

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Shavuot)

This week we celebrate the festival of Shavuot, commemorating a moment, thirty-two hundred years ago, when we all stood together, beneath a wind-swept mountain, deep in the Sinai desert. The power of that moment, was that, more than at any other time in our history as a people, we truly became one; one people, experiencing a desire to receive and to share, together.

There is a legend about Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of the well-known German composer, who was far from being handsome. Along with a rather short stature, he had a grotesque hunchback.

One day he visited a merchant in Hamburg who had a lovely daughter named Frumtje. Moses fell helplessly in love with her. But Frumtje was repulsed by his misshapen appearance.

When it came time for him to leave, Moses gathered his courage and climbed the stairs to her room to take one last opportunity to speak with her. She was a vision of heavenly beauty, but caused him deep sadness by her refusal to even look at him.

After several attempts at conversation, Moses shyly asked, “Do you believe marriages are made in heaven?”

“Yes” she answered, still looking at the floor. “And do you?”

“Yes, I do” he replied. “You see, in heaven at the birth of each boy, G-d announces which girl he will marry. When I was born, my future bride was pointed out to me. Then G-d added, ‘But your wife will be humpbacked.’

“Right then and there I called out, ‘Oh G-d, a humpbacked woman would be a tragedy. Please, give me the hump and let her be beautiful.’ “

Then Frumtje looked up into his eyes and was stirred by some deep memory. She reached out and gave Mendelssohn her hand and later became his devoted wife.

Sometimes, we have a sense that we have been there before. On our journey through life, we often experience the feeling that we are not traveling a new undiscovered path, but rather coming back to where we have somehow been.

Having left the festival of *Pesach* behind, the Jewish people finds itself eagerly anticipating the Festival of *Shavuot*, when we celebrate the giving of the Torah at Sinai over 3000 years ago. And somehow, there is a feeling that we have been there before; that once, so long ago, we all stood together at the foot of a lonely mountain, deep in the heart of the desert, ready to receive... what?

The festival of *Shavuot* and indeed, the giving of the Torah itself is one of the strangest experiences in Judaism. The Torah shares no date for this festival, describing only the agricultural significance (the beginning of the harvest) of this celebration, leaving us to rely on tradition for the historical perspective.

Even stranger is the *place* where this momentous event occurs - deep in the heart of the desert. We don't even know exactly where Mount Sinai is, and amazingly, we gave it away in the peace accord with Egypt and no one even noticed!

The giving of the Torah has no date, and no place.

And that is precisely the point. Torah is the recipe we are given to make the world a better place. It is the sum total of why we are here, and how we can make a difference. The Torah is essentially one long love-letter written by G-d, for us; all of us. It contains the secrets of how we can tap into who we are, and become all that we can be.

And of course, if the Torah is about discovering who we are; about being and becoming, then that can never be about a specific time, or place.

Nonetheless, we receive this beautiful treasure in the desert, because sometimes, in order to take a good look at who we are, and who we need to become, we need to find a little bit of desert.

So many experiences in Judaism are about getting beyond time and space. On Shabbat we step back from the week and experience the joyful opportunity to take a good look at where we are, and where we are headed. Traditionally, we take a little time in the allegorical desert every morning, in prayer, to consider, again, where we really are, and where we hope to go.

But make no mistake about it. Judaism is not about staying in the desert. We don't believe in staying up on the monastic mountain.

The Jewish people travel, ultimately, for 40 years, to arrive in the Land of Israel. To be a nation, you need a place you can call home.

In fact, one of the most basic rules in life, an essential piece of achieving one's goals and getting organized, is that everything needs a place.

When something has a place, you can always find it when you need it. And so, it will always be there to achieve its purpose in this world. This is true for files, household items; for everything in life.

And it is true for people as well. We all need our place in the world. So many people in this world are still searching and have not yet found their place.

Which is why the festival of Shavuot follows Pesach; If Pesach is about freedom, Shavuot is about what to do with it. Judaism has never believed in freedom for freedom's sake. The Jewish notion is '*freedom for*'. And so, we arrive at Sinai, an unknown mountain deep in the heart of no-place, to discover *why* we got out of Egypt. We all have our own personal Egypt, and it is so hard to get beyond it. Often, it seems we can't do it alone, and even if we could get out, then what? What would we do with our new freedom?

So the first time, G-d showed us how it works. And deep within each of us, is that collective sense, that if we really try, we can succeed, because we have been there before. And of course, we don't stay at Sinai, because Sinai isn't the goal. The goal is what *we* choose to do with that newfound recipe. The challenge is to take that recipe and see if we can create a place that allows us to achieve our purpose here, in this world. For the Jewish people that place, ultimately, is the land of Israel, at peace with the world, maybe one day soon.

But first each of us must find our own freedom, explore our own desert, and journey to discover, each in our own way, the place that will allow us to become all we can be.

May we all be blessed to experience the joy of discovering our place, and the power of the journey, together, soon.

Shabbat Shalom, best wishes for a happy and meaningful Shavuot,

Binny Freedman