



THE SECRET OF SHAVUOT

THE NAME OF THE SEDRA¹, AND OF THE FOURTH BOOK OF THE TORAH WHICH WE begin this week, is Bemidbar. This means: “In the Desert”. The Jewish people were camped together in the desert of Sinai, led by Moses. The Sedra concerns making a census. It gives the numbers of the adult men in each of the tribes, and then the total of all of them. Altogether there were just over 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60.

If we add to this figure estimates for the number of men under 20 or over 60 years old, we see that the total number of men was probably close to a million. We should double that number to include the women. It was a striking phenomenon: about two million people, in the empty desert, led by Moses. They were to be there for forty years, living in a miraculous way. Their food was Manna from heaven, their drink was water flowing from the Well of Miriam, water from the rock. Many neighbouring peoples were terrified by the sense of supernatural power which they evoked.

It was this great community which received the Torah at Sinai, in a revelation of G-d in which every man, woman and child took part. It will be commemorated this Sunday (27 May) on the first day of Shavuot, when the Ten Commandments will be read in the Synagogue, re-enacting the Divine revelation of the Ten Commandments to the Jewish people gathered at the foot of the mountain.

This unique event was discussed by Rabbi Judah Halevi, a poet and thinker who lived a thousand years ago in Spain. His book *Kuzari* gives an account of the discussions between the 8th century King of the Khazars and a Jewish sage, after which the King and most of the nobility converted to Judaism. This established the Jewish Khazar Kingdom which existed for several centuries.

In the *Kuzari* the Sage points out to the King that the Giving of the Torah was an event witnessed and participated in by the entire Jewish people. As such it was quite unlike the lonely individual revelations claimed by other religions. The memory of this event has been faithfully passed down through the ages, to successive generations of the Jewish people. It is the backbone of our identity as Jews. It is therefore an appropriate time for every Jewish man, woman and child to be in the Synagogue to hear the Ten Commandments being read.

Chassidic teachings tell us that this is not just a commemoration, an act of remembering, but a re-enactment. In a spiritual sense the Giving of the Torah of some 3300 years will be taking place again in our own time, on Shavuot.

What happened at the Giving of the Torah? At that moment, the doors of perception were opened. The Zohar tells us that at the Giving of the Torah, in every direction we looked, we could perceive the Divine life-force which continuously makes everything exist. We could hear, or sense, G-d's words: "I am the L-rd your G-d, who took you out of the Land of Egypt, from the house of Bondage..." For a short while, ultimate reality was revealed.

This was a foretaste of the time of the Messiah, when people will attain the power to see the spiritual nature of the world². Yet at the same they will not lose touch with the daily reality of human life, which will achieve true fulfilment as an expression of beauty, purity and holiness.

So, in addition to the cheesecake and other beautiful aspects of the festival, here is the secret of Shavuot. A foretaste of the time of the Messiah, and a glimpse of ultimate reality. Enjoy!

1. Numbers 1:1-4:20. 2. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman's Tanya, ch.36.

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FESTIVAL OF SHAVUOT

MMMMM - CHEESECAKE!!

The ingredients lay spread out on the kitchen counter. Biscuits, soft cheese, eggs and sugar - all ready to be made into the most delicious cheesecake ever to be made, at least, according to Miriam.

Miriam and Chava, her best friend, had decided to spend the afternoon making cheesecake. Dina, Miriam's older sister had explained exactly what had to be done, and now the two chefs stood ready to begin.

'Ok,' said Miriam, 'let's do this', and she began preparing the ingredients. They mixed the cheese and the eggs together and added sugar and cinnamon. Chava dipped her finger into the mixture and tasted.

'Mmmm', she murmured, 'this is going to be just delicious!' she said.

'Yes,' agreed Miriam, 'I can't wait to eat it on Shavuot - then it will taste *even* better!'

'Mmmm', murmured Chava again, 'I can already taste it!' she exclaimed fervently.

'Of course you can', said Miriam laughing, pointing at Chava's cheese covered finger. 'Anyway,' she said, 'I

wonder why we actually eat cheesecake on Shavuot. Every custom we have has some sort of meaning, but cheesecake on Shavuot just seems like a lot of fun’.

‘Well. it is!’ said Chava, laughing. ‘Seriously....’

‘Ok, there is a reason’, said Chava. ‘I heard that when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai, which is what we celebrate on Shavuot, it was on Shabbat. You are not able to slaughter an animal on Shabbat, so they had to have milky food.’

‘That’s not what I heard’, said Miriam, remembering a conversation with her teacher a few days back, ‘Mrs Reeves explained to me that the Torah is referred to as “Milk”, since it provides us with a total diet, as milk does for a baby, so since we are receiving the Torah on Shavuot, we celebrate this by eating milk products’.

‘Maybe that is true too - there could be a few reasons’, said Chava. ‘In fact, I heard another explanation as well... the numerical value of the Hebrew word for milk, *chalav*, is 40 - which is exactly the number of days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai when he went to receive the Torah from G-d’.

‘Wow,’ said Miriam, ‘so many explanations. I wonder if there are any more...’

‘I’m sure there are’, replied Chava, ‘I will ask my father tomorrow night - if there are any more explanations, he will know them’, she said confidently.

‘Good idea’, said Miriam, you ask your father tomorrow. But, in the meantime, what say you, shall we get on with the cake?’ ‘Mmmm’ murmured Chava.

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