

YLJC Judaism 101

SHAVUOT

Study pack

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PART I: REVELATION

ACCEPTING THE LAW

When God gave the Torah to Israel, the Eternal One offered it not only to Israel but to all the nations.

God went first to the children of Esau [the Romans] and asked them, “Will you accept the Torah?” They replied, “What is written in it?” God said to them, “Thou shalt not murder’.” They replied that this is the very essence of their people.

God then went to the Ammonites and the Moabites and asked them, “Will you accept the Torah?” They replied, “What is written in it?” God said, “Thou shalt not commit adultery’.” They replied that adultery is the very essence of their people.

God went next to the Ishmaelites [the Arabs] and asked them, “Will you accept the Torah?” They replied, “What is written in it?” God said, “Thou shalt not steal’.” They replied that theft is their very essence and that their forefather was a thief.

The comical ending –

Finally, God went to Moses, and asked, “Would you like my commandments?” Moses asked, “How much are they?” “They’re free.” “Great – I’ll take ten!”

Or the traditional ending –

And thus it was with every other nation. So ultimately Israel accepted the Torah, with all of its explanations and details, as well as the seven commandments which the children of Noah had not been able to observe and had cast off.

Sifre Deuteronomy

NOT QUITE ACCEPTING THE LAW

“And they took their places at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 19:17).

Rabbi Avdimi-bar-Hama-bar-Hasa said, this teaches that the Holy One held the mountain over them like an overturned tub, and told them: “If you accept the Torah, well and fine; otherwise, you will be buried right here.”

Shabbat 88a

RETURNING THE LAW

Moses took the tablets of the law and descended, and was exceedingly glad.

But when he saw the offence which the Israelites committed in the making of the Golden Calf, he said to himself, "How can I give them the tablets of the law? I shall be obligating them to the commandments and condemning them to death at the hands of Heaven, for it is written in the commandments: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before Me' (Exodus 20:3)."

He then started back up Mount Sinai, but the seventy elders saw him and ran after him. Moses held fast to one end of the tablets and they held fast to the other end of the tablets.

"Better that I take hold and break them," he thought.

Avot de-Rabbi Natan

PART II: CHOSEN STATUS

CREATING THE LAW

Ten things were created on the eve of the sixth day of creation, at twilight, and these are they: (1) the mouth of the earth that swallowed up Korach; (2) the mouth of the well that the Israelites drank from in the wilderness; (3) the mouth of the ass that spoke to Balaam; (4) the rainbow that marked the end of Noah's flood; (5) manna; (6) Moses's staff; (7) the shamir; (8) the font in which the law was written; (9) the instrument with which the law was written; and (10) the tablets of stone.

Some also say: the burial-place of Moses; the ram of Abraham.

Some say further: also the demons; and tongs too, because there must have been an original set of Heavenly tongs with which the first set of human tongs was made.

Pirke Avot 5:6

THE FIRST SET OF TABLETS

Rabbi Hiya said: “When the letters were engraved upon the two tablets of stone they were visible on both sides of the tablets. The tablets were of sapphire [lapis-lazuli?], and the letters were formed of white fire and covered again with black fire, and were engraved upon both sides.”

According to Rabbi Abba, the tablets were not engraved, but the letters fluttered on to them.

Rav H̄isda said: “The letters mem and samekh that were in the tablets were standing miraculously.” Each letter was chiselled all the way through the tablets. In that case, the segment of the tablets at the centre of the samekh ם and final mem ם – letters that are completely closed, should have fallen. Miraculously, they remained in place.

Rabbi Joshua ben Nehemiah said: “They were of a miraculous nature: they were of hard stone, and yet they rolled up.”

The tablets were six handbreadths in length, six in breadth, and three in thickness.

Zohar II:84a; Shabbat 104a; Song of Songs Rabbah 5:19; Nedarim 38a

THE SECOND SET OF TABLETS

The first tablets were written by the hand of God while Moses watched. However the second were begun with the command: “Ktav l’cha et hadevarim ha-elah – You write these words down for yourself.”

And so, says the Torah, Moses sat there for 40 days and 40 nights writing out the words himself. No Godly, magical writing that dazzled with jewels, just Moses’ own penmanship. Now while the first set – written in God’s hand – lasted all of about ten minutes when they reached humanity, this second set – written jointly by God and humanity – endured and endured.

Revelation is a process that needs both parties, humanity and God. The first set were kept to remind God and the people that a revelation which is just given to people and in which they play no part, does not endure.

Rabbi Charley Baginsky, 2008

USING THE LAW

On the day of judgement, the Holy One will then say to the Romans: “How have you occupied yourselves?” They will reply: “O God, we have established many marketplaces, we have built many public baths, we have accumulated gold and silver, and all this we did for the sake of Israel, that they might have leisure for studying Torah.”

The Eternal One, ever to be blessed, will say in reply: “You fools! All that you have done, you have only done to satisfy your own desires. You have established marketplaces to place prostitutes therein; baths, to revel in them; and as to the distribution of silver and gold, that is Mine.”

On the departure of Rome, Persia will step forward. The Holy One will ask them: “How have you occupied yourselves?” and they will reply: “Sovereign of the Universe, we have built many bridges, we have captured many cities, we have waged many wars, and all this for the sake of Israel, that they might engage in the study of the Torah.”

Then God, ever to be blessed, will say to them: “You fools! You have built bridges in order to extract taxes; you have subdued cities so as to impose forced labour; as to waging war, I am the God of battles.”

And so will every nation fare in turn.

Avoda Zara 2b (or not 2b?)

ABSORBING THE LAW

One trembles at the thought that one might say about the Torah things that are not true, that the human mind is too weak to grasp the truth. But the Torah was not given to ministering angels. It was given to humankind with its human mind. God gave us the Torah in conformity with the ability of the human mind to decide, even though it may not be the Truth, only true according to the conclusions of the human mind.

Aryeh Leib Heller, 1790

TRANSMITTING THE LAW

You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal One your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of the Eternal One your God, which the God is concluding with you this day, to the end that God may establish you this day as God’s people and the Eternal One will be your God, as God promised you and as God swore to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

And Moses said: “I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal One our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”

Gather the people – men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities – that they may hear and so learn to revere the Eternal One your God and to observe faithfully every word of this teaching. Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere the Eternal One your God as long as they live in the land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

Deuteronomy 29:9-14, 31:12-13

PART III: THE FESTIVAL

BUT WHY CHEESECAKE?

On the day of the first fruits, your Feast of Weeks ('Shavuot'), when you bring an offering of new grain to the Eternal One, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations.

וּבַיּוֹם הַבְּכוּרִים, בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה בְּשִׁבְעַתֵּיכֶם מִקָּרֶא-קֹדֶשׁ
יְהִי לָכֶם, כָּל-מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ.

Numbers 28:26

AND WHY RUTH?

In traditional settings, the Book of Ruth is read on the second day of Shavuot. The book is about a Moabite woman who, after her husband dies, follows her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, into the Jewish people with the famous words: "Where you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people; your God will be my God." She asserts the right of the poor to glean the leftovers of the barley harvest, breaks the normal rules of behaviour to confront her kinsman Boaz, is redeemed by him for marriage, and becomes the ancestor of King David.

There are many explanations given for the reading of Ruth on Shavuot. The most quoted reason is that Ruth's coming to Israel took place around the time of Shavuot, and her acceptance into the Jewish faith was analogous of the acceptance of the Jewish people of God's Torah.

A second explanation relates to genealogy. Since the Book of Ruth ends with the genealogy of David, whose forbearer Ruth was, it has been suggested that it is read on Shavuot because there is a legend that David died on Shavuot.

Another reason for the reading of Ruth on Shavuot is that its story takes place at harvest time, and Shavuot also occurs at the time of the spring harvest.

Ronald H Isaacs, 'Every Person's Guide to Shavuot', 1999