

SHAVUOT - THE PATH TO TORAH

The Twisted History of Shavuot

(Derived from an article by Elon Gilad posted on *haaretz.com* on 6/2/22)

The Jewish holiday of Shavuot has been through so many changes and adaptations over the centuries that the holiday Jews celebrate today is almost certainly nothing like the one it's based on. After all these years, it's unclear what the real date of the holiday is, and even what it's named. In fact, according to the Bible, Shavuot may not be a holiday at all.

Shavuot has its origins in the ancient mid-summer harvest celebrations of the Canaanites, the ancient people from which Israelite society sprang during the Bronze Age. These early religions' celebrations, in which revelers rejoiced in the harvesting of wheat, were local affairs probably celebrated in communal threshing grounds, where the wheat was separated from the chaff, and other cultic sites.

All that started to change in the 7th and 8th centuries BCE, when the Jerusalem monarchs and priesthood consolidated power, bringing formerly separate tribes under the helm of one ruler. As part of this program, they co-opted these local affairs and supplanted them by unified rites that could only be performed in the Temple in Jerusalem. This program would create a sense of peoplehood for the people of the land and enrich the coffers of both palace and Temple.

Shavuot is referenced as one of the three pilgrimages or "Sh'loshet Ha-regalim" in Exodus, which was probably written during the exile in Babylonia. But in its earliest stages, during the First Temple period, Shavuot was an appendage to Passover, the first of the two major agricultural holidays. Shavuot marked the end of the festival (Atzeret) of the 50-day period called the Omer, between the harvest of barley – Passover – and the harvest of wheat. Sukkot, the second agricultural holiday, involves the same pattern, in this case with a seven-day period between the start of the holiday and the Atzeret.

Since Shavuot is not a holiday in its own right, it doesn't have a set name either – it is cited as *The Festival of Weeks* (Exodus 34:22, Deuteronomy 16:10), *The Festival of Reaping* (Exodus 23:16) and *The Day of First Fruits* (Numbers 28:26).

Shavuot and Passover indeed share many customs. For example, *matza*, unleavened bread made out of the first crop of barley, plays a major part in Passover, and leavened bread made out of the first crop of wheat, "wave loaves," are a major part of Shavuot. Two of these specially prepared loaves – "they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the first fruits unto the Lord" (Leviticus 23:17) – would be brought to the Jerusalem Temple by each Israelite farmer. And the farmers would present the loaves to the priests while chanting a Hebrew text reaffirming the fealty to God and the common history of the tribes (i.e. the Exodus and conquest of the land), who offered them to God.

But this form of the holiday could not last, and, like so much of the Jewish religion, it had to be adapted to the new realities that faced the Jewish people after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. With no temple to make a pilgrimage to, and no place in which to offer sacrifices to God, Judaism was being reshaped under the guidance of the rabbis.

It was the rabbis of the first decades after the destruction of the Temple who changed the significance of Shavuot and proclaimed that Atzeret, as they called it, was the celebration of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai.

“All agree in respect to Atzeret that it is required because on that day the Torah was given,” Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus is quoted in the Talmud as saying during the early second century CE (Pesachim 68b). Eliezer based this assertion on an ancient tradition that placed the giving of the Torah in the month of Sivan, a tradition that appears in the apocryphal 2nd century BCE *Book of Jubilees*, and that is based on a passage in the Book of Exodus that reads: “In the third month, when the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, the same day came they into the wilderness of Sinai” (19:1).

From the 2nd century on, Shavuot began to focus on the Torah. The Torah portions read on the holiday revolve around the theophany, the physical manifestation of God, atop Mount Sinai, namely the receiving of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19-20).

Aside from these readings, few traditions were assigned to Shavuot during late antiquity (after 70 CE) and the early Middle Ages. This began to change during the Middle Ages, however. This is when traditions such as the act of decorating synagogues with greenery first became associated with Shavuot. This particular custom is said to have its roots in a midrash about the giving of the Torah according to which before the Torah was given on Mount Sinai the entire mountain blossomed.

Other traditions that took shape during the Middle Ages included the tradition of inducting young Jewish boys to Hebrew school on Shavuot, so that they could begin receiving the Torah on the anniversary of the giving of the Torah.

As time went by, explanations of why dairy food was eaten on Shavuot began to arise. One of these explanations was that when the Torah was given to the Jews in the desert, they couldn't prepare a meat meal according to the new commandments right away, so a dairy meal was made instead. Another explanation is based on one reading of the erotic Song of Songs verse: “Your lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under your tongue.” According to this reading of the verse, it is not the lips of a lover but rather the Torah itself that is likened to honey and milk. If that is true, what better way, the explanations goes, to celebrate the receiving of the Torah than by eating cheese blintzes.

An even later tradition to become associated with Shavuot is that of all-night Torah study sessions. The tradition started in the 16th century by Rabbi Joseph Caro. Later, under the influence of the Kabbalah revolution of the Ari, these were dubbed “Tikkun Leil Shavuot,” as they are called to this very day.

A surprising twist on the story of Shavuot came in the 20th century, when Jews, mostly from Eastern Europe, started to settle Israel and establish agricultural communities. Suddenly, Jews were once again tilling the land and reaping wheat in the summer. In the Kibbutz Movement, Shavuot was resurrected as an agricultural holiday and adapted to these Jews' socialist ideology. The agricultural produce was presented - not to God or priest but to the community itself - in jubilant processions featuring singing and dancing. This secular, agricultural take on Shavuot spread across Israel, even to the cities, but as time went by and agriculture played a smaller part in Israeli life, the celebrations became more modest. Today celebrations of this kind are less common and largely used as a photo-op for dressing children in white clothes and putting wreaths of flowers on their heads, much like the old European May Day festivals.

While religious Jews still celebrate Shavuot as the holiday of the receiving of the Torah, among secular Israeli Jews little is left of Shavuot. For most, the only tradition to survive to this day is the coincidental connection with dairy products – for many, if you do anything to celebrate the holiday, you probably eat some cheesecake.

In your blood, live: re-visions of a theology of purity

(Derived from an article by Rachel Adler in *Tikkun* v. 8, Issue 1 1993)

In the mind of God, according to a midrash, is a Torah of black fire written on white fire. In the hands of Jews is a Torah written in gall on the skins of dead animals. And the miracle is that the fire of God's Torah flickers through our scroll. I continue to [study our] texts, hoping for some yet unglimped spark, but that is not enough. I must learn what [they] can mean in my own world and in the most human world I can envision. For if ours is a Torah of and for human beings, it may be perfected only in the way that we perfect ourselves. We do not become more God-like by becoming less human, but by becoming more deeply, more broadly, more comprehensively human.

We must keep asking the Torah to speak to us in human, this crude jargon studded with constraints and distortions, silences and brutalities, that is our only vessel for holiness and truth and peace. We must keep teaching each other, we and our study partner the Torah, all that it means to be human. Human is not whole. Human is full of holes. Human bleeds. Human births its worlds in agonies of blood and bellyaches. Human owns no perfect, timeless texts because human inhabits no perfect, timeless contexts. Human knows that what it needs need not be perfect to be infinitely dear.

Sinai Again (Merle Feld)

I'm coming back
to this mountain now
alone.
It's quiet
the barren brush
the stillness
match my mood.

I haven't seen you
in a long time, God –
where have you
been keeping yourself?

Me, I've had two kids
work has its ups and downs
I'm still married
to the same man.

I don't know if you noticed
but I stopped talking to you.
I called to you
I called and called
but you didn't answer.

You pushed me far away
so far that even I,
who has so little pride
after all, even I
couldn't bring myself
to come crawling back.
I don't know if you noticed.

I only returned now
to walk around
kick the brush
across the sand
to walk around
and think about us.

This could be a holy place
again, if you would just
give me a sign –
a thrush or a hare
or a mountain goat
gracefully coming
toward me.