

## **Who We Are**

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Since the second day of Pesach, we have been counting towards the first day of Shavuos. Each day, we have been getting increasingly prepared to be able to accept the gift of the Torah and its many benefits and obligations. We are one week away from the great day for which the entirety of the world was created.

During the initial days of this world, when there was little more than the earth and the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars, the world was waiting. Even after Adam Harishon was created and settled into Gan Eden, the world was still in a state of anticipation. The doubt would remain for centuries on end. Would the world continue to exist or would it be brought to an end?

Throughout the generations that followed, despite Noach's piety in a world of darkness, Avrohom Avinu's perception and teachings about a Creator, and Yitzchok Avinu's readiness to be offered as a sacrifice, the question was not yet settled.

Even as Yaakov Avinu studied through the long nights and his sons marched forth, an army of soldiers of the Ribbono Shel Olam, the world was not yet perfect.

It was all a journey, a process leading finally to the Yom Hashishi, the sixth day of Sivan at Har Sinai, when the world received its heart and soul. Bishvil haTorah shenikreis reishis.

“Ve’am nivra yehallel Kah” (Tehillim 102:19). A nation, newly identified, newly charged with a mission, called out the two words that echo through the ages, defining us and what we are about: “Naaseh venishma.”

It was then that Klal Yisroel announced that they would live on a higher and loftier level by following the guidance of the Torah on all matters of life.

The world gained permanence when that happened. The mystery was settled, the question was answered. The world would continue to exist. All the animals would live, as would the trees, flowers and grasses. Millions of insects would continue crawling and fish swimming. The sun would rise and shine every day, the moon would gleam at night, the winters would be cold and the summers hot. The wonder of creation had received its sustaining purpose and would live on.

And next week, once again, we will be at the time of year when the power and potency of that day reign again and we are able to tap into its energy.

As we prepare for Zeman Mattan Toraseinu, the best and most appropriate preparation is to focus on how blessed we are with the gift we received and what those moments at Har Sinai and their reverberations mean to us.

If we take a moment and contemplate, conducting an honest self-assessment, we will realize that whatever might give us a degree of happiness – a new car or home, a good meal or a great vacation – isn’t the real deal. The feeling it gives us does not compare to the elation we feel when we gently stand up after a good shiur or seder, having learned with a child or chavrusa. Shetihyu ameilim baTorah. The joy we feel when we understand a difficult sugya and it all comes

together is like none other. We taxed our powers of thought and concentration, and it became clear to us. Aah! That is satisfaction.

The joy of Kabbolas HaTorah is eternal and hasn't faded along with everything else. Every time we hear a good sevorah, vort, or shiur; every time we work hard to understand a Gemara, Rashi, or Tosafos, the joy that was felt at Har Sinai is felt again.

Everything else is fleeting. The world was created for Torah. The joy that was felt on that day in Sivan so many years back and all those feelings that were apparent on that day are eternal. We can feel them anytime we delve into the holy words of amar Abaye and Rebbi Yehuda omeir.

Hashem gave us the ultimate gift, and when we express our thanks, we allow ourselves to become vessels that contain it and open our hearts to its light. Hanosein matonah lachaveiro tzorich lehodio. This means, when a person gives someone a gift, he must inform the recipient that he is giving him something. Additionally, the word lehodio also has in its root the word hoda'ah, thanks, indicating that when a person gives a gift, he has a reasonable expectation that it will be appreciated and acknowledged. Therefore, we say thank you every day. Asher bochar bonu. You chose us. And on Shavuos, we celebrate it.

On Shavuos, when we reaffirm that we only exist for the Torah and our nation has a unifying goal, we allow the Torah to shine its light into our hearts. We remain awake at night, demonstrating our appreciation of the Torah's role in our lives. We read through the entire Torah in Tikkun Leil Shavuos to show that we treasure every sefer of the Torah and the knowledge contained therein.

The Meshech Chochmah asks at the end of Parshas Yisro: What did Moshe Rabbeinu personally gain from Kabbolas HaTorah? He had already been worthy and was able to soar Heavenward even before having received the Torah. This was an indication that Moshe Rabbeinu had personally achieved perfection before Sinai.

The Meshech Chochmah's answer is instructive and relevant. Until Mattan Torah, he says, Moshe Rabbeinu and man were able to serve Hashem with ruchniyus. The novelty of Kabbolas HaTorah was that now, acts of gashmiyus were invested with kedusha. Man was directed to sanctify himself, his corporeal needs, and his animal instincts.

This, says the Meshech Chochmah, is the idea of Hashem telling Moshe Rabbeinu at the sneh, the burning bush, "She'al na'alecha mei'al raglecha – Remove your shoes from on your feet. Remove the vehicles for your gashmiyusdike living. Remove your chomer as you approach Me. Here you must be an angel." That was before Matan Torah. Afterward, the shoes became part of the package – the package called Am Yisroel, to whom the Torah was given.

After Matan Torah, Hashem tells Klal Yisroel, "Ve'anshei kodesh tihiyun li – And holy people you should be unto me" (Shemos 22:30). The Kotzker Rebbe explained this to mean, "Be mentchlich heilig. Be holy within the context of being human." Figure out how to exist within society, to be a father and a husband and a friend who is holy. We are meant to be people who live elevated lives, not malochim. To be good, we don't have to escape to a desolate island away from humanity. Rather, we are to excel as we live among others.

On Shavuos, we celebrate this concept. Hakadosh Boruch Hu desires our service. He gave us the Torah to guide us and address our physical existence. We celebrate the potential of man, who can use the Torah as the ladder to climb to ever loftier heights.

Hashem didn't ask us to become malochim, but, rather, to remain human, to incorporate the Torah and its laws into our lives.

The Gemara states that while regarding other Yomim Tovim, Chazal disagree how much of the day should be dedicated to the purely spiritual, on Shavuos, "hakol modim deba'inan nami lochem." They all agree that on Shavuos, we need to please the more physical side as well.

We can understand this to mean that on Shavuos, we need "lochem," to proclaim that the physical is part of the Shavuos celebration. We demonstrate through our actions that Torah affects and impacts our basic human behaviors as well. The bein adam lachaveiro, the way we conduct ourselves and the way we deal with other people, is an integral part of Torah, not just the bein adam laMakom, the way we serve Hashem. Torah touches our souls, impacts our actions, and improves our personal conduct.

Perhaps this is a reason why the Torah is achieved through 48 attributes, many dealing with interpersonal relationships, because in order to excel in Torah, a person's middos must be refined as well.

This is also a reason why the Torah was only given when the Bnei Yisroel were united as one. As the posuk (Shemos 19:2) states, "Vayichan shom Yisroel neged hahar," using the singular conjugation vayichan, instead of the plural

vayachanu, to denote that they came to rest at the foot of the mountain prior to Hashem giving them the Torah.

As Rashi famously states, "Vayichan shom Yisroel neged hahar – k'ish echod beleiv echod, as one person with one heart."

In fact, prior to that, the posuk uses the plural forms to track their movement: "Vayisu m'Refidim vayavou Midbar Sinai vayachanu bamidar." As long as they were divided and quarreling, Hashem did not yet see fit to give them the Torah. It was only after they were able to put aside their differences that Hashem said that now He could give them the Torah as He had intended since He created the world.

Individually, as well, in order to be worthy of Torah, we have to have perfected our character, for it is only when people have refined their middos that they are able to set aside jealousy, petty concerns and hatred, and are able to join together in harmony with others.

Achdus and the ability to live peacefully with others is not just a good tag line. It is the prerequisite for Torah.

Chazal (Pesikta Zutrasa, Va'eschanon) state, "Chayov odom liros ess atzmo ke'ilu mekabel Torah miSinai shene'emar, 'Hayom hazeh nihiyeisa le'am.' Every day, a person is obligated to conduct himself as if he accepted the Torah that day at Har Sinai." We are all familiar with this directive regarding Yetzias Mitzrayim. In fact, it is the central theme of the leil haSeder, but we don't think about it on Shavuos.

Imagine if today were the day you received the Torah. Imagine standing at Har Sinai and hearing the words of the Aseres Hadibros being called out. Imagine the sounds. Imagine the sight. Imagine being led out of Mitzrayim with very little knowledge or holiness, and trekking through the desert, becoming a better person every day.

Now, imagine how empty and meaningless your life would be without Torah. No Torah, no learning, no Shabbos, no tefillin, no Yom Tov, nothing that your life is centered around, nothing that gives your life the meaning it now has. You wouldn't even have potato kugel or cholent, or a nice suit, hat or shaitel. You wouldn't have a shul to go to and no reason to go to one altogether. Think of everything you do in your day, week and year. Now imagine that there was no Torah.

Imagine that today is the day you discovered the secret of the world. Imagine that today you were invited to study the Creator's words, to bask in His glow, to find meaning, satisfaction and joy in your life. How excited you would be! How grateful and how dedicated!

Today is that day. "Ke'ilu mekabel Torah miSinai."

Hayom hazeh! Today and every day. Despite the degeneration of the world, despite the struggles we experience with every tefillah and the challenge of concentrating fully when we learn, despite the many forces competing for our attention, we have a new Kabbolas HaTorah.

Our human shortcomings are not a hindrance. We weren't given a Torah despite the fact that we are people, but specifically because we are mere humans.

As we prepare for Shavuot, it is a time to refocus on what Torah means to us and on how blessed we are to be able to spend time by a Gemara or Chumash or Shulchan Aruch, surrounded by talmidei chachomim and yeshiva bochurim.

We prepare to once again accept the Torah, just as our parents and grandparents have done for thousands of years. We cherish its words, raising our children and helping guide them to see the sweetness and brilliance of it all.

As we go about our daily lives and confront issues of parnossah, health, and everything else that we contend with and encounter in life, we have to keep focused on our roles as bnei and bnos Torah to deal with everyone and everything as befitting those who stood together at Har Sinai and were embraced by Hashem and given the Torah.

If we have a store or a business, we should view our task as helping people and certainly not to take advantage of them. We should go out of our way to help customers who come into our store, as well those who approach us for expertise and business acumen in our field of industry. We should never mislead people or charge them more than we have to just because we are able to. People are often naive and trusting. We should always be unfailingly honest and truthful in our answers and with our service and advice.

My belt was getting too big for me so I took it to a shoemaker near where I live, in the West Gate section of Lakewood, and asked him to add a hole. He took out his hole-puncher, did the job, and handed it back to me with a smile. I asked him how much I owe him for that service. He said, "Nothing." He felt bad charging for something that took him 30 seconds to do. I told him that it's very



commendable of him, but that I don't want to take advantage of him, so I gave him \$5.00. I could tell that he was very touched.

As I was leaving his shop, I was thinking how nice it would be if every shopkeeper were like him, unfailingly honest and kind, happy and proud to help someone who had never even previously patronized his store. Wouldn't it be nice if every business would be run that way and not as a vehicle to get ahead of others, squeeze and crush the little guys, constantly raise prices, and treat people flippantly and dishonestly?

Someone who runs his business like that shoemaker is guided by the principles of the Torah and is a mekadeish Hashem. I don't know the gentleman, but I'd venture to say that when he drives, he doesn't speed through red lights, or take up two parking spaces, and extends common courtesies to other drivers.

We need to be strong enough that we do not get pulled down and sucked in by the whirlwind connived by the yeitzer hora. We need to live the way the Torah guides us and take pride in who we are and our actions.

As we prepare for Shavuos and Kabbolas HaTorah, let us bear in mind that Torah is not some esoteric thing reserved for the bais medrash and for roshei yeshiva, rabbonim, kollel people and yeshiva bochurim.

It is what makes the world worth existing. It is what makes our lives worth living. It is intended to make us who we are.

Following it brings us joy and satisfaction, success and praise.

We have one last week to figure it out. Let's not waste the week.