

FIRST DAY SHAVUOS 1988  
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In the Torah portion that we read on the first day of Shavuos we learn about how the Jewish people were commanded to prepare to receive the Ten Commandments. We learn, "And G-d said to Moses, 'Go to the people and sanctify them today and tomorrow and they should wash their clothes'." Later on we learn, "And Moshe came down from the mountain to the people, and he sanctified the people and they washed their clothes." What is going on here? Why do we have to learn how Moshe Rabbeinu told the people to wash their clothes? What does washing their clothes have to do with sanctification? Why did they have to do that in order to receive the Ten Commandments? What's more, why is it that Shavuos, itself, is such a nondescript holiday? We have no special ceremonies for Shavuos. Except for putting a little greens in the shul and eating a little blintze, there are no ceremonies connected with Shavuos. What's more, why is it that Shavuos, itself, has more or less been deserted by the Jewish people? If you look around here today you will see that although it is a Sunday we do not have that many people in shul. Why don't people come and celebrate the holiday of Shavuos? Also, when the Jewish people received the Torah they said, "We will do and we will understand." How is it that the Jewish people said that? After all, it does not seem logical that a person should do something before they understand it. They should first understand it and then they do it.

Perhaps we can understand the answers to all these questions if we understand that Shavuos, itself, cannot be understood or appreciated unless we first count the Omer. Shavuos is tied to Pesach by the counting of 49 days, and the 50th day is Shavuos, itself. Shavuos is different than all the other holidays because in order to understand and appreciate Shavuos, you have to prepare for it. You have to do. You have to understand what it is all about. Unless you prepare for Shavuos you will never be able to celebrate Shavuos, and that, of course, is an important lesson that many people forget.

People are interested in instant religion and instant gratification, and they do not want to prepare. You have to prepare if you are going to be able to appreciate the spiritual life. You cannot just walk into an experience and understand it. What you must do is prepare for it. Shavuos is different from Pesach or Succos. On Pesach you have a Seder. On Succos you have a succah. It is possible that you do not have to do anything to get something out of Pesach. You can attend someone else's Seder and enjoy it and get something out of it. You can go into somebody else's succah and get something out of it, but when it comes to Shavuos there is nothing you can do. You have to have prepared for it. You have to understand that unless you do something yourself and prepare for it days and weeks in advance, you will not be able to appreciate the inner spiritual holiday because this is a holiday of inner spiritual growth. Pesach is actually a holiday of potentiality where we all declare the potentially man can rise. Man has to free<sup>be</sup> so he can reach his potentiality. Shavuos is a holiday which celebrates the fulfillment of this potentiality. Unless you fulfill this potentiality you cannot appreciate it. That's why on Pesach we bring unworked barley, which stands for potentiality. Animals eat barley, but when it comes to Shavuos we wave on the altar bread, which is processed wheat. You can only appreciate and eat bread if you have worked for it, if you have cut it and milled it and baked it, etc. You cannot just eat it raw like an animal could eat it raw. On Shavuos, in order to understand Shavuos, we have to count every day. We have to work at it. We have to prepare, and that, of course, is why the word "Spira" is used. Spira means "to count" in Hebrew. It also comes from the same word as "sefer - book". It also refers to a border village. In order to understand Shavuos you have to go from the border to the center, so to speak. You have to prepare, to learn, to get an inner feeling, and an inner feeling does not come about automatically and it does not come about

by some surface experience. The only way you get an inner feeling is by working at it. The only time you can appreciate a spiritual experience is by working at it. I have talked many times about how in Judaism we gain a spiritual experience by going through the physical. In other words, in order to have a wonderful experience of music, and music, of course, is an uplifting spiritual experience, someone had to practice on that instrument for hours and hours. An expert had to cut the wood just right. He had to make the catgut just right. He had to take the horsehair and dry it out just right and make it perfect so the beautiful sound will come out. In order to have a spiritual experience we have to go through the physical. Unless we go through the physical we will never be able to enjoy a spiritual experience.

That is, of course, why the people at Mount Sinai had to wash their clothes. They had to do something to put themselves in the right mood so that they would be receptive to the words of the Torah. They had to show that the physical things they did were also correct and proper so that they would be in the right posture to receive the words of the Torah. They had to come with clean hearts and clean clothes. Judaism is a combination of the mental and the physical in order to reach the spiritual. You cannot just do it through the mental, through an idea. You have to do it through the physical. That is why it is so important that people keep kosher in their homes because then the children see their religion in material, concrete terms and not just abstract terms. Three times a day when they eat they realize who they are and what they are. When their friends come over they have to again confront who they are and what they are, and they strengthen their relationship with G-d. In order to understand you really have to do, and a Jew has to do no matter what the world says. A Jew has to do deeds of kindness and be compassionate and be sentimental, etc., as Hitler called us a sentimental people, no matter

what the world says because this is who we are, and if we do it eventually we will understand it.

This is true of Shavuos. Unless we do, unless we prepare, unless we, ourselves, have these inner spiritual experiences Shavuos will not mean anything, and people, instead of coming to shul on Shavuos, will go on vacations, go to picnics, go play golf, do anything except coming to shul.

I am reminded of the story they tell based upon the sentence in Pirke Ovos that says that "every Jew has a portion in the world to come". The rabbis all ask, how is it possible that every Jew could have a portion in the world to come? After all, some Jew are bad, some Jews are good. How could they all have a portion in the world to come. They explain that actually, what is the world to come? In the world to come G-d gives a lesson in the Talmud for five or six hours a day, and everybody sits in their seats listening to G-d giving a lecture in Talmud. To those who have studied Jewish life and Jewish law and Talmud in this life, to them it is a Gan Eden, a heaven. To those who have not studied a word, it is a Gehenen, a hell. That is, too, the story of Shavuos. If we have prepared for it, studied every day, learned about it, then it has an inner meaning. Spiritual things only come through hard work. You can only receive an appreciation of them if you have worked very hard. If you do not work hard, it does not mean anything to you at all. Let us all hope that our people will understand spiritual things because they have worked at it day after day, that they have not missed a day. Just like when we count the Omer, if you miss a day, you no longer can count anymore with a Brocha. Therefore, too, let our people always realize that they have to work at spiritual things day after day in order to reap the benefit, in order to have a spiritual experience. Let us all have this spiritual experience so that the Mashiach will come.