

# The Chief Rabbi's Shavuot Message 5780

It was the most stunning, awe-inspiring event that the world has ever known. Some three and a half millennia ago, we gathered as a fledgling nation at the foot of Mount Sinai and experienced the Divine revelation. But, we were not alone.

This single account of Hashem speaking in public is described in the Torah as “a great voice that did not cease”. The Midrash teaches from this verse that the voice of Hashem was heard without echo across the world. The sound permeated every possible barrier and was heard in 70 different languages. Clearly, this was not only an historic, epic moment for the Jewish people; it was a turning point for all of humankind.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik commented that from here we learn that the Divine revelation was intended to send a message of truth to everyone on earth - because the Torah is both a blueprint for how we as Jews should live our lives and also the foundational document of morality for the whole world. It is at once both particular and universal. The revelation at Sinai therefore heralded our dual responsibility to have the exclusive privilege to observe the mitzvot given to us by Hashem and also to be an ‘or lagoyim’ - ‘a light unto the nations’.

This dual responsibility looms ever larger in these extraordinary times of the coronavirus pandemic. We cannot escape the fact that our ability to observe the mitzvot of the Torah as we usually would, has now been curtailed in ways we have never previously known. What is Shavuot without being able to gather together for davening in our Shuls, beautifully adorned with floral arrangements? Or without being able to learn together at an inspiring Tikkun Leil? We can take comfort in observing a Shavuot which will have at its heart a truth which permeates every possible barrier and be heard in every language - that there is nothing more sacred than the protection of life.

In addition, Shavuot this year provides us with an unprecedented opportunity. On that original Shavuot day, Moshe, alone on the mountain, was detached from the rest of the nation. The inclusion of our people and all others in the Sinai experience was accompanied by the necessity for Moshe, by himself, to have an extraordinary, spiritually elevating experience. Similarly, in addition to our engagement in community life, we all need to personally feel connected to the Torah and the beauty of its eternally relevant teachings.

The calling of this Shavuot, therefore, is for each one of us to be a Moshe Rabeinu – to champion the universal morality of Torah and also to appreciate the privilege it affords us, even when by ourselves at home, to embrace a life of meaning and joy.



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