



# ACTT Inspirational Reading for Shavuot 5784

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# Small Acts, Cosmic Implications

by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg 6 min read

***The camera is always on. You never know which small deed you do that can have cosmic implications.***

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 20-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! 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 The Book of Ruth on Shavuot because the story of Ruth describes the paradigmatic convert. Ruth 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 Mount 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. The Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah 5*) says:

*When a person does a mitzvah, 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 Aaron 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 Moses). 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.)*

Had he only known that the mic is on and the camera is rolling. Had he only realized that this clip of his life would be shown on YouTube they would have done so much more.

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 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 Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, 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 Aaron and Moses met, the greatest redemption in history was beginning to unfold and Moses 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 Ruth was the beginning of a relationship that would yield the Davidic dynasty and ultimately that will bring the Messiah.

Indeed, Ruth and Boaz were truly a match made in Heaven. Ruth in her soft-spoken manner did what she thought was a small act of kindness. 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 redemption. Indeed, the Midrash notes how God Himself took notice of their humility and declared, "Boaz did his, and Ruth 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. As the chaos theory's "butterfly effect" attests, small acts can have large outcomes. Chaos theory is applied in mathematics, microbiology, computer science, economics, engineering, finance, just to name a few.

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 Ruth 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 Ruth on Shavuot:

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

On the day that we celebrate the giving of the Torah, Ruth 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 Book of Ruth and a Scroll of Esther and new stories 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. The camera is always on. You never know which small deed you do that can have cosmic implications.

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## **More About The Author**

### **Rabbi Efrem Goldberg**

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg is the rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue.

# Field of Potential

by Rabbi Doniel Baron 5 min read

## ***The Maharal of Prague on Shavuot and the essence of man.***

*The following is a translated excerpt adapted from the Maharal of Prague's homily delivered in Posen, Poland on Shavuot, in 5352/1592. The full text of the essay is printed at the end in the London edition of the Maharal's Be'er Hagolah and has never been published in English.*

King Solomon begins the book of Ecclesiastes with a question: "What advantage does man, *adam* in Hebrew, have in all that he toils under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:3). The question belies an assumption. If man does have any advantage at all, it is somehow connected to his name Adam, a name derived from his being created from the earth, *adama* in Hebrew. An understanding of that assumption provides us with an insight into the question.

Why is it more fitting for a human being specifically to be called "Adam" from the word *adama*, more than other creature? After all, God created everything from the earth (Medrash Rabba Bereishis 12:11). One would think that an animal's earthy, materialistic nature would make it more worthy than man of receiving a name associated with the *adama*.

### **Fertile Ground**

Yet a closer look reveals that man bears a relationship and likeness to the earth in a way that differs from that of all other animals and creatures. The ground has the power to grow things. It brings out the potential in plants, trees, fruits, and everything else it produces. *Adama* essentially exists in potential, and brings everything to fruition. In a similar vein, Adam is distinct in that he represents pure potential, and, like the land, the ability to bring forth bounty, namely, his own perfection.

Accordingly, man's positive actions are called "fruits," as it is written "say to the righteous person that he is good, for [righteous people] shall eat the fruits of their deeds (Isaiah 3:10)." Conversely, evil deeds are also called fruits, for it is said of the wicked "and they shall eat the fruits of their ways, and be satiated from their counsel (Proverbs 1:31)."

### **Animals: No Inherent Potential**

No other living creature exists as pure potential waiting to be realized. All that could come from an animal is found within it immediately upon creation. The essence of an animal is determined at birth. It is already known from the start that a calf will grow up to become an ox that plows, and a foal will become a donkey equipped to bear a burden. This is the inevitable outcome, not subject to the animal's choice. Thus, all an animal will ever become is present in its being from its inception. This is why the Hebrew word for animal is "*beheima*." *Beheima* is a compound comprised of two Hebrew words: "*bah*" (in it) and "*mah*" (what), which means: what it is – its essence – is already contained within it. There is nothing in an animal which exists in potential to later be realized in actuality.

In contrast, man is called Adam because he needs to realize his potential and achieve perfection practically; he is *adama* (earth) for he is considered like land having only potential. His outcome is not inevitable; it is subject to his innate free will. One sows wheat kernels or other seeds in the land, they take root in the soil and bring forth produce. In exactly the same fashion, God gave man a pure and pristine soul – a part of God from above. It is a seed that takes root and is embedded in his body exactly as wheat is embedded in the ground.

## **Man as a Boor**

If man does not produce his good plants and fruits, then he is akin to land which lies “*boor*” which means fallow in Hebrew. He is like a field which has not been sown. Our rabbis, therefore, decided to call a person who does not master Torah by the name “*boor*” (ignoramus) for he is like land which is *boor*, which has not been seeded and which produces nothing.[1]

With this background, we can return to King Solomon’s question. “What advantage does *adam*, man, have in all that he toils under the sun?” Man’s advantage necessarily lies in his deeds, the fruits of the *adama* (earth) to which the name Adam alludes. Man exists in potential and needs to realize his potential to fruition, and this alone is the source of his advantage, his virtue.

Yet what advantage does *adam* have in all his toil under the sun? Indeed, his actions “under the sun,” a reference to the natural realm, provide him with no advantage and he is no different than an animal. One must therefore conclude that his real advantage, his unique nature, lies in his actions *above* the sun, a reference to the transcendent realm – namely Torah. Man’s connection to Torah represents the fruit of the soul God placed within, and its ability to produce spiritual bounty.

## **Receiving Torah in the Desert**

With this background, we can understand the Torah’s emphasis on the place in which the Jewish people received Torah: the desert. When Adam, so called on account of the *adama*, exists in a state in which he has no Torah, he is considered a desert, a wasteland with no grass or plants. In such a state man is more like a fallow field than any other creature. Without Torah, he remains in that state; but once he receives Torah, he realizes his potential as *adama* to bring forth bountiful produce.

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[1] This is likely the real source of the English word “boor” which is an unflattering description of a person who acts in a rude, coarse, and unsophisticated manner – a manner appropriate for one who does not receive Torah. See the commentaries on Ethics of our Fathers 2:5 –*ein boor yareh chet*, a boor does not fear sin.

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## **More About The Author**

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# Shavuot: Nexus between Man and G-d

by Rabbi Ahron Lopiansky 7 min read

## ***How Shavuot and its parallel facets of meaning represent the intertwining of G-d's omnipotence with man's free will.***

The Jewish holidays have many facets of meaning that run parallel to each other. Historically, Passover celebrates the formation of the Jewish people, Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah, and Sukkot celebrates the journey of the Jewish people through the desert on the way to the Land of Israel.

The Torah also allocates a specific point in the agricultural cycle for each holiday. Passover is the sprouting of the grain, Shavuot is the cutting of the crop, and Sukkot is the gathering in of the crop.

There are also names of various mitzvot (commandments) associated with each holiday. Passover is the festival of matzot, Sukkot is the festival of dwelling in the sukkah huts, and Shavuot is the festival of bringing an offering of our first fruits (*bikkurim*) to G-d.

The various parallels of Passover and Sukkot are not difficult to match up. Passover is the nascence of the Jewish people, and as such it is the blossoming of the crop. Sukkot is the destiny of the Jewish nation marching towards the Land of Israel, their final destination. As such it parallels the final ingathering of the grain to its 'home', i.e. the silo.

But the parallels of Shavuot don't seem to match up. ***How does the agricultural midpoint of "cutting the grain" correspond to the giving of the Torah?*** Where's the parallel? And what quality exists in the act of "cutting the grain" that makes it a suitable metaphor for Shavuot?

To understand the quality of this moment in the agricultural cycle, we must touch on the theological issue of G-d's omnipotence and man's free will.

Judaism demands from us both a very strong sense of personal accountability and at the same time an acknowledgment of G-d's totality. We are enjoined to do good as if it all depended on us, yet we pray to G-d with a sense of utter human frailty. We must push ourselves to the utmost, but never lose sight of the omnipotent G-d.

If man were to live with *only* a sense of G-d's omnipotence, he would shirk his duties, adopting a fatalistic attitude of "what's the point of it all", and accomplish naught. If on the other hand he were to only see his own endowed capabilities, he could become arrogant and selfish. What usually happens is that we end up tilting emotionally towards one perspective or the other, depending on the particular circumstances.

This paradox is one of the great theological issues, namely free will vs. Divine omniscience. Which ever way we choose to answer this intellectually, on the practical level we live with *both* understandings as being true, each utilized in its proper application.

This division of duties -- of assuming the mantle of responsibility while simultaneously believing everything is from G-d -- expresses itself most blatantly during the agricultural growth cycle. From when the seed is first planted until it is cut, it is G-d who is solely involved in its development. The act of "cutting the grain" then begins man's role in processing it: threshing, winnowing, sifting, grinding etc. He is the one whose action converts it into edible food.

At that critical junction of putting the scythe to the stalk, the grain moves from the domain of G-d's providence into the realm of human responsibility and capability.

A similar bridge between two domains expresses itself at the moment of the giving of the Torah. Before the Torah was brought down from the heavens, the world was the mirror of G-d, who was the sole Creator and Master. It has been pointed out that the number of generations from the beginning of the world until the giving of the Torah is 26, which is the numerical value of G-d's ineffable name, connoting that all those generations lived only as an expression of G-d's benevolence. They did not have a clear mission which would define them as self-deserving of existence.

However, once the Torah was given to the Jewish people, man is charged with a mission. He is responsible for the keeping of the Torah and enacting its moral code. It is up to him to build or destroy the world.

Even at Creation there is a hint of man's role to come. The sixth day of creation is written in a way that hints at the sixth day of Sivan when the Torah will be given. The rabbis teach us that G-d's creation of the world was conditional on man's future acceptance of the Torah. It may have all been G-d's doing, but it depended on man as its *raison d'être*.

This intertwining of G-d and man is true with regard to all moral accomplishments, but most strongly brought home by Torah study itself. Nothing is closer to a person's sense of self than his faculties of reason and comprehension. Yet when we study Torah we need to be fully aware of the two truths, simultaneously. We cannot be said to be studying G-d's word unless we are firmly convinced and believe that the ideas we struggle to understand are G-d's Divine wisdom. Yet, if we do not fully comprehend them with our own mind and understand it with our words and our mind, we have also not fulfilled our obligation for Torah study. If G-d's words have not genuinely become our own words, we have yet to receive the Torah.

This, then, is the magnificent holiday of Shavuot. It is the day that G-d passes the Torah to man, so to speak, and man becomes the bearer of responsibility for the world. The world rises or falls on the weight of man's accomplishments, instead of the sheer benevolence of the Almighty. This is why the cutting of the crop is chosen as the precise moment to mark Shavuot. ***We are holding in one hand the stalk of G-d's bounty, and in the other hand the scythe of human endeavor.***

Furthermore, G-d has given us the opportunity to be a part of His wisdom so that the same idea belongs to both G-d and man, at one and the same time.

How appropriate that this is the holiday we would bring the first fruits to G-d when we had the Temple. While the fruit is still growing, it is obvious to all that it was in G-d's hands; there is no need to demonstrate our awareness at this point that our bounty is a gift from the Almighty. If we were to wait much longer after the harvest, we would likely have gotten used to the notion that it is 'ours' and thanking G-d would be belated and perfunctory.

It is at the precise moment of laying a scythe to the crop -- at "the cutting of the grain" -- that we stand at the nexus of these two forces and are able to correctly convey our gratitude. We recognize man's responsibility and G-d's benevolence at one and the same time and genuinely acknowledge that even that which is the fruit of man's labor is ultimately G-d's.

Let us then celebrate the night of study on Shavuot in the spirit that it was given. We will study Torah with the imperative that only we have the ability to know right from wrong, and if we will not set the world right no one else can. And let us study the words of the Torah with the appropriate humility that all our intellectual struggles are there but to understand a sliver of G-d's infinite wisdom.

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## **More About The Author**

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Rabbi Lopiansky is the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington. He is the author of numerous scholarly works, in Hebrew and English.

# Burnout, Shavuot and Living with Purpose

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech 5 min read

## ***Pursue meaning, not happiness.***

It's official. Last week the World Health Organization just concluded that the official compendium of diseases needs to include one more common contemporary disease under its list of sicknesses to be taken seriously by the medical profession.

Burnout has been upgraded from a "state of exhaustion" to a "syndrome" – which means that a truly significant number of people are not just sick of their jobs and sick of their lives; they are sick in the literal sense, ill mentally, emotionally and physically to the extent that their condition requires professional attention.

Perhaps this new phenomenon can shed on a famous biblical story, a seminal event in the life of Moses which may have much greater meaning than commonly understood at first reading.

Moses' first encounter with G-d took place at a bush. Bush in Hebrew is called *sneh*. Commentators claim that very spot would be the location for the giving of the 10 Commandments. From the word *sneh* comes the word Sinai. The holiday of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah are inextricably linked with the scene of the miracle shown to Moses. A bush burning with fire was strangely not consumed.

Superficially it was simply the scene of a miracle. It was G-d demonstrating his supernatural power. It was the prelude to G-d asking Moses to assume the heavy burden of leadership. Yet the question begs to be asked: Could not G-d have performed a more amazing feat than this? Surely there must've been some greater meaning to this particular miracle. Indeed, the specific nature of the miracle must have also been a sign and a message.

Permit me to suggest that G-d was giving Moses a powerful answer to the very same problem currently identified as key to contemporary culture. A bush was burning – yet it was not consumed. So too, G-d assured Moses, doing G-d's will, ***having a life filled with meaning and purpose, is the best way to never suffer from burnout.***

The "burning bush" is not so much the story of a miracle as it is a vivid depiction of the miracle of lives filled with fiery passion for a greater cause.

Burnout, psychologists tell us, is apathy, akin to the feeling that life has no meaning. There is a crisis of purpose in our world today. People feel overwhelmed, lonely, and unfulfilled. In chasing the "good life," they have sacrificed their relationships, their health, and, at the end of the day, still find themselves with lives and work that bring them little joy and meaning. Depression is on the rise and many people can't cope with the pace of change brought on by technological, cultural, and social transformations. Some turn to drugs and other forms of avoidance, some put on a happy face to mask the issues, while others simply withdraw and postpone living a full life. Many people feel like they are "prisoners" in their own lives.

Viktor Frankl, the world-renowned psychiatrist, existential philosopher, and author of the classic bestseller, *Man's Search for Meaning*, described it brilliantly. People today, he said, are living in an existential vacuum. Vacuums need content - and the content must be purpose.

In *The Power of Meaning: Crafting a Life That Matters* Emily Esfahani Smith reviewed hundreds of empirical papers from the growing body of research on meaningfulness and found that the defining features of a meaningful life are connecting and contributing to something beyond the self. Meaningful activities generate positive emotions and deepen social connections, both of which increase our satisfaction with life. Research shows that focusing on happiness in life is actually self-defeating. Helen Keller put it well: "Many persons have



a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

The most motivating choices are ones that align with our “why” and our purpose. Christine L. Carter Ph.D., a sociologist and happiness expert at UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center, and author of *The Sweet Spot: How to Find Your Groove at Work and Home* explains:

“Compelling research indicates that the pursuit of happiness – when our definition of happiness is synonymous with pleasure and easy gratification – won’t ultimately bring us deeper feelings of fulfillment; it won’t allow us to live in our sweet spot. Although we claim that the “pursuit of happiness” is our inalienable right and the primary driver of the human race, we humans do better pursuing fulfillment and meaning – creating lives that generate the feeling that we matter.”

In her research, Iris Mauss, a social psychologist at U.C. Berkeley who studies the possible negative consequences of seeking happiness, found that people who place a great value on being happy actually have more mental health problems, including, sadly enough, depression. The more value you place on your own happiness, the more likely you are to feel lonely. “Wanting to be happy can make you less happy. If you explicitly and purposely focus on happiness, that appears to have a self-defeating quality. Don’t spend your valuable time seeking your own happiness. You will end up feeling more shallow than you can ever imagine. Pursuing meaning, however, makes you feel good about yourself, because you are pursuing something bigger than yourself. Something that makes you come alive.”

The holiday of Shavuot recalls the single most important moment in all of human history. At Sinai we were given a call to make our lives filled with meaning. We were given the commandment that our lives must have purpose – and the pursuit of that purpose would ensure far greater joy than the pursuit of happiness.

Sinai reinforced the message of the *sneh*, the burning bush. In making our lives meaningful we have found the divine response to the dreaded disease of burnout.

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## **More About The Author**

### **Rabbi Benjamin Blech**

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, a frequent contributor to Aish, is a Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and an internationally recognized educator, religious leader, and lecturer. He is the author of 19 highly acclaimed books with combined sales of over a half million copies. See his website at [rabbibenjaminblech.com](http://rabbibenjaminblech.com).

# Change This One Word to Increase Your Motivation

by Rabbi Philip Moskowitz 5 min read

## ***How to turn any goal, including your Jewish observance, from a burden to a gift.***

During the months I was preparing for the Boston Marathon (that was ultimately postponed), people would often ask me what was the most difficult part of the training. And for me, the most difficult part of training was simply finding the motivation to get out the front door.

I didn't always feel like running. Each time I'd get ready for a run, my mind would become flooded with a slew of reasons why not to run: I was too tired, I didn't feel great, I had a sore toe, or a million other reasons why it would be more comfortable and relaxing to stay inside my house rather than go out on a run.

We all struggle with motivation from time to time. What do we do when we don't feel motivated?

The key is to change the activity from a chore to a gift. In her book, "No Sweat: How the Simple Science of Motivation Can Bring You a Lifetime of Fitness," Michelle Segar argues that by simply changing one word in your vocabulary and reframing the task at hand you can dramatically increase your chances of success.

Instead of saying to myself, "I *have* to run," I say to myself, "I *get* to run." Why does changing that one word from "have" to "get" make such a difference? ***Research shows that we are much more likely to continue an activity if we view the activity as a gift or an opportunity rather than an obligation.***

Saying "I have to do something" robs me of my autonomy and forces the activity upon me. It represents something that I'm doing unenthusiastically — or worse, something I'm doing against my will.

Saying "I get to do something" means that it's my choice and I get to do it because I want to. Changing that one word reframes your mindset from "I am forced to do this thing..." to "aren't I lucky to be able to..."

That one trick made an enormous difference in my training, and it can increase your motivation for whatever goals you are pursuing.

Nobody understood this about the human psyche better than G-d Himself. What exactly happened at Mount Sinai is a subject of debate between two Rabbinic statements. According to one Talmudic source, the revelation was a moment of national coercion. G-d suspended Mount Sinai above the Jewish people and gave them an ultimatum – accept the Torah or die, leaving us with very little choice in the matter.

According to another Rabbinic source, G-d went on a world tour, so to speak, and approached each nation to offer its people the Torah. Only after each one declined did He finally approach the Jews who excitedly proclaimed "*Naaseh v'nishma* – we will do and we will understand."

So which one is it? Did G-d force the Torah upon us or did we voluntarily choose to accept it?

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm suggests there is no contradiction between these two stories:

Both chronologically and logically, G-d first chooses us, but then we must choose Him. He chose us only once, at Sinai. This choice, thereafter, devolved upon each and every Jew, in any place and at any time, no matter what his wish, his commitment, or his conduct. For all eternity, anyone born into this people is chosen. But we must choose G-d anew in every generation. Indeed, every individual must choose G-d all over again... At Sinai it was true that "*Asher Bachar Banu*," G-d chose us. But, when we study Torah and recite the blessings, and preface our remarks with *Baruch Ata Hashem*, Blessed are You, G-d, then we have chosen Him as well.

Our acceptance of the Torah represents a synthesis of saying “I have to...” and saying “I get to...” At Mount Sinai, G-d coerced us into accepting His Torah. The observance and study of Torah is something we have to do. It’s an obligation incumbent upon every single Jew – male or female, beginning with that moment at Mount Sinai and extending for all of eternity. I am bound by the Torah and its precepts because “I have to.”

But that alone may sometimes leave us unmotivated and uninspired. If that is the case, our response must be to reframe it. Every time you sit down to study our sacred Torah, don’t just do it because you have to, but tell yourself proudly, “I get to!” Learning Torah and living my life according to its values is the greatest privilege and opportunity a person can dream of. The ability to open up G-d's roadmap for this world and elevate our lives is the greatest honor.

Whether it’s going for a run or opening up a sefer to learn, finding motivation will always be a challenge. Just make sure to remind yourself, you don’t just have to do it, you get to do it!

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### **More About The Author**

#### **Rabbi Philip Moskowitz**

Rabbi Philip Moskowitz is the associate rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue.

# Sinai's Big Bang

by Rabbi Shraga Simmons 4 min read

## ***An unparalleled boom of spiritual light and energy.***

Imagine living in pre-biblical times, when prevalent values included infanticide, human sacrifice and idol worship. It was a largely chaotic human landscape, devoid of moral anchor, where "might makes right" and barbarians reigned.

Then 3,300 years ago, the Jewish people stood at Sinai and – bang! – in the course of one revelation, humanity acquired a Divine code that quickly spread its revolutionary ideals of sanctity, justice, compassion, family, education and peace.

Over the millennia, various influencers – Christianity and Islam – helped Torah values become firmly rooted in human consciousness.

Just as the physical universe expands from its seminal moment, so too Sinai's spiritual Big Bang reverberates today. With the founding of the United States of America the voice from Sinai echoed in the ideals of "all men are created equal"; "in G-d we trust"; "proclaim liberty throughout the land." These are bedrocks of civilization and stem directly from the declaration of Genesis 1:27 that every human is "created in the image of G-d."

The words of history's greatest leaders, philosophers and historians – including U.S. Presidents from John Adams ("I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize man than any other nation.") to Lyndon Johnson ("Our society is illuminated by the spiritual insights of the Hebrew prophets.") – attest to Sinai's profoundly powerful effect.

### **The Imperative**

The holiday of Shavuot, which marks the Sinai experience, presents a unique opportunity to access Torah's unparalleled spiritual power.

But while any Jewish holiday requires intense preparation (before Sukkot we build the sukkah and obtain the four species; before Passover we clean the house and prepare the Seder), the very name of this holiday – Shavuot means "weeks" – alludes to the essential seven-week preparation period. Through a process of self-introspection, we attain a new level of clarity and commitment in four key realms:

#### **(1) Acceptance**

At Sinai, every Jew humbly stood in a barren desert, before a humble mountain, and in unison declared: *Naaseh v'Nishma* – we gladly accept the Torah, sight unseen.

Today, we demonstrate our acceptance of Torah through a commitment to study its words, day and night.

Particularly in modern times, with the propensity of distraction so great, passionate and constant Torah study is our best chance for making the right choices.

#### **(2) Observance**

Beyond mere "obligations," the 613 mitzvot – defined by G-d as the instructions for living – exert a practical observable affect on our lives. For example:

- Shabbat – our weekly rest and recovery seminar, exerting a centrifugal force of shared time that binds families and the community.

- Kashrut – instills a lifelong sense of self-discipline, enabling us to choose higher human pleasures over the competing desire for immediate gratification.
- Mikvah and associated laws – infuses married life with fresh vitality, appreciation and closeness.

### (3) Sharing

For those who love G-d and Torah, a natural desire is to share these ideas with others.

The Torah was given not to individuals, but to a nation, teaching us that its loftiest levels of fulfillment are achievable only as a group.

The Jewish message is fully universal. Anyone can join the club, and every [righteous human being](#) has a secure place in Heaven.

### (4) Unity

Finally, Torah is the ultimate unifier. Unity is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah, as Exodus 19:2 implies: The Jewish people stood at Sinai as one body with one heart. Only by seeing ourselves as part of an organic whole can that organism thrive.

Yet despite the many material-spiritual comparisons, one Big Bang is not like the other.

The cosmological Big Bang was a one-time event, which no human intervention can ever impact.

The influence of Sinai, by contrast, is a constant voice, beckoning each of us to choose Torah.

Torah is not an abstract and arcane text, but rather provides everything we need to live a healthy life.

By constantly directing us toward our unique life mission, *Torah study and observance is the very act of discovering self.*

On Shavuot, we stay up all night immersed in study, celebrating the Big Bang, and declaring that Torah – like water – is the essential life-sustaining force.

That's one thing worth staying up all night for.

## More About The Author

### Rabbi Shraga Simmons

Rabbi Shraga Simmons is the co-founder of Aish.com, and co-author of "**48 Ways to Wisdom**" (ArtScroll). He is Founder and Director of Aish.com's advanced learning site. He is co-founder of HonestReporting.com, and author of "**David & Goliath**", the definitive account of anti-Israel media bias. Originally from Buffalo, New York, he holds a degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin, and rabbinic ordination from the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. He lives with his wife and children in the Modi'in region of Israel.

# Unity at Sinai

by Rabbi Noah Weinberg, zt"l , was the dean and founder of Aish HaTorah 3 min read

***When the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai, the entire nation was unified. The lesson is clear for us today.***

Throughout the Torah, the Jewish people are always referred to in the plural form. This is evident in Exodus 19:2, which says the Jews "journeyed (*vayi'su*)... arrived (*vaya'vo'u*)... encamped (*vaya'chanu*)" -- all references are in the plural.

But then this verse ends with a surprise: *Vayichan sham Yisrael neged ha'har* -- "and the Jews encamped (singular) opposite the mountain."

In coming to Sinai, the Jewish people are referred to in the singular form. Rashi says this emphasizes how the entire nation encamped "with a single goal, and a singular desire."

Unity was a prerequisite for Sinai. An event with such earthshaking consequences could only be possible with unity.

## UNDER ATTACK

How were the Jews able to achieve such unity at Sinai?

In Exodus chapters 15-17, the Jews are having a hard time. There's no water -- and they complain. Then there's no meat -- and they complain. They're so upset that Moses is afraid they'll kill him! Then again no water. The Jews are fighting and bickering terribly.

Then Amalek came and battled Israel. An outside threat shook us. What happened next? The Jews encamped in unity at Sinai.

When Jews are threatened as a people, we get the message loud and clear. We know we are one. In the Six Day War, all Jews stood together. In the struggle for Soviet Jewry, all Jews rallied together. When we're attacked, we become one.

The prophet compares the Jewish people to a "flock of sheep." As the Midrash explains, when one is attacked, they all react.

## GOAL BEFORE EGO

There is one other instance where the Torah refers to a nation in the singular. Seven weeks earlier, as the Jews approached the Red Sea, they looked back and saw *Mitzrayim no'saya acha'ray'hem* -- "the Egyptians journeying (singular) after them" (Exodus 14:10). The Egyptians were united in their goal of destroying the Jewish people.

In this instance, unity was negative and destructive. At Sinai, unity led to world civilization. What's the difference?

In referring to the Egyptian unity, Rashi makes a slight change in the order. He says the Egyptians pursued "with a singular desire, and with a single goal." With the Jews, the **goal** came first. With the Egyptians, the primary emphasis was on personal **desire**.

If ego, partisanism, and private agendas are what define a people, then they'll destroy themselves and the world. Whereas if a meaningful common goal of G-d and Torah is what unites, that will bring utopia.

The lesson is clear for us today.