

## SHAVUOS FIRST DAY 1996

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

We learn in the Torah reading for today not only the Ten Commandments, but it begins with the words, "In the third month of the going out of the children of Israel to the land of Egypt." The number three predominates in the rabbinic thinking about the holiday of Shavuos. They say the three part Tenach, the three part Bible, is composed of Torah, the five books of Moses, the Neviim, the prophets, and the Ketubim, the writers, was given to a three part people composed of Kohanim, Leviim, and Yisroel in the third month to the third child, and you have Miriam, Aaron, and Moshe. The number three predominates on the holiday of Shavuos because, the rabbis say, there were also three important personalities which we remember on this holiday. We remember Dovid HaMelech, who was born on Shavuos and died on Shavuos. We remember, of course, Ruth, his great-grandmother, and we also remember Moshe Rabbeinu, who the rabbis tell us was three months old when he was put in the basket on Shavuos. We remember, of course, Bifia, the Pharaoh's daughter, who saved Moshe. We remember the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, whose yahrzeit is Shavuos, and he, too, had a woman who was the power behind the throne, his daughter, Eidel. The rabbis tell us that the Torah is both for men and women. They also tell us that there are three prerequisites before we can accept the Torah, and they are that we have to have Rachmones, as Bifia showed mercy and compassion in saving Moshe. We also have to have the concept of Teshuva, which Dovid HaMelech taught us when he sinned with Bathsheba, and we know that unless there is the concept of Teshuva we cannot accept the Torah. That's how the Christians always caricatured the Jews by saying that they do not know anything about forgiveness and starting over again, which is not true, of course. We also have to have the concept of the connectedness of Jews to every other

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Jew and connectedness of all humanity to every other human being, which is exemplified by the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov.

The rabbis also tell us there is another reason why Shavuot stresses the number three because after we had accepted the Ten Commandments and after we accepted the Torah there is still inevitably going to be arguments. The Hasam Sofer says specifically that there is always going to be dissension in the world because no two people look at a problem the same way and it is through the clash of different ideas that progress is actually made. Many people think that if you have a written constitution, therefore, all the problems will be solved. If it is written down, then people will know what to do in every given situation, but we know that that is not true. After all, all we have to do is look at the United States Constitution. It is a very small document, but the books that interpret it will more than fill a room in this synagogue. We know for a fact that when people read a constitution as a living document they read into it all sorts of things that may or may not be there. After all, look in the United States how we have determined that there is such a thing as a right of privacy and because there is a right of privacy abortion is legal. I am not here to try to discuss whether abortion should or should not be legal. Judaism has its own particular view on this subject, but when you have a living document judges read into the document many things that may have been or may not have been the intent of the founders, so, therefore, a person can never say, "I wrote the constitution so, therefore, I know what it means," because a constitution has a life of its own.

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In fact, the rabbis stress this very clearly in a beautiful Medrash when they talk about how when Moshe Rabbeinu was receiving the Torah from G-d he saw that G-d was making little decorative signs on the top of the letters. Moshe Rabbeinu asked him, "What are you doing?" G-d said, "Well, I am making little decorative notes on top of these letters because in another 1300 or 1400 years a great rabbi is going to come up who is named Rabbi Akiva, and he is going to interpret every single one of these little decorative marks on these letters." Moshe Rabbeinu said, "Well, I would like to see how he is doing this." G-d said, "Okay, and He transported Moshe ahead in time." Moshe sat in the back of a Beis Medrash, a study hall, and Rabbi Akiva was expounding on the Torah, and he explained every one of these little decorative notations on top of the letters, and Moshe Rabbeinu could not understand a thing so he came up to Rabbi Akiva and said, "Rabbi Akiva, how can you explain these things this way?" Rabbi Akiva said, "I am explaining it this way because this is what we learn from our teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu," and Moshe Rabbeinu then was satisfied.

Documents have a way of causing people to learn different things out of them. We bring ourselves and our experiences to them. The rabbis say that as long as we are sincere in our learning everything is correct and right, but we have to many times come to a decision, and, therefore, there is going to be dissension. The rabbis also tell us that just as G-d made no two people with the same face and the same appearance, so G-d has given no two people exactly the same opinions.

In fact, we learn about this quite clearly in the Pirkei Ovos when it says, "All arguments that

are for the sake of heaven, in the end they will exist, and if it is not for the sake of heaven it will not exist. Which is an argument which is for the sake of heaven? This is the argument between Hillel and Shammai, and what is an argument that is not for the sake of heaven? This is the argument between Korach and his congregation." First of all, what are we talking about when we say that every argument that is for the sake of heaven in the end will exist? What does that mean? It means that there are many problems in life that are never going to be solved and we are going to be arguing about them forever and ever. Therefore, what we must do is look at both sides of the argument and then come into each particular situation to a correct answer.

For example, the problems of church and state are neverending. Therefore, if they ever end that shows that the state or the religion is persecuting the other. Therefore, every generation has to solve these problems based upon the particularities of each situation. Therefore, if arguments are really for the sake of principle, and you can tell if an argument is for the sake of principle because if two people are fighting over a principle and they still remain friends, you can see they are arguing over principle, but if it becomes personal attacks, then you see that this is not over principle. This is what it means when it says arguments for the sake of heaven, that they will continue to exist. If the argument is only how to share the booty and who should be able to get more of his own self-interests satisfied, then this is not an argument for the sake of heaven. We know, for example, that in marriage there is constantly the argument of whether the couple should be close or distant. Of course, you know if you

are too close in a marriage relationship you smother each other. If you are too distant, who needs a marriage relationship? Then there is no warmth at all, so we have to constantly balance conflicting forces like distance and closeness. It is like children and dependence and independence. How much independence are you going to give your children? Of course, when they are very small you are going to give them very little independence. When they get older as teenagers you have to give them more, so you are constantly balancing the arguments of independence and dependence. People are on both sides. In this country, too, we have the arguments of freedom of and freedom from. Freedom of means the government should butt out of everything, but freedom from means the government has to help to make sure people can be free from hunger and disease and fear. We know that you have to balance both government interference and the government leaving people alone. Therefore, there is a constant argument which depends basically upon every given situation. Of course, when a person applies for a job he may be overqualified, which means that his boss is afraid of him. His boss is afraid that he will take his job. We know today, too, with this downsizing many people are losing their jobs. Who do the companies fire? They fire the supervisors and get an ordinary worker who will take the job for less, so many supervisors are afraid to hire anybody who has any talent because they are going to be replaced. They are afraid of their employees. Here you are trying to do a very good job but if you do too good of a job you may end up being fired because the boss is afraid of you, so we see that you always have to balance conflicting forces. Judaism never believes in either/or; we believe in both. How can you tell if an argument is for the sake of heaven? It is an

argument which will endure, which you will never be able to solve completely.

And what does it mean that this is the argument between Hillel and Shammai? We know that in almost every case Hillel wins the argument. The rabbis ask why, and they say because Hillel was willing to study the arguments of Shammai but the school of Shammai was not willing to study the arguments of the school of Hillel. Also, the school of Hillel were polite and talked nice about the people of Shammai, but the people of Shammai did not act nice to the people of Hillel. Even if you have an argument for the sake of heaven, for the sake or principles, we can see that if it ends up in personal attacks or in conduct which is offensive or is just causing a person to be, so to speak, pushed aside without even being given a hearing, then we see, too, that that is not very good either.

What is an argument that is not for the sake of heaven? This is the argument of Korach and his congregation. It does not say Korach and Moshe but Korach and his congregation because Korach's group was composed of people with special interests and they ended up fighting among themselves as to who should divide the spoils. They really were not arguing against Moshe. They were not arguing about principles. They were just arguing about how to divide the spoils.

That's why we have the number three on the holiday of Shavuos which is stressed. Number two is also stressed because it talks about the marriage of G-d and Israel and relationships,

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but we also know that the number three is stressed because when we received the Torah, as long as we accept the basics of the Ten Commandments then we can still argue within it. We can argue within the Ten Commandments. We can argue about how things should be applied in every given situation. As the Rambam said, himself, when he wrote his book the Mishnah Torah, "I know that by writing this book I am going to make many more arguments," because when things are written down you can pull this and this out and say this is what it means and someone says that is what it means, and we know that there are going to be many different types of arguments and that is the way it should be because that is the way new insights are found into Halacha and into personal experiences, but they have to be done with respect, and that, of course, is what the Torah is also teaching us here on this holiday of Shavuos. Go ahead and disagree but disagree with respect, and make sure that you understand that both sides are really right. Yes, in any argument between church and state both sides are right but you have to in every situation come to one particular type of a compromise. When you argue about peace and security, like you have in Israel, yes, Israel needs peace and, yes, Israel needs security, but we have to be careful and not sacrifice all of Israel's security for the sake of a peace which may not exist. We also have to make sure that we do not sacrifice any opportunities for peace because we are too frightened to take them up on it. Of course, we all know that Israel is having its election shortly, and we all hope that they will treat each other with respect throughout the campaign and that they will realize that both sides really have a good say. As you know, I have many times encountered people in Israel who are so arrogant and who, themselves, feel that the opposition are either

fools or completely deluded or completely malicious and they are not willing to give them a hearing. It is important that all sides get a hearing. These arguments will probably go on. We all hope and pray that Israel will endure forever and ever and that the correct decisions will be made at the next election.

I am reminded of the story they tell about four rabbis who were always arguing. Three of them always decided one way and one rabbi decided the other way. They were discussing a particular issue and the vote was three to one. This particular rabbi was outvoted again and he said, "Listen, I know I am right. You see the sky is blue right now? I am asking G-d, 'G-d, please, give me a sign that I am right'." Immediately a cloud came on the sky. The other three rabbis said, "What kind of a sign is that? It is natural that clouds come in the sky." The rabbi prayed to G-d again and said, "G-d, please give me a better sign." All of a sudden the sky got very dark and there was thunder and lightning and rain. The other rabbis say, "What kind of a sign is that? Many times we have thunderstorms. What kind of sign is that?" The rabbi once again said, "G-d, please make a very clear sign so my colleagues can see that I am right." All of a sudden a spotlight came out of heaven and shone right on this rabbi and a voice was heard shouting out of heaven saying, "Reb Chaim is right, Reb Chaim is right," at which time the other three rabbis looked at him and said, "Okay, so now the vote is three to two."

We all know that when it comes to making decisions in life we have to go by the majority,

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and we also know that as long as both sides are given a hearing and both sides recognize that there are always two sides to every issue and that in a practical sense we have to decide an issue in the here and now, we have to adopt a third position, and the third position is always going to be between the two extremes. Let us all hope and pray that Israel in this election will make the correct decision and that all of us in our own personal lives will make the correct decisions so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.