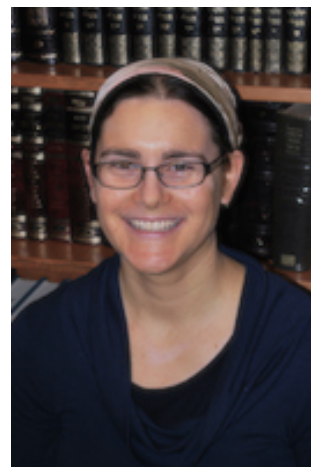




How Do We Celebrate Our Anniversary?

Rabbi Aviva Richman

Shavuot and Simḥat Torah are two holidays that celebrate the gift of Torah, but I am often struck by how different these celebrations are. On Shavuot we stay up all night and learn, engaging with the content of Torah, while on Simḥat Torah we spend our time dancing and celebrating—not studying—Torah. Why is it that on Shavuot, the anniversary of our relationship with Torah, we don't joyfully dance around Torah but open it up and engage more soberly with what Torah says?



It was not always this way. A fourteenth century compendium of holiday practices describes a custom for Simḥat Torah where adults threw apples off of synagogue roofs and children grabbed them in great celebration.¹ What do apples have to do with Simḥat Torah? Nothing! But, as historian Daniel Sperber explains, the symbolism becomes clear when one realizes that the custom originated on Shavuot.² Apples are a symbol of love in the Song of Songs and multiple *midrashim* associate the apple with *Matan Torah*—the wedding day of Israel and God.³ It was also a common practice to throw apples on a bridegroom. In other words, Sha-

¹ *Minhagei ha-Maharil* (R. Ya'akov ben Moshe Levi Moelin).

² Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*.

³ Cf. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:3.



vuot was at one time more of a festive reenactment of a wedding day than a holiday devoted to passionate study.

How did this anniversary celebration become so much more focused on content? The custom of all night Torah study (*Tikkun Leil Shavuot*) first emerged among sixteenth century Kabbalists in Sefad. The act of study, restricted to an elite circle, was about preparing for unification with the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence). The practice looked nothing like our contemporary learning grid of a myriad of topical *shiurim*. It was a fixed recitation, which had become standardized and widespread by the late sixteenth century: three verses from the beginning and end of each Torah portion, the beginning and end of *mishnayot*, passages from Kabbalistic works (*Sefer Yetzirah*, *Zohar*), the list of 613 *mitzvot*, and the Song of Songs.⁴ This list, jumping around from passage to passage, does not represent a sustained act of intellectual engagement with the content of Torah but rather a more emotional or symbolic act expressing love for Torah and all it contains. In fact, one Kabbalistic source describes the *tikkun* as a means to “adorn the bride [i.e. the Torah] and prepare her for the *huppah* the next day.”⁵ The origins of learning on Shavuot, then, are not so far away from earlier festive practices of reliving the wedding day; the Torah of Shavuot night was more like a sonnet than a *shiur*.

In the wake of a modern intellectualized approach to Torah learning, a new question surfaces. Can one engage in difficult Talmud study on the night of Shavuot, instead of the traditional *tikkun*? Does toiling over learning (*yegi'ah*) have any place on this festive anniversary? R. Menashe Klein addresses this question, posed by twentieth century students. His response

⁴ *Sh'nei Luhot ha-Brit Masekhet Shavuot Perek Ner Mitzvah* 4-5 (R. Yeshayahu ha-Levi Hurwitz).

⁵ *Hemdut Yamim*, 18th c.



points towards a profound tension in how we define our relationship to Torah. At first, he affirms that real *limmud Torah* (learning) involves deep and rigorous study:

“Clearly the central point in learning Torah is *yegi’at ha-Torah* (toiling over Torah)... the rabbis expounded that Torah is only fulfilled by one who ‘kills himself’ over it... The Mishnah teaches ‘Reward is in accordance with suffering’⁶ and Maimonides explains that Torah learned out of pleasure has no use and will not last.”

This rather harsh articulation claims that our engagement with Torah and Judaism isn’t meant to be something nice, light and enjoyable and certainly not a mindless recitation. Based on this part of his response, one could conclude that if our learning on the anniversary of *Matan Torah* is meant to be representative of our relationship with Torah—it should be rigorous and demanding. What if an anniversary wasn’t just an evening of a romantic dinner (or cheese-cake, as it were) but actually an affirmation and celebration of how a relationship involves hard work and intensity? In the model of *yegi’ah*, we celebrate our relationship with Torah as a challenge that draws us in, demands our full attention, and asks us to rise into our largest selves.

Yet, R. Klein does not end here with a glorification of *Talmud Torah* that is about hard work. Instead he bemoans ways in which the intellectual focus on *Talmud Torah* has eclipsed many beautiful customs, giving one anecdote of *yeshiva* boys who won’t even stay at the Shabbat table to sing because they are in such a rush to return to Talmud study. As a model for Shavuot night, he turns to the story in the *haggadah* of four rabbis who stay up late telling the

⁶ Mishnah Avot 5:23.



story of the Exodus. Interestingly, he does not suggest that these rabbis were engaged in studying Torah all night, but differentiates between *sippur* (storytelling) and *Talmud Torah*. The learning of Shavuot night is analogous to storytelling; it carries the sweetness of a tradition that has a value separate from rigorous study. Even if hard work is essential, the anniversary of *Matan Torah*, and our relationship with Torah and Judaism in general, should not be overwhelmed by hard work and struggle. All of that *yegi'ah* is for naught if it is not framed by the sweetness of the relationship.

Shavuot and Simḥat Torah model two approaches to our gift of Torah—the one a giddy expression of sheer joy, and the other a more sober engagement with the content of our relationship, asking real and perhaps even hard questions. The range of practices we have seen suggests that these two poles should perhaps be more intertwined. On this Shavuot, in between jumping from one *shiur* to the next or looking up from a difficult text, it could be worth it to throw around some apples too. May our learning be “with great desire, abounding joy and heartfelt passion” for on this day “it is decreed how many *hiddushim* (new insights) a person will have all year.”⁷ An anniversary is not just about remembering a moment in the past, but about a commitment to renew and reframe a relationship each year.

Hag Sameah.

⁷ R. Benzion Abba Shaul. *Or L'Tzion* 3:18



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