



Celebrating 10 Years of Ten Minutes of Torah

Shavuot Study Guide—Parashat Va-eira/Mishpatim

May 2014

This year marks the 10th anniversary of **Ten Minutes of Torah**. Each weekday, over 20,000 subscribers receive an e-mail that brings the Jewish world to them. From Torah commentaries written by scholars to recipes for baking challah, *Ten Minutes of Torah* explores the great variety of Jewish life. Join the many readers of **Ten Minutes of Torah** and subscribe now.

What better time is there to celebrate *Ten Minutes of Torah* than on Shavuot! Like many Jewish holidays, Shavuot has its origins as an agricultural festival. The word *shavuot* means “weeks,” and Shavuot refers to the period of seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. The timing of the festival marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. Our ancestors would bring an offering from their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple such offerings could no longer be made. Over time, this offering was replaced by reading the Ten Commandments and the Book of Ruth. By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, Shavuot became associated with the Ten Commandments and the festival became known as *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the “Time of the Giving of the Law.”

One of the most distinctive customs of Shavuot is *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, an evening-long study session held on the night of Shavuot. *Tikkun* means a “set order” of something and refers to the order in which the texts are read. The custom originated with the mystics of Safed in the 16th century, and today, many Jews stay up all night on Shavuot reading and studying a variety of sacred texts. Traditionally, readings from the Torah and Talmud are included.

Many synagogues hold a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Some host programs that go on all night, culminating in morning services at sunrise. Other congregations gather for a few hours of study. Whether one is planning to attend an all-night session, study for a few hours, join with others, or study on one’s own, Shavuot is a wonderful time to encounter sacred text.

We asked several rabbis on the staff of the Union for Reform Judaism to share their own encounters with our text. Each video explores a different text. Some focus on a commandment. Others challenge a difficult passage, while others grapple with age-old questions.

These videos provide interesting responses to our sacred writings whether you are studying with others or watching these videos on your own. This guide offers a couple of questions to accompany the video, spark conversation, and give the reader an opportunity for further reflection.

Rabbi Josh Weinberg, President, ARZA—The Reform Israel Fund

Text—Exodus 6:7 and Exodus 24:7, as interpreted by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/va-eira

Summary:

- Despite God’s message that they will be redeemed from slavery, the Israelites’ spirits remain crushed. God instructs Moses and Aaron to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt. (6:2–13)
- The genealogy of Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and their descendants is recorded. (6:14–25)
- Moses and Aaron perform a miracle with a snake and relate to Pharaoh God’s message to let the Israelites leave Egypt. (7:8–13)
- The first seven plagues occur. God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, and Pharaoh rescinds each offer to let the Israelites go. (7:14–9:35)

reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/mishpatim

Summary:

- Interpersonal laws ranging from the treatment of slaves to the exhibition of kindness to strangers are listed. (21:1–23:9)
- Cultic laws follow, including the commandment to observe the Sabbatical Year, a repetition of the Sabbath injunction, the first mention of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals, rules of sacrificial offerings, and the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk. (23:10–19)
- The people assent to the covenant. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascend the mountain and see God. Moses goes on alone and spends forty days on the mountain. (24:1–18)

Questions:

As Rabbi Weinberg explains, Rabbi Soloveitchik’s (a prominent 20th century Orthodox rabbi) interpretation of Exodus 6:7 suggests a covenant of fate between God and the Jewish people. Do you feel that you carry the history of the Jewish people with you in your life? If so, in what ways?

Similarly, Rabbi Soloveitchik interprets Exodus 24:7 as a covenant between the Jewish people and destiny. Are there examples in your own life that illustrate the ways you are committed to God’s covenant of destiny with the Jewish people?

Rabbi Weinberg tells the story of the man with two heads whom Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik compared to the Jewish people, noting that when one part of the body feels pain, the entire body feels it. In what ways do you feel connected to the entirety of the Jewish people?