


**CHABAD**  
  
**RESEARCH UNIT**

שבת..... *for Friday nights* ..... קדש

**From Thur eve. 28 May 2009 - 5 Sivan 5769**  
**Shavuot Festival**

**UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

**ONE OF THE MANY PUZZLING THINGS ABOUT JUDAISM IS THE diversity of opinions among our Sages, the great leaders of the Jewish people. ‘Shammai says this, Hillel says that’. Why are there so many different opinions?**

We should not exaggerate the extent to which they differed. All the Sages were of one mind when it came to central issues such as the Divine origin of the Torah, and there is no dispute about the basic laws of Shabbat and kashrut, and about the eternal relevance of Jewish law as it has been passed down through the generations. For the most part the arguments concern quite subtle details.

Nonetheless, one can still ask: why should there be any disagreements at all? Why were the disagreements recorded so carefully, and why are they still discussed by people studying Jewish law today?

The Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, celebrated in the Festival of Shavuot which extends from Thursday evening till Saturday night<sup>1</sup>, was a point at which finite human beings confronted the infinity of the Divine.



**In Memory of Esther Morgenstein v"g whose Yahrzeit is  
 2nd Day Shavuot. Dedicated by her grandson 'ha**

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By definition, a finite mind cannot comprehend the infinite. The mind can grasp the actual law - do this, and do not do that. Thus we can understand the instructions in the Ten Commandments<sup>2</sup> given at Sinai: honour your parents, do not murder, do not steal. Yet the first Commandment is the profound statement: "I am G-d..." Between the lines of the law is G-d Himself, beyond understanding.

Further, it was not just one individual at Sinai, receiving G-d's teaching. The Jewish people numbered 600,000, each representing a slightly different approach, a slightly different path of understanding. The Sages tell us that the Giving of the Torah took into account this diversity among those who were receiving it. The Torah was given with the potential to be explained in 600, 000 different ways, for each of the 600, 000 different souls. When our Sages came to record the oral teachings of the Torah, a hint of this diversity was preserved<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time there was another aspect to the Giving of the Torah: Unity. The Talmud tells us that when the Jewish people, led by Moses, came to the Sinai desert where they were to receive the Torah, suddenly an unusual feeling of peace, calm and unity embraced them. The other encampments had the usual squabbles you would expect when a large number of people are travelling somewhere. Yet at Sinai they camped "like one man, with one heart"<sup>4</sup>.

This ultimate, inner unity is also seen in the Sages' discussions of the Torah thousands of years later. Although the Mishnah and Talmud explore the many diverse opinions of the Rabbis, there is a sense of underlying unity. As the Sages themselves put it, despite the diversity of opinion, all are "the words of the Living G-d"<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps this is a hint that through the diversity, we discover the unifying G-dliness within. In this way, finite human minds are perhaps able to grasp something of the Infinity of the Divine...

1. In Israel the festival is only one day. 2. Ex.20:1-17, included in the Torah reading on Friday morning, the first day of the festival. 3. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman's introduction to his *Tanya*. 4. Rashi commenting on Exodus 19:2. 5. Eruvin 13b.

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### SHAVUOT FESTIVAL

#### **THE PRINCE IN THE CITY**

The warm afternoon sun slanted through the windows of the classroom as the teacher settled down in front of her desk for story time. She folded her hands neatly on her lap, closed her eyes and began....

“Once upon a time there was a king. The king had a son. This son was the prince, of course. Our Prince was a fine prince, the son of a fine king. He did all the princely things that princes do. He wore beautiful clothing.... And spoke fine words.... And drank sweet wine from golden goblets. He sat in his princely chair, like a throne, next to his father, the king.

“One day, the king told his son, the prince, that he wanted him to do something special. He wanted him to go and spend time with the people of the kingdom. All by himself, wearing ordinary clothes, so that he can find out about the world outside the Palace.

“The Prince changed his clothes, so that he looked like an ordinary person. Then he set off that very day. When he came to the city he was amazed by how many people there were walking on the streets. There were shops and houses and a market. The fine Prince was a little overwhelmed by all the noise and the bustle.”

Sara was sitting in the back row of the classroom. The teacher’s calm voice and the warm sun were making

her sleepy. She could just imagine the way the prince felt, being in the bustle of the town for the first time. 'The king is always G-d, she thought. And the prince must be the Jewish people.'

The teacher continued the story. "The prince decided to go into a shop, which had watches and jewellery on display. The shop was crowded with people. Suddenly – people began shouting! *Stop thief! Thief! Police!* A man had grabbed some jewels and had run out of the shop."

Sara was startled. What a terrible thing. "How do you think the Prince felt?" asked the teacher. Various girls in the class suggested different feelings: shocked, confused, upset.

"You are right," said the teacher. "At that moment, the Prince began thinking to himself: Who am I? Suddenly, in his imagination he could see himself again sitting in his princely chair next to his father the king, in the beautiful Palace. He remembered he was a Prince, and that he was going to have the task to make this city a better place to live..."

Sara smiled with relief. The Prince had not forgotten who he was. Suddenly Sara remembered what she had learnt in another lesson. She put up her hand.

"We are the Prince" she said. "At Shavuot when we got the Torah we were given the power to go into the world and still be connected to G-d, the King. Even when we're in the world which has many problems we can connect to the King through learning Torah and doing Mitzvot. And when we keep Mitzvot, we know we are changing the world and making it improve..."

"Yes!" said the teacher. At that moment, the bell rang. "And now," the teacher continued, "it's time for our Princesses to go out to break!"

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