

# מסילה Mesilah

AN INITIATIVE OF KOLLEL RABBONIM RABBEINU TZVI ASHKENAZI AMSTERDAM



## HISTORICAL FACTS

INSPIRING THROUGH STORY AND TIME

### Staying Up on Shavuos Night: A Historical Journey of the Minhag

Rabbi Yisroel Meir Inglis



The custom of staying up on Shavuos night is one of the most widespread minhagim of Shavuos. Walk into virtually any shul worldwide on Shavuos night and you will find coffee, cheesecake and various refreshments for the many men who gather to learn.

This minhag has been widely practiced for centuries. Many of the later halachic authorities mention it and discuss the halachic ramifications of staying awake, particularly concerning birchas hatorah and netilas yadayim. In Pirkei Zichronos, a memoir about Lomza Yeshiva, the author writes in passing “after staying up the whole night, the whole yeshiva would take part in a milchig kiddush at the Rosh Yeshiva’s house”

However, the source for this custom and its origin requires examination. It is not mentioned by either R’ Yosef Caro or the Rema in Shulchan Aruch. Neither is it mentioned in the Talmud. The earliest account of Jews staying up Shavuos night is recorded by Philo of Alexandria. He writes of a group of first-century Hellenistic Jews outside Alexandria who celebrated Shavuos. He describes how “they remain awake all night” and “sing hymns to G-d”. One of the primary sources for this minhag is the Zohar “the early pious ones wouldn’t sleep on this night and would engage in Torah study”. It also discusses the kabbalistic reason for doing so. From the 13th century we find further records of those who followed this custom. Rabbi Moshe de Leon (1240-1305) writes that “the early Sages who know how to draw grace from the Heavens would not sleep on these two nights”. Rabbi David, a grandson of the Ramban, also records testimonies from 1255 describing select individuals who would stay awake on Shavuos night. All of these accounts, however, only mention the custom of Talmidei Chachamim, the rabbinic elite who would stay awake.

The adoption of this minhag by the masses only begins in the 16th century. This was perhaps inspired by a famous story recorded by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (1505-1584) the author of Lecha Dodi. He writes that he and a group of students were learning with Rav Yosef Caro one Shavuos night in Salonika.

At midnight a heavenly voice was heard emanating from the

throat of Rav Yosef Caro. This voice praised them for staying awake and learning Torah and told them that their learning would be even more praiseworthy if done with a minyan.

This story was printed in the introduction to Magid Meisharim (first printed in 1646). It was later reprinted by the Shelah in 1648 and in the very popular (if somewhat controversial) anonymous work Chemdas Yamim in 1731. The proliferation of this story further popularised the minhag of learning through Shavuos night. It is noteworthy that Rav Yosef Caro omits this custom from his Shulchan Aruch despite the episode with the heavenly voice. (For an interesting discussion of the possible connection between the increasing availability of coffee during this period and the growing popularity of both this minhag and Tikkun Chatzos see Elliott Horowitz, ‘Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry,’ AJS Review 14:1 (Spring 1989).

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Another factor that may have contributed to the popularisation of this minhag was the promise of the Arizal that “one who stays up the whole night learning will survive the year and not suffer any harm during the entire year.” This was first printed in Shulchan Aruch shel Ha-Arizal in 1650. It is later cited in many popular seforim such as the Sefer Zechira and Shaarei Tzion. In 1747 Rabbi Yaakov Emden published his Siddur Sharei Shamayim. He describes how the men would come to shul on Shavuos night. However, many of the attendees were not really learning. Regarding this he writes “those who stay up should be careful not to engage in useless conversations, and even more in joking and frivolity, because then sleep is good for them and enjoyment for the world.”

Several explanations have been offered for this custom. Early sources base it on the explanation of the Zohar that since Shavuos is the union of the Jewish people and the Shechina, we adorn ourselves with the crown of Torah, similar to a bride who adorns herself with jewellery in preparation for her wedding. The Magen Avraham brings a different reason based on the Midrash that the Jewish people overslept the night before the giving of the Torah and Hashem had to awaken them. To rectify this apparent lack of appreciation for the Torah we stay awake the whole night.

May the zchus of continuing this minhag and preparing for Kabolas Hatorah enable us to once again be *רואה פני השכינה!*



## The Nature of Birkas HaTorah: Biblical or Rabbinic?

Rabbi David Sztajnhauer

Chazal derive from the verse: “For the Name of Hashem I proclaim; give greatness to our God” (Devarim 32:3) that one must recite a blessing before learning Torah (Berachos 21a). This raises a fundamental question: Is Birkas HaTorah a Biblical obligation (דאורייתא), or merely Rabbinic (דרבנן) with the verse serving as an *asmachta*? The Gemara in Berachos 11b records three blessings recited before Torah study:

- La’asok b’divre Torah
- Vaha’arev Na
- Asher Bachar Banu

Rav Hammuna referred to Asher Bachar Banu as “the finest of the blessings,” and the Gemara concludes that all three should be recited. A major dispute exists between the Rambam and Ramban regarding the status of Birkas HaTorah. The Rambam does not count it among the 613 mitzvos, implying that it may be Rabbinic, while the Ramban maintains that it is a Biblical obligation. The Shaagas Aryeh supports the Ramban’s position from the Gemara in Nedarim 81a, which states that the destruction of the First Beis Hamikdash occurred because people failed to recite a blessing before Torah study. He therefore rules that in a case of doubt whether one recited Birkas HaTorah, one should repeat the blessing due to the principle of *safek d’oraisa l’chumra*. However, he concludes that only one blessing should be repeated, specifically Asher Bachar Banu, which the Gemara calls the most significant of the blessings.

The Mishnah Berurah cites both opinions and writes that it is difficult to rely on the lenient view, since many Rishonim hold that Birkas HaTorah is Biblical. Nevertheless, if the doubt whether the blessing was said arises af-

ter davening, one may rely on Ahavah Rabbah to fulfil the obligation, (as it’s a bracha that specifically discusses learning Torah) especially if Torah is learned immediately afterward. Ideally, one should either hear the blessing from another person or have explicit intent during Ahavah Rabbah to fulfil the obligation of Birkas HaTorah.

### Women and Birkas HaTorah

Although women are exempt from the mitzvah of Talmud Torah, the Shulchan Aruch rules that women nevertheless recite Birkas HaTorah. The Beis Yosef explains this is because women are obligated to learn the halachos relevant to them. Rav Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk offered a deeper explanation: Birkas HaTorah is not merely a blessing on the mitzvah of Torah study, but an independent obligation that Torah itself requires a blessing. Therefore, although women are exempt from the mitzvah of Talmud Torah, their Torah learning still retains the status of Torah study and requires a blessing.

### Thinking or Writing Torah Before the Blessing

The Shulchan Aruch rules that merely thinking Torah thoughts does not require Birkas HaTorah. However, the Vilna Gaon maintains that even mental Torah study requires a blessing. Regarding writing Torah thoughts, the Shulchan Aruch rules that writing Divrei Torah does require Birkas HaTorah. The Mishnah Berurah adds that ideally one should verbally recite a few words of Torah rather than rely on writing alone.

### Reciting Pesukim Before Birkas HaTorah

The Shulchan Aruch rules that one should preferably avoid reciting pesukim before Birkas HaTorah, even when said as supplication. The Rema, however, defends the common custom to recite selichos and other verses before the blessing, since they are recited in the context of prayer and supplication rather than formal Torah study. Nevertheless, the Rema concludes that the accepted custom is to recite Birkas HaTorah immediately after Asher Yatzar, and the Mishnah Berurah notes that common practice today is to be stringent and avoid reciting pesukim before Birkas HaTorah.



1 Why do we have the custom of eating dairy foods on Shavuot?

2 How many times is the prohibition against mixing meat and milk written in the Torah, and why is it repeated so many times?

3 Why do many people stay awake all night on the first night of Shavuot?

4 What are the names of the two loaves of bread that were offered in the Beit HaMikdash on Shavuot?

5 Why is Megillat Ruth traditionally read on Shavuot?

6 When did Moshe receive the Tablets of the Law (Luchot Habrit)?

7 Why is it customary to decorate the synagogue with flowers and greenery on Shavuot?

See answers on page 3



## מצות לימוד התורה

Rabbi Fischer, Rosh Kollel

Is one obligated to learn all parts of the תורה, or is it sufficient to learn only what is necessary for the practical performance of the commandments?

Rav Yisroel Salanter זצוק"ל writes that the commandment to learn תורה has two parts:

- 1) לימוד התורה - Learning the תורה,
- 2) ידיעות התורה - Knowledge of the תורה.

The basic מצוה of Torah study can be fulfilled by learning anything, whether it is verses of Chumash, Mishna, Gemoro, Aggada or practical laws. Even if it is not possible to derive practical rulings from a particular subject one is nevertheless performing the מצוה of Torah study.

Concerning the second concept, Torah knowledge, there are two sub-categories:

- 1) To acquire a vast knowledge in all subjects of the Torah and become fluent in them;
- 2) The ability to become proficient in Torah so that one is capable of delivering rulings with clarity and be wholly knowledgeable in all aspects of the Torah. For this, one would have to specifically learn Shas and Poskim. He adds that one shouldn't mistakenly think that this level of Torah knowledge is only necessary for someone who is interested in becoming a Rov or a Dayan but not a requirement for everyone. On the contrary, anyone who really wants to serve Hashem properly can only do so by being proficient in all areas of the Torah as increased knowledge enhances one's ability to perform the commandments correctly. It is therefore incumbent upon everyone to learn every area of the Torah and to know it clearly.

When כלל ישראל were asked by משה רבינו whether they were ready to accept the תורה, we famously declared



נעשה ונשמע - we will perform and we will listen. The Gemoro relates that at that moment 600,000 angels came and tied two crowns on every Yid, one for נעשה and the other for נשמע. The בית הלוי asks, why does saying נעשה before נשמע deserve two crowns, seemingly one should suffice? Furthermore, why did the Yidden say נעשה before נשמע? He explains that the Yidden were accepting two concepts of תלמוד תורה - Torah study.

1) נעשה - we will perform the מצוות, which of course entails learning the subjects required to perform them correctly. This is learning as a means to an end.

2) נשמע - we will learn the תורה for the sake of learning תורה, as a means in itself.

Had we said נשמע ונעשה - we will listen and we will perform the מצוות, our acceptance would have been limited to תורה learning as a means to know how to practically perform the מצוות. However, by saying נעשה before נשמע we declared that we are ready to learn תורה for the sake of לימוד התורה alone, (as a מצוה in its own right similar to any other מצוה in the תורה) and to become proficient and knowledgeable in ALL aspects of the תורה.

And as Rav Chaim of Volozhin זצוק"ל writes, this of course requires much toil and delving into the depths of the תורה to attain a deeper level of understanding in the תורה according to the best of one's capabilities.

This would explain the incident described in the Gemoro about Rovo who was learning with such concentration that he didn't even realise that he was putting so much pressure on his fingers and actually making them bleed. The Sadducee who noticed this commented "you are a hasty nation who spoke before listening" referring to our having said נעשה before נשמע. And he was correct, for as we explained, that concerning the מצוה of לימוד התורה, both our obligation of what we must learn - which is everything - and how we must learn it - with full concentration and all of our abilities - stem from our declaration of נעשה before נשמע.

Answers: 1: One reason is that after receiving the Torah, the Jewish people learned the laws of kashrut and could not immediately prepare kosher meat, so they ate dairy foods instead. 2: It is written three times. The repetition teaches three separate prohibitions: not cooking meat and milk together, not eating them together, and not benefiting from the mixture. 3: According to tradition, the Jewish people overslept before receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, so we stay awake learning Torah to show our excitement, and readiness to receive it again. 4: They were called the "Shtei HaLechem". 5: One reason is that Ruth was the great-grandmother of king David, and king David was born and passed away on Shavuot. 6: Moshe received the first Tablets 40 days after Matan Torah, on the 17th of Tammuz. He later received the second Tablets on Yom Kippur after praying for the Jewish people's forgiveness following the sin of the Golden Calf. 7: One reason is that Har Sinai miraculously blossomed with flowers when the Torah was given there.

## News from the Kollel

With Summer zman well underway, the Kollel Avreichim and their wives have been busy with many learning and social initiatives! Alongside the dynamic learning atmosphere under the inspiring guidance of our new Rosh Kollel, the Avreichim devote many hours to one-on-one learning sessions and delivering shiurim throughout the week. Everyone is welcome to get in touch to discover learning opportunities suited to all interests and levels. We have also launched a Friday and Shabbos program where the Avreichim learn the practical halachos of Eiruv relevant to the sugyos they are studying, taking place in the Cheider. In <sup>17</sup>h this will soon expand to include an exciting new program with the <sup>10</sup> boys after Shavuot. The Avreichim and their wives have also been active in many social initiatives to enhance Jewish life in the community. R' Moishe Bald has spearheaded weekly social programs and Shabbos activities for high school boys, both warmly received. In addition, a popular Sunday juggling club for boys now takes place weekly under the guidance of R' Meir Katz. The Kollel Neshei have been busy with communal events, Shabbos hospitality, and other initiatives, including a well-attended sourdough workshop led by Mrs. Neomi Inglis. As part of Rabbi and Mrs. Katz's ongoing role in the Bendigamos community, Mrs. Bassy Katz has also hosted several delightful programs for ladies in her home.

This and much more — all happening at The Amsterdam Community Kollel!



**HASHKafa**  
MEANINGFUL WORDS



## The Fiftieth Day

Rabbi Meir Katz

The Gemara in Pesachim (68b) relates that Rav Yosef said, "If not for this day, how many Yosefs are there in the marketplace?" In other words, without the greatness of this day, he would have been no different from any ordinary person named Yosef.

The obvious question is: why did Rav Yosef refer to Shavuot merely as "this day"? Why did he not explicitly say, "If not for Shavuot," or "if not for Matan Torah"?

The answer may lie in the unique nature of Shavuot itself. The Torah commands us to count forty-nine days of the Omer, culminating in the fiftieth day, Shavuot. These forty-nine days consist of seven complete weeks. The number seven represents the natural, physical order of the world; creation itself was completed in seven days.



Seven times seven therefore symbolizes the perfection and completion of the physical realm, the fullest development of Teva, nature. During the days of Sefiras HaOmer, a person is meant to refine and perfect himself, elevating his physical and human qualities in preparation for the fiftieth day. The fiftieth day transcends the ordinary natural order; it represents a dimension beyond Teva. It is on this elevated plane that the Torah was given.

Rav Yosef was expressing a profound idea. Had the Torah been given on any ordinary day, Torah study might have remained merely another intellectual pursuit, a hobby, an interest, or a discipline like any other form of wisdom. He still would have learned Torah, but he would have remained just another "Yosef in the marketplace." But because the Torah was given specifically on the fiftieth day, a day that transcends the limitations of the physical world, Torah became something transformative. Through Torah, a person is elevated beyond his natural state into a higher, more spiritual dimension. Rav Yosef was saying that "this day," the unique essence of the fiftieth day of Shavuot, is what made him who he became.

This issue of mesilah has been dedicated leilui  
nishmat Netanella bat Sara  
תנצב"ה



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