

## **Shavuot — How do we accept the Torah? — JewishClarity.com**

What was required for the Jewish people to receive the Torah at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai) over 3,300 years ago, and what has been necessary for us to receive the Torah every year since then at the time of *Shavuot*? Much of what I will be presenting is based on ideas that I heard from Rav Matis Weinberg, the nephew of my *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*.

Let's begin with a number of questions related to *Shavuot*. Each question will then be repeated and explained in the course of this article.

- a. Why is the holiday of *kabalat haTorah* (receiving the Torah) called "*Shavuot*" ("Weeks")? Since a Hebrew name is always the identification of the essence of whatever it is describing, how is "Weeks" the essence of this holiday?
- b. Since we don't believe in historical coincidence, what is the connection between the *sefirah* (counting) period preceding *kabalat haTorah* and the *aveilut* (mourning) for Rabbi Akiva's students which happened during this *sefirah* period?
- c. Why did the plague, which caused Rabbi Akiva's students to die, stop specifically on the 33rd day of the *sefirah* period?
- d. Why is the counting of the *Omer* a count-up and not a count-down?
- e. Why do we count only 49 days of the *sefirah*, when the Torah speaks about counting a full 50 days?

### **The Torah is compared to Water**

The *Gemara Yuma 72b* says something that might sound heretical if it weren't found in the Talmud. It makes a play on the word "*sam*" ("placed") from the verse – "*V'zot haTorah asher sam Moshe* – And this is the Torah that Moshe **placed**" (*Dev. 4:44*). The word "*sam*" can also mean "a drug" or "medicine." The *Gemara* explains that the Torah can be compared to a "*sam*" (drug), which can either be a "*sam chayim* – drug of life", or, G-d forbid, a "*sam misa* – drug of death."

It is obvious how the Torah could be a "*sam chayim*" – it shows us how to live our lives and it keeps us in touch with reality. In what way, however, could it ever be a "*sam misa*?"

Many classical sources compare the Torah to water. The Rambam (*Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:9*), for example, tells us that, just as water always flows to the lowest spot, Torah is found only with those who are humble. In addition, just as we cannot survive for three consecutive days without water, we never go more than three days without a public Torah reading.

The essential quality of water is that it facilitates growth and development. What, however, is it which water enhances the growth of when one waters a field? Obviously, whatever was **already** planted in the ground, whether crops or flowers. There is also, of course, a much less ideal possibility. If nothing good was planted in the ground, and there are only weeds there, then the water will actually facilitate the growth of those weeds just as it would facilitate the growth of desirable plants.

There is an important parallel to this when it comes to the Torah, which also facilitates growth and development. Just as water enhances the growth of whatever was planted in the ground, whether good or bad, this is also true with the Torah. It will similarly enhance the growth of whatever was "planted" within ourselves, whether positive or negative.

### **"Derech erez kadmah l'Torah" – proper middot (character traits) precede Torah"**

The first comment of Rashi in the Torah asks a famous question – Why does the Torah begin with the book of *Bereshit*? The Torah is referred to as "*Torat Chayim*" – "instructions for living." This makes a lot of sense when it comes to most of the Torah, which is filled with the 613 *mitzvot*. How, then do we understand *Sefer*

*Bereshit*, which is filled with lots of stories (and only 3 of the 613 *mitzvot*), as *Torat Chayim* as well? In other words, how is *Sefer Bereshit* also considered to be “instructions for living?”

There is a well-known Jewish expression – “*Derech erez kadmah l'Torah* – proper *middot* (character traits) are a prerequisite for the Torah.” Perhaps this is the “*Torat Chayim* – instructions for living” of *Sefer Bereshit* – to learn how to behave properly. The 613 *mitzvot* that are found throughout most of the Torah tell us **what** to do and **what** not to do, whereas the stories of *Sefer Bereshit* tell us **how** we should do it. The story of Avraham taking guests into his home, or *Hashem* visiting Avraham when he is not well following his circumcision, for example, convey far more than a list of formal rules ever could.

This two-tiered structure of general principles of behavior along with specific do's and don'ts also helps to explain the concept of “*kedoshim ti'yu* – be sanctified” (*Vayikra* 19:2). Isn't the purpose of **all** of the 613 *mitzvot* to sanctify and elevate our lives? What, then, is the Torah adding by stating this goal as an independent requirement? To illustrate, imagine that after a mother had extensively spelled out for her son how he should dress, speak, and behave when going to his first job interview, she would then add one last point – “And be sure to also make a good impression!” Specific rules only go so far in helping us to live our lives; we also need general principles to help us apply those rules to the particular situations that we encounter. The Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah, explains that without this general principle of “*kedoshim ti'yu* – be sanctified,” one could theoretically miss the whole point of the Torah, while sticking to all of the technical rules.

**We can now address the questions that we asked in the beginning:**

**Question #1: Why is the holiday of *kabalat haTorah* (receiving the Torah) called “*Shavuot*” (“Weeks”)? Since a Hebrew name is always the identification of the essence of whatever it is describing, how is “Weeks” the essence of this holiday?**

Which are the weeks that the name “*Shavuot*” is referring to? Obviously, these seven weeks of **preparation** that we are in the midst of right now. This is a very significant point. As important as preparation is for every one of the holidays, only with *Shavuot* is this preparation beforehand the actual **essence** of the holiday. Why is this? Because, as we mentioned, only that which we have “planted” within ourselves, whether positive or negative, is what the Torah will help to grow and develop.

If we don't prepare for *Shavuot* properly by working on ourselves during the *sefirah* period beforehand, the Torah could end up, G-d forbid, helping the “weeds” inside of us to grow. This explains the widespread custom to learn the six chapters of *Pirkei Avot*, the section of the Talmud that is most oriented towards helping us to improve our *middot* (character traits), on the six *Shabbatot* between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. Also, the custom of learning each of the 48 Ways in which the Torah is Acquired (two of which have two parts each for a total of fifty) on the 50 days between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. The way to ensure that the Torah will truly be a “*sam chayim* – drug of life” for us, is to work on our *middot* during this period of the year.

**Question #2: Since we don't believe in historical coincidence, what is the connection between the *sefirah* (counting) period preceding *kabalat haTorah* and the *aveilut* (mourning) for Rabbi Akiva's students which happened during this *sefirah* period?**

Rabbi Akiva, the greatest Rabbinical leader of his generation, had a remarkable total of 12,000 pairs of students (i.e., 24,000). The *Gemara* (*Yevamot* 62b) tells us that they all died of a terrible disease, between *Pesach* (Passover) and *Shavuot*, because they did not treat each other with the proper degree of respect. As a result of this tragic occurrence, the Jewish people observe a 33 day mourning period every year, specifically between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, when they refrain from weddings, haircuts, and music.

In fact, when we think about the *sefirah* period (i.e., the counting from *Pesach* to *Shavuot*), we generally associate it much more with these three aspects of mourning than with any anticipation and preparation for the receiving of the Torah on *Shavuot*. The problem with this is that there doesn't seem to be any intrinsic connection between this mourning which we observe and the *sefirah* period leading up to *Shavuot*. In other words, it seems that it is only because Rabbi Akiva's students **happened** to die during the *sefirah* period that we mourn for them then. But had they died during the winter, for example, then that is when we would have had 33 days of no weddings, haircuts, and music.

Hence the question which we asked – Since we don't believe in historical coincidence, what, in fact, **is** the connection between the *sefirah* (counting) period preceding *kabalat haTorah* and this *aveilut* (mourning) for Rabbi Akiva's students?

Rabbi Akiva's students were meant to serve as their generation's links in the chain of the Oral tradition from Mt. Sinai towards the future. As the intended leaders of the next generation, their responsibility to properly prepare themselves to accept the Torah by working on their *middot* was enormous. And since the Talmud tells us they died for not showing proper honor to one another, it seems that, in terms of who they were and what was expected of them, they definitely did not use this period of preparation as they should have.

These three aspects of mourning which the Jewish people have been observing ever since then, therefore, serve as both a powerful reminder as well as a warning to us. It reminds us that this *sefirah* (counting) period which begins during *Pesach* and continues up until *Shavuot* is perhaps the most opportune time of the entire year for us to work on our *middot* (character traits). We will thus enable the Torah, which we receive on *Shavuot*, to then truly be a "*sam chayim* – drug of life," providing the crucial nourishment for the positive *middot* we have developed to grow and flourish within us.

At the same time, however, these three aspects of mourning also serve as a profound warning to us not to squander this special season. We need to remember that every opportunity is a double-edged sword – we benefit greatly if we use it properly, but we can actually be worse off if we waste it. And while this is particularly true for leaders of the Jewish community, like Rabbi Akiva's thousands of students, it is true for every one of us as well.

### **Question #3: Why did the plague, which caused Rabbi Akiva's students to die, stop specifically on the 33rd day of the *sefirah* period?**

First of all, let's clarify what exactly was the counting of the *Omer*? The *Omer* was a barley offering that was brought in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) on the second day of *Pesach*, and which permitted the new grain crop to be eaten. Since the second day of *Pesach* is the same day we begin the counting toward *Shavuot*, this counting is referred to as the counting of the *Omer*. In other words, the counting of the *Omer* is the counting towards *Shavuot* which begins the same day as the *Omer* offering is brought in the *Beit HaMikdash*.

While there are different opinions as to which days between *Pesach* and *Shavuot* the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva died, everyone is in agreement that the deaths stopped on *Lag b'Omer* (the 33rd day of the counting of the *Omer*). Do we have any indication as to what was special about that day which might have caused this?

While it may be impossible for us to definitively know why the deaths stopped specifically on the 33rd day of the *Omer* count, there is a remarkable juxtaposition that may shed some light on this timing. We mentioned earlier that there is a custom to learn each of the 48 Ways in which the Torah is Acquired on the days between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. The 32nd of the 48 Ways, the one that immediately precedes the 33rd day is – to love other people. Remarkably, it was specifically problems in their relationships towards others which the Talmud had identified as the root issue that had caused the plague! Perhaps the fact that the deaths stopped the very day following a focus on caring for others means that Rabbi Akiva's students were working on this, to prepare themselves to receive the Torah. In any case, this is certainly a strong

encouragement for us to work on the 48 Ways in general, and to increase our concern for others specifically on the 32nd day of the *Omer* count.

#### **Question #4: Why is the counting of the *Omer* a count-up and not a count-down?**

This question touches on a tremendous insight into how we can most effectively work on our *middot* (character traits).

When it comes to a **countdown**, there is only one thing that matters – getting to the final goal. Either one successfully arrives at this endpoint or one does not. A number of years ago there was a rocket launch that needed to be stopped at the very last minute. While it got very close to actually launching, it was ultimately just as much of a failure as if it had missed by a wide margin. Every countdown has a clear bottom line, and the bottom line of that launch was that it had failed.

When one **counts up**, on the other hand, the focus is not only on the **goal** and whether one did or did not reach it, but also on the **journey** itself. One day we are at level 17, then we reach #18, and the following day we hope to be at #19. Every step of the way is significant. Each day has its own value.

As we count the *sefirah* every day from *Pesach* until *Shavuot*, we are marking our gradual progression towards *kabalat haTorah*, towards connecting with G-d at *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai). How could this be a **countdown**? Would it make sense to reduce this process of spiritual growth to such a simple bottom line of either complete success or complete failure? Certainly not. So, instead, we **count up** to *Shavuot* — hopefully getting closer and closer every single day.

Additionally, to fully connect with G-d at the peak of *Har Sinai* would be to attain absolute perfection. While this is certainly our greatest aspiration, it is one that we know can never be completely attained in this world.

While we know that we will never finish the process of self-perfection and spiritual elevation, by counting up we show our strong desire to continually be at a higher place each day than the previous one. As Rabbi Tarfon famously declares in *Pirkei Avot* 2:21 – “The task is not upon you to complete, but you are [still] unable to exempt yourself from [beginning] it.”

#### **Question #5 – Why do we count only 49 days of the *sefirah*, when the Torah speaks about counting a full 50 days?**

To count a full 50 days would be to proclaim that we had, in fact, reached this pinnacle of absolute perfection in connection with G-d at the peak of *Har Sinai*. And as we just said, it is self-evident that this is impossible.

We are now in the midst of the greatest opportunity of the Jewish year to work on our character traits and to spiritually elevate ourselves. That is the essential prerequisite for us to then be able to receive the Torah that G-d wants to give us on *Shavuot*. G-d should give us all the *siyata d'Shimaya* (Heavenly assistance) to come as close as we possibly can to the 50th level at the peak of *Har Sinai*, and a true *kabalat haTorah* that will last for us all throughout this coming year.