

Shavuot 5779, 2019:

The Meaning of Shavuot

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

As the Torah attests, *Ya'akov Avinu's* (our father, Jacob's) emigration from the Land of Israel to Egypt was the collective action of a family:

And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt; with Jacob, each man and his household came: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin. Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. Now all those descended from Jacob were seventy souls, and Joseph, [who] was in Egypt. (*Sefer Shemot* 1:1-5, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This family's 210-year sojourn in Egypt engendered a major change in their status, as during this period they became known as a people: "A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know about Joseph. He said to his people, 'Behold, the people (*Am*) of the children of Israel are more numerous and stronger than we are.'" (*Sefer Shemot* 1:8-9). In a variety of midrashic passages, our Sages teach us that this recognition resulted from our ancestors' unwillingness to change their names, dress and language. Outwardly, at least, they remained distinct from their Egyptian neighbors.

Sadly, however, many of the Jewish people at this time were spiritually weak and unable to maintain the uncompromising monotheism that Avraham had brought to the world. This is illustrated by the well-known midrash wherein the *malachai hasharet* (Ministering Angels) declared at the Sea of Reeds: "These [the Egyptians] and these [the Jews] are idol worshippers; why, then, are you saving the Jewish people and drowning the Egyptians in the Sea [of Reeds], for

in truth, there is no difference between them?!” (*Midrash Tehillim* 1:20, 15:5, *Zohar*, Parashat Terumah 170, translation my own)

We are indeed fortunate that the Master of the Universe had very different plans for us. He knew there was but one way to guarantee the continuity of our people; namely, we would have to abandon idol worship and become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:6) In order to achieve this goal, we needed to undergo a radical transformation — we had to become *gerim* (converts), and accept the Torah and *Mitzvot*.

This is precisely the significance of Shavuot, for it is on this day that we embraced the Torah and declared “*na’aseh v’nishmah*” (“We will do and we will hear/learn,” *Sefer Shemot* 24:7). At that auspicious moment, we simultaneously became *gerim* and Hashem’s chosen people. As the Torah states: “And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant [that is, the Torah], you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth.” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:5) My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, expanded upon this idea in a public lecture that analyzed the connection between our becoming *gerim* and the reading of *Megillat Rut* on Shavuot:

The Parsha of Mattan Torah, receipt of the Torah at Mount Sinai, was the story of Gayrus, conversion of the Jewish people. The children of the patriarchs converted *en masse* [as a total group] at Ma’amad Har Sinai [the Revelation]. Hence the connection to Ruth. The story of *Mattan Torah* and Ruth together comprise the topic of conversion...The principle of conversion is a fundamental connection between the events at Mount Sinai and the story of Ruth.

As Boaz tells Ruth, she should be blessed for leaving everything behind to join a people that she did not know and for coming under the wings of the *Shechina* [the Divine Presence] of the G-d of Israel. In other words, she converted. The same idea is found at Ma’amad Har Sinai where the Torah tells the story of the conversion of B’nai Yisrael [the Jewish people] in conjunction with the Revelation of G-d on Mount Sinai. (Direct transcription of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s public lecture on 5/24/68. Source: www.parsha.net/Bamidbar/Shavuos2-60.doc, italics, underlining and brackets my own.)

The Rav is well-known for underscoring the concept that the exalted night of Pesach is existentially a re-experiencing of *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt). This, he opines, is what the *Ba'al Hagaddah* (Editor of the Haggadah) meant when he wrote, “*B'chol dor v'dor chaiyav adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatza mi'Mitzraim*” (“In each and every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if he personally went out of Egypt”). In other words, for the Rav, the Exodus must never be viewed as a mere historical event; rather, all Jews, for all time, were and ever will be active participants in its continuous unfolding in our lives.

In my estimation, we can build upon this idea of the Rav and extend it to Shavuot. In so doing, we can perceive this majestic *Yom Tov* as the time to declare, “*na'aseh v'nishmah,*” and, like Rut, come “under the wings of the *Shechina* of the G-d of Israel.” With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may this be so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.