YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SHavuot 5784**

**Giving and Receiving the Torah**

**Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Translated by David Strauss

The Gemara in *Shabbat* records a discussion about the date of the giving of the Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: On the sixth day of the month [of Sivan] were the Ten Commandments given to Israel. Rabbi Yose said: On the seventh thereof… An objection was raised [to Rabbi Yose’s opinion]… Rabbi Yose can answer you: Moshe added one day [to the period of separation between husbands and wives, in preparation for the giving of the Torah,] of his own understanding. For it was taught: Three things did Moshe do of his own understanding, and the Holy One, blessed be He, gave His approval: he added one day of his own understanding, he separated himself from his wife, and he broke the tablets. (*Shabbat* 86b-87a)

The Sages maintain that the tablets were given on the 6th of Sivan, while Rabbi Yose says they were given on the 7th of that month. According to Rabbi Yose, the reason the tablets were given one day later stems from the fact that, although God said “sanctify them today and tomorrow” (*Shemot* 19:10, alluding to two days of separation), Moshe added a third day based on his own interpretation of God’s words. It turns out that the giving of the Torah did not take place on the fiftieth day of the *omer*, but rather on the fifty-first day*.*

What is the reason for this? Why did Moshe delay heaven and earth for a whole day?

It seems that Moshe sensed that the people of Israel were not ready. They needed an additional day of preparation to receive the Torah, and preparation for Torah is so significant that it warranted pushing off Israel's receiving the Torah for an entire day.

Interestingly, in light of what we have said, it turns out that the festival of Shavuot is celebrated on the fiftieth day of the *omer* – on the day when God was ready to give the Torah – rather the day we actually received it. Thus, essentially, we do not celebrate the day of receiving the Torah, but rather the anniversary of its giving. The real joy is precisely in the giving of the Torah, not in receiving it.

The same is true with regard to Torah study. Even though Torah study takes place through the intellect, the success of one’s study depends on *yirat shamayim* (awe of heaven) and observance of the *mitzvot*. This is evident from the midrashic description of David's request to learn from God: "'Blessed are You, O Lord; teach me Your statutes' (*Tehillim* 119:12) – I know nothing, except for what You have taught me" (*Midrash Tehillim* 144). Despite his investment in intellectual efforts, David asks to learn Torah from God Himself. In other words, it is impossible to study Torah without God's help.

**We Will Do and Hear**

The statement, "we will do and we will hear" opens with action – the willingness to accept the Torah, in a practical sense, as it is. Even if I don't understand the Torah, I will observe it. In a similar fashion, the Rambam says in his *Moreh Nevukhim* (III, 26) that one who gives a reason for the details of the *mitzvot* is considered "void of sense," for the only reason for the particulars of the *mitzvot* is to refine people through them. That is to say, a person must accept God's command as it is, without a reason.

However, "doing" in itself is not enough; "hearing" is also necessary. The Rambam writes that when a gentile comes to covert to Judaism, he is taught the fundamentals of the religion and the *mitzvot*:

We inform him of the fundamentals of the faith… And we inform him of the punishment given for [violating] the *mitzvot*… Just as he is informed of the punishment [for disobeying] the commandments, so too, he is informed about the reward for [their observance]. We tell him that by observing these *mitzvot*, he will merit the life of the world to come. For there is no completely righteous man other than a master of wisdom who observes these *mitzvot* and knows them. (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* 14:2-3)

One of the fundamentals of the faith that we deem appropriate to tell a gentile who comes to convert is that "there is no completely righteous man other than a master of wisdom who observes these *mitzvot* and knows them." That is to say, one who recites *Kiddush* on Shabbat but does not know what *Kiddush* is, one who dons *tefillin* but does not know the laws of *tefillin*, cannot be a fully righteous man! Thus, together with the commitment of "we will do," there must also be "we will hear." The Torah requires observance of the *mitzvot* together with understanding them.

**God Overturned the Mountain Over Them**

The pairing of “we will do” and “we will hear” is still only one aspect of receiving the Torah. There is also another aspect – that "God overturned the mountain over them like a barrel" (*Shabbat* 88a). However we understand this, the message is that there was an element of force in the receiving of the Torah.

We all have moments of "smallness of mind," moments when we get up on our "left foot." We must remember that even at those moments, we have no choice but to observe the *mitzvot.*

This point is doubly important in our time. The whole world of Western culture is based on lack of coercion. We must be aware and admit the fact that this element is lacking in us, and that this absence affects our religious world as well. We must not observe Torah and *mitzvot* only because we desire to do so; accepting the Torah must come from a dimension of being forced, or coerced. Even when I don't have the desire to do it; even when I don't understand.

**Acceptance for the Future**

As mentioned, accepting the Torah should come, on the one hand, from a sense of "we will do and hear," and on the other hand, from a sense of coercion. However, in order to give that acceptance force for the long term, we mention in the blessing recited over the Torah:

Please, Lord, our God, make the words of Your Torah pleasant in our mouths and in the mouths of all of Your people, the House of Israel. And may we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel – all of us – be knowers of Your Name and studying Your Torah for its sake.

Do you want your children to be "religious"? Do you want them to be among those who know God's name? Then you must make the words of the Torah pleasant in your mouth.

In order for the Torah to be pleasant in our mouths, we must first of all approach it with thirst and humility. We shouldn’t make the Torah fit into our lives; we should shape our lives around the Torah. Don't expect to receive the Torah in partial manner! Don't say I have already decided for myself what I will be and how my life will look! We must accept everything the Torah asks and demands of us.