

Dear Chavraya,

Shavuuous may be the most important holiday for Jews to observe, to really observe. Not just by eating blintzes and cheesecake, and, if lucky, even ice cream. The “dairy holiday,” Shavuous celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, Torah meant to be as milk and honey on our tongues. The question is whether milk and honey can wash away the vituperative speech that slashes the parchment of human Torah carried by each of us, whether it can purify the source from which such speech comes and sweeten the lips that speak it.

Sinai remains the quintessential moment of Jewish unity, and, by extension, a model for the masses of humanity united in common purpose. At the moment the Torah was given, responding to Moses’ call to accept it, as though reflecting on its own essence and pre-condition, the Torah says, *va’ya’an kol ha’am kol echad/and the entire people answered with one voice*. Going further, the people then utter the awesome words, *na’aseh v’nishma/we will do and we will understand*. Underscoring the a priori state of consciousness necessary for receiving the gift of Torah, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches, *the unity of Israel is the tachlis/essence of Torah and also the tachlis/essence of the preparation for the receiving of the Torah*.

In a famous midrash, the rabbis underscore that the unity of Sinai was not founded on a uniform hearing of God’s voice. When God’s voice went forth at Sinai, the rabbis teach that it was heard by each person according to her or his own unique strength, *bako’ach shel kol echad v’echad/in the strength of each and every person: the elders according to their strength, the youth according to their strength, and the little ones according to their strength, and the nursing babies according to their strength, and the women according to their strength, and even Moses according to his strength..., and even pregnant women according to their strength..., each and every person according to her or his own strength*. Diversity of thought and insight, of head and heart, in Torah and in life, reflects the unique experience and nature of every person.

In response to the people’s words, Moses offered prayerful celebration. Very different from our own way of expressing gratitude from the depths of our being, Moses made offerings to God. As part of the ritual, underscoring the awesome drama of life, Moses collects the fluid of life in a bowl and sprinkles the blood of the offering on the altar, *ha’dam zarak al ha’mizbe’ach*. A fascinating thread winds from that moment of diversity affirmed at Sinai to this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*. On the completion of the desert sanctuary, the *Mishkan*, the prince of every tribe brings a gift for the dedication of the altar. The gift that is brought from every tribe is exactly the same, down to the smallest detail. Among the gifts is a *mizrak*, a sprinkling basin, a noun formed from *zarak/spinkled*, as in “Moses sprinkled the blood of the offering.” Every *mizrak*, as brought by each one of the princes, was to weigh seventy shekels. In the deliciously associative way that midrash works, a seemingly insignificant detail gives birth to profound meaning that brings us back to the perfect unity of Sinai. The *mizrak* comes to represent Torah, which is compared to wine. In addition to its service at the altar, a *mizrak* was also used as a vessel from which to drink wine. The numerical value of *yayyin/wine* is seventy, seen now to correspond to the seventy-shekel weight of the *mizrak*. However playful the midrashic

imagination, the importance of playfulness itself not to be underestimated, the rabbis then deftly open up a seemingly obscure detail to reveal a precious gem of meaning. Leaving us breathless at their audacity, asking why the seventy-shekel weight of the *mizrak*, the rabbis come to the denouement of their teaching, *as yayyin/wine has the numerical value of seventy, so there are seventy faces in the Torah/kach yesh shivim panim baTorah*.

The number seventy comes to represent diversity, often in a universal context, as in the proverbial rabbinic enumeration of the seventy nations, or the seventy tongues. Drawing on the teachings of diversity that come to characterize *Parashat Naso*, in the introduction to his own teaching on the gifts of the princes, the Slonimer Rebbe writes, *there are six hundred thousand interpretations of Torah, corresponding to the six hundred thousand souls of Israel (as stood at Sinai); for every Jewish soul there is a unique interpretation in the Torah/yesh perush m'yuchad ba'Torah*.

As we enjoy blintzes, and cheesecake, and ice cream on Shavous, may we find even deeper nourishment in discovering our own unique interpretation in the Torah, seeing our own face reflected in her seventy faces. The sweetness of honey on our tongues, may we also see each other's face reflected, and be amazed at the multiplicity of ways that we hear God's voice. If this could be the way of our observing Shavuous as a people, going forward then, hand in hand with the seventy nations, we will surely come to stand at Sinai once again.

Shabbat shalom and Chag same'ach,
Rabbi Victor