

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE BEMIDBAR/SHABUOT

MAY 10-11, 2013 2 SIVAN 5773

Day 46 of the Omer

Happy Mother's Day to all and Happy Anniversary Chantelle

SEPHARDIC CONGREGATION OF LONG BEACH

We look forward to welcoming Baruch and Michal Abittan & Rabbi Dr. Meyer and Debra who along with Rebetzin Ida are sponsoring the Kidush in honor of their, daughter, granddaughter and great granddaughter Sarah Chaya, Abittan

Friday Night: Candles: 7:41 PM - Afternoon and Evening service (Minha/Arbith): 7:00 PM

Morning Service (Shaharith): 9:00AM –Please say Shemah at home by 8:29 AM

11:00 - 12:00 Oran's will be here with our Shabbat Morning Kids Program upstairs in the Rabbi's study. Stories, Tefillah, Games, Snacks and more . . . And Leah Colish will be babysitting down in the playroom

5:30 - Mincha Shabbat Afternoon Oneg with Rabbi Yosef and Leah; Treats, Stories, Basketball, Hula-hoop, Parsha Quiz, Tefillot, Raffles and Fun! Supervised play during Seudat Shelishit.

5:30: Ladies Torah Class at the Lemberger's 1 East Olive.

Pirkei Avot 6:30 with Rabbi Aharon

Minha: 7:00 PM –

Seudah Shelishi and a Class 7:30 – with Rabbi David –

Seudah Shelishi co-sponsored in honor of Chantelle and David's anniversary and for all the moms on mother's day ... Evening Service (Arbith): 8:30 PM - Shabbat Ends: 8:41PM

WEEKDAY TEFILLA SCHEDULE

Shaharit Sunday 8:00, Mon-Fri at 7:00 (6:55 Mondays and Thursdays)

WEEKDAY TORAH CLASS SCHEDULE

Daily 6:30 AM class – Honest Business Practices

Monday Night Class with Rabba Yanai – 7PM Monday night

LADIES: Wednesday Night 8PM with Esther Wein at various homes – continues next week

Financial Peace University – Continues next Tuesday at 8PM

The sisterhood will once again sponsor lunch the second day of shavuoth. Anyone who can help with the preparations and setup please speak with Rebitzan Ida, Tina or Patti

SHABUOT TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Tuesday, May 14th Erev Shavuot

Candle Lighting 7:46 pm / Mincha 7:00 pm

Tikkun Leil Shavuot 11:45 pm - All night learning with Rabbi David Bibi and Rabbi Aharon Seigel

Rabbi Yosef Colish and Rabbi Michael Wagner - Please let us know if you will be learning with us

followed by Vatikin Minyan at 4:45 am Sunrise and Amidah at 5:38

Wednesday, May 15th First Day of Shavuot Shaharit 9:00 am - We need a commitment of ten guys for regular minyan Tefilot and Torah Reading by Na'im Zemiroth Yisrael – Uri Lemberger

Mincha 7:30 pm Followed by Azharot and Megilat Ruth Part 1 Candles after 8:52 pm

Thursday, May 16th Second Day Shavuot Shaharit 9:00 am - Yizkor 11:00 am

Mincha 7:30 pm Followed by Azharot and Megilat Ruth Part 2 And a Class

Arbit at 8:35 Havdalah – Holiday Ends 8:47 pm

To subscribe or to unsubscribe, please reply to ShabbatShalomNewsletter@gmail.com
Newsletter archives now at BenaiAsher.Org

Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue, 17th Floor, Artistic Frame at 4PM – Please join us! 212-289-2100

Happy Mother's Day Happy Anniversary Chantelle

Editors Notes

Don't Kick Me Off The Ladder

When I was a young boy, each Shabbat morning we would go to the Synagogue, stop at our grandmothers home for Kiddush and lunch, come back home and change and go out to the football field to play ball. Well we really didn't have a football field; it was actually the street on East Seventh between R and S which we transformed depending on the game to be played into a punch ball court utilizing sewer covers as the bases, into a hockey rink with garbage cans as the goals or the aforementioned football field where catching a ball between parked cars was in bounds.

It wasn't just kids playing. There were teens, parents and the occasional grandparent, and we played until we saw the people walking back to the Synagogue for Mincha. With that signal we ran up to change and ran to Kenis or Shul. Inevitably though at some point during the game, a group of young boys walking to Mirrer Yeshiva would stop and watch us obviously puzzled at the sight of some boys with yalmakas on their heads playing ball on Shabbat. I can still hear them chanting aloud, "goyim, goyim, goyim" as they passed by. But to us, they were akin to aliens from outer space. Who were they to call us goyim? We knew we were "observant" Jews and paid no heed.

Keep in mind that those days proceeded the days of whether you held by the eruv or not, or whether ball playing was permitted or not. In those days there was no eruv to argue about. And today few if any of those who joined us would even think of playing in front of their own homes. No eruv means no carrying. We were wrong. But we thought we were religious..

The rabbis at the time didn't come out and tell us that we would burn in hell for playing ball. They didn't chastise us in public. What they did do was work their magic by drawings us in. Rabbi Jack Mevorach got us to cut the games short by bribing us to class with bats, balls and tickets. We were taught that if we

were going to play, we might as well play basketball in the yard within an eruv.

My Rabbi, Asher Abittan z'sl always taught me, it's not where a person is on his ladder of spirituality that counts as much as which way a person is heading. Had we been ridiculed as sinners by our own, I shudder to think how many would have fallen off the ladder never to return.

This week we begin the book of Devarim which the world named the book of numbers as this first portion tells of the counting of the people. But the census is not a simple count. Moses is requested "Naso et rosh beney Yisrael", to lift up the heads of the children of Israel. The Midrash tells us that G-d was asking Moses himself to personally go out and have each person come before him to raise them up and show them how important they were, each as an individual, unique and worthy of an entire world. There is no better gift one can give than the gift of self-confidence.

I often wonder about the many other communities of Jews who came to America at the same time as our community came here. They disappeared while we held strong and have grown, ken yirbu, in numbers, observance and strength. We had holy grandparents and they had holy grandparents. Yet at some point our paths diverged. One group ascended the spiritual ladder while the other descended and at some point jumped off intermarrying and cutting themselves off from the Jewish people forever.

The Rabbi would say that the mistake of some in that generation was in giving over to their children the idea that religion was a burden. They would bemoan the fact that Shabbat observance forced them to lose a job or that Kashrut was too expensive. The children of those complainers did what any normal person would do. They removed the yoke of that burden.

In our community religion was treated as a gift, a delight and something that we could enjoy together. Nobody complained that it was a burden. We didn't do everything we should have and we did do things we shouldn't have, but the focus was on the victories and successes. A child beginning to walk is praised for each step and not criticized for failing to run a marathon.

While in Florida last month for Passover, I heard many stories from people about their connections. I would like to tell you two of them.

In both cases, the men telling me the story are today leaders of the community, observant with observant children and grandchildren and bound to Torah.

Like so many of us, they too grew up playing ball in the streets, taking their cheese to Vic's pizzeria in Bradley Beach, eating fried knishes at the sandbar, pancakes at Perkins and thinking that a tuna salad sandwich at the Blue Swan Diner was fine. They went to nightclubs and did whatever boys being boys do. At the same time, they put on Tefilin every morning, came to Synagogue every Shabbat, did not work, drive or turn on lights on Shabbat, never ate pork or shellfish, said a blessing every time they ate and thought they were religious. To protect their identities, I have changed a couple of unimportant facts.

"I was just getting married. My father was as poor as they come with no business for me to go into. Nor did he have connections to get me a job. I got my real estate license and began working as a salesperson renting out apartments. It wasn't easy. After two years I was making \$10,000 a year which in 1970 when median income was \$7000 looked pretty good. My future father in law sat me down and told me he had an opportunity for me. He owned two stores in Old Orchard, Maine. My future brother in law was running one of the stores and would return home after 14 straight weeks of work from Memorial Day through Labor Day with a check for \$70,000. I remember thinking that I was earning \$200 a week while he was earning 25 times as much. My father in law suggested that I take the second store. It might not earn as much but I could expect at least \$50,000 over the season and I could still work in real estate for the other nine months. I was so appreciative of the offer. He then turned to me and said, "You realize, you'll need to work on Saturday"? I said that I would have a manager on Saturday and be there the other 6 days, every hour of the day. He told me that it didn't work like that. Managers couldn't be trusted and Saturday was the busiest day and I would need to be there. He told me that I wouldn't need to touch money or write. I just would need to be there. 'And what's the big deal', he continued. 'Even Rabbis work on Shabbat and get paid. If they can do it, why can't you?. It's 14 weeks and you can have your Shabbat the rest of the year.' I thanked him for the opportunity and told him I couldn't accept. And I wonder still today where did I have the strength to refuse?"

Another told me about his girlfriend. "She was Jewish and grew up in a completely secular home. She had no concept of Halacha and over dinner one night in some Manhattan restaurant we discussed our future. I explained that if she could accept Shabbat and

Kashrut, we could get married. She promised she would try and we decided to see if she could simply avoid opening and closing the television and lights and driving on Shabbat. If she could do that for 6 weeks, then we would take the next step. For two weeks she managed. On the third Saturday night when I called her, I heard hesitancy in her voice. She admitted she opened the TV and started asking what the point was in restricting electricity. I was in love and thought I would spend the rest of my life with this girl. She was everything I thought I wanted, but when I heard the tone in the question, I realized then and there that she could never be the mother of my children and we had no future. In my mind, I was a "religious" Jew and couldn't imagine the possibility of giving that up. It would be treason."

Some might call it hypocrisy. We as a community were eating in non-kosher restaurants, going to clubs and worse. Yet we called ourselves observant or religious.

But therein lays the success. In name, we were observant. In title, we were religious. Within the community no one called us sinners. With title comes responsibility and because we kept our title, we kept our responsibilities. We had lines in the sand we couldn't or wouldn't cross because crossing those lines would turn us into sinners.

Had we lost that title, then all the responsibilities would have disappeared with them. As ridiculous it might sound to some of us today if instead of being lauded for bringing our cheese to Vics, we were ridiculed for eating there, most would have stopped bringing the cheese and instead of ascending the ladder we would have dropped off of it. If I'm a sinner, I might as well be a sinner.

Many will point to the commandment *hocheyach tochiyach et amitecha* – to rebuke our friends. But my Rabbi would caution us that it takes a great expert to offer rebuke. Rebuke given the wrong way can more likely turn a person away rather than bring them back.

We talk about tolerance. This great Rabbi who we remember tolerated this and that great Rabbi who we remember tolerated that. But it's much more than what we refer to as tolerating. It's looking at a glass half full rather than a glass half empty. It's respecting people for what they are doing rather than demeaning them for what they are not. It's about drawing close rather than pushing away.

We cannot forget Jacob's ladder. It is a spiritual ladder which ascends to heaven itself. Some of us by

virtue of birth were born on one rung and some on another. It's easy for those above to look down upon those below. But who are we to judge. Instead we should offer everyone on that ladder encouragement. "Hold on tight", we should say. "You're doing great", we should remind them. "Reach up for the next level", we should cheer.

It's too easy for the one above to step on the hands of the one below forcing him to fall and be lost forever. Just as one can save a world by saving a person, one can destroy a world by kicking one off that ladder. And none of us wants to be guilty of that.

So the next time you see someone doing something wrong. Think twice before you criticize. And teach your kids the same. We all want to grow. We all want to get better. And obviously we want the same for all of those around us. But let us not forget that the goal is for all of us to climb higher without losing any in the process.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Bibi

Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st & 2nd Aliyot: Moshe counts all males over the age of 20, and registers them according to their paternal ancestry. The total, not including Shayvet Layvie, was 603,550. The total number of Jews was around 3 million.

3rd Aliya: The tribes are each assigned their position within the camp, and in the order of the traveling.

4th Aliya: In preparation for separating the tribe of Layvie, the Torah establishes Aharon's genealogy. Although the Kohanim were also from the Tribe of Layvie, they were counted by themselves.

5th Aliya: Moshe counts the Leviyim according to their three basic families: Gershon, Kehas, and Mirarri. Their individual responsibilities in transporting the Mishkan is stated, and their total was 22,000.

6th Aliya: Being that the Leviyim were to be in direct exchange for the first born, Moshe counts all the first born in the rest of the nation. Their total was 22,273. The extra 273 first born are instructed to redeem themselves from Aharon the Kohain for 5 silver shekels.

7th Aliya: The Parsha concludes with detailed instructions for the family of Kahas. Their primary responsibility was to transport the vessels of the

Mishkan. Only Aharon and his sons were allowed to cover the vessels in preparation for transport. Once covered, the family of Kahas did the actual carrying.

This week's Haftorah is from Hoshea 2:01-22. Hoshea's prophecy is a seemingly contradictory presentation of the relationship between the Jews and G-d. On the one hand Hoshea compares the Jews to a Harlot who betrays her husband and can not in good conscience claim that her husband has fathered her children. On the other hand, Hoshea concludes his prophecy with G-d's promise that he will never abandon the Jews and that despite the nations betrayal and disloyalty, the children are still His.

In order to understand this prophecy, a little background is in order. G-d had stated to Hoshea that the Jews had sinned. Hoshea responded by suggesting to Hashem that He exchange the Jews for another nation. As a Prophet, it was Hoshea's responsibility to follow Moshe's example and fight on behalf of the nation, not reaffirm their guilt and sins. In essence, Hoshea had spoken Lashon Harah about the Jews.

As a part of Hoshea's training, Hashem instructed him to marry a woman who was a prostitute. He fathers three children whom he gives unusual names reflecting his personal frustration with the Jews. His oldest is named Yizrael - The G-d Who plants. His second child, a daughter, he names Lo Ruchamah - One who does not deserve mercy. His third child, a boy, he named Lo Ami - Not My nation.

Hashem then told him to send away his wife and children. Hoshea begged G-d to rescind His order because he loved his family and did not want to be apart from them. G-d then says to him, "Isn't your wife a prostitute, and don't even know if your children are yours? Yet you love them! So too is my relationship with the Jews. No matter how they betray me I still love them and do not want to be apart from them!"

Hoshea understood the lesson and changed his entire attitude toward the Jews. Instead of presenting the angry demeanor of harshness and judgment, Hoshea prophesied some of the most beautiful and optimistic prophecies that we have.

The final words of the Haftorah capture the eternity of G-d's love for His Chosen People. "I shall marry you to Me forever..."

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"Moshe received the Torah at Sinai and handed it down to Yehoshua." (Pirkei Abot 1:1)

"And Boaz said... 'to whom is this young girl?'" (Megillat Ruth 2:5)

We are about to celebrate the holiday of Shabuot. This is the time of year that we celebrate the giving of the Torah to our nation at Mount Sinai. We have been learning Pirkei Abot to prepare us for the holiday, and on this holiday we read the story of Ruth.

Pirkei Abot starts with a historical chain which tells of the Torah carefully being handed down from generation to generation. It seems out of place that a book of ethics should begin with a historical chain. However, there is a profound message here. This book is not just telling us the ethics of the Torah, but it is telling us that there is also a tremendous responsibility. Our generation is a link in that glorious chain from Moshe until today. We are responsible to practice these ethics in order to inspire the younger generation to pick up the baton and carry it to their children. We shouldn't be a sterile generation that is born into a rich tradition and does not give birth to a new generation of enthusiastic followers of the Torah. If one sees a clock whose hands are not moving, he knows that the problem is not in the clock's hands, but in the inner movements of the watch. If the youth of a generation is not excited about the ethical lifestyle of the Torah, it is because of the parents. Therefore, Pirkei Abot starts with a chain, to tell us that we must learn these lessons well. Don't be the generation that breaks the chain.

When Boaz came to his field, he saw a young woman by the name of Ruth. He couldn't help but notice her modesty and purity. He commented to his worker, "To whom is this girl." He doesn't ask who she is, but he asks to whom she is, meaning to say, "Who is the one who taught her such beautiful ways?"

On this holiday of the giving of the Torah, let us resolve to accept the Torah way of life in such a way to cause our youth to happily accept the Torah as well. Shabbat Shalom and Happy Holiday. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"And they gathered the entire nation on the first of the second month...according to the number of the names" (Bemidbar 1:18)

Hashem commanded Moshe to take a census of the Children of Israel by counting the "number of the names." The Ramban explains the meaning of counting the names: "Hashem told Moshe: 'Count each and every [member of Israel] with honor and dignity. Do not merely ask the head of each household how many children he has.

Rather, everyone should pass before you with honor, and you should count them'." B'nei Yisrael deserved to be counted in person by Moshe.

The purpose of a census is a practical one: to ascertain the total population of a nation. The most efficient method is to ask the head of each household for data regarding his family. Having Moshe personally count each person was not only very inefficient, but extremely laborious and tiresome considering the numbers involved. (There were approximately three million Jews in the desert.) Why did Hashem trouble Moshe to exert himself to such an extent? Had Moshe asked the representative of each household for a tally of his family, the result would have been the same.

Hashem was teaching Moshe and the Children of Israel the value and uniqueness of each and every person. No one can be treated as a mere number, even when he is being counted for a census. Moshe had to meet each member of B'nei Yisrael and show him the honor and respect he deserved, as a human being created in the image of Hashem.

When dealing with a group of people, be it a group of ten or ten thousand, we must be conscious of the fact that the group is comprised of individuals, each one unique and worthy of the entire world existing for his sake. Each person deserves the dignity and warmth of our personal attention, and cannot be looked upon as just a number. Every resident of our community, every member of our family, every co-worker at our job should be treated with the same care and sensitivity we ourselves would expect.

Sometimes just stopping to spend a few moments with another person, even if only long enough to share a smile and say "good morning," can do a great deal to raise his spirits and carry him through the rigors of his daily schedule. If we bear in mind the overwhelming love and concern Hashem has for each of His children, we will surely feel a natural desire to emulate His example. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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Decisions

It is customary on Shabuot to read Megilat Rut, which tells the extraordinary story of Rut, a Moabite woman who converted to Judaism and moved to Eretz Yisrael. The story began when a famine struck Eretz Yisrael, prompting Elimelech, one of the wealthiest men among Beneh Yisrael, to leave the country and settle in Moab. He feared that as poverty became

widespread, more and more Jews would be knocking on his door asking for assistance, and so he left. In Moab, his two sons, Mahlon and Kilyon, married Moabite women.

G-d punished Elimelech for abandoning his people during their time of crisis, and he lost his entire fortune. Shortly thereafter he died, as did his two sons. His wife, Naomi, who had previously been a wealthy, prominent woman, was now left as a poor, penniless widow. She decided to return home to Bet Lehem, and her two Moabit daughters-in-law, who were named Rut and Orpa, expressed their desire to join her. Naomi pleaded with them to stay in their homeland, Moab, rather than move with her to what was for them a foreign country. After all, she was penniless, and they would not find anyone in Eretz Yisrael willing to marry them. Orpa heeded her mother-in-law's advice and went home, but Rut insisted on accompanying Naomi to Eretz Yisrael. Ultimately, she ended up meeting and marrying a wealthy landowner named Boaz, with whom she had a child, Obed, who was the grandfather of David Hamelech.

One of the many meaningful lessons we can learn from this story is the impact of the decisions we make in life. When Naomi urged Rut to stay in Moab, but she insisted on accompanying her to Bet Lehem, she could not possibly have imagined what kind of long-term impact this decision would have, and how it would change world history forever. From her perspective, this was simply a matter of performing kindness for a family member in need to whom she was very devoted. But at that moment, when she told Naomi that she was joining her regardless of what she said and what happened, she laid the groundwork for the birth of David Hamelech who would establish the eternal Jewish dynasty, from which Mashiah will emerge.

It is frightening to consider how even the small decisions we make in life – not to mention the larger decisions – can have such far-reaching effects. This is not to suggest that everyone should fret and panic when planning what to eat for dinner or choosing a shirt to wear. It does mean, however, that we must exercise care and patience when making the significant decisions in our lives. We never know which decision we make can change the entire direction of our and our families' lives. I still recall several occasions when as a student I had to decide whether or not to attend a certain Shiur. There were various considerations that had to be taken into account, and ultimately I decided to go. In those Shiurim, I heard ideas and insights that literally changed my life and profoundly impacted upon the

direction I took. At the time I had to make the decision, it seemed like a relatively trivial and minor matter. But in the end, this decision altered the direction of my life.

We must not be flippant when it comes to making decisions in life. This is certainly true when it comes to larger decisions such as where to live and where to send our children for schooling, but also with regard to the seemingly small decisions, such as whether to attend a Shiur, whether to go to the synagogue, whether to make the humorous, not-so-nice remark that we want to make, or whether to share a Devar Torah with a friend. The implications of these decisions can often be far more profound than we think, and they therefore must be made carefully and responsibly, after serious thought and consideration.

Rabbi Wein

With the holiday of Shavuot lurking joyfully just around the corner, I have spent some time reviewing the holy book of Ruth. Traditionally read in many synagogues on the holiday, the narrative quality of this book itself is masterful and its delineation of the main characters is sharp and arresting.

But it is the moral and idealistic quality of the book, especially as it is reflected through the prism of thought and interpretation of the rabbis of the Midrash and the Talmud and the latter commentators, which gives this book its transcendent relevance and importance. It is a book about family destruction and rebuilding, about loyalty to others and self-interest, about hope, faith, despair and loneliness.

It is so human in its portrayal of events and people that all who read its story are able to identify with it and aspire to incorporate its greatness into one's own behavior. The book, authored by the prophet Samuel, speaks to each of us on an individual basis because it was meant to do so.

The great heroine of the story is Naomi, widowed, bereft of her children, poverty stricken and shunned by the community which only remembered her former privileged status, and still resents her abandoning the Land of Israel at a time of need and crisis. Through Ruth, Naomi will also be redeemed and rehabilitated and reinstated as one of the great matriarchs of the Jewish people.

The tenacity of Ruth in refusing to abandon her mother-in-law to her fate guarantees her place as the mother of Jewish royalty. Ruth arrives at greatness

from outside of the camp of Israel. She is originally a pagan princess who now, through Naomi's presence and example, finds her fate inextricably bound together with the people and God of Israel.

She takes advantage of Judaism's openness to strangers, converts and the downtrodden and refuses to be rejected and cowed by the slights and insensitivity of individual Jews whom she encounters. She has lost her pride and arrogance and her external trappings of royalty and wealth but has gained an inner conviction and tenacity of purpose, a vision of fulfillment and hope.

But as is often the case in life, one cannot accomplish such a mission by one's self. A partner is always needed. And the unlikely partner to this drama of Ruth's life is Boaz, a leader in Israel, also widowed, alone and searching for his own fulfillment and immortality in Jewish life. Together, Ruth and Boaz will create the Jewish future for all eternity, even if at the moment of their marriage they are unaware of anything more than their personal needs and happiness.

Naomi apparently has a greater sense of the true import of their union and therefore when the child is born to Ruth and Boaz, the women of Bethlehem, gifted with the Godly intuition given to them by the Creator, correctly state: "A child is born unto Naomi." It is Naomi's vision that is the catalyst for the entire enactment of this human and national drama.

The story revolves about small details and seemingly unimportant events. The menu of a meager lunch served to a poor woman gleaner in the fields of Judah, the loyalty of a younger person to the care of an impoverished older woman, the unwillingness of an otherwise good person – his name is Tov, goodness itself – to take the risk of public disapproval or private financial loss in order to help someone else, all somehow fit into the matrix of this divine story.

The warning of the rabbis in Avot, that one should never take a small matter of Torah and kindness lightly, resonates throughout the Book of Ruth and its events. The negative personal results of abandoning the Land of Israel and its Jews are explicit in the story and in the words of all of the commentators to the book.

For good or for better the individual Jew is tied to the fate of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel as a whole. Great people were undone simply by not realizing that their own personal comfort and welfare is not always paramount to God's wishes and the fate

of the Jewish community. It will be a long and painful road back to Bethlehem for Naomi but she is aware of the mistake that was originally made and is determined, through Ruth, to correct it. That is really the sublimely great message of this holy book.

**Sir Jonathan Sacks
Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations
of the Commonwealth**

Love as Law, Law as Love

On the face of it the connections between the sedra and haftarah of Bemidbar are slender. The first has to do with demography. Bemidbar begins with a census of the people. The haftarah begins with Hosea's vision of a time when "the number of the children of Israel will be like the sand on the sea-shore which cannot be measured or numbered." There was a time when the Israelites could be counted; the day will come when they will be countless. That is one contrast between the future and the past.

The second goes deeper. The sedra and the book that bears its name are called Bemidbar, "in the wilderness". The book is about the wilderness years in both a physical and spiritual sense: a time of wandering and internal conflict. Hosea, however, foresees a time when God will bring the people back to the desert and there enact a second honeymoon: . . . I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her . . .

There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
As in the day she came out of Egypt.

What gives the haftarah its special resonance, however, is the fact that Bemidbar is always read on the Shabbat preceding Shavuot, the festival of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. The fact that tradition chose this of all prophetic passages tells us something deeply moving about how the Jewish people understood this festival and about the Torah itself as the living connection between a people and God. The story of Hosea is one of the strangest of that great chain of visionaries we call the prophets. It is the story of a marriage. The prophet married a woman called Gomer. He was deeply in love with her. We can infer this, because of all the prophets, Hosea is the most eloquent and passionate on the subject of love. Gomer, however, proved faithless. She left home, had a series of lovers, was serially unfaithful, and was eventually forced to sell herself into slavery. Yet Hosea, caught between anger and tender longing, found that he could not relinquish his love for her.

In a flash of prophetic insight, God leads him to understand that his own personal experience mirrors that between God and the Israelites. He had rescued them from slavery, led them through the wilderness and brought them to their new home, the land of Israel. But the people proved faithless. They worshipped other gods. They were promiscuous in their spiritual attachments. By rights, says God, I should have abandoned them. I should have called them (as the prophet called his third child) Lo-ammi, "you are not My people". Yet God's love is inextinguishable. He too cannot let go. Whatever the people's sins, He will bring them back into the desert, scene of their first love, and their marriage will be renewed.

The Talmud in Pesachim gives an extraordinary account of the dialogue between God and Hosea – the unwritten story of the episode that precedes chapter 1 of the book of Hosea:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Hosea, "Your children have sinned." To this, the prophet should have replied, " – they are Your children, the children of your favoured ones, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Be merciful to them." Not only did he not say this, but he actually said, "Lord of the universe, the whole world is yours. Exchange them for another nation." The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "What shall I do with this old man? I will tell him to go and marry a prostitute and have children by her. Then I will tell him to send her away. If he can, then I too will send Israel away."

There are few more telling passages in the whole of rabbinic literature. If I were to summarise it, I would say: Who is a leader of the Jewish people? Only one who loves the Jewish people. Reading the prophetic literature, it is easy to see the prophets as social critics. They see the people's faults; they speak them aloud; their message is often a negative one, foretelling disaster. The Talmud is telling us that such a view is superficial and misses the essential point. The prophets loved their people. They spoke not out of condemnation but from the depths of deep desire. They knew that Israel was capable of, and had been summoned to, great things. They never criticised in order to distance themselves, to set themselves above and apart. They spoke in love – God's love. That is why, in Israel's darkest nights, the prophets always had a message of hope.

There is one verse in the haftarah so deep that it deserves special attention. God is telling the prophet about the time yet to come when He will bring His people back to the places they once visited, the

desert where they first pledged their love, and there they will renew their relationship:

In that day – declares the Lord – you will call Me 'my husband'; you will no longer call Me 'my master'.

The resonances of this sentence are impossible to capture in translation. The key words in Hebrew are Ish and Baal, and they both mean 'husband'. Hosea is telling us about two kinds of marital relationships – and two kinds of culture. One is signalled by the word Baal, which not only means 'husband' but is also the name of the Caananite god. Baal, one of the central figures in the pantheon of the ancient Near East, was the storm god of lightning and the fertility god who sends rain to impregnate the ground. He was the macho deity who represented sex and power on a cosmic scale.

Hosea, punning on the name, hints at the kind of world that emerges when you worship sex and power. It is a world without loyalties, where relationships are casual and people taken advantage of and then dropped. A marriage predicated on the word Baal is a relationship of male dominance in which women are used not loved, owned not honoured. The word Baal means, among other things, 'owner'.

Against this Hosea describes a different kind of relationship. Here his literary device is not pun but quotation. In using the word Ish to describe the relationship between God and His people, the prophet is evoking a verse at the beginning of Genesis – the words of the first man seeing the first woman:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called 'woman' for she was taken out of man."

Daringly, Hosea suggests that the making of woman from man mirrors the creation of humanity from God. First they are separated, then they are joined again, but now as two distinct persons each of whom respects the integrity of the other. What joins them is a new kind of relationship built on fidelity and trust.

How we understand the giving of the Torah depends on how we see the relationship between God and the people He chose to be His special witnesses on earth. Inevitably, the language of Judaism when it speaks of God is metaphorical. The Infinite cannot be compassed in finite categories. The metaphors the prophets use are many. God is, among other things, artist, creator, king, master, warrior, shepherd, judge, teacher, redeemer and father. From the point of view

of God-as-king, the Torah is the code of laws He ordains for the people He rules. From the perspective of God-as-father-and-teacher, it represents the instructions He gives His children as to how they should best live. Adopting the image of artist-creator, Jewish mystics throughout the ages saw the Torah as the architecture of the universe, the deep structure of existence.

Of all the metaphors, however, the most lovely and most intimate was of God as husband, with Israel as His bride. Isaiah says: For your Maker is your husband, The Lord Almighty is his name . . . (54:5)

Likewise Jeremiah: 'Return, faithless people,' declares the Lord, 'for I am your husband.' (3:14)

This is how Ezekiel describes the marriage between God and Israel in the days of Moses:

Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you -- declares the Lord God -- and you became mine. (16:8)

From this perspective, the Torah is more than a constitution and code of laws, more than a set of instructions or even the metaphysical DNA of the universe. It is a marriage contract – a token and gesture of love.

When attraction, that most fleeting of emotions, seeks to perpetuate itself as love, it takes the form of marriage: marriage as covenant, in which both parties pledge themselves to one another, to be loyal, steadfast, to stay together through difficult times as well as good and to achieve together what neither could do alone. A marriage is created not by force or coercion but by words – the word given, the word received, the word honoured in faithfulness and trust. There are such things as the laws of marriage (the respective responsibilities of husband and wife), but marriage of its essence is more than a dispassionate set of obligations and rights. It is law suffused with love, and love translated into law. That, according to this metaphor, is what the Sinai event was.

The supreme poet of marriage was Hosea. By reading this haftarah on the Shabbat before Shavuot, we make a momentous affirmation: that in giving the Torah to Israel, God was not asserting His power, dominance or lordship over Israel (what Hosea means when he uses the word ba'al). He was declaring His love. That is why it is no accident that the words with which the haftarah ends – among the

most beautiful in the entire religious literature of mankind – are the words Jewish men recite every weekday morning as they wind the strap of the hand-tefillin like a wedding ring around their finger, renewing daily the marriage covenant of Sinai:

I will betroth you to me for ever;
I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice,
love and compassion;
I will betroth you to me in faithfulness,
And you will know God.

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Life is just so busy. Traveling to work, back home, family responsibilities, household responsibilities; the days seem to go by in a blur-like fashion. My wife and I find this pace to be the most difficult adjustment of living in the States.

The Ramcha"l explains that Paroah's plan to keep the Jews as slaves was to keep them as busy as possible. This wouldn't allow for the introspection and growth which would render them worthy of redemption. Life in Israel seemed to go at a much slower pace. There was more time to focus on what was being accomplished without having to spend so much time and energy on just getting there.

We read the parsha of Bamidbar as we are making our final preparations for Shavuot. As such, Bamidbar must reveal some sort of a game-plan to make our Kabalas HaTorah a greater reality on Shavuot itself and one that will last throughout the year.

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe in Midbar {the wilderness of} Sinai. [1:1]" According to the Medrash [Rabbah 1:7], the passuk is stressing that the Torah was given in the Midbar. Many different explanations are offered but an idea that struck me is the hushed, serene, solitude of a midbar. Time for thoughts. Time for self-awareness, self-understanding, self-assessment. That is what enabled a Kabalas HaTorah.

And us? Our already busy, hectic lives are incessantly invaded by our cellphones, beepers and all the myriad electronic, multi-tasking devices that provide us with "all noise, all the time." I longingly recall the summers I spent running a sleep-away camp in Israel without a phone in our bungalow. The sweet sounds of silence . . .

When Eliyahu HaNavi witnessed Hashem's presence, we are told that at first a stone-shattering

wind passed, but Hashem's presence was not manifested in that wind. That was followed by a clamorous din and then by a blaze but Hashem's presence wasn't found in either of those. Finally, Hashem's awesome presence was evident--in the guise of a soft, gentle voice.

As we prepare for Shavuot, we need to find or create that environment and those moments when that soft, gentle, resonating voice of Hashem can be heard and felt, enabling us to shift our focus from the clutter of our lives to the purpose of our existence.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

As we approach the subject of the Dor Hamidbar (the generation of the Wilderness), also known as the Dor Deah (the generation of True Knowledge), let us keep constantly before our eyes that this era was the time when Hashem's love was strongest. These men were chosen as witnesses of the most wondrous spectacles and demonstrations of Hashem's Presence among His people. At the same time, they were subject to the most severe chastisement, because "The one that Hashem loves, He rebukes, as a father to the son that He favors" (Mishle 3:12). The harshest punishments were bestowed upon this generation, as well as the greatest expressions of Hashem's love and the most sublime encomium and encouragement. All the chastisements and castigations of this period were because of Hashem's especial love: "to afflict you in order to test (or, to elevate) you, to do benefit to you in your end" (Devarim 8:16).

Rabbi Yochanan (Sanhedrin 110B) upholds the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer that the generation of the Wilderness is very highly regarded by Hashem, who declared: "I remember for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your bridal days, when you followed me into the wilderness, a land unsown. (Therefore) Israel is holy to Hashem" (Yirmiyah 2:2-3)

"Gedolah Deah!" "How great is True Knowledge!" (Berachot 33A).

The greatest revelation of Hashem for all time was at Har Sinai. And we can look back and see that the purpose of Yosef being sold by the brothers was to bring Jacob and his family to Egypt. The exile in Egypt and the Nation's witnessing of the 10 Plagues and the splitting of Yam Suf were all to prepare us for the great and fearsome day when we were going to meet and hear Hashem. In fact the purpose of the Creation of heaven and earth was only to bestow the Torah upon the Nation of Yisrael.

The Rambam says, regarding the Revelation at Har Sinai, "We must Exhalt it over all others" (Igeret Teman). This means that we must build this scene in the edifice of our minds. Picture that there were 600,000 men between the ages of 20 and 60, along with women, children and converts. Total over 2 million people. The thick cloud of Shechina was on the top of Har Sinai. Thunder and lightning and the strong sound of Shofar.

The Voice is heard, "Anochi Hashem Elokecha", speaking directly to the Nation. The Nation was overwhelmed with the very greatest fear and the greatest love.

The revelation at Har Sinai was the greatest injection of 'Deah', the acquiring of True Knowledge combined with actual sensory perception, which has remained an integral part of the Jewish Nation until today.

Adapted from "Journey into Greatness" by Rabbi Miller ZT'L
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