

The HINDA Institute

Helping Individuals Ascend

Monthly Newsletter

Shavuot 2017



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Shavuot (a two-day holiday, celebrated on May 30–June 1, 2017) coincides with the date that G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai more than 3,300 years ago. It comes after 49 days of eager counting, as we prepared ourselves for this special day.

It is celebrated by lighting candles, staying up all night to learn Torah, hearing the reading of the Ten Commandments in synagogue, feasting on dairy foods and more.

What is the Torah?

If you are confused by usage of this word, you're probably on the right track. Grammatically, the word torah should mean any instruction, but in actual usage:

- The title Torah often refers specifically to the Five Books of Moses. A parchment scroll version of the Torah, carefully written by an expert scribe, is kept in the ark of the synagogue and taken out to be read during services.
- Torah can also refer to the entire Written Torah, meaning the entire canonized scripture.
- Torah can also refer to the above plus the Oral Torah, which includes:
 - the compilation of laws and rulings known as Mishnah, along with other accepted compilations,
 - the discussion and debate of that material, known as Talmud or Gemara,
 - the stories and their lessons that are collected in the Talmud and Midrashic works,
 - any other teaching that has been accepted by a long-term consensus of the observant Jewish community, because it is based firmly on some precedent, or because it has been demonstrated to emerge by accepted means from previous texts and opinions.

What's so special about it?

"If someone tells you there is wisdom among other peoples, believe him . . . If someone tells you there is Torah among other peoples, do not believe him . . ."

—Midrash

Torah, it seems, is distinct from what we generally call wisdom. Our sages go so far as to say that Torah precedes all existence, that it contains the blueprint for the cosmos, and that the very existence of the cosmos is contingent upon Torah.

Even the term "divine wisdom" is insufficient. Our universe, after all, is composed of divine wisdom. Our environment, our bodies and the very psyche with which we observe all of these are of un-

fathomable design. "How wondrous are Your works, O G-d," the Psalmist declares. "You made all of them with wisdom!" Yet the laws of nature are not the laws of Torah.

Human wisdom can be described as the ability to predict the outcomes of this wondrous design. We take note of its patterns and extrapolate into the future. We strive to know enough about what is to predict what will be—and therefore, what could be if we make informed choices. Nevertheless, what should be is decided by means that are not related to knowledge or wisdom.

For example, wisdom tells you that how you treat others is bound to come back to you. It's up to you to decide whether you want that coming back or not. Possessing property that doesn't belong to you might not be a good idea—for you or for the people around you. It's up to you to decide whether or not to suffer the consequences for the sake of the immediate benefits.

Torah, on the other hand, doesn't simply inform, it instructs, "Don't steal." It's nice to know that respect of private property benefits you and the society in which you live, but that's not the reason you refrain from stealing. You don't steal because that is your Creator's will.

Torah as Oneness

A construction worker looks at a blueprint and sees a building; an architect listens to the builder and understands what he really wants. The Torah is like the architect—which is why studying it tells us not only what is, but what should be. Torah is the Creator sharing His innermost desire with us, the created.

The seed of Torah was planted with the experience at Sinai, recorded in the Five Books of Moses. But the voice of Sinai continues to be heard in each generation as students of the Torah unfold the DNA of that seed, discovering new meanings that were always meant, new applications that had always lay dormant. After all, the ultimate instruction is that which lifts the student to a vantage point from which he can discern his own evaluation, using the same tools as the teacher.

What's in it for us

When you immerse yourself in Torah, your goal is not simply to amass information, but to gain a sense of how the Creator of the Universe relates to His creations. To think in a G-dly way. It is a sharing of spirit, until the same preferences and desires breathe within the two of you. His thoughts are your thoughts and your thoughts are His. There is no comparable union to be found in any other wisdom.

Jewish Story

Onkelos was the son of Emperor Hadrian's sister. Being a clever, handsome, well-mannered young man, he had grown up to be one of the most promising future leaders of the mighty Roman Empire. His uncle looked forward to the time when Onkelos would be ready to make his formal debut on the stage of public Roman life.

By chance, Onkelos had become acquainted with some of the noble Jewish families who had settled in Rome. Through them, he was introduced to the Jewish religion, and was very much attracted to it.

Onkelos had to remember, however, that he was the noble son of the most eminent family of the Roman Empire. It was unwise for him to be observed associating with Jews. Still more dangerous would it have been, had he openly stated his intention of changing to the Jewish religion. It would have been sheer suicide. On the other hand, Onkelos felt increasingly drawn to the Jewish faith.

After long deliberation, he worked out a solution to his problem. He visited his uncle, Emperor Hadrian. During their conversation he casually mentioned that he had become interested in the world of commerce, and that he would like to dedicate some time and effort to becoming fully acquainted with the principles and workings of this most important field of public endeavor.

Hadrian, who was very fond of his nephew, was highly pleased at this show of interest in such complicated matters as the theory and practice of economics. He gave Onkelos this advice: "The basic approach to commerce is the discovery of merchandise of a highly marketable product which has yet to come before the public. This type of merchandise is the most profitable kind of business."

This is exactly what Onkelos wanted to hear. Now he was given a free hand to travel about and to associate with merchants, many of whom were Jews, without attracting unwanted attention and giving cause for suspicion. In the course of extensive trips he visited the Holy Land, and remained there to study Torah.

Gifted with an extraordinary and keen mind, he easily overcame the difficulties of the Hebrew language, law and lore. After a while he was ready to adopt the Jewish religion and to abide by the commands of the Torah. Secretly, he became a ger, a convert to Judaism.

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua were the spiritual leaders of the Jewish people in those days. Onkelos visited them and begged them to accept him as their disciple.

The Sages saw the deep change that had taken place in the attitude of the young, noble Roman. Instead of haughtiness, he now showed humility and a readiness to study, like all other students of Torah.

They finally agreed to the urgent request of the young ger, and spent much time and effort on his Jewish education.

The time came when Onkelos could no longer delay his return to Rome. Confident in G-d's help, he parted from the Sages who had become his revered teachers, and embarked on his trip home.

After his arrival in Rome, he paid his due visit to the Emperor Hadrian, who quickly noticed the deep change that had come over his nephew during his long absence. It was a more humble, yet wiser Onkelos, who now stood before him, than the one who had left to study commerce.

"What has happened to you, my dear nephew? Did you meet failure in your business ventures, or did any one dare to harm you?" the emperor asked him.

"Who would harm the nephew of the mightiest man in the world?" replied Onkelos with a smile.

"Why then do I see such humility in your countenance, my nephew?"

Onkelos decided to be straightforward. "I cannot but tell you the full truth, my dear uncle. The reason for the change in me is the fact that I spent much time and effort in the study of Torah, the Law of the Jewish people. What is more, I even went so far as to adopt the Jewish religion as my own."

Emperor Hadrian's face grew red with fury over his nephew's confession. This spelled the end of Onkelos's political career and deprived him, his uncle, of the one on whom he had counted heavily in his future political plans.

When his fury abated, Hadrian felt that he should give his nephew a fair chance to explain his behavior before doing anything to punish him. "You have thoroughly disappointed my high hopes and expectations of you. Yet I am curious to know what caused such unbelievable foolishness on the part of such a clever young fellow as you. Perhaps there was some young woman who trapped you against your will?"

"My dear uncle and friend, to be frank, I must state that no such reason was at the root of my change of religion. What prompted me to take such a weighty step was none other than your sound advice before I parted from you."

Angrily, Hadrian retorted: "I would be the last man to advise you so stupidly."

"Yet remember, dear uncle, before I left, you advised me to search for merchandise that had the promise of being a best-selling article. On my extensive trips and thorough study of many countries and conditions, I did not discover any merchandise that, at the present time, is considered lowlier or cheaper than the Jewish religion and the Jewish people.

Yet, there is also no doubt in my mind that it will become the most valuable merchandise of all in the future. As the Prophet Isaiah said: 'Thus said G-d, the Redeemer of Israel, the Holy One, to him who is despised by men, to him who is abhorred by nations, to the servants of rulers; kings shall see it and rise up; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves.' I should think no reasonable businessman would miss the chance of such great profit."

Hadrian recognized his nephew's conviction, and despite his regret and sorrow, he let him go. He did nothing to interfere with Onkelos's open conversion to the Jewish faith, and his life as a pious and observant Jew.

Pirkei Avos

Between Passover and Shavuot it is customary to study Pirkei Avos, Ethics of our Fathers. Here is a selection from Chapter 5.

1. The world was created with ten utterances. What does this come to teach us? Certainly, it could have been created with a single utterance. However, this is in order to make the wicked accountable for destroying a world that was created with ten utterances, and to reward the righteous for sustaining a world that was created with ten utterances.

2. There were ten generations from Adam to Noah. This is to teach us the extent of G-d's tolerance; for all these generations angered Him, until He brought upon them the waters of the Flood.

There were ten generations from Noah to Abraham. This is to teach us the extent of G-d's tolerance; for all these generations angered Him, until Abraham came and reaped the reward for them all.

3. With ten tests our father Abraham was tested and he withstood them all-in order to make known how great was our father Abraham's love [for G-d].

4. Ten miracles were performed for our forefathers in Egypt, and another ten at the sea. Ten afflictions were wrought by G-d upon the Egyptians in Egypt, and another ten at the sea. With ten tests our forefathers tested G-d in the desert, as is stated (Numbers 14:22), "They tested Me these ten times, and did not hearken to My voice."

5. Ten miracles were performed for our forefathers in the Holy Temple: No woman ever miscarried because of the smell of the holy meat. The holy meat never spoiled. Never was a fly seen in the slaughterhouse. Never did the High Priest have an accidental seminal discharge on Yom Kippur. The rains did not extinguish the wood-fire burning upon the altar. The wind did not prevail over the column of smoke [rising from the altar]. No disqualifying problem was ever discovered in the Omer offering, the Two Loaves or the Showbread. They stood crowded but had ample space in which to prostrate themselves. Never did a snake or scorpion cause injury in Jerusalem. And no man ever said to his fellow "My lodging in Jerusalem is too cramped for me."

7. There are seven things that characterize a boor, and seven that characterize a wise man. A wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom or age. He does not interrupt his fellow's words. He does not hasten to answer. His questions are on the subject and his answers to the point. He responds to first things first and to latter things later. Concerning what he did not hear, he says "I did not hear." He concedes to the truth. With

the boor, the reverse of all these is the case.

10. There are four types of people: One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" is a boor. One who says "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours" ~ this is a median characteristic; others say that this is the character of a Sodomite. One who says, "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours" is a chassid (pious person). And one who says "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine" is wicked.

11. There are four types of temperaments. One who is easily angered and easily appeased-his virtue cancels his flaw. One whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease-his flaw cancels his virtue. One whom it is difficult to anger and is easily appeased, is a chassid. One who is easily angered and is difficult to appease, is wicked.

12. There are four types of student. One who is quick to understand and quick to forget-his flaw cancels his virtue. One who is slow to understand and slow to forget-his virtue cancels his flaw. One who is quick to understand and slow to forget-his is a good portion. One who is slow to understand and quick to forget-his is a bad portion.

13. There are four types of contributors to charity. One who wants to give but does not want others to give-is begrudging of others. One who wants that others should give but does not want to give-begrudges himself. One who wants that he as well as others should give, is a chassid. One who want neither himself nor others to give, is wicked.

14. There are four types among those who attend the study hall. One who goes but does nothing-has gained the rewards of going. One who does [study] but does not go to the study hall-has gained the rewards of doing. One who goes and does, is a chassid. One who neither goes nor does, is wicked.

15. There are four types among those who sit before the sages: the sponge, the funnel, the strainer and the sieve. The sponge absorbs all. The funnel takes in at one end and lets it out the other. The strainer rejects the wine and retains the sediment. The sieve rejects the coarse flour and retains the fine flour.

20. Judah the son of Teima would say: Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, fleeting as a deer and mighty as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven. He would also say: The brazen-to purgatory; the bashful-to paradise. May it be Your will, L-rd our G-d and G-d of our fathers, that the Holy Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days; and grant us our portion in Your Torah.

21. Ben Bag Bag would say: Delve and delve into it, for all is in it; see with it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing better.

Ben Hei Hei would say: According to the pain is the gain.

Jewish Joke

Issy is on another of his weight reduction diets and goes to see his doctor with a hamishe cucumber up his nose, a bagel shoved in his right ear and a wine glass sticking out of his left ear.

Issy says, "Doctor, I'm not feeling very well."

The doctor replied, "It's no wonder - you're not eating right."

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HINDAHELPS.COM

In loving memory of
Mrs. Hinda Scheiman OBM

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NOTICES:

Please make a request to your Chaplain that you would like a visit from a Rabbi in JUNE.

HINDA Family Division Connect your family member (parent, spouse, sibling, child etc.) with our Family Division! Please contact us for more information.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: All mail sent to the Hinda Institute should be addressed to our Inmate Advocate. Letters should NOT be addressed to Rabbi Scheiman. Please use this mailing address to

contact us by mail:

Inmate Advocate
The Hinda Institute
9401 Margail Ave
Des Plaines, IL 60016

Housing Resource: For any families trying to find a rental for their loved one to parole to upon release. Contact Mr. Marcus. This applies even to register with the state upon release. There is a fee for his services. Don Yosef Marcus—(847) 361-7770

Special Days this Month

Pesach Sheni—May 10, 2017 (Iyar 14)

"Second Passover" (1312 BCE)

A year after the Exodus, G-d instructed the people of Israel to bring the Passover offering on the afternoon of Nissan 14, and to eat it that evening, roasted over the fire, together with matzah and bitter herbs, as they had done on the previous year just before they left Egypt. "There were, however, certain persons who had become ritually impure through contact with a dead body, and could not, therefore, prepare the Passover offering on that day. They approached Moses and Aaron ... and they said: '...Why should we be deprived, and not be able to present G-d's offering in its time, amongst the children of Israel?'" (Numbers 9).

In response to their plea, G-d established the 14th of Iyar as a "second Passover" (pesach sheini) for anyone who was unable to bring the offering on its appointed time in the previous month. The day thus represents the "second chance" achieved by teshuvah the power of repentance and "return." In the words of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch, "The Second Passover means that it's never a 'lost case.'"

It is customary to eat Matzah on this day.

Lag BaOmer—May 14, 2017 (Iyar 18)

Lag BaOmer (the 33rd day of the Omer count) celebrates the end of the plague amongst Rabbi Akiva's students, and the ascent on high of the soul of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

Plague among R. Akiva's Disciples Ends (circa 120 CE)

In the weeks between Passover and Shavuot, a plague decimated 24,000 students of the great sage Rabbi Akiva—a result, says the Talmud, of the fact that they "did not respect one another." The plague's cessation on Iyar 18—the 33rd day of the Omer Count or "Lag BaOmer"—is one of the reasons that the day is celebrated each year

Passing of R. Shimon bar Yochai (2nd century CE)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai ("Rashbi"), was a leading

disciple of Rabbi Akiva and one of the most important tana'im whose teachings of Torah law are collected in the Mishnah. He was also the first to publicly teach the mystical dimension of the Torah known as the "Kabbalah", and is the author of the basic work of Kabbalah, the Zohar. For 13 years Rabbi Shimon hid in a cave to escape the wrath of the Romans whose government he criticized. On the day of his passing—Iyar 18, the 33rd day of the Omer Count—Rabbi Shimon gathered his disciples and revealed many of the deepest secrets of the divine wisdom, and instructed them to mark the date as "the day of my joy."

The mourning practices of the Omer period are suspended, which is why many three-year-old boys receive their first haircut on this day. Many visit the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron in northern Israel. It is customary to go on outings and to light bonfires; children play with bow-and-arrows to recall that "during the lifetime of Rabbi Shimon the rainbow (—a sign of the world's unworthiness, as per Genesis 9:14) was not seen."

The Lubavitcher Rebbe initiated the organization of parades of Jewish unity and pride on Lag BaOmer and on a number of occasions he addressed the parade held near his headquarters in Brooklyn in which thousands of Jewish children and their teachers participated.

Shavuot—May 31-June 1, 2017 (Sivan 6-7)

Torah Given (1313 BCE)

On the 6th Sivan of the year 2448 from creation (1313 BCE), seven weeks after the Exodus, G-d revealed Himself on Mount Sinai. The entire people of Israel (600,000 heads of households and their families), as well as the souls of all future generations of Jews, heard G-d declare the first two of the Ten Commandments and witnessed G-d's communication of the other eight through Moses. Following the revelation, Moses ascended the mountain for 40 days, to receive the remainder of the Torah from G-d.