

SHAVUOT



This text is a summary of ideas drawn from:

Sarah Yehudit Schneider, "Shavuot 2011/5771" and "Shavuot 2010/5770," <https://astillsmallvoice.org/category/holidays/shavuot/>.

Rabbi Yosef Stern, The Three Festivals: Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes on Pesach, Shavuot, and Succos (New York: Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, 1993), pp. 184-188, 204-206.

THE 613 MITZVOT ENCOMPASSED IN THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

ALL OF THE MITZVOT ARE INCLUDED IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

With Hashem's revelation on Har Sinai, we only committed to the 10 Commandments... so how did our obligations mushroom into 613?

Our sages explain that all of the mitzvot are included in those original ten. One indication of this is the number of letters in the *Aseret HaDibrot*—620—which corresponds to the 613 Torah mitzvot plus 7 rabbinic enactments. Hidden within each utterance is layer upon layer of halakhic and spiritual depth.

COMMITMENT TO THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AT SINAI

620 LETTERS = 613 MITZVOT + 7 ENACTMENTS

WE ONLY HEARD THE FIRST TWO COMMANDMENTS DIRECTLY FROM HASHEM

However, the matter becomes even more striking when we recall that we actually only heard the first two commandments directly from Hashem. According to the Midrash and Oral Torah, the intensity of that direct revelation was so overwhelming that our souls flew from our bodies with each Divine word. God revived us with His resurrecting dew, the same holy drops He will use at the end of time to bring the dead back to life.

It is said that we “died” over sixty times during the delivery of those two commandments. It was simply too much for the human soul to endure. Eventually, the nation, terrified yet awed, begged Moshe to serve as intermediary, asking him to receive the rest of the message and convey it to the people.

THE FIRST TWO COMMANDMENTS ARE COMPREHENSIVE

Even so, these first two commandments are far from limited in scope. On the contrary—they are comprehensive.

The First Commandment, which declares the truth of God's existence—“I am Hashem your God who took you out of the land of Egypt”—is the root of all 248 positive mitzvot: all the “do”s that require active expression of service, connection, and holiness.

The Second Commandment, which prohibits idolatry —“*You shall have no other gods before Me*”—serves as the root of the 365 negative mitzvot: all the “do not”s that restrain us from corrupting or distorting our connection to God.

DIRECT
REVELATION
CAUSED SOULS TO
DEPART

THE PEOPLE
BEGGED MOSHE TO
BE INTERMEDIARY

THE FIRST
COMMANDMENT IS
THE ROOT OF THE
248 POSITIVE
MITZVOT

THE SECOND
COMMANDMENT IS
THE ROOT OF THE
365 NEGATIVE
MITZVOT

And in truth, say our sages, even the second is included in the first. If we fully grasped the meaning of the First Commandment, its reality would automatically guide us away from anything false or misdirected.

The core of the entire Torah is embedded in this single, foundational utterance.

THE SECOND IS
INCLUDED IN THE
FIRST

THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: UNDERSTANDING THAT EVERYTHING COMES FROM GOD

UNDERSTANDING THAT GOD IS ONE

If we truly understood what it means that God is One, as expressed through the First Commandment, then our reflexive, spontaneous response to every moment would naturally align with Torah. We would live in spiritual synchronicity with truth. There would be no conflict between instinct and obligation—because we would see everything as coming from Hashem.

IF WE TRULY
UNDERSTOOD...

The goal of our lives, both individually and collectively, is to deepen our understanding of this truth. To slowly absorb what it means that God is not only One, but also present—guiding, sustaining, and communicating with His world.

THE GOAL OF OUR
LIVES

HASHEM REPEATS THE FIRST COMMANDMENT DAILY

To help us in this mission, say the Midrash and the Sod Yesharim, Hashem repeats the First

THE FIRST
COMMANDMENT IS
REPEATED EVERY
DAY

Commandment every single day. He continually broadcasts that foundational truth:

“I am Hashem your God.”

The Divine voice never stopped—it’s we who stopped listening.

WE STOPPED
LISTENING

So why don’t we hear it? What keeps us from receiving this daily, sacred message?

The answer is not that the message has changed—but that the conditions of reception have. At Sinai, the world became silent. Creation paused. The birds, animals, angels—all fell still. Not even the sea made a sound. The silence was absolute, because even the smallest distraction could have garbled the message for eternity.

RECREATE INNER
SILENCE

To hear it again, we must recreate that inner silence.

We must designate space—in our day, in our mind, and in our heart—where no other voice intrudes. This is the only way to become truly receptive.

MAKING SPACE THROUGH REFLECTION

QUIET REFLECTION
IS NECESSARY

And so, if Hashem continues to repeat the First Commandment every day, we must also learn how to quiet ourselves enough to receive it. That kind of quiet doesn’t just mean physical silence—it means honest, humble reflection.

[Making silent space can only come about through quiet, honest reflection on events without outside distractions. It is only through such a medium that we can consider the meaning of both individual and collective events that we have experienced and focus on the message.]

HONEST
REFLECTION
REVEALS MEANING

SEEING DIVINE DESIGN IN EVERYTHING

When done properly, such reflection can bring a subtle clarity—a growing awareness that nothing happens by chance. Every step, every experience, every disruption is part of Hashem's design. The First Commandment is not only a historical statement; it is a living truth, waiting to be rediscovered every day—if we make space to hear it.

NOTHING HAPPENS
BY CHANCE

ATZERET: THE RABBINIC NAME FOR SHAVUOT

A RABBINIC NAME WITH DEEPER MEANING

In rabbinic literature, Shavuot is often called “Atzeret”, a term that means cessation or holding back. Unlike other names for holidays that appear in the Torah, this name is found primarily in the Talmud and Midrash, and carries deep spiritual implications.

SHAVUOT IS
CALLED ATZERET
IN RABBINIC
SOURCES

The term *Atzeret* suggests a kind of spiritual pause or containment—a moment of stillness in which something powerful is held in place. On Shavuot, this refers to the inner state of *bittul*—*self-negation before Hashem*—that the Jewish people reached at the time of *Matan Torah*. Having left Egypt and journeyed

ATZERET AS
SPIRITUAL PAUSE
AND SELF-
NEGATION

through spiritual refinement, they arrived at Sinai ready to nullify their own will in full acceptance of God's word, saying “Naaseh v'nishma” (“We will do and we will listen”).

Calling Shavuot *Atzeret*, then, reflects this state of inner stillness and surrender—a holding back of the self to make space for the Divine.

A DIFFERENT ATZERET ON SHEMINI ATZERET

By contrast, on Shemini Atzeret, the Torah itself uses the word *Atzeret*, but here it reflects a different kind of intimacy: Hashem “holds back” the people, not letting them leave the sacred closeness of the festival. Rashi (on Vayikra 23:36) explains: “*It is difficult for Me to part with you—stay with Me one more day.*” In this sense, God negates all else, focusing entirely on His relationship with Israel.

So while both days are called *Atzeret*, on Shavuot, Israel draws near to Hashem through surrender, and on Shemini Atzeret, Hashem draws close to Israel in loving exclusivity.

ATZERET AS INNER
SURRENDER

HASHEM HOLDS
BACK ISRAEL FROM
LEAVING

ISRAEL DRAWS
NEAR, AND
HASHEM DRAWS
NEAR

THE TIME OF THE GIVING OF THE TORAH (ZEMAN MATAN TORATENU):

THE ANNUAL RE-GIVING OF THE TORAH

This phrase can be understood not only as a reference to the historical event that occurred at Mount Sinai, but also to the ongoing re-giving of the Torah that we experience each year.

NOT ONLY A
HISTORICAL EVENT

TORAH STUDY ON SHAVUOT NIGHT

One of the ways we can render ourselves vessels worthy of receiving the Torah anew is by engaging in Torah study on Shavuot night. This practice forges a spiritual union between the Jewish people and Hashem. Studying the Torah texts directly—reading the letters with our own eyes, rather than passively listening to a lecture—infuses a person with a unique spiritual energy capable of reaching the deepest layers of the soul.

TORAH STUDY ON
SHAVUOT NIGHT

Some commentaries emphasize that the Torah study performed on Shavuot serves as a gateway and foundation for all Torah achievements throughout the year. Shavuot is therefore an auspicious time to immerse oneself in learning, at whatever level one is capable.

FOUNDATION FOR
THE YEAR

Shavuot is also a fitting time for *chidushim*—the offering of novel interpretations of Torah passages or teachings. Every individual has the potential to contribute a unique insight or perspective, rooted in their particular soul and life experience (within the bounds of tradition). One is especially encouraged to do so during the night of Torah study on Shavuot.

CHIDUSHIM
ENCOURAGED

600,000 JEWS AND THE BLESSING OF THE KNOWER OF SECRETS

When a person sees 600,000 (or more) Jews gathered in a single place, they recite the following blessing:

“Blessed are You, G-d, Sovereign of the Universe, Knower of Secrets.”

It is no coincidence that 600,000 is the approximate number of Israelite family units who stood at Mount Sinai during the original revelation.

This blessing suggests that whenever 600,000 Jews convene in a single place, it echoes the Sinaic experience. A certain aspect of Hashem becomes revealed through the vessel created by the fusion of this critical mass of Jewish souls.

BLESSING ON
600,000 JEWS

FUSION OF JEWISH
SOULS

ROOT SOULS AND THE LIVING TORAH

The idea, explains R. Tzadok HaKohen, is that just as there are 600,000 root souls in the spiritual community of Israel, so too are there 600,000 letters in the Torah. Every individual embodies a fragment of one of these letters. We each experienced the giving of the Torah from a distinct distance and angle—utterly unique to our soul. Consequently, we each know something about God, truth, and Torah that no one else can know.

But when 600,000 landsmen gather, something transformative occurs: their souls fuse into a unified vessel, capable of drawing down the higher, collective levels of soul that only descend when all root types are present.

Only then do we begin to appreciate the profound diversity of secrets that Hashem embedded in plain sight—in every single letter of His precious scroll of scrolls.

600,000 LETTERS
AND SOULS

A UNIFIED VESSEL
DRAWS DOWN
SOUL

SECRETS IN EVERY
LETTER