



SHAVUOT

Shavuot 1 / 6 Sivan

Receiving The Torah In 2448, 5727, & 5777

May 31, 2017

RECEIVING THE TORAH IN 2448, 5727 (1967) & 5777 (2017)

ABSTRACT

Imagine if, instead of in synagogue, you and your congregation were standing at the foot of Sinai receiving the Torah.

Imagine if, instead of in synagogue, you and your congregation were standing at the Kotel, at the foot of the Temple Mount, in 1967, a mere week after Israel returned to its eternal center.

The Torah was given and received at Mount Sinai 3329-years-ago, in the year 2448 from creation. Every year since, on Shavuot, the event is recreated anew. And every one of the 3329 years has its own special story.

In 1967, a few days following the miraculous victory of the Six-Day War, the Western Wall, for the first time in 2000 years, was in Jewish hands, and Jewish people celebrated the giving of the Torah at the liberated Kotel in Jerusalem, the spot where the Holy Temples stood. There was a euphoric energy in the air, reminiscent of the awe-inspiring atmosphere of the first Shavuot at Sinai.

One account: “Every section of the population was represented. Kibbutz members and soldiers rubbing shoulders with Neturei Karta. Mothers came with children in prams, and old men trudged steeply up Mount Zion, supported by youngsters on either side, to see the wall of the Temple before the end of their days. Some wept, but most faces were wreathed in smiles. For 13 continuous hours, a colorful variety of all peoples trudged along in perfect order.” Another: “I’ve never known so electric an atmosphere before or since. Wherever we stopped, we began to dance. Holding aloft Torah scrolls we swayed and danced and sang at the tops of our voices.”

Now in 2017, how do we achieve that same level of miraculous euphoria of Sinai and ’67, how do we celebrate Shavuot as the momentous event that it is meant to be?

And what lessons can we learn from the past to ensure that we never lose the awe and awesomeness of the miracle?

A combination of moving eyewitness accounts of that first Shavuot at the Kotel, the way it was reported even in left-wing papers like the *Times* and *Haaretz*, its global impact, and personal applications of Sinai to our lives today – make for a riveting sermon that will inspire your listeners to recreate on this Shavuot 5777/2017 – the passion and excitement, the relevance and the emotions of Sinai 2448 and 5727/1967.

1. Who Said These Words?

Chag Sameach, a happy Shavuot to one and all. May we merit to receive the Torah on all its levels and in a personal and relevant way.

I want to begin by quoting something I recently read, and I want to see if you can guess where it's from:

The military victory of Israel, startling in its speed and efficiency, is not as impressive as the spirit that produced it in this moment of her history.

With the Old City of Jerusalem back in their control, Israel is not only a nation but a family. No doubt it will go back to squabbling later on as all families do, but for these few days it has given the world a glimpse of what can be done by an intelligent and courageous people with a common purpose.

The Jews have not suffered for nothing. If there is any consolation for their centuries of agony it was apparent here in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem this week. These people have acted as if the life of the nation was everything and their personal lives were incidental.

Can you guess where these words are from?

“Israel is not only a nation but a family.”

“For these few days it has given the world a glimpse of what can be done by an intelligent and courageous people with a common purpose.”

“These people have acted as if the life of the nation was everything and their personal lives were incidental.”

James Reston, a Presbyterian Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist, wrote these words on June 7, 1967 – a week before Shavuot that year – and they were printed in *The New York Times*, under the header, “Determined Nation – Israelis, Hesitant at Outset of Crisis, Forged an Overpowering Unanimity.”

Would *The New York Times* describe the Jewish people today in the same way? As a nation and a family, with overpowering unanimity, the Old City of Jerusalem **back** in their control, an intelligent and courageous people with a common purpose?

Never mind *The New York Times*, would you describe Israel and the Jewish people this way?

Why in 1967 was this clear even for a Presbyterian, and why today, 50 years later, is it confusing even for a Jew?

2. Some History

Today, the Torah was given and received at Mount Sinai 3329-years-ago, in the year 2448 from creation.

Every year since, on this day we celebrate the festival of Shavuot and as we read the Ten Commandments, the event is created anew¹. And every one of the 3329 years of Shavuot has its own special story.

In 1967, a mere week after the miraculous victory of the Six-Day War, the Western Wall, for the first time in 2000 years, was in the hands of Jews, and the Jewish people celebrated Shavuot and the giving of the Torah at the freed Kotel in Jerusalem, the spot where the Holy Temples stood. There was a euphoric energy in the air, reminiscent of the awe-inspiring atmosphere of the first Shavuot at Sinai.

To capture a taste of the feelings and wonder running through the Jewish people, here are two 1967 covers from *Haaretz Shelanu*, Haaretz newspaper's children's weekly magazine, a newspaper, we might add, that is not exactly known for its right-wing or religious bylines:

A day before Shavuot, and just days after liberating Jerusalem, the 5th of Sivan 5727 (1967) cover of Haaretz quoted the verse *Im eshkochech Yerushalayim – If I forget thee o Jerusalem*². Its next week's cover, right after Shavuot, 12th of Iyar, ran a full-page picture of Rabbi Goren surrounded by soldiers in battle gear holding a Sefer Torah, with the words, *Bayom habu yitakah b'shofar gadol – And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great shofar shall be sounded*.³

In 1967, to everyone from the right to the left, from the New York Times to Haaretz, the miracle and the wonder was clear. *Shofars* were blasted, tears were shed, we were one nation, one family, praying together under one G-d.

I want to share some moving eyewitness accounts to describe that first Shavuot to you:

3. Shavuot 1967

On the morning of Shavuot, which was then June 15, 1967 – just six days after the liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six Day War – the Old City was officially opened to the Israeli public. (The army wanted to first be sure there were no landmines or snipers remaining in the Old City.) For the first time in almost 2,000 years, masses of Jews could freely visit the Western Wall – under Jewish control – and walk through the cherished streets of Judaism's capital city. Each Jew who ventured to the Western Wall on that unforgettable day was realizing their ancestors' dreams over the millennia. It was one of those rare, euphoric moments in history.

¹ See Pesikat D'Rav Kahana on the verse B'Chodesh Ha'Shlishi. Cited in Rokeach section 296.

² Pslams 137:5.

³ Isaiah 27:13.

From the late hours of the night, thousands of Jerusalem residents streamed toward the Zion gate, eagerly awaiting entry into the Old City. At 4 a.m., the accumulating crowds were finally allowed to enter the area of the Western Wall. As the sun continued to rise, there was a steady flow of thousands who made their way to the Old City.

The Jerusalem Post described the epic scene:

Every section of the population was represented. Kibbutz members and soldiers rubbing shoulders with Neturei Karta. Mothers came with children in prams, and old men trudged steeply up Mount Zion, supported by youngsters on either side, to see the wall of the Temple before the end of their days.

Some wept, but most faces were wreathed in smiles. For 13 continuous hours, a colorful variety of all peoples trudged along in perfect order, stepping patiently when told to do so at each of six successive barriers set up by the police to regulate the flow.

In total, 200,000 visited the Western Wall that day. It was the first pilgrimage, en masse, of Jews to Jewish-controlled Jerusalem on a Jewish festival in 2,000 years, since the pilgrimages for the festivals in Temple times.

An eyewitness described the moment:

“I’ve never known so electric an atmosphere before or since. Wherever we stopped, we began to dance. Holding aloft Torah scrolls we swayed and danced and sang at the tops of our voices. So many of the Psalms and songs are about Jerusalem and Zion, and the words reached into us a new life. As the sky lightened, we reached the Zion gate. Still singing and dancing, we poured into the narrow alleyways beyond.”

On Shavuot, 3,279 years earlier, the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and forged a unique relationship with their Creator. On the day of Shavuot following Israel’s amazing victory in the Six Day War, multitudes ascended to the Western Wall, and they, too, felt the eternal magic of this moment. After all, “For from Zion shall come forth Torah, and the Word of G-d from Jerusalem.”⁴

4. 50 Years Later...

Now in 2017, how do we achieve that same level of miraculous euphoria of Sinai and ’67, how do we celebrate Shavuot as the momentous event that it is?

Our sages tell us that we need to relive the awe of Sinai.⁵ How can we recreate that passion and excitement today?

⁴ Isaiah 2:3.

⁵ Just as there it was in awe and fear and trembling and quaking, so in this case too, it must be in awe and fear and trembling and quaking (Berachos 22a).

And what lessons can we learn from the past to ensure that we never lose the awe and awesomeness of the miracle?

Right before the Ten Commandments we read: *The sound of the Shofar grew increasingly stronger.*⁶ Rashi, from the Mechilta, explains what “increasingly stronger” means: Human mortals, the longer they blow a horn the weaker it gets. The sound is strongest initially and begins to fade and diminish with time, as the blower’s energy wanes. At Sinai however, the blowing of the divine Shofar “grew increasingly stronger,” it began lower and grew louder and louder with every moment.

Perhaps we can say that this is also true over the generations: As time passes, the sound of the Sinai Shofar increases and grows. This was certainly the case 50 years ago when “the great shofar sounded” and created an unprecedented spiritual awakening.⁷ And now 50 years later, 3329 after Sinai, the sound of the Shofar is, on certain levels, louder than ever, “increasingly stronger,” beckoning us to respond to the call.

What does it take for us to hear it?

5. Lessons Learned Over the Last 50 Years

The Six-Day War fought in June 1967 and culminated with the celebration of Shavuot at the Western Wall, marked one of the highest points in modern Jewish history. Twenty-two years after Auschwitz, the fledgling Israel was surrounded from all three sides – Jordan to the East, Egypt to the South and Syria to the North – all determined to drive it into the sea. Mass graves were dug and fear consumed the land; would there be a second holocaust, this time in the Promised Land?

Then in a mere six days, Israel triumphed and tripled in size. The unprecedented victory of a tiny country, the size of New Jersey with a population of under 2 million, over the surrounding Arab countries numbering hundreds of millions, stunned the world. The miracle became the source of unparalleled Jewish euphoria and pride. Religious and secular alike, believers and cynics, could not contain their tears when touching the stones of the newly reclaimed Western Wall.

What happened next remains, as we speak, one of the sad chapters of Jewish history. From a state of euphoria, today’s Israel is embroiled in conflict from within and without. Peace seems as distant as ever. Israelis themselves cannot agree on what sort of Israel they want. Israel’s vision – so powerfully celebrated 50 years ago – is now in question.

But this can change. And we can help bring on this change.

⁶ Exodus 19:19.

⁷ See sermon of Shabbat Bamidbar this year.

Sinai holds the answer. We need to open our ears and hear the “great shofar” sounding today, as it did 3329 years ago and 50 years ago.

6. The Secret to Jewish Success

There is no question that in the past half century Israel has made great advances in finance, technology, culture and so on. But we are speaking now not of material success and prosperity, but of a spiritual success and vitality – of a vision for tomorrow, one that Israel can embrace with passion and one that its neighbors and the world would respect.

Because after all, the Jewish people and the Jewish land are a holy people, “you shall be for Me a kingdom of princes and a holy nation,” as G-d told the Jews before Sinai.⁸

And our success and perpetuity was always dependent not on political, cultural or financial success, not on any of the *isms* that have come and went, but on our unwavering embrace – and our commitment to teach the world – a spiritual vision – a vision of virtue, morality and ethics, one that turns the world into a divine home. At Sinai the Jewish people embraced G-d’s mandate to create a civilized world, to refine and sanctify the mundane.

What transpired during the last fifty years? What mistakes were made following the victory in 1967 that allowed for the downward spiral that has led to the stalemate in 2017? How was such great victory and pride squandered?

The answer is both simple and profound, and it can be gleaned from the *sound of the Shofar which grew increasingly stronger* at Sinai, and continues to grow from year to year.

The pre-Shavuot miracles and blessings of 1967 was a divine call to each one and all of us. And indeed, at the time it elicited an unparalleled awakening, as described by so many who lived through it. A few of those accounts I shared earlier.

But like all inspiration, it can easily dissipate if it isn’t continuously maintained and fueled.

Consider the fact that even after the original Sinai, the Jewish people and most of their leaders – the scouts, as we will read in two weeks time – also struggled with what the Promised Land means, and they chose to reject the land.⁹ Instead, they tragically all remained in the wilderness, while only their children would rise to enter the Promised Land.

⁸ Exodus 19:6.

⁹ Numbers 13:28 and on.

The euphoria of Sinai to the resignation of the “desert generation” parallels the euphoria of the Six Day War and today’s situation uncannily. The mistakes made then by the scouts were meant to be lessons not to be repeated in 1967 and in the fifty years hence.

Shavuot reminds us of the shofar call to wake up our hearts and souls to the true meaning of the Promised Land, to the true significance of G-d’s miracles—to the true nature of the Jewish people and spiritual pioneers in changing this world to a world of goodness and kindness.

7. Practical Lessons

Here are some of the lessons to take to heart so that we may indeed hear the blast of the ever growing and increasing Shofar:

1) G-D’S PROMISE

The only right that Jews have to Israel is because G-d granted them the Promised Land. We are taking **back** (not merely **taking**) the Old City and Jerusalem, as the *Times* itself stated then in 1967. We are **returning** to our homeland.

Why else would several million Jews insist on planting themselves in a small sliver of land surrounded by hundreds of millions of Arabs and Muslims who don’t want them there?

2) HOW, NOT WHETHER

We do not have the power, and were not given the right, to challenge the mission we are charged with. Our role is to figure out how to fulfill our calling, not whether to do so or not.

Jewish leaders then, leaders in 1967 and leaders today have allowed their own subjective perceptions and philosophies – and doubts – to dictate policy whether to hold on to and advance into the Promised Land. Your role as leaders is to explore ways to ensure security and peace; not to question your right to the land.

Before and during the Six-Day War Israeli leaders were questioning whether to proceed forward. The Israeli Defense Minister at the time declared unwillingness to conquer the Old City of Jerusalem, stating “who needs this Vatican city?” The miraculous conquests continued despite the initial opposition of the leaders.

After the war, these same leaders declared a policy of returning “land for peace.” In one of the greatest historical ironies, it was President Nasser of Egypt and the other Arab leaders – humiliated in defeat – that rejected the offer, arguing that taking back land for peace would be a declaration of... defeat.

No one asked for or wanted the Six-Day War. But once it was fought and won, behave like winners not like losers.

[Moses' scouts refused to enter the land because they feared it would compromise their own deep spirituality. Today the reasons are far different; some actually fear that Israel's spirituality will compromise their "free" lifestyle. But regardless, both positions, as different as they may be, are rooted in personal agendas overriding the Divine command to enter the Promised Land].

3) CONFIDENCE

In opposition to their ten colleagues, Caleb and Joshua declared: "we must definitely go up and take possession [of the land], we are definitely capable of it;" "the Land through which we passed in our explorations is a very, very good land. If G-d is satisfied with us and brings us to this land... He can surely give it to us. But don't rebel against G-d. Don't be afraid...G-d is with us."¹⁰

4) HUMILITY

When we are blessed with miracles, we must never ever become arrogant. Blessings must elicit in us humility. Humility enables us to review our own previous positions and perhaps change them, instead of stubbornly holding on to old attitudes. And humility leads to sensitivity, instead of aggression, which is the only sure way to true peace.

5) VISION

Entering and living in the Promised Land is not somebody's whim or personal desire. It reflects a global vision for life – the Divine promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give them the Land of Israel – the Holy Land, a place that would be sanctified and transformed into a spiritual haven. A land that would be a "light unto nations" – "a house of prayer for all people"¹¹– illuminating the entire world, serving as an example to all nations, peoples, races and cultures, how to live a life according to the highest spiritual standards. The Holy Land is meant to inspire every man, woman and child on earth to fulfill his or her Divine calling, and civilize his corner of the universe into a home for G-d.

¹⁰ Numbers 13:30; 14:7-9.

¹¹ Isaiah 56:7.

As the prophet Isaiah foretold:

“It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of G-d’s house shall be established on top of the mountains and all the nations shall flow unto it. And [they] shall go and say, let us go up to the mountain of G-d and He will teach us of his ways and we will walk in his paths, for from Zion shall go forth the Torah; and the word of G-d from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.¹²

The scouts back then, and the “scouts” entrusted with Israel’s security today must never forget the purpose and mission of the Promised Land.

When leaders are driven by faith, confidence, vision and humility, they combine both fortitude and wisdom to face every challenge that will come our way. Nowhere is this more important than in the hotbed of the Middle-East – a vortex that has been consumed with battles over the last three millennia.

“Leaders” who lack these vital features will waver from doubt to aggression (to compensate for the doubt), to paralysis and more aggression – fluctuating extremes – as witnessed in the Israeli approach to last year’s Lebanese war. Instead of leadership, we end up at best with “administrators” and “fire-fighters,” offering temporary band-aids for deep rooted wounds.

We cannot turn the clock back to 1967, but we can learn from past mistakes – and from errors made for thousands of years – and adopt new policies and approaches, and perhaps finally offer Israel, the Middle East and the entire world the vision it expects and deserves to see emanating from the Holy Land.

Do we have such leaders? And if yes, will they rise to the occasion and make us aware of their presence?

And let us remember the descriptive and prophetic words of a Presbyterian journalist in 1967, reminding us of our true identity and destiny:

The military victory of Israel, startling in its speed and efficiency, is not as impressive as the spirit that produced it in this moment of her history.

With the Old City of Jerusalem back in their control, Israel is not only a nation but a family. No doubt it will go back to squabbling later on as all families do, but for these few days it has given the world a glimpse of what can be done by an intelligent and courageous people with a common purpose.

The Jews have not suffered for nothing. If there is any consolation for their centuries of agony it was apparent here in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem this week. These people have acted as if the life of the nation was everything and their personal lives were incidental.

¹² Isaiah 2:2-4.

It is an honor celebrating Shavuot with my nation and my family.

Happy Shavuot and Chag Sameach!

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