A special compilation of learning sources for Shavuot brought to you by the Princeton community
Kisses From Heaven

Shavuot is a holiday of unity, where we all came together as a nation Before God to receive the Torah. the element of being a nation, "משלי ממלכת קדוש וגויה כהנים", is crucial to the ability to receive the divine present of Torah from God. In the description of the giving of the Torah the word "העם" appears more than 20 times, emphasizing the nations role as a key element in this process.

The idea of a nation as a collective, with a united destiny and purpose is a core value in Judaism and seems like the purpose of giving of the Torah: “Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (Exodus 19:5-6). The gift of the Torah was given to us so we can fulfill our purpose, our role of turning the world into a better place. One question that might come up in this context is: where is the place of the individual? What about the intimate personal relationship of each individual with God? Where does the unique identity of each human being come into expression when standing before God?

The Midrash answers that question by explaining the words from song of songs: 'פיהו מנשיקות - he shall kiss me from the kisses of his mouth' (Yalkut Shimoni The Song of Songs) - each and every individual who was standing by mount Sinai received every word from the mouth of God as a personal kiss - intimate and direct, with no mediator. This intimate acceptance of the Torah created a very personal and unique revelation, in the deepest level, engraving the words of God in each individual’s heart. In Jeremiah 31 we are promised that this personal and intimate connection will be the constant nature of the covenant with God in days to come: “See, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah... But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days—declares the LORD: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people”.

The idea of “Tikkun Leil Shavuot” originates in the book of the Zohar that presents a beautiful metaphor of the wedding between God and the people of Israel taking place on Shavuot every year. The night before the wedding day the bridesmaids stay up all night with the bride to help her prepare with all her beautiful garments, jewelry and her unique crown-shining her true beauty in the best way. The fulfillment of this metaphor is through the custom of staying awake and learning Torah on the night of Shavuot- shining our beautiful inner essence as a nation and as individuals towards reunited with God and being worthy of accepting the divine words that hopefully our souls will be able to hear. The compilation of sources before you, is a beautiful demonstration of the individual and unique Torah of individuals in an our wonderful community. And all the individual lights, when coming together, shine a bright and unified light of Torah- the Torah that is our inheritance and gift from God as part of a glorious past, present and future.

We hope you enjoy this unique compilation of wisdom and insight, and may we all experience the acceptance of the Torah united - even from afar! Thank you to all those who contributed and shared their wisdom.

Each source sheet stands on its own and contains insights/guiding questions so it can be used as a source for learning on Shavuot. Just choose the topics you are interested in, sit back, learn and enjoy!

Chag Sameach!
Rav Mati and Shira
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Insight and guiding questions

What does God’s response to Moshe mean; how does it make sense grammatically and thematically?

First met this source...

In my TNT Chevruta with Alison Root

Favorite learning snack

Pizza

Favorite learning location

Beit Midrash, TNT
I think it's interesting to look at the power dynamics among Saul, David, Michal, and Jonathan. I think the bonds and relationships are also super interesting.
He said to me, "Mortal, eat what is offered you; eat this scroll, and go speak to the House of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and He gave me this scroll to eat, as He said to me, "Mortal, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give you." I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey to me. Then He said to me, "Mortal, go to the House of Israel and repeat My very words to them. For you are sent, not to a people of unintelligible speech and difficult language, but to the House of Israel—not to the many peoples of unintelligible speech and difficult language, whose talk you cannot understand. If I sent you to them, they would listen to you. But the House of Israel will refuse to listen to you, for they refuse to listen to Me; for the whole House of Israel are brazen of forehead and stubborn of heart. But I will make your face as hard as theirs, and your forehead as brazen as theirs. I will make your forehead like adamant, harder than flint. Do not fear them, and do not be dismayed by them, though they are a rebellious breed." Then He said to me: "Mortal, listen with your ears and receive into your mind all the words that I speak to you. Go to your people, the exile community, and speak to them. Say to them: Thus says the Lord God—whether they listen or not."

Then a spirit carried me away, and behind me I heard a great roaring sound: "Blessed is the Presence of the Lord, in His place," with the sound of the wings of the creatures beating against one another, and the sound of the wheels beside them—a great roaring sound. A spirit seized me and carried me away. I went in bitterness, in the fury of my spirit, while the hand of the Lord was strong upon me. And I came to the exile community that dwelt in Tel Abib by the Chebar Canal, and I remained there where they dwelt. And for seven days I sat there stunned among them.

After those seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: "O mortal, I appoint you watchman for the House of Israel; and when you hear a word from My mouth, you must warn them for Me. If I say to a wicked man, 'You shall die,' and you do not warn him—you do not speak to warn the wicked man of his wicked course in order to save his life—he, the wicked man, shall die for his iniquity, but I will require a reckoning for his blood from you. But if you do warn the wicked man, and he does not turn back from his wickedness and his wicked course, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have saved your own life. Again, if a righteous man abandons his righteousness and does wrong, when I put a stumbling block before him, he shall die. He shall die for his sin; the righteous deeds that he did shall not be remembered; but because you did not warn him, I will require a reckoning for his blood from you. If, however, you warn the righteous man not to sin, and he, the righteous, does not sin, he shall live because he took warning, and you will have saved your own life." Then the hand of the Lord came upon me, and He said to me, "Arise, go out to the valley, and there I will speak with you." I arose and went out to the valley, and there stood the Presence of the Lord, like the Presence that I had seen at the Chebar Canal; and I fanged myself down on my face. And a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet. And He spoke to me, and said to me: "Go, shut yourself up in your house. As for you, O mortal, cords have been placed upon you, and you have been bound with them, and you shall not go out among them. And I will make your tongue cleave to your palate, and you shall be dumb; you shall not be a reprover to them, for they are a rebellious breed. But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God!' He who listens will listen, and he who does not will—not for they are a rebellious breed.
Guiding questions

Skin Ezekiel. Does he act?

what was the experience of prophecy?

Jeremiah 20:7-12 - how does the prophet experience the word of God?

Sources

Ezekiel 1:1-3

תּוֹכָה | פָּרְשֵׂי | מִי?

In the thirteenth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was in the community of exiles by the Chebar river, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God. The word of the LORD came to the prophet Ezekiel son of Buzi, by the Chebar Canal, in the land of the Chaldeans. And the hand of the LORD came upon him there.

Rashi 1:3

Every time the term "hand" is used in this book or in prophetic language it means none other than force, that the prophecy forces itself [upon him] against his will, like a man who has gone crazy, Distritute in German/French

Ezekiel 8

In the sixth year, on the fifth day of the sixth month, I was sitting at home, and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, and there the hand of the Lord GOD fell upon me. As I looked, there was a figure that had the appearance of fire: from what appeared as his loins down, [he was] fire; and from his loins up, his appearance was resplendent and had the color of amber. He stretched out the form of a hand, and took me by the hair of my head. A spirit lifted me up between heaven and earth and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the Penimitth Gate that faces north; that was the site of the infuriating image that provokes fury. And the Presence of the God of Israel appeared there, like the vision that I had seen in the valley. And He said to me, "O mortal, turn your eyes northward." I turned my eyes northward, and there, north of the gate of the altar, was that infuriating image on the wall. And He said to me, "Enter and see the vile abominations that are practicing here." I entered and looked, and there all detestable forms of creeping things and beasts and all the fetishes of the House of Israel were depicted over the entire wall. Before them stood seventy men, elders of the House of Israel, with Jazaniah son of Shaphan standing in their midst. Everyone had a censer in his hand, and a thick cloud of incense smoke ascended. Again He said to me, "O mortal, have you seen what the elders of the House of Israel are doing in the darkness, everyone in his image-concealed chamber? For they say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has abandoned the country.’" And He said to me, "You shall see even more terrible abominations which they practice." Then He brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the House of the LORD, and there, at the entrance to the Temple of the LORD, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men, their backs to the Temple of the LORD and their faces to the east; they were bowing low to the sun in the east. And He said to me, "Do you see, O mortal? Is it not enough for the House of Judah to practice the abominations that they have committed here, that they must fill the country with lawlessness and provoke Me still further and thrust the branch to their nostrils? I in turn will act with fury, I will show no pity or compassion: though they cry aloud to Me, I will not listen to them."

Ezekiel 37

The hand of the LORD came upon me. He took me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the valley. It was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many of them spread over the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “O mortal, can these bones live again?” I replied, “O Lord GOD, only You know.” And He said to me, “Prophesy over these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus said the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live again. I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you shall live again. And you shall know that I am the LORD! I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone to matching bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O mortal! Say to the breath: Thus said the Lord GOD: Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again.” I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood upon their feet, a vast multitude. And He said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’ Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel. You shall know, O My people, that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and lifted you out of your graves. I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil. Then you shall know that I the LORD have spoken and have acted”—declares the LORD. The word of the LORD came to me: And you, O mortal, take a stick and write on it, “O Judah and the Israelites associated with him”, and take another stick and write on it, “Of Joseph—the stick of Ephraim—and all the House of Israel associated with him.” Bring them close to each other, so that they become one stick, joined together in your hand. And when any of your people ask you, “Won’t you tell us what these actions of yours mean?” answer them, “Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in the hand of Ephraim—and of the tribes of Israel associated with him, and I will place the stick of Judah upon it and make them into one stick; they shall be joined in My hand.” You shall hold up before their eyes the sticks which you have inscribed, and you shall declare to them: Thus said the Lord GOD: I am going to take the Israelite people from among the nations they have gone to, and gather them from every quarter, and bring them to the land of Israel. And I will make one nation in the land, on the hills of Israel, and one king shall be king of them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. Nor shall they ever again defile themselves by their fetishes and their abhorrent things, and by their other transgressions. I will save them in their all their settlements where they sinned, and I will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them; there shall be one shepherd for all of them. They shall follow My rules and faithfully obey My laws. Thus they shall remain in the land which I gave to My servant Jacob and in which your fathers dwelt; they and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, with My servant David as their prince for all time. I will make a covenant of friendship with them—it shall be an everlasting covenant with them—I will establish them and multiply them, and I will place My Sanctuary among them forever. My Presence shall rest over them; I will be their God and they shall be My people. And when My Sanctuary abides among them forever, the nations shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel.
The word of the LORD came to me: What do you mean by quoting this proverb upon the soil of Israel, "Parents eat sour grapes and their children’s teeth are blunted?" As I live—declares the Lord GOD—this proverb shall no longer be current among you in Israel. Consider, all lives are Mine; the life of the parent and the life of the child are both Mine. The person who sins, only he shall die. Thus, if a man is righteous and does what is just and right: If he has not eaten on the mountains or raised his eyes to the fetishes of the House of Israel; if he has not defiled another man’s wife or approached a menstruous woman; if he has not wronged anyone; if he has returned the debtor’s pledge to him and has taken nothing by robbery; if he has given bread to the hungry and clothed the naked; if he has not lent at advance interest or exacted accrued interest; if he has abstained from wrongdoing and executed true justice between man and man; if he has followed My laws and kept My rules and acted honestly—he is righteous. Such a man shall live—declares the Lord GOD. Suppose, now, that he has begotten a son who is a ruffian, a shedder of blood, who does any of these things, whereas he himself did none of these things. That is, [the son] has eaten on the mountains, has defiled another man’s wife, has wronged the poor and the needy, has taken by robbery, has not returned a pledge, has raised his eyes to the fetishes, has committed abomination, has lent at advance interest, or exacted accrued interest—shall he live? He shall not live! If he has committed any of these abominations, he shall die; he has forfeited his life. Now suppose that he, in turn, has begotten a son who has seen all the sins that his father committed, but has taken heed and has not imitated him: He has not eaten on the mountains or raised his eyes to the fetishes of the House of Israel; he has not defiled another man’s wife; he has not wronged anyone; he has not seized a pledge or taken anything by robbery; he has given his bread to the hungry and clothed the naked; he has refrained from oppressing the poor; he has not exacted advance or accrued interest; he has obeyed My rules and followed My laws—he shall not die for the iniquity of his father, but shall live. To be sure, his father, because he practiced fraud, robbed his brother, and acted wickedly among his kin, did die for his iniquity; and now you ask, “Why has not the son shared the burden of his father’s guilt?” But the son has done what is right and just, and has carefully kept all My laws: he shall live! The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent’s guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child’s guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone. Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions he committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness he has practiced, he shall live. Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die?—says the Lord GOD. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live. So, too, if a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, practicing the very abominations that the wicked person practiced, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds that he did shall be remembered; because of the treachery he has practiced and the sins he has committed—because of these, he shall die. Yet you say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Listen, O House of Israel: Is My way unfair? It is your ways that are unfair! When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does wrong, he shall die for it; he shall die for the wrong he has done. And if a wicked person turns back from the wickedness that he practiced and does what is just and right, such a person shall save his life. Because he took heed and turned back from all the transgressions that he committed, he shall live; he shall not die. Yet the House of Israel say, “The way of the Lord is unfair.” Are My ways unfair, O House of Israel? It is your ways that are unfair! Be assured, O House of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways—declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn back from your transgressions; let them not be a stumbling block of guilt for you. Cast away all the transgressions by which you have offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die, O House of Israel. For it is not My desire that anyone shall die—declares the Lord GOD. Repent, therefore, and live!
Even if you defeated the whole army of the Chaldeans that are fighting against you, and only
Do not delude yourselves into thinking, “The Chaldeans will go away from us.” They will not.
back and attack this city and they will capture it and destroy it by fire.” Thus said the LORD:
which set out to help you, will return to its own land, to Egypt. And the Chaldeans will come
you say to the king of Judah who sent you to Me to inquire of Me: “The army of Pharaoh,
the LORD came to the prophet Jeremiah: Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: Thus shall
besieging Jerusalem heard the report, they raised the siege of Jerusalem.) Then the word of
in prison. The army of Pharaoh had set out from Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were
the priest Maaseiah to the prophet Jeremiah, to say, “Please pray on our behalf to the LORD
who were brought as exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the able men, to the number of seven
deported Jehoiachin to Babylon; and the king’s wives and officers and the notables of the land
well as all the craftsmen and smiths; only the poorest people in the land were left. He
eighth year of his reign. He carried off from Jerusalem all the treasures of the House of the
and his courtiers, commanders, and officers, surrendered to the king of Babylon. The king of Babylon took him captive in the
eighty year of his reign. He carried off from Jerusalem all the treasures of the House of the
and the city came under siege. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon advanced against the city while his troops were besieging it.
Thereupon King Jehoiachin of Judah, along with his mother, and his courtiers, commanders,
and the warriors—ten thousand exiles—as well as all the craftsmen and smiths; only the poorest people in the land were left. He
deported Jehoiachin to Babylon; and the king’s wives and officers and the notables of the land
were brought as exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon. All the able men, to the number of seven
thousand—all of them warriors, trained for battle—and a thousand craftsmen and smiths
were brought to Babylon as exiles by the king of Babylon. And the king of Babylon appointed
Maccabees named Mattaniah. Jehoiachin’s uncle, king in his place, changing his name to Zedekiah.
Yirmiyahu 37:1-10.
Zedekiah son of Josiah became king instead of Coniah son of Jehoiakim, for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon set him up as king over the land of Judah. Neither he nor his courtiers nor the people of the land gave heed to the words which the LORD spoke through the prophet Jeremiah. Yet King Zedekiah sent Jehucal son of Shelemiah and Zephaniah son of the priest Masseiah to the prophet Jeremiah, to say, “Please pray on our behalf to the LORD our God.” (Jeremiah could still go in and out among the people, for they had not yet put him in prison. The army of Pharaoh had set out from Egypt; and when the Chaldeans who were besieging Jerusalem heard the report, they raised the siege of Jerusalem.) Then the word of the LORD came to the prophet Jeremiah: Thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: “Thus shall you say to the king of Judah who sent you to Me to inquire of Me: “The army of Pharaoh, which set out to help you, will return to its own land, to Egypt. And the Chaldeans will come back and attack this city and they will capture it and destroy it by fire.” Thus said the LORD: “Do not delude yourselves into thinking, “The Chaldeans will go away from us.” They will not.
Even if you defeated the whole army of the Chaldeans that are fighting against you, and only wounded men were left lying in their tents, they would get up and burn this city down!

Ezekiel 29:1-20
In the twenty-seventh year, on the first day of the first month, the word of the LORD came to me: O mortal, King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon has made his army expend vast labor on Tyre; every head is rubbed bald and every shoulder scraped. But he and his army have had no return for the labor he expended on Tyre. Assuredly, thus said the Lord GOD: I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon. He shall carry away the land of Egypt as spoil, and the houses of the Ethiopians. And the Egyptians shall be a羞辱 to you and an execration, and they shall have a curse among the people, and the land of Egypt shall become desolate forever; and they shall know that I the Lord have destroyed the land of Egypt.

Ezekiel 17:
The word of the LORD came to me: O mortal, propound a riddle and relate an allegory to the House of Israel. Say: Thus said the Lord GOD: The great eagle with the great wings and the long pinions, with the full plumage and the brilliant colors, came to the Lebanon range and seized the top of the cedar. He plucked off its topmost bough and carried it off to the land of traders and set it in a city of merchants. He then took some of the seed of the land and planted it in a fertile field; he planted and set it like a willow beside abundant waters. It grew and became a spreading vine of low stature; it became a vine, produced branches, and sent out boughs. [He had intended] that its twigs should turn to him, and that its roots should stay under him. But there was another great eagle with great wings and full plumage; and this vine now bent its roots in his direction and sent out its twigs toward him, that he might water it more than the bed where it was planted— though it was planted in rich soil beside abundant water—so that it might grow branches and produce boughs and be a noble vine. Say: Thus said the Lord GOD: Will it thrive? Will he not tear out its roots and rip off its crown, so that its entire foliage withers? It shall wither, despite any strong arm or mighty army [that may come] to remove it from its roots. And suppose it is transplanted, will it thrive? When the east wind strikes it, it shall wither—wither upon the bed where it is growing. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Say to the rebellious breed: Do you not know what these things mean? Say: The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and carried away its king and its officers and brought them back with him to Babylon. He took one of the seed royal and made a covenant with him and imposed an oath on him, and he carried away the nobles of the land— so that it might be a humble kingdom and not exalt itself, but keep its covenant and so endure. But [that prince] rebelled against him and sent his envoys to Egypt to get horses and a large army. Will he succeed? Will he who does such things escape? Shall he break a covenant and escape? As I live—declares the Lord GOD—in the very homeland of the king who made him king, whose oath he flouted and whose covenant he broke—right there, in Babylon, he shall die. Pharaoh will not fight at his side with a great army and with numerous troops in the war, when mounds are thrown up and siege towers erected to destroy many lives. He flouted a pact and broke a covenant; he gave his promise and did all these things—he shall not escape. Assuredly, thus said the Lord GOD: As I live, I will pay him back for flouting My pact and breaking My covenant. I will spread My net over him and shall be caught in My snare; I will carry him to Babylon and enter with him into judgment there for the trespass which he committed against Me. And all the fugitives of all his battalions shall fall by the sword, and those who remain shall scatter in every direction; then you will know that I the LORD have spoken. Thus said the Lord GOD: Then I in turn will take and set [in the ground a slip] from the lofty top of the cedar; I will pluck a tender twig from the tip of its crown, and I will plant it on a tall, towering mountain. I will plant it in Israel’s lofty highlands, and it shall bring forth boughs and produce branches and grow into a noble cedar. Every bird of every feather shall take shelter under it, shelter in the shade of its boughs. Then shall all the trees of the field know that it is I the LORD who have abased the lofty tree and exalted the lowly tree, who have dried up the green tree and made the withered tree bud. I the LORD have spoken, and I will act.
I enjoy this story because, despite being one line long, it portrays Shammai as a family man concerned with his own grandson. In general, I appreciate the stories about the people we don’t always think of as our main heroes. While many readers of Mishna encounter legends about the kindness of Hillel, it is nice to encounter a sweet story about Shammai caring to make a Sukkah for his grandson.

Questions: How do you interpret Shammai’s act? How do you think the sages interpret it given the Mishna which records it?

Women, slaves and minors are exempt from the [commandment] of the sukkah. A minor who no longer relies on his mother is obligated in the [commandment] of the sukkah. It happened that the daughter-in-law of Shammai the elder gave birth and he opened up the ceiling and put skhakh on top of the bed[posts] on behalf of the minor.

Cream herring mixed with leftover wasabi sauce from sushi lunch and learns. Try it!
I found this to be a powerful insight in the boundaries of the extent to which debate is appropriate. We often associate Torah with the fiery exchanges of tanaaim and amoraim trying to distill the truth, but it seems clear from this source that such an approach is not always appropriate.

The question becomes why exactly was it so praiseworthy that the student was silent during the Shabbos drasha? I thought of a few possibilities but I’m sure others have their own thoughts. What does this say about the nature of our relationship to Torah, our teachers, and truth?
I just love this aggadah. I think its a very interesting way to think about our history and our continued interest

First met this source...

The first time I came across it was in yeshiva, and it inspired me to say the korban tamid every day during shacharit

Favorite learning snack

Pretzels

Favorite learning location

Beit Midrash
Insight and 
guiding questions

I came across this text while learning daf yomi during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it felt especially relevant. I am struck by the assertion that the Shechina, the divine presence, is always there to comfort a sick person and keep them company, even when no human is there. During the time when a person is sick and bedridden, which has the potential to be so isolating, our tradition tells us that the person is not truly alone.

Source

A sick person is different. [He does not need the angels to bring his prayer before God because] the Divine Presence is with him. As Rav Anan said that Rav said: From where is it derived that the Divine Presence cares for and aids the sick person? As it is stated: “God will support him on the bed of illness” (Psalms 41:4). The Gemara comments: That was also taught in a baraita: One who enters to visit the sick person should sit neither on the bed nor on a chair; rather, he should wrap himself in his prayer shawl with trepidation and awe, and sit before the sick person below him, as the Divine Presence is above the head of the sick person, as it is stated: “God will support him on the bed of illness,” and he must treat the Divine Presence with deference. On a similar note, Rava said that Ravin said: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, feeds the sick person during his illness? As it is stated: “God will support him on the bed of illness.”

(Shabbat 12, translation from Sefaria)
Incidental to the verse, "Tremble, and do not sin," the Gemara mentions that Rabbi Levi bar Ḥama said that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination, i.e., that one must constantly struggle so that his evil inclination does not lead him to transgression, as it is stated: "Tremble, and do not sin." If one succeeds and subdues his evil inclination, excellent, but if he does not succeed in subduing it, he should study Torah, as alluded to in the verse: “Say to your heart.” If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should recite Shema, which contains the acceptance of the yoke of God, and the concept of reward and punishment, as it is stated in the verse: “Upon your bed,” which alludes to Shema, where it says: “When you lie down.” If he subdues his evil inclination, excellent; if not, he should remind himself of the day of death, whose silence is alluded to in the continuation of the verse: “And be still, Selah.”
So Close, Yet Wor(l)ds Apart
-Avodah Zara 2a

Source

GEMARA: Rav and Shmuel disagree with regard to the correct version of the text of the mishna. One teaches the term meaning: Their festivals, as eideihen, spelled with an alef as the first letter, and one teaches eideihen with an ayin as the first letter. The Gemara comments: The one who teaches eideihen with an alef is not mistaken, and the one who teaches eideihen with an ayin is not mistaken, as there is support for each version of the term.

The Gemara elaborates: The one who teaches eideihen with an alef is not mistaken, as it is written: “For the day of their calamity [eidam] is at hand” (Deuteronomy 32:35), and the future downfall mentioned in the verse is partly due to the festivals of idol worshippers. The term there is spelled with an alef. And likewise, the one who teaches eideihen with an ayin is not mistaken, as it is written: “Let them bring their witnesses [eideihem], that they may be justified” (Isaiah 43:9), i.e., the festivals will serve as witnesses against gentile sinners, proving that they engaged in idol worship. The term there is spelled with an ayin.

Insight and guiding questions

The first question in the gemara is a seemingly pedantic question about the spelling of a word, with an aleph or an ayin. Rav Yehoshua Weisberg at Nishmat explains that this is actually a deep philosophical question. If you look at the source for each spelling, one comes from Devarim and one comes from Isaiah. Devarim has much to say about the destruction of idols and a creation of a unique and separate Jewish people; contrastingly, Isaiah talks about being a “light unto the nations” and interacting with the rest of the world. Although not contradictory, there seems to be tension between total uniqueness and being a part of the world. It was interesting to me that, if understood this way, the gemara says that both spellings (and by extension, interpretations) are correct.

First met this source...

Rav Yehoshua Weisberg, Nishmat
Drifting or Steering—Which?
-Rabbi Israel H. Levinthal

Source
Drifting or Steering - Which? - that is the question which Rosh Hashanah puts to you and to me as we review the past year of our life, with its successes and failures, its hopes and disappointments, its achievements and barrenness, its conquests and its surrenders. The difference between the life that has achieved success, the life that has won for itself the esteem and love of its fellow men, and the life that has failed ignobly, that has won for itself only shame and despair, is the difference in the attitude each takes toward life. One is a drifter, permitting himself simply to drift and to be buffeted along the sea of life; the other regards himself as the captain whose duty it is to stand at the helm and to steer past all obstacles and over every difficulty until the port is reached. How many a failure could have been averted, how many a broken man could once more come to himself, how many a sickly man could be restored to health, if only we could all learn to transform ourselves from Drifters to Steerers!
-1926 Rosh Hashana Sermon

Insight and guiding questions
Do you feel like you are drifting or steering more in your life right now? When is it better to drift and when is it better to steer? What is the port that you hope to reach one day?

First met this source...
From my mentor, Rabbi Dr. Sam Mendelowitz, of blessed memory.
Insight and guiding questions

When I first learned this source, I was blown away by its beautiful play on words. The Ishbiter reads the root of the word "Bechukotai" differently: instead of obeying the traditional root "law," he deviates from the exact translation to understand the root as "be inscribed." I love thinking about Torah and the holiness of God as something "inscribed and affixed in our hearts." Learning is a process, and here it's understood as the conscious decision to contract ourselves before turning to align our wills with the will of God. From there, the Ishbiter takes it one step further: once we've internalized the full power of "divrei Torah," (words of Torah), we can "go forth" because God is truly with us. In the text, the Ishbiter distinguishes between moments of "omed" (standing) with moments of "holech" (going). Each time I re-learn this passage, new questions burst forth. How do we balance moments of "standing" with movements of "moving?" Can we really distinguish our lives into times where we focus on contemplation with times where we reach out and focus on action? What role does movement and action play in embodying Torah in our lives? Can movement be a way of affixing beliefs and ideas onto our hearts? As we approach the holiday of Shavuot, I'm reminded yet again of the beauty found in quietly contemplating my relationship to Torah. Even in times like these, I'm feeling comforted by the possibility of focusing on myself to ultimately strive to illuminate new kinds of goodness in my relationships and to God.
Insight and guiding questions

Qu. 1: What is the significance of the idea that God himself only uttered the first letter of the first word of the revelation at Sinai to the Children of Israel? What does this say about the origins of the rest of the words, sentences, and commandments, that are attributed to the revelation at Sinai?

Qu. 2: Why does R. Naphtali Tzvi say that R. Mendel’s idea about the Alpeh can help us to understand what it means for God to have spoken ‘face to face’ with the Children of Israel at Sinai? And why does he say that R. Mendel’s idea has the power to smash rocks?

Qu. 3: What does it mean for the letter ‘Alpeh’ in particular to have been the one thing which God spoke to the Children of Israel? What is special and strange about the letter Aleph when it comes to pronouncing it? And what significance does this have

Source

Naphtali Tzvi of Ropshitz (1760-1827), in his book “Zera Kodesh", from his ‘Homily for the Festival of Shavuot’:

“I heard from the mouth of our master, our teacher, and our rabbi from Rimanov – our teacher the rabbi Mendel, may his memory be for a blessing – [a remark] on the verse ‘God spoke one, etc’ (Ps 62:12), that it is possible that they [=the Children of Israel] only heard the letter ‘Aleph’ [whose numerical value is one] from [the word] ‘Anochi’ [i.e. the first letter of the first word of the Ten Commandments] from the mouth of the Holy One (blessed is He) [at Sinai]. And the words of the mouth of the wise are a delight! And to understand his [=Rabbi Mendel’s] holy words – words of the living God – whose words are like a hammer that smashes rock [Jer 23:29], is also to understand why it says ‘Face to face God spoke with you’ [Deut 5:4]...”
The Heart's Desire
-Likkutei MoHaran 142

Insight and guiding questions

This (short) torah can help frame what it means to be learning while socially distanced. It centers on a reinterpretation of Malachi 3:16. Also, think about how Rebbe Nachman uses the Talmudic description of Avraham as לְגֵרִים" ראש and how Avraham as a figure could be a paradigm for our current experience in the pandemic.

Source

Someone who cannot study Torah at all—for example, he is either unlearned or has no holy book or is in a wilderness—but his heart is alight within him and he greatly longs to study Torah and serve God; in such a case, his heart’s desire to study Torah is itself an aspect of learning from a holy book.

For there are two tzaddikim in the world. They speak to each other, though they are separated from one another by many hundreds of miles. That is, one tzaddik raises some difficult question in the Torah and the second tzaddik, there, where he is, says something which is an answer to the difficulty raised by the first tzaddik. And sometimes, this one raises a question and the other one also raises a question. But the question one raises is an answer to his friend’s question. In this way they are conversing with each other, yet no one hears this, just the Holy One Himself.

This is the meaning of: [“Then those who fear God conversed one with his fellow, and God hearkened and heard it; and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for those who fear God and contemplate His name” (Malachi 3:16).] Then those who fear God conversed one with his fellow—That is, they do not speak to one another, but they in any case converse by virtue of one raising a difficulty and the other providing an answer. Yet, no creature hears this, just the Holy One.
Now, this book into which their words are written is an aspect of the heart that exists Above. Their words are inscribed there, as in (Proverbs 3:3), “Inscribe them on the tablet of your heart.” So one whose heart is aflame within him and he yearns to study Torah, only it is impossible for him—he receives heart from the heart of Above, corresponding to a “book of remembrance,” and from there his heart receives its yearning. This is the aspect of studying Torah from a holy book, literally.

Thus, it is written: and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for those who fear God and contemplate His name—As our Sages expounded: Even if he thought about performing a mitzvah but through no fault of his own was unable to do it, he is credited as if he had done it (Berakhot 6a).

For this itself that his heart longs and contemplates to do, but he cannot, is considered doing. This is because he receives yearning from the heart of Above/the “book of remembrance.”

Therefore, Avraham, who was the first convert—and thus had no one from whom to learn, but only a heart that greatly yearned for the service of God—also received from this heart of Above, which is called a “book of remembrance.” At that time there were no tzaddikim in the world, and the insights which the souls had originated prior to Creation were written on the heart.

Therefore, all converts are named after him; they are called “the N’DiVei nobles of the nations... the nation of the God of Avraham” (ibid. 47:10), corresponding to “a N’Div (generous) heart” (Exodus 35:22). For they have nothing but the longing of their hearts for the Holy One, like Avraham.
Insight and guiding questions

Joshua ben Sira, who wrote at the beginning of the second century BCE, clearly intends his picture of Wisdom as a revision or updating of the picture of Wisdom in Proverbs 8 in the Tanakh. Ben Sira wrote in Hebrew. Some of the Hebrew survives, but the complete book comes down to us in Greek. Fortunately, Wisdom--sophia--is a feminine noun in Greek as well as in Hebrew.

What similarities and differences do you notice when you compare the chapters?

What does it meant to identify Wisdom with the Torah?

First met this source...

I first encountered this source in college (a very long time ago!).

Favorite learning snack

Tea and cake.

Favorite learning location

Home
Whoever put on a tallis when he was young

- Yehuda Amichai

Source

Whoever put on a tallis when he was young will never forget:
Taking it out of the soft velvet bag,
opening the folded shawl,
Spreading it out, kissing the length of the neckband
(embroidered Or trimmed in gold).
Then swinging it in a great swoop over head
Like a sky, a wedding canopy, a parachute
And then winding it Around his head
as in hide-and-seek,
wrapping His whole body in it,
close and slow,
snuggling into it like the cocoon Of a butterfly,
then opening would-be wings to fly.
And why is this tallis striped
and not checkered black-and-white Like a chessboard?
Because squares are finite and hopeless.
Stripes come from infinity and to infinity they go
Like airport runways where angels land and take off.
Whoever has put on a tallis will never forget.
When he comes out of a swimming pool or the sea,
he wraps himself in a large towel, spreads it out again
Over his head, and again snuggles into it close and slow,
still shivering a little, and he laughs and blesses.

Insight and guiding questions

I think it’s interesting that the poem never explicitly mentions God or prayer, even though most would say that that is their primary reason for wearing a tallit.

Why do you think that is? Where do you see your relationship with God or prayer reflected in this imagery?

What other metaphors/similes would you use if you were writing this poem?

One of my favorites, just for an example, is the last few lines about the swimming pool. When I would get of the pool as a kid, it was always one of my parents who was standing there waiting to embrace me with a towel. In this way, I see God as a parental figure, and wearing a tallit is like getting a hug from God. Another thought is that this poem is focused on the personal experience of wearing a tallit, specifically what you as an individual are feeling in the act of first putting it on. What are some ways in which wearing a tallit can also be a communal experience? Some examples to think about: our ancestors have been wearing tallitot for generations. We wear tallitot when we are davening in a minyan, surrounded by many other people also wearing tallitot. We wear tallitot at our wedding to symbolize a new life, not alone, but rather with another person. We cover our heads and the heads of our families in our tallitot when we are being blessed by Kohanim in the community.

Overall, what do you find most meaningful here? If you are a tallit wearer, what imagery will you take with you next time you put on a tallit? If you are not a tallit wearer, to what other areas of your life can you bring this poem’s imagery and significance?

First met this source

I first heard this poem in seventh grade from my Rabbinics teacher, Rabbi Betsy Forester. At that point, I had already committed to wearing a tallit, but this poem got me really excited about wearing my tallit and added new meaning and beautiful imagery to my relationship with my tallit that I still think about today.
Sources

A matter of Life and Death
-Shabbat 94a

Insight and guiding questions

Why would you be exempt for carrying a living thing according to each opinion?

How convincing is the argument “a living being attempts to lighten the load of the person carrying it = במשכן נמשכת יוליה?”

Why would a person be different from an animal in this regard?

Then see Tosfot on ימי - what is Tosfot’s question? How do they answer? How is the answer different than what you expected?

Next, read Tosfot HaRosh - what is his question on Tosfot? What is his conclusion? Is there a difference in principle or in the reality?

Last, read the Korban Netanal on the Rosh for this section. How does he explain the machloket? How does this make things more or less clear?

First met this source...

In my chavruta with Neti Linzer the great!

Favorite learning snack

TNT pizza

Favorite learning location

Beit Midrash and TNT
Are the Ten Commandments more important than other parts of the Torah?
(Spoilers: NO)

The Gemara related above that the priests in the Temple **read the Ten Commandments**, along with the sections of *Shema, VeHaya im Shamoa, VaYomer, True and Firm, Avoda, and the priestly benediction*.

Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: Even in the outlying areas, outside the Temple, they **sought to recite** the Ten Commandments in this manner every day, as they are the basis of the Torah (Rambam), but they **had already abolished** recitation of the Ten Commandments due to the grievance of the heretics.

They sought to establish the Ten Commandments in the reading of *Shema*.

**Due to the grievance of the heretics** - That they shouldn’t tell uneducated folk: The rest of the Torah is not true, and you should know that you only read that which was said by the Holy One, Blessed be He and you heard from His mouth at Mount Sinai.

According to Rashi, wouldn’t people also think that Shema has a higher status and not just the (Ten Commandments)? (See bonus sources 1

Are there other ways in which we indicate that certain parts of the Torah may be “more significant” than others
Iyun

Yoni Goldberg
21'

the heretics would say that the Ten Commandments are on a higher level than the rest of the Torah. He said that anyone who wants to stand for the reading of the Ten Commandments should be protested, because this is heretical and implies that the Ten Commandments are more important than the rest of Torah. The Rambam agreed to this ruling because standing for the Ten Commandments causes a lack of faith and gives the impression that some parts of the Torah are higher than others, which is very bad.

Many of our shuls do have the custom to stand for the Ten Commandments even though we typically sit for Torah reading, how can we justify this in light of the Rambam?

There are two different tunes that we use to read from the Torah. On Shavuos we read with the Ta’am Ha’elyon where each of the commandments has its own verse, because on that day the Ten Commandments were given. In Parshas Yisro and Parshas Va’eschanan we read with the congregation using the Ta’am Hatachton. Some have the custom to read with the congregation always using the Ta’am Ha’elyon even in Parshas Yisro and Parshas Va’eschanan and only the individual reads with the second tune.

[There was a new Rav who came to a certain town]. Their previous custom was to stand when reading the Ten Commandments, he cancelled that and had them sit for it and did not let them stand. He brought a proof from when our Sages cancelled the custom of reading the Ten Commandments with Shema because the heretics would say that the Ten Commandments are on a higher level than the rest of the Torah. He said that anyone who wants to stand for the reading of the Ten Commandments should be protested, because this is heretical and implies that the Ten Commandments are more important than the rest of Torah. The Rambam agreed to this ruling because standing for the Ten Commandments causes a lack of faith and gives the impression that some parts of the Torah are higher than others, which is very bad.

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Summary: We read the Ten Commandments with a special tune, the Ta’am Elyon. This breaks up the reading not by the verses in the Chumash but by each commandment, since it represents the day we received them. In fact, some hold we only use the Ta’am Elyon on Shavuos and not during the year because on Shavuos we reenact the receipt of the Torah and the Ten Commandments. Thus, standing for the reading of the Ten Commandments is not showing that it is more important, rather it is meant as a reenactment of the Mount Sinai experience, where the Jews stood around the mountain. It is possible in the locale of the Rambam they read with Ta’am Hatachton, at which point we would not be able to say this idea of re-experiencing Har Sinai and we should not stand.

- Are there any other ways on Shavuos that we reenact Har Sinai?

- Ex. רמ”א תצד:ג says that we put flowers and grass around the shul on Shavuos, and the משנה ברורהשם explains this is because there was grass at Mount Sinai.

- Are there any other facets of Judaism that are meant to reenact the experience at Mount Sinai? (See bonus sources 2)

Bonus Sources

1. במדבר רבה יב

This would take away the Rambam’s proof against standing during the
Iyun Yoni Goldberg 21'

-Continued-

Yoni Goldberg 21'