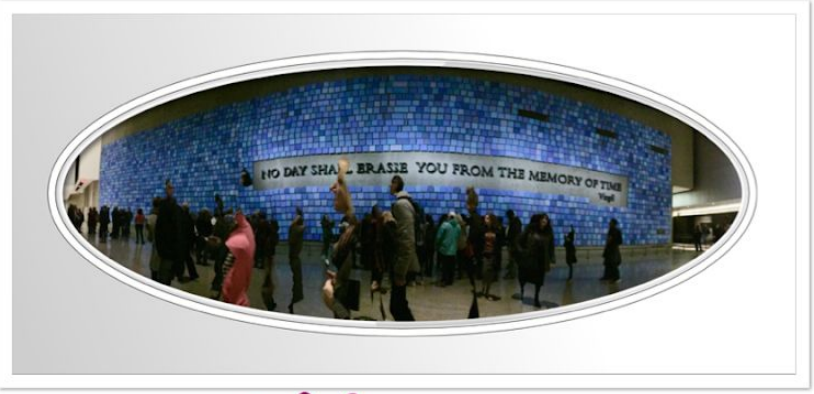
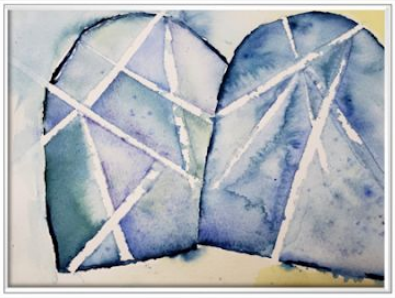


Shteiging into Shavuot

Young Israel
St. Louis
5780



Approaching this holiday of Shavuot,
Chag 2 in quarantine, trying to stay afloat.
Learning by ourselves, away from shul
We ladies sought a way to keep our hearts full.

Cheesecake we will eat with our children and hubbies,
But grandkids we will miss, or perhaps our zaidies and bubbies.
That togetherness as a community we yearn to feel,
As we beg Hashem that this decree He repeal.

Our community of women took this plea to heart,
Their Torah thoughts to share, adorned by precious works of art.
A zoom-free act of unity, achdut at its best,
K'ish echad b'lev echad,
With this booklet we can attest.

L'chaim to our artists, adding color to our chag,
and to our thoughtful authors, who made us think so hard!
L'chaim to the distributors, who hand-delivered these pages,
and to the generous donors, thank goodness for their wages. ;)

May this Yom Tov be our last in painful separation,
And l'shana haba'ah b'Yerushalayim TOGETHER in joyful celebration!

Bella Adler
Rachel Deutsch
Baila Shulman

Shavuot 5780

SHTEIGING INTO SHAVUOT

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Our Past for our Future - Finding the Beauty of Yizkor on Shavuot
by Debby Schuman

- Retired O.T. Now I travel the world, visiting children and grandchildren.
- Fun Fact: In Sept. 1970, I was on the famous ElAl flight that thwarted a hijacking attempt, returning us all to safety. Really, it's true!

The following was a Yizkor Drasha that my uncle, Rabbi Joshua Shmidman, once gave. Rabbi Shmidman taught Jewish Studies and Philosophy at Stern College/Yeshiva University where he inspired many of our present-day Jewish leaders. He was an incredible teacher and charismatic speaker whose erudition, personal warmth and exceptional sense of humor made him beloved by people of all ages and backgrounds.

We don't just learn things about yom tov and simcha from books. We also learn about them from the people in our lives.

In Megillat Rut, the people of Beit Lechem said to Boaz: "May Hashem make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, both of whom built up the house of Israel....And may your house be like the house of Peretz, whom Tamar bore to Yehuda, through the offspring which Hashem will give you by this young woman" (Ruth 4:11,12). The verse mentions Tamar, Rachel, and Leah. Why? These women exemplify what an eishet chayil should be. On the one hand, they were the most self-effacing, humble, and selfless people but on the other hand, they were strong, determined, and demanding when necessary.

Rachel went so far as to give up her beloved chatan for her sister. Leah demanded children from Yaakov; she had a holy chutzpa. Tamar was humble and quiet, so much so that Chazal tell us that Yehuda did not recognize Tamar on the roadside because the entire time she lived in his home she was so extremely modest and "tzanua" that he literally did not know what she looked like. Yet, when there was a need, she was determined and brazen, even posing as a prostitute for the sake of continuing Yehuda's lineage.

Ruth also was self-effacing and humble. She gave up her whole life for the sake of Naomi, for the sake of giving an old, downtrodden woman another chance at life. Boaz remarked on Ruth's modesty in the fields. However, when there was a need to continue Naomi's lineage Ruth went forth and brazenly demanded of Boaz that he marry her.

These characteristics are the key elements of an "eishet chayil" and a "gibor chayil". They are noted in the well known verse in Sefer Mishlei, "Oz v'hadar levusha v'tischak l'yom acharon." "Oz" is strength and might; not physical strength but moral strength. "Hadar" is the beauty of humility. Together these two elements are the "levushim," the vestments, of an eishet chayil.

These characteristics of the eishet chayil and a gibor chayil give us a sense of the Jewish future. We have a purpose, and that is why the verse in Mishlei ends, "v'tischak l'yom acharon", they will

laugh and be merry in the future. Why? Because they lived their lives with goals and a sense of purpose, then in the future they will rejoice to see their goals fulfilled.

Today we are saying Yizkor for people who were "neshot chayil" and "giborei chayil," the people who instilled in us that sense of future and purpose in our lives.

Rav Shmidman once asked what right he had to mold his children with his ideas about life and the world. He concluded that he was only able to do so because he was molded with those ideas by his parents, my grandparents, who were themselves an eishet chayil and a gibor chayil. They had a sense of the future and they taught Rav Shmidman that there was meaning in life and a goal to everything.

“Obeisance”, by Selina Epstein Rovinsky

- This photo was taken at the 9/11 memorial in NY. I love how the pano captured people coming in and out of the photo as if disappearing and/or reappearing. I found the quote so powerful in relation to loved ones lost (during 9/11 but also in life). I love how Yizkor remembers our loved ones who may no longer be here physically, but nothing can erase who they are/were.
- I am currently pursuing creative interests such as iPhone photography, watercolors, mosaics and Reiki. I am anxiously awaiting returning to work at Happy Spaces by Lizzy, where I get to use my creativity to help others edit, organize and reimagine their spaces!

Moooving Through The Meals (Why dairy?)
by Aliza Freilich

- Graduated with her MBA prior to coming to St. Louis
- I marched in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade twice (though only made it on TV once)

Chag Sameach to all! As we embark on the holiday of Shavuot, some are enthusiastic about the possibility of all four dairy meals while others are thrilled simply that eating cheesecake is one of the components of this holiday. Whatever your take on dairy and yom tov mixing, Shavuot is by far the most connected to the dairy side of the kitchen than any other yom tov. In fact, eating and drinking "bassar v'yayin" (meat and wine) encompasses all the other yamim tovim so much so that it's hard to sometimes believe dairy does play a major role here. Following are 10 reasons why we have a custom to eat dairy on Shavuot. Whatever motive you choose, and whichever type of cheesecake you select to munch on, I hope this Shavuot is sweet, comforting, and brings you some ease in knowing that this indulgence is mitzvah-based!

1. According to the gemara, when Bnei Yisrael received the Torah it was Shabbat (Shabbat 86b). Bnei Yisrael did not have time to kasher their utensils and prepare meat dishes to follow their newly received Torah guidelines. However, they had milk from before Shabbat with which they used to feed the animals. Timewise, dairy was the more practical approach for eating post matan Torah (receiving the Torah). (Mishna Berurah 494:12)

2. Further, once Bnei Yisrael received the Torah, certain meats became prohibited, however, dairy became permitted. Prior to that, the Jews kept the sheva mitzvot bnei Noach (the seven laws of Noah) which included the prohibition of "ever min hachai" (not eating a limb from a live animal). As an added stringency for Bnei Yisrael, milk was originally included in this prohibition prior to receiving the Torah. Once the Jews received the Torah, which lists Eretz Yisrael as a land of flowing with milk and honey, dairy became allowed. Since their meat pots were no longer kosher but dairy was allowed at that point, dairy was served. (Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, HaElef Lecha Shlomo – YD 322)

3. Each of the 365 days of the year corresponds to a negative mitzvah (Makot 23b; Tanchuma Ki Seitzeh 2). Shavuot corresponds to "reishit bikurei admutcha tavee beit Hashem Elokecha, lo tevashel gidi b'chalev imo," "The choicest of the first of your soil you shall bring to the house of the Lord, your God. You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk" (Shemot 34:26). In fact, Shavuot is represented as "Chag HaBikkurim" (the Holiday of First Fruits) (Bamidbar 28:26). The second half of the sentence, not to cook a kid in its mother's milk, is the negative commandment of the day associated with Shavuot. Since the first day one can bring bikkurim is

Shavuot, here again on Shavuot we take extra care not to mix meat and milk, the day's associated negative mitzvah, and have two separate meals. (Rema OC 494:3, YD 88:2)

4. The korban shtei halechem (the two-bread offering) was commanded to be brought on Shavuot. To commemorate, we eat two separate meals, first a dairy meal then a meat meal. (Rema OC 494:3, YD 88:2)

5. In Shir Hashirim (Song of Songs) it writes, "Nofet titofna siftotayich kallah, dvash v'chalav tachat lishonech," "Sweetness drops from your lips, honey and milk are under your tongue" (4:11). Honey is one taste, milk is another. Torah is compared to milk here in Shir Hashirim and is also the unique taste of the milk and honey combined. With its unique sweetness and being unlike any other taste, it nourishes us for life just as it can fully nourish a baby when born. (Kol Bo brought by Rabbi Daniel Glatstein, Rabbi Meir of Dzikov – Imrei Noam)

6. The malachim (angels) begged Hashem to not give Bnei Yisrael the Torah at Har Sinai (Shabbat 88b). Hashem did not listen to this because the malachim were not as meticulous as they could have been when eating meat after milk when visiting Avraham (Genesis 18:8 commentated by Midrash Tehillim ch. 8). We therefore eat dairy on Shavuot, take a break, then have meat to show our commitment to this mitzvah of separating milk from meat. (Beit HaLevi, Parshat Yitro)

7. The gematria (numerical value) of chalav is 40. We eat dairy to commemorate the: a) 40 days Moshe was on Har Sinai getting the Torah b) 40 days Moshe spent on Har Sinai after the chet haegel (sin of the golden calf) asking for forgiveness c) additional 40 days getting the second set of luchot (tablets). (Dvarim 10:10; Rav Menachem Mendel of Ropshitz)

8. One eats a celebratory seudah for finishing the omer. If it were a meat meal, people would think it's for general Yom Tov. Therefore, we make it clear it's for finishing sefirat haomer for Shavuot. (Rabbi Daniel Glatstein From Rav Pinchas Koritzer)

9. Har Sinai has been called Har Gavnunim, mountain of majestic peaks (Psalms 68:16). Related to gavnunim is the Hebrew word for cheese, gevina. Further, the gematria of gevina is 70, relating to the 70 faces of Torah. (Midrash – Bamidbar Rabba 13:15; Rebbe of Ostropole; Reb Naftali of Ropshitz; Rabbi Dovid Meisels, Rabbi Shraga Simmons)

10. Moshe was fed from his mother Yocheved even after he was rescued and adopted by Pharoh's daughter. As Moshe was born after six months of pregnancy according to the Midrash, his mother was able to hide him for three months prior to putting him in the river for the daughter of the Pharaoh to find him. This rescue of Moshe occurred on the sixth day of the month of Sivan, the same day Bnei Yisrael received the Torah. Because Moshe would eventually speak to Hashem and need a tahor (pure) mouth, we commemorate the neis that he was only fed

from a Jewish woman, specifically his mother Yocheved. (Talmud – Sotah 12b, Yalkut Yitzchak)

Whichever reason speaks to you the most with regards to eating dairy on Shavuot, it is important to remember not everyone actually enjoys having dairy meals on yom tov. For some, wine and meat are what brings simchat yom tov and that is perfectly fine.

Going forward in this uncertain time, where frustration, sadness, and the unknown seem to loom on a daily basis, we can rely on yamim tovim to bring back some state of normalcy. Whether that means reading the aseret hadibrot (ten commandments) and megillat Rut, staying up all night learning, buying flowers to beautify one's home, opening up the same machzor one used last year, or simply eating a piece of one's favorite cheesecake on Shavuot, rest assured one can rely on these familiarities to carry us through from year to year.

I like to write a note to myself at the end of certain yamim tovim, and they have now accumulated over the past several years. Needless to say, my notes from this past Pesach and what I expect to write after this upcoming Shavuot will look quite different than the other years. Regardless of how the situation may seem, I still would choose to have an enjoyable Yom Tov over a less enjoyable one. I'm looking forward, be'ezrat Hashem, to reading this year's notes at later dates, and plan and hope to be able to look back on the positive aspects of this time.

Not being able to celebrate with others in the same way may be disheartening. However, if we look closely there are so many more ways than not in which we can actually choose to make Shavuot just as beautiful as other years. While we look forward to "normal" days returning quickly, try to utilize the current situation to the best of your ability, in whichever way you find meaningful to you and your family.

“Paradise on a Plate” by Michal Koshner

- Homemade Sweet Cheese Blintzes, aka “Paradise on a Plate”
- Owner of Michal’s Sweet Treats

The Struggle is Real: Reframing the Narrative of the Luchot
by Aviva Needle

- Aviva works for Health Equity Works, a research-based public health initiative housed at Washington University's Brown School. Through this role, she is currently serving as support staff for the COVID-19 Regional Response Team, a centralized system of response to social needs of residents during the COVID-19 pandemic in the St. Louis region. She's also managing her four energetic children.
- Fun fact: Both sets of Aviva's grandparents, parents, and even one of her great-grandparents were born and bred in St. Louis.

It is written in Pirkei Avot, the ethical teachings read by Jews around the world between Pesach and Shavuot, "לפום צערא אגרא," meaning, "according to the effort is the reward" (5:26). A foundation of Jewish belief is that we must toil to get the greatest reward, and that it is that toil, and not necessarily where you begin and where you end, that is the most vital in Hashem's eyes.

This concept is illustrated in the story of our nation receiving the Torah -- in the narrative of the first luchot, Moshe breaking them, and the formation of the second set. The first set of luchot were by all accounts a work of extraordinary perfection. We are told they were formed from sapphire, written "with the finger of Hashem" in such a miraculous way that the words were both carved all the way through, yet still could be read the correct way on both sides. In his responsa, the Beit HaLevi teaches that the first set of luchot had the entire Torah written upon them - both the Torah Shebichtav (the written Torah) and the Torah Shebaal Peh (the oral Torah) (Beit HaLevi 18). In this manner, all of our laws and the reasons behind them were set forth. There would be no confusion as to how or why the mitzvot were done; the Rabbinic teachings would be apparent.

At the sin of the golden calf, Moshe descended the mountain and, upon seeing the Jewish people dancing and worshipping the Eigel, he threw the luchot down and shattered them. The Midrash says that the luchot became too heavy for him to carry because the words of the Torah flew off of them. The Beit HaLevi goes further to explain that the words of the *Torah Shebaal Peh* flew off, and without the oral Torah to support the written law, the Torah was impossible to bear.

The second luchot were less incredible than the first in most ways. They were earthly, made by Moshe, a man, out of regular rock - not sapphire like the first. There was no oral Torah included, instead leaving generations to work and toil to understand the hows and whys and wonder whether our interpretations are correct. It seems that the second luchot were not ideal, rather, a less than perfect solution to our nation's downfall.

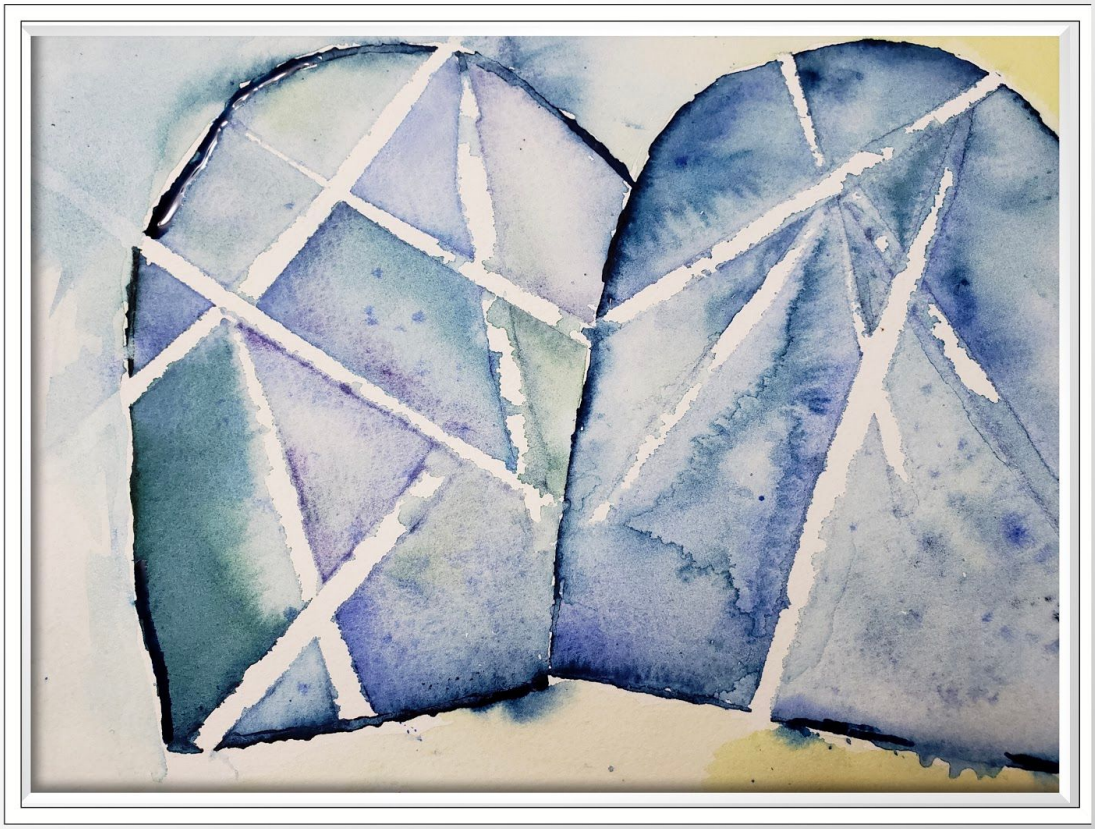
But despite these facts, the Beit HaLevi says that the *second* luchot were actually the superior set, not the first. Sure, the first would have spoon-fed us what to do, but we would never have the need to invest and challenge ourselves to find the answers. We wouldn't struggle and develop a relationship with the text, grapple with its meaning, and strive to apply ancient wisdom to modern day. The concept of toil and struggle with Torah Shebaal Peh is so essential to Jewish life that in the Hadran, the bracha that is recited after completing a part of the Talmud, we specifically thank Hashem for placing us in a Beit Midrash of study and toil:

מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹקינוּ וֵאלֹקי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁשַּׂמְתָּ חֶלְקֵנוּ מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ... אָנוּ עֲמֵלִים וּמְקַבְּלִים שָׂכָר

It is this struggle in life for which we must have the utmost respect and appreciation. When we must endure hardship, the comfort we have is that we can emerge with greater strength. As we are all now struggling in different ways amidst an international crisis, we have the opportunities to emerge with greater wisdom, more prepared to take on the world. Of course, for many of us, just surviving - day to day and literally - is the challenge. Nevertheless, going through hardships has historically shaped us both as individuals and as a nation. It is through the toil and the struggle of our times, just as it is through the toiling over a page of Gemara or a commentary by the Rambam, that will ultimately give us our appropriate reward.

“Lookingglass Luchot” watercolor by Judith Frankiel

- Fun fact- I have my zumba license!



Torah- the Ultimate Gift!
by Avital Elkaim

- Graduate of Stern College, PhD candidate at Weill Cornell in the field of Cell Biology.
- Married to Natie Elkaim, and mother to Shoshana Leah.
- Fun fact- plays the flute and figure skates!

There are two separate days in the Jewish calendar on which we celebrate the Torah. Simchat Torah, when we complete the annual cycle of leining and learning through the entire text of the Torah, and Shavuot, when we commemorate and celebrate receiving the Torah at Har Sinai. Celebrating the day we were given the Torah shows that it must have been a great gift to us. If we find an unknown package at our door we don't celebrate before opening it, but if we are handed a wrapped package from a good friend we are happy immediately, even without opening it to see what's inside. The celebration at Simchat Torah is the celebration after opening the box and examining the contents; it is a celebration of appreciation. The celebration of Shavuot is one of thanksgiving simply for being handed the box, for only if we know the contents to be a gift would we celebrate so upon its receipt. If that is so, what makes the Torah such a wonderful gift?

The Ramchal writes in Derech Hashem that since Hashem is a being of ultimate goodness, He must by His nature wish to bestow upon others the ultimate goodness. The purpose of creation therefore was to create a being, man, upon whom He could bestow such goodness. What is this ultimate goodness that Hashem wishes to bestow? Closeness to His presence, as we will receive in Olam Habah. However, this view of the purpose of creation begs a question. If the purpose is to bestow upon man the ability to be close to Hashem in Olam Habah, why not simply create our souls in Olam Habah to begin with? That way all would be at the ultimate level of closeness to Hashem, and none would have the opportunity to lose or diminish their reward by their actions in this world. The Ramchal explains that if Hashem were to do so we would not fully accept or appreciate the gift, since it would be given to us "incidentally." To fully appreciate the goodness a person would have to earn it for him/herself.

"שלהיות הטוב שלם ראוי שיהיה הנהנה בו. מי שיקנה הטוב בעצמו, ולא מי שיתלוה לו הטוב בדרך מקרה."

"For the goodness to be complete it is fitting for the one enjoying it to be one who has earned the good for himself, and not one upon whom it was placed in an accidental manner."

It is for this reason that we are created in this world, and given a system by which we can build a relationship with Hashem and earn the ability to be close to Him. The Torah is that system, for without it we do not know what Hashem wants from us, or how to do His will in this world. The Torah therefore is the ultimate gift, for it is through following its laws and directives that we build a relationship with Hashem, cultivating a bond that is ultimately manifested in Olam Habah when Hashem brings us directly into His presence. That reward is only the ultimate goodness Hashem can bestow because we have the Torah in this world. On Shavuot therefore we are not simply receiving a set of laws and directives, we are receiving Hashem's ultimate goodness. That is a gift worth celebrating.

“Torah the Greatest Gift of All!", Silk Art by Baila Shulman

- “How I love your teachings, they are in my thoughts all day long.” (Tehillim 119:97)
- Rebbetzin, Entrepreneur- business owner Rodan + Fields, Artist and Art Teacher
- Fun Fact - I have 4 passports!

“Chesed in Ruth”, embroidered Judaica by Bonnie Goldmeier

- I live in Clayton with Mickey. We have 6 sons, a fabulous and amazing daughter-in-law, Chelsea, and a grandson ~ Yehuda. I spend much of my free time as a partner at Rikma Art. Rikma Art is your source for custom embroidered Judaica art and more.

Chesed in Ruth
by Chelsea Goldmeier

- I am Chelsea Kornmehl Goldmeier, Married to Bradley Goldmeier. I live in New Jersey with Bradley and my son Michel Yehuda. In the summer we will be moving to Cleveland, as I will be starting Dental School at Case Western Reserve University.

The most fundamental question that one has to ask themself about the book of Ruth is, why do we read it on Shavuot?

The answer can be simple and superficial, like its connection to the wheat harvest. Shavuot is designed to always fall around the time of harvesting wheat and the book of Ruth mentioned harvesting wheat. But I imagine we can do better. One of the most memorable parts of the book of Ruth is her breathtaking speech to Naomi. She promises to unconditionally follow Ruth wherever she goes. It rings very similar to the Jewish people's acceptance of Hashem and his Torah, na'aseh v'nishma. It seems to make sense. It is the holiday of accepting the Torah, after all. But the only problem with that answer is it doesn't really fit textually. That beautiful speech happens in the later part of the first chapter. If that's the climax, what is the rest of the book doing?

I'm sure you will be happy to hear that we are not the first ones to ask this question. Chazal also asked this question. In fact, it is Chazal that tell us that the central theme of the book of Ruth is chesed. In order to really crack open what they are trying to tell us we have to figure out where Ruth and chesed cross paths.

We can go back to Ruth's ancestry and see chesed through the actions of her direct relative Lot. Lot invited guests into his house. A mob appears outside his house demanding the guests be thrown out. In an attempt to save his guests, Lot offers his daughters instead. At first this seems like a noble act of chesed, but when you take a second look something is off. Chesed should radiate outwards being strongest to the people closest to you. It's great to do nice things for people, but not at the expense of your loved ones.

Moav and chesed likewise is mentioned in Devarim. They failed to do chesed when Am Yisrael had just left Egypt and were starving, as the pasuk says "עַל־דְּבַ֞ר אֲשֶׁ֣ר לֹא־קִדְּמ֣וּ אֶתְכֶ֗ם בַּלֶּ֙חֶם֙ וּבַמַּ֔יִם בַּדָּ֑רֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶ֖ם מִמִּצְרָ֥יִם." For this selfish act we are forbidden to marry from the nation of Moav. It appears as if Lot's daughter is scarred from her father's action and unable to pass on the concept of chesed to her progeny.

Ruth, through her acts of kindness, is able to correct the wrongdoing of her ancestors. At the climax of the story, Ruth sneaks into Boaz's room in order to enter into a yibum-like marriage

with him. When she reveals herself he exclaims …."בְּרוּכָה אַתְּ לַה' בִּתִּי הֵיטַבְתְּ חַסְדֵּךְ הָאַחֲרוֹן מִן־הָרִאשׁוֹן … Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first …" He recognizes what she is doing for him, the opportunity she is giving him and boasts about all the chesed Ruth does. She decides to give up her dream husband in order to do yibum with Boaz. This also means that she is giving up her first child in a way as well. Her children are, as the Torah states, meant to carry on the name of the lost relative. It's an unbelievable act of chesed to give up your future, your husband and your children to a relative. It makes it even more special when the person you do the chesed for is passed away and cannot do anything to begin to repay you.

If you reread the pasuk you will realize that this isn't the first major act of chesed. Boaz says that this act of chesed is better than the first. But what exactly is the first chesed he is talking about? Rashi among other commentators tell us that the first chesed Ruth performed was throwing away her whole life, wealth, family, friends and birthplace in order that Naomi wouldn't be alone. She had already decided to follow Naomi to a strange place where she knew no one and had nothing just to stay with her mother-in-law.

What is most striking to me about these acts of chesed is how they are emanating directly and inauspiciously from her heart. No one else is aware of the unbelievable acts of kindness that Ruth does. It is a powerful message to put your neck on the line and possibly even to place your life in danger standing up publicly for justice. It is even more amazing to the same when no one else is aware of your tremendous kindness and purity. Ruth did these two tremendous acts of self sacrifice in front of basically no one. She did it because she believed it was the right thing to do. A true act of chesed.

Sefirat HaOmer: The Journey or the Goal?
by Leora Hertan

- Talent and Organizational Development Consultant
- Fun Fact: I tap dance

Within the construct of the Jewish experience, measurements hold a seemingly sacred place. This is nothing new; we measure almost everything in the Orthodox framework – how many hours between meat and milk, the days until a baby boy is circumcised, and the amount of matzah we eat at the Pesach Seder, just to name a few. In fact, the opposite is true as well – the absence of proper counting, such as through defective measurements, is prohibited by the Torah. Rambam notes that the very act of using an inappropriate vessel to measure actually violates a negative biblical commandment (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Theft, 7:1).

Sefirat HaOmer (the counting of the Omer) is no different. It is a unique period marked by a measurement of time – counting of the days up to the giving of the Torah. With this in mind, it begs the question: Does the power and importance of Sefirat HaOmer emanate strictly from its association with Matan Torah, or is there anything inherently valuable in the counting exercise itself, similar to how we value it in so many other aspects of Jewish life?

I'd like to suggest that its holiness radiates from both, a multi-faceted measurement though its value not easily quantifiable. How so? The experience of growth links both to what we strive for (Matan Torah) but also in the day-to-day (daily counting). Without a goal, we go nowhere, lost amidst a world of missed opportunities and digital distractions. It's no surprise that productivity experts highlight the importance of starting each day listing what you hope to accomplish, a goal you can look towards. The very act of identifying a goal – in our case, reaching the moment we received the Torah – is in itself a noble and spiritual activity. At the same time, we cannot underplay the importance of the very counting in and of itself. Why?

Consider when Hashem asks that Moshe to count the Israelites leaving Egypt with a "machazit hashekel" (half a shekel). It is odd that Moshe couldn't just count them as we would expect. The Talmud explains, however, that blessing is not "in something that has been weighed, nor in something that has been measured, nor in something that has been counted, only in something that is hidden from the eyes" (Bava Metzia 42a).

So why, then, is the counting of the Omer inherently holy? After all, it is all related to the measurement of time. Consider reframing how we think about the counting of the Omer – perhaps the focus is not on the counting itself, but on what the counting represents, what is hidden from the eyes. Sefirat HaOmer, as with the other counting experiences in our Jewish law, is momentous in its hidden meaning; in its ability for each individual to make it her or his own,

to tap into the very depths of our souls and identify where we are today and where we want to be tomorrow.

Consider a tool that many use each day – journaling. We use it to reflect on our daily practice, track progress of habits, activities and feelings. It is not meant to be used once a year, rather daily – to recognize and acknowledge the daily struggles, wins, and experiences that we each face and mark progress towards our goal. Similarly, the Omer encourages us to acknowledge the value of each and every day, the power it brings us – when we maximize it – to get that much closer to our goal.

Rabbi Avraham Twerski illustrates an incredible concept about growth through the experience of a lobster. The lobster, itself, is soft but is protected by a hard shell. How then can it grow with this protective shell that doesn't expand? Rabbi Twerski explains that as the lobster grows, it becomes very uncomfortable in its restricted shell, and ultimately will rid its shell and produce a new one that is more fitting for its new size, and so on. He points out that the stimulus for ridding its shell is the feeling of discomfort in its current state – its confining shell.

Our experience of counting the Omer can be much like that of the lobster that Rabbi Twerski describes, an experience to rid ourselves of that which confines us and restricts our growth. It is so much more than a simple counting exercise, it is an opportunity for self-reflection and mindfulness, a chance for us to get comfortable with the uncomfortable, recognize where we need more work to reach our Matan Torah.

At its core, Sefirat HaOmer highlights both the goal of receiving the Torah and perhaps just as much the importance of the self-reflection and personal work that it takes to get there. May we unlock the hidden potential of each day's counting and reach our personal Matan Torah.

“Walking the Path to Shavuot”, watercolor by Lisa R. Tager

- Owner of Small Batch Boutique - custom formal accessories and fiber art
- Fun Fact: I can remember what I (and most of the people around me) was wearing for every first day of school, job or special occasion without looking at pictures!

The Paradox of the Divine-Human Encounter at Sinai
by Leah Farkas

- *Very closely adapted from a dvar Torah given by Judy Klitsner, senior lecturer in Tanach at the Pardes Institute and author of* Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*, one of my favorite books.*

"The paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a love without feeling: a paltry mediocrity." - Søren Kierkegaard

In Shemot 19:3-4, G-d tells Moshe to tell Bnei Yisrael: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me." This verse begins the divine-human encounter at Har Sinai. Perhaps most recognizable here is the phrase "eagles' wings," a metaphor for a soaring, miraculous delivery that we see used elsewhere in Tanach. Notably, however, the metaphor breaks down as quickly as it is built when G-d does not say He brought us to His nest or to a safe spot or something that is similarly symbolic or evocative (see Devarim 32:11 for an example where this metaphor *is* further extended). Instead, G-d says He brought us to Him. That seems to project a certain intimacy between G-d and the people. He takes care of us, He protects us, He bears us on His wings, and He brings us not to some metaphorical haven but actually to Him directly.

Elsewhere in the chapter, in verse 17, there's another phrase that points to this intimacy. Moshe brings the people out from the camp to greet G-d, "likrat ha'elokim." The term "likrat" is used when describing personal greetings, usually when two people who love each other meet. Perhaps for this reason Rashi brings down a midrash here that says that the shechinah, G-d's presence, went out to meet the people like a bridegroom who goes out to meet his bride. Thus, with "likrat ha'elokim," the sense of intimacy is amplified. Another contributor to this notion of an intimate meeting between G-d and the people is the recurring verb in this chapter: y-r-d, "yarad," to go down. It appears no fewer than seven times in this narrative and implies that G-d came down to find the people where they were, thus bridging the distance between Him and the people.

The paradox is introduced when the more dominant, and of course, opposite, theme of the narrative becomes obvious: throughout Shemot 19, there is an intense emphasis on keeping the people at a safe distance, with warnings and frightening words such as "stoned," "shot," "trembled," and "perish," (19:13-21). The words "l'hagbil," to cordon off, and "lingoa," to touch, are most telling here and contribute to the sense that G-d's space is closely guarded and there is great danger to those who get too close. Numerous times the people are told NOT to approach it, NOT to touch it; if they do, there will be dire consequences. Interestingly, in contrast to the oft-appearing y-r-d verb, the verb a-l-a, "alah," to go up, appears seven times as well. A-l-a suggests that G-d and Torah reside in a heavenly, untouchable place. Bnei Yisrael can cautiously move toward it, but they cannot go up to greet it.

So which one best describes our encounter with G-d during this pivotal moment of revelation? Is it a familiar, special intimacy or a threatening, terrifying distance? Does G-d meet us on our own territory, or are we cautiously allowed a limited degree of entry into G-d's territory?

In his keystone work, *God, Man and History*, Eliezer Berkovits summarizes this paradox in a different way: "Now we find that the encounter threatens the very existence of man...but there can be no religion without some active relationship between man and God; in the relationship, however, man cannot survive." So if Judaism requires both an all-powerful, removed, unknowable, and consuming G-d but also an intimate partnership between G-d and man, how can both of these be sustained? The latter repudiates the former, and the former repudiates the latter. On the one hand, we are reduced to nothing in the presence of G-d, but on the other hand, we have to be in G-d's presence in order to be His partner in keeping Judaism alive.

Rather than resolving this paradox, it might be more constructive to keep it in place and posit that both aspects of the relationship, although contradictory, are true. Humility and majesty, empowerment and incapacity work in tandem as essential components of this complex relationship between us and G-d. With utmost caution and with a sense of awe, obligation, and humility, we approach G-d, and G-d gives us a perfect and complete Divine text filled with rules and limitations. But on the other side, G-d also comes down to us, meeting us where we are in the spiritual spaces of our own making.

To expand further on this paradox, let's jump to an ambiguous verse in Devarim 5:19 where Moshe recounts the revelation story. G-d's voice is described in this verse as "kol gadol v'lo yasaf," a great voice that did not "yasaf." Rashi defines "yasaf" with yet another paradox: he says the word can either mean "it didn't continue," in that the voice was heard once and that was the end, or it can mean that "it never ended," in that the voice will continue to reverberate forever.

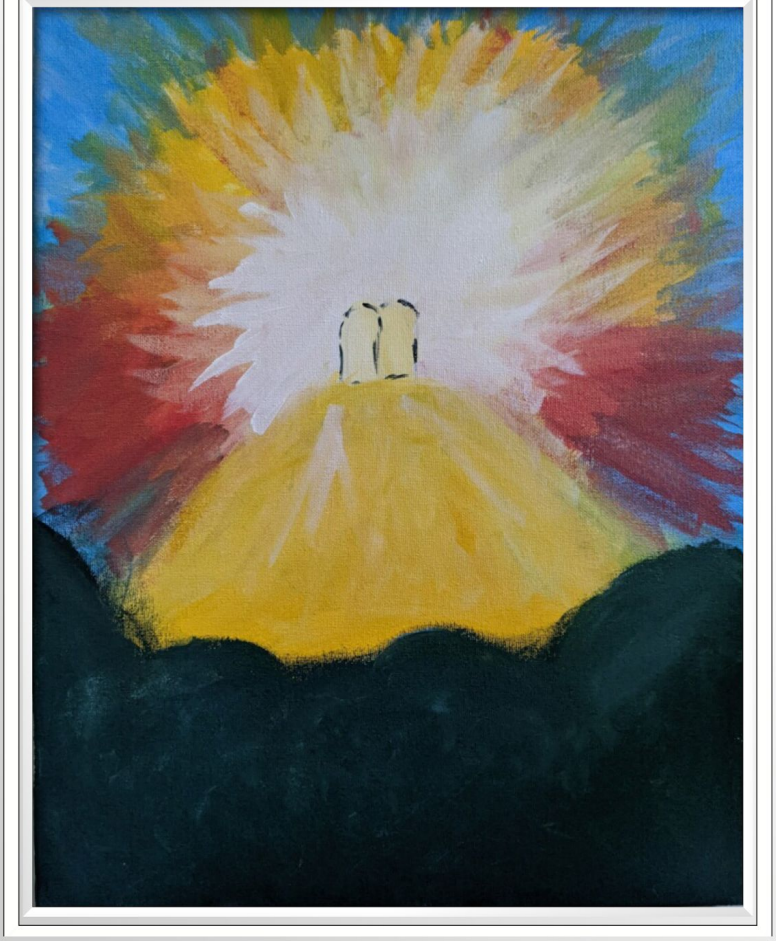
Rashi leaves us with the notion that the definition of "yasaf" is an either/or, but famously, Rabbi Yeshaya HaLevi Horowitz (the Shelah HaKadosh, named after the title of his best-known work, the Shnei Luchot HaBrit) claims that *both* are true and that this word reveals a paradoxical truth about revelation. On the one hand, "lo yasaf" means that G-d's voice did not continue. With this definition, revelation was a one-time, top-down event in which humanity cautiously approached G-d in His space to receive the pristine and perfect Torah. Our task that follows is to try to recover this original divine truth as much as we can. This view, of course, conforms to the distant divine-human encounter within the Matan Torah narrative, where Bnei Yisrael were told to keep within their boundaries and not to encroach on G-d's space. However, says the Shelah, "lo yasaf" *also* means that the voice of revelation did not end, and in fact, the voice of revelation never ends. With this definition, the revelation at Har Sinai is actually an ongoing and intimate dialectic between G-d and the people. When people are committed, creative, and courageous in their learning and interpreting of Torah throughout the generations, they have the potential to be active participants in continuing the revelation. In this view, when we learn Torah in rigorous, passionate, and authentic ways, we have the opportunity to contribute to the ever-continuing Matan Torah moment that began at Har Sinai.

These two components of the divine-human relationship at Har Sinai demonstrate that a relationship with G-d and the Torah should encompass both distance and closeness, humility and empowerment, passive reception and active participation. There is no better time to reflect and rekindle this relationship than on Shavuot, when we have the opportunity to both commemorate this beautiful and pivotal revelatory moment while at the same time contributing to its continuity.

A question for further discussion: there is a second paradox in Shemot 19:5. G-d says "and now if you faithfully obey Me and keep my covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples." The first half of the verse seems conditional ("*if* you obey, *then*…"), but the word "segula," treasure, seems to be anything but anything but conditional. The word is rarely used in Torah and often refers to precious gems that have great inherent worth. So how do we understand this? Is our "treasured" status conditional, or is it inherent? What might be learned from maintaining this paradox as is instead of attempting to resolve it?

"From Kriyat Yam Suf to Matan Torah!" by Ruthie Shach (Grysman)

- MPH, PhD student in clinical health psychology
- Fun Fact: I speak three languages!



From *Dayenu* to *Akdamut*
by Glenna Gelfand

- Glenna R. Gelfand is a lifelong learner
- She works as an adjunct instructor at St. Louis Community College, and as an office manager at Chabad on Campus at WashU
- She is an avid reader, a puzzle fiend, and she likes to sew and bake.
- Fun Fact? Glenna has had many jobs including accounting clerk, paralegal, and teacher, but the most fascinating for most was her stint as a Stage Manager Off Broadway.

Why, of all the *piyutim*, is one obscure and seemingly strange rhyming poem inserted before the first Aliyah of the *Kriyat Ha'Torah*, on Shavuot, especially in light of the fact that in recent years there has been a movement to remove it entirely?

Akdamut is a *piyut* written by Rabbi Meir ben Yitzchak Nehorai in the eleventh century in Worms, Germany (the Rhineland), and its authorship coincides with the Crusades. Rabbi Meir was a contemporary of Rashi, a learned Rabbi and *Peyyetan* (poet/composer of piyyutim), and a prayer leader, which in his time, was more than what we would refer to as a *chazan* or *shaliach tzibur*. At that time, there was a practice in many European Ashkenazi synagogues to introduce the Torah reading each Shabbat with a verse in Aramaic as an introduction to the translation. Then the leader would read from the Torah, and after each verse, a translation in Aramaic was recited. This was a practice that followed the Jews from Ancient Israel into exile.[1] In addition, while the order of prayer was set, the siddur was still evolving with the introduction of new prayers written by *rabbanim* and scholars and even laypeople (even women were among them) that would reflect the time of year or even the political situation. A number of our most well known prayers, for example, *av ha'rachamim* (also written in Worms in the year 1096 in the wake of the first Crusade there), the *unetaneh tokef* and *kol nidrei*, now codified, started in this manner.

Akdamut is not easy to understand. First of all, it is written in Aramaic - and while many are familiar with Aramaic from the Talmud - *Akdamut* is written in verse form, 45 couplets to be exact, and like much poetry, its language is not the vernacular of the gemara. It also contains a mono-rhyme scheme in which every line ends with a *taf-alef* - the syllable *"ta,"* which represents the totality of Torah by using the first and last letters (specifically in reverse order) of the alef-bet. This symbolizes that where we end, we begin again, over and over. The piyut also contains an acrostic spelling of the author's name and a prayer. That said, the themes of Akdamut are common in both biblical texts and our liturgy: Exaltation of Hashem's power and majesty in the form of praise, the significance of the Torah, and Hashem's Jewish People who

[1] Hoffman, Jeffrey, *Akdamut: History, Folklore, and Meaning*. Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 99, No. 2, Spring 2009, pp.161-183

have remained faithful and steadfast.[2] The poem uses ideas from *Tanach* and *Kabbalah,* evidenced by allusions to *malachim*, *seraphim* and texts in the *neviim achronim*.

So why does this *piyut* endure in our Ashkenazi custom, and why do we read it on Shavuout?

Aside from the history we know, there is some folklore around *Akdamut*. There is an idea that it was written in gratitude after a disputation in Germany when Rabbi Meir himself was victorious in openly debating political and religious figures of the time, resulting in a stay of execution of sorts for the Jewish community, though there is no proof of this. (It is more likely that it was written in gratitude for those who survived the first Crusade.) His *piyut* then praises Hashem not only for his gift of Torah, but for the political victory allowing Jews to remain 'free' in the Rhineland. There is also a legend, somewhat midrashic in proportion,[3] asserting that Rabbi Meir was not the disputant, but was instrumental in finding a spokesperson for the Jews of the day. However, in order to do so, he had to break Shabbat to cross the River Sambatyon to find the Ten Lost Tribes from whence the savior would come. He did so because it was *pikuach nefesh.* Once he had crossed the river, he could not cross back - Shabbat being the only day the river was passable - and so he spent the rest of his days unable to lead his people, leaving behind only his prayers for them, specifically requesting that the *Akdamut* be read on Shavuot. The association of this tale, at a time when the Jews had just faced "the first outbreak of Christian anti-Jewish mass murder in Europe,"[4] in the form of the 1096 Crusade in Worms, Mainz and the surrounding area, which occurred a couple of days before Shavuot, and the then mythic status of Rabbi Meir, made it hard not to include this *piyut*. In addition, the tale was then printed a couple of centuries later in Yiddish in many *machzorim,* thus cementing it in the liturgy of the Ashkenazi community in the Middle Ages.

In some ways, it is obvious why we read *Akdamut* on Shavuot. Firstly, it was written expressly for that purpose and that day, to be read just before the reading of the first *Aliyah*. Furthermore, it praises Hashem for his power and majesty in general, but also, more specifically, for giving the Torah to *Am Yisrael*, and in gratitude for the opportunity to be chosen to be partners with Him. Additionally, we are creatures of habit and tradition. So much of our present day practice is based not only on *halacha*, but on *minhag*, but I believe there is also a deeper understanding of *Akdamut* which accounts for its continued recitation.

The idea of a throughline from Pesach to Shavuot is a common theme in our observance. The Jewish People leave Egypt, traverse the desert, and arrive at Sinai to receive the Torah. We see this in the counting of the *Omer* as B'nei Yisrael move eagerly toward their goal, but Sinai was meant to be only one stop on the continuum. They were meant to continue on and enter the Land

[2] Laura Lieber, *Akdamut Milin: The Enigma and Perseverance of Tradition.* TheTorah.com (2014).
[3] Hoffman
[4] Hoffman

of Israel, conquer it, and then build the *Beit HaMikdash*. This is no more apparent than in the piyut *Dayenu* sung on *Seder* night.

We often ask ourselves, how can we say it would have been enough, it would have sufficed, if Hashem had only . . . ? The common answer is that it is a way of expressing gratitude to Hashem every step of the way. We are grateful for the 'little' things, though none of the kindnesses listed in *Dayenu* could be classified as little. Each one is of great importance - possibly none more so than the giving, and receiving, of the Torah. For who would we be without it? Is it not the essence of our being as individuals and a nation? Does it not provide our purpose? Do we really mean even if we got to Sinai, but did not receive the Torah, it would have been enough? Clearly not. Hence this *piyut* is a celebration of Hashem as the author and giver of the Torah, as well as in praise of the Jewish People for accepting it upon themselves, and is thus a perfect fit for Shavuot morning, read at the commencement of the Torah reading.

Akdamut is the metaphorical drumroll for a finale of sorts; it is the culmination of the first stage of our journey. While some may see the Exodus from Egypt as the finale after months of negotiation and plagues, the likes of which the world had never seen, others may see the arrival at Sinai as the end point, and that the actual receiving of the Torah is the goal. That is clearly Rabbi Meir's take as is exhibited in his language of praise for this one event in our history, seminal though it was.

Rabbi Meir, and most of diaspora Jewery, seem to be in agreement that having Torah is enough; otherwise, we would have flocked to Israel decades ago. However, it is not enough to receive the Torah. As *Akdamut* recounts, we need to remain vigilant and steadfast in our dedication and devotion to merit Hashem's continued beneficence so that we may continue the journey, proscribed in *Dayenu*, to Israel, and ultimately rebuild the *Beit HaMikdash* where we can read the Torah on Shavuot preceded by the *Akdamut*.

In recent years, there has been a movement toward reading Akdamut in Hebrew, and the *Rinat Yisrael machzor* has a Hebrew translation printed in its text. There has also been a suggestion that it be replaced with various verses from *Tehillim*. The idea that we should use *tehilim* remains unsurprising as it too is largely liturgical poetry - hence so much of it is codified as part of our prayer service - and it is in Hebrew, which is more commonly understood today. However, it is undeniable that *Akdamut* remains a truly great work not only of prayer and devotion, but of beautiful and rich literary allusion which should remain, even if it means we have to work a little harder to understand it. What else are we going to do over Yom Tov if not learn Torah?

“Crown of Praise”- Watercolor and Ink on Paper, by Elianna Dryer

- Student at Boston University, College of Fine Arts
- Fun fact- I love painting-especially murals!

Adinah's Cheesecake Recipe, Adinah Raskas

- I began baking cheesecake recipes in September, 1962. And just to let you know, most store brand cream cheese is made the same way as Raskas brand cream cheese.

Ingredients:

Crust:
1 ¼ cups cookie crumbs crushed-chocolate cookies are great
1/3 cup butter, melted
¼ cup firmly packed light brown sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon

Cake:
3 8 oz. bars of cream cheese, softened (leave out of the fridge for at least ½ hour before using)
1 cup sugar
2 eggs
1 cup sour cream
1 tablespoon vanilla
1 cup (mini) semi-sweet chocolate chips
Glaze:
3 oz. chocolate bar or chips
½ cup whipping cream
½ teaspoon vanilla

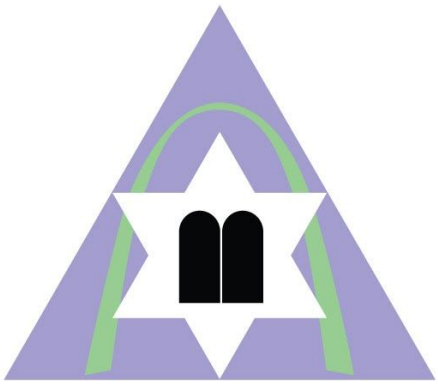
Directions:
Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Crust: Blend all ingredients in a bowl. Then press the mixture into the bottom and sides of the springform pan. Refrigerate crust until firm, about 30 minutes.

Cake: Beat the cream cheese until fluffy. Add the sugar and eggs, beating until smooth. Beat in sour cream and vanilla. Fold in chocolate chips. Pour the batter into the prepared crust. Bake on the center rack for 1 hour. Turn the oven off and leave the cake in the oven for an additional hour.

Remove from the oven and cool completely. It is okay if the cake cracks in the center. Once the cake is completely cooled, place in the fridge for at least 5 hours or overnight before putting the glaze over the cake.

Glaze:
Heat the cream in a small pot over high heat. Add the chocolate and vanilla. Stir about one minute. Remove from heat and stir until all chocolate is melted. Refrigerate the glaze for about ten minutes. Then pour the glaze over the chilled cake, using a spatula, if desired, to spread over the top of the cheesecake. Refrigerate for at least 1-2 hours before serving.



YOUNG ISRAEL of ST. LOUIS