

5 Core Lessons
From Shavuot and Mt. Sinai
With Adina Landa

Text 1: Exodus 24: 10-11

... and they perceived the G-d of Israel, and beneath His feet was like the forming of a sapphire brick and like the appearance of the heavens for clarity. And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He did not lay His hand, and they perceived G-d, and they ate and drank.

Question: Why did they eat when they just experienced the greatest revelation in history?

Text 2: Rashi 24:11:

He did not lay His hand: this indicates that they deserved a hand be laid upon them

Text 3: Onkeles 24:10

“And they saw the glory of G-d, and they rejoiced in their sacrifices, which were accepted graciously, *as if* they ate and drank” (italics added).

Text 4: Ramban 24:10

“And they drank” means that they made a celebration and holiday, because it is an obligation to rejoice because of receiving the Torah, just as they were commanded to do when they wrote the Torah on the stones, as the verse states: And you shall slaughter peace offerings, and you shall eat there, and you shall rejoice before the Lord, your God. Similarly, it is regarding Solomon it is written “Wisdom and knowledge is given to you...” immediately afterward the verse states that he came to Jerusalem and made a feast for all his servants. Rabbi Elazar said: from this episode we learn that we must make a feast when we conclude the study of Torah. Regarding David it is written that when they donated to the Holy Temple: “they slaughtered sacrifices to the Lord... And they ate and drank before the Lord on that day with great joy...”. Here too, on the day of the marriage of the Torah, they did the same.

Text 5: Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4

Once there was a king who decreed: The people of Rome are forbidden to go down to Syria, and the people of Syria are forbidden to go up to Rome. Likewise, when G-d created the world He decreed and said: "The heavens are G-d's, and the earth is given to man." But when He wished to give the Torah to Israel, He rescinded His

original decree, and declared: The lower realms may ascend to the higher realms, and the higher realms may descend to the lower realms. And I, Myself, will begin — as it is written, "And G-d descended on Mount Sinai,⁴ and then it says, "And to Moses He said: Go up to G-d."

Text 6: Adapted from the Alter Rebbe

The Hebrew word for “nobles”, atzilei, shares the same root as the word etzel, which means “near”. The Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad, explains: “He did not lay His hand” means that G-d did not place paralyzing fear within their hearts. Many of the Jewish people at Sinai were overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience and were unable to eat. It was specifically the nobles, those close to G-d, who were not awe-stricken, and were able to engage in elevating the food and drink. The lesson, says the Alter Rebbe, is that the more we connect to the sacred, the more we are able to fulfill the task of elevating the physical world.

Practical Core Lesson & Application #1: The world before the Giving of the Torah, and the world after the Giving of the Torah was a completely different world. Afterward, physicality had the potential to be elevated to holiness and remain holy. This is the entire purpose of creation, elevating the physical, and bringing Heaven Down to Earth, known in Hebrew as Dirah Bitachtonim - creating a dwelling place for G-d here below. The lesson is that the closer we are to Hashem, the more we carve out times to connect to Him. This allows us the greater ability to fulfill the purpose of creation, namely creating a Dirah Bitachtonim.

10 Commandments = The foundation to a strong bond

First Tablet:

1. I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of the Land of Egypt: Hashem is with us always, even in the darkest times.
2. You shall not have other gods in My presence: Don't be afraid of other people, or treat them like they have control//Hashem is in charge of everything.
3. You shall not take the name of the L-rd, your G-d, in vain: The above described relationship may indeed be intimate and personal, but you must never lose perspective—He's your Creator, not your buddy.
4. Remember the Sabbath day to sanctify it: G-d commanded us to allocate one day every week for "relationship maintenance." This is the Sabbath, a day to focus on the real priorities in life, and draw inspiration for the following week.

5. Honor your father and your mother: we must not forget to express gratitude to those people whom G-d has empowered to help us in our journey through life. As the Talmud says: "The wine belongs to the host, but thanks is [also] said to the waiter."

Second Tablet:

1. Do not murder: Murder is a result of one person's deeming another person totally insignificant. In truth, every human was created by G-d in His holy image, and therefore has an innate right to exist. The first message we must internalize is the importance of respecting every individual. G-d thinks this person is important—so should you.

2. Do not commit adultery: Love is not everything...we need boundaries...some times we need to be very strict and say no..even when we love. -what is right and expected of me- what would Hashem want from me?

3. Do not kidnap: The essence of kidnapping is utilizing another for personal gain. Focus on being a real friend; don't be in the relationship only for your own benefit. Be there for your friend even when it is uncomfortable or inconvenient for you.

4. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor: Every person is a judge. We are constantly observing our acquaintances and friends, judging their every word and action. We must be wary of a tendency to "bear false witness" in the process of issuing our personal verdict. We must always give the benefit of the doubt, taking into consideration various factors of which we may be unaware, ensuring that we don't reach an erroneous judgment.

5. Do not covet your neighbor's possessions: Be happy for your neighbor's good fortune! All the abovementioned exercises pale in comparison with this final message imparted by the Ten Commandments. After you've trained yourself to intellectually respect your fellows and consistently view them in a positive light, now it's time to get your heart involved. Love them. Be happy with their accomplishments. Share their sorrow during their difficult moments. Don't be afraid of getting emotionally involved—that's what family is all about

Once this is clear - then the rest of the rules come on a journey, one step at a time. Just like the 40 year journey of our ancestors .

Practical Core Lesson & Application #2: Actions are not meaningful without the bond. We have to work on our underlying BOND with G-d (and with others) so that the actions we take are actually significant. Ask yourself: How much time do I give my relationship with G-d? Do I treat my relationship with G-d as a *relationship* just like I would every other relationship (one that needs nurturing, attention, selfless giving etc)? How do I want to strengthen my essential bond with G-d this Shavuot?

Lessons from the Desert, the Valley, and the Mountain:

The Torah was given freely, in an ownerless public place. If it had been given in the land of Israel, the nations of the world would say that they have no portion in it. Anyone who wishes to properly accept it is welcome to do so.

Question: Why was Mount Sinai chosen to be the site for the giving of the Torah?

Answer: The conventional answer is that the choice of Mount Sinai was to teach us humility, since Mount Sinai was the most humble of all mountains.

Question: If so, why was it not given in a low lying valley? Surely that would have been a stronger lesson in humility?

Answer: We learn that a Jew must be able to distinguish between being proud and being arrogant. Arrogance is distasteful. Being proud of one's roots is a virtue. The Torah therefore, was given on a humble mountain.

The desert also represents us, who we are, in our simplest, purest, most authentic place. And that's beautiful. Hashem wants our essence. Not our mask or our fluff. If we want to find Hashem we need to go to peace and quiet

Text 7: Adapted from a talk of the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

Everybody knows that the Ten Commandments were given by G-d on Mount Sinai. But why Mount Sinai in particular? The *Midrash* tells us that Mount Sinai was not the highest and most splendid mountain. In fact it is described as being the lowest of all the mountains which might have been chosen. Nonetheless, G-d chose Mount Sinai for the Giving of the Torah in order to teach an important message: to tell us that humility is a prerequisite to the learning of Torah.

Torah comes from G-d. When hearing an instruction from the Torah, we need the ability to listen. This is a rare quality: usually our own ego gets in the way. We hear our own ideas, not what the Torah is saying. Humility is the step beyond our ego, a mood of selflessness, which makes us receptive to the Torah. Thus we say at the end of the daily *Amidah* prayer "May my soul be to all as the dust - open my heart to your Torah". A Chassidic comment on this idea goes a step further. Surely, if the emphasis is on humility, why choose a mountain at all? Wouldn't the message have been more keenly felt if the Torah were given on a flat plain, or even better, in a valley?

This puzzle is explained as follows. While humility is important, there are also many occasions in Jewish life when a more determined and forceful approach is demanded. Personal self-sacrifice, steadfastness in the face of ridicule or contempt, the readiness to suffer for Judaism (as Jews in Communist Russia did for many years) are responses that are sometimes required.

It is interesting that right at the beginning of the Code of Jewish Law comes the statement "Do not be embarrassed by mockery and ridicule". If one were to waver in observance of a Jewish law simply because of the derisive criticism of others, there would soon not be much observance of Judaism left at all!

So one needs both qualities: humility and strength. The ability to listen, and also the firmness to be able to stand up against the current. Both qualities are expressed in the image of Mount Sinai.

Practical Core Lesson & Application #3 & #4:

Finding the right balance between humility and pride (not self-negation and ego) is a delicate and perhaps challenging balance, but we have the ability to do it, bequeathed to us by Mount Sinai itself.

3 categories of mitzvot corresponding to 3 elements in every relationship:

There are 3 different categories of mitzvot in the Torah:

- 1) Aidut - Mitzvot to testify to something - testimonial mitzvot
- 2) Chukim - supr-rational mitzvot - with no reason
- 3) Mishpatim - logical moral laws and values als, etc

Practical Core Lesson & Application #5: Just as there are 3 categories of mitzvot, so too, there are three levels/categories in our relationships (both with G-d and with others): 1) basic common decency and respect 2) deepening connection and higher understanding of each other 3) going above and beyond our own intellect, reasoning, and desires.

Ask yourself: How can I incorporate all three into my most significant relationship? How can I incorporate all three into my relationship with G-d?

Happy Shavuot!!!