



Chicago Rabbinical Council

מועצת הרבנים דשיקגו

# Divrei Torah

## SHAVUOS 5786



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# The Mitzvah of Loving a Ger

Rav Yona Reiss  
Av Beth Din



The *Megillah* of *Rus* that we read on Shavuot focuses greatly upon the conversion of *Rus* to Judaism. Indeed, the *Gemora* (*Yevamos 47b*) derives many laws regarding the scope and nature of the acceptance of mitzvot by a *ger* (a convert) from the story of *Rus*. Since Shavuot is also the holiday in which we celebrate the collective conversion of the Jewish people at *Har Sinai* (see *Kerisus 9a*), it is a particularly apt time to reflect about our responsibilities towards righteous converts.

One of the most oft-repeated mitzvot in the Torah is that of treating a *ger* properly. In fact, the *Gemora* (*Bava Metzia 596*) notes that this requirement appears up to forty-six times (depending on how you count) in the Torah, in a variety of different contexts. There is a special obligation to demonstrate compassion towards a convert because, as the Torah repeatedly reminds us (*Shemot 22:20, 23:9, Vayikra 19:34, Devarim 10:19*), we were all *gerim*, or “foreigners,” in the land of Egypt, and therefore need to have compassion for others who have joined us from foreign nations. The *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah 431*) speaks about the mitzvah to be particularly proactive in identifying and satisfying the needs of a convert according to one’s abilities as part of the fulfillment of the mitzvah of “*Ve’ahavtem et Hager*” - you shall love the convert (*Devarim 10:19*).

Numerous laws govern the process of conversion to Judaism. The *Geirus* Policy and Standards (GPS) Network of

conversion courts under the rubric of the Rabbinical Council of America (of which the Chicago Rabbinical Council is a member) all follow uniform standards that were designed, and continue to be fine-tuned, to ensure high standards of halakhic integrity and sensitivity in the conversion process. However, following the conversion process, many obligations pertain to the treatment of converts by all members of the community.

For example, the Torah forbids causing verbal distress to a convert (*Vayikra 19:33, Bava Metzia 58b, 59b*) and oppressing a convert (*Shemot 22:20, 23:9*). Similarly, when it comes to distributing communal funds and resources, a needy convert is often singled out by the Torah for special attention (*Vayikra 25:35, Devarim 10:18, 14:29, 16:11, 16:14, 26:11*).

At the same time, certain limitations are placed upon converts. For instance, a *kohen* is not allowed to marry a female convert (*Even Haezer 6:8*). Converts are not permitted to serve as *dayanim* (Jewish law judges), except in limited situations (see *Yevamos 102a, Choshen Mishpat 7:1*). Additionally, it is generally prohibited to appoint a convert to a position of public authority (see *Kiddushin 76b*).

Nevertheless, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein writes in his responsa (*Yoreh Deah 4:26*), along the lines of the *Sefer HaChinuch* (*ibid.*), that the commandment of loving a convert requires the community to

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\*Adapted from R. Reiss’s article in *Jewish Action*, Fall 2018 Issue

search for halakhic leniencies in terms of appointing worthy converts to respectable positions in a way that would not violate the technical interdiction against appointing converts to positions of public authority. On this basis, he permits a convert to serve as a *rosh yeshiva*, arguing that (a) being a *rosh yeshiva* is not really a position of public authority, because there is only internal authority over students and teachers, but not over communal members; (b) when there is nobody else as worthy as the convert for the position, the prohibition is not applicable (this argument is also found in the *Tashbetz*, *Magen Avot 1:10*, and *Minchat Yehudah*, *Parashat Mishpatim*, in the name of the *Ba'alei Tosafot* with respect to the appointment to the *Sanhedrin of Shmaya and Avtalyon*, according to the opinions that they were converts); and (c) the prohibition is not applicable to the convert himself in the event that the community chooses to appoint him to a particular position.

Based on some of these considerations, Rabbi Asher Weiss (*Minchat Asher*, *Bereishit no. 71*) rules that a convert could even be appointed rabbi of a synagogue if the community members all agree upon accepting him to serve in that position. Rabbi Dov Aaron Brisman *zt"l*, former *av*

*beth din* of the *Beth Din* of Philadelphia, penned a similar responsum (*Shalmei Chovah*, *YD 47*) in which he concluded that a convert can be appointed president of a synagogue if final decisions are fundamentally made by the synagogue board rather than in unilateral fashion by the president (although Rabbi Aaron Felder *zt"l* expressed an opposing view in *She'eilat Aaron 2:10*).

Additionally, Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky *zt"l* rules (*Netzach Yisrael 2:145*) that there is a mitzvah of “loving the convert” in the context of a marriage relationship with a righteous convert. Some of the rabbis involved in conversion have taken upon themselves the task of serving as “*shadchanim*” to individuals whom they have converted, ensuring that the converts are fully acclimated into communal life by finding them a suitable *shidduch*. On that note, my wife has, *B'ezrat Hashem*, been privileged to match several converts from our community with their life partners, and we have celebrated with them the *brit milah* of a number of their sons and other joyous occasions.

But unquestionably there are challenges. The *Gemora* (*Yevamot 48b*) mentions that converts often have a difficult time in their



adjustment period. One convert commented to our *beth din* that some people seem to feel that the types of personal questions that are inappropriate when posed to other people (regarding their personal lives or level of observance) become fair game in the context of conversations with converts. This is not acceptable, either on an individual level or a communal level.

Rashi comments (*Vayikra 19:34*) that when the Torah reminds us that “we were converts in the land of Egypt,” it is telling us that we started out in the same predicament as new converts to Judaism. The *Gemora* (*Shabbat 146a*, see *Rashi ad locum*) further relates that all individuals who were destined to become converts throughout the generations had some type of spiritual presence (“*mazlayhu havu*”) at Mount Sinai when the Torah was given. It is important to underscore that a person who has gone through a valid conversion procedure is every bit as Jewish as someone who was born Jewish.

There is a striking statement in the Talmud (*Yevamot 46b*) in the name of Rabbi Chelbo that “converts are as problematic for the Jewish people as a wart in the skin.” *Tosafot* (*Kiddushin, ibid*) offer several explanations to this quixotic statement, ranging from the concern that converts may sometimes be less knowledgeable and therefore less observant in the performance of mitzvot, to the observation of Rabbi Avraham *HaGer* that converts make others look bad due to their scrupulous level of mitzvah observance and commitment. Ultimately, the trajectory of a convert, like that of each member of the Jewish nation, can go in either direction, but much depends on the love and support she or he receives from the community. On some level, “it takes a village” to “raise up” a convert.

Perhaps this sense of communal

responsibility is why the *Baàlei Tosafot*, in an alternative explanation, explain that the greatest pitfall with respect to converts is the difficulty of avoiding the numerous prohibitions against causing a convert any distress. We must raise our sensitivity in terms of reaching out to the sincere converts in our midst with compassion and love, and making all converts feel completely accepted.

Today, many of the most active members of any Jewish synagogue, community or institution are converts or descendants of recent converts. It is instructive to bear in mind the words of Avraham Avinu (*Bereishit 23:4*) who described himself, when he was interacting with the *Bnei Chet*, as *Ger ve'toshav anochi imachem*—“I am both a stranger and an inhabitant with you.” Along similar lines, we are all part of the magnificent mosaic of worldwide Jews from different origins, backgrounds, and cultures. By respecting and honoring each member of our Divinely inspired nation as part of a unified whole, we will truly be able to recapture the experience of Har Sinai when we were all “*ke'ish echad b'lev echad*” - united as one person with one heart. ■

## When Salvation Is Not Yet Success – A Shavuos Reflection on *Hallel*

Rabbi Dovid Flinkenstein

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There are phrases in our prayers so familiar that we rarely stop to examine them closely. One of them appears in *Hallel*: “Please, Hashem, save us; please, Hashem, grant us success.” We naturally hear these as two distinct requests, first for salvation and then for success. Yet that only sharpens the question: if we have already asked for *ישועה*, for deliverance, what does *הצלחה* add? What is the second plea asking for that the first did not already include?

*Chazal* themselves treat the two clauses as distinct. In *פסחים קיט א*, the *Gemora* places them in different mouths: *הרשיעה נא* is said by King David’s brothers, while *הצלחה נא* is said by King David himself. Rashi explains that the brothers pray that salvation come through King David, while King David prays that he prosper in his kingship. That reading stands on its own terms, and it already shows that the two phrases are not mere repetition.

But once these words become part of our *tefillah*, they also invite reflection on the level of *avodah*. What is the difference between asking Hashem for *ישועה* and asking Hashem for *הצלחה*?

A possible approach emerges from the classic discussion of *ונשמע* and *נעשה*, “we will do and we will hear,” the defining response of the Jewish people at Sinai. *Chazal* in *שבת א* describe these words as the unique greatness of Israel. The Alter Rebbe explains that *קבלת עול נעשה* is the movement of *עול* and *ביטול*, accepting the Torah because it is the word of Hashem, before it has yet been fully absorbed by one’s own inner faculties. But

one cannot stop there. *ונשמע* means that what was first accepted in submission must now become inwardly integrated, until one’s understanding and emotions are involved as well. Torah is first received because it is His will, and then internalized until, as described in *Pirkei Avot*, one reaches *עשה רצונו כרצונך*, “make His will your will.”

With that in mind, one may suggest a similar two-stage movement in

*הרשיעה נא*, *אנא ה' הצליחה נא*.

*הרשיעה נא* is not only a plea for rescue from distress. It is the recognition that the beginning itself comes from beyond me. The opening, the breakthrough, the very possibility of moving forward, all come from Hashem. In this sense, *הרשיעה נא* parallels *נעשה*. Just as *נעשה* begins with the acknowledgement that Torah comes from beyond the self, so too *הרשיעה נא* begins with the acknowledgement that salvation comes from beyond the self. I do not create the opening. I receive it.

But then comes *הצלחה נא*.

If *הרשיעה נא* is the recognition that the beginning comes from above, *הצלחה נא* is the prayer that what comes from above should now enter life and bear fruit within it. Not only that Hashem save, but that the salvation become fruitful in our own thought, feeling, effort, and action. In that sense, *הרשיעה נא* parallels *ונשמע*. What was granted from beyond must now be inwardly absorbed and outwardly embodied.

This reading is strengthened by a broader Torah principle. The Torah says, *למען יברכך ה' אלקיך בכל מעשה ידיך אשר תעשה*, “so that Hashem your G-d may bless

you in all the work of your hand that you do” (*Devarim 14:29*). The *bracha* is from Hashem, but it rests upon מעשה ידיך אשר מעשה תעשה. *Tanna Dvei Eliyahu* expresses the point directly: אם עושה אדם מתברך, ואם לאו: אינו מתברך, “if a person acts, he is blessed; if not, he is not blessed.”

This does not mean that success is self-made. Quite the opposite. Even הצלחה is from Hashem. But it is the stage at which the Divine gift enters the arena of human life. הצלחה ישועה is the opening from above. הצלחה is that opening taking hold below.

This is also why the connection to Shavuos is so natural. Shavuos is not only the anniversary of *Matan Torah*. It is the annual return to the task of receiving Torah in both of its movements: first as נעשה, with acceptance and submission before what

comes from beyond us, and then as ונשמע, with פנימיות, until Torah enters the mind, engages the heart, and becomes part of the person’s conduct and character.

Perhaps this also sheds light on the well known Shavuos greeting of the Rebbe Rayatz: קבלת התורה בשמחה ובפנימיות, “receiving the Torah with joy and inwardness.” Shavuos asks not only that Torah be accepted anew, but that it be received with joy, enthusiasm, and פנימיות, until it enters the inner life of the person.

Seen this way, the double plea in *Hallel* traces the movement of Shavuos itself: what comes from beyond must be received, and then inwardly made one’s own. May we merit קבלת התורה בשמחה ובפנימיות. ■



# Get Your Head Out of the Clouds: Receiving Torah in the Digital Age

Rabbi Shaanan Gelman

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The opening *mishnah* in *Pirkei Avot* traces the history of Torah transmission, from *Har Sinai* to *Moshe Rabbeinu* and onward through the *Anshei Keneset Hagedolah*:

**משנה מסכת אבות פרק א משנה א**

משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה הם אמרו שלשה דברים הוו מתונים בדין והעמידו תלמידים הרבה ועשו סייג לתורה:

Many commentators note that the *mishnah* employs two distinct terms to describe the transmission of Torah: קבל, “to receive,” and מסר, “to hand over” or “transmit.” Moshe received the Torah and then transmitted it to his primary disciple, Yehoshua. The chain of transmission, the *mesorah*, continued through the generations until the *Anshei Keneset Hagedolah*, the last of whom was *Shimon HaTzadik*.

Then, in the third *mishnah*, something changes. *Shimon HaTzadik* hands the Torah over to *Antigonus Ish Socho*, yet instead of using the word *מסרה*, the *mishnah* reverts to the language of קבלה:

אנטיגנוס איש סוכו קבל משמעון הצדיק

Likewise, in *Mishnah* 7, the term קבלו is again used in describing the transmission to *Yosi ben Yoezer* and *Yosi ben Yochanan*:

יוסי בן יועזר איש צרדה ויוסי בן יוחנן איש ירושלים קבלו מהם

How do we distinguish between קבלה and *מסורה*?

Rabbi Yaakov Haber, in his work on *Pirkei Avot*, *Lev Avot*, based on the *Maharal* in *Derech Chaim*, explains that there is a fundamental difference between an act of transmission (*מסירה*) and reception (*קבלה*),

in that there is never a guarantee that what is transmitted will be fully received.

Every attempted transmission carries with it the possibility of incomplete reception. By way of illustration, if two friends are tossing a basketball back and forth, assuming the catch is successful, one hundred percent of the object has been transferred. But if one attempts to throw an entire bucket of tennis balls at once, the likelihood that every ball will be caught is quite small. What emerges is a break, or at least a sharp quantitative decline, between the *מקבל* (transmitter) and the *מקבל* (receiver).

Whenever the *mishnah* uses the word קבל, it indicates that reception took place, but not necessarily that everything transmitted was fully absorbed. Whenever there is a significant drop in spiritual or intellectual stature, the space between the *מקבל* and the *מקבל* widens.

When *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* gave the Torah to *Moshe Rabbeinu* at Sinai, it would have been impossible for any recipient, even *Moshe Rabbeinu* himself, to receive the entirety of what was being bestowed. Yet whatever Moshe did receive was fully transmitted to Yehoshua; hence the expression *מסרה ליהושע*. Similarly, the conclusion of the era of the *Anshei Keneset Hagedolah* marked not merely the end of a period, but the transition into an entirely different generation, one unable to fully comprehend or absorb all that had been handed over. This was not a rupture in the *mesorah*, but rather an example of *ירידת הדורות*, the regression of the generations,

in which the student could grasp only a portion of the values, ideas, and ideals embodied by the teacher.

That gap, which emerges inevitably from time to time, cannot be entirely avoided.

In response to this regression, *Chazal* insisted that despite the inevitable decline from one generation to the next, the *posek* or judge of each generation retains full authority within his own era: יפתח בדורו יפתח בדורו כשמואל בדורו (*Rosh Hashana 25b*).

And in some sense, this is precisely the challenge confronting our generation. Consider the way we consume information in the digital age. There is no shortage of material being hurled in our direction, yet only a tiny fraction of it is truly absorbed. This was already true with the advent of the internet. A simple online search can generate a false sense of mastery, an artificial omniscience. We imagine that information is entering our minds and hearts, when it is merely being stored somewhere in the cloud, in a data center halfway across the world. Information is constantly transmitted to us, but very little is received.

The outsourcing of human memory and intellect means that we no longer feel the need to carry information within ourselves. I no longer need to memorize or review what I learned earlier that day, because it exists digitally. In my family, my father has long served as the keeper of *yahrzeits*; every family has one. I recently explained to him that this role is no longer necessary because we have online calendars and Google reminders. Yet even if big-tech possesses total and unflinching recall of the important dates and milestones, someone still must walk into *shul*, and stand before the *Ribbono Shel Olam* to recite the words of *Kaddish* with a broken heart.

Much like the generational divides described in the opening *mishnayot* of

*Pirkei Avot*, we are now experiencing a new kind of divide, one in which the term *מסורה* feels more accurate than *קבלה*. We receive fragments, impressions, and endless streams of data, but increasingly less is internalized and transmitted.

Until recently, however, we still retained the ability to process information and apply it. In Talmudic language, we could be *קונה* *בשינוי*, acquiring something by reshaping it, filtering it through our own personality and applying it in a unique way. This is part of what *יפתח בדורו כשמואל בדורו* means. A *posek* applies eternal Torah through the lens of his own generation and reality. The raw intellectual capacity of one generation may not rival that of a previous one, but every generation is nonetheless obligated to acquire Torah through personal effort, struggle, and toil.

The introduction of AI into our homes and lives threatens to outsource the final thing we still possessed: the ability to think deeply, to develop a personal relationship with an idea, to sit with something and to deliberate, as *Chazal* cautioned us: *הרו מחוננים בדנין*. Regardless of brilliance or pedigree, regardless of whether one descends from great rabbinic lineage or humble origins, every Jew has always possessed the ability to pour his own soul into Torah. It is that last component, the personal effort, and individuality that we must never let go. May we experience a *kabalat haTorah* this Shavuot, one which not only passes through our fingers as part of a chain, but which is truly integrated and internalized. ■



# COUNTerintuitive

**Rabbi Joel Gutstein**

*President of cRc and Rabbi of Congregation Yehuda Moshe*



A man went to the doctor because he had trouble falling asleep. The doctor told him to count to 1000 every night to help him fall asleep. So that night, the man got into bed and started counting to 1000. When he got to 50, he started feeling very tired, so he got up, made himself a coffee, and went back to bed to keep on counting.

Shavuot is a holiday that is associated with counting. The Torah assigns dates to all the holidays. Rosh Hashana is the 1st of *Tishrei*, Yom Kippur the 10th, Sukkot the 15th, Shmini Atzeret the 22nd of *Tishrei*. Pesach is the 15th of *Nisan*. However, for Shavuot we do not find a date in the Torah. Rather, the Torah teaches us that “You shall count from the day after Shabbos – which the Rabbis teach us means the 2nd night of Pesach – seven complete weeks . . . you shall count 50 days” (*Vayikra 23:15,16*). Shavuot is 50 days after Pesach. Our Rabbis teach us that Shavuot can be on the 5th, 6th or 7th of *Sivan*. The determining factor is the number of days in the months of *Nisan* and *Iyar*. If both have 30 days, Shavuot will be on the 5th of *Sivan*. If both have 29 days, it will be on the 7th of *Sivan*. If one has 29 and the other 30 days, it will be on the 6th of *Sivan* – as we have it in the permanent calendar.

The Torah commands us to count 50 days. The Rambam explains that the Torah commands us to count the weeks and the days. So, for example, on the 18th night, we counted “today is the 18th day which is two weeks and four days in the *Omer*.” Are we supposed to count down towards Shavuot or upwards towards Shavuot?

There are several situations that are focused on counting. When watching a sporting event, it is quite common for the fans and the players to keep an eye on the clock. For example, in hockey there are three twenty-minute periods. At the beginning of the period, there are twenty minutes left in the period. As the period moves along, the clock moves down to 15 minutes . . . 10 minutes . . . 5 minutes . . . and then the period ends. At the end of a game, one can hear the home crowd counting down the seconds until their team seals the victory – 10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . 1. We do not count 5 minutes have been played . . . 10 minutes have been played . . . 15 minutes have been played.

When taking road trips with the family, the main question was, “How long until we get there?” The answer is five hours, then three hours, then one hour, then five minutes, etc. We don’t answer, “We have been travelling for two hours . . . three hours . . . ten hours.”

We are towards the end of the school year. We do not count how many days of the school year have passed. We have had 50 days of school . . . 100 days of school . . . 150 days of school. Rather, we count “there are ten days left of class . . . five days left of class.” These are all countdowns.

On the other hand, when a woman is pregnant, she counts upward. In most cases, the couple won’t say “we have five months left in this pregnancy . . . we have three months remaining.” Rather, they count “I am 20 weeks . . . 22 weeks . . . 30 weeks . . . 35 weeks.” They count upwards.

When we count our age, we count upward – as Rabbi Fasman *zt”l* would say - towards 130 with inflation. We don’t count, “Happy another 50 years until 130.” Rather, we count Happy 80th birthday.”

When we count the *Omer*, we are counting the time from the Exodus from Egypt until G-d gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai. We do not count “49 days left in the *Omer* . . . 39 days left in the *Omer* . . . 10 days left in the *Omer*.” We do not count down in anticipation of Shavuos and receiving the Torah. Rather, we count upwards, “5 days in the *Omer* . . . 15 days in the *Omer* . . . 49 days in the *Omer*” (See *Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 306*).

Why are there some occasions when we count down and others when we count upward? One would think we should count down in the *Omer* in the excitement and anticipation of receiving the Torah just as we count down with excitement and anticipation at the end of a game.

When counting down, one looks for the time to pass and get it over and done. The fans want the last seconds to tick away so they can celebrate a victory. So, they count downward. When taking a road trip, the emphasis is the anticipation of arriving at the destination. One wants that distance to go away. One wants the remaining school days to pass quickly. So, we count down. Perhaps, for the *Omer* we should do the same as we want the days to pass to attain the Receiving of the Torah?

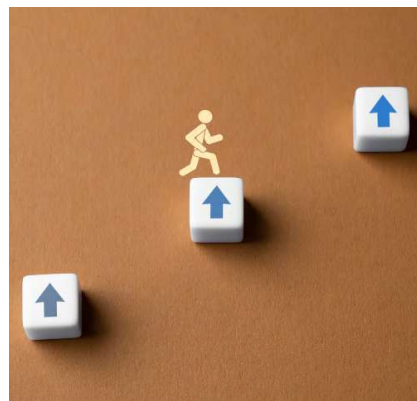
On the other hand, maybe not. A pregnant woman looks at each month, week, and day as significant. So, she counts upward. When we count birthdays, we look at the added significance of each year.

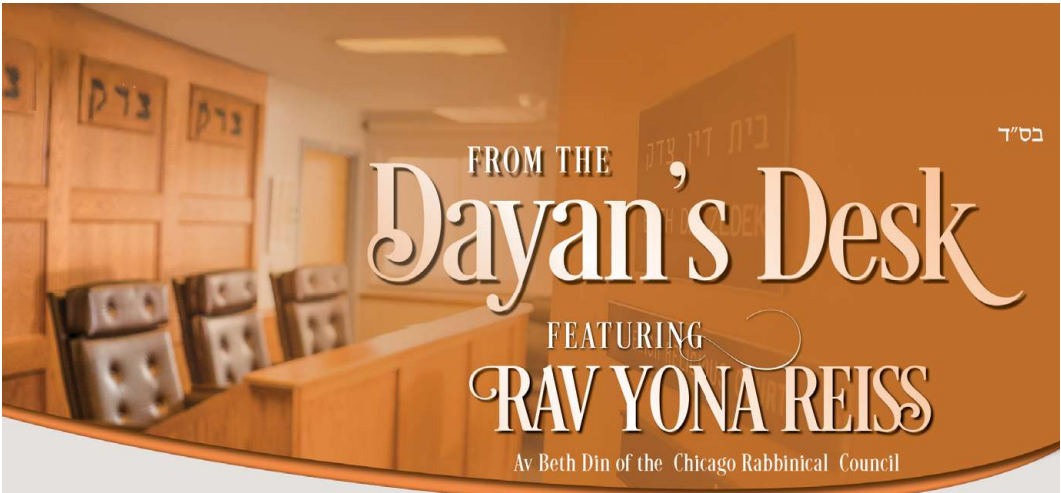
When we count the *Omer*, we are looking at the continued spiritual growth of the Jewish people in preparation for G-d giving us the Torah. G-d took the

Jewish people from Egypt – the symbol of immorality and idolatry. Every day was one additional day removed from that impurity. Every day, the Jewish people were adding to their holiness and purity. Today is the first level of purity . . . today is the 10th level of purity. This continued for 49 days. Finally, on day 50 they reached the summit – the high point of their state of purity. So, every additional day was significant. Every day was built on the previous day. So, we count upwards towards Shavuos to build ourselves to a level that we can feel worthy to receive the Torah. We build ourselves from a physical freedom at the Exodus to the true spiritual freedom of the Torah - the symbol of Shavuos – the entire reason for our existence.

We count upwards towards Shavuos to spiritually recharge ourselves. Shavuos is more than just remembering G-d giving us the Torah. It should inspire us to study more, try harder, improve our performance of mitzvos and grow spiritually.

Counting upwards towards receiving the Torah teaches us that the Torah is special, we are a special nation and G-d is looking out for our best needs. The Torah is our key to survival . . . and it will lead us up the proper path in the future –to build towards a meaningful future for us, our children, grandchildren and beyond. ■





# FROM THE Dayan's Desk

FEATURING  
RAV YONA REISS

Av Beth Din of the Chicago Rabbinical Council

## WEEKLY SHIUR FOR MEN

MONDAYS | 8:00 PM | CONGREGATION KINS  
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