

Parsha Ponders

Shavuos | May 16, 2021 | 5 Sivan 5781

*Torah is a gift, not a burden*¹

ותתן לנו יקוק אלקנו באהבה מועדים לשמחה חגים וזמנים לששון, את יום חג השבעות הזה זמן מתן תורתנו
Hashem our G-d, with love give us festivals of happiness, holidays and times of joy, this holiday of
Shavuos, the time of the giving of our Torah²

In our calendar³, Shavuos always falls out on the sixth day of Sivan. Something not mentioned explicitly in the Torah is the event that Shavuos commemorates. As noted in our prayers, Shavuos commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This is why we read the Ten Commandments on Shavuos morning⁴. There's actually a disagreement in the *gemarra*⁵ what day the Torah was given. The Rabbis say that the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan, whereas Rabbi Yossi says that it was given on the seventh of Sivan. Due to the underlying basis of their disagreement, we actually rule like Rabbi Yossi⁶. If so, how can we say that the Torah was given on the sixth, when we rule it was given on the seventh⁷?

Furthermore, what did the Jews receive on Shavuos? The Ten Commandments. Forty days later, Moshe returned from Mount Sinai with the tablets which contained the Ten Commandments, only to find the Jewish people worshipping a Golden Calf. In fury, he smashed the stone tablets⁸. It wasn't until Yom Kippur that they received a second set of tablets to replace the first set. It turns out then that the Torah they received on Shavuos didn't last. Really the Torah we have is the Torah they received on Yom Kippur⁹. What this means is even according to the Rabbis, who say that the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan, the text of our prayers seems inaccurate. Shavuos is not the time of the giving of our Torah, as the Torah from that day was lost, due to the Golden Calf. According to everyone then the prayers need explanation.

On Seder night we recite the questions of the four children. The "wise son" asks¹⁰ what are the laws and statutes that Hashem commanded us. It's interesting that he's called wise if he doesn't know the basics of Judaism. Therefore, some explain¹¹ his question as follows: Non-Jews have only seven

¹ Based on a *shiur* heard from [Rav Zev Leff](#) in 5781

² From the Festival *Shemoneh Esrei* and evening Kiddush prayers

³ As opposed to when the Jewish calendar wasn't fixed, and the start of the months depended on the testimony of two witnesses who saw the New Moon. See [Rosh Hashanah](#) 1:1-3:1

⁴ [Megillah](#) 31a

⁵ [Shabbos](#) 86b

⁶ [Magen Avraham](#) to [Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim](#) 494:1. The underlying disagreement between the Rabbis and Rabbi Yossi is how long must a couple temporarily separate before spiritual purification can commence. Rabbi Yossi rules that there needs to be six twelve-hour periods, meaning three days, which is actually the *halacha* found in [Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah](#) 196:11

⁷ See [Magen Avraham loc. cit.](#), who cites from the [Rema MiPano's Asarah Ma'amaros Chikur HaDin](#) 2:15 (although, really to answer why we celebrate Shavuos on the 50th day of the Omer, when the Torah was given on the 51st day, but the answer could also apply to this question as well), that the Torah was given outside the land of Israel, **on the second day of Yom Tov**, to give those in exile a portion in the Torah. [Rav Leff](#) wasn't satisfied with this answer, as *Yom Tov Sheni* on the seventh of Sivan is because we're not sure if that day is really the sixth of Sivan, which isn't like Rabbi Yossi

⁸ [Exodus](#) Chapter 32

⁹ [Rav Leff](#) cited this from the [Seforno](#), who uses this to explain why Shavuos isn't referred to in the Torah as *עצרת*, a gathering, considering it was the greatest gathering in our history. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to locate it

¹⁰ [Deuteronomy](#) 6:20

¹¹ [Ibn Ezra ad. loc.](#)

commandments that they are required to follow, yet we have 613 *mitzvos*. Why were we given this burden? What's the answer that is given? "Hashem gave us all of these commandments *for our good*¹²". They are in fact not a burden. Our Sages¹³ say that Hashem gave us an abundance of *mitzvos* לזכות את ישראל. This is usually translated as in order to give us merit, but it can also be read to mean to purify us. Our soul is so great that it's like a diamond, which needs more polishing than the average stone. That's why we have so many *mitzvos*¹⁴.

The *gemarra* recounts¹⁵ an interesting drama that occurred when Moshe went to Heaven to receive the Torah. The Angels wouldn't let him take it, as they wanted it for themselves. Moshe then showed them how the *mitzvos* in the Torah only apply to humans. If so, what were the Angels thinking¹⁶? They wanted to give Moshe a message: If the Torah would indeed be applicable to the Angels, they'd jump at the opportunity to get it. It may seem daunting, but it is not a burden. The Torah is an opportunity¹⁷.

We are taught¹⁸ that Hashem offered the Torah to the entire world. He went to each nation and offered it to them, but they all rejected it. He offered it to Eisav, and they asked what was in it. Hashem said an example: "Don't kill". They responded that we received a blessing that, "by your sword you shall live"¹⁹, therefore the Torah and us are incompatible. He offered it to Yishmael, and they asked what was in it. Hashem said, "Don't steal". They responded that a prophecy was said about us that, "our hands will be in everything and everyone's hands will be in us"²⁰, meaning we are suited for theft. They therefore rejected it. Hashem eventually offered it to the Jews, who gladly accepted it²¹.

What's confusing about this story is why didn't Hashem explain to them that there was no contradiction? True, Eisav was destined for killing. However, there are permitted ways to kill. Perhaps they'll be hired soldiers to protect the Jewish people. Yishmael interpreted "our hands will be in everything and everyone's hands will be in us" to mean they are suited for theft. Another explanation is²² that they'll be dependent on everyone, and everyone will be dependent on them. No need for theft.

We can say that Hashem knew that the non-Jews had the wrong attitude about what Torah is. As a result, there was no convincing them. If someone asks you do to them a favor, no matter how giving you are, you'll ask what it is. The non-Jews thought Hashem was asking them to do Him a favor, and accept his Torah. He had this burden called 613 *mitzvos*, and He "needed" someone to observe them. In

¹² V. 24

¹³ Makkos 3:16

¹⁴ This also explains Deuteronomy 10:12,13, which says, "What does Hashem command from you? Just..." and then it lists almost everything included in the Torah. The point is the final phrase, לטוב לך; Hashem wants what's for our best

¹⁵ Shabbos 88b, 89a

¹⁶ See Teshuvos Radvaz III § 643 (אלף ט"ח), Chasam Sofer's Toras Moshe I to Deuteronomy 32:3, and Beis HaLevi to Exodus Chapter 19 s.v. להביך for other interesting explanations

¹⁷ Rav Leff thought of this on his own, and was happy to find a *Midrash* that said the same

¹⁸ Sifrei Devarim § 343. See Targum "Yonasan" to Deuteronomy *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Genesis 27:40

²⁰ Ibid 16:12

²¹ See <https://parshaponders.com/vezos-haberacha-5780> for an explanation of this story in the context of the seven *mitzvos* non-Jews having to keep including not murdering or stealing

²² Targum Onkelos *ad. loc.*

contrast, when someone offers you a present, you don't ask what it is. The Jews knew that the Torah was a present, and therefore accepted it without asking.

One problem with this approach would seem to be a comment of Rashi. He describes²³ the Torah as a yoke on our necks. We are also taught²⁴ to toil in Torah, and there are harsh consequences if we don't. This would sound more like a burden, and not a present. However, there is no contradiction. If someone were to offer us a treasure map, which would require traveling the globe and excavating deeply into the Earth, would we call it a burden? It sure won't be easy, but the immense treasure at the end will provide tremendous joy. The Torah isn't easy, but it's so sweet it's worth it. It's a burden for our sake, for our betterment. That provides true joy.

Back to the questions we started with. Even according to Rabbi Yossi, the Torah was meant to be given on the sixth of Sivan²⁵. However, Moshe realized that the Jewish people weren't ready. They needed one more day of preparation. Hashem agreed, and the Torah was given on the seventh. If the Torah were a burden, would Hashem really wait until we were ready? He would give it to us anyways, ready or not. Since the Torah is for our good, Hashem pushed it off for us. When we stress on Shavuot that it's the day of the giving of our Torah, the word מתנה, gift, is quite apropos. It may not be the day that we received the Torah, but it's the day that we realized that Torah is a gift²⁶. Even after the tablets were broken, we understood that the Torah is not a burden, but is for our betterment²⁷. It is for our benefit²⁸.

Chag Sameach!

²³ In the *sugya* of *mitzvos lav lehenos nitnu*

²⁴ Rashi to Leviticus 26:3, quoting Toras Kohanim ad. loc.

²⁵ See Shabbos 87a, and Tosafos to Avodah Zara 3a s.v. יום

²⁶ See Beis HaLevi *loc. cit.* who makes a similar inference from the wording, but with a different explanation

²⁷ This doesn't seem to answer why according to the Rabbis we would say זמן מתן תורתנו, since they don't understand it that Moshe added a day and Hashem concurred. Perhaps Rav Leff felt according to them there would be a different text to our prayers

²⁸ This also explains why Moshe broke the tablets, indicating that they weren't worthy of such a gift. If it were a burden, he should have given them an even greater burden