



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Shavuot 5774 ***Wake Up, Sleepyheads!*** **By Rabba Sara Hurwitz**

Shavuot marks the historic day of Revelation—the day when, according to tradition, God gave the Torah to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Many Jews today mark this extraordinary moment by staying up all night studying the Torah.

It makes sense to mark the anniversary of the Torah's entry into the Jewish narrative by spending time studying it. But why at night? And why *all* night? Why not incorporate time to study Torah within the framework of the morning services? Or create a ritual that commemorates revelation—perhaps a sounding of the shofar along with a resounding recitation of the 10 commandments? I understand that studying is the central focus of Shavuot, but why stay up all night?

The tradition began in 1533 when Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the legal code the Shulchan Aruch, invited a few of his Kabbalistic colleagues to hold a study vigil on Shavuot night. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner, the 17th-century author of Magen Avraham, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, suggests that Caro held this all-night vigil in a nod to a midrashic tradition about the Israelites oversleeping on the morning they were scheduled to receive the Torah:

Rabbi Hakinai says: On the third month the day is twice as long as the night, and Israel slept two hours into the day, for the sleeping in the daytime in this season is sweet, and the night is short.

Although the Israelites had been preparing for revelation for days, they succumbed to sweet slumber, perhaps revealing their hesitation and fear of all that the Torah would require of them. The *midrash* continues, invoking the metaphor of Shavuot as a marriage between God and the Jewish people:

And Moses went into the camp of Israel, and woke Israel up from sleep. He said to them, “Wake up sleepyheads! The groom has already arrived, and is asking for the bride and is waiting for her, that he may usher her into the bridal canopy, to give you the Torah” (Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer 41).

The Israelites had to be woken up, shaken from their slumber to embark on their new journey of pursuing a life of Torah, a life of God, a life of justice.

In response, rather than be caught sleeping, like their ancestors at the foot of Sinai, the Kabbalists established *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a process of ‘rectifying’ our forebears’ lack of vigilance. While they slept, keeping the Torah and its code of ethics waiting for them, we spend the night absorbed in learning its core messages. While they dozed through that warm summer night and on into the morning, we deprive ourselves of sleep until after daybreak. And while they had to be woken to hear God’s voice from Sinai, we wait eagerly through the night to re-enact this revelation by reading the Ten Commandments, our code of law and ethics that obligates us to build a better world.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot is an opportunity to correct past mistakes. It is a call to wake up, arouse our souls, rise to the

challenge of our imperfect world, and commit not to wait to repair its brokenness. There is much to be fixed: poverty, hunger, abuse and discrimination are just a few of the many plagues that require our alert attention.

I recently officiated at a Bat Mitzvah at which the Bat Mitzvah girl spoke about an awakening she had just experienced: during a recent trip to Manhattan, she saw, for the first time, the face of hunger and poverty in the form of a beggar, asking for money. It brought me back to the first time I stared poverty in the face as a young girl in South Africa. A man, too weak to even stand, was sitting outside a supermarket. We handed him a loaf of bread and a carton of milk. I will never forget his face. Up until I saw him, I—just like that 12-year-old girl—lived an insulated life, coddled and protected from the darkness that pervades our world. It took 12 years for that Bat Mitzvah girl's peaceful slumber to be interrupted by the ugliness of poverty, and for her to recognize her obligation to do something about it. Fully awake now, she set on a path, in her small way, to try to fix God's world.

Sleep is sweet. Closing our eyes is easier than being awake and recognizing that we must address the pain and destruction that diminishes our world. But sleeping can no longer be an option. We must rise up and accept our obligation to overcome injustice.

The Talmud teaches that sleep is one sixtieth of death (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 57b). Perhaps Chazal (the rabbis of the Talmud) is teaching that if we close our eyes to the darkness that surrounds us, we may as well be dead. To truly live, to truly be alive, is to be awake to the injustices of our society, and become vigilant about responding.

This Shavuot, may we not be caught sleeping and may we not keep "the Groom" waiting. Wake up! And commit to *tikkun*, to fixing poverty, hunger, abuse, discrimination—all that is broken in our world, so that we can enter the canopy and truly live a life of Torah.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz is on the rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and serves as Dean of Yeshivat Maharat, the first Orthodox program to ordain women as clergy. Rabba Sara graduated from Barnard College, Columbia University and completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program. She was ordained in 2009 by Rabbi Avi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber. Rabba Sara was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize in 2013. She was named as one of *Newsweek's* 50 most influential rabbis three years in a row, *The Jewish Week's* 36 under 36, *The Forward's* 50 most influential Jewish leaders, and is a Bikkurim fellow.

For more information, educational resources and the latest ways to take action:

www.ajws.org

45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018

212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/cvc.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.