



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shavuot 5762
May 2002**

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Introduction

This week we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, one of the three biblical pilgrimage holidays. In the Torah reading for the holiday we read chapters 19 and 20 of the book of Exodus, describing the experience of the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. Moses tells the elders that God has commanded them to get ready to receive the law, and explains how they are to prepare themselves for the occasion. He warns them that they are not to approach the mountain, but rather to stay at the foot of it and wait. Moses goes up by himself, and is instructed to go get his brother Aaron and return. Again it is stressed that no one else is to approach.

God then reveals the teachings we refer to as the Ten Commandments:

1. I am the Lord your God.
2. You shall have no other gods besides me. You shall not make images of what is in the heavens above or in the earth to pray to them
3. You shall not swear falsely using God's name
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, because God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet anything of your neighbor's.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. In the Torah, when the holiday of Shavuot is mentioned, it is described as the holiday of the First Fruits, or the Feast of Weeks. Nowhere in the Torah is the pilgrimage holiday of Shavuot connected to the giving of the Ten Commandments. It seems to be a holiday of first harvest – nothing more, nothing less. Only after the exile of the Jews from their land of Israel did the connection to the Ten Commandments become the main reason for celebrating the holiday of Shavuot. Why do you think this is so?
2. When Jews began to resettle the land of Israel in large numbers, during the late 1800's and the early 1900's, they began to create new rituals for celebrating Shavuot, especially in non-religious agricultural settlements. Can you guess why?
3. There are many *midrashim* about the giving of the Torah. In one, God asks many different groups of people if they will accept what is being offered, and each group finds a reason that the Torah and its rules won't work for them. When God asks the Israelite people, they respond, "Na'aseh v'nish'mah" - "We will do and we will hear", implying that they would accept the commandments first, without questioning ahead of time what will be involved. What do you think that means to tell us about the commitment of our people to the rules of the Torah?
4. The first commandment says that there is only one God and that we are to have no other gods. Can you think of a way that we sometimes allow other things to be more important in our lives than God? How can we try to keep God the most important thing in our lives?
5. The commandment about honoring parents sounds at first as though it applies to children. Can you think of any other commandments directed toward children? If this commandment is not intended to be for or about children, how should we understand it? How should we act to obey it?
6. "Thou shall not murder" is **not** the same as "Thou shall not kill." Explain the difference. Do you think this commandment means that capital punishment is forbidden by the Jewish religion?

Some texts to Wrestle With

"The Lord called to [Moses] from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples."

(Exodus 19: 4-5)

Does this mean that if we don't obey faithfully that God will not love us?

"The Lord said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish."

(Exodus 19:21)

What do you think this means? Will God kill them if they disobey, or is there some other message about the danger in approaching God too closely?

We have been taught that on one can see God, because God is not anything one can see. Then what does it mean when it is written "You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens."

(Exodus 20:22)

How can one see what it is impossible to see?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. Shavuot is the least observed of the three pilgrimage holidays. Try to observe it in your home by following some of the customs of the *hag* – Eat dairy foods, especially blintzes which look something like the way we imagine the two tablets of stone on which the Commandments were written. Decorate your home with flowers and greens, in honor of the harvest season in Israel. Go to the synagogue and read the Book of Ruth.
2. Although the Torah tells us we are to go to Jerusalem on each of the pilgrimage holidays, it also says that if we are unable to go right now we are to set aside some money for our next trip there. Begin to plan your next trip to Israel and Jerusalem. You can even take a virtual tour of Jerusalem at: <http://www.snunit.k12.il/md/vjt/> or a virtual tour of Israel at: http://israel.hillel.org/about_israel/tour_index/tour_index.html
3. Send flowers to some friends here and/or in Israel in celebration of the holiday. You're helping Israel's economy at a difficult time, and helping others to know that their Jewish brothers and sisters here are united with Israel. You can do this through <http://www.walk4israel.com/flowers.cfm>



Chag Sameach!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact Rabbi Arnold D. Samlan at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

Around the Shabbat Table is a project of the Nassau / Queens Center of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York. This project has been funded through a generous grant by the Long Island Program Services Committee of UJA-Federation of New York.