

Shavuot: Receiving Torah through *Nothing But Nets*

In ancient Israel, Shavuot was originally an agricultural holiday to celebrate and give thanks for the first fruits of the spring harvest, as cited in Exodus 34:22, Numbers 28:26, and Deuteronomy 16:9-10. Over the ensuing centuries, Scriptural interpretation by the Sages identified Shavuot also as a holiday to commemorate the giving and receiving of Torah at Mount Sinai, and to confirm our Covenant revelation experience there with God (*Talmud Shabbat* 86b). We are nourished not only by the fruits of the earth, but also by receiving, studying and following Torah.

How do we follow Torah? By doing and living it. Judaism is a religion of deed over creed. After all, at Sinai we responded “*na’aseh v’nishma*”—we will do and (then) we will hear/understand. By doing the *mitzvot* of Torah—like the Ten Commandments, feeding the hungry, supporting the poor, healing the sick, and even thinking about what and how we eat—we come to understand their role in leading us to a life of holiness, one in covenant relationship with God. Supporting the *Nothing But Nets* campaign to combat malaria entails many *mitzvot* and is one way to live Torah.

Today, African refugees fleeing genocide or civil war are then oppressed again by poverty and the threat of malaria in refugee camps and impoverished communities in sub-Saharan Africa. They need our help to survive. Malaria infects over 500 million people each year and kills over a million, most of them children. It overwhelms healthcare systems, costs billions in worker productivity, and perpetuates poverty. Yet a simple \$10 donation to the Union's *Nothing But Nets* campaign for an insecticide-treated bed net can protect an entire family, help eradicate this life-threatening disease, and give hope for a better future. Linking with other Movement Darfur efforts, the Union's *Nothing But Nets* contributions are being used to help these refugees. You can learn more and donate at www.urj.org/nets and by doing so, live the tenets of Torah.

Continuing to study and live Torah is a vehicle to allow us to sense God's Revelation, God's Presence, not only on Shavuot, but every day, as we navigate in this world toward godliness.

Activity for the Congregation

The mystic Sages of 16th century Safed (*Tzfat*) offered another interpretative celebration of the holiday—the practice of studying Torah late into the night on Shavuot eve: *Tikun leil Shavu'ot* (“a set order of study of the evening of Shavuot”) to prepare ourselves to re-experience Sinai. The mystics taught that at midnight, the Heavens opened up briefly to the possibility of revealing God's Presence anew. Many congregations today have recaptured a modern version of this mystical practice by hosting a variety of study sessions on Shavuot eve.

Attached is a “Modern Talmud” page and Discussion Questions you can use as one study session for Shavuot eve, before, during or after services—to explore how we can receive and live Torah through *Nothing But Nets*:

- Distribute this Shavuot holiday essay and the *Nothing But Nets* “Modern Talmud” page and ask people in groups of two or three to read them together and discuss their initial questions and reactions to the Jewish texts: What do they mean, and how do they relate to each other?
- The Discussion Questions can then be used either by the small groups for further discussion, or by a group leader/facilitator for a full group discussion together, to relate the texts to *Nothing But Nets*.
- At the same time, you can use our [brochures and informational material](http://www.urj.org/nets) at www.urj.org/nets to raise awareness and funds for this crucial life-saving program, so we can both *na’aseh v’nishma*—do and understand the Covenant *mitzvot* of Torah.

Discussion Questions for the *Nothing But Nets* “Modern Talmud” Page

A traditional Talmud page contains the Sages’ discussions of the Mishnah text surrounded by later commentaries. The accompanying “Modern Talmud” page is a similar collection of related quotes around a central Mishnah text that can be used as a tool to elicit discussion. Use the following questions with that “Modern Talmud” page to help guide the discussion toward the relationship of these Jewish texts to Nothing But Nets.

1. What does the central text from *Mishnah Sanhedrin* (“One who saves a life...It’s as if one saves an entire world.”) mean to you? How do the other quotes relate to, or expand upon, this central text? How does this central *Mishnah* text relate to the concept of *Nothing but Nets*?
2. In what ways does Maimonides’ theory of *tzedakah* pertain to the *Nothing but Nets* campaign? Where do you think *Nothing But Nets* would fit in his theory?
3. What do you think Rabbi Tarfon’s quote means? How does it apply to *Nothing but Nets*?
4. What does the Talmud conversation between Rabbi Joshua and Elijah teach us about the nature of *tzedakah* and helping others?
5. How are African refugees like the captives mentioned in the *Shulchan Aruch*?
6. Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the RAC, speaking about Darfur, said “This time we have to speak out. We can’t stand idly by while hundreds of people are dying or being killed...We can’t stand by while people in camps are going to be dying of disease

and hunger...We have to act.” To which of the Jewish texts does this quote most closely apply? Are any of the Jewish texts *not* applicable?

7. Which text speaks to you the most? Why?

8. After reading the “Modern Talmud” page, why do you think the Reform Movement is involved in the *Nothing But Nets* campaign?

9. After reading the “Modern Talmud” page, do you think that the work of *Nothing But Nets* to prevent malaria in Africa is a way to “live Torah”? Is it a *Jewish* issue? Why?

A Nothing But Nets “Modern Talmud” Page

Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? And if not now, when?"
(*Pirkei Avot* 1:14)

Rabbi Tarfon said, "It is not up to you to finish the work, yet you are not free to abstain from it."
(*Pirkei Avot* 2:16)

"You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor."
Leviticus 19:16

"What is might? When you see people about to fail and you rescue them." *Midrash Tehillim* 52:24

... וְכֹל הַמְּקַיֵּם נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת
כְּאִלוּ קָיָם עוֹלָם תְּלֵא.

**One who saves a life...
It's as if one saves an entire world.**

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Rabbi Joshua asked, "Where shall I find the Messiah?" "At the gate of the city," Elijah replied. "How shall I recognize him?" "He sits among the lepers." "Among the lepers?!" cried Rabbi Joshua, "what is he doing there?" "He changes their bandages," Elijah answered; "He changes them one by one. That may not seem like much for a Messiah to be doing. But apparently, in the eyes of God, it is a mighty thing indeed."
Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a

Maimonides taught that there are eight levels of *tzedakah*, each greater than the next, and the greatest level is to empower others through gifts, loans or partnerships in such a way that they are able to become independent and able to sustain themselves.

---URJ Resolution to End Global Poverty

"Every minute that one delays to redeem the captives when it is possible to move forward, it is as if one spilled blood."
Shulchan Aruch, Yorah Deah 252:3