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THE TEST OF SHAVUOS

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<http://bilvavi.net/sugya/shavous>

The Test of Shavuos

The Test That Returns Each Year

Shavuos is the time of the giving of the Torah. Consequently, it is now the time to prepare to receive the Torah. In order to ‘receive’ the Torah each year we can gain inspiration from reflecting on what the Jewish people did to prepare themselves to receive the Torah.

When Hashem came down to Har Sinai, He revealed Himself to the Jewish people. The entire nation trembled at the awesomeness of His revelation. Moshe *Rabbeinu* had to reassure the people that they had nothing to fear, and that Hashem was merely giving them a test.

A difficult test is called a *nisayon*. The days of *Sefiras HaOmer* occur during three months of the Jewish calendar – the second half of the month of Nissan, the entire month of Iyar, and the beginning of the month of Sivan. The word *Nissan* is rooted in the word *nisayon*. In other words, this first month of the *sefiras ha’omer*, the month of Nissan, contains in it a *nisayon* – a test. The “test” is how we will prepare for the Torah.

The word *Iyar* (the month which follows Nissan) comes from the word “*yirah*”, awe. This alludes to how the month of Iyar contains the power of *yirah* which can help enable us to prepare for receiving the Torah.

Thus, the months of Nissan and Iyar both serve to help us prepare for Shavuos. The “*nisayon*” (test) of *Nissan* requires us to prepare for the Torah, and the month of *Iyar* aids us in having the proper *yirah*, which are both necessary in order to receive the Torah.

The word *nisayon* comes from the word *nes*, which means to “run”; if a person “runs” away from the *nisayon*, he fails to grow from it. Alternatively, the word *nes* also means “miracle,” which uplifts a person. The hint of this is that a *nisayon* can either cause a person to run away from it, or become uplifted from it. Thus, every *nisayon* we endure serves as a test of our power of free choice – we can choose to elevate ourselves through the *nisayon* we are presented with, or run away from the message and fail to grow.

When the people heard the voice of Hashem at Har Sinai and all the thunder and lightning that followed, they had a *nisayon*. They were faced with a choice – they could want to run away, or they could choose to become uplifted. Their first reaction was to want to flee; only then did Moshe *Rabbeinu* calm them down and reassure them not to flee in fear. He was really teaching the people that the purpose of this *nisayon* was to uplift them.

The Test At Har Sinai and Each Year

What exactly is the *nisayon* which the Jewish people faced in receiving the Torah? What did they find so difficult?

The *Mesillas Yescharim* writes that everything in this world is in a *nisayon*. No matter who you are and what your situation is, one is always facing a *nisayon*.

The first *nisayon* at Har Sinai was whether we the Jewish people would really accept the Torah when it was offered by Hashem to them as an option. The second *nisayon* occurred at the actual time of the giving of the Torah and was a much deeper but more subtle kind of test. At this point the Jewish people had already reached the apex of

perfection, standing at Har Sinai and seeing the revelation of Hashem. Their test was whether they were willing and courageous enough choose to hear the Torah directly from the voice of Hashem.

Did they pass the test?

The Torah tells us that they did not pass the test. When the people heard the voice of Hashem at Har Sinai, they were afraid that they would die from hearing Hashem's voice. In their fear, they requested to hear the Torah from Moshe's voice instead. The Vilna *Gaon* teaches that this deviation from listening to Hashem was the seed that ultimately led to the sin of the Golden Calf. The Jewish people were supposed to be on the level of being willing to die in order to hear the voice of Hashem. From this we learn that we actually need to serve Hashem on the level of being prepared to die just to listen to Hashem's voice!

But surely we would be forgiven for wanting to live and give up the opportunity to hear Hashem's voice, rather than hear Hashem's voice and die? What is the problem with choosing to live rather than hear Hashem's voice? The answer is that to live without hearing the voice of Hashem's is not really a life!

Admittedly, the people's fear of Hashem's voice did not signify idol worship. However, the sin lay in the fact that their fear of dying (which they associated with hearing His voice directly) surpassed their love of Hashem. The people's fear of dying led them to settle for hearing the Torah through Moshe instead of directly from Hashem's voice. However, the people failed to realize that life without hearing Hashem's voice is meaningless.

When Adam sinned, he was ashamed in front of Hashem. He said, "*Your voice I hear amidst the garden, but I am afraid and hiding.*"¹ He ran away from hearing Hashem's voice. At Har Sinai, we reached the purified state of Adam before the sin and were tested once again to see if we would listen to Hashem's voice or run in fear. However, we failed to pass the test.

All of us were at Har Sinai, for our souls were there in a previous lifetime. Thus, we all failed to pass that test – we were afraid to die. However, we have a chance every year to pass this test again every year at Shavuos time. Are we ready to die to hear the voice of Hashem?

Before we accept the light of receiving the Torah which returns every year on Shavuos, we are first tested again to see whether we have reached the level of choosing to listen to Hashem's voice and risk dying. At Har Sinai, the test was overt. In contrast, the test of our current day is not as clear to us, though it is the same test. And though we are not on the same level as we were at Har Sinai, Hashem still sends us the same test to each and every one of us each year [to see if we will pass].

Striving For A Relationship With Hashem In Our Daily Life

In practical terms, what is our "test" that returns to us each Shavuos? In order to understand the essence of this difficult test presented to us each year on Shavuos, we must first understand that there are two totally different ways to live life.

When faced with a difficulty, one kind of person will continue to learn Torah and do all the *mitzvos*, visit *tzaddikim* and give *tzedakah*. He may also *daven* by *kevarim* (and even talk to Hashem a little when he is there). In contrast, the second type of person who meets with challenges will talk to Hashem about them all the time, and share with Him all his problems.

¹ Bereishis 3:10

The first type of person is missing the point of life. Of course, there is something special in visiting *tzaddikim*. There is certainly a concept of *segulos*, but relying on spiritual charms is not enough!! We need to have a constant relationship with Hashem, including regular interaction and talking to Him, so that when we face a challenge we will naturally talk to Hashem directly, without wanting or thinking we need someone else to do it for us!

When we *daven* to Hashem in *Shemoneh Esrei*, we must realize we are speaking directly with Hashem. We can choose to ‘hear His voice’ and have direct contact with Him. And this is not just limited to our *Shemonei Esrei*. Our entire life can and should involve Hashem in this way. We should strive to always feel that Hashem is in front of us. As we learn from the *Mesillas Yesharim*, we should talk to Hashem “as a man who talks to his friend.”

For instance, imagine that you need something urgently. There is something very specific that you personally can do about it. Talk to Hashem! *Davening* to Hashem is not a “*segulah*.” Rather, it should be natural to you. This mindset and practice affects our entire life. *Tefillah* is the art of a Jew, which we received from our ancestors. We can ask and thank Hashem before everything we do.

However, since many of us are unfamiliar with this regular practice, we do not feel that closeness to Hashem. Therefore, it is only natural that we would be less likely to be prepared to die for Hashem. There is no relationship, so we would be less inclined to sacrifice anything for Him. There has to first be a relationship with Hashem. Only once we have fostered and ignited a close and loving relationship can we ever hope to reach the level of being prepared to give himself up for Him.

Every year, Hashem approaches us on Shavuos and offers to speak to us again so we can hear His voice. The question is – are we prepared to listen to Him? The truth to this question lies deep in your heart. We must try to reach a level whereby we truly should be willing to and want to hear the voice of Hashem.

Of course, if you ask anyone if he wants to hear Hashem’s voice, he will respond, “Of course! What spiritual bliss that would be!” But as soon as he told that he will have to give his life for it and die for it, he turns back and runs away. At Har Sinai the people did not want to hear Hashem’s voice. Instead they chose to hear the Torah from Moshe. It is harsh to say something like this, but the same thing is likely to happen at the time of the *Moshiach* if one did not develop a strong enough relationship with Hashem. At the time of the *Moshiach*, we are taught that we will learn Torah. But from whom will we hear this Torah from? We will have a choice to hear it either from Hashem directly, or from *Moshiach*.

If someone never spent his life talking with Hashem, then when *Moshiach* comes, he will not be able to suddenly run to go hear Hashem’s voice teaching the Torah. He will reject hearing the Torah directly from Hashem Himself, in favor of hearing it from *Moshiach*!

The Sages teach that one must exert himself over the Torah, and must “kill himself in the tents of Torah.”² Why it is indeed necessary for us to ‘die’ for the Torah? On a simple level, this is a euphemism for sacrificing all materialism for the sake of *ruchniyus*, and a greater connection with the Torah. However, on a deeper level, we learn that just as the Jewish people were supposed to die in order to hear Hashem’s voice, so must we be prepared to die in order to hear Hashem’s speaking to us through the Torah.

And so, the question we must ask ourselves each Shavuos is: Are we prepared to *die* for the Torah?

Imagine if Hashem came to us again and asked us if we wanted the Torah. Imagine if we heard His voice and felt our souls leaving us, just as the souls of the Jewish people left them with each word of the Torah they heard from

Hashem. What would we do? Would we be willing to continue listening and sacrifice our soul? Or would we say, “I don’t know about this. I have to ask my wife. Also, I have kids at home. If I die, they will be left without a father.” All kinds of excuses....

Preparation for receiving the Torah is really all about being prepared to sacrifice one’s life for the sake of Torah and to hear Hashem’s voice. And, this must be a true willingness in one’s heart, and it will not suffice as a mere utterance of the lips that is superficial.

Preparing For Shavuos: Making A Self-Accounting

Practically speaking, in the three days leading up to Shavuos, everyone should actively carve out some time of quiet to make a self-accounting and ask himself if he is ready to accept the Torah or not. Is he willing to stay and listen to Hashem’s voice at the risk of death? This is the question that each Jew should ask himself every Shavuos: “If I would be standing at Har Sinai right now, would I be on the level to receive the Torah directly from Hashem’s voice?”

People may assume that such willingness to sacrifice our lives for Hashem was only relevant and appropriate for previous generations, and that we surely cannot be on the level of standing at Har Sinai. They may react, “What do you want from us?? These words are not for this generation...”

But such an attitude reveals a rejection of receiving the Torah. Whether or not we are there yet, we must at least strive to have a yearning to reach that high level, and we must not remain complacent with a low spiritual level.

This willingness to die for Hashem and His Torah should not be limited just to Shavuos. It should carry over into the rest of the year as well – to live a life of connection with Hashem, all day, and not just when we daven three times a day. Every day, each person should actively consider deeply about his relationship with Hashem, and how much he is willing to sacrifice to get closer to Him.

The Torah says, “*Remember the day in which you stood before Hashem, your G-d, at Horeb.*” Don’t just remember that you stood at Har Sinai – remember that you stood in front of **Hashem** at Har Sinai.

These words here will ring true for anyone who searches for a true kind of life. It is the true way to prepare for receiving the Torah. I hope that the words here are not new to you; to the contrary, I hope that they are quite familiar to you. We must separate ourselves from the mores of our generation to become souls of the Creator of the World.

May Hashem merit all of us to accept the Torah before Shavuos, and to be ready to give ourselves up in order to hear Hashem’s voice and His Torah, all year.