



## VAYIKRA

Bamidbar: Erev Shavuot

The Road Less Traveled: How To Own Your Judaism?

May 19, 2018

## HOW TO OWN YOUR JUDAISM? THREE BEAUTIFUL WALLS AND A FOURTH

### ABSTRACT

Would you prefer to receive a great inheritance as a gift or to earn your way on your own?

Most of us would probably prefer the former, but our pride would cause us to answer the latter.

Indeed, an argument can be made both ways. On one hand, take the gift and use your effort and time to achieve other goals. On the other hand, the Talmud says “a person would rather a single measure of his own than nine measures of his fellow’s.

The same question can be asked about an ideology and way of life: Is it better to follow a heritage and tradition – a path forged by those that came before us, but one that is time-tested and proven, or to follow your own unique voice and individuality, which has its risks, but is driven by your personal passions and interests. Would you rather be a conformist and take the safe route, or be a pioneer and take the road less traveled?

Would you believe that you can actually have both – the benefits of both the gift (quantity) and the effort (quality); the virtues of both an established model coupled with your personal touch?

The formula to achieve this synthesis was given to us 3330 years ago at Sinai.

Tonight begins Shavuot, the celebration of the giving of the Torah to each and every one of us. We know that the Torah is our inheritance and heritage – one passed on to us in a 3330-year unbroken chain. But how many of us are aware that the Torah is personally given to them by G-d on this very day? We may be familiar with the laws and commandments we are expected to follow, but how many feel the personal relevance of the Torah to our lives today?

We can appreciate this formula by demystifying a mysterious day leading up to Shavuot referred to as *Yom Hameyuchos*, the “connected” day, or day of “lineage.”

A luxurious and four-walled analogy from the Holy Ruzhiner explaining the meaning of this day teaches us how Torah and Judaism is the most personally-earned and most inherited, most eternal and most contemporary experience a person could ever have.

## 1. Where There's A Will...

A math professor poses the following problem to his class:

“A wealthy man dies and leaves ten million dollars. One-fifth is bequeathed to his daughter, one-fifth is to go to his son, one-sixth is to be inherited by his brother, and the rest he leaves for his wife. Now, what does each inheritor get?”

After a very long silence in the classroom, Moshe raises his hand and says, “A lawyer?”

## 2. A Quiz

Let me ask you:

Would you prefer to receive a great inheritance as a gift or to earn your way on your own?

Most of us would probably prefer the former, but our pride would cause us to answer the latter.

Indeed, an argument can be made both ways. On one hand, take the gift and use your effort and time to achieve other goals. On the other hand, the Talmud says<sup>1</sup> “a person would rather a single measure of his own than nine measures of his fellow’s.”

The same question can be asked about an ideology and way of life:

Is it better to follow a heritage and tradition – a path forged by those that came before us, but one that is time-tested and proven, or to follow your own unique voice and individuality, which has its risks, but is driven by your personal passions and interests?

Would you rather be a conformist and take the safe route, or be a pioneer and take the road less traveled?

Would you believe that you can actually have both – the benefits of both the gift (quantity) and the effort (quality); the virtues of both an established model coupled with your personal touch?

The formula to achieve this synthesis was given to us 3330 years ago at Sinai.

And this will be the theme of my words today.

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<sup>1</sup> Baba Metzia 38a.

### 3. Is Torah Inherited or Earned?

Inheritance is a tricky thing. On one hand inheriting something is deep, it is time-tested legacy past down from generation to generation. On the other hand, legacy and inheritance is not yours because of you, its not something you've earned, it's not something personal or individual.

Something you've earned on you own is intimate and yours, but it's not as deeply rooted as an inheritance, lacking pedigree and stock.

This is true with physical wealth and material possessions, and it is true with spiritual wealth and soulful possessions. Is Torah something we inherit or something we earn? Is it given to our forefather and foremothers or is it given directly to us?

We read: *The Torah that Moses commanded us is a legacy for the congregation of Jacob.*<sup>2</sup> This clearly states that Torah is *morasha*, our inherited legacy.

We also read: *This day, the Lord, your God, is commanding you to fulfill these statutes and ordinances, and you will observe and fulfill them with all your heart and with all your soul.*<sup>3</sup> Rashi quotes Tanchuma, which states that the words this day teaches us, "Every day, you shall regard the commandments as if they are brand new, as though you are just today being commanded regarding them!"

So which one is it – is it a legacy, which implies seasoned and ancient, or brand new, given today, highly personal?

On one hand, if it's given personally to us, what then of all the thousands of years of commentaries and pages articulated on Torah – are we starting from scratch? If it's personal, does every person create his or her individual interpretation of what he or she receives?

On the other hand, if Torah is a heritage and legacy, does this mean that we do not experience an individually intimate and personal reception of Torah?

It seems that each lacks the benefits of the other. On its own, inheritance and legacy has its pros and cons, and personal and contemporary has its pros and cons. Are they mutually inclusive or mutually exclusive?

As we stand at the foot of Sinai, with the holiday of Shavuot just a day a way, are we experiencing the giving of the Torah personally or as a 3330 year process that we are but one link in this eternal chain?

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 33:4.

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 26:16 with Rashi.

## 4. Do You Want Torah To Be Personal?

Tonight begins Shavuot, the celebration of the giving of the Torah to each and every one of us.

We know that the Torah is our inheritance and heritage – one passed on to us in a 3330-year unbroken chain. But how many of us are aware that the Torah is personally given to them by G-d on this very day?

We may be familiar with the laws and commandments we are expected to follow, but how many feel the personal relevance of the Torah to our lives today?

So what is the formula to integrating the “best of both the worlds” – the proven legacy of 3330 years of tradition, and the adventure of personal individuality and initiative?

## 5. The Days Leading Up To Shavuot

We can find the answer in a mysterious day leading up to Shavuot, the 2nd day of Sivan, which is referred to as *Yom Hameyuchos*, the “connected” day, or day of “lineage.”

All great events needs preparation. This preparation primes and trains us to appreciate and maximize the benefits from the upcoming event we will be experiencing. The way we prepare for the event will define how we experience it.

This is why the momentous occasion of the Sinai Revelation on Shavuot – when G-d gave His Divine Mandate, the Torah to the Jewish people – was preceded by several preparatory days.

It is always difficult to prepare for something while you are actually experiencing it. By definition, ‘preparing,’ with the suffix ‘pre-‘ meaning before, means doing something to ready yourself prior to the event. If you walk into the experience believing it is only an inheritance, then that will be the prism through which you experience the event. If you walk into the experience believing it is only present and contemporary then that will be your context.

The unprecedented Sinai experience on Shavuot followed a forty-nine-day preparation of yearning and self-refinement, called the days of the Omer. These seven weeks culminated in the 50th day when the Torah was given.

We recreate this process each year when we count the 49 days of the Omer, preparing us for Mattan Torah. How we ready ourselves for the Torah and Judaism is how we will relate to and experience it.

Like with anything in life, it is virtually impossible to change things while you are experiencing them. It is much easier to change things before so that you experience them differently. So, today being the day before Shavuot, what can we do to help us embrace the legacy of Torah while simultaneously making it our own?

## 6. The Connected Day of Lineage

This brings us to the mysterious second day of Sivan leading up to Shavuot, called *Yom Hameyuchos*, the “connected” day, or day of “lineage.”<sup>4</sup>

Initially it appears that this day is in “no man’s land.” The day before is Rosh Chodesh (Sivan), the three days after are the *Sholoshes Yemei Hagbalah*, the three days of readying ourselves to the Giving of the Torah, as the verse states, *Be ready for three days... It came to pass on the third day.*<sup>5</sup>

But in between there is the 2nd of Iyar, which seems to be neither here nor there. It’s not Rosh Chodesh and it’s not yet the three-day build-up to Shavuot. Yet, our sages call this day *Yom Ha’meyuchot*, a day that we celebrate and don’t say *Tachnun* (penitence) because it is connected to and of the same stock of the other days.

This day also always falls on the same day of the week as the following Yom Kippur, so it’s also *meyuchas*, has a special and distinguished “yichus” by virtue of it being connected and related to the holiest day of the year. Why?

## 7. Three Walls And One

The Holy Ruzhiner, R’ Yisrael ben Sholom Shachna Freidman, was renowned for his luxuriousness and opulence. He taught and demonstrated that beauty and magnificence was created by G-d for holiness and thus did everything holy in the most priceless and extravagant way. His clothing were made of the highest quality. The Ruzhiner synagogue was a palatial edifice. His home was a marvelous mansion.

The Ruzhiner shares<sup>6</sup> a magnificent and luxurious analogy to understand the Yom Ha’meyuchot, how our service today could harness the shining light and magnificent beauty of our ancestors and predecessors.

This analogy can help us appreciate the synthesis of our unbroken chain of Jewish tradition, as well as personalizing the experience – ultimately how the two are one and the same.

<sup>4</sup> See Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 294:7. See also Sharei Hamoadim, Shavuot #14 (p. 90).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:15-16.

<sup>6</sup> Irin Kadishin, p. 24.

There was a king who built a magnificent palace. The palace was a true work of art and the construction was finally complete. Except for one thing. The four walls were left bare, unpainted, unadorned, unfinished. They were raw and naked concrete.

The king hired the four best craftsmen and artisans, each to design, paint and adorn one of the four walls. He allotted a set time for their artistry, after which the king would inspect the work and decide which wall was decorated and enhanced most brilliantly and award that artist accordingly.

The first artist, known for his brilliant color and exotic inks dyed the wall in the most dazzling hues and stunning palettes. Shades of blue intermingled with green marrying red giving way to yellows and orange. The finished product was a magical rainbow of kaleidoscopic proportions.

The second great master, well renowned for his mastery of precious metals, adorned his wall in gold and silver, platinum and hammered bronze. Every metal of value was worked into the wall, forming exquisite shapes and telling a story of iron strength and plain subtlety.

The third craftsmen, famous for his use of skins and hides, carpeted his wall in leathers and furs from the rarest animals, cut into patterns and fashioned into a tapestry. His wall was a veritable exercise in hide-and-go-seek, a trail more piercing than anything skin deep.

The fourth artist did nothing at all. He simply cleaned his wall every day, day after day, but did not apply to it a single design, color, or material. On the last day of the competition, the fourth designer spent all day with his wall and then covered it up for the unveiling.

When the time for design was up, the king toured his completed palace. Each expert artist unveiled his masterpiece. And each wall elicited a broad smile and an enthusiastic response from the king as he marveled at these true works of wonder.

But, when the king came to the fourth wall, his face utterly lit up – far beyond his reaction to the previous three walls. When the fourth wall was unveiled, the king was in disbelief.

The fourth artist cleaned and polished his wall every day. Then, on the last day, he applied a translucent finish, refined shellac so pure and polished, that, like a mirror, its subtlety reflected the brilliant beauty of the other three walls in their full majesty and glory.

The true humble simplicity of this wall contained and captured the beauty of the other three – without de-

tracting from those three and their uniqueness but reflecting their genius in a whole new way.

This is the wall the king rewarded

## 8. Conclusion: Clarity, Purity, Reflection

This fourth wall, says the Holy Ruzhiner, teaches us the power of *yichus* (pedigree and lineage). When we selflessly refine, polish and purify ourselves – we become receptacles and reflectors mirroring the collected beauty of all the holy ancestral Tzadikim -- spiritual craftsmen as it were.

On Rosh Chodesh Sivan, when the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai, they reached a state of utter unity. “Israel encamped there opposite the mountain – as one man with one heart.”

This unity came from their utter *bittul* – ego-nullification, allowing them to transcend their differences and unite as one, in preparation for receiving the Torah a few days later.

And this *bittul* carried over to the next day, the 2nd of Sivan, *Yom Ha'meyuchot*, when the Jews suspended the elaborate ornaments and complex designs of their personalities, and instead of adorning themselves (their “walls”) with all sorts of colors, shapes and tapestries, they cleaned and polished themselves to be nothing more than reflectors of the bright and beautiful colors of a higher divine light.

This is also why the 2nd day of Sivan (which was on a Shabbos the year R' Yisrael of Ruzhin said his Torah) always falls on the same day as Yom Kippur, because this *Yom Ha'meyuchot*, when we polish and refine ourselves, is similar to – and reflects – the holiest and purest day of the year, the day of white, when we shed and suspend all colors and imagery, to experience utter *bittul* of *yechida*, utter unity with our Source.

So too today, we use our individuality to prepare for Mattan Torah by refining ourselves, suspending our own “colors” to channeling the rich energy of our heritage and ancestors.

Such a refined and clear “wall” embodies and underlines the past, present, and future of Judaism and Torah. Precisely because we are in the presence of genius, surrounded by artworks of priceless wonder and unimaginable sophistication – our heritage and legacy – we reflect each aspect off of and within the “fourth wall” that is our purity, translucence, and clear humility.

All we have to do is polish, polish, polish the nuances of the walls of our character. If we clarify our lives, remove any opaqueness or ego, we automatically begin to reflect genius and project beauty for all to see.

Using the analogy, we have a legacy, pedigree, and heritage 3330 years of soulful art and spiritual craftsmanship.



All we have to do, then, is be pure and clear enough to reflect that.

Shavuot celebrates both 3330 years of tradition, as it reflects in our personal and contemporary lives.

As we prepare for Shavuot, think of one aspect of your life that you could polish and refine to reflect the brilliant luxury of our tradition.

Say Shabbat is the artist's wall you wish to reflect in your own life, how can you make your wall reflect and embrace Shabbat?

Say it's the divine wisdom, heavenly knowledge, and esoteric yet practical genius of Torah. How can you refine and polish and shellac your personal wall so that it reflects Torah?

The true greatness – and uniqueness – of an individual – is not only to do what you are capable of. But to be a conduit that channels a higher truth, and the heritage of those came before us, an interface that reflects all the wisdom, good deeds and refined activities of the previous generations – and illuminates our world with these awesome reflections.

Meditate on these questions and your Sinai experience is guaranteed to be timeless and timely, eternal and contemporary, momentous, monumental, and in the moment all at once.

See you at Sinai!

Good Shabbos and Shabbat Shalom, and may we all receive and accept the Torah joyfully and internally.

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