



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BAMIDBAR > Shavuot

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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June 7-8, 2011  
Shavuot

**One Heart**



# Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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## ABSTRACT

What is the greatest curse plaguing the Jewish people? Divisiveness.

What is the greatest blessing bestowed upon the Jewish people? Unity.

That unity was demonstrated more strongly than ever before (or since) at Sinai. It was such an extraordinary experience that, when we recite *Dayanu* during the Passover *Seder*, we say: “If we had only just arrived at Sinai, it would have been enough.”

As Jews, what we need today more than anything else is that unity – to finally look at each other as brothers and sisters. And instead of all the infighting of “denominations,” we need to recognize that we are all “one nation,” “one pillar,” and “one people, with one heart,” and that this does not need to compromise our diversity.

Instead of considering anyone more moral/religious than us as a fanatic and anyone less moral/religious than us as a heretic, we need to get beyond the labels and stereotypes that divide us, and treat our fellow Jews as our own family.

If you saw your own child do something you disapprove of, you would not cease to unconditionally love your child; yet, out of love you would also discipline your child, and you would let your child know that any rebuke is coming out of love.

Our collective attitude has to be the same as with our own family. We do not need to compromise our own commitment to Judaism to love others Jews, who have not yet reached our place, and welcome them and encourage them to grow together with us in our relationship with God.

Bamidbar

Shavuot

One Heart

If we have not internalized that lesson, it is what we must learn today, as we observe the holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

This day we also observe *Yizkor*, a special time to honor our unity as a people. As we transcend our bodily differences and petty divisions, and remember the souls of our loved ones, we learn about a new depth of love between us – a connection that unites “those standing here with us today and those that are not here with us this day.”

## ONE HEART: STANDING TOGETHER, AS ONE, AT SINAI

### 1. May That Jew Be Blessed

Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz<sup>1</sup> one of the great rabbis of pre-war Lithuania, once said:

“When I will stand before the heavenly court, and they will ask me, ‘What merit have you brought with you?’ What shall I answer? Shall I say ‘Torah’? Is my Torah knowledge worth enough to be mentioned? Shall I say ‘Fear of Heaven’? Are my deeds worthy of that description? There is only one thing I could possibly claim – that I loved every Jew with all my heart. Whenever I walk in the street and I see a Jew, one thought comes to me: ‘May that Jew be blessed!’”

How many of us think that way today?

The sad answer is: very few.

Today’s Jews are extremely judgmental. It is well known joke that today’s Jews think that anyone less religious than they is a heretic, while anyone more religious than they is a fanatic.

Or, as the saying goes, “Two Jews, three opinions.”

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Boruch Ber Leibowitz (1864-1939) was a main student of Rabbi Chaim Brisker and was famed for his Talmudic lectures. He was born in Slutsk and was known a prodigy while at a very young age. In 1904 he was appointed head of the Kneset Beis Yitzchak Yeshiva in Slobodka.

## 2. The Last Two Jews in Afghanistan

You might have read about the two remaining Jews in Afghanistan.

Yitzhak Levy and Zebolan Simanto were the last two Jews in Kabul until 2005 when Levy passed away. You would think that as the two remaining Jews in all of Afghanistan, they would have been friends and allies. But these two Jews hated each other, each one claiming that he is the head of the community!

The pair had lived together in a shabby courtyard on Flower Street in Kabul throughout the Soviet invasion, a civil war and the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban government, but held separate services in separate synagogues, and had vicious shouting matches neighbors could hear a block away.

Today, the synagogues are unused, their floors coated with a thick layer of dust and their walls cracked and peeling. Simanto's synagogue has a bird's nest in the ceiling light. Levy's has Hebrew inscriptions on the walls, testimony to the fact that it once was a place of worship.

The arks in both which had held the community's Torah scrolls are empty but for a few yellowing prayer books. That, it appears, is the root of the hatred that gripped the two men. The last Torah scroll was taken away by the Taliban and deposited at the interior ministry. Both men laid claim to the scroll, which was 500 years old and worth \$2 million ...

## 3. The Greatest Curse; the Greatest Blessing

This brings us to two important questions:

What is the greatest curse plaguing the Jewish people? Divisiveness.

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As Jews, what we need today more than anything else is that unity – to finally look at each other as brothers and sisters. And instead of all the infighting of “denominations,” we need to recognize that we are all “one nation,” “one pillar,” and “one people, with one heart,” and that this does not need to compromise our diversity.

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Our collective attitude has to be the same as with our own family. We do not need to compromise our own commitment to Judaism to love others Jews, who have not yet reached our place, and welcome them and encourage them to grow together with us in our relationship with God.

If we have not internalized that lesson, it is what we must learn today, as we observe the holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

#### 4. As One

States the Torah:

In the third month following the exodus from the land of Egypt, that same day the Children of Israel came into the wilderness of Sinai. They had journeyed from Rephidim and had come the desert of Sinai and camped (*vayachanu*) in the desert. And there Israel camped (*vayichan*) opposite the mountain.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Exodus 19:1-2.

Explain biblical commentators:

At all their other encampments, the Torah says *vayachanu* ("and they camped," in the plural). But here it says *vayichan* ("and he camped," in the singular). For at all other encampments, they were in argument and dissent, whereas here they camped as one human being, with one heart.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. One Human Being, One Heart

What does this mean: "one human being, with one heart"?

The Midrash explains: "If the Jewish people were lacking just one person from the 600,000 Jews at Mount Sinai, they would not have received the Torah."<sup>4</sup> The one human being – the body of Israel – would have been missing an essential component, like a body missing an eye or a limb.

How could this be?

The mystics point out<sup>5</sup> that *Yisroel* (the Hebrew word for Israel) is an acronym for *yesh shishim riboi oisiyos l'Torah*, there are 600,000 letters in the Torah (including the vowels<sup>6</sup>), which correspond to the 600,000 Jewish souls which stood at Mount Sinai. Because just as a Torah scroll is invalid if even a single letter is missing so, too, the Jewish people are handicapped if even one Jew has fallen away from our people.

Each and every Jew is completely integral – regardless of his or her beliefs or level of observance. In fact, even the worst sinners are part of the whole.

<sup>3</sup> Mechilta, Rashi on the verse.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash, Bereishit Rabba 70:9. Devorim Rabba 7:8. Mechilta Yisro19:11.

<sup>5</sup> Megaleh Amukot ofen 186.

<sup>6</sup> See Likkutei Torah Behar 41b. 43d.

This we learn from the fact that one of the spices used in the incense at the Temple was galbanum, which had a foul aroma. The Talmud<sup>7</sup> derives from this that even the worst sinners are inextricably bound into the community of Israel.

In short we are one. This was the gift of Sinai, a perception which is slowly but surely permeating our understanding of the world today.

## 6. Singular View

History is a witness to that fact that our understanding of the universe has evolved from a pluralistic view to a singular view.

Earlier in time, our primitive perspective measured the universe with the naked senses, resulting in the conclusion that the world was made up of many different parts, ruled by diverse forces.

Today, however, we have developed a far more sophisticated appreciation of the universe as one unified whole. The multitude of systems and organisms are all part of a single entity, and the countless aspects of nature all fall under several unifying laws that govern all of existence.

And the search for the one “unified field theory,” which will explain all phenomena, remains the defining and ultimate scientific achievement.

When exactly did this perception change? When did humankind begin to see and experience the universe as one unified entity, instead of a composite of myriad pieces?

## 7. At Sinai

According to the Torah it happened 3,323 years ago today, when the nation of Israel camped opposite Mount Sinai.

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<sup>7</sup> Talmud, *Kritot* 6b.

What power did Sinai have that united the people when they “camped opposite the mountain”?

The Midrash explains that at Sinai an unprecedented experience took place that would change the course of all history. Up until that point that which was “above” did not descend “below” and that which was “below” did not ascend “above.”<sup>8</sup> The spiritual and sublime was divorced from the material and the mundane. Spirit and matter were two forces that could not join. Obviously, even before Sinai, matter and energy were essentially one. (I mean, the existence of  $E=MC^2$  was discovered, not created, by Albert Einstein.) But human beings were not able to integrate this.

Sinai changed all that. It married heaven and earth, integrating the sublime and the mundane, uniting the majestic and the plain.

In one word: Fusion.

## 8. Fusion

Sinai achieved a total fusion of matter and spirit. It empowered humanity to renovate the very nature of existence, to transform the material into spiritual fuel.

Because of what happened at Sinai, we now can take an inanimate, physical object, and convert it into sublime energy, to bring alive every fiber of our beings and every aspect of our existence. To take an ordinary experience and make it extraordinary. To take the temporary and make it permanent. To take the mortal and make it immortal.

This unprecedented fusion changed not only the global landscape, but – and perhaps even more importantly – it transformed our personal experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, Vaeira 15; Midrash Rabbah, Shemot 12:4.



## 9. The Human Universe

The human being is a universe in microcosm. We, too, are comprised of two forces – our bodies and our souls. Each of us hears inside us a *biological* voice of survival, which competes with a *transcendental* voice seeking relief.

Can we integrate these two forces? Or are we condemned, at best, to a compartmentalized life? Most of the time we are involved in the struggle for survival, otherwise known as our physical needs, while attempting to carve out moments for transcendental activities, which take on many shapes, some healthy, some not so – romance, music, art, travel, spirituality and faith.

The transcendental thirst is sometimes quenched through self-destructive means – various (physical or psychological) obsessions or addictions – anything to “get out of this place” of the monotonous grind.

Isaac Bashevis Singer tells the story of a man who traveled to the famous city of Vilna and then came back and told his friend, “the Jews of Vilna are remarkable people. I saw a Jew who studies all day long. I saw a Jew who spent all day scheming how to get rich. I saw a Jew waving the red flag calling for a revolution. I saw a Jew who was loyal to his country. I saw a Jew running after his desires all day, and I saw a Jew who was self-denying and avoided temptation. I encountered a Jew who was a socialist, a Jew who was a capitalist, a Jew who was a Zionist and a Jew who was an anti-Zionist. I met a Jew who embraced Enlightenment and a Jew who shunned it.”

The traveler’s friend remarked, “I don’t know why you’re so astonished. Vilna is a big city, and there are tens of thousands of Jews, all types.”

“No,” said the first man, “it was all the same Jew.”

As the feistiest of people, Jews fight with themselves and they fight with each other. But there’s a fight and there’s a fight. Healthy debate and disagreement is a way of reaching clarity. It is the very nature of the entire Talmud: argument and counter-argument. Question, answer and counter question. But these dialogues lead to a peaceful conclusion. However, when a disagreement gets personal and creates divisiveness then we have a curse on our hands.

## 10. A New Way of Being

But we do not have to segment our life into two (or more) parts. For Sinai introduced into our lives a new way of being. We have the power to spiritualize the material, and to fuse our body with our soul.

We do this by turning our body and our physical activities into vehicles to express and fulfill our soul's mission. Instead of controlling and directing our spiritual life, our material life follows our soul's desires. The driver directs the vehicle, not the other way around.

The psychological implications of personal fusion between are as life transforming as they are astonishing. For Sinai unequivocally states that *we do not* have to resign ourselves to a life of duality.

## 11. Jewish Divisiveness (Optional)

And just as Sinai infused us with the ability to integrate our personal lives (despite our conflicting proclivities), it also empowered us as a community and a nation to join and love each other “as one person with one heart” (despite our differences).

People in general are different, each with his or her own personality, opinion and perspective. It is therefore quite natural that there be disagreements, and even arguments and conflicts. So long as they don't get out of hand.

A story is told about a rabbi, who was ripping his hair out because, every time it came to saying the *Shema*, half of his congregation wanted to sit, and the other half wanted to stand, and each side would shout for the other to get with the program.

Thinking that he needed to resolve this issue somehow, the rabbi tracked down one of the original founders of the synagogue in a nursing home, and went there to determine – once and for all – what was the original custom of the founding members. He explained the problem and asked the old man:

- “Did you all stand for the *Shema*?”
- “No, that’s not the way it was.”
- “So you all sat for the *Shema*?”
- “No, that’s not the way it was.”
- “What do you mean? Just how was it? You have to help me out here, because they are all killing each other.”
- “*That’s* the way it was.”

## 12. The Power of Unity (Optional)

Sinai taught us that that’s not the way it has to be. Despite our differences we are truly one. Just like a body is one, despite its 75 trillion different cells and multitude of diverse organs and systems. We are one people, “one person, with one heart.”

And when we see beyond the surface disparity, and love each other as brothers and sister of one family, we draw down the greatest blessings. But when we stand apart, we open ourselves up and become vulnerable to the dangers of the world.

In the Australian outback, known for its beauty but also for the ability to get lost there and never be found, a family out camping discovered that their little girl had disappeared.

At first they didn’t panic, assuming she must have wandered into another family’s tent. But after a while, they realized that she was lost. And everybody began frantically searching for her.

More and more volunteers joined the search, but to no avail. The child could not be found.

As time passed the volunteers realized they needed a concerted effort, because time was running short. It would soon get dark, and the search would be next to impossible. As well there was the danger of wild animals, hypothermia, and dehydration.

One volunteer came up with a brilliant idea: to form a human chain, with everyone holding hands in a giant circle, spreading out as far as possible. Then they would slowly close the perimeter of the circle, and in the process they'd hopefully find the little girl.

So they got their supplies together, held hands, and formed a human chain for miles, and they began closing in the circle. They shouted her name, but there was no response ... it was almost dark, but nobody wanted to give up. They felt that they would find her with this method ... Finally, darkness descended, and just as they were about to give up, someone spotted the little girl curled up against a tree. She was barely breathing...

You can imagine the reaction ... Everybody was weeping and praying for this little girl, as a doctor on the scene was desperately attempting to save her life.

But, it was too late ... the little girl breathed her last breath and returned her precious soul to its maker.

One volunteer who had been there from the very beginning called out with great anguish: "If we could have only held hands sooner ... If only we could have held hands sooner..."

No family is perfect. The only families I know are normal are the families I don't know well... Yet being imperfect is not an excuse for discord and conflict. Don't wait for the funeral and say, "If we could have only held hands sooner...?"

### 13. A Tale of Two Brothers (Optional)

There were two brothers who had neighboring farms on a mountain. One brother was childless and wealthy. The other had many children yet was poor. They both grew wheat on their adjacent farms. During the harvest season, after they had bundled their wheat into sheaves, the wealthy brother thought to himself, "What do I

need so much wheat for? My brother has more bills to pay, and more hungry mouths to feed. Yet I know he won't accept my charity. I'll sneak some of my wheat to his farm."

Meanwhile, the brother with many children said to himself, "My brother has no children. He gives so much charity with his money. I'll give him some of my wheat. He'll have more money to give. That will make him so happy." Each brother would set out each night, dragging sheaves of wheat to each other's farm.

One night, they bumped into each other at the border of their properties. When they each realized what the other was doing, they laughed, put down their wheat, and fell into a brotherly embrace.

And that is the place where the *Bet HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple, was built, on the mountain top in Jerusalem.

But the story, an ancient Jewish legend, has a sequel:

There were two brothers. They, too, lived in Jerusalem. One brother was childless and wealthy. The other had many children yet was poor. The childless brother thought, "My brother is loaded. What does he need so much wheat for? I on the other hand, have lots of expenses." So each night he went to his brother's farm and stole some wheat.

The other brother thought, "My brother has so many children, and I have none. I should at least have the consolation of greater wealth." So he helped himself to his brother's wheat each night.

One night, they both bumped into each other. When each realized what the other was up to, they become furious and beat each other without mercy.

And that is the place where the Israeli Knesset stands today...

Unity then is the call of the hour. And there is no better time to begin then on Shavuot, when Sinai joins us "as one person, with one heart."

## 14. Perception of Plurality

This does not mean that there is no struggle. Our perception – of ourselves, our communities and of the world – continues to be one of plurality, and it clutches us in its powerful grip. And, as we all know too well – the battle is fierce. We all unfortunately have seen the tragic consequences of discord and war, both in our families and communities as well as between nations of the world.

This is why when we say the *Shema* (the most fundamental statement of monotheism), “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is Our God; the Lord is One,” declaring that there is only one reality, we cover our eyes. This is because our naked eyes deceive us into perceiving a pluralistic universe.

In fact, all moments of truth are best experienced with closed eyes. Because by shutting down the external stimuli of our outer senses, we can experience the pulsating seamlessness of our inner senses.

And the way we perceive ourselves affects the way we perceive others, and it affects, as well, the way we understand the universe at large. But there is more to it. For the way we perceive ourselves, actually *impacts* others and the world around us.

Students of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle know that.

That’s the Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle – not to be confused with the *Heineken* Uncertainty Principle which says “You can never be sure how many beers you had last night.”

[But] the students of Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle are familiar with the scientifically proven fact that on a sub-atomic level the “observer” of phenomena is not a mere “observer,” but actually impacts the “object” he is observing.

Bizarre as it sounds (that is, bizarre to our limited faculties), this has been proven time and again in laboratories around the world.

## 15. The Connection

When you think about it, it actually makes more sense that all aspects of the universe – and our lives – are connected rather than disconnected. But this is yet another demonstration how our external senses hold us hostage in their stubborn, myopic view of a fragmented universe and of our lives as a series of random, disjointed experiences.

This is especially true when we say *Yizkor* today and connect with the souls of our loved ones. This is a good time to honor our unity as a people. As we transcend our bodily differences and petty divisions, and remember the souls of our loved ones, we learn about a new depth of love between us – a connection established at Sinai, which united “those standing here with us today and those that are not here with us [in physical bodies] this day.”<sup>9</sup>

Close your eyes, listen to a gentle melody, and you will feel (for the moment at least) as one with yourself, one with others, one with the universe, one with the souls of your loved ones – seamless and whole.

This is what happened at Sinai.

When the people arrived at Sinai, they were suddenly taken by a new “music” that surrounded them. All their differences, all their disagreements dissolved in the awesome moment. They became “one human, with one heart.”

Today, we want to recreate that awesome moment, to repeat that first rendezvous with destiny. So let’s try:

Close your eyes. Visualize heaven meeting earth and allow yourself to be absorbed by the symmetry.

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<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 29:14.

Imagine invisible threads connecting you (and your family) to all other people – all of us tiny fibers in a tapestry-matrix woven together from all the cells and atoms of the universe. Let go of the world as you know it and be mesmerized by the Sinai fusion.

And ask yourself: “When I open my eyes, who will be in the driver’s seat? My body and its needs or my soul?”

You have the power to choose. Choose well. Today is the day. Amen.