



Around the Shabbat Table

**Shavuot 5764
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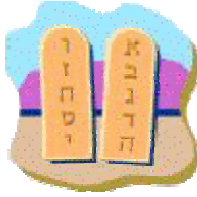
Introduction

Shalom!

This week, beginning on Tuesday night, we celebrate the holiday of Shavuot. The word Shavuot means "weeks," and apparently was given that name because, unlike other Biblical holidays, the date of this holiday was never actually specified in the Torah. Rather, the Torah states that we are to celebrate the day after counting off seven weeks from "the day after the Sabbath," understood by rabbinic tradition as meaning seven weeks from the day after the first day of Pesach.

Our Jewish holidays are often connected to two purposes: one, based on agriculture or nature, the other, relating to a religiously significant historical event. So, for example, Pesach is both the beginning of the harvest season, as well as a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt; Chanukah is a festival of lights at the winter solstice (when the daylight hours are shortest) as well as the celebration of the victory of the Jews over their enemies.

Similarly, Shavuot has both agricultural/nature and religious/historical meanings. Agriculturally (and this is how the holiday is described in the Torah itself), it was *chag ha-katzir*, the holiday of the harvest, in which the conclusion of the grain harvest was celebrated. But in later times (before the time of the Talmudic Era in the first few centuries of the Common Era), Shavuot was given another name: *z'man matan Toratenu*, "the time of the giving of our Torah." Curiously enough, as the religious significance gained precedence, there was still uncertainty about the actual date for celebrating the Torah's giving, with some following our practice of celebrating it on the 6th day of the month of Sivan, while others observed it on the 7th of Sivan.



There are numerous customs associated with the holiday today:

1. Some decorate the synagogue with greenery, either as a reminder of the agricultural roots of the holiday, or because the Torah is viewed as a "tree of life."
2. The biblical book of Ruth is read in many congregations.
3. Many synagogues have their religious school graduation or confirmation ceremonies on Shavuot, as this is an appropriate time to recognize our continuing "receiving of the Torah" through Jewish education.
4. Shavuot has traditionally become of time for rededication to Jewish education. Many communities follow the custom of having Torah study sessions on the evening of Shavuot, with some people staying up the entire night in study.
5. There is a custom which many follow of eating dairy foods on Shavuot. The origins of this practice are unclear. Some tie it to the land of Israel, which is called the "land of *milk* and honey." Others suggest that it related in some way to the situation of the Israelites during the Exodus, as they were accepting and adjusting to the laws of Kashrut, with the demand for separation of dairy and meat.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

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

1. What is the reason that Jewish holidays have both an agricultural as well as religious basis? Do you think it was just the way the holidays evolved, or is there something that our heritage is trying to teach us about the relationship between nature and religion?
2. The idea that holidays contain both an agricultural and religious message might be understood in the rabbinic statement that "*im ain kemach, ain Torah*," "If there is no wheat, there is no Torah." What do you think this statement means? How would you relate it to the dual meanings of the holidays?
3. In the Torah blessings that are recited, we say "Baruch ata Adonai, notain ha-Torah," "Blessed are You, God, who gives the Torah." Why do you think the blessing is in the *present* tense, if the Torah was written thousands of years ago?



Some Texts to Wrestle With

The Book of Ruth, read in many congregations on Shavuot, tells the story of the Moabite woman, Ruth, who had been married to an Israelite man. When he dies, she is left a widow. She attaches herself to her mother-in-law, and moves from Moab to Israel, to become a part of the Israelite nation.

Ruth states to her mother-in-law, Naomi:

Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

- Ruth 1:16-17

This declaration has been understood traditionally as Ruth's "naturalization" to becoming part of the Jewish people. A number of questions can be raised by this story:

1. What does the attitude of the Book of Ruth seem to be on the subject of intermarriage [Ruth is married to an Israelite before she herself becomes a member]?
2. What is the nature of the "naturalization" or "conversion" that Ruth goes through?
3. In the text quoted above, Ruth first mentions that "your people are my people" before she says that "your God is my God." Do you think that there is a reason for this order?

Towards an Action Agenda

1. If the Torah is "given" (present tense), what do we do to "receive" it each day (present tense)? What can your family do to make the receiving of Torah a regular event? Work as a family to develop a list of ways to receive the Torah.

2. Appreciating nature is a part of Shavuot, especially as it is celebrated today in Israel. Ne'ot Kedumim is an Israeli nature reserve that presents the environment as it was viewed in ancient times. Take a look at their Shavuot display at <http://www.neot-kedumim.org.il/Feat/Holidays/shavuot.html>

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

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