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## When Heaven Meets Earth: The Complete Picture of Shavuot

Some moments don't just happen in time — they bend it. History has a handful of them: instants when the infinite broke through into the finite, when eternity stepped inside the clock. [Shavuot](#) marks one of those moments, when the Divine reached toward the human, and the human reached back.

The Talmud captures the uniqueness of this encounter in a striking pattern:

*“Blessed is the Merciful One, Who gave the threefold Torah to the threefold nation, through a third-born child, on the third day of preparation, in the third month.” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a)*

Rashi unpacks this: the “threefold Torah” is Torah, Prophets, and Writings; the “threefold

nation” is Priests, Levites, and Israelites; Moses was his parents’ third child; the Torah was given after three days of preparation; and it all happened in the third month, Sivan.

In Jewish thought, one represents unity; two, division and tension; three, a higher harmony that integrates opposites. Shavuot is that harmony in action: Heaven and earth, spirit and matter, God and humanity meeting in a shared space.

## Creation’s Third Day

This theme is woven into the opening chapters of Genesis. On the second day, the Torah describes a split:

*“Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters and let it separate between the waters.”*

*At Sinai, the distance between Heaven and earth was bridged.*

The world is divided between “upper waters” and “lower waters,” between Heaven and earth, the spiritual and the physical. Notably, the Torah does not say “and it was good” on that day; separation alone is unfinished work. Only on the third day does integration emerge. The waters gather, dry land appears, and the earth begins to sprout life and vegetation. For the first time, the Torah says, “And God saw that it was good” twice. Division is transformed into creative unity.

Shavuot is the spiritual “third day” of creation. At Sinai, the distance between Heaven and earth, fixed since the dawn of time, was bridged. From that moment, human beings could touch holiness and the Divine Presence could dwell within the physical world.

## Infusing Sanctity

Even the Hebrew alphabet hints at this vision. The Jerusalem Talmud asks why the letter *beit* ב — the first letter of the Torah’s opening word, *Bereishit* (In the beginning)—has a projection pointing upward and another pointing backward. It answers:

*If the beit is asked, “Who created you?” it points upward toward Heaven. If it is asked, “What is His Name?” it points backward toward the aleph א , teaching that His Name is One.*

*Beit* , the first letter of creation, points both upward, toward its Creator, and backward, toward the underlying unity symbolized by aleph. Creation might look fragmented, but its inner purpose is to reveal oneness within multiplicity.

Shavuot sits at the heart of that purpose. The Torah was not given to create a class of scholars removed from daily life, but to sanctify daily life itself—to infuse business, family, agriculture, ethics, speech, and human relationships with holiness. Judaism does not escape the world; it transforms it.

## God in the Story

The daily prayer *Adon Olam* puts this into sharp focus:

*“Master of the universe, Who reigned before any form was created... And after all things shall cease to exist, He alone will reign.”*

God exists before creation and beyond it yet chooses to step into history and reveal Himself within a finite world. Shavuot marks that choosing. The Torah was given not to angels but to human beings—physical, imperfect, conflicted, and limited. It was entrusted to people who eat and sleep, work and worry, trust and fail. That is the greatness of Sinai:

holiness taking root in ordinary human life.

## Manna, Clouds, and a Well

The Talmud teaches that three leaders sustained Israel in the desert—Moses, Aaron, and Miriam—and that through them came three gifts: manna, the Clouds of Glory, and a miraculous well.

- Manna rained down from above.
- The well rose up from the earth.
- The Clouds of Glory enveloped the people and lifted them in between.

Together, they sketch a world where every layer—Heaven, earth, and everything in between—is touched by the Divine. Shavuot is the festival that reminds us that such a world is still possible.

## Counting Up to Sinai

The journey to this moment begins on [Passover](#) , when the Jewish people step out of Egypt as a newly freed but still undefined nation. The Exodus ends physical slavery, but leaves an open question: Who are we now—and what are we for?

The answer comes weeks later at Mount Sinai, when the people not only hear but, in some sense, see the words of God. Through the Torah they receive, they gain a spiritual identity and a national calling; redemption becomes complete.

The Torah underscores the connection between Passover and Shavuot through a mitzvah called *Sefirat HaOmer* —the [Counting of the Omer](#) . We count 49 days from the second night of Passover until the festival the Torah calls *Atzeret* , the Day of Assembly, later known as Shavuot. The name “Counting of the Omer” comes from the barley offering ( *omer* ) brought in the Temple on the 16th of Nisan, the second day of Passover; on Shavuot, the

offering shifts to wheat bread.

Barley was commonly used as animal feed, while wheat bread is a distinctly human food. As we count, we trace a movement from a more instinctive, survival-oriented existence toward a more human life defined by choice, conscience, and a conscious bond with God.

## Rising Through 49 Gates

Jewish mystical tradition speaks of 50 levels of holiness. The generation in Egypt, it teaches, had descended to the 49th level of impurity—immersed in Egyptian beliefs and almost devoid of faith. Only God’s decision to redeem them when He did prevent them from sinking to a point from which return would have been impossible.

The 49 days between the Exodus and Shavuot become a ladder of ascent: each day an opportunity to climb one more rung toward clarity, sanctity, and readiness to receive the Torah on the 50th day. Counting the Omer is not just marking time; it is measuring inner growth toward Sinai.

## Shavuot: No Single Mitzvah, All of Torah

On the 49th night, we count the Omer one last time. The next evening, as the sun sets, Shavuot begins. It is the anniversary of the Revelation at Mount Sinai, when God communicated the Torah to the entire Jewish people and defined their mission and purpose as a nation. In prayer, Shavuot is called *Zman Matan Torateinu* —“the Time of the Giving of Our Torah.”

*Shavuot is about the Torah as a whole—its total, all-encompassing impact on life. It cannot be captured in a single symbolic act.*

Strikingly, Shavuot has no single, defining mitzvah. On Passover, we eat matzah; on Sukkot, we sit in a sukkah; on Rosh Hashanah, we blow the shofar. Shavuot has no comparable ritual. That absence is itself the message: Shavuot is about the Torah as a whole—its total, all-encompassing impact on life. It cannot be captured in a single symbolic act.

## Re-Experiencing Revelation

Jewish tradition teaches that the spiritual “light” revealed at the origin of a festival is available again each year when that festival returns. On Shavuot, that means the power of Sinai is not just a memory; it is something we can taste again.

The Torah describes the people’s response to God’s offer of the covenant in a famous phrase: “ [We will do and we will hear](#) .” They commit to action even before full understanding, expressing radical trust and deep willingness to accept God’s will sight unseen.

One of the most widespread Shavuot customs is designed to help us tap into that energy: all-night Torah study, known as *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* . After evening prayers and a festive meal, communities gather to learn and teach, often until dawn, studying material drawn from across the spectrum of Torah to demonstrate a desire to embrace it in its entirety.

At sunrise, the morning festival prayers are recited. People return home for a dairy-rich breakfast—and, often enough, a long nap.

## Witnesses at Sinai

[The revelation at Mount Sinai](#) was unlike any other claimed revelation in religious history.

The Torah describes a scene where every man, woman, and child experiences the Divine word

with all their senses; thunder, lightning, a shofar blast, a trembling mountain, and a voice that reaches an entire nation.

*Because this claim centers on a mass, public event, it is not easily fabricated.*

Unlike other faith narratives where God is said to speak to a single prophet in private—a mountaintop, a cave, a solitary vision—the Torah claims that the Jewish people themselves heard God declare, “I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt.” They also heard God address Moses, appointing him as His prophet and leader.

Because this claim centers on a mass, public event, it is not easily fabricated. If it had not happened, it would be nearly impossible to convince an entire nation—and their descendants—that their ancestors had once stood together at the foot of a mountain and heard God’s voice. That is why the Torah repeatedly stresses the public nature of the revelation and calls on later generations to remember—and to testify.

“You are My witnesses,” says the prophet Isaiah in God’s name. The Jewish people are witnesses not only in a poetic sense but in a literal one: their national story is rooted in a shared encounter with God at Sinai. There is even a mitzvah to pass on the memory of that day to one’s children, ensuring that Sinai remains a living reference point rather than a fading myth.

Shavuot, in this sense, is an annual day of testimony. Each year, the Jewish people stand together again—through prayer, study, and tradition—and say: we were there, we remember, and we are still bound by what we heard.

## Milk, Honey, and Harmony

A beloved [Shavuot custom is enjoying dairy](#)

[foods](#). One traditional explanation is practical and evocative at once: fresh from Sinai, having just learned the laws of kashrut, the people were not yet equipped to prepare meat in accordance with those new standards, so they turned instead to simple dairy and plant-based foods.

Another layer of meaning comes from the *Song of Songs*: “Honey and milk are under your tongue.” The Torah is compared to milk and honey for its sweetness and delight. Both foods also symbolize gentle harmony with nature: they are produced without taking life or even halting growth. In this sense, they echo the Torah’s own promise: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.”

Eating dairy and, in some communities, milk and honey, becomes a way to taste the Torah’s sweetness and its vision of peace between the physical and the spiritual.

## Reading Ruth

On Shavuot morning, we read [the Book of Ruth](#) in the synagogue. Ruth is a Moabite woman who chooses to join the Jewish people, leaving behind her homeland, wealth, and comfort for a life of faith and covenant. She becomes the model of the righteous convert.

Why this story on this day? One reason is that Ruth’s choice highlights what receiving the Torah really demands: the willingness to reorder one’s priorities, to let go of what once seemed valuable in favor of what is truly precious. Ruth shows that Torah is worth any sacrifice.

*Reading Ruth, the paradigmatic convert, reminds us that this greatness is open to anyone who sincerely chooses it.*

Another reason runs even deeper. On Shavuot,

the entire Jewish people see themselves, in a sense, as converts. At Sinai, they accept God’s kingship and the entire Torah; they undergo purification; the men undergo circumcision; and the people as a whole enter into a covenant. These same elements appear, in individual form, in the conversion process. The laws of conversion are modeled on this “mass conversion” at Sinai, when a collection of former slaves becomes a covenantal nation.

Reading Ruth, the paradigmatic convert, reminds us that this greatness is open to anyone who sincerely chooses it—and that even King David, whose descendant the Messiah will be, traces his lineage back to a woman who began her journey outside the Jewish people.

## First Fruits: Shavuot as Harvest Festival

Biblically, Shavuot is also called *Chag HaBikurim*, the Festival of the First Fruits, and *Chag HaKatzir*, the Festival of the Harvest. In ancient Israel, farmers would bring the first ripened fruits of the season to the Temple in Jerusalem as an offering of gratitude to God.

The mitzvah of *Bikkurim* required farmers to mark the earliest fruits of the seven species associated with the Land of Israel—wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates—and later carry them to Jerusalem in a joyous procession. The Mishnah describes villagers traveling together, accompanied by music and an ox adorned with gold-covered horns and olive wreaths; workers in Jerusalem would stop their tasks to greet them, and the Levites would sing as the offerings entered the Temple.

To bring first fruits is to say: my effort matters, but it is not the whole story. The farmer has labored for months or years, yet acknowledges that rain, sun, soil, and timing are beyond human control. The first fruits are a declaration

of faith and gratitude—not just for the harvest, but for the partnership with God that makes any harvest possible.

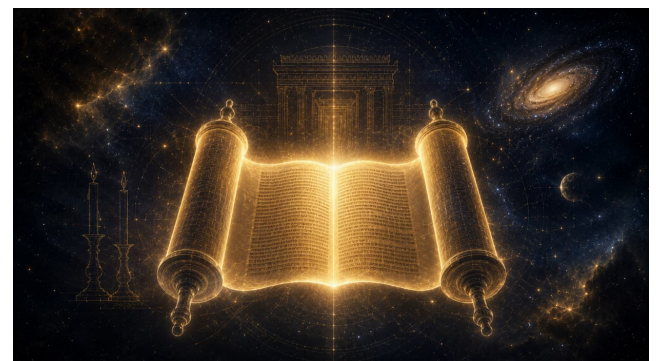
Today, with no Temple standing, we cannot bring actual first fruits. But *Bikkurim* is still remembered in the Shavuot Torah reading and in our prayers, and many communities decorate homes and synagogues with greenery and flowers to recall both the agricultural dimension of the festival and the idea that this is the time when God judges the fruit trees.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that just as the first fruits ripen around Shavuot, so too the Jewish people “ripen” as a nation on this day. The seeds of freedom were planted at the Exodus, but the people truly mature into a sacred nation with the giving of the Torah.

## When Heaven and Earth Meet

Shavuot is more than the anniversary of a revelation; it is a celebration of possibility. It teaches that the distance between Heaven and earth is not absolute, that human beings can ascend higher than they ever imagined, and that the physical world can become a vessel for holiness.

At Sinai, God and humanity touched. Every year on Shavuot, we are invited to step back into that moment—and to let it reshape the way we live in the world today.



## Why Shavuot Is the Most Important Holiday You're Ignoring

In his groundbreaking book *Authentic Happiness*, Dr. Martin Seligman, one of the founders and leaders of Positive Psychology, identifies three distinct levels of happiness:

**The Pleasant Life:** The lowest level, focused on immediate pleasures and short-term gratification. These enjoyable sensations and momentary delights, while pleasant, are ultimately fleeting and leave us wanting more.

**The Good Life:** A higher level involving effort and accomplishment. Here, you engage your strengths, set goals, and experience the deeper satisfaction that comes from genuine achievement.

**The Meaningful Life:** The highest level, reached by connecting to something beyond yourself. The larger that connection, the more meaning and genuine happiness you experience. This level transcends both pleasure and personal achievement to find purpose in something eternal.

### Torah: The Ultimate Guide to Meaningful Living

[The holiday of Shavuot](#) fits squarely in the highest level of happiness. It marks the pivotal moment when the Jewish people received what might be called the ultimate guide to a meaningful life—the Torah. It offers comprehensive wisdom on how to infuse every relationship, every endeavor, and every moment with deeper significance and connection.

The Torah isn't simply a religious text; it's a blueprint for connecting to God—the infinite source of all meaning and existence. It

transforms ordinary activities—eating, working, loving—into opportunities for transcendent connection. It elevates the mundane to the sacred.

Many traditions claim to offer a path to meaning, so what makes Torah different? Most religious frameworks provide inspiration and general moral guidance, but the Torah goes further: it gives you specific, actionable instructions for every dimension of life. It doesn't just tell you that kindness matters—it tells you how to practice it at the dinner table, in the marketplace, and with the stranger you've never met. It makes the sacred accessible in the ordinary. And uniquely, the Torah presents itself not as a human interpretation of the Divine, but as God's direct communication to humanity, an unbroken chain of wisdom linking you to something infinite.

Ask most people to name a Jewish holiday symbol, and they'll answer easily: Rosh Hashanah has the shofar, Passover has matzah, Sukkot has the sukkah. But Shavuot? It often draws a blank.

Unlike other holidays, Shavuot has no specific ritual object attached to it—no shofar to blow, no sukkah to build, no matzah to eat. Why is that?

*Shavuot doesn't need its own symbol because it is the source of all the other symbols. It is the holiday that makes every other holiday possible.*

Every other holiday symbol exists because the Torah commanded it. The shofar, the matzah, the sukkah—none of them would exist without the Torah that gave them their meaning and purpose. Shavuot, then, doesn't need its own symbol, because it is *the source* of all the other symbols. It is the holiday that makes every other holiday possible. Giving Shavuot its own ritual object would be like giving the

sun its own light source. The absence is the point.

## How Torah Infuses Life with Meaning

So how does an ancient text connect you to something larger than yourself in practical, felt ways?

The answer lies in [the mitzvot](#)—the commandments that structure Jewish life. Each mitzvah is a point of connection between you and God, between you and the Jewish people across time, and between you and your deepest self.

When you light Shabbat candles, you are joining every Jewish family that has done the same for three thousand years, and dedicating a moment of your week to something beyond productivity and achievement. When you give tzedakah, you are enacting a divine principle that your resources are not entirely your own, that you are a steward of something larger. When you study Torah, you are entering into a conversation with God and with generations of seekers who asked the same questions you're asking today.

*As the blueprint for all existence, the source of the spiritual DNA throughout the universe, the Torah builds meaning into the architecture of your day, your week, your year.*

As the blueprint for all existence, the source of the spiritual DNA throughout the universe, the Torah builds meaning into the architecture of your day, your week, your year. Every blessing before eating reminds you that sustenance is a gift. Every Shabbat creates a weekly island of transcendence. Every lifecycle event—birth, coming of age, marriage, death—is held within a framework that connects the personal to the eternal. The Torah gives you a daily practice

for experiencing that meaning firsthand.

## Living the Meaningful Life

Hunger for meaning has never been stronger. Research consistently shows that the number one thing people seek from their careers isn't money or status—it's meaning. Organizational Psychologist Adam Grant has shown that when people find meaning in their work, they become more motivated, more productive, and more fulfilled.

And as Viktor Frankl demonstrated through his own harrowing experience surviving the Holocaust, the search for meaning is a fundamental human need. Shavuot celebrates our possession of a time-tested guide to infusing every dimension of life with meaning and transcendent connection.

The beauty of Torah is that it meets you exactly where you are. Whether you're deeply observant or just beginning to explore Jewish wisdom, the path to meaning is open. Every step toward greater connection—every mitzvah, every moment of study, every Shabbat candle—expands your capacity for that highest level of happiness.

If there was ever a time to celebrate the beauty and significance of Jewish life, it's Shavuot, the holiday that makes all other holidays possible. In a world desperately seeking meaning, you have been entrusted with its ultimate source.

What greater gift could there be?



## The Book of Ruth: A Crash Course

From *Women in the Bible*, an online course from [JewishPathways.com](http://JewishPathways.com).

Ruth is the ancestor of King David, and consequently the matriarch of the Messianic line. Who is this woman, special enough to have an entire book in the Bible named for her, which we read on Shavuot, the epic day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people? Ruth must have a very important message to convey to us about what it means to be a Jew, to receive the Torah, and to merit royalty.

### Background To The Story Of Ruth

The story of Ruth takes place in the time period of the Judges. This was a difficult time of spiritual ups and downs in Jewish history.

*"And it was in the days of the judgment of the Judges": This refers to a generation that judged its own judges... [The Judge] would say, "Remove the toothpick from between your teeth," and [the people] would answer, "Remove the beam from between your eyes." (Talmud - Bava Batra 15b)*

The 400-year span of the Judges began after the death of Joshua, who conquered and divided the Land of Israel, and ended with the establishment of the monarchy with King Saul. This period was known for the serious deterioration of the spiritual state of the Jewish nation. Each time a Judge would arise to help restore order for a number of years, inevitably the nation would slip back into its old idolatrous habits and assimilate into the surrounding nations' culture and behaviors, erasing their own identity meant to be a light unto the nations.

When we meet the characters surrounding Ruth, the Land of Israel has been hit with a famine:

*At that time God said: "My children are stubborn. To destroy them is impossible. To return them to Egypt is impossible. I cannot exchange them for another nation. What, then can I do? I must make them suffer and cleanse them with famine." (Midrash - Ruth Rabba, Intro. 1)*

### The Leadership Fails

It seems that as soon as the Land of Israel was conquered, everyone ran to settle his own portion, work the land, plant vineyards and fields, establish gardens and farms, and in general amass material wealth and creature comforts. The leaders at that time, the heads of the judicial court, the Sanhedrin, were expected to take this opportunity to travel across the country from one border to another, teaching Torah ethics to the populace. The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 12 - Shoftim 68) describes a kind of mobile Beit Midrash that should have existed in those early years of settling the land, but did not. As a result, the nation became self-centered and materialistic. They quickly forgot the Torah and mitzvot, and deteriorated into moral corruption.

Then, when a famine hit, Elimelech from the tribe of Judah - a great and wealthy man with many acres of land and enough produce to feed the entire nation for years - jumped ship:

*Elimelech was among the great scholars and patrons of the nation, and when the years of famine came, he said: "Now all of Israel will come to my door, each with his box (to collect money)." He stood up and ran away from them. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 1:4)*

Besides his lack of generosity, Elimelech severely disappointed everyone's expectations, causing demoralization and loss of hope among the people. He took his family and defected to Moav, where his two sons, Machlon and Kilyon, married Moabite women.

## The Moabite Nation - The Self-Centered Nation

Elimelech and his family left the Jews of Israel in a state of famine and financial crisis. Their escape from responsibility came from a desire to save themselves and their possessions from the difficulties facing the nation. Their self-centeredness was indicative of the level of the Jewish people at that time, each intent on maintaining his own material wealth.

*And a man from Beit Lechem... went to sojourn in the fields of Moav, he and his wife and his two sons. (Ruth 1:1)*

It started as a "sojourn." Then:

*They arrived in the fields of Moav and stayed there. They married Moabite women - one named Orpah, and the other names Ruth. And they dwelt there for 10 years. (Ruth 1:4).*

The decision to leave the Land of Israel and avoid helping out led Elimelech's family to deteriorate spiritually to the point where they intermarried with the Moabites:

*They didn't convert them... and there was no law yet that allowed Moabite women to enter into the congregation of Israel (even with conversion). (Midrash - Yalkut Shimoni)*

The Torah ostensibly prohibits the Moabite nation from ever entering into the Jewish covenant:

*They should not come into the congregation of God, neither Moabite nor Amonite, even the tenth generation should not enter into the congregation of God, forever, because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way when you left Egypt... (Deut. 23:4-5)*

After the Jewish people left Egypt, they had to pass by the lands of Moav and Amon. These nations did not attack the passing straggling group of Jewish slaves as the Amalekites did. Yet they were expected to greet the Jews with food and drink, especially since Amon and Moav are descendants of Lot, who owed so much to his uncle Avraham for the care he showed him when they both started out in the land of Canaan. This Amon and Moav did not do, denying the refugees even the most common courtesy. Moav, then, is considered the epitome of self-centeredness and lack of generosity and kindness.

Significantly, Moav is the place where Elimelech and his family felt most comfortable settling. The similarity is striking: Moav avoided feeding the suffering Israelites, who were distant cousins, and Elimelech escaped from feeding his fellow Jews in their time of need. As if to complete the circle, Elimelech's

sons then marry Moabite girls!

Seemingly, this is the beginning of the end of this family. Elimelech dies, as do both his sons, and Naomi is left alone with her two non-Jewish daughters-in-law. And yet, at this very moment God opens a window of hope and a second chance. Somehow, out of this family, will eventually come King David - and the Messiah from the house of David.

## Ruth And Naomi

Naomi, the lone remnant of an illustrious family, decides to leave Moav with its tragic memories and go back to the Land of Israel:

*Because she heard that God redeemed His nation to give them bread. (Ruth 1:6)*

This entails tremendous courage, to go back - alone - to a country where she will have to face the family and friends she betrayed, to admit she was wrong and has suffered the loss of her husband and sons - and now to try rebuilding her life in a society that feels only animosity toward her.

*And she left the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her, and they went on the way to return to the Land of Judah. (Ruth 1:7)*

At first, both daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, choose to leave their country with Naomi. This speaks volumes about Naomi's character and about the relationship that existed between this lone Jewish family and the Moabite wives. These girls were both daughters of Eglon, the king of Moav. They left a house of royalty and the status of princesses to connect to this Jewish family, its values and its practices.

And now they are willing to leave their homes,

country and culture to go with Naomi to a place where they will be strangers and completely alone, with no husbands and no view of a future. They must have really loved Naomi who - over the ten years of marriage - must have inculcated in them a spiritual value system and Jewish lifestyle to the point where they were willing to start anew with their old widowed mother-in-law.

Naomi tries to dissuade them from coming with her. Initially they refuse to be dissuaded, but as Naomi genuinely convinces them that her tragic life will only tie them down and limit their options for happiness and blessing, one of the daughters-in-law, Orpah, agrees to leave. Ruth, however, is able to see beyond the logic of Naomi's words, to the nuances of love and care.

*"Don't, my daughters, because I am bitter and sad for you, because the hand of God has come out against me." (Ruth 1:13)*

Ruth, like the matriarchs in the Torah, intuits the deeper meaning in Naomi's words: Naomi really would be happy to go back with someone and not be completely alone. Her words were only meant as a necessary discouragement to one who wishes to convert to Judaism, to make sure their intentions are pure.

In seeing beyond the logic and surface, Ruth exhibits the trait of *binah*, deeper understanding. She also expresses a deep caring and kindness - the complete opposite of her countrymen and of her husband's family. She prepares to leave all of her own physical wealth and comforts behind to care for an aging lonely woman who isn't even her family anymore, with only spiritual benefits to gain.

*"Don't push me to leave you and to go back, for wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you sleep, I will sleep."*

*Your nation is my nation, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. So will God do to me and so He will add (I swear) that only death will separate between us."*  
(Ruth 1:16-17)

This is Ruth's famous statement, which the Midrash tells us is an announcement of her desire to convert to Judaism - no matter what. Naomi, sensing her sincerity, starts explaining to her the basics of Judaism. Being a princess in Moav, Ruth was used to the kinds of entertainment that were not acceptable among Jewish people:

*It is not the way of the daughters of Israel to go to theaters and circuses of idol worship, so Ruth said: "Wherever you go, I will go." Naomi said to her: "My daughter, Jewish people live in a house with a mezuzah." Ruth said: "Wherever you sleep, I will sleep."*  
(Midrash - Ruth Rabba 2:23)

Ruth is making it clear to Naomi that she is perfectly ready to leave her old habits of leisure and meaningless entertainment, and adopt a more purposeful, spiritual life.

## Life in Beit Lechem

*And it was, as they came to Beit Lechem, the whole city was startled at the sight of them, and they said: "Could this be Naomi?" She said to them: "Don't call me Naomi; call me 'bitter' (mara), because God has made me bitter. I went full, and God has returned me empty..."* (Ruth 1:19-20)

The Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 601) says that the whole city had gathered together on that day to attend the funeral of the wife of Boaz, the leader and Judge of the generation.

They see Naomi coming back widowed, impoverished, wearing tattered clothes and with a Moabite girl at her side. They are shocked and horrified, and perhaps a little bit pleased at the turn of fate that she was dealt after her family's defection.

Naomi and Ruth settle back in Israel, which has slowly returned to a semblance of normalcy after a 10-year "depression." Though people had suffered due to their lack of consideration and care for others during the early years of settling the land, they have rehabilitated themselves, returning to the path of generosity with the help of their Judge and leader, Boaz.

With regard to Naomi, however, there seems to be a lingering anger and resentment. No one caters to her needs, even though Boaz himself is Naomi's cousin. Boaz could be excused, given that he recently lost his wife, but it seems like the two women are ignored by virtually everyone.

## Humility and Modesty

Ruth, a famous princess, who had married into the wealthiest Jewish family around, now offers her mother-in-law:

*"I'll go out to the field and collect some sheaves of wheat." (Ruth 2:2)*

Ruth doesn't go without obtaining permission from Naomi. She hopes to find someone who will allow her to take the leftover wheat that falls from the crops being collected. This is an obligatory charity that field owners must leave for the poor, but Ruth knows she must still find someone kind and willing. She is humbly submitting to her new station in life, not expecting anything from this nation for which she gave up her past life, and not disappointed in their lack of care for her.

Once Ruth goes out to the field, her behavior

stands out as well:

*All the women would bow and gather, while Ruth would bend her knees to gather... All the women would flirt with the field workers, while Ruth behaved modestly. All the women would take from among the rows of wheat, while Ruth would only take from what was clearly ownerless. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 4:9)*

Ruth is focused on her goal, behaving as a "rose among thorns," not influenced by the loose behavior of the other gatherers. She also carefully observed the laws of *leket* (collection for the poor) so as not to accidentally take from the field owners what is not rightfully hers.

Divine guidance leads Ruth to a field belonging to Boaz, Naomi's cousin, and the nephew of Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech. Although Boaz was the greatest sage of the generation and didn't normally come to his field, this day he came and noticed Ruth's dignified and modest behavior.

"Who is this girl?" Boaz asks of the field workers. Even though he must have heard that his cousin had returned from Moav with a widowed daughter-in-law, he must not have gone to pay them a visit or to offer any assistance. It could even be that his hands-off approach was copied by the other Jews, as he was a leader and role model. If he didn't feel the need to reach out to his own cousins, why should they?

A field worker answers him with subtle criticism:

*"She is a Moabite girl returning with Naomi from Moav, and she said: 'I will gather and collect the sheaves of wheat that fall behind the rows,' and she has been here gathering since the*

*morning..." (Ruth 2:6-7)*

Don't you know her, the worker asks Boaz? Doesn't everyone in Beit Lechem know this story of the gentile girl who is now supporting her mother-in-law and being forced to gather the remnants of the crops as a poor woman?

Boaz may feel some pangs of guilt as he tries to compensate by being extra kind to Ruth, but he still doesn't take any real responsibility for his relatives. He begs her to stay in his fields, and his workers are instructed to treat her kindly and give her drink from their own well water. He also addresses her with endearment, "my daughter," and tells her that for the wonderful kindness to her mother-in-law, she will be rewarded from God.

And yet, Boaz doesn't seem to get the message. He doesn't realize it is his mission to take these women into his care, to support them and make sure they are reaccepted into the community. The Torah itself commands a Jew to "love the convert" and to leave crops behind for the poor, so really Boaz wasn't even going beyond the call of duty for his relatives. Nor did he ask how Naomi was doing after ten years in Moav and about the fate of his uncle Elimelech and his cousins Machlon and Kilyon.

Ruth doesn't have any better expectations. She, who started out a Moabite princess, now falls on her face and bows down in immense gratitude and appreciation for this small consideration and asks:

*"Why have I found favor in your eyes, as I am a gentile?" (Ruth 2:10)*

She is so humble and modest that she doesn't even realize her "rights" in this situation. She is full of positivity and is able to see the good in others and in life.

## Moabite Converts?

When Machlon and Kilyon, Naomi's sons, married the Moabite princesses, there existed a distinct prohibition to accept a Moabite convert into the Jewish community. How then could Ruth have converted and become a part, albeit not wholly accepted by society, of the Jewish people?

In the days of Boaz's leadership, the Sanhedrin (high court) revealed that the prohibition in the Torah regarding Moabite converts applied only to male Moabites and not to females. The reason was that in biblical times, only the males were expected to go out and greet travelers (the Jewish refugees), and therefore they were faulted for not doing so. However, women who tended to stay at home could not be blamed for not proactively welcoming the passing nation with food and drink.

In Boaz's words of consolation to Ruth, he alludes to the fact that she has, in fact, a future with the Jewish nation.

*"God should pay your reward... from Whom you have come to take shelter under His wings..." (Ruth 2:12)*

And later, when she implies that she is a stranger and not even worthy of being one of Boaz's servants, he reassures her:

*"God forbid, you are not one of the servants (ama'hot) but rather like one of the matriarchs (ima'hot)." (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 5:5)*

## Yibum - The Levirate Marriage

The Torah tells us:

*If brothers abide together and one of them dies and has no child, then the wife of the dead brother should not*

*marry a stranger. Her husband's brother should take her to him as a wife and perform the duty of yibum. And it shall be that her firstborn child will have the name of the dead brother, so that his name not be wiped out from Israel. (Deut. 25:5-6)*

The mitzvah of yibum applies when a married man dies and leaves no children. The brother of the dead man (or the next closest relative, if there is no brother), has a special mitzvah to marry the widow. If they subsequently have children, the first son is considered to "fill the void" of the dead brother - inheriting his estate and his portion of land in the Land of Israel. He thus "redeems" the name and memory of the dead man, who otherwise would have no lasting remnant in this world.

Of course, there are ways to get out of this obligation and responsibility, if either the widow or relative are not so inclined, but it is considered a great kindness to the dead to go through with the marriage and the resulting redemption of the land. If the brother refuses to marry his sister-in-law, he then goes through an act of severing the bond, in which he is shamed for not keeping his brother's memory alive.

In this story, Ruth is a widow of a Jewish man who has died and left no children. His brother and father have also died, so that the family, although they may own some land currently, will have no continuity and will lose the land when Naomi dies, unless a close relative marries Ruth and fulfills the obligation of yibum.

Boaz seems to be the perfect choice for the performance of this mitzvah. He is a cousin, part of Elimelech's family. And yet he doesn't even seem to realize that he has a decision to make regarding Ruth.

## Naomi's Plan of Redemption

*NaomiseesthegreatpotentialinRuth,and knows she is destined to become integral to the Jewish nation.*

Ruth has been frequenting Boaz's fields for two months now, bringing home to Naomi the stray pieces of wheat, happy with her lot, not expecting any more. But Naomi, knowing the Torah laws, and concerned for the future of her widowed daughter-in-law, is waiting for something else - a sign, some news of Boaz's interest in Ruth and her family. Naomi sees the greatness and the potential in Ruth, and knows that she is destined to become an integral part of the Jewish nation in some way. After waiting, praying and hoping, Naomi decides to help matters along with a more proactive plan:

*Naomi said to her: "My daughter, I would like you to have a better future. Now, our relative, Boaz... is piling the wheat in the granary tonight. Wash and anoint yourself, dress up and go down to the granary. Don't show yourself until he is finished eating and drinking. And when he lies down, see where he goes to sleep and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." Ruth replied: "Anything you tell me to do, I will do." (Ruth 3:1-5)*

Naomi suggests a rather audacious, even dangerous plan. It's the only choice, now that the harvesting season is over, and Ruth will no longer be going out to the field. Though it is necessary, Naomi suggests it with fear and trepidation. What a risk to Ruth's reputation as a modest Jewish girl! If anyone should see her, or if Boaz is repelled by her behavior, her chances of ever marrying would be greatly limited. However, Naomi knows Boaz's greatness and his descent from the royal family of Judah, and she secretly hopes he would fulfill his responsibility and agree to marry Ruth. The situation only demands a little bit of effort.

Ruth must have been shocked by this idea. She must have had countless questions and doubts, tormented by thoughts of discovery or rejection. And yet she answers simply, with faith in Naomi's Torah perspective: "Whatever you say, I will do."

## Ruth and Boaz

Ruth went down to the granary, with Naomi's promise that her merit will accompany her (Yalkut Shimoni 605). She wisely took clothes with her and changed into them only after her arrival (Midrash Lekach Tov). Although she complied with her mother-in-law's every word, she kept her wits about her and strategized the best way to go unnoticed.

Boaz wakes at midnight to discover a woman lying at his feet. His initial horror gives way to rationality as he asks for her identity. She answers: "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wings over your maidservant, since you are a redeemer" (Ruth 3:9). He immediately pulls himself together: "Blessed are you to God, my daughter."

Surprisingly, only now does Boaz realize that he should have initiated this union, and that his prior passivity had caused Ruth torment and shame. He praises her for her willingness to confront him and to marry him only for the sake of the mitzvah of yibum and redemption of the land. He assures her: "You have done more kindness now, in not going after the young men, than your first kindness (to come with your mother-in-law to Israel)." Boaz then promised to make sure she would be taken care of.

Boaz asks Ruth to stay through the night out of concern for her safety, even though he was risking his reputation, and had to resist the temptation to touch her:

*All that night Boaz prayed to God: "You know I have not touched her. Please let it be Your Will that it not be known that*

*a woman came to the granary, causing a desecration of God's Name through me." (Yalkut Shimoni 606)*

Boaz walked Ruth to the town at dawn, gave her a gift of grain and oats to bring to Naomi, and promised to be in touch as soon as he figured out if he is the closest relative with whom she can perform the mitzvah of yibum.

After a short process in court, where a closer relative absolves himself of the obligation to marry Ruth (out of the fear of "sullyng" his gene pool by marrying a Moabite convert), Boaz publicly declares that he intends to marry Ruth and redeem their land as well.

Ruth's voice is not heard in this last chapter of marriage and acceptance. Through her marriage to the great leader Boaz, she achieves credibility by virtue of the publicizing of the Jewish law that Moabite women can convert to Judaism, but not Moabite men.

The elders of the nation and Judges in the court respond with a special blessing:

*"God should allow this woman who is entering your home to be like Rachel and Leah, who both built the house of Israel... And your home should be like the home of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda, from the seed which God will give you with this girl." (Ruth 4:11-12)*

The ultimate praise for Ruth is to be like Rachel and Leah, the matriarchs who built the nation of Israel through the birth and raising of the Twelve Tribes. Ruth was to build the monarchy of Israel by marrying into the royal line, a descendant of Peretz, the son of Yehuda.

In his book *Simchat HaRegel*, Rabbi Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai (the 18th century "Chida"),

comments on the similarity between Ruth and Leah and Rachel in another way:

*Ruth demanded verbally [that Boaz marry her], just like Rachel and Leah demanded with words. Leah said: "You will come to me tonight," and Rachel said, "Give me children or else I will die."*

A proactive assertiveness, a willingness to do whatever it takes to become a part of the creation of Jewish destiny, is a thread that ties Ruth to the matriarchs of the nation.

## Aftermath

*Boaz married Ruth and she became his wife... and God granted her a pregnancy and she bore a son" (Ruth, 4:5-16). The same night in which Ruth conceived, Boaz died. (Yalkut Shimoni 608)*

Boaz, an 83-year-old man, fulfilled his purpose in this world by conceiving a child with Ruth, and dies. She, on the other hand, becomes a widow again, this time of the leader of the generation, and pregnant.

Her suffering is not over, but she merits to have a child, raise him with Naomi, to see a future hope for her family and the continuity for Naomi's son's name. Ruth, full of kindness and generosity, even seems to be marrying Boaz for the sake of others. Ruth doesn't voice any opinions or comments until the end of the book recording her life:

*The neighbors all named him, saying "Naomi has borne a son," and they called him "Oved"; he is the father of Yishai, the father of David. (Ruth 4:17)*

Ruth and Naomi are now full-fledged members

of the community, and the other women share in their newfound happiness. Even here, it is obvious that Ruth has given the best years of her life to take care of Naomi, giving her a grandchild and seeing the family line continue.

But Ruth's reward is still forthcoming. The text indicates the direct lineage of King David: Ruth's son Oved is the father of Yishai, the father of David. Ruth deserves to become part of the Jewish royal family which will eventually produce the Messiah, and be an eternal light for the Jewish people and the world.

Ruth herself lived a long, fruitful life, and even merited to see King Solomon, her great-great grandchild ascend the throne:

*And he put a throne next to his for the mother of the king (Kings I 2:19). Rabbi Eliezer said: "for the mother of royalty" - this is Ruth. (Talmud - Bava Batra 91a)*

## Ruth & Monarchy

Since Moav is considered such a self-centered nation with bad character traits, how could it be that King David and the royal line descended from a member of this nation?

On the verse in Genesis 12:13, "And the nations of the world will be blessed through you," the Talmud (Yevamot 63a) interprets the word "blessed" as "grafted," which shares the same root:

*God said to Avraham, "Two good graftings I have to graft in you: Ruth the Moabite and Naama the Amonite (King Solomon's wife and mother of the next king, Rechavam)."*

These graftings from Amon and Moav are considered necessary and a blessing of Divine Providence. They are needed for the fulfillment

of Jewish destiny. Moav and Amon come from Lot, Avraham's nephew. In fact, they are born from the incestuous union of Lot and his two daughters after the destruction of Sodom. His daughters, thinking they were the only survivors of an apocalypse, figured it was up to them to repopulate the world. They caused their father to become inebriated and each slept with him. The name Moav means "me-av," "from father."

*The concept of monarchy did not exist in Israel and it was necessary to take it from Amon and Moav, since the "shell" of Moav is brazenness, as it says: "The pride of Moav is very arrogant" (Isaiah 16:6). King David's soul was trapped in the shell of Moav in order to bring out the concept of boldness from the shells and to elevate it to holiness - to be forceful and brazen for the sake of Heaven. (Shem Mishmuel in his article on Shavuot 5760)*

Without going into the kabbalistic terms of "shells" and elevating the sparks of holiness from within these shells, suffice it to say that the main character trait of Lot was brazenness. We see how his daughters inherited this audacity to behave in an extremely inappropriate and unnatural manner for a cause they considered important.

However, boldness is a trait that is possible to be used for the right causes, "for the sake of Heaven." After going through a process of purification and refinement through the generations, finally being distilled in Ruth's personality, the trait of holy forcefulness and arrogance are grafted into the foundations of a Jewish monarchy in King David. As it is said (Chronicles II 17:6), "And his heart [King David] was proud (arrogant) in the ways of God." It is necessary for a Jewish king to be forceful and bold when it comes to doing the will of God and ruling over the populace. This is the trait Ruth brought from Moav and elevated for us.

## Why do we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot?

The book of Ruth is read on Shavuot, the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. We, who were all present as a nation at Mount Sinai, who experienced the revelation of God and became Jews by nature of the overwhelming force of that revelation, have much to learn from Ruth, who converted on her own and whose whole life was dedicated to doing good for others.

*This megillah has no laws of purity or impurity, no transgressions and no mitzvot. It is just to teach how much reward comes to those who act with loving-kindness. (Midrash - Ruth Rabba 2:14)*

The holiday of Shavuot is also the birthday of King David, as well as the day of his death. It is fitting to commemorate on this day his roots and righteous ancestress who merited to be the Mother of Royalty.

*Why do we read Ruth on this holiday? On this holiday when we received the Torah, it teaches us that Torah is only given through suffering and poverty. (Yalkut Shimoni Ruth 596)*

*Why do we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot? This Book is full of chessed and the Torah is all chessed (loving kindness) as it says, "The Torah of chessed is on her lips" and was given on Shavuot. (Midrash Lekach Tov)*

## Frequently Asked Questions:

### Is the Book of Ruth in the

### Bible?

The Book of Ruth is not part of the Torah, but it is part of Tenach, as it is in the section known as 'Ketuvim', or 'Writings'.

### How was Boaz related to Elimelech?

Boaz was a cousin of Naomi - whose husband was Elimelech.

### Who wrote the Book of Ruth?

According to the Talmud, the biblical prophet, Samuel, wrote the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth ends with a list of Ruth's descendants, the last of them being King David. It then traces David's lineage back to the early biblical figure, Judah. David's lineage is a mixed blessing, on the one hand, his descent from Ruth, a Moabite convert, was a source of controversy, and caused some to question his legitimacy to rule. Yet on the other, he's also from the tribe of Judah, which fulfills the verse (Genesis 49:10), "The scepter will not depart from Judah," and indicates that the Jewish monarchy—including in messianic times—must come from that line.

### When was the Book of Ruth written?

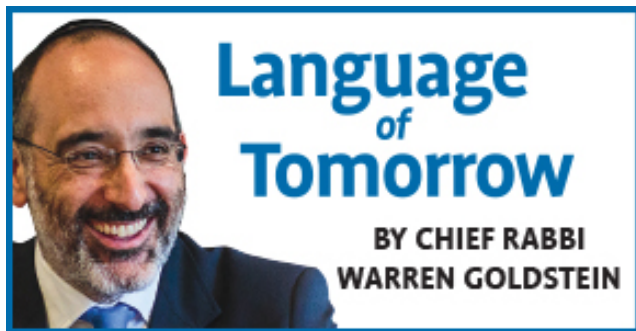
The events described in the book of Ruth take place during the period described in the book of Judges, which, according to Jewish tradition, was an approximate 400 year period that starts with Joshua's death in 1300 BCE, and ends with the birth of the prophet Samuel in 905 BCE. Those dates are disputed, however, and many scholars push them back an additional 165 years. As noted in the question above, Samuel is the book of Ruth's author, who, according to Jewish tradition, lived from 905 until 853 BCE.

### What is the main message of the Book of Ruth?

Many important lessons and laws are derived

from the book of Ruth including the laws of converting to Judaism and the intricacies of the Levirate marriage (called “*yibum*” in Hebrew). The story also documents King David’s lineage, and provides important background and context for his subsequent dynasty.

The book of Ruth is traditionally read on the holiday of Shavuot. The story takes place during the harvest, which is also the time of the holiday, and it describes Ruth’s conversion to Judaism—when she accepts upon herself the obligations of being a Jew—which is what the Jewish nation did on Shavuot, when they accepted the Torah.



## Shavuot: Always Receiving

Click [here](#) for podcast version

The year was 1935, and the Spanish government was making elaborate plans to commemorate the 800th anniversary of the Rambam’s birth – seemingly a great honor and proud moment for Jews everywhere.

Yet, while many Jews around the world welcomed the initiative and prepared celebrations of their own, some had reservations. These concerns were addressed to the leading Torah sage of the time, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky. Here is his extraordinary response:

“We do not need to commemorate the Rambam’s birth, for he lives on wherever teachers and students discuss his words; his teachings upon which we meditate every day are his eternal remembrance. This has been an

everyday occurrence for many generations – the wellsprings have not ceased to this day.”

*The Rambam is not a historical relic; he is a figure of the present.*

Stamps and statues. Plaques and paintings. Buildings and bridges. Google Doodles. These are the traditional ways we commemorate the great people of the past. And the 1935 Spanish government sought to celebrate the legacy of the great Maimonides, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, the Rambam, in much the same way. But we Jews aren’t in the habit of memorialising our leaders and teachers. Rav Chaim Ozer’s objection was based on the fact that we live with the Rambam – with his writings and teachings – every day. His philosophical ideas and halachic rulings form part of our collective Jewish consciousness. To commemorate an 800-year anniversary is to live in the past – Torah is about living in the here and now. The Rambam is not a historical relic; he is a figure of the present.

What, then, is our approach to history? Jewish history is rich and replete with important events. The Torah is filled with mitzvot that are a remembrance of the past. Our holy days are linked to historical events. And yet, there is tension between the past and the present. The Torah is very much about how we live life today. It seems to be rooted in both the present and the past.

This vignette about the Rambam provides a window into understanding the Torah’s approach to history. We do more than remember the fact that the Exodus from Egypt took place – we relive that liberation. The Rambam himself codifies – based on the Talmud – that a person is obliged in every generation to see themselves as if they had personally gone out of Egypt. And it’s not just once a year. We live by the Exodus daily – by its messages of faith in God, of the importance of freedom and of resisting tyranny, and of dedicating that freedom to something greater than ourselves.

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, quoting from the writings of our sages, says Jewish time is not linear, but cyclical; that every year, when, for

example, Pesach comes around, it's not that we are remembering an event that happened in the distant past, but rather we experience the same spiritual energy that was unleashed in the world at the time of the original Pesach.

Similarly, when we keep Shabbat each week, we commemorate the anniversary of the creation of the world. But we also re-experience what it means that God is our Creator, that we owe Him everything, and that the world is constantly being renewed and refreshed by God's pulsating energy into the molecules of the universe. We re-experience the same energy that G-d unleashed into the world on the seventh day of creation – the energy of rest and rejuvenation and returning to source that was introduced on the very first Shabbat of human history.

This same principle applies to every one of the events that are recorded in the Torah, and that we are called on to remember. We are not merely remembering; we are reliving and re-integrating the experiences, and making them part of our daily lives – tangible and relevant in every way.

Arguably, no festival embodies this idea quite like Shavuot, which is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah exactly 3331 years ago. The Kli Yakar points out that when the Torah calls on us to celebrate the festival of Shavuot, it does so without mentioning it is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at all. We infer that Shavuot is the anniversary of the giving of the Torah from the date on which the festival takes place (the 6th of Sivan), but there's no explicit mention of it. Why would the defining dimension of Shavuot not be directly stated by the Torah?

He answers that the Torah did not want us to fixate on one day as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, to relate to this day as a memory of the distant past.

Our relationship with the Torah is immediate and visceral. We receive it – we incorporate it into our lives – each and every day. When the Jewish people are approaching Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, the verse says, “In the third month of the children of Israel leaving the land of Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert

of Sinai.” Rashi notes that it says “this day” and not “that day”. “That day” would imply an event in the past, “this day” implies that it's happening today. Right now. Let us stop for a moment now and realise that at this moment in time we are actively receiving the Torah from God.

The Shema speaks about “these words that I command you today” (Deuteronomy 6:6). Rashi, on that verse says, that “today” means that the words of Torah should always feel as new and fresh to us as the day they were given. This is not some ancient, dusty manuscript stored away in a museum somewhere. This is a living Torah, a *Torat Chaim*. It gives us our mission and purpose; direction and guidance on how to live and why to live, and what our ideals are. It is something of immediate relevance, every moment of every day.

The Talmud cites the verse in Proverbs which compares our relationship with the Torah to a suckling infant with its mother; the more we draw out of it, the more life-giving nutrients are produced. The Torah is an endless reservoir of spiritual sustenance; no matter how deep you go, you can always go deeper. A small child, for example, can learn the first verse of the Book of Bereishit: “In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth”, and understand it in a very basic way. And the greatest Torah sage of the generation can learn that same verse with all of its nuances and mystical meanings in a much deeper way. In each case, it's the same Torah being learnt. But there's always something new in it.

There's a unique offering which was brought in the Temple on Shavuot – two loaves of bread, made from the newly ripened first grains of the wheat harvest. The Torah calls this offering the *Mincha Chadasha* – the “new offering”. Why this focus on newness? By now, the reason should be clear. Shavuot is a celebration of freshness and renewal. It's a celebration of renewed inspiration and renewed challenge. It's a celebration of Torah, today.

We must live life dynamically, not statically. We do not remain in frozen perfection like the angels; we struggle constantly to become better people. We do not remain set in what

we know and what we've experienced; we must always search in Torah for new knowledge and fresh inspiration. This is the way God wants us to live – and He sets the example. As we say in the morning prayer service, God “renews the works of creation in His goodness, at every moment of the day, always”.

And just as God recreates the world from afresh, moment by moment, every single day, we should be recreating our own personal world on a similar basis, always looking for renewed inspiration, receiving the Torah into our lives that is as fresh as the day it was given.

Shavuot is a great place to start.