת שהיא עונת מלאכה  
אינה אלא יום אחד בלבד. מלמד שחסך הכתוב על ישראל.

*Pesach and Sukkos, which do not fall during the work season – He made one seven and the other eight. But Shavuos, which falls during the work season, is only one day. This teaches that the Torah spared Yisrael [the loss of work].*

Answers the Midrash, Pesach and Sukkos fall during more convenient times to take off from work. Shavuos is during the harvest season, at the end of the year when one is out of vacation days. Hashem with His great sympathy accordingly made it the shortest holiday.

The Tolner Rebbe of Yerushalayim asks – if Shavuos is during the harvest time when one cannot take off from work, why did Hashem give the Torah this time of year? Surely He knew it would be inconvenient on the calendar. He explains, Torah is not meant to be studied in an ivory tower, it is designed to guide us through practical life. Celebrating receiving the Torah cannot result in a weeklong retreat. We celebrate for a day or two and bring what we learned back into the workplace, into life, as better people. Torah is not a theoretical intellectual pursuit; it is a practical guide for leading a meaningful life.

Torah study of inestimable value. The Maharal (Nesiv Ha'Torah #1) writes that the holy Beis HaMikdash doesn't compare to the sacredness of Torah. Torah is indeed greater than the Kodesh Ha'Kodoshim, the Holy of Holies, because it is not bound by space or the physical world. And yet, our Torah learning only finds fulfillment when it transforms us and makes

us better people in our interactions out of the beis medrash, in the world around us.

Rav Yehuda Amital zt"l, the founding Rosh Yeshiva of Har Etzion ("The Gush"), was very fond of telling a story about the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Ba'al HaTanya. Rav Schneur Zalman was studying Torah in the end room of a railroad flat. Two rooms away there was a baby sleeping. In the middle room, his grandson, the Tzemach Tzedek, was learning. Suddenly, the Ba'al HaTanya heard the baby cry. The elder rebbe rose from his studying, passed through the room where his grandson was studying, and went to the next room to soothe the baby to sleep. Meanwhile, his grandson was too involved in his studies to notice the baby crying. On returning to his room, the Ba'al HaTanya told his grandson to stop learning. He proclaimed, "If someone is studying Torah and fails to hear a baby's cry, there is something very wrong with his learning."

Rav Amital said that when he saw the original plans for the Yeshiva's Beis Midrash and noticed that it did not have windows, he immediately requested that the hall be re-designed to have big windows. A Beis Midrash must be connected to the outside world to hear the cries of Am Yisrael.

The Mishna in Peah which we recite each morning says

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהן בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא.  
כבוד אב ואם, וגמילות חסדים, והבאת שלום בין אדם לחברו, ותלמוד תורה  
כנגד כלם.

*These are things the fruits of which a man enjoys in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring one's father and mother, acts of kindness, and bringing peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all.*

The Rebbe Reb Zusha explained the final expression another way. "K'neged kulam" doesn't mean Torah study is equal to them all. Reb Zusha explained it means Torah is only valuable when it is *k'neged kulam*, when one does all the other mitzvos previously listed: honoring parents, doing loving-kindness, engaging in hospitality, visiting the sick. If you

aren't keeping these mitzvos, the Torah you are studying has little value.

Today we celebrate receiving the Torah, not as an intellectual pursuit but as a guiding light. Torah must transform us. It must make us better, instill in us greater *yiras shomayim* and *emunah*, and inspire us to be more thoughtful, more mindful, more kind, more sensitive and more committed to Hashem and His children, our fellow man. If it doesn't accomplish that, we may have read and even debated a Torah text, but as the Alter Rebbe said, we have not achieved Talmud Torah or fulfilled the vision for *kabbalas ha'Torah*.

*Kn'eged kulam* – Torah study must complement our being good. But our being good must also be complemented by consistent Torah study. The Gemara (קידושין ל) says בראתי יצר הרע בראתי תורה תבלין, I created the instinct, desire and temptation to do the wrong thing, but I created Torah as its antidote. Torah refines our character, gives us strength, support and guidance to ensure we are in fact good people guided by *yiras shomayim*. Learning Torah and becoming a ben Torah must go hand in hand. One without the other is lacking and inauthentic. It is not Torah study if it doesn't make you a better person; correspondingly, you cannot be the best version of yourself without engaging in Torah study.

*Ki heim chayeinu*, Torah is our nourishment, our life source, it gives us vision, clarity, and informs our lives. It enables us to be good and do good. We must feel dehydrated and malnourished when we fail to study Torah. If we went the whole day without eating or drinking, no matter how tired we were, we would eat something before going to sleep. We must feel the same way about studying Torah. No matter how tired we are, if we have not studied that day, we must nourish ourselves with something before we can retire for the night.

**YIZKOR REFLECTION...**

On our recent Rabbinic JNF mission to Israel, we visited a project called Green Horizons that, among other things, operates the Rainwater Harvesting program across 50 schools in Israel. This amazing program not only helps the environment but also helps build self-confidence and leadership skills among the thousands of Israeli students it impacts. The head of the program is a guy named Ido. In telling us about himself, he mentioned he had given up a successful life in finance in which he was doing very well to work in the non-profit field. One of the rabbis asked him why he did that and he tersely answered, "I wanted to give back to my country." He finished the presentation and as we were heading back to our bus, Rabbi Denburg asked something he asked at almost every stop on the trip. He asked Ido if he would like to put on tefillin. Ido said yes.

Ido shared that the last time he had put on tefillin was at his bar mitzvah. He then said, "I didn't fully answer your question before. I want to say Shema with the tefillin on and then I will tell you the whole story." He said shema with Rabbi Denburg and then he told us the following:

The only time he ever met a rabbi in his life was at his bar mitzvah. But in the army he met a fellow soldier by the name of Yedidya. This soldier was the exact opposite of him. Ido was big and athletic had everything he wanted and was good with the girls. Yedidya, on the other hand, was smallish and wimpy looking and much quieter, but he was always there helping others.

Ido shared that Yedidya was religious, put on tefillin every day, and what stood out most was that from morning to night he made himself available to be of service for other people. Ido was so impressed by Yedidya from afar. He marveled that though he felt he had so much more going for him and was more advantaged than him, somehow Yedidya seemed more content and even happier. One time, Yedidya invited Ido to his house for Shabbat. Ido had experienced many dinners on Shabbos but had never had a Shabbos dinner. That weekend began a genuine and deep friendship and a connection to Judaism through Yedidya.

During the Lebanon war an explosion took place that injured many soldiers. Yedidya was a medic and he began to save and take care of the

soldiers that were injured. When they had basically cleared everyone from danger and Yedidya had done what he could for them on the spot, tragedy occurred. Before Yedidya could clear himself out of the area, a Katyusha fell and killed him.

Ido remembers well the day that Yedidya was killed. He was devastated by the news. How could the world continue without Yedidya? What would a Yedidya-less world look like? Who would run to do things for other people all the time?

Overwrought with emotion, he made a promise that day. He wanted to honor Yedidya's memory and decided on the spot, the best way to do it would be to take over where Yedidya left off. He would be Yedidya. He decided to leave the world of finance, the pursuit of earning and accumulating more, and to work in nonprofit helping others. And that, said Ido, is the real story of why he took a huge pay cut, left finance and went to work with this amazing project.

Rabbi Denburg thought he was doing a favor to Ido by putting tefillin on him, but Ido did a favor for us by sharing with us that remarkable story and inspiration.

There is nothing wrong with feeling comfortable in our own skin, with caring about ourselves and our needs and with being happy by oneself. But there is something terribly wrong with sologamy. We don't believe in celebrating our devotion and dedication to ourselves. We believe the most meaningful thing for ourselves is to be devoted and dedicated to others.

When Ido lost his friend Yedidya, he concluded the best way to honor his memory was to take his place, do his work, continue his mission be more like him. And that is what we do right now when we say yizkor. We don't simply invoke the memory of our loved ones for nostalgia. On this day of receiving the Torah anew, we commit to regular Torah study, and we pledge to become better people, to emulate, imitate and do our best to take the place of our loved ones who are no longer here.

# *Investing Our Total Selves*

**SHAVUOS 2018/5778**

*Hemlines should be knee-length and shoulders covered*

*Heels must be low, worn with tights*

*Heads should be covered with hats in the sanctuary*

**T**hese are not the guidelines or standards of a Shul; it is the dress code for the royal wedding this weekend. While millions around the world woke up in the middle of the night to be spectators to a royal wedding in England, we were staying up all night in preparation to actively participate in a different kind of royal wedding.

בַּיּוֹם הַתְּנַתּוֹ וּבַיּוֹם שֶׁמָחַת לְבוֹ: בַּיּוֹם הַתְּנַתּוֹ זֶה הָרַר סִינַי, וּבַיּוֹם שֶׁמָחַת לְבוֹ  
זֶה אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד.

*“On the day of his marriage and on the day of the joy of his heart”:  
on the day of his marriage, this is Har Sinai, on the day of the joy of  
his heart, this is the Ohel Moed. (Vayikra Rabbah 20:7)*

The Gemara at the end of Taanis interprets this passuk in Shir HaShirim, referring to the experience of receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, as our wedding with the King of Kings. The Midrash (Mechilta, Yisro) further extends the imagery of Matan Torah paralleling a wedding with the Almighty:

ויוצא משה את העם לקראת האלקים מן המחנה. אמר ר' יוסי, יהודה היה דורש, (דברים לג) ויאמר ה' מסיני בא, אל תקרא כן, אלא ה' לסיני בא, ליתן תורה לישראל או אינו אומר כן, אלא ה' מסיני בא, לקבל את ישראל, כחתן זה שהוא יוצא לקראת כלה.

*Rabbi Yosi said, Yehuda would expound, (Devarim 32:2) ‘And he said, Hashem came from Sinai’ don’t read it as this, rather Hashem came to Sinai to give the Torah to the Jewish people or perhaps otherwise, rather He came from Sinai to accept the Jewish*

*people, as this groom who goes out to greet his bride. And they stood, they pressed together [...] we learn that the mountain was uprooted from its place and they encroached and stood beneath the mountain as it says (Devarim 4:11) 'and you came close and you stood under the mountain'.*

We have been preparing for this wedding for the last 49 days. The Ohr HaChaim points out that it isn't a coincidence we counted in units of seven - seven weeks, seven days each week. A bride counts seven days before she stands under her chuppah, and we have counted for seven weeks to purify ourselves and prepare ourselves to be betrothed to our beloved Groom.

The passuk describes that at Har Sinai, וַיִּתְנַצְּבוּ בְּתַתִּית הַהָר, we stood beneath the mountain. The Midrash comments, Hashem lifted the mountain over our heads. Targum Yonasan says the suspended mountain was clear like glass. The mountain served as the chuppah over our heads and the stars could be seen through it, just like we ideally have a chuppah outside, under the stars.

Indeed, the Tashbatz, Rabbi Samson ben Tzadok, who was a student of the Maharam Mi'Rutenberg and lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, writes, "All customs pertaining to a *chassan* and *kallah* are derived from the giving of the Torah, where Hashem revealed Himself as the *chassan* towards the *kallah* — *Klal Yisrael*," and then he enumerates some of them.

For example, Each Yom Tov has a greeting. On Rosh Hashana we say "Kesiva v'chasima tova," on Pesach, "Chag kasher v'sameach," etc. The Lubavticher Rebbe references an old Chabad minhag that on Shavuot the greeting is "Mazel tov!" Mazel tov on our marriage and wedding to Hashem.

Once, when expressing concern about Jews' dispassion for Judaism, the great Kotzker Rebbe observed the following: When a couple stands under the chuppah, if the chassan says to the kallah a thousand times, "*harei at mekudshes*, behold you are married," it is as if he has said nothing and their status as a single man and woman remains. It is only a marriage when the chassan adds one more word: "*li*." Behold, you are married to me. You can have a twenty-piece band, a buffet filled with baby lamb chops,

magnificent flowers, and the Gadol HaDor as the Mesader Kiddushin, but there is no marriage without the word "Li," to me.

The Kotzker explained that marriage and relationships are not about the theoretical or conceptual, or about lip service or platitudes. They are about giving "li," investing our total selves. They demand putting our entire self into the relationship, not casually, not when it is convenient or comfortable, but in sickness and in health, in happiness and in sadness, in success and in failure, in good times and in bad times, as the saying goes, until death do us part. A marriage is not about *at*, you alone, or *li*, me alone. It is *harei at*, behold you are betrothed "li," to me. I am in it, not giving you just a piece of myself, not having one foot in and one foot out, but giving you all of me, saving for you the best of me.

We spend a lot of time and effort, in our Jewish educational system and in our own adult experience, on the *harei at*, talking about the other. We talk about Hashem in the abstract, we learn Halacha and we even recite words that are directed at Him. But do we give Him our "li," are we invested in a relationship, in a marriage, in pursuing intimacy and closeness with Him? Do we confide in Him, turn to Him, are we attentive to Him, do we have both feet in the marriage, does He have our total commitment? Are we all the way in?

Today is the anniversary of our royal wedding. We are married to the King of Kings and nothing could be a source of greater joy or pleasure. If your marriage to Him is strong, celebrate it today and find ways to make it even stronger. And if your marriage to God is weak, come, walk down the aisle anew, with excitement and joy. This time, bring a sense of "li" a commitment to be in it together, invested in this relationship that needs your time, attention, effort and like all relationships, needs healthy communication.

My friends, join me today in saying to Hashem, *V'eirastich "LI" l'olam* – You are betrothed to me, *l'olam*, forever.

## YIZKOR REFLECTION...

Our marriage to Hashem, like all marriages, will have ups and downs, joy and sadness, feelings of closeness and at times alienation. How do we know we can endure? Why should we have the confidence we can give our “*li*,” we can give our all to the relationship, we can be “all in” in our Judaism?

The answer is *yizkor* – the strength comes in remembering those who came before us and persevered, who led the way, who stuck with it and who gave Hashem their “*li*” in circumstances we can never even imagine.

Rabbi Yosef Wallis, director of Arachim of Israel, owns an incredible handwritten *kesubah* that was written from memory by the Klausenberger Rebbe. It is his parents’ *kesubah*; the story Rabbi Wallis relates of their marriage is absolutely astounding:

While he was in Dachau, a Jew who was being taken to his death suddenly flung a small bag at my father, Judah Wallis. He caught it, thinking it might contain a piece of bread. Upon opening it, however, he was disturbed to discover a pair of *tefillin*. Judah was very frightened because he knew that were he to be caught carrying *tefillin*, he would be put to death instantly. So he hid the *tefillin* under his shirt and headed for his bunkhouse.

In the morning, just before the *appel* [roll call], while still in his bunkhouse, he put on the *tefillin*. Unexpectedly, a German officer appeared. He ordered him to remove the *tefillin*, noted the number on Judah’s arm.

At the *appel*, in front of thousands of silent Jews, the officer called out Judah’s number and he had no choice but to step forward. The German officer waved the *tefillin* in the air and said, “Dog! I sentence you to death by public hanging for wearing these.”

Judah was placed on a stool and a noose was placed around his neck. Before he was hanged, the officer said in a mocking tone, “Dog, what is your last wish?” “To wear my *tefillin* one last time,” Judah replied.

The officer was dumbfounded. He handed Judah the *tefillin*. As Judah put them on, he recited the verse that is said while the *tefillin* are being wound around the fingers: “*Ve’eirastich li le’olam, ve’eirastich li b’tzedek uvemishpat, ub’chessed, uv’rachamim, ve’eirastich li b’emunah, v’yodaat es Hashem* – I will betroth you to me forever and I will betroth you to me with righteousness and with justice and with kindness and with mercy and I will betroth you to me with fidelity, and you shall know God.”

It is hard for us to picture this Jew with a noose around his neck, wearing *tefillin* on his head and arm – but that was the scene that the entire camp was forced to watch, as they awaited the impending hanging of the Jew who had dared to break the rule against wearing *tefillin*.

Even women from the adjoining camp were lined up at the barbed wire fence that separated them from the men’s camp, forced to watch this horrible sight.

As Judah turned to watch the silent crowd, he saw tears in many people’s eyes. Even at that moment, as he was about to be hanged, he was shocked. Jews were crying! How was it possible that they still had tears left to shed? And for a stranger? Where were those tears coming from? Impulsively, in Yiddish, he called out, “*Yidden*, I am the victor. Don’t you understand, I am the winner!”

The German officer understood the Yiddish and was infuriated. He said to Judah, “You dog, you think you are the winner? Hanging is too good for you. You are going to get another kind of death.”

My father, was taken from the stool and the noose was removed from his neck. He was forced into a squatting position and two huge rocks were placed under his arms. Then he was told that he would be receiving 25 lashes to his head – the head on which he had dared to position his *tefillin*. The officer told him that if he dropped even one of the rocks, he would be shot immediately. In fact, because this was such an extremely painful form of death, the officer advised him, “Drop the rocks now. You will never survive the 25 lashes to the head. Nobody ever does.” Judah’s response was, “No, I won’t give

you the pleasure.”

At the 25th lash, Judah lost consciousness and was left for dead. He was about to be dragged to a pile of corpses, after which he would have been burned in a ditch, when another Jew saw him, shoved him to the side, and covered his head with a rag so people didn't realize he was alive. Eventually, after he recovered consciousness fully, he crawled to the nearest bunkhouse that was on raised piles and hid under it until he was strong enough to come out under his own power. Two months later he was liberated.

During the hanging and beating episode, a 17-year-old girl had been watching the events from the women's side of the fence. After liberation, she made her way to Judah. She walked over to him and said, “I've lost everyone. I don't want to be alone any more. I saw what you did that day when the officer wanted to hang you. Will you marry me?”

My parents walked over to the Klausenberger Rebbe and requested that he perform the marriage ceremony. The Klausenberger Rebbe, whose *Kiddush Hashem* is legendary, wrote out a *kesubah* [marriage contract] by hand from memory and married the couple. I have that handwritten *kesubah* in my possession to this day.

The Zohar quotes a practice of inviting loved ones who are no longer here to a simcha, especially a wedding. When we say Yizkor momentarily, we are inviting our loved ones to our wedding, our royal wedding with the Ribono Shel Olam.

*V'eirastich "LI" l'olam* – Hashem, You are betrothed to me, *l'olam*, forever. Like so many who came before and who we remember today, Mazel Tov, we are all in.

## אייר תשע"ט

בבית הדין  
ביום ה' אדר ב'  
ה'תשע"ט  
בבית הדין  
ביום ה' אדר ב'  
ה'תשע"ט

חיי עולם נטע בתוכנו

## אייר תשע"ט

בבית הדין  
ביום ה' אדר ב'  
ה'תשע"ט  
בבית הדין  
ביום ה' אדר ב'  
ה'תשע"ט

