



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## SHAVUOT > Day One

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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June 4, 2014  
Shavuot - Day One

**Roses, Moses, and Noses**



# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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## ABSTRACT

Question: What do ROSES, MOSES, and NOSES have in common?

Answer: The Holiday of Shavuot.

It is a custom to adorn both synagogue and home with flowers. Mount Sinai, a mountain in the desert, miraculously bloomed at the giving of the Torah. And the Jews are compared to a rose among thorns. This is the connection of ROSES to Shavuot.

Moses ascended Sinai to study and convey the Torah to the people. Moses also instructed the people to keep their cattle from grazing upon the suddenly green desert mountain. This is the connection of MOSES to Shavuot.

A flower's uniqueness is its scent. Scent is the most refined of the five senses. The most spiritual. At Sinai the world was perfectly spiritual, spiritually perfect. It was positively fragrant. This is the connection of NOSES to Shavuot.

Every single Jew is a rose, a flower, whose role it is to bloom and send forth heavenly scents even – and especially – among the prickliest thorns. This is what we Jews do. And it all began with the giving of the Torah on Sinai.

And it begins right now, on the Holy Day of Shavuot.

Shavuot

Day One

Roses, Moses, and Noses

## ROSES, MOSES, AND NOSES

### 1. Say It With Flowers (Joke)

Shprintza's business had recently moved to a new location. Yona sent a gorgeous bouquet of flowers to congratulate Shprintza on the recent move and grand opening of her new store.

When the flowers arrived, Shprintza eagerly unfolded the accompanying card; it read: "Rest in Peace."

When Shprintza told Yona about the card, Yona was infuriated and called the florist to complain.

"Madam, I'm really sorry for the mistake. We have a new employee who isn't yet familiar with processing and must have confused orders."

Suddenly, Yona started laughing hysterically. "What's so funny?" asked the florist.

Between laughs, Yona responded: "I know this sounds terrible, but somewhere there must be a funeral going on, and just imagine the reaction when they open the card and read:

"Congratulations On Your New Location."

### 2. Flowers as Metaphor

Flowers, more than the sum of their petals and stems, are representative of greater things. The strewn white petals and fancy bouquets accompany brides on their wedding day; fancy black-tie dinners are celebrated with floral arrangements; a dozen red roses represent love; hospital gift-shops beckon well-wishers with their stemmed offerings; upscale restaurants are augmented with flowers, as are hotel lobbies and other luxury accommodations.

Flowers could be used to congratulate or apologize, to ornament a Shabbat table or to pin on a lapel, as a testament to love or as a way to console.

Flowers could also be used as a metaphor for the essence of a Jew, and there is no better day to unpack this metaphor than on Shavuot.

### 3. Desert Blooms

Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah upon Mount Sinai. As with all things Jewish, many customs are unique to Shavuot, such as eating dairy or pulling an all-nighter. One botanical custom is to adorn the synagogues and homes with greenery and flowers.<sup>1</sup> Different reasons are given for this custom.<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons provided is based on this Torah verse, in which Moses instructs the Jews in preparation for the receiving of the Torah:

*No one shall ascend with you, neither shall anyone be seen anywhere on the mountain, neither shall the sheep nor the cattle graze facing that mountain.*<sup>3</sup>

The cattle and livestock should not graze on this holy mountain of Sinai, upon which the Torah will soon be given.

This begs an obvious question: Since Mount Sinai was in the desert where nothing grew – no greenery, no grass, no plants – on what would the cattle and sheep graze? Sand?

From this our Sages learn<sup>4</sup> that, at the giving of the Torah, the sandy Sinai miraculously bloomed with beautiful flowers and greenery. Though it was situated in a desert, the mountain sprung alive in a floral symphony. It became a riot of scented<sup>5</sup> bloom and vibrant color.

<sup>1</sup> Orach Chaim 494:10 (Rama). The Vilna Gaon, as recorded in Mishnah Brurah ibid, was adamantly against this custom.

<sup>2</sup> See commentaries on Shulchan Aruch ibid, especially Magen Avraham.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 34:3.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Levush* (R' Mordechai b. Avraham Yaffe) 494:1.

<sup>5</sup> See Shir Hashirim Rabba 5:13.

Therefore, Moses commanded the people: *neither shall the sheep nor the cattle graze facing that mountain.*

Thus, on the Festival of Shavuot, in order to commemorate the blooming of Mount Sinai at the giving of the Torah, it is customary to decorate our synagogues and homes in lush greenery and beautiful flower arrangements.

#### 4. Rose Among Thorns

And while we are on the topic of flora, we are reminded that the wisest of all men, King Solomon, provides a apt analogy to describe the Jewish people: *As a rose among the thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters.*<sup>6</sup>

What does this analogy mean and what is its message?

The Midrash<sup>7</sup> explains King Solomon's analogy with an analogy of its own:

This can be compared to a king who possessed an orchard that was sown with rows of figs and grapes and pomegranates and apples. The king traveled to his provinces and, when he returned to evaluate the condition of his orchard, he found it overrun with brambles and thorns. The king came with tools to uproot the whole orchard when, suddenly, he came upon a vine with a single rose. The king smelled the rose and his soul was at peace. Said the king: "Because of this single rose I will preserve the entire orchard."

So, too, the entire universe was created but for the Torah. After twenty-six generations, the Holy One came to evaluate the universe and see how it was faring. He found that it was in chaos ... and overrun with thorns and barbs. So the Holy One came with shears to cut down and uproot the world. But then the Holy One saw one vine with a single rose – this is Israel – He took it and smelled it during the giving of the Ten Commandments, and His soul was at peace.

<sup>6</sup> Song of Songs 2:2.

<sup>7</sup> Vayikra Rabba 23:3

When the Jewish people said, “We will do and we will hear,” God said, “Because of this one rose, I will preserve the entire orchard: because of the Torah and Israel I will preserve the entire world.”

This analogy to explain Solomon’s analogy compares the earth to an orchard overrun with weeds, thorns, and barbs. Yet, within this dark and chaotic place, there is a blooming rose with a beautiful scent, and when the king smells this divine fragrance, his soul (and perhaps the soul of the universe) is at peace.

This revelation of the rose amongst thorns, says the Midrash, occurred at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

## 5. Bnei Yissachar

The early 19th century founder of the Munkatch Chassidic dynasty – Rabbi Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynov, better known as the Bnei Yissachar – quotes this Midrash and explains the flowers of Shavuot in a very beautiful and meaningful way, providing a modern takeaway lesson for each of us alive today.<sup>8</sup>

When we have examined what he has to say we will understand the profound miracle of the desert itself blooming, the essential revelation of the Torah at Sinai, and why we adorn the synagogue and home in flora on Shavuot. And we will understand why Israel is compared to a rose of all things. Why not a fruit, or a tree, or an animal, or a mineral? Why *davka* a rose?

The essence of a flower is its unique beauty but even more so is its scent – this is particularly true of a rose. And so is it with the Jew.<sup>9</sup>

The key to everything – we are about to discover – is scent.

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<sup>8</sup> Bnei Yissachar, Mamarei Chodesh Sivan, pp. 135bff.

<sup>9</sup> See Vayikra Rabba 23:6.

## 6. At the Beginning

But let's start at the beginning.

Whenever faced with a dilemma, an impasse, a confusion that demands clarification, it is always good to go back to a place preceding the confusion. This, in general, is a good piece of advice for almost any dilemma in life. Go back to a place before the dilemma took root and see what worked then. And apply it now.

Today, the world is not so perfect. An understatement? Definitely! No one has to be reminded of the darkness and pain that circulates throughout this world like the stale air of an exhaust pipe. Innocents are harmed daily; suffering isn't even shocking anymore but has impossibly become the expected norm; tears are for many a natural state and smiles but a long-gone artifact.

How the hell did this world get this way?

Exactly 2448 years prior to the giving of the Torah on Sinai, and that means 5774 years prior to today, two human beings existed in a place called the Garden of Eden. You may have heard of this couple – their names were Adam and Eve.

The Garden of Eden, as its name implies, was a beautiful botanical masterpiece, filled with sublime flora. This garden was at the disposal of Adam and Eve, to eat of its fruits and partake of its pleasures – except, of course, for one item in the garden, “The Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil.” This tree was off-limits.

For whatever reason, not to be elaborated on here, Adam and Eve did not heed the instructions put forth by the Creator and Landlord of the garden and they did indeed eat from the Tree of Knowledge. The consequences of this inappropriate consumption were dire: Henceforth every creation in existence, from the tiny to the giant, would be an intermingled snowball, consisting of both good and evil, positive and negative, light and darkness. Henceforth any physical matter could be turned either into something heavenly or diabolical.

*Prior* to eating of the Tree, good and evil were mutually exclusive domains. *After* eating of the Tree, nothing was any longer defined as either exclusively good or exclusively evil; all things could be either good or evil. Or both. Depending on human actions.

We see how it works everyday: Love can be holy and pure, or abusive and hurtful. What we put in our mouths can be good for us or bad for us. We can use our hands to embrace or to slap. Our eyes can look at the world with kindness or cynicism. Our words can inspire or devastate. A knife can be used to slice a loaf of Challah on Shabbat or to stab someone in the heart any day of the week. Fire can warm a soul or burn your skin. Everything in life could be used to create and elevate, or destroy and denigrate.

And, ever since the eating of the Tree, it is the role of humanity to refine the world by embracing the good and rejecting the evil, to find, highlight and utilize the positive in everything and remove and delete the negative.

It really is as simple as this: Do good with all things and you will remove evil in all things.

How do we know what is positive and what is negative? This we know by studying and following a thing called the Torah and its mitzvahs, which just so happens to have been given to us on this day.

## 7. Blessing on Everything

Every single item in existence – bar none – is a means to perform a positive act, by revealing the good in that specific item and destroying the bad. In order to remind us of this monumental task, the Talmud<sup>10</sup> makes a grandiose statement:

One is prohibited from enjoying *anything* in this world without first making a blessing.

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<sup>10</sup> See Berachot 35a, based on Psalms 24:1.



The *bracha*, the blessing on an item reminds us of our purpose in this barbed universe – to find and extract the good in all things – and it helps us channel our energies to achieve this divine purpose.

But then the Talmud<sup>11</sup> asks something perplexing: How do we know that we should also make a blessing on scents? And the Talmud answers that we derive this from the final verse of the Book of Psalms, *Let every soul praise God*.<sup>12</sup> Why does the Psalm use the phrase “every soul” and not “every body”? Obviously, because there is one delight in existence that is more pleasurable for the soul than it is for the body. And what, pray tell, may that thing be? Why, scent of course.

But, as the Bnei Yissachar wonders, the question itself is perplexing. The Talmud mentions that one is prohibited from enjoying anything in this world without first making a blessing, why then do we need *specific proof* that scents themselves require blessings if we already know that all things require them? Why would we think that scent be any different?

By answering this question, the Bnei Yissachar explains everything – why we have the customs of flowers on Shavuot, why Jews are compared to flowers, and most importantly, what this all means for us 3326 years after the original Shavuot and 5774 years after the eating of the Tree:

## 8. The Talmud Explained

First Bnei Yissachar explains the Talmudic assertion that all pleasures in this world require a blessing. Ever since Eden, all things in this physical world are intermingled with both good and evil and the blessing assures that all pleasures will be holy pleasures, perpetuating the refinery purpose of humankind.

<sup>11</sup> Berachot 34a.

<sup>12</sup> Psalms 150:6.

Then, he explains why the Talmud makes an argument that perhaps scents themselves – aromas, perfumes, fragrances, and bouquets – should not require a blessing. Because scents are ethereal, scents are soulful, and the soul was *not* contaminated and intermingled with evil but remains always pure and innocent. This is why the Talmud asks: How do we know that scents require a blessing, if they themselves were never negatively affected by the eating of the Tree?

The Talmud's answer to this question is: We know this from the final words of the Book of Psalms, *Let every soul praise*. Why? Because, although scent in its pure form was not affected, nevertheless, the human olfactory organ was affected (just as the entire human body was affected) and it is for its sake that we make the blessing. The sense of smell – as all our senses – still need to distinguish between the good and evil.<sup>13</sup>

## 9. The Rose at Sinai

This is why, at Sinai, the Jews were compared to a rose. For at that moment the true nature of who we are was revealed – a people that transcends the contaminated world and is one with the source of all good.

And this is why many communities have the custom to decorate their synagogues and adorn their homes with floral arrangements. These flowers represent the essence of the Jews, a people who at the core precede the mingling of good and evil, and who can thus glean the good in all things.

How? Through receiving the Torah and adhering to its mitzvahs, today on the holiday of Shavuot.

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<sup>13</sup>To quote Bnei Yissachar's exact words: "Because the sense of smell was not affected to the extent that the other senses were, therefore scent is a spiritual sense and more pleasurable to soul than body ... As such, there is an argument to be made that scent does not require a blessing because it does not require as much refinement to separate it from corporal pleasure as the other senses. Nevertheless, because the body itself was materialized by the eating of the Tree, and even something spiritual is now the fruit of matter as well, it too requires some form of refinement. This is why we make a blessing on scent and why the Talmud needs to provide a proof thereof."

At the moment when the Jewish people gathered at the foot of the mountain to receive the Torah from God Himself – united as one body with one heart – tradition teaches<sup>14</sup> that the “toxicity ceased,” the very confusion and corruption caused by the eating of the Tree was removed and transcended, and the world was perfect (only to revert back to its sorry state after the sin of the Golden Calf).

And this is why the mountain erupted in a rapture of flowers and why the Jewish people are compared to flowers. The Jewish people – you and I, standing here today as we did at the foot of Sinai, as one unified organism, with one heart and one soul – are essentially roses. We are uncontaminated scents, pure perfumes, innocent aromas – we, you and I, predate *at our core* the eating of the Tree of Knowledge and transcend *at our core* both good and evil.

And on the holiday of Shavuot, when the Torah is handed to us by God Himself, a Torah which too preceded the very creation of the world, we (and the King of the Orchard) are reminded of our essential selves – roses among thorns, and just one whiff of us has the ability to bring peace to the King’s soul.

## 10. The Snuff-Box (Optional Story)

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, once received a silver snuffbox as a gift.

But he did not want to put it to its intended use, and he remarked: “There is one part of the body which is not constantly seeking gratification – the nose. Should I train it, too, to be a pleasure-seeker?” Instead, he found a more lofty use for the gift: he detached the snuffbox’s shiny cover and used it as a mirror to help him center the *teffilin* on his head.

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<sup>14</sup>See Talmud Shabbat 146a. Zohar II, p.168a.

This incident was once related to Rabbi Schneur Zalman's grandson, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch. As the one telling the anecdote described how Rabbi Schneur Zalman "broke off" the cover of the snuffbox, Rabbi Menachem Mendel remarked: "No, no, my grandfather never broke anything. He merely removed the hinge-pin which connected the upper part to the lower."

The deeper significance of Rabbi Menachem Mendel's clarification is this: Rabbi Schneur Zalman would never have "broken off" the cover. His entire life was devoted to sublimating the ordinary and elevating the mundane, and he taught that the way to deal with the material world was not to repress or crush it, but to gently detach the upper from the lower – to extract, by harmonious and peaceful means, its lofty potential from its lowly enmeshments.<sup>15</sup>

There is in us all an olfactory faculty that is representative of our souls, where the desires of the world are naught and the desires for the divine are paramount. By adorning our synagogues and homes with flowers, we remind ourselves of this ideal.

And when we are reminded of this, we do not antagonistically "break off" the physicality of which we are a citizen, but we bend and nurture it into spiritual submission. We act like proud and blooming roses and thus turn all thorns into roses as well.

## 11. Conclusion: Floral Arrangements

Two elderly couples were enjoying friendly conversation when one of the men asked the other, "Fred, how was the memory clinic you went to last month?"

"Outstanding," Fred replied. "They taught us all the latest psychological techniques – visualization, association – it has made a big difference for me."

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<sup>15</sup> Sefer Hasichot 5702 p. 90 and 5696, p. 130. The rendition here is from *Once Upon a Chassid* by Yanki Tauber.

“That’s great! What was the name of that clinic?”

Fred went blank. He thought and thought but couldn't remember. Then a smile broke across his face and he asked, “What do you call that flower with the long stem and thorns?”

“You mean a rose?”

“Yes, that’s it!” Then he turned to his wife and asked, “Rose, what was the name of that clinic?”

Customs are there to connect us and to remind us. In any thorny situation in which we may be present, it is our role to be a blooming rose. Whenever the world seems barbed and sharp, we have to provide the softness and goodness ... we have to give off a fragrance and perfume that can bring peace to the soul.

When we receive the Torah anew, we refresh our ability to transform a desert rock into a mountain of flowers. And this very act causes arid sand to bloom and flourish, for the Torah brings with it the power to make a desert, a world that seems dark and deathly dry, bloom in a divine orchard, a symphony of flower and greenery.

The Torah is compared to water. And it nourishes all flowers. It nourishes us even as we struggle to bloom among the thorns.

Today we receive the gift of the Torah and begin to water our parched souls to quench our thirst for the divine so that we can bloom, from now into eternity.

Ultimately, may the divine wisdom of the Torah cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. And may the orchard of the King flourish even brighter than the original Garden of Eden.

It is time. It is high time we rose to the occasion.

Chag Sameach!