

HASIDIC TALES OF SHAVUOT

(Derived from *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber and *Hasidic Wisdom* by Simcha Raz)

Giving and Receiving

The rabbi of Kotzk was asked: “Why is Shavuot designated as ‘the time the Torah was given’ to us, rather than the time we ‘received’ the Torah?”

He answered: “The giving took place on the day commemorated by this feast, but the receiving takes place at all times. It was given to all equally, but they did not all receive in equal measure.”

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

“When the people saw [the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking] they moved back and stood at a distance.” (Ex. 20:15).

People can see, people can be moved and astonished and, nevertheless, still keep their distance.

Teaching

In a certain year, on the eve of Shavuot, the feast of the Revelation, the rabbi of Rizhyn sat at his table and said no word of the teachings to his disciples, as he usually did at this hour. He was silent and wept. It was the same the second evening of the feast.

After grace, the rabbi said: “Many a time, when my ancestor, the holy maggid, taught at table, his disciples discussed what their teacher had said, on the way home, and each quoted him differently, and each was positive he had heard it in this, and no other way, and what they said was quite contradictory.

There was no possibility of clearing up the matter because when they went to the maggid and asked him, he only repeated the traditional saying: ‘Both, these and those, are words of the living God’ (*BT Eruvin 13b*).

But when the disciples thought it over, they understood the meaning of the contradiction. For at the source, the Torah is one; in the worlds her face is seventyfold. If, however, we look intently at one of these faces, we no longer have need of words or of teachings, for the features of that eternal face speak to us.”

Thou Shalt Not Steal

Rabbi Yehiel Meir of Gostynin had gone to his teacher in Kotzk for Shavuot. When he came home, his father-in-law asked him: “Well, did your people over there receive the Torah differently than anywhere else?”

“Certainly!” said his son-in-law.

“What do you mean?” asked the other.

“Well, to give you an instance,” said Rabbi Yehiel. “How do you here interpret ‘you shall not steal’?”

“That we shall not steal from our fellow men,” answered his father-in-law. “That’s perfectly clear.”

“We don’t need to be told that anymore,” said Rabbi Yehiel. “In Kotzk this is interpreted to mean: You shall not steal from yourself.”

Rabbi Aharon of Karlin

“*You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image (pesel)*” (Ex. 20:4).

This means: do not make of yourself one who rejects (*posei*) other people’s ideas out of hand.

Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz

“*You shall not steal*” (Ex. 20:13).

I heard ten different interpretations and analyses of this verse from the Torah, until I almost forgot that there was one additional interpretation – and that is: Do not steal!

Hidden Teachings

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak said: “It is written in Isaiah: ‘For instruction shall go forth from me’ (Is. 51:4). How shall we interpret this? For we believe with perfect faith that the Torah, which Moses received on Mount Sinai, cannot be changed, and that none other will be given. It is unalterable and we are forbidden to question even one of its letters. But, in reality, not only the black letters but the white gaps in between, are symbols of the teaching, only that we are not able to read those gaps. In time to come God will reveal the white hiddenness of the Torah.”

The Wine of Life

It is told: Once, on the second evening of Shavuot, the hasidim were seated around Rabbi Elimelekh's table and rejoicing in the feast. The rabbi looked around and nodded to each in turn, for he rejoiced in their joy. And he said smilingly: "See, we have everything here to make us joyful. Is there anything still lacking?"

Then a headstrong foolish young man cried out: "All we still lack is to drink of the wine of life, like the devout in paradise." The *tzaddik* said to him: "Take a pole on your shoulders. Fasten two pails to it, and go to the gates of the cemetery.

When you get there, set down the pails, turn your back on them, and say: 'Elimelekh has sent me to fetch wine.' Then turn around, lift the full pails, fasten them to the pole, and bring them here to us. But be careful not to talk to anyone—no matter who should speak to you."

The young man shuddered, but did as he was bidden. He fetched the wine at the gate of the cemetery, shuddered, and brought it back with him. All about him the moonless night vibrated with the sound of voices, begging him for a drop: old voices and young voices, and they all sighed and moaned. He hastened on in silence and behind him he heard the dragging of countless ghostly steps. He was almost on Elimelekh's threshold, when they approached him from the other side.

"Now you can't do anything to me!" he shouted.

The pole broke in two. The pails fell and cracked, and he felt something strike him on both cheeks. He tottered through the half-open door. Outside all was silent as death.

Inside, the *tzaddik* spoke: "Fool, sit down at our table."