



STUDY GUIDE FOR ADULTS

THE GIFT OF TORAH

Covenant Freedom & Revelation

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Shavuot stands apart among the Jewish festivals. Unlike Pesach or Sukkot, it has no distinctive physical mitzvah – no matzah, no lulav, no sukkah. It is the festival of pure idea: the giving of Torah at Sinai. Yet within this simplicity lies its greatest depth.

“Jewish destiny was defined by one moment of revelation.” Rabbi Sacks wrote, “but each age adds its commentaries.” At Har Sinai, an entire people stood together and heard the Divine call. United they received the Torah. But the story doesn’t end there. In every generation, we pass down the words and continue the conversation.

As a proponent of ‘a Judaism engaged with the world’, Rabbi Sacks crafted a rich dialogue between Torah and secular teachings across eras and disciplines – what he called “Torah v’Chochmah.” Drawing from ancient sources alongside modern philosophy, science, economics, and psychology, he revealed the Torah as a living framework that speaks powerfully to contemporary life.

This resource follows that tradition, pairing classical Jewish sources and Rabbi Sacks’ teachings with Western voices. The goal is a genuine conversation – one that illuminates both traditions.

THEME ONE

What Happened at Sinai? Revelation and Moral Knowledge

The Torah describes Sinai as an event unlike any other in history: a whole people hearing the voice of God. But what kind of event was it? And how does it compare to other accounts of how human beings come to know what is true and good?

1 | Shemot 19:16, 19

The third day came; and that morning there was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain and the sound of a ram's horn, intensely loud, and all the people in the camp shook... As the sound of the ram's horn grew louder and louder, Moshe spoke and God answered him aloud.

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיט הַבַּקָּר וַיְהִי קֶלֶת וַיִּבְרָקִים וַעֲנָן כָּבֵד עַל הָהָר וְקוֹל שֹׁפָר חֹזֵק מְאֹד וַיִּחַרְדוּ כָּל הָעָם אֲשֶׁר בְּמַחֲנֵה... וַיְהִי קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר הוֹלֵךְ וְחֹזֵק מְאֹד מִשָּׁה יִדְבָּר וְהָאֱלֹהִים יַעֲנֶנּוּ בְּקוֹל.

2 | Devarim 4:32–33

...Has anything as great as this ever happened before? Has anyone heard of anything like this? Has any people ever heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived?

...הִנְהִיָּה פִּדְבָּר הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה אוֹ הַנְּשָׁמַע כְּמֹהוּ. הַשְּׁמַע עִם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים מִדְּבַר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ אֶתְּהָ וַיְחִי.

3 | Mechilta DeRabbi Yishmael, Tractate Bachodesh 1 (Translated by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein)

Why was the Torah given in the wilderness? To teach you that the Torah was given in public, in the open, in a place belonging to no one nation. Had it been given in the Land of Israel, the nations of the world could have said, 'We had no share in it.' Therefore it was given in the wilderness, so that whoever wishes to receive it may come and receive it.

4 | Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, “Bamidbar: Egalitarian Society, Jewish-Style”, I Believe

The Sages understood that something profound was born at Mount Sinai, and this has distinguished Jewish life ever since. It was the *democratisation of knowledge*. Literacy and knowledge of the law was no longer to be confined to a priestly elite. For the first time in history everyone was to have access to knowledge, education and literacy. “The law that Moses gave us is the possession of the assembly of Jacob” (Deut. 33:4) – the whole assembly, not a privileged group within it.

The symbol of this was the revelation at Mount Sinai, the only time in history when God revealed Himself not only to a Prophet but to an entire people, who three times signaled their consent to the commands and the covenant.

5 | Summary of Plato, “Allegory of the Cave”, The Republic, Book VII

Plato describes a group of prisoners trapped in a dark cave, chained up from childhood. When other people parade behind them carrying objects, they see the shadows of the objects on a cave wall, but they are so tightly bound that they can never turn their heads to see the objects themselves.

Then he asks, if the prisoners were finally freed and shown the real objects in daylight, would they believe their own eyes? No, they would struggle to adjust to the sun's glare, and more than that, all the truths they encountered would be uncomfortable. Would they ever accept that the shadows they saw in the cave were mere illusions, or would they cling to what they grew up believing?

This story is understood to be a metaphor for the journey of human understanding and growth. It raises profound questions about knowledge, perception, and the nature of reality, challenging us to reflect on their own understanding of truth, and the potential difficulty of accepting new ideas.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ Plato believed moral knowledge requires a turning of the whole soul, not just acquiring new facts. How does this compare to the Sinai experience? Is the revelation at Sinai more like Plato’s philosophical ascent – a reorientation – or something entirely different?
- ♦ The Mechilta says the Torah was given in the wilderness so all could receive it. This is a universalist claim embedded in a particular people’s story. How does Rabbi Sacks’ idea of the ‘democratization of revelation’ compare to Plato’s vision of the philosopher-king who alone ascends to truth?
- ♦ In Plato’s allegory, it will take a new person to bring the prisoners to the truth, similar to how Moshe brought the Torah to the people. What are the obligations of those who have encountered truth or revelation to those who have not yet turned towards it?

THEME TWO

Law as Liberation – Freedom and Obligation

One of the deepest tensions in Western thought is between law and freedom. Enlightenment thinkers struggled to explain why free individuals should accept any binding obligation. Rabbi Sacks argued that this tension rests on a fundamental misunderstanding – and that Torah illuminates a third way.

6 | Mishnah Avot 6:2

It also says, “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved (*charut*) on the tablets.” Read not *charut* (“engraved”) but *cherut* (“freedom”), for the only person who is truly free is one who occupies himself with Torah study.

ואומר והלחת מעשה אלהים הַמָּה וְהַמְּכֻתָּב מְכֻתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא חֲרוּת עַל הַלְּחָת, אֶל תִּקְרָא חֲרוּת אֶלָּא חֲרוּת, שְׂאִין לָךְ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי שְׁעוֹסֵק בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה.

7 | Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuva 5:1

Free will is granted to all human beings. If one desires to turn toward the good path and be righteous, the choice is theirs. If one desires to turn toward the evil path and be wicked, the choice is theirs... This principle is a great fundamental and a pillar of the Torah and its commandments.

8 | Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958)

The first of these political senses of freedom or liberty I shall call ‘negative’ sense, – ‘the area within which the subject... is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?’. The second, which I shall call the positive sense, is involved in the answer to the question ‘What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?’ The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap.

9 | Rousseau, The Social Contract, Book I (1762)

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer. If I took into account only force, and the effects derived from it, I should say: “As long as a people is compelled to obey, and obeys, it does well; as soon as it can shake off the yoke, and shakes it off, it does still better; for, regaining its liberty by the same right as took it away, either it is justified in resuming it, or there was no justification for those who took it away.” But the social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights. Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions.

10 | Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Pesach Message to Jewish Communities, 2012

To truly be free, we must understand what it means to not be free. Yet 'freedom' itself has different dimensions, a point reflected in the two Hebrew words used to describe it, *chofesh* and *cherut*. *Chofesh* is 'freedom from', *cherut* is 'freedom to'. *Chofesh* is what a slave acquires when released from slavery. He or she is free from being subject to someone else's will. But this kind of liberty is not enough to create a free society. A world in which everyone is free to do what they like begins in anarchy and ends in tyranny. That is why *chofesh* is only the beginning of freedom, not its ultimate destination".

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ Isaiah Berlin distinguishes 'negative liberty' (freedom from interference) and 'positive liberty' (freedom to self-mastery). The Talmud's *charut/cherut* wordplay suggests engraving – being bound – is itself freedom. Which concept of liberty does Torah's view most resemble, and where does it part ways with Berlin entirely?
- ♦ Rambam insists free will is a foundational pillar of Torah. If God commands, in what sense is obedience truly free?
- ♦ Rousseau's social contract is built on rational consent – individuals calculate their interests and agree. The covenantal *na'aseh v'nishmah* agrees before fully understanding. What is the fundamental difference between these two kinds of commitment.

THEME THREE

Covenant – Beyond Contract, Beyond Community

Rabbi Sacks argued that *brit* – covenant – is one of Judaism's most revolutionary contributions to civilization. It offers a model of human togetherness that is neither the liberal social contract (a transaction between rational individuals) nor organic ethnic community (kinship and shared blood), but something with a different grammar altogether. Shavuot is the anniversary of that covenant.

11 | Shemot 24:7

Then he took the book of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. They replied, "All that the Lord has spoken we shall do and we shall hear."

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְיָהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

12 | Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a

When Israel gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hear,' a heavenly voice went forth and said to them: 'Who revealed to My children this secret that the ministering angels use?' ... First they do, then they hear.

בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהַקְּדִימוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל "נַעֲשֶׂה" לְ"נִשְׁמָע" יִצְתָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה לָהֶן: מִי גָלָה לְבָנֵי רִזְזָה שֶׁמַּלְאֲכֵי הַשָּׁרָת מְשַׁתְּמָשִׁין בּוֹ? ... בְּרִישָׁא "עֵשִׂי", וְהִדֵּר "לְשִׁמְעֵי".

13 | Megillat Ruth 1:16–17

For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

כִּי אֶל אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלַי וּבְאֶשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלֶיךָ עַמִּי עַמִּי וְאֵלֶיךָ אֵלֶיךָ.

14 | Rabbi Jonathan Sacks | A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility

We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what Megillat Rut is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had for Naomi and Boaz had for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ Ruth's declaration – “your people shall be my people” – is a choice of identity, not just geography. In what ways is belonging to the Jewish people today covenantal rather than merely ethnic or cultural? What would it mean to inhabit that covenant more consciously?
- ♦ What makes *na'aseh v'nishmah* angelic? Why would acting before understanding be a secret to the heavenly world?

CLOSING REFLECTION

The Living Conversation

Each year on Shavuot we re-receive the Torah. But Rabbi Sacks insisted that this is not a passive activity. We do not inherit Torah as an ancient artifact, rather, Torah is constantly with us: **כי הם חיינו וארך ימינו**, “For they are our life and the length of our days.”

15 | Talmud Bavli, Menachot 29b

Moshe ascended to heaven and found the Holy One attaching crowns to the letters of the Torah... God replied: “There is a man who will arise after many generations – Akiva ben Yosef – who will expound heaps and heaps of laws upon each crown.” Moshe went and sat at the back of eight rows of students and did not understand what they were saying. Then a student asked Akiva, ‘From where do you know this?’ and Akiva replied: ‘It is a law given to Moshe at Sinai.’ And Moshe was comforted.

בְּשַׁעָה שֶׁעָלָה מִשָּׁה לְמָרוֹם, מִצָּאוּ לְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שְׂיוֹשֵׁב וְקוֹשֵׁר כְּתָרִים לְאוֹתֵיזוֹת... אָמַר לוֹ: אָדָם אֶחָד יֵשׁ שֶׁעֲתִיד לְהִיֹּת בְּסוּף כְּמָה דוֹרוֹת וְעֵקִיבָא בֵּן יוֹסֵף שְׂמוֹ, שֶׁעֲתִיד לְדְרוֹשׁ עַל כָּל קוּץ וְקוּץ תִּילְיִן תִּילְיִן שֶׁל הַלְּכוֹת... חֲזוֹר לְאַחֲרָה. הֵלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּסוּף שְׂמוֹנֶה שׁוּרוֹת, וְלֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ מָה הֵן אוֹמְרִים, תִּשַׁשׁ כָּחוֹ. בֵּינוֹ שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לְדָבָר אֶחָד, אָמְרוּ לוֹ תִּלְמִידָיו: רַבִּי, מִנֵּין לָךְ? אָמַר לָהֶן: “הַלְּכָה לְמִשָּׁה מְסִינִי”, נִתְיַשְׁבָּה דַּעְתוֹ.

16 | Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Introduction, Koren Sacks Shavuot Machzor

[Shavuot is when we celebrate] our greatest gift: the Torah, our constitution of liberty under the sovereignty of God, our marriage contract with Heaven itself, written in letters of black fire on white fire, joining the infinity of God and the finitude of humankind in an unbreakable bond of law and love, the scroll Jews carried wherever they went, and that carried them. This is the Torah: the voice of heaven as it is heard on earth, the word that lights the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ♦ Moshe cannot follow the Torah being taught in his name, and yet he is comforted when he hears it attributed to Sinai. What does this story say about the relationship between innovation and faithfulness in a living tradition?
- ♦ Rabbi Sacks says Torah is “the scroll Jews carried wherever they went, and that carried them.” In what ways does the literal and figurative nature of this expression speak to you?



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