

Shavuot 5780, 2020:

Shavuot, the Torah and the Jewish People

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, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

HaRav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1820-1892) was one of the 19th century's greatest European Torah scholars. He is known as the Beit HaLevi after the title of his grand exposition of the Pentateuch that is universally recognized as a jewel within the Lithuanian Torah tradition. In his comments on *Sefer Shemot* 19:5, the Beit HaLevi discusses exactly why Hashem gave us the Torah and, in so doing, helps us understand its role in our lives. He explains that the Torah was given to the Jewish people so that we would analyze it in accordance with the accepted rules of Biblical exegesis as delineated by our Sages, who have been tasked as the protectors of Hashem's Torah in this world. He notes that the conclusions that are reached according to these guidelines thereby constitute that which is undeniably true. In addition, he asserts that since the Torah is "*lo b'shamayim he* — no longer in Heaven" (*Talmud Bavli, Baba Metziah* 59b), its authentic interpretation can only be apprehended via the intense study and analysis of the earthly *beit din* (Court of Law). After all, "*lo nitnah Torah l'malachei hashareit* — the Torah was not given to the Ministering Angels" (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma* 30a), but rather to us.

After presenting these ideas, the Beit HaLevi focuses on why our Sages call Shavuot *zeman matan Toratainu* (the time of the Giving of **our** Torah), instead of '*zeman matan Torah*' ('the

time of the Giving of **the** Torah'). His answer is mesmerizing: "The reason why Shavuot is called *zeman matan Toratainu* and not *zeman matan Torah* is because Toratainu means that the Torah became our own. [How did it become our own? This happened] as a result of *Torah She-be'al Peh* — the Oral Law, and the explanations of the [Torah] that are the product of our people." For the Beit HaLevi, though the *Torah She-biktav* — the Written Law is the Almighty's greatest gift to the world besides life itself, it is through the never-ending dynamic process of Torah She-be'al Peh — the study and explanation of His holy Torah — that humankind encounters Him.

In many ways, the Beit HaLevi infuses profound meaning into the phrase we recite each morning in our *tefilah*, "*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u'mah nayim goraleinu* — We are fortunate, how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage!" (Translation, *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, p. 27) *Chelkeinu*, our portion, is two-fold in nature. It includes the outright gift of the *Torah She-biktav* and the ever-developing *Torah She-be'al Peh*, through which we analyze, interpret and apply that bequest to the challenges and realities of our lives. Truly then, *Ashreinu!*

May we be *zocheh* (merit) to witness the fulfillment of the passage we proclaim every day in the *Birchot HaTorah* (Ibid., p. 17): "Please, Hashem, our G-d, sweeten the words of Your Torah in our mouth and in the mouths of your people, the family of Israel. May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel — all of us, know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake." *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, *Chag Sameach* and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and the entire world.

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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** 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.