

Sparks

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A Love Letter from the Divine

After the miraculous Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people traveled in the desert for 49 days until they reached Mount Sinai on the 6th day of the Hebrew month of Sivan. There they experienced the ultimate revelation and communion with G-d. They encountered G-d face to face, heard the voice of G-d and received the Torah and its commandments—the *mitzvot*.

Whereas, Passover is the birthday of the Jewish people, this holiday, which is referred to as the holiday of *Shavuot*, can be likened to the *Bar Mitzvah* of the Jewish people. It is a time to celebrate the *Mitzvot*—the responsibilities implicit to the loving relationship we enjoy with G-d.

Recently a friend asked me if I would meet with his son, Sam, and help him prepare his *Bar Mitzvah* speech. I generally don't teach thirteen-year-olds, but for a friend I made an exception. So I got together with Sam and I began to share with him some insights into the Torah portion he would be reading in the synagogue on Shabbat. I actually got really into it, seeing how carefully he was listening, nodding his head ever so often. So I started to go even deeper and began to tell him some of the mystical meanings behind the passages he would be publicly reading. I was really impressed, he seemed to be really understanding me. Well, after about an hour of all this deep talk, I said, "Sammy, do you have any questions?"

He said, "Yeah, just one. Why do I have to obey all these commandments, keep all these rules?"

Well, I felt pretty silly. Here I was going off the deep end when he doesn't even know what his *Bar Mitzvah* meant.

I asked him, "Sammy, do you like football?"

"I love it! I play it all the time."

"Do you know the rules?" I continued.

"Of course, you can't play if you don't know the rules."

"Why not?"

"Cuz then there would be no game. You couldn't win or lose. There couldn't be touch downs, no out of bounds, no violations, no penalties. Without the rules it would just be chaos and no fun."

"Precisely, and that's true about the game of life also. Without rules and regulations it would be chaos, no fun, no adventure, no challenge. You couldn't win or lose. And even though we all know, 'it's not whether you win or lose but it's how you play the game,' without rules there is no way to evaluate 'how you play the game.' The Torah's commandments are the game rules of life and G-d is the referee."

In the end, Sammy got psyched for his *Bar Mitzvah*. On Shavuot we celebrate getting the game rules of life because if there are no game rules, there is no game. And on that day we rejoice because we became players

in the game of life. Because if there is no right and wrong, then what difference does it make what I do? If there is nothing to violate, there is nothing to fulfill. I can't even play a game of basketball without rules, let alone live my life! Without the Torah's game rules for living, the world is just one big chaos and our choices are meaningless.

The Torah, however, is more than the rules of life. Torah is a living encounter with G-d. The revelation of G-d at Mt. Sinai wasn't simply an opportunity for the Jewish people to receive G-d's laws but experience G-d's love. What happened at Mt. Sinai was a personal, face-to-face encounter with G-d. It wasn't just about getting the laws that made the day important, it was about feeling the ecstasy of G-d's intimacy with the Jewish people.

The experience at Mt. Sinai was not only a revelation of G-d's truth, but more importantly, it was a revelation of G-d's love. Torah was and continues to be G-d's love letter. It is the greatest gift ever because it embodies G-d's presence. When you learn the Torah, you can actually feel G-d's closeness to you. The Talmud teaches that when G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people He said, "I am giving you My soul in writing."

Imagine one day you receive a love letter. You are at work and eating lunch at the employee cafeteria, and someone drops a letter in front of you. You see that it's a letter from the one you love. Do you rip open the envelope and start to speed-read through the letter? No, of course you don't. You save this letter. You're going to read it in a very special place because this letter deserves more.

Now imagine you're in that special place. You open the letter carefully, you start to read your beloved's words and you actually begin to hear her voice. And then you feel her presence.

If you're anything like me, you'll read the letter over and over again, because you know there's much more to this letter. The first time you read it you get the simple meaning. But then you read it even more carefully. You notice that she tells you about the weather and then she starts talking about her mother. What's the connection, you wonder. You then read the letter again and now you see that there are hints in this letter. You pay attention not only to what she says, but also to the way she's structured her sentences. Then you go over it again because you realize that it's even deeper than that. You look at how she even forms the very letters. There are secrets in the nuances of the actual shape of her letters. You then start looking for the deeper subtle meanings.

Once you've analyzed every aspect, you carefully refold the letter, place it in its envelope and tuck it away for safekeeping. You save this letter because you sense the presence of your beloved within these mere sheets of paper.

Now let's imagine that someone else is reading that letter. Is that person going to feel the presence of someone else's beloved? No. He'd just get the letter's simple meaning, the information. But for you it would be different. You wouldn't just be reading the letter; you'd get involved in it. And through your involvement with the words, nuances, and deeper meanings, you'd meet your beloved.

This, in essence, is learning Torah. Through our involvement with the text, we hear G-d's voice, feel the Divine presence and experience G-d's love and relive the revelation at Sinai each day of our lives.

Therefore, the Torah embodies not only a way of life but also a way to love. The wisdom and commandments of the Torah empower us to love each other and love G-d. Shavuot is a day to celebrate the laws in love and the love in law.

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