



What Fireflies Can Teach Us About Love

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Think back to summer as a kid. It's dusk. Fireflies swirl around your head, their light is a delight you try, and fail, to grasp. You need a vessel, a jar, something to contain the light, even for a moment, as you hold it in your hands and bring it close.

Mitzvot are this vessel. The light, God's light.

Shavuot is a holiday of many names. Yet, it's Shavuot's name as it's called in the Mishnah (Rosh HaShanah 1:2), "Atzeret," connected to the Hebrew root "to stop," that's been creative fodder for many commentators.¹

Why the new name? What does "stopping" have to do with Shavuot? R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev offers three compelling explanations for the origin of this new name for Shavuot: First, he suggests that other holidays contain two ways in which we celebrate the holiday: the performance of positive *mitzvot* and the prohibition to refrain from work. Shavuot, however, has no positive *mitzvot* associated with it. We observe Shavuot through the performance of one *mitzvah* alone, namely the stopping, or refraining from performing *melakhah*, and for this reason, it's called Atzeret.

Second, he suggests all the other holidays are named for events that are associated with a particular holiday. Pesah is named for skipping over the houses of the Israelites; Sukkot for our temporary booths in the wilderness. Shavuot, however, isn't named for an event associated with Shavuot itself but rather a *mitzvah* that has already ended, the *mitzvah* of

¹ Not to be confused with the way the Torah uses the word "Atzeret," which is to mean the 7th day of Pesah (Deuteronomy 16:8) or the 8th day of Sukkot (Leviticus 23: 36, Numbers 29:35)—this latter Atzeret, the festival that we now call Shemini Atzeret / Simhat Torah. In Rabbinic sources, both days are generally known as "the last festival day of Pesah" or "the last festival day of Sukkot," respectively.



counting the seven weeks, or *shavuot*, of the *omer*. Why do we refer to Shavuot by an action that has already been completed? Goodbyes are always difficult. We're sad to say goodbye so instead we say, don't go, stop here, stay a little while. And, thus, Shavuot, or Atzeret, is the moment of stopping or lingering, as we are reluctant to leave behind the *omer*.

It is R. Yitzhak's third reason I'd like to focus on as it offers a model not only of how to be in relationship with God but how to be in relationship with our loved ones.

קדושת לוי

אופן הג', הוא על פי דברי הרמב"ן שפירש על פסוק "מה תעירו ומה תעוררו את האהבה עד שתחפץ" (שיר השירים ב, ז), ופירש כשמגיע לאדם איזה התעוררת של יראה ואהבה להבורא ברוך הוא אזי תיכף ומיד יראה לעשות לה כלי, היינו שיעשה תיכף איזה מצוה, דהיינו שיתן צדקה או ישב תיכף ללמוד וכדומה, כי ידוע שהתעוררת הבאה אל האדם בפתע פתאום הוא אור הנשפע עליו מלמעלה ונקרא בחינת נשמה אזי צריך האדם להלבישה בגוף בכדי שיהיה לה חיזוק ובסיס שלא יהיה מוטה חס ושלום כידוע למביני מדע

Kedushat Levi, Homily for Shavuot

The third component follows the words of the Ramban on the verse, "Do not wake or rouse love, until it pleases!" (Song of Songs 2:7). [Ramban] explains that, when a person experiences an awakening of love and awe for the Holy One, immediately he will see fit to make a vessel for this awakening, meaning that he must immediately perform a *mitzvah*, to give *tzedakah*, or immediately sit and learn, or something of that nature. Because it's known that this awakening that comes to a person suddenly is the light that flows down in abundance from above, and it's like a soul, insofar as one must clothe it in a body in order to strengthen it and give it a foundation so that it not slip away, God forbid. As is known.

R. Yitzhak writes that when one experiences an overflowing of love or awe for the Creator, one needs to channel these feelings into something concrete, namely the performance of *mitzvot*. It's as if this feeling of awakening is like a soul that we must clothe with a body in order to strengthen it, to contain it, so that it can stay with us. If we don't clothe our experience of awe, if we don't provide it with a vessel, it will quickly disperse and disappear back into the ether from where it came.

So too, he writes, with revelation. When the Israelites stood at the foot of the mountain, their world shaken by God's presence and the sound of the *shofar*. They experienced an awakening, a rising up of love and awe for God. They needed a vessel to hold on to this awakening. There was only one problem. They didn't yet have the *mitzvot*, the actions, through which to channel these feelings. They had only been commanded to do one action: not to touch the mountain, to maintain the boundary surrounding it.



שמות יט:כ-כג

וַיֵּרֶד ה' עַל-הָר סִינַי אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיִּקְרָא ה' לְמֹשֶׁה אֶל-רֹאשׁ הָהָר וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה רֵד הָעֵד בְּעַם פְּנִי-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי לְרֹאוֹת וְנָפַל מִמֶּנּוּ רָב: וְגַם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַנִּגְשִׁים אֶל-ה' יִתְקַדְּשׁוּ פָּן-יְפֹרֶץ בָּהֶם ה': וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה' לֹא-יִכַּל הָעָם לַעֲלֹת אֶל-הָר סִינַי כִּי-אַתָּה הַעֲדַתָּה בְּנֹוֹ לֵאמֹר הַגִּבֵּל אֶת-הָהָר וְקִדְּשָׁתוּ:

Exodus 19:20-23

The LORD came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. The LORD said to Moses, “Go down, warn the people not to break through to the LORD to gaze, lest many of them perish. The priests also, who come near the LORD, must stay pure, lest the LORD break out against them.” But Moses said to the LORD, “The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, ‘Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.’”

And, so, they made the most of this one commandment. The Israelites channeled all of this new love and awe into performing this one *mitzvah*: maintaining the boundary around the mountain. This *mitzvah*, this stopping or refraining from crossing the boundary, became the vessel for their new love; hence, the name Atzeret, a stopping, because they stopped themselves from touching the mountain.

There's two components of this that I want to draw out. First, love, awe, and wonder—these are all beautiful but amorphous concepts, difficult to touch, challenging to hold. No sooner than we experience an overwhelming feeling of awe, we are distracted by the next item on our agenda. The feeling of wonder dissipates, the firefly lost. Second, when we experience these feelings, these awakenings in relationship to God or to another human being, it's not enough to just feel them within ourselves. In the words of my mom, “Actions speak louder than words.” When it came to love, she was a big proponent of the idea that it's not enough to just say you love someone, you have to actually show them through actions.

For both of these reasons, we need vessels. We need actions that can make the intangible tangible, that can help us hold on to the light before it disappears. With God, we do this through *mitzvot*. With our loved ones, we do this through acts of kindness. There are all sorts of vessels we create every day to make the intangible tangible. Soothing a crying kid in the middle of the night is a vessel. Calling a friend to check in on them is a vessel. Picking up milk on the way home is a vessel. Through concrete actions, we translate these momentary awakenings, these rushes of love, into something that lasts, a relationship built upon actions.



A haiku.

take this offering,

tired, late night, washing dishes,

a vessel of love.

As we prepare to stand again at the mountain, may we be so lucky to experience a year of awakenings, awakenings in our relationship with God, with our loved ones, and with our community. And, may we create vessels through our actions to hold on to them, lest they slip through our fingers, the fireflies in the night.

