

SHAVUOT - THE TIME OF THE GIVING OF THE TORAH

What was Moses doing on Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights?

INTRODUCTION

Shavuot is the festival in which we celebrate the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai. According to our tradition, God revealed the 10 commandments to the Jewish people on Shavuot. After that, Moses remained on Sinai with God for 40 days and 40 nights, during which time God taught the Torah to Moses. The Rabbis of the Talmud tried to imagine what Moses did for so long on top of Mount Sinai with God. The Midrashim, or stories they wrote about these 40 days, often reveal to us the Rabbis' understanding of the nature of the Torah itself.

Here are some of these Midrashim that you can study together with discussion questions and notes that include ideas on how to answer the questions. You can study all, some, or just one of the texts.

Before studying, ask participants what their association is when you say the word Torah. Does it evoke positive or negative feelings? What makes them proud of the Torah? What makes them feel disconnected to Torah?

NOTE:

It is worth explaining what we mean when we use the term 'Torah'. It can be understood differently in different contexts. It could refer to the Five Books of the Torah found in a Sefer Torah. It could also be understood to refer to all the 'Written Torah', the whole of the Tanach or Hebrew Bible. It could also refer to the 'Oral Torah', the collective works of the Rabbis from about 100 BCE to 500 CE. This would include the Mishna, Talmud, and Midrashim. In a much broader use, 'Torah' could refer to all Jewish wisdom and writings from throughout history. The Hebrew word 'Torah' also means theory, or teaching, and therefore it can refer to any individual's teaching or way of thinking of the world.

SOURCE 1: BABYLONIAN TALMUD MENACHOT 29B

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says:

When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and tying crowns on the letters of the Torah. Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, who is preventing You from giving the Torah without these additions? (Who will derive any meaning from these crowns on the letters of the Torah?)

God said to him: There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name; he is destined to derive from each and every thorn of these crowns mounds upon mounds of *halakhot*. It is for his sake that the crowns must be added to the letters of the Torah.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, show him to me.

God said to him: Return behind you.

Moses went and sat at the end of the eighth row in Rabbi Akiva's study hall and did not understand what they were saying. Moses' strength waned as he thought his Torah knowledge was deficient. When Rabbi Akiva arrived at the discussion of one matter, his students said to him: My teacher, from where do you derive this? Rabbi Akiva said to them: It is a *halakha* transmitted to Moses from Sinai. When Moses heard this, his mind was put at ease, as this too was part of the Torah that he was to receive. Moses returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have a man as great as this and yet You still choose to give the Torah through me. Why?

God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, You have shown me Rabbi Akiva's Torah, now show me his reward.

God said to him: Return to where you were.

Moses went back and saw that they were weighing Rabbi Akiva's flesh in a butcher shop, as Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by the Romans. Moses said before Him: Master of the Universe, this is Torah and this is its reward?

God said to him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

QUESTIONS:

- Why did Moses not understand the Torah taught in Rabbi Akiva's class?
- Why was Moses put at ease after initially being despondent?
- Why did God shut up Moses when he asked why the Torah was not given to Rabbi Akiva?
- Why does the story end with the brutal torture and execution of Rabbi Akiva by the Romans?
- What do you find challenging about this story?
- In this story, Moses represents the Written Torah, and Rabbi Akiva represents the Oral Torah. What does this story tell us about the nature of the Written and Oral Torahs?
- What do you think is the message of this story?

Notes for educators:

- **Why did Moses not understand the Torah taught in Rabbi Akiva's class?**

In this imaginary story, Moses is sent by God to the lecture of Rabbi Akiva. It is Rabbi Akiva who will interpret Halachot from every letter and every mark in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva's power of interpretation is so strong that even Moses, who was taught the whole Torah, did not understand the interpretations of Rabbi Akiva. This highlights the potential dangers of interpreting the Torah so that Moses cannot even recognize it.

- **Why was Moses put at ease after initially being despondent?**

Rabbi Akiva said in his lesson that the idea being presented was passed down as a tradition from Moses. The idea may be totally unrecognizable to Moses, but its original source is from Moses himself. This put Moses at ease as he realized that there was a connection between the new interpretation and the original teaching of Moses. The Oral Torah is both radical and conservative. It offers new and innovative interpretations and is still connected to the past.

- **Why did God shut up Moses when he asked why the Torah was not given to Rabbi Akiva?**

In the story, Moses thinks that the process of the development of the Oral Torah is a waste of time. Why not just get to the bottom line of what we are meant to do as presented by Rabbi Akiva? God rejects this idea. There is inherent value in the process of developing Torah ideas in every generation.

- **Why does the story end with the brutal torture and execution of Rabbi Akiva by the Romans?**

The story also warns that interpretation can be dangerous. We don't always know how things will end.

- **In this story, Moses represents the Written Torah, and Rabbi Akiva represents the Oral Torah. What does this story tell us about the nature of the Written and Oral Torahs?**

According to this story, the Written Torah is the word of God transmitted directly to Moses. The ideas of the Oral Torah, represented by Rabbi Akiva, are more difficult to understand.

SOURCE 2: BABYLONIAN TALMUD 88B-89A

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on High to receive the Torah, the ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, what is one born of a woman doing here among us?

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: He came to receive the Torah.

The angels said before Him: The Torah is a hidden treasure that was concealed by You 974 generations before the creation of the world, and You seek to give it to flesh and blood?...The rightful place of God's majesty, the Torah, is in the heavens.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Provide them with an answer as to why the Torah should be given to the people.

Moses said before Him: Master of the Universe, the Torah that You are giving me, what is written in it?

God said to him: "I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt from the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

Moses said to the angels: Did you descend to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should the Torah be yours? Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it?

God said to him: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). Moses said to the angels: Do you dwell among the nations who worship idols that you require this special warning? Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it?

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Remember the Shabbat day to sanctify it" (Exodus 20:8).

Moses asked the angels: Do you perform labor that you require rest from it? Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it? "Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7), meaning that it is prohibited to swear falsely. Moses asked the angels: Do you conduct business with one another that may lead you to swear falsely? Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it?

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12).

Moses asked the angels: Do you have a father or a mother that would render the commandment to honor them relevant to you?

Again, Moses asked: What else is written in it?

God said to him: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal" (Exodus 20:13)

Moses asked the angels: Is there jealousy among you, or is there an evil inclination within you that would render these commandments relevant? Immediately they agreed with the Holy One, Blessed be He, that He made the right decision to give the Torah to the people, and as it is stated: "God our Lord, how glorious is Your name in all the earth" (Psalms 8:10), while "that Your majesty is placed above the heavens" is not written because the angels agreed with God that it is appropriate to give the Torah to the people on earth.

QUESTIONS:

- Why did the angels not want the Torah given to Moses?
- Why did God let Moses answer the angels?
- How does Moses prove that the Torah should be given to humans?
- What does Rabbi Yehoshua want to tell us about the nature of the Torah?
- What is the message of the story?

Notes for educators:

- **Why did the angels not want the Torah given to Moses?**

The angels believed that the Torah was a heavenly work created by God. It is not meant to be given to earthly human beings.

- **Why did God let Moses answer the angels?**

It highlights God's will that humans interpret the Torah for themselves and have the intellectual power to develop their own ideas.

- **How does Moses prove that the Torah should be given to humans?**

By going through the mitzvot of the Torah, he proves that they are relevant only for the Jewish people and human beings and not for the angels.

- **What does Rabbi Yehoshua want to tell us about the nature of the Torah, and what is the message of the story?**

The Torah is something that needs to be applied to our everyday lives. The Torah is not a theological set of ideas, it instead instructs how to live our lives in the most meaningful way possible.

SOURCE 3: MIDRASH TANCHUMA, KI TISA 34

And God said to Moses: "Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" (Exod. 34:27). R. Judah the son of Shalum was of the opinion that when God said to Moses *Write these words*, Moses wanted to write the Mishnah as well. However, God foresaw that ultimately the nations of the world would translate the Torah into the Greek language and would claim: "We are the Israelites."

God can say to the nations of the world: You claim that you are My children, but I know that only those who know My secrets are My children. Where are His secrets (to be found)? In the Mishnah, which was given orally, and from which everything can be derived.

QUESTIONS:

- What was Moses told to write down and not to write down when he was on Mount Sinai?
- Why does Rabbi Judah think the Mishnah should not be written down?
Do you agree with him?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of not writing the Oral Torah?

Notes for educators

- **What was Moses told to write down and what not to write down when he was on Mount Sinai?**

Moses asks to write the Mishna (Oral Torah) and the Written Torah.

- **Why does Rabbi Judah think the Mishna should not be written down? Do you agree with him?**

Rabbi Judah's message is that the power to interpret the Torah should be given exclusively to the Jewish People. Each generation interpreting the torah is a key element of Jewish identity.

- **What are the advantages and disadvantages of not writing the Oral Torah?**

If the Oral Torah is written, it will lose its dynamic nature. By definition, an Oral Tradition requires a community to pass on the oral tradition. However, it risks being lost if the community is weak.

SOURCE 4: MIDRASH TANCHUMA KI TISA 36

And he was there with God for forty days and forty nights (Exod. 34:28). How did Moses know when it was day? When God taught him the Written Torah, he knew it was daytime, and when He taught him the Oral Torah, the Mishnah, and the Talmud, he was aware that it was nighttime.

QUESTIONS:

- Why did God teach Moses the Written Torah in the day?
- Why did God teach Moses the Oral Torah at night?
- What does the day symbolise, and what does night symbolise?
- What is the message of this Midrash concerning the difference between the Written and Oral Torahs?

Notes for educators

This Midrash is purely metaphoric. The Written Torah is represented by day and the Oral Torah by night. Everything is clear and can be seen easily in the light of day. This represents the Written Torah as, according to tradition, it was transmitted to the Jewish people through prophecy and was directly inspired by God. The Oral Torah, on the other hand, is represented by night. The law is unclear; they are subject to debate, and often the Rabbis disagree. On the other hand, night is more mysterious, exciting, and romantic. We make music at night!

CONCLUSION

All these midrashim imagine what happened on Mount Sinai. They use these imagined stories to explain their interpretations of the Torah's meaning.

- What does the Torah mean to you? Why is it important to you? What do you find challenging about the Torah?

- Write your own midrash, imagining what Moses did on Mount Sinai. How does your midrash reflect your understanding of the meaning of the Torah?