



SHAVUOS AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF TORAH

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Shavuos is *zman matan Toraseinu*, the time when Hashem gives us the Torah and we accept it. We do not just commemorate the fact that Hashem gave us the Torah many years ago, but we are called upon, in some sense, to accept it anew and receive it once again from Hashem. But what exactly does it mean to accept the Torah? How does one accomplish this? What precisely is Hashem giving to us when He gives us the Torah anew? The answers to these questions will help define for us the *avodah* of Shavuos. They will also bring us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the essence of the Torah and of the nature of our relationship with Hashem.

In order to deal with these issues and put them into their proper context, we must first examine one of Rambam's most fundamental teachings.

A Lesson from Rambam's Thirteen *Ikkarim*

Rambam famously writes that there are thirteen *ikkarim*, foundational beliefs of the Torah, and he proceeds to identify and explain them. The understanding of these *ikkarim* is not simply an academic exercise; rather, Rambam *paskens* that a Jew must be aware of these principles, and accept them as being true, in order to be in possession of the Torah. A Jew who does not know any one of them, even if it is through no fault of his own, simply does not have the Torah, as these principles define the minimum requirement necessary for one to relate to Hashem through His Torah.

We have elaborated elsewhere on why each of these thirteen principles is a necessary prerequisite for the Torah. One key idea that emerges from these discussions is that the Torah is predicated upon its recipient being a *muchrach*, one who is compelled by his understanding of reality, to observe

the Torah. Accepting the thirteen principles as being true is necessary to make one a *muchrach*. Let us illustrate this by explaining how the first few principles serve this purpose.

The first step in being a *muchrach* is to accept the existence of Hashem (the first principle); one who does not believe in Hashem's existence certainly has nothing to compel him. Next, one must accept the absolute unity of Hashem (the second principle), for a person who believes that there are different parts or facets in Hashem inevitably feels that he can play off one aspect or attribute of Hashem against another. This is simply human nature, just as a child plays off his mother against his father, and a small country plays off two large nations against each other. It follows that a person does not feel fully compelled unless he affirms the truth of Hashem's absolute unity. Similarly, a person must accept the incorporeality of Hashem (the third principle), as one who believes that Hashem has physical form necessarily believes that He has boundaries and can be evaded. Such a person would not feel truly compelled, because he would intuitively feel that he can run away or hide from Hashem. Thus, one must affirm Hashem's incorporeality to be a *muchrach*.

The other principles are also essential to being a *muchrach*. For example, one must accept that Hashem dispenses reward and punishment (the eleventh principle) because without these, a person does not feel truly compelled. This is true even one for a *tzaddik* who serves Hashem out of love. Without a belief in reward and punishment, there will come a time that he will say, "Hashem should be satisfied with all the years that I have selflessly served Him – now I need to take care of my own needs." Inevitably, a person will feel that way and act that way, no matter who he is. And once he does so, he is acting autonomously, based upon what he feels is good for himself, and he is not being



compelled by the greater reality of Hashem and His Torah. To avert that, one must accept the principle of reward and punishment, so that the person knows that he is accountable to Hashem for everything. This principle is, thus, part of what it takes to make a person fully *muchrach* to observe the Torah. The same holds true for the other *ikkarim*.

In sum, being a *muchrach* is the key to a Jew having the Torah. A Jew can relate to Hashem through the Torah and its *mitzvos* only if he is a *muchrach*, and the thirteen *ikkarim* are necessary to render him a *muchrach*.

The Offer of the Torah at Sinai

This leads to a puzzling question. If, as we have explained, the Torah, by its very nature, requires its recipient to be a *muchrach*, why did Hashem at Mount Sinai leave the decision whether to accept or reject the Torah in the hands of the Jews? Why did He ask them if they would consent to accepting the Torah, why did He not compel them and say, “Here is the Torah – keep it, or suffer the consequences! It is the ultimate reality of all existence and you have no choice but to observe it.”

It is clear from the account of the giving of the Torah in Parshas Yisro (Shemos ch. 19) that Hashem, in actuality, did not give the Torah in this latter manner; he, rather offered them the Torah and waited to see if they would accept it. The verses state that Hashem sent Moshe with this proposal to the people (19:3-6), and Moshe reported their answer back to Hashem (19:8), implying that their response was freely given and determinative of the outcome. In his proposal, Hashem tried convincing the Jews to accept the Torah by reminding them of His affection for them (“You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me” – 19:4), and by offering an inducement for their acceptance (“If you observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most treasured of peoples...” – 19:5). The fact that He had to convince them implies that the decision was theirs to make. Furthermore, Hashem forbade Moshe to elaborate upon His words (“These are the words you shall speak to the Children of Israel” – not more and not less – 19:6, with Rashi). Apparently, He wanted the Jews to make the decision on their own, based upon what Hashem told them, without being unduly swayed by Moshe.

The question is quite glaring: Why did Hashem make the Torah

dependent upon their free-willed acceptance, if the Torah by its very nature imposes itself on its recipient and compels him, as a *muchrach*, to observe it?

Na’aseh VeNishma

To deal with this question, let us examine what this free-willed acceptance actually consisted of. Chazal (Shabbos 88a) teach that the Jews’ acceptance of the Torah was with the words *na’aseh venishma*, we will do and we will hear (Shemos 24:7). Chazal (Sifrei to Devarim 33:2) also state that Hashem offered the Torah to the non-Jewish nations, and instead of saying *na’aseh venishma*, they responded by asking, “*Mah kosuv bah*, what is written in it?” Hashem replied to the nations by telling them one of the *mitzvos*, whereupon they declared that they could not accept the Torah.

It is clear that the responses of *na’aseh venishma* and *mah kosuv bah* contrast sharply. *Na’aseh venishma* is an extremely meritorious response, because by stating *na’aseh*, we will do, before *nishma*, we will hear, the Jews indicated that they willingly accepted the Torah even without first hearing what it contained (see Shabbos 88a-b). The response of *mah kosuv bah* is the exact opposite: it means we will not accept the Torah unless we first hear what it contains. It is an attitude of profound lack of trust in Hashem. Chazal are teaching that one who approaches the Torah with that attitude inevitably comes to out-and-out rejection of the Torah.

We can take this a step further. *Mah kosuv bah* focuses on the content of the Torah. Those who spoke these words believed that they had to assess whether they could accept the content of the Torah, and in order to do that, they asked to be told what it consisted of. *Na’aseh venishma*, by contrast, does not deal with the content of the Torah at all. Not only did those who said *na’aseh venishma* not know what this content was, but their very statement means that it is unnecessary to know the content of the Torah in order to accept the Torah. So what are they accepting when they accept the Torah? They are certainly not accepting content! The answer is that they are accepting *avdus*, servitude to Hashem.

Na’aseh venishma means that I accept *avdus* to Hashem



upon myself. It means that I am placing no limits on what I accept to do for Him, for I am accepting to do and only later will I find out what this acceptance entails. I am not seeking to define a job description, or in any other way place limits or reservations on what He may ask me to do. I am simply accepting to do whatever He tells me. I am accepting to be an *eved Hashem*.

Defining *Matan Torah*

We have just shown that *na'aseh venishma* is the only way to accept the Torah, and that it is an acceptance of *avdus* to Hashem. It follows logically from this that the Torah is nothing other than a system of *avdus* to Hashem. Just as *na'aseh venishma* is people accepting *avdus* to Hashem upon themselves, so too *matan Torah* is Hashem giving people the privilege of becoming His *avadim*. This explains why *mah kosuv bah*, what is written in it, invariably falls short as an acceptance of the Torah. *Mah kosuv bah* is a response that is appropriate for the offer of a job or a business opportunity. But in response to an offer of the Torah, whose essence is *avdus* to Hashem, *mah kosuv bah* is ultimately, in and of itself, a rejection.

Chazal convey this idea, that *matan Torah* is Hashem giving us *avdus* to Him, when they compare Hashem at Sinai to a king who extended his rule to a new country. The people of that country said to the king, "Decree laws for us!" But the king said, "First you must accept my kingship, and only then will I decree laws for you, for if you do not accept my kingship, you will not keep my laws." Similarly, Hashem asked the Jews at Sinai to accept His kingship, and they said, "Yes!" He responded, "Since you have accepted my kingship, you must now keep my laws" (Mechilta to Shemos 20:3).

The import of this Midrash is that the essence of *matan Torah* is the acceptance of His kingship, or lordship, over us. This acceptance binds us to keep all His laws unreservedly. The *mashal* also makes it clear that the laws are for the benefit of the people, not of the king. The king gives the people the opportunity to accept his kingship so that they can have the laws that they need. So too, Hashem does not need our service. He offers us the opportunity of accepting His kingship for our benefit, so that we can have the unparalleled privilege of performing His service.

This changes the way we conceive of *mitzvos*. The point of *matan Torah* is not that Hashem gave us *mitzvos*; it is, rather, that He became our King and we became His *avadim*. The *mitzvos* are what we need to serve the King properly, what we need to carry out our *avdus*. It is actually a separate kindness of Hashem that He revealed to us the *mitzvos*, so that we now know how to serve Him properly; theoretically, He could have left us groping in the dark. The Midrash implies that we asked Him for the *mitzvos*, and this is why, because we deeply desired to know how to serve Him. We could not bear to grope around unknowingly in the service of Hashem. Because we accepted His Kingship, Hashem granted to us this second favor of revealing to us His *mitzvos*.

This insight, in turn, helps explain the *minhag* that we have to stay up all night and learn Torah on Shavuos. The reason that we stay up is certainly not to commemorate the fact that on Shavuos Hashem taught us the Torah. First of all, He taught us only on the day of Shavuos, not at night; second of all, and more fundamentally, the essential point of Shavuos is not that Hashem taught us the Torah. Shavuos is not, in its core, about Hashem giving us the content of Torah; it is, rather, as we have been explaining, about His giving to us, and our accepting upon ourselves, the privilege and responsibility of becoming his *avadim*. We learn during the night of Shavuos to demonstrate how dear this responsibility is to us, that we want to find out what it is that we need to do as *avadim*. We too do not want to grope around unknowingly; we deeply desire to know how to serve Him, because we want to be the best *avadim* that we can be.

This also explains why the Yom Tov of Shavuos is distinctive among the other Yomim Tovim in that it does not have a *mitzvah* specific to its day. Pesach has *matza* and *haggadah*, Succos has *succah*, Rosh Hashanah has *shofar*; why does Shavuos not have a specific *mitzvah*? The reason is that Shavuos is about the prerequisite of *mitzvos*, about the state of *avdus* that must exist in order for there to be *mitzvos*. It is about accepting to do the will of Hashem without conditions and reservations, and without any expectation of what He will ask. *Mitzvos* cannot help us establish that state, because the state of *avdus* is itself prior to there being any *mitzvos*.



Our Role at Sinai and Beyond

We had questioned earlier why Hashem needed to ask the Jews whether they would accept the Torah, why He needed their willing consent. An accurate understanding of reality turns a Jew into a *muchrach*, one who is compelled to keep Hashem's commands; why, then, did the Jews have to voluntarily accept the Torah? The answer, however, should now be clear. Hashem does not need us to accept His commands – once He issues a command, we are absolutely compelled to keep it. Hashem will not, however, command us in the first place unless we first undergo a prerequisite. He will not command us unless we accept His kingship, unless we accept *avdus* upon ourselves.

The laws of the Torah are predicated upon there being a relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people, with Hashem as King and the Jewish people as His *avadim*. We had to create this relationship by accepting our role as *avadim* and His role as King. That we did when we said *na'aseh venishma*, when we accepted unreservedly to listen to whatever He says. After that, He commands and we are compelled to obey.

Once the Jewish people collectively accepted to be his *avadim* at Mount Sinai, they are bound for all time. As Rambam teaches in his *ikkarim*, we are compelled to keep His commands and no escape is even theoretically possible. This is the nature of the *avdus* that we accepted. It follows that Hashem is no longer asking us to be His nation. He is no longer asking us to accept the Torah – that was already accomplished three thousand years ago at Sinai.

Yet even though we no longer have the choice that was given to us at Sinai, the fact that we were given the choice then is extremely relevant to us today. It teaches us about the nature of *avdus* to Hashem. It teaches us that *avdus* to Hashem requires consent, it requires the desire to truly be an *eved* to Him. On the national level, the Jewish people became His *avadim* when they freely accepted His *avdus* at Sinai. What about on the personal level? How can I, as an individual, become an *eved Hashem*? How can I grow in my closeness to Hashem by increasing the level of *avdus* to Him that I have?

The answer is that this can come about only if I freely will it upon myself. Just as on the national level we had to voluntarily accept *avdus* in order to become His *avadim*, so too on the personal level. This means that I have to develop a sincere desire to be an *eved Hashem*. I have to accept *avdus* to Him not because I am compelled to (although in truth I am compelled), but because I truly desire it. I have to feel that I truly need to become His *eved*, that I truly need Him to become my King. Only in this way can I become – or grow as – an *eved Hashem*.

This is different than the way one usually tries to improve in other religious qualities, such as in *mitzvah* observance or in attaining *midos tovos*. In those areas, religious growth can develop out of the sense that one is compelled to obey Hashem. One can, for example, grow in one's observance of Shabbos even without recognizing the privilege and special gift from Hashem that it truly is. Consequently, one often grows in those areas by developing further the sense of obligation that one feels, or by habituating oneself to perform good deeds. With regard to becoming a true *eved Hashem*, however, the inner desire to be an *eved* is of the essence and one can grow only by increasing that desire.

On Shavuos, we have an unparalleled opportunity to increase that desire. Shavuos is *zman matan Toraseinu*, the time when Hashem gives us the *avdus* of Torah for us to willingly accept. Just as Hashem made this *avdus* available to the nation as a whole many years ago at Sinai, so too He makes it available to each and every one of us on Shavuos. He calls upon all of us to respond as our ancestors did at Sinai, by desiring this *avdus* and by accepting lovingly and unconditionally to fulfill His will, to make Him our King and to become His *avadim*. If we do so, we will have a much deeper and fuller experience of Torah and *mitzvos*, because Torah and *mitzvos* are predicated upon the relationship between Hashem and us as King and *avadim*. This is the *avodah* of Shavuos – to appreciate the privilege of being his *avadim* and to willingly accept that state and all that goes along with it, thereby achieving a deeper connection to all of Torah and *mitzvos*.

