

# Shavuot

## Opening Thoughts

One of the standard, indeed frequent disagreements in synagogues across the world surrounds the questions of whether to stand or sit during the reading of the Ten Commandments. Some have the custom to stand during the Ten Commandments themselves, some stand for the entire aliya and some stand for the entire reading of the day, even if they do stand during the reading of the Torah the rest of the year. On the other hand, some have the custom not to stand at all, and some will only stand if those around them do so. Indeed, some will remain sitting as a matter of principle to show that the entire Torah is important, and no one part is more Divine than any other.

The reasons for standing or sitting are many and varied. For example, Maimonides (1135-1204), in his Responsa (263), rules that one should not stand:

Indeed, in every place where they stand the people should be prevented from doing so, as this has a negative effect on belief, meaning that they mistakenly think that the Torah has levels, some higher and some lower. This is very wrong, and every opening that could potentially lead to such belief and understanding should be firmly closed.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920-2013) agrees with this ruling and writes (Yechave Daat 1:29) that "the truth is with Maimonides in his responsa and one shouldn't deviate from it left or right.

On the other hand, the Chida, Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (1724-1806), writes in his Responsa (Tov Ayin laChida, 11) to maintain the custom of standing where enacted, "for even though there is no law requiring one to stand, seeing as all the people in that place have accepted this custom, it has become law, for if one does not stand when everyone else does so looks as if he is disrespectful."

Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (1915-2006) after writing in his Responsa Tzitz Eliezer (17:26) that the basis for the custom to sit is firmly rooted, concludes his answer in the following manner:

From everything we have written, it is clear that one should not deviate from the practiced custom of yesteryear or from the local custom. I have witnessed righteous sages in synagogues, yeshivot and other places of Torah here in the Holy Land who continue the custom with deep fervor and holy trepidation of standing and encouraging others to stand, making sure that individuals do not deviate from this practice. I have heard that this was and still is the custom among our Sefaradi brethren as well.

Without wishing to take sides between these illustrious Torah giants, I'd like to raise a suggestion that distinguishes between different readings of the Ten Commandments. Shavuot is, in essence, the conclusion of Pesach. With Pesach we recall and relive the Exodus, begin counting the Omer until Shavuot on which day we received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Shavuot is, therefore, another steppingstone of the experience of the Exodus whose highlights are leaving Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, receiving the Torah and finally arriving in the Promised Land. Just as we experienced the exodus at the Seder, on Shavuot it is incumbent that we relive the experience of the Giving of the Torah. Therefore, when reading the Ten Commandments as part of the annual cycle in the portions of Yitro and Va'etchanan, each person should continue the family/local practice. However, on Shavuot, when once again we stand united "one person with one heart" at the foot of Mount Sinai ready for God's words and call out "we will do and we will hear", we should do so today as we did then. Standing, united, joyful in the experience of the wonders, miracles and commandments of those days at this time.

May we merit to always be united and accept upon ourselves the Yoke of Heaven, whether sitting or standing.

## Sources and Questions for Discussion

### The Date of Shavuot

Why did the Torah not specify that the festival of Shavuot is also the day of the giving and receiving of the Divine Torah? ... this is because remembering and receiving the Torah should not be time-bound, but is relevant every day at every hour... and every day we are commanded that they, the words of the Torah, seem like new, fresh and pleasant in our eyes as they were on the day they were given. (Akeidat Yitzchak, Vayikra 67, Emor)

- In your opinion, is it important to know on what date is Shavuot, and if so, why is it not written clearly in the Torah?
- Is there an inherent difference between Shavuot and the other festivals?

### Dairy Foods

The custom is in every place to eat dairy foods. (Rema, Orach Chaim 494:3)

- What effect – spiritually and religiously speaking – do the foods we have on us?
- Do you have other family traditions regarding foods for Shavuot or during the year? What are they and what do they symbolize?

### Mutual Responsibility and Commitment

At the time of the Giving of the Torah the people said, "we will do and we will hear" in the plural. The beauty and sweetness of the Torah led each person to accept responsibility for every fellow Jew. (Chidushei HaRim)

- How, in your opinion, is the sweetness of Torah best expressed?
- Is it right to accept responsibility for others, even if perhaps they wouldn't want it?

### "She saw that she was determined to go" (Ruth 1:18)

On The Talmud tells of the meeting between Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish by the River Jordan. When Resh Lakish jumped over the river Rabbi Yochanan said "your strength should be for Torah!" Once he accepted upon himself to go and study, Resh Lakish no longer had the strength to cross the river with one jump, as the Torah weakens a person. From here we see that even the willingness to accept the Torah can have a fundamental impact on a person's powers. So too, when Naomi saw that Ruth was making an enormous effort to go with her, she understood that Ruth had accepted the Torah with all her heart. (Rabbi Chaim of Zanz)

- If the Torah really weakens a person, how can we explain why we should study and keep it?
- How does the Torah also strengthen us?

### Why was the Torah Given in the Wilderness

The main thing is that a person should be happy with his lot and not continuously chase luxuries. Rather, he should make do with what he has and think that he is in the desert, for a person in the wilderness thinks only about the absolute necessities needed to maintain the body, so that the person be able to serve the Creator. (Mabit, brought in Me'am Lo'ez).

- Does the physical location of a person have an impact on their ability to learn Torah and serve the Almighty?
- Does one need to forego luxuries in order to be truly happy?



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