

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Aidel *bas* Yoel *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Grass and Torah

BAMIDBAR – SHAVUOS 5775

A Closer Look at a Time-Honored Shavuos Custom

Upon entering the synagogue on the Yom Tov of Shavuos, one is greeted by a most exhilarating sight – an array of greenery and/or other foliage. A similar type of adornment decorates the private residences of many Jews, as well.

Joy and Judgment

What is the central idea upon which this practice is based? The conventional understanding – which has the added benefit of being both true and documented – is that the greenery commemorates the vegetation surrounding Har Sinai at the time of the giving of the Torah. The Rama in Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim 494:3*) records this view, stating: “It is our custom to spread grasses on Shavuos in the synagogue and the houses in remembrance of the joy of the giving of the Torah.” The Mishnah Berurah (*ibid.* § 10) clarifies that the Rama is referring to the aforementioned phenomenon – the greenery of the mountain.

The Mishnah Berurah elaborates there on an “offshoot” of this custom: namely, setting out trees as decoration. This practice is based on the judgment factor mentioned in the Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah 1:3*):

בְּאַרְבַּעַת פְּרָקִים הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן, בַּפֶּסַח עַל הַתְּבוּאָה, בְּעֶצְרַת עַל פְּרוֹת הָאֵילָן, בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו... וְנִחַג נְדוּנִין עַל הַמַּיִם.

“At four junctures throughout the year the world undergoes (a specific form of) judgment: On Pesach (the judgment is) for produce, on Shavuos for fruit of the tree, on Rosh Hashanah, all of humanity passes before Him (in judgment)... and on Succos, (the judgment is) for water.”

Thus, the placement of trees reflects the fact that this Yom Tov is a day of judgment for the fruit of the tree. However, as the Mishnah Berurah concludes, the Vilna Gaon abolished the particular practice of using trees for decoration once the gentiles engaged in a similar practice on their idolatrous holiday.

There exists yet another Shavuos custom relating to the earth’s produce that is not as well known, but is mentioned in Chazal’s work on Megillas Esther known as “Targum Sheni.” Apparently drained from the troubles caused by their hostile gentile neighbors, the Jews would petition Hashem to remove them and their influence. They would express this sentiment in a most interesting way: On the *yom tov* of Shavuos, they would ascend to their rooftops and hurl down a cascade of apples, which they would then proceed to gather. In so doing, they would direct this prayer to Hashem: “Just as we gather these apples, so may You gather up our enemies from our midst.”

Going Vegan

R' Tzvi Hirsch from Ostrow was a saintly sage who devoted himself to Torah, completely unfazed by his abject poverty and the dilapidated conditions of his abode. He proffered a novel explanation of the custom of spreading greenery on Shavuos, as related in his name by R' Yitzchak Zilberstein (*Aleinu L'shabei'ach, Parshas Vayeilech*). His approach is based on the Talmudic account of R' Ada bar Masna (*Eruvin 22a*). The Gemara was discussing the imperative to be willing, if necessary, to experience deprivation for the sake of Torah study – even to the extent that one's family might be affected. Of course, this does not mean that one can pain or torment them, *chas v'shalom*. On the other hand, they might at times demand a certain standard of living whose maintenance would necessitate a mitigation of one's commitment to Torah. If that is the case, and there exists an alternative in consonance with the level of that particular generation, this could well be the preferred outcome.

And so the Gemara relates the example of R' Ada bar Masna who was to embark on an extended stay away from home, where he could engage in uninterrupted Torah study. Prior to his departure, his wife remarked: “With you away for such a long time, what will be with the children? Who will provide for them?” To which R' Ada responded: “There's plenty of grass in the field...”

As noted, this exact method may not be suitable for every generation – especially given the vast gap that exists between the spiritual levels of the former generations and the current one. But the message is eternal. As long as everyone is provided for – in a fashion deemed suitable for that particular situation – the needs of Torah should not be neglected. This, R' Tzvi Hirsch explains, is why we spread greenery on Shavuos. It reminds us at this opportune time, as we celebrate the giving of the Torah, what a commitment to Torah entails: it may very well require a substantial measure of *mesirus nefesh* – exertion and self-sacrifice. That is, one who desires to truly grow in Torah and develop into a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar) must be willing to subject himself to “whatever it takes” to reach this goal, even to the point of subsisting on nothing but grass.

It is interesting to note that in recording this thought, R' Yitzchak Zilberstein was fulfilling the Talmudic dictum (*Chagigah 14a*) of נָאֵה דוֹרֵשׁ וְנָאֵה מְקַיֵּים (the rough equivalent of which would be: “He practices what he preaches”); R' Yitzchak writes that he himself, at one point, had to endure conditions very similar to those experienced thousands of years earlier by the family of R' Ada bar Masna.

This took place during the 1948 war, during which Yerushalayim and its environs suffered extreme deprivations due to the siege laid by the Arab fighters. Conditions deteriorated to the point that there was only one available form of sustenance: grass. Specifically, there was a type of growth known by its Arab name “*khubeza*,” for which young R' Yitzchak himself would venture out to the area of Romema, where this particular grass would grow. He collected what he could, bringing the bundle home to his mother, who prepared it for consumption. Thus it was, in that period, that they ate nothing but *khubeza* grass – for breakfast, lunch, and supper.

It was not a situation, obviously, that they had sought out. But when it presented itself, they rose to the challenge, remaining steadfast in Torah and *avodah* (Divine service) throughout the protracted ordeal. Perhaps, the event may have even contributed to R' Yitzchak's own development into a most accomplished Torah figure.