



## IN DEFENSE OF STAYING UP ALL NIGHT LEARNING ON SHAVUOT

Many of us have experienced or at least have heard of the extravagant all-night learning programs that some shuls have on the first night of Shavuot. It is certainly a sight to be seen. In an effort to encourage members to stay awake into the early hours of the morning, some shuls are known to have barbecues, sushi bars, cheesecake galore — and sometimes that is just in the first half of the evening! After hearing about or witnessing this scene, it is easy to be cynical about all-night learning because if you play your cards right, you don't have to do much learning at all. Nonetheless, I would like to paint a different picture both of what all night learning could be and perhaps even what it already is, and in so doing, I hope to convince you to consider staying up all-night this year, whether or not your shul has a carving station or a fondue fountain.

The source for staying up all night is

mentioned by the Zohar, and at face value seems to indicate that this was not initially intended to be a widespread custom. In fact, the *Magen Avraham* (OC 494) notes that this custom was not intended for the masses, but rather the most pious of individuals who were attempting to repair the mistake of our ancestors who had overslept the morning of the giving of the Torah. It is also important to note that while the *Magen Avraham* might advocate that some should follow this custom, he subsequently (*Magen Avraham* 619:11) quotes the *Levush* to say that it is usually better to sleep during the evening because failing to do so will cause someone to have insufficient *kavana* during his prayers the following day.

There are additional reasons why one might opt to go to sleep on the night of Shavuot, but there is one that seems to stand out more than the rest. The Brisker Rav, Rabbi Yitzchok Zev Soloveitchik zt"l, was bewildered by

the popularity of the practice that many have to stay up all night on Shavuot. The practice is a nice custom at best, whereas on the night of Pesach there is a clear halachic imperative that one should stay awake as long as possible and discuss the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> How ironic that staying up all night on Shavuot became the popular tradition whereas Pesach fell by the wayside. Further, in Brisk they felt that it was better to sleep at night and have higher quality learning during the day. Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l also was accustomed to maintain his regular learning schedule on the night of Shavuot, which included going to sleep and waking up sometime in the early morning hours to learn.<sup>2</sup> When his grandson asked him why he did not follow the regular custom of many others, he explained that he could simply learn more by following his regular regimen.

Given that there seem to be two

divergent world views, it is worthwhile to examine and see if there is an ideal practice, or if perhaps we can simply choose whichever one seems more relatable, realistic and enjoyable.

Sleep is something we do not appreciate enough. Indeed, the same Rambam who is known for his authoritative, meticulous and methodical compilation of the laws in our tradition notes that sleep is a critical element of our service of God. He writes:

הואיל והיות הגוף בריא ושלם מדרכי השם הוא... די לו לאדם לישן שלישי שש הוא שמונה שעות

*Maintaining a healthy and complete body is part of following in the ways of Hashem... it is enough for an individual to sleep for a total of one third of the day, which is eight hours in all.*

#### **Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 4:4**

The Rambam's depiction of the necessity of sleep is shocking, mostly because we have all heard the numerous stories of great rabbis and historical figures who have rarely slept in order to allot further time to Torah study. Perhaps most paradigmatic is the Midrash, which notes that while Yaakov Avinu was studying in the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever, he did not sleep for a single night over the course of 14 years due to his commitment to learning Torah.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, our Rabbis even teach us that not sleeping to make an acquisition of Torah is necessary. The beraita that is commonly listed as the sixth and final chapter of *Pirkei Avot* lists the forty-eight ways in which Torah is acquired. The list offers several things that we must limit in our desire for Torah; one trait or feature that is to be limited is sleep.<sup>4</sup>

To make matters even more confusing, the Rambam himself seems to contradict his earlier point on the

necessity of sleep. While delineating the laws of learning Torah he makes a striking statement:

אף על פי שמצוה ללמוד ביום ובלילה אין אדם ללמוד רב חקמתו אלא בלילה. לפיכך מי שרצה לזכות בכתר התורה יזהר בכל לילותיו ולא יאבד אפלו אחד מהן בשנה ואכילה ושתייה ושיחה וכיוצא בהן אלא בתלמוד תורה...

*Even though it is a mitzva to learn in the day and night, one should learn most of his knowledge at night. Therefore, whoever wants to merit the crown of the Torah should be careful that his evening is not wasted on anything like sleeping, eating, drinking, speaking and anything like that but rather it should be filled with learning Torah ...*

#### **Rambam Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:13**

Stuck in this apparent contradiction between the imperative to care for our bodies and sleep properly while also trying to fulfill the obligation to learn Torah, we have yet to determine the ideal way to spend our Shavuot night. The general solution to this paradox seems to be that there are times that sleep should be prioritized and times that Torah and other commandments might take precedence. For example, the Brisker Rav, in his comment above, would likely argue that on the first night of Pesach, telling over the story of the Exodus is more important than having a good night's sleep.

The solution to our conundrum might be found in understanding the nature of this holiday: Why is it that learning Torah is seen as a central element of the celebration of Shavuot? To answer, let us turn to a clear theme of the holiday, that emerges through multiple references to the fact that this day is *zman matan Torateinu*, the commemoration for receiving the Torah.

It is worthwhile to try and understand how we celebrate the anniversary of

receiving the Torah. On the one hand, we might say that learning Torah and internalizing its content and message is critical to properly celebrating the day. Through this explanation, we come to believe that Shavuot might be a cognitive experience, intellectual in nature, with the hopes of acquiring as much Torah as possible. Alternatively, we could suggest that Shavuot is not about the academic endeavor of learning as much Torah as possible, but is perhaps about reminding ourselves of the passion, love and fervor that we are capable of feeling toward this dear gift that Hashem gave us so many thousands of years ago.

I would posit that Shavuot is about the latter. Every day of the year is meant to be filled with learning, internalizing and studying our ancient texts, but perhaps Shavuot is about more than that. It is the day on which we reignite our flame for the greatest book ever written. Just how do we reignite this passion? By doing something so odd and unusual, offering a gesture so grand and over the top, that we are jolted into a euphoric reminder of how much we love our Torah. Perhaps, therein lies the true purpose of why we stay up all night on Shavuot. What better way to demonstrate our love and passion for the Torah than by sacrificing our most precious sleeping hours for it.

Will we be exhausted the next day? Most likely. Will we remember every word that we learned? Doubtful. Will we maximize every moment of our learning? Maybe not. But will we learn to love the Torah a little more? Absolutely.

This might also explain why there are detractors of this custom. Indeed, if staying awake the whole night is not possible, then certainly spending the

entire day learning is a wonderful and grandiose gesture to express your passion for learning. And, for those who are incredibly passionate about the Torah, perhaps, like some of our greatest *gedolim*, their responsibility is not necessarily to be involved in such a gesture because arguably, every day of their lives is a grand expression of their love of Torah. For them, Shavuot remains another day of passionate yet routine learning on their exalted level.

The best path to take for Shavuot is the one that will bring about the most passion for Torah study. For many of us, staying up all night with a large crowd, delicious food and wonderful speakers is likely the most ideal option. At 8 a.m. on Shavuot morning, when you fall into your bed in complete and utter exhaustion, I bet you'll think to yourself, "Look what I was willing to do to express my love for Torah!" Yet for others, this might not be what is best. As long as we seek to spend the holiday

of Shavuot rejuvenating our yearning for Torah, then indeed we will merit to truly live up to the meaning of *zman matan Torateinu*.

## Endnotes

1. *Uvdot v'Hanhagot L'beit Brisk*, Volume 2, Page 79.
2. *Hashakdan*, Volume 2, Page 240.
3. *Genesis Rabbah* 68:11 and see also Rashi in *Parshat Vayetztei* 28:11.
4. *Pirkei Avot* 6:6.

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## CHESED: THANK YOU OR THANK GOD? (Continued from page 27)

people who are performing the acts of kindness are emulating God's attributes (*imitatio Dei*) and are therefore truly agents of God.

If every time someone performs an act of kindness for me I need to thank both the person, and God, an interesting question emerges: who do we thank first? Do we first thank our friend who did the act of kindness or God for inspiring and orchestrating the act? While analyzing Naomi's statement will lead us to assume that it is appropriate to thank the benefactor first, as she blesses Boaz and then God, there is a parallel story that complicates the message.

After Avram helped the five kings defeat the four kings, Malki-Tzedek, king of Shalem, who was also the "priest of God Most High," brings out bread and water for Avram and his soldiers (*Bereishit* 14:18). As an expression of gratitude, Malki-Tzedek blesses Avram to "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth" (14:19), and afterwards blesses God, "Who has delivered your foes into your hand" (14:20). The Gemara (*Nedarim* 32b) critiques his priorities. He should have blessed God before he blessed Avram,

as first one blesses the Master and only afterwards the servant. As a result of his error, God removes the privilege of priesthood from Malki-Tzedek and bestows it upon Avram instead.

Ibn Ezra suggests an alternative approach, that Malki-Tzedek's order of blessing is appropriate: First he should bless Avram, acknowledging that he saved the captives, and only afterwards bless God, who aided Avram in his quest. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik adds a fascinating explanation of Malki-Tzedek's reasoning: God, as it were, requires man's assistance in revealing His presence in the world. Avram's job was to spread God's message in a world where He was obscured by idol-worship. It is specifically through Avram's success that God would be blessed. The blessing to Avram, therefore, also functioned as a blessing to God.

While the different approaches may disagree on who should be blessed first, the resonating message is important in either case. There is a purposefully blurred line between gratitude toward people and gratitude to God. When others do us a kindness, we should not limit our

gratitude to the interpersonal realm. We must expand our expression of gratitude to God as well. The person doing the *chesed* is acting as an emissary of God, making His name great and revealed in this world. In addition, we must acknowledge that it is God's providence that allowed for the kindness to happen.

By incorporating a Divine element into all of our interpersonal gratitude experiences, may we merit additional spiritual and psychological well-being, above and beyond what is generally associated with being grateful people.

## Endnotes

1. This article excerpts and elaborates on an essay entitled "Spiritual Gratitude" from my book *Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being Through the Weekly Parsha*, published by Kodesh Press in 2022.
2. Rosmarin, D., Pirutinsky, S., Cohen, A., Galler, Y., & Krumrei, E. (2011). Grateful to God or just plain grateful? A comparison of religious and general gratitude. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 6(5), 389–396. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2011.596557>.
3. *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, pp. 11-38.