

SHAVUOS 1993
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On the first day of Shavuos we read about the Jewish people receiving the Ten Commandments. We start off by saying, "In the third month of the going out of the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt, in this day they came to the desert at Sinai, and they travelled from Refitim and they came to the desert of Sinai and they camped in the desert, and Israel camped there opposite the mountain." Here the name Israel is used for the people. It is also used once more in the next sentence when it says, "And Moshe went up to G-d and G-d called him from the mountain saying, 'So you shall say to the House of Jacob, you shall tell to the sons of Israel'." However, during the rest of this Torah reading until after the Ten Commandments the Jewish people are always referred to as Am. They are not referred to as Israel. We also read here that the Jewish people were not referred to as the sons of Israel until they willingly took upon themselves the Torah when they actually heard the Ten Commandments and said that they were going to follow the ways of Judaism. Why is it that the Jewish people are referred to as Am throughout this reading until after they accepted the Ten Commandments? It is true that in the very beginning they are referred to as Israel because they had done teshuva, the rabbis said. They had sinned at Refitim, but they had done teshuva and said that they wanted to accept the Torah and they had become united. They had become one people, so the term Israel is used at that particular time, but throughout the rest of the Torah portion the word Am is used. Why should this be so?

The rabbis explain that the word Am is actually a lesser term than the word Israel. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that there are actually two covenants that the Jewish people made with G-d. One was made against their will when G-d said, "I will take you for Me as a nation and I will be for you a G-d." The Jewish people were not asked whether they wanted to be a special nation, a holy nation, a nation who carried G-d's message. This is similar to the covenant that G-d made with Abraham during the time of the bris, during the time when Abraham circumcized

himself. From that time on Abraham's descendants were in a covenantal relationship with G-d. Every human being is in a covenantal relationship with G-d because the first covenant G-d made with Noah, and so every human being is sacred. Every human being has a piece of G-d in him and we must treat every human being with dignity, but the Jewish people have two additional covenants. The first one stems from Abraham and was reiterated by G-d at Egypt when He said, "I will take you to Me to be a nation and I will be for you as a G-d," whether you like it or not. The name Jew is upon you and when the name Jew is upon you you are going to be treated different from all the other peoples. You are going to be singled out, and all the other peoples are going to know that you are special, and many times they are going to persecute you and hound you because they do not want to listen to the message which is implied in the fact that you have been chosen to be G-d's people. We see that this is true. Throughout all history the Jewish people have been singled out as special and unique. If you read a newspaper you will think that at least 10-20% of the population of the world is Jewish. Every time you pick up the newspaper there is a Jewish name in it. Of course, we know that we are 0.000% of the population. If there are 14 or 15 or 16 million Jews in the world that is all there are. There are more Catholics in California and Texas than there are Jews in the whole world. We Jews have made an immense impact upon the world. There are many Jews who would rather not have the name Jew. As Tevya said in Shalom Aleichem's play, "G-d, I know that we are the chosen people, but couldn't You chose somebody else?" Many times Jews have felt that they do not want to be Jews anymore. They try to flee the name Jew, but it is impossible unless the biologically assimilate. Even the Jews who have changed their religion are still looked upon as Jews. Benjamin Disraeli, whose father changed Benjamin Disraeli's religion just before he was bar mitzvah, was always considered a Jew. In fact, he always said about himself that he was a blank page between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Hitler regarded anybody who had a Jewish grandfather or grandmother as Jewish. We know here in the United States that many Jews have tried to run away only to be told by their gentile neighbors that they are Jewish and are going to be treated differently and specially, and that, of course, is what we read about in Hemingway's novel where a prominent figure is known as Cohen and he is made fun of because he tries to be more goyish than the goyim, but everybody knows that he is a Jew. Many Jews try to flee Judaism, but against our will we have to be Jewish. In fact, even those who have successfully biologically through the generations assimilated many times still have a tinge of Jewishness about them. My brother lives in Charleston and when that community celebrated its 350th anniversary of organized Jewish life they looked for the families of the original founders. They found only one who was still Jewish, and the most prominent of all the families in Charleston actually descended from these original founders. They knocked on their doors and asked if they wanted to be recognized for the 350th anniversary, and all of them said, "No, no, don't mention that we were originally Jews," even though it was in some cases 200 or 300 years ago. The name Jew sticks to people and against our will we are forced to be Jews. In Russia, too, many of the Jews tried to run away and become good communists, but it did not help. They still put the word yid on their passport, and today now these Jews are returning to Judaism. They know that communism has failed and that Judaism still has much to teach the world. G-d said you are going to be a Jew. You are going to be Am. You are going to be My people regardless whether you like it or not, and that, of course, is that first covenant that is special between the Jew and G-d that other people do not have. It has, as I said, these negative connotations but it also has positive connotations as well. Because we Jews know we are singled out and we share a common destiny, a common fate, therefore, we realize that we share historical circumstances, that if something is going to hurt Jews in South Africa it is eventually going

to hurt Jews in America. We know that we are really one people. As Mordechai said to Esther, "If you will not save the Jewish people G-d will cause somebody else to come and save the Jewish people, but you and your family will be cursed forever." We know that we are all one people. We know that what happens to the Jews in England will affect the Jews in America. We know that what happens to the Jews in Israel will affect our lives here in America very greatly, so we have a shared historical circumstance. We also have shared suffering. Not only do we know that what happens to the Jews in Russia and Poland are going to affect us, but we also feel their suffering. We feel for them. We know that if Jews are suffering anywhere we are suffering, too, otherwise how can you explain the great outpouring of support for Ethiopian Jews, a people who do not speak a common language with us, have a different culture than us, even have different religious practices than us, but they have the name Jew and we know when they suffer we suffer, too. It is like what the Gemora talks about when it talks about the fact that what happens if a person is born with two heads? Is that person two individuals and, therefore, should have two inheritances? But the Gemora says, no, because if you put some boiling water on one head the other head will also scream, that we are all together. It is one body. The Jewish people are one body, and when the Jewish people suffered in Europe in the Holocaust it hurt us here. We are all one body. When the Jewish people in Syria are suffering it hurts us here and, therefore, we have common suffering. We feel the pain and anguish of our fellow Jew. That is something that you cannot say for the other nations of the world. Look at how the people are suffering in Bosnia Herzegovina, and does anyone really care? Did anyone really care about how the Christians were suffering in Lebanon? Did the other Christian states really care? We also share common responsibility. We know that we Jews are responsible one for another, that if a Jew does something bad it reflects not only upon him but also upon his family and his whole people. If a Jew does

something bad, they do not say, "Oh, Chaim Goldberg did something bad." They say, "Those Jews are terrible." We all know that. In fact, we Jews were blamed for Karl Marx even though he was not much of a Jew, and they say that communism is Jewish, but I never heard anybody talk about a Russian or Chinese person as all communists or all people who spread bad philosophies. After all, it was in Russia and China that they adopted communism, but the Jewish people know that what one does reflects upon all of them and, of course, that highlights the Halachic principle, that because all Jews are responsible one for another if I have already fulfilled my mitzvah I can fulfill for another Jew. If I have already heard the blowing of the shofar and I have already blown the shofar for myself I can blow for somebody else later on. If I have already made kiddush and someone else did not make kiddush and does not know how to make kiddush I can make it for him because all Jews are responsible one for another.

Finally, we have the idea of shared activity, that we know that we have to help each other and we know that we have to raise money to help each other. We have to do things for each other. It is not enough to be sympathetic for each other, to suffer for each other; we have to do things for another. The fact that the Jewish community raised over one billion dollars in two years in a row to help the Jews in Ethiopia and the Jews of Russia immigrate to Israel shows that we still have the shared activity. We Jews know that we have to help each other. We Jews know that if we do not have each other nobody else is going to help each other, so there is a positive result of this covenant of Am, but there is a higher covenant. There is a covenant that came later on at Mount Sinai when we received the Ten Commandments, when Jews recognize that they needed something more in their life. They needed meaning in their life, that they have to help not just each other because they have the name Jew on them and they cannot help it and they cannot run away, but that Judaism adds so much to their life and gives so much beauty to their life. It is such a wonderful

thing to have, and that is, of course, what the Jewish people felt at Mount Sinai. Many times before the Jewish people had said, "We will do it,". Yes, we are stuck with Judaism. We will do what we have to do. But at Mount Sinai they said, "We will do and we will understand," because we want to understand. We want to comprehend everything about Judaism because it adds so much to our life. It is so beautiful and positive. Today in America we find that slowly the Jews are slipping away into America. Many Americans are not singling out Jews although I do now know how long it is going to last. Historically, this only lasts for a short period of time, like it happened in Germany and then they singled us out again, but I hope it does not happen here again, too, because that means we are in for a lot of suffering, but the Jews in America, in order to maintain themselves based on the second covenant, about the covenant that Judaism is wonderful and we have to practice it because it adds so much to life, not that we do not have any choice but that we would willingly choose it because we want to understand everything about it.

That's why at the end of this Torah portion we talk about Israel. Israel is a choice. When we say the word Israel it means that we have struggled with man and G-d and overcome, that G-d has given us a great gift and we want this gift. That's why the beginning of this reading Israel is also referred to as Israel and not Am because at the beginning they wanted the gift. They came to Sinai to get the gift. They were anxious for the gift. We counted 7 weeks for the gift. Later on some of them were not so sure about the gift. Then it is, "We will do it because we have to do it. We are Jews. We have been singled out. What else can we do?" But when we realize how great it is, how beautiful it is, how we are choosing it, how even if we did not have to choose it we are choosing it, that is, "We want it and we want to understand it because we realize that it adds so much to our life."

I am reminded of the story they tell about a dean of a university who was at a faculty meeting when all of a sudden a heavenly voice came up and said, "I will give you, Dean Smith, infinite wisdom, infinite money, or infinite beauty. What do you want?" Immediately he said, "Infinite wisdom." Then he turned glum and silent and did not say anything. His head was surrounded by a little halo and the people in the meeting said, "Dean, Dean Smith, tell us something. Tell us something." He looked at them and said, "I should have chosen the money." Unfortunately, in America today that is the way many Jews feel. They do not feel Judaism is worth preserving. They would rather choose the money. All right, if they have to be Jews they will be Jews, grudgingly. They wish they had not been born Jews but if they are Jews they will be Jews, but they do not realize the beauty of Judaism. They do not realize how much it can add to their life. They do not realize how it has so much more yet to teach the world. They have forgotten all about the second covenant. Let us all hope and pray that the Jewish people will remember about the second covenant so that Judaism will thrive in America and the Mashiach will come soon. Amen.