

Yad Avraham Institute
WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY SERIES

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita
Special Shavuos Edition

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkofa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Shavuos Edition

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Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

Dean

1. The Meteoric Ascent of the Jewish People

The Torah tells us that on the second day of Passover the Omer offering was brought. This offering was comprised of barley flour. On the festival of Shavuos, the day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people, the communal offering that was brought was comprised of two loaves of wheat bread. What is the significance of the Omer offering being made of barley flour and the two loaves of bread brought on Shavuos being made of wheat flour?

The Mishna in Tractate Sotah tells us that the meal offering (Mincha) that is brought by the suspected adulteress was made of barley flour. It explains, "Since her behavior was similar to that of an animal (by sequestering herself with a man other than her husband), the material make-up of her meal offering is the grain used as animal fodder (which is barley)." The majority of barley grain is used for animal consumption.

The Maharal explains that when the Jewish people left Egypt they were devoid of spirituality. They were at the point of spiritual extinction, which is the 49th level of spiritual contamination. At that point, the classification of the Jewish people was the equivalent of the animal that has no relevance to spirituality and is totally physical. Therefore, the Torah chooses the ingredient of barley for the Omer offering to signify the spiritual level of the Jewish people at that moment. Fifty days later at Sinai when the Torah was given to the Jewish people, they had reached the pinnacle of their spirituality. At that moment they had achieved the classification of "adam (man/the perfected human)" whose objective and function is to achieve spirituality. As it states, "You (the Jewish people) are called 'adam (man)' but they (the nations of the world) are not called 'adam'." Adam was the ultimate spiritualized being that was created by G'd Himself. After the Jewish people accepted the Torah, their status no longer was the equivalent of the animal, but rather, they reflected the characteristic of Adam. In order to signify their advanced spiritual level at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the Torah tell us that the communal

offering must be comprised of wheat flour. As the Gemara in Tractate Huryos tells us that the primary consumption of wheat grain is by human beings.

Chinuch in his codification of the mitzvos explains the philosophical understanding of the counting of the days of the Omer. He writes, "The counting of Sefira is from the time of the exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. We count in anticipation of that special moment which culminates on the 50th day after we began counting. Just as the slave who works in the sun longs and yearns for the moment that he will have the relief of the shade, so too is our counting an expression of anticipation and yearning for that moment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai."

The level of clarity that the Jewish people had achieved at Sinai was unique. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that when they unequivocally accepted the Torah by declaring "Naaseh V'nishma – we will do and we will listen" G'd had said, "Who revealed this secret to My children?" The Jewish people were willing to do the Will of G'd even before understanding the extent of the commitment, which is the characteristic of angels. They were able to assume the level of clarity of an angel because they had advanced to the ultimate level of their own spirituality.

We say in the Hagadah "If G'd had only brought us to Mt. Sinai and had not given us the Torah it would have been sufficient." If the objective of leaving Egypt was for the sake of receiving the Torah at Sinai, why would it have been sufficient for them to merely be brought to the foot of the Mountain? The ultimate achievement of man is to come to the realization that his only purpose and function is spirituality. All that exists is only a means to that end. It was only because the Jewish people had come to their pinnacle of spirituality at the foot of Mt. Sinai that they were able to make the declaration of "Naaseh v'nishmah." This is the meaning of the statement, "it would have been sufficient."

2. *Appreciating the Declaration of Naaseh V'nishmah*

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that a Sadducee (heretic) observed Rava engrossed in Torah study to such a degree that he was not aware that his hand was wedged under his foot –causing it to bleed. The heretic said to Rava, “You impulsive people! Just as in the past your mouth spoke before your ears listened, you are behaving in a similar impulsive manner – not thinking about the consequences of your behavior.” Initially at Sinai when G’d offered the Torah to the Jewish people their response was *Naaseh V'nishmah* (we will do and we will listen). They had accepted the Torah unequivocally – regardless of the extent of the obligation. The Sadducee had criticized our ancestors at Sinai for behaving irresponsibly by accepting something upon themselves although they were not aware of the degree of obligation it entailed. Rava responded, “The Jewish people accepted G’d’s Torah with a pure and trusting heart. One who loves another assumes that the one he loves would not burden him with more than he can assume. Therefore, we accepted His Torah unequivocally because of our faith and trust in Him.”

As it is written in *Mishlei* (Proverbs), “The innocence of the just will guide them but the corruption of the faithless will despoil them.” Rava was able to immerse himself in his Torah study, to the point that he was oblivious to his surroundings, because of his trust in G’d. Rava understood that G’d would not allow any harm to come to him when he was engaged in Torah study. However, the Sadducee, on the other hand, who did not have a trusting heart or faith in G’d, would not merit G’d’s protection.

What causes one to be trusting in G’d? Contrastingly, what causes one to be suspicious of Him? Human beings naturally have many needs and thus feel insecure because of their concern that they may not be able to fulfill them. It is when one focuses on his own needs and insecurities that he becomes suspicious. Whereas, one whose heart is filled with love for G’d does not focus on himself but rather on G’d. The Jewish people at Sinai had an unusual level of love for G’d because of their understanding of what they meant to him. Therefore, they had no concern that their needs would not be addressed. It is comparable to a child who has always been provided for by his father without fail. That child will not be concerned that his father will stop providing. When one knows that G’d has provided for him – even in the most unusual

circumstances- that person will not suspect that G’d will offer him anything that would be beyond his capacity.

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that one merits Torah through Divine Assistance. In order to merit Divine Assistance one must have a relationship with G’d, which comes about through trust. If one is distracted while studying Torah because of his concern for his material needs, he is failing in an area, which is fundamental to the acquisition of Torah. The Jewish people only merited the Torah because of their unswerving faith in G’d. If we are to be the proper receptacle to receive the Torah at a special level, we must have that unconditional trust and faith in G’d.

Rava’s level of immersion in Torah had a semblance of the Jews at Sinai because of his trust in G’d. He was not concerned that his needs would not be fulfilled. It is because of that unswerving faith/trust and that Rava merited an advanced level of Divine Assistance. Contrary to the Sadducee’s claim that the Jewish people impulsively declared their acceptance of the Torah with *Naaseh V'nishmah*, it was their level of trust that caused them to accept the Torah unequivocally.

3. *Understanding Choice Within the Context of Torah*

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* states, “Reb Elazar says, “When the Jewish people said *Naaseh V'nishma* (we will do and we will listen) a heavenly voice was heard saying, “Who revealed this secret to my children? It is an expression used only by the angels!” As it is alluded to in *Tehillim* (*Psalms*), “Bless Hashem O His angels; mighty in strength who do His bidding to obey the voice of His word.” Meaning, the angel first does the Word of G’d and then listens. Similarly, the Jewish people expressed themselves as angels because of their advanced level of spirituality that they had achieved at Sinai. Thus, we see that the Jewish people assumed the posture of *malachim* (angels) at Sinai through their own free will.

Throughout the Torah when the various levels of obligation are delineated, it is stated in the following order: *Chukim* (Statutes), *Mishpatim* (Commandments), and *Mitzvos*. *Chukim* (*Statutes*) are laws that are not able to be understood within a rational context (such as dietary laws, Red Heifer (parah dumah), prohibition of wool and linen, etc.). *Mishpatim* are rational laws (such as those pertaining to stealing, murder, charity etc.). The Torah introduces different classifications of obligations in this specific order

to communicate that even when one performs a so-called “rational” mitzvah, in essence it is being observed as a *Chok*. The fundamental principle of Torah is *Chok*. Meaning the Jew accepts the Torah only because it is the Will of G'd. In essence this is the equivalent of “*Naaseh V'nishmah*.” The only reason the Jewish people merited the Torah and became the nation of G'd was that they had accepted it unequivocally without any need to understand its extent or rational value. The significance of the Torah to the Jewish people was only to do the will of G'd.

The Jews at Sinai established themselves as angels. Just as an angel's function is only to do the Will of G'd without any other motive or personal benefit, identically the Jews at Sinai assumed that level.

We say in the *kiddusha*, “We will sanctify Your Name in this world, just as they (the *malachim*) sanctify it in heaven above.” What relevance do the Jewish people have to the manner in which the angels sanctify the Name of G'd? Since the Jewish people at Sinai accepted the Torah with the declaration of *Naaseh V'nishmah*, they assumed the status of *malachim*. The only people who are qualified to sanctify G'd's Name as it is done in heaven is the Jewish people because they possess the innate characteristic of angels.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin zt'l, in his work *Nefesh HaChaim*, cites the Zohar which says that the angels in heaven cannot say *shirah* (the praises of G'd) until the Jewish people from below have said their *kiddusha* (*shirah*). The Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin* states, “The tzaddik (devoutly righteous person) is greater than the *malach*.” Although the angel has greater understanding of G'd, the tzaddik is greater because when he does the Will of G'd it is only through his free choice – which is not the case with the angel (who does not have free choice). The angel was created to perform only the way G'd willed him to function. The Jewish people at Sinai – with the declaration of *naaseh v'nishmah* chose through their own volition to accept G'd's Torah. Thus, the angels in heaven must wait to sing G'd's *shirah* until the Jewish people (who are angels at a more advanced level) have sung theirs.

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that one of the reasons Jerusalem was destroyed was because the Jewish people disgraced the “*malachei Elokim* – the angels of G'd.” The Gemara tells us that the *malachei Elokim* is referring to the Torah sages. Rebbe Yishmael tells us that there are 13 methods through which the written law can be interpreted. It is only through this methodology that the

interpretation of Torah is considered accurately the Word of G'd. Any other interpretation, which is not limited to these parameters, has no relevance to the divine. Despite the breadth and depth of proficiency of the Torah sage (and the genius that he may possess), he understands that he is bound by a specific structure of interpretation – regardless of his own ability to see it differently. Thus, the Torah sage assumes the posture of the *malach* – who is bound by the Word of G'd.

Acher (Alisha ben Avuya – the rebbe of Reb Meir) was a Torah sage that had reached a unique level of Torah knowledge; however, he became a heretic. The Gemara explains that the reason for this is that he had “an impurity in his heart.” Acher had studied Greek writings, which have a sensual appeal and created a conflict that ultimately caused him to process information differently. He was a man of unlimited ability who wanted to go beyond the parameters that were set by the Torah. He rebelled against the concept of limitation – thus giving up his posture of *malach*. A *malach* functions within the context of what he was created to do. Similarly, a Jew, despite his ability to do differently must live within the limits that are set by the Torah. The Jew must do the Will of G'd only because it is His Will and not because of his rational understanding.

The Maharal of Prague asks, “If the Jewish people had already accepted the Torah at Sinai with the declaration of *Naaseh V'nishmah* why was it necessary for G'd to hold a mountain over their heads to compel them to accept the Torah? The Maharal answers that it is true that the Jewish people had said *Naaseh V'nishmah*; however, the mountain over their heads was to demonstrate to them that they must accept the Torah because it is the Will of G'd regardless of their own preference.

The world was created only for the sake of the Jewish people who are referred to as “*Reishis* – the first/chosen” –as the Torah is referred to as “*Reishis*.” The setting for the giving of Torah at Sinai was one of obligation because G'd was communicating to them that in order to have relevance to the Torah, one must assume the posture of an angel. Just as the angel functions as he does only because G'd Wills it to be so, similarly the Jewish people must accept the Torah because G'd Wills it to be so. Therefore, if the Jew is able to perform within a similar context in which the Torah was given at Sinai, (that there is no choice but to do the Will of G'd), he can achieve a level that is even greater than the angel because he has the choice to do otherwise.

4. The Human Mind Vis-à-vis G'dliness

The Gemara in Tractate *Shabbos* tells us that when Moshe ascended to heaven (to receive the Torah) the angels said to G'd, "Master of the Universe, why is there a mere mortal among us?" G'd responded, "He came to receive the Torah." The angels said to G'd, "This precious treasure that has been hidden away for 974 generations before creation, are you giving it to a mere mortal? What is the value of this undeveloped being that he is even worthy of being remembered? Give Your glory to heaven." G'd spoke to Moshe saying, "Answer them." Moshe then responded and refuted the angels' claim by saying, "The Torah states, 'I am the Lord your G'd who has taken you out of Egypt' – were you ever in Egypt? The Torah says, 'You shall honor you father and mother – do you have a father and mother?' Moshe provided the angels with many examples, which confirmed the fact that the Torah was intended for man and does not have relevance to the heavenly body of angels. Thus, Moshe acquired the Torah for the Jewish people. Why was it necessary for Moshe to respond to the angels' claim when the question was directed to G'd Himself? G'd could have responded to them directly.

The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metzia* tells us that Rebbe Eliezer, the Chachamim (rabbis) and Rebbe Yehoshua debated the status of an earthenware oven that had become contaminated and subsequently severed into parts. The contamination of an earthenware vessel can be removed only if that vessel is broken and thus loses its status as a vessel. The question was if that vessel that was broken were to be reassembled, would it contain the original contamination or would it be considered a new vessel, which is uncontaminated. Rebbe Eliezer's position was that the reassembled oven is considered spiritually pure; however, the majority of his colleagues disagreed and ruled that it was spiritually contaminated. After a lengthy exchange between Rebbe Eliezer and the Chachamim, a *Bas Kol* (Heavenly Voice) declared, "The law is according to Rebbe Eliezer." Rebbe Yehoshua stood up and said, "*Lo ba shamayim he* – Torah is not in heaven!" Meaning, the definitive legal rulings of Torah were given to man to decide and not G'd. Thus, the declaration of the *Bas Kol* was irrelevant. It is not that the human mind has greater understanding (G'd forbid) than the Divine Mind; but rather, when the Torah was given at Sinai it was given to be processed and elucidated with the human intellect of the Jew – (within the context of the 13 methods of interpretation).

It was necessary for Moshe to participate in the acquisition of Torah through his response to the angels in order to establish the principle of "*Lo ba shamayim he* – Torah is not in heaven!" The way Torah is acquired is through human initiative. For example, the Vilna Gaon zt'l shared with his closest disciples that although angels were made available to him to reveal the hidden secrets of the Torah, he was not interested. He rejected the offer from the angels. The Vilna Gaon said that if he has the capacity and ability to derive from the Torah the information that would be transmitted to him by the angels, he preferred to use his own initiative to bring that about. This is based on the principle of "*Lo ba shamayim he*." Torah was given to the Jewish people to toil and understand through their own initiative and intellect.

The Gemara in Tractate *Megillah* tells us that if a person toils sufficiently in Torah he will come upon its truth. Although the human mind processes the Torah with its own intellect; nevertheless, one succeeds only through Divine Assistance.

Chazal tell us that at Sinai, G'd brought down heaven to earth. Why was this necessary? He could have remained in heaven and communicated the Torah from there. What is the symbolism of bringing heaven to earth? Before the sin of Adam, physical existence was meant to accommodate G'd's Presence and the purity of the world was at such a level that it was able to contain G'd's Presence (no less than heaven could). However, because of the sin of Adam a level of spiritual contamination was introduced into existence that made it unfit for the Divine Presence. It was only later when the Jewish people were commanded to build the Mishkan that G'd's Presence was accommodated in their midst. The Mishkan was a microcosm that was symbolic of all existence. G'd's entering into that location was a semblance of the initial intent of Creation. When the Torah was given at Sinai, the Jewish people were reinstated to the state of pre-sin of Adam. Thus, G'd's Presence was able to descend again into this existence. This was the symbolism of G'd's bringing heaven to earth at Sinai.

Initially, before the sin, the extent of Adam's grasp was touching upon the unlimited. As Chazal tell us before the sin, Adam was able to see from one end of world to the other. He had a level of clarity that there was nothing occluded from his understanding. Thus, the mind of man initially was the mechanism used to process spirituality. The intent of creation was that Torah should not be in heaven because of man's special ability.

The way one acquires Torah is only through toiling and applying oneself on a continuous basis. We pray to G'd, "Give us a portion in Your Torah." It is true G'd gives us our portion of Torah however to be worthy of that acquisition is only through our own efforts.

5. The Innate Characteristic of G'd

The Torah tells us that the Levym were designated to redeem the *Bechorim* (The First Born). **"Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Behold! I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel, in place of every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine.'**" After this process was completed the Levym were designated to assist the Kohanim (Priests) as the officiants of G'd. The First Born were originally designated by G'd to be His officiants (as Kohanim); however, because of their involvement with the *Chet HaEigil* (The Sin of the Golden Calf) they were disqualified. Since the Levym were not tainted with the impurity of idolatry, they retained that special relationship with G'd.

Why was the First Born initially more qualified to be the Kohen? What is the innate characteristic of the *Bechor* (First Born) that makes him special? The Torah states that on the Festival of Shavuot one must begin bringing the first of the newly ripened fruits (*Bekurim* – from the same word as *Bechorim*) to the Temple Mount for G'd to be given to the Kohen. At the Temple Mount, the *Bekurim* must be given to the Kohen. At the time of the ceremony (the *Bekurim*), the one who brings the new fruits must declare his gratitude to G'd for the land that was given to bring forth this produce. Subsequently he prostrated himself in order to negate himself in the presence of G'd.

Rabbeinu Bachya, in his introduction to the Portion of *Ki Savo* (where the Mitzvah of *Bikurim* is mentioned), explains that this process involves bringing the new fruits that are *Reishis* (first), to the location that is *Reishis* (The Temple Mount – which is the most special location), for G'd who is the *Reishis Kol* (Beginning of everything). Then it is given to the Kohen (who is *Reishis* because he was chosen to be the officiant of G'd). Rabbeinu Bachya is saying that there is a single thread, which weaves through the entire *Bikurim* ritual that reflects the concept of *Reishis*.

The Torah is revealing to us that anything, which reflects the characteristic of *Reishis*, has an innate holiness and special status because it possesses the innate

characteristic of G'd - who is the beginning of everything. The reason for this is that anything that has a commonality with G'd can be associated with Him. The *Bechor* (the First Born) innately shares the characteristic of being *the* first, since he is the first child to open his mother's womb. Thus sharing this innate characteristic of G'd (of being first) allows him to have a special relationship with Him. However, because the *Bechorim* became tainted with the *Chet HaEigil* they no longer qualified to have that special relationship. The Levym, on the other hand, who were unique because they were the only ones who did not succumb to the *Chet HaEigil*, assumed the status of *Reishis* (unique/ one of kind). Thus, they assumed the characteristic of G'd which is unique and one of a kind-qualifying them to be the officiants.

The Midrash tells us that the letters of the word "*B'Heboram*" are the same letters as Avraham. The Maharal of Prague explains that the word "*B'Heboram*" which means, "And He (G'd) created them (existence)" has the same letters as Avraham to indicate that Avraham himself is the beginning of a new existence within creation. The Gemara in *Tractate Berachos* tells us that Avraham was the first human being to refer to G'd as "*Adni (Master)*." The commentators point out that although Adam had referred to G'd as "*Adni (Master)*" it was only because he was the handiwork of G'd that he recognized G'd as the Master. Avraham, on the other hand, was born into a pagan world where G'd's existence was unknown; despite this, he was able to recognize G'd as the Master. According to this understanding, Avraham also possesses a uniqueness- being the first human to recognize G'd's existence- *Reishis*. This is why G'd refers to Avraham as, "My beloved" because he possessed this commonality with G'd.

Reb Meir Simcha of Dvinsk z'tl cites a verse that refers to Avraham as the "*Navone*" (Perceptive and insightful one) and to Yitzchak, Yaakov, and Moshe as "*Chacham*" (One who is a repository of knowledge). Reb Meir Simcha z'tl explains that Avraham is referred to as *Navone* because he was able to perceive G'd's Omnipotence despite the lack of His obvious presence. However, Yitzchok and Yaakov were initially made aware of G'd's Presence through the teaching of their father and were only able to advance themselves spiritually because of that previous foundation. Therefore, they are referred to as "*Chacham*."

After Avraham defeated the four kings, Malki Tzedek (Shem, the son of Noach who is referred to as Kohen) came to offer Avraham bread and wine to restore

his strength after the battle. Malki Tzedek then blessed Avraham. At this moment, the Midrash tells us that G'd transferred the *Kahuna* status (the Priesthood) from the other descendents of Shem to the descendents of Avraham. Avraham merited this new status of Kohen because he possessed the characteristic of *Reishis*. He was the only human being in all existence who was willing to die for the sake of G'd and proclaim His Omnipotence/Unity.

6. What is the Essence of the Jewish People?

The Torah states, **“You (the Jewish people) shall be holy because I your G'd am holy.”** The *Yalkut* explains an application of this concept is found in the verse stated in the Book of Devarim “And you are attached to G'd.” Yirmiyah the Prophet says, “Just as one’s belt is attached to one’s waist so too are the Jewish people attached to G'd.” The *Yalkut* continues, “G'd said to the Jewish people, “I am not like the mortal king who does not permit his subjects to carry his name (which would be punishable by death). You (the Jewish people) carry my Name.” The *Midrash* continues to discuss the various ways G'd is identified and how the Jewish people are identified in a similar manner. For example, G'd is referred to as *Elokim* (an appellation for G'd) and G'd called the Jewish people by His appellation. As it is stated in the verse in *Tehillim* (Psalms), “I have said that you (the Jewish people) are *Elokim*.” G'd is called *Chacham* (wise) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Chachamim*. G'd is referred to as *Dodi* (Beloved) and He refers to the Jewish people as beloved. G'd is identified as *Chassid* (scrupulously Pious) and He refers to His people as the scrupulously pious. G'd is referred to as *Kadosh* (holy) and He refers to the Jewish people as *Kadoshim* (holy). What is the significance of identifying the Jewish people with the many appellations of G'd Himself?

Tana d'vei Eliyahu (teachings of Eliyahu the Prophet) states that every Jew must say, “When will my accomplishments be comparable to the accomplishments of my forbearers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov?” Some commentators explain the reason one must aspire to the accomplishments of nothing less than our forefathers (and not to people of lesser dimension) is that one must set his goals at the most advanced level in order to go farther. However, we are able to explain this passage of the *Tana d'vei Eliyahu* differently.

The Gemara in Tractate *Yevamos* tells us that Jewish people possess three innate qualities: they are merciful, have shame and perform acts of loving-kindness. These qualities exist within the Jew because they are

passed down to us from Avraham our Patriarch. The Jewish people are the spiritual heirs of their forefathers and thus possess the innate characteristics and qualities exemplified by Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They are part of our spiritual gene pool. The spiritual potential of the Jew goes beyond ordinary limits only because of his relevance to his forbearers. It is only because the Jew descends from the holy Patriarchs that he has unlimited spiritual potential. Therefore, one must aspire to the accomplishments of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov because his potential in this regard is defined by their accomplishments. One cannot achieve the same level as our Patriarchs; nevertheless one must aspire to it because we are a semblance of who they were.

The Jewish people may think that they are no different from any other nation. To this G'd says that the Jewish people are truly unique. He identifies them with many of His own appellations (Wise, Pious, Beloved, Holy, etc.). Since G'd identifies the Jew as such, it is evident that the Jew possesses these inherent qualities and characteristics. He possesses a semblance of G'd's Wisdom because G'd chooses to refer to the Jew as *Chacham*.

The Jew must understand and appreciate who he is. If the Jew is able to value and understand his intrinsic ability, he will be able to appreciate his potential.

At Sinai when G'd identified the Jewish people as “My kingly, priestly and holy people,” after they had said, “*Naaseh V'nishmah* – we will do and we will listen,” He was revealing to them that they are inherently kingly, priestly and holy. It was only because they possessed the potential for these qualities that they were able to accept the Torah unequivocally with the declaration of “*Naaseh V'nishmah*.”

G'd commands the entire Jewish people, saying, “You must be holy, because I am holy.” This is to communicate to every Jew that he has relevance to G'd's holiness because of his unique commonality with Him. How does one hone and appreciate these special characteristics? The tool that was gifted to us for this specific purpose is the Torah itself. It is through the study of Torah that one is able to achieve and appreciate his potential.

7. *Discerning Between the Sinai Experience and Purim*

The Torah states, “**They stood at the foot of the mountain.**” The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos explains that when the Torah states, “They stood under the mountain (*tachtis ha hahar*)” it does not mean “at the foot of the mountain” but rather “under the mountain.” Meaning, that G’d held the mountain over their heads “like a barrel and He said to them: If you accept the Torah you will live; however, if you do not, there you will be buried.” The Gemara continues, “Because of the manner in which the Jews accepted the Torah – under duress and coercion – it is to be made known that qualitatively speaking, the Jews should not have the same degree of culpability as the one who accepts the Torah wholeheartedly.” Raba states, “Nevertheless at the time of Achashveirosh (Purim) the Jewish people reaffirmed their acceptance of the Torah. It was an acceptance out of love. As it is stated in the Megillah of Esther - ‘They fulfilled it and accepted it upon themselves.’” Seemingly, the need for the Jewish people to reaffirm their acceptance of the Torah at the time of Purim seems to be difficult.

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us that if one is coerced to relinquish/accept something but is compensated for his compliance, it is considered a valid transaction. At Sinai G’d had told the Jewish people that if they accept the Torah, the world would continue and they would have their lives. Despite the fact they were coerced to accept, the Jewish people were compensated for their acceptance – with their lives/existence. Thus, it is a valid transaction and there is no need for a future reaffirmation of the original acceptance. If this is so, then why does the Gemara tell us that because of the circumstance of coercion at Sinai, the Jews have a lesser degree of culpability? What was the value of the reaffirmation of Purim, which was out of love?

The experience of Sinai/the time of our accepting of our Torah was in fact a valid transaction. However, qualitatively speaking it was not the same had they accepted the Torah out of love. The Gemara states, “If one performs a mitzvah for its own sake (l’shmah – proper intent) the Torah acts as a life potion – and he will merit having long days (eternal share in the World to Come). However if one performs a mitzvah not for its own sake but rather in a “left-handed” manner (with an awkwardness) the Torah acts as a death potion.” Although the experience at Sinai had value, because the Jewish people were compensated with their lives, qualitatively

speaking it does not represent the ultimate life potion. (However, the Jewish people definitely merited a share in the world to come).

When the Jewish people reaffirmed their commitment to the Torah out of love on Purim, their mitzvah involvement assumed a more advanced level of value. It was only after they had seen the miracle of Purim- that the decree of Haman that every Jewish man women and child be annihilated was overturned at the last moment, did they reaffirm their acceptance of Torah out of love. When the Jewish people understood and appreciated the love that G’d had for them, and did not allow them to go into oblivion, they accepted the Torah out of love. The Jewish people thus became greater beneficiaries of their accomplishments in Torah.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the Second Temple (which came after the event of Purim), prophecy ended. During the time of the Second Temple, the Jewish people relied on tradition as the basis for the authenticity of the Torah. This was the Oral and Written Law being Divine. Prior to this period, the divinity of the Oral Law was unquestioned because of the existence of prophecy. However, during the Second Temple Period the Sadducees (a sect of Jews) denied the authenticity of the Oral Law. This posed a threat to the Jewish people because the entire Torah could have been undermined. It was only now (after the reaffirmation of the Torah) that the Torah assumed a new level of value, that it came under attack.

When one fulfills the mitzvos out of love and not as a burden, qualitatively speaking he is a greater beneficiary of his accomplishments. However if one only fulfills the mitzvos as a burden to be dispensed with, then he will not merit the proper level of spirituality that was meant to be.

8. *The Essence of Shavuos*

There is some degree of symbolism associated with each of the Holidays/Festivals. On Rosh Hashanah we blow the Shofar, which reminds G’d of the merit of the Akeidah (the binding of Yitzchak) and thus silences satan’s prosecution of the Jewish people. On Yom Kippur we repent and afflict ourselves by assuming the posture of heavenly angels accepting upon ourselves the five areas of deprivation. On Succos we commemorate the Clouds of Glory that protected us for forty years in the desert, with the Succah. We also take the four species, which

symbolize the four segments of the Jewish people being united as one. On Pesach (Passover), we partake of the Pascal lamb and we eat matzah symbolizing the transition from bondage to freedom. However, regarding the Festival of Shavuos, "the time of the giving of our Torah" there is no symbolism whatsoever associated with this important day. It is customary to study Torah the entire night of Shavuos; however, this is only a custom and not a law. A Jew is obligated to study Torah every available moment throughout the year.

One is obligated to count the days of the Omer (Sefiras Ha'Omer) from Pesach to Shavuos. One counts forty-nine days concluding with the fiftieth, which is Shavuos – the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Chinuch explains the philosophical aspect and understanding of the counting of the Sefira. He writes, "The counting of Sefira is from the time of the exodus from Egypt to the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. We count in anticipation of that special moment which takes place 50 days from the time we begin counting. Just as the slave, who works in the sun longs and thirsts for the moment that he will have the relief of the shade, so too is our counting towards the giving of the Torah at Sinai." Thus, Shavuos cannot be commemorated through a symbol. The essence of the Festival is the "feeling" of being privileged to be taken as G'd's people through the receiving of the Torah. This can only be experienced by the individual who truly values his Jewishness and his relationship with G'd. This is the value and importance of the counting of the Sefira to Shavuos.

We say in our morning prayers, "Fortunate are we because of our good portion! How pleasant is our lot and how beautiful is our inheritance!" These statements are more than mere words. A Jew should feel fortunate and privileged to have been chosen from among all of the nations of the world to be G'd's people – the people who were given the Torah. The Mishna in Tractate Shabbos states, "All Jewish people are considered princes." The Torah refers to the Jewish people as "A kingly, priestly, and holy people." This feeling of being privileged should be experienced as a reality by every Jew.

On Succos we dwell in the succah to commemorate the reality of being protected by the Clouds of Glory. On Pesach we eat the matzah to commemorate the reality of leaving Egypt in haste. The reality of Shavuos is the sense and feeling of being privileged. That reality is one that exists on an individual basis and cannot be symbolized. Each person will experience the anticipation and excitement of receiving the Torah to the

extent of his own capacity to internalize the reality of being chosen to receive G'd's "most prized possession."

The only way a Jew could truly experience his Judaism is through the Torah itself. The pride of feeling special as a Jew comes not from wearing Jewish symbols or participating in political/humanitarian causes; but rather, it is from immersing oneself and actualizing the Torah itself. The blessing recited on the Torah states, "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G'd, King of the universe, Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah..." Our privileged status from among the nations of the world is indicated by the fact that G'd gave us, and no other nation, His Torah. Shavuos is a time of experiencing the privileged feeling of being taken as G'd's people through His Torah.

The festival of Succos is a seven-day holiday. The day that follows the seven-day period of Succos is (Shemini) Atzeres. The Gemara tells us that although Shemini Atzeres is juxtaposed to the Festival of Succos, which seems to indicate that it is an extension of the holiday, it is considered an independent festival. On Shemini Atzeres we no longer dwell in the succah or take the four species. The Yalkut explains that in fact Shemini Atzeres should have been celebrated fifty days after Succos- similar to Shavuos following Pesach. However if that were the case Shemini Atzeres would fall out in the middle of winter and cause hardship for the Jew to return to Jerusalem in order to visit the Temple. G'd had mercy on the Jewish people and allowed us to celebrate (Shemini) Atzeres immediately after Succos, since we were already in Jerusalem. After sitting in the succah for seven days commemorating being protected and surrounded by the Clouds of Glory, we celebrate an additional day with G'd – (Shemini Atzeres). Shavuos is also referred to by the Torah as "Atzeres" which means to "hold back." Chazal tell us that after seven days of Succos, G'd says to the Jewish people, "Please remain with Me an additional day because the parting for Me is difficult." "Atzeres" reflects G'd's love and desire to have an intimate relationship with the Jewish people.

If G'd wants to keep the Jew close to Him on "Atzeres" – on Shavuos should we not all feel privileged? If one is able to internalize and experience the privilege of being a Jew and performing mitzvos similar to the slave who anticipates the moment that he will be relieved by the shade, then one will be able to experience the essence of Shavuos. No symbol can encapsulate that feeling.

9. The Receptivity of Man to Conditioning

The Torah states, ***‘Im bechukosai teileichu- If you will follow My Statutes.’*** Klie Yakar explains, “There is no other location in the Torah where we find the term *‘chok- statute’* used in conjunction with *‘haliecha – follow/go’*. In this instance, *‘chok’* it is referring to the study of Torah. One who studies Torah on a continuous basis and makes it part of his routine, will eventually overcome the initial inertia which creates a resistance to become fully engaged...Kind David writes in Psalms that although he wanted to go in one particular direction his feet carried him to the study hall because he was so conditioned to go there.”

The Torah continues, ***‘If you will follow My Statutes...then I will provide your rains in their time...’*** Klie Yakar cites the Gemara in Tractate Taanis which states that the only reason G’d withholds rain from the Jewish people is because they are not sufficiently engaged in Torah study. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai the heavens opened and it rained upon the Jewish people. This was to indicate that there is a correlation between the Torah and rain. If one wishes to receive the blessing of rain, which is the source of life, he must engage sufficiently in Torah.

The Gemara in one location tells us that after one passes away and goes before the Heavenly Court he is asked, “Did you set specific times for the study of Torah?” Then he is asked, “Did you deal honestly in business?” However, the Gemara in another location inverts the order of the questions. How do we reconcile these two Gemaras? Tosfos in Tractate Sanhedrin explains that in each instance, the Gemara is referring to a different type of person. For the one who studies Torah but does not set aside specific times to do so, the first question that he is asked is, “Did you deal honestly in business?” However, for the one who does not study, the first question he is asked is, “Did you set aside time for the study of Torah?” It is important for one to set aside specific times for Torah study because it is only in this manner that it will become his second nature to study. If one is not inclined to the study of Torah, then the slightest interference will prevent one from doing so. The Gemara in Tractate Eruvin tells us that if one was not able to meet his time commitment for the study of Torah because of circumstances that were beyond his control, he must make up the time – similar to one who needs to repay a debt.

Rambam in his work *Shemona Perakim* (Eight Chapters) explains the concept of conditioning one’s behavior with an allegory. When a parent wants his young child to follow his directive, he offers him a sweet date as an incentive. As the child matures, when the date is no longer sufficient, the parent will offer him a pair of leather shoes as the incentive. Eventually the parent will need to offer a suit of clothing or even a gold coin as an incentive. Ultimately when the child matures and develops as a result of this conditioning, he would have overcome the initial inertia and resistance and will be able to appreciate proper behavior and values that have been established. Identically, through conditioning, (regardless of the means to achieve this result), the correct behavior will eventually establish itself as second nature.

Chofetz Chaim in his work *Chofetz Chaim* explains that if one raises his children in an atmosphere where Lashon HaRa (Negative speech) is seen as negative and unacceptable, the child will eventually naturally disassociate himself from negative speech. However, if one is not naturally sensitive to the negativity of Lashon HaRa and consequently regards it as innocuous, when he matures he will have great difficulty overcoming the natural tendency to engage in negative speech. This is a result of negative conditioning.

10. The True Understanding of a Leader

The Midrash states, “G’d said to the Jewish people, ‘You are the generation that witnessed the miracles of the desert. Yet, you said to Moshe, ‘Why did you take us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?’ Did I (G’d) treat you as if you were in a desert? If a mortal king were to go out into the desert, does he have the tranquility and comfort of his own palace? Does he have the same amount of food and drink available to him? With Clouds of Glory, I took you out of Egypt where you were slaves to Pharaoh. I treated you in the desert as if you were in a palace. In addition to treating you royally (despite the desolation of the desert), I gave you three good redeemers to accommodate your needs. As it states, ‘I sent before you Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam.’ In the merit of Moshe you were given the gift of the Manna, which sustained you in the desert. In the merit of Aaron, you were given the Clouds of Glory, which protected you. In the merit of Miriam, you were given the living wellspring, which provided you with water. Yet you complained.”

Seemingly, the Midrash should have said that Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam were “good redeemers”

because of their unique levels of spirituality. Moshe was the spiritual equivalent of the entire Jewish people and Aaron was his spiritual equivalent. Miriam, because of her spiritual accomplishments was also unique in her own right. Yet the Midrash quantifies Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam as “three good redeemers” because it was in their merit that the Jewish people were sustained and protected in the desert for 40 years.

Nadav and Avihu, the most special sons of Aaron were the upcoming leaders of the Jewish people. However the Torah tells us that they were struck down by G'd. As it states, **“A fire came forth from Hashem and consumed them (Aaron’s sons), and they died before Hashem...”** If they were destined to be the future leaders of the next generation what precipitated the events that lead to their death? Chazal tell us that when Moshe and Aaron would walk, Nadav and Avihu because of their special status would walk behind them. The Midrash tells us that they communicated with one another, “When will these elders die, so that we would be able to assume the leadership of the Jewish people?” It was because of this mindset – of seeing Moshe and Aaron as leaders of the past and no longer relevant- that they transgressed. It is possible, in terms of leadership capabilities, Nadav and Avihu were truly qualified to lead the new generation. However, they did not understand that leadership goes beyond one’s intellect and astuteness. An essential component of leadership is the special merit of the leader.

Nadav and Avihu did not understand or appreciate the aspect of Moshe and Aaron that made them “good redeemers.” Although Nadav and Avihu may have been as qualified as Moshe and Aaron to lead the Jewish people, they did not have the foresight to know that the Jewish people were destined to wander in the desert for 40 years. Only Moshe and Aaron possessed the necessary merit to provide the Manna and the Clouds of Glory, which protected and provided for them during their 40-year trek. Nadav and Avihu, who were just beginning their lives as members of the Jewish people, did not have that special merit that was needed to lead.

This is why the Midrash identifies Moshe, Aaron and Miriam as “good redeemers.” The qualification to be a true leader of the Jewish people surpasses one’s capabilities and knowledge. One must be that special person to draw on his merit.

11. The Pedigree of the Jewish People Defining Their Essence

The Torah tells us that G'd Commanded Moshe to take a census of the Jewish people in the desert saying, **“Hashem spoke to Moshe ..., saying ‘Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel according to their families...they established their genealogy according to their families, according to their fathers’ household, by number of the names...’** Rashi explains, **“they established their genealogy”** to mean that each Jew brought his documents of pedigree which established his paternal line and his particular tribe.

The Midrash tells us that after the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the nations of the world asked G'd, “Why did You give the Torah to the Jewish people and not to us?” G'd responded, “Can you establish your pedigree as My children have established theirs?” The nations of the world could not respond. When the nations of the world became aware of the purity of the Jewish people, they were astounded and began singing the praises of the Jewish people. As it is states Proverb, “Her children have risen and praised her.” The reason the Jewish people were chosen by G'd to be the recipients of His Torah was because they were the only nation that could establish its pedigree. The nations of the world, because they had engaged in forbidden sexual relations were not able to establish their pedigree. Why is the purity of pedigree a prerequisite for being qualified to receive the Torah?

At the time of creation, regarding all species (plant and animal) the Torah continuously reiterates that G'd created them “according to their own kind.” Meaning, when G'd created the world, He did so with a specific order. Because He initially created pure species, He wanted creation to continue within that context. He did not want cross-breeding of crops and species of animals. Because the Torah is the blueprint of existence, everything must reflect Its plan. If one procreates in a manner that is not permitted by the Torah the resulting offspring is considered a “hybrid (mixture).” The Jewish people, in the area of procreation, did not breach the guidelines set by the Torah. They maintained the order that reflects G'd’s infrastructure of creation – that each species retains its own purity according to the blueprint of the Torah. In contrast, the nations of the world did not reflect the purity of creation because they crossed the lines that were set by the Torah/G'd. Therefore, they have no relevance to the Torah itself.

Maharal of Prague explains that something of a spiritual nature is not subject to change- it affects but it is not affected. If one is subject to the influences of the world, it is an indication that his essence is physical and not spiritual. The physical realm is one of cause and effect. In contrast, if one is able to resist and not succumb to his physical inclinations, he is demonstrating the characteristic of spirituality. The Gemara in Tractate in Makos tells us that stealing and forbidden sexual relations are the two drives that consume the human being. Thus, the Jewish people, by presenting their pedigree, had proven and established their true essence- that they are not dominated and controlled by what all humanity is inclined to do. They established themselves as a spiritual people. Therefore the Jewish people are the only nation that is able to have a special relationship with G'd and consequently be the recipients of His Torah. They are a people who have the ability to live within the context of His spiritual infrastructure, which demands that one spiritualize his physicality.

12. The Unfathomable Essence of Torah

The Torah states, **“Hashem spoke with Moshe in the Desert of Sinai...”** The Midrash explains, “Why did G'd choose to address Moshe in the ‘Desert of Sinai’? Chazal tell us that the Torah was given within the setting of three things – fire, water, and desert. Regarding ‘fire’ the Torah states, ‘G'd descended upon the mountain with fire...’ Regarding ‘water’ the verse states, ‘G'd came from Seir to Sinai in your field (with water).’ Regarding the setting of the ‘desert’ it states, ‘G'd spoke to Moshe in the Desert of Sinai...’ Why was the Torah given within these settings? In order to teach us that just as fire, water, and the desert are given gratis, so too the Torah was offered without cost (*bechinam*)...Why was the Torah given in the ‘Desert of Sinai?’ In order to teach us that unless one is willing to negate/humble himself to the point of being unassuming as the desert, he will not have the capacity to acquire the Torah that was given in the desert.”

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that there are three things that are acquired through suffering - Torah, the world to come, and the Land of Israel. If this is so, why does the Midrash tell us that the acquisition of Torah is without cost? If one must sacrifice (himself) to a point of deprivation, evidently it has a significant cost factor. In addition, the Gemara tells us that the Torah can only be acquired by the one who is willing to die for it/to be totally negated in its presents.

If one were to acquire something of infinite value, although he may have to actually spend a significant amount of money, relatively speaking to its true worth, he has acquired it without cost. As much as one must toil and sacrifice for the sake of the Torah, relative to the unlimited value that one receives from It, his contribution is less than miniscule. The actual sacrifice that one must make to acquire the Torah, is only in regard to his humility. If one is willing to negate himself to suppress his ego and assume an unassuming posture, then he will have the capacity to acquire Torah. If one truly understands and appreciates the unlimited value of Torah his self-negation will come about without any difficulty. Because if one is able to internalize the true worth of eternity, then there is nothing that is too difficult. This is the correlation between Torah, fire, water, and the desert- all being given without payment.

In addition, the Torah Itself is G'd's wisdom, which is unlimited and cannot be fathomed by a mortal of limited intellect and capacity. As a physical being, one cannot appreciate or grasp the essence of spirituality. However if one humbles himself and is willing to sacrifice for Torah, G'd Himself will assist him to comprehend and acquire it. This is another understanding of Torah being given without payment/*bechinam*.

13. The Component of Joy at the Sinai Event

The Torah states at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, **“Moshe, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel ascended. They saw the G'd of Israel...they gazed at G'd, yet they ate and drank.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that they had gazed upon the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) in an inappropriate manner and thus were liable for death. However, since G'd did not want to interfere with the joy of the receiving of the Torah, He postponed their death (Nadav and Avihu) until the inauguration of the Mishkan.

The Gemara in Tractate Megillah tells us that the level of joy that G'd had at the time of the inauguration of the Mishkan was the equivalent of the joy that He had at the time of Creation. The inauguration of the Mishkan was a confirmation for the Jewish people that they had been forgiven for the Sin of the Golden Calf. The experience was one of the most momentous occasions in Jewish history. Why was G'd not concerned that the death of Nadav and Avihu would detract from this joyous event? Why was He only concerned with disrupting the joy at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai?

An essential component in the service of G'd is simcha (joy). Avnei Neizer z'tl writes in his introduction to the Iglei Taal, "When one derives pleasure from his study of Torah does that personal benefit detract from the value of the mitzvah, which must be selflessly performed (*l'shmah*)?" He explains, "Not only does the joy that one experiences from Torah study not detract from the mitzvah, it is an essential component that is considered an enhancement of the mitzvah."

Tosfos in Tractate Shabbos tells us that at the time of the Sinai experience, G'd revealed to the Jewish people all the heavens from above as well as the depths of *gehenom* from below to show them the dimension of His power. As a result of the Sinai event, the Jewish people had the capacity to appreciate G'd. This revelation impacted them and inculcated within their souls a depth of spirituality that was unique. If the Jewish people had not experienced the joy of the giving of Torah, their experience would have been deficient. Secondly, if the joy of Sinai were disrupted, they would have been distracted from their focus of value. Thus, undermining the effectiveness of the event. Consequently the Jewish people's capacity for spirituality would have been limited. It was experiencing the Sinai event with simcha that gave them the breadth and depth of understanding that would enable them to process all future events despite their circumstance. Although the inauguration of the Mishkan was marred with the death of Nadav and Avihu, the Jewish people were nevertheless able to appreciate the lesson that was meant to be learned from that tragedy. Thus, G'd delayed the death of Nadav and Avihu until that time.

Once the Jewish people were established as a spiritual entity/ (holy and priestly people), the death of Aaron's children did not interfere with their understanding of the innate value of that misfortune. The death of Nadav and Avihu is classified by the Torah as a Sanctification of G'd's Name (Kiddush Hashem). As Moshe had said to Aaron his brother, "It is through those who are holiest I (G'd) am sanctified." The Jew is able to weather many storms of life and to put them into perspective because of what was instilled in them at Sinai.

The Midrash tells us that the least amount of wealth that was taken out of Egypt by every Jew was forty pack animals laden with wealth. Nevertheless, the Torah tells us that the only gift that qualified for building the Mishkan was the one that was given as a result of the generosity of one's heart. If their dimension of wealth was so great why was it necessary for the Torah to set that criteria to qualify the gifts? Seemingly, they should have

given it without difficulty. Without the proper appreciation of value, even giving an amount that is relatively inconsequential would be too difficult. It was only because of their previous undisturbed experience at Sinai that the Jewish people had the appreciation to participate in the building of the Mishkan whole-heartedly.

14. The Unlimited Ramifications of "Naaseh V'nishmah"

The Midrash cites a verse from Yishaya, " 'You (hein) come from nothing. From a putrid wetness do you come. All of your accomplishments come from a groan ...' What is the meaning of this? The word 'hein' in the Greek language means 'one.' Meaning, the Jewish people are one people who are unique among the nations of the world who are considered to be nothing. As it states, 'All the nations are nothing before Him.' What is the meaning of 'All of your accomplishments come from a groan'? All the good and blessing that will come upon the Jewish people until the end of time is only because of that one groan that they had expressed at Sinai. They had said, 'Naaseh V'nishma – we will do and we will listen.' G'd said to the Jewish people. 'Even the abomination, you should choose for yourselves.' What is the meaning of this? The Jewish people had chosen to commit the abomination of idolatry with the Golden Calf. G'd said to them, 'Bring the calf as a sacrifice and through it I will choose you.'" If the calf was the basis for the most severe sin of the Jewish people, then how could it be brought as a sacrifice based on the principle "a prosecutor cannot be an advocate"? Nevertheless G'd specifically told the Jewish people to bring a calf as a sacrifice.

Maharal of Prague explains that the concepts of repentance (teshuvah) and spiritual atonement have no relevance to the gentile. This is within the context of spiritual rehabilitation/reinstatement. The Gemara tells us that if a gentile violates any one of the seven Noachide laws he is liable for the death penalty. As it states, "The prohibition is the basis for his death." This is not the case with a Jew. A Jew has relevance to atonement and can be spiritually rehabilitated, regardless of the severity of his sin (although there are times that the Jew must be put to death because of his transgression). This is because when the Jew sins it is only an incidental to his existence. His sin does not emanate from his essence, which is spiritual and pure. Therefore the consequence of sin does not touch upon his essence. He is kept alive to be able to repent and be reinstated. However regarding the gentile, whose essence is not spiritual (although he has a soul), sin emanates from his essence. Therefore the consequence of

his failing must touch upon his essence, which is his physicality. When the gentile sins, the consequences are terminal.

The Jewish people are different from the nations of the world because of their unique spiritual essence. They quantified themselves at Sinai by unequivocally declaring, “Naaseh V’nishma – we will do and we will listen.” When G’d heard their declaration He said, “Who revealed this secret to My children?” The Jewish people had assumed the posture of angels who perform the Will of G’d without needing to understand the extent of their obligation. The spiritual quantification of the Jew is even greater than that of the angel because despite his human frailties he rose to the level of an angel.

In order to demonstrate and reveal that this fact, regarding the spirituality of the Jew, G’d specifically chose the calf as a sacrifice. Although it was considered an abomination, through which they had gravely sinned, nevertheless, it was to be the spiritual mechanism to reinstate and rehabilitate the Jewish people. If their essence had been physical, they would have perished.

The Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin tells us that if a Jew intends to perform a mitzvah, and he is not able to bring it to fruition because of circumstances beyond his control, he is fully accredited for the mitzvah. Since the essence of the Jew is spiritual, he was not able to execute the action only because G’d did not allow it. He is therefore fully deserving. However, regarding the gentile, the Gemara tells us that if he had in mind to perpetrate an evil act, although he had failed and could not bring it to fruition, he is fully culpable as if he had actually sinned. This is extrapolated from the verse, “The Aramian (Lavan) who killed our father (Yaakov).” Although Lavan wanted to kill Yaakov and his family, he did not succeed because G’d intervened and did not allow him to do so. Nevertheless the Torah expresses it as if he had. This is because when evil and sin are perpetrated by the gentile, he assumes full culpability, since it emanates from his essence, which is his physicality.

15. The Unique Characteristic of the Jewish People

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos cites a verse from Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) “You (the Jewish people) are like the apple (*tapuach*) among the trees of the forest.” The Gemara asks, “Why are the Jewish people likened to the apple tree (*tapuach*)? Just as with the

tapuach/apple tree whose fruit precedes its leaves, so too the Jewish people declared ‘Naaseh – we will do’ before ‘Nishmah - we will hear’ regarding their accepting of the Torah at Sinai.” The Jewish people, unlike all other nations, unequivocally accepted the Torah before knowing the extent of their obligation. This is the characteristic that the Jewish people have in common with the apple tree - whose fruit precedes its leaves.

Tosfos cites Rabbeinu Taam who asks, “If one observes the development of the fruit of the apple tree he will note that it grows no differently than the fruit of any other tree. Its leaves develop before its fruit.” Rabbeinu Taam answers, “It must be that when King Solomon uses the term “*tapuach*” he is not referring to the apple but rather to the Esrog (citron). The Targum explains the verse, “The scent of your mouth is like a *tapuach*” to mean “Esrog.” Tosfos explains, “The fruit of the Esrog tree precedes its leaves because its fruits remain on the tree from one year to the following year. It sheds its original leaves, which preceded the development of its fruit and are replaced with new leaves. In this sense the fruit of the Esrog precedes the leaves of the Esrog.”

The Torah tells us that Yaakov our Patriarch wore the garments of his brother Esav (which were fashioned by G’d Himself for Adam) in order to receive the blessing from his father Yitzchak. The Torah states, “See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of the field.” Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the clothing one wears for hunting has a foul and musky scent. However when Yitzchak had given the blessing to Yaakov (believing it was Esav) he had experienced the fragrance of the Garden of Eden/ Paradise. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that when the Torah states that Yitzchak had experienced the “scent of the field” it is referring to the fragrance of *tapuchim*. Tosfos explains that “*tapuchim*” is referring to *Esrogim* (Citrons). The fragrance that Yitzchak had experienced when he gave the beracha (blessing) to Yaakov was that of the Esrog (*tapuchim*).

It is interesting to note that because the Jewish people had declared at Sinai “Naaseh – we will do” before “Nishmah –we will listen,” they are likened to the “*tapuach*” – Esrog. Yaakov is the Patriarch who personifies Torah. As the verse states, “*Yaakov...yosheiv ohalim* – the one who dwells in the tent (the tent of Torah).” Thus, the Torah is equated to the Esrog because its fruit precedes its leaves. What is the value of a leaf? A leaf conceals and protects the fruit in order to allow it to develop. Regarding the Esrog, the fruit precedes the leaves and thus the fruit is revealed and obvious. Torah represents clarity. Through it, truth and falsehood are

identified. As it is stated, “*Torah Ohr* – Torah is the illuminator/elucidator.”

through the study of Torah, which is the ultimate illuminator.

When the Jewish people had declared “*Naaseh V’Nishmah*” G’d said, “Who revealed this secret to My children?” G’d was taken aback (if it were possible to say) that mere mortals could have reached such a level of clarity that they were able to perceive and internalize the value of the truth of Torah. The Gemara tells us, the physical/material world is compared to night. Just as during nighttime things are unclear and the reality is distorted, identically within the physical context, truth is obscured and not obvious. “*Naaseh V’Nishmah*” is the language used by the angels who have exceptional clarity. Nevertheless, the Jewish people at Sinai attained the level of clarity of an angel. This is why King Solomon equates the Jewish people to the *tapuach*/Esrog among trees of the forest.

On the third day of Creation, G’d Commanded the earth to give forth “*Eitz pree oseh pree*- fruit trees that bear fruit.” This means that the tree itself should be as edible as the fruit of the tree. However, the Torah tells us that what manifested itself because of the Command was – “*eitz oseh pree*- a tree bearing fruit” – only the fruit was edible and the tree was not. The Gemara in Tractate Succah asks, “How do we know that the “*pree eitz hadar*” which is one of the four species is the Esrog? Perhaps it is another species.” The Gemara answers, “The term “*pree eitz*” connotes that not only is the fruit of the tree edible but also the tree itself. The only tree which possesses this characteristic is the Esrog tree.” Thus the “*pree eitz hadar*” mentioned in the Torah is the Esrog. The only fruit tree that fulfilled the dictate of G’d as commanded was the Esrog. This is clarity.

The “scent of the field” mentioned in the Torah regarding Yaakov receiving the blessing from his father refers to the Garden of Eden where Adam wore this garment. The Garden of Eden was a location of exceptional clarity. The Jewish people at Sinai assumed that special level of angels and had a similar degree of clarity. They thus declared – “*Naaseh V’Nishmah*.” Yaakov, because he is the Patriarch who personified Torah, had that special clarity and thus, was accompanied with the scent of the Garden of Eden – *tapuach*/Esrog.

The only one who has irresolvable and gnawing questions is the one who is lacking in clarity. However, the Jewish people were given a gift at Sinai that is able to transform the darkness of night into the light of day