



The Ziegler School  
of Rabbinic Studies

בית המדרש ע"ש זיגלר

# Walking with the Jewish Calendar

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# SHAVUOT

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## A CLIMAX IN THE STORY

The Jewish calendar is not intended to merely gather and record dates, rather it exists to tell us a story. It tells of the spiritual saga of our ancestors and we, as their descendents, are obliged to remember and re-experience their story. When we are mindful of the calendar and celebrate its holidays, we re-encounter the vision, the values, and the wisdom that comprised the birth of Judaism and the Jewish people.

The story the calendar tells is especially unavoidable as we move from the springtime harvest and Passover celebration of freedom to the early summer festival of Shavuot. Passover and Shavuot each represent two important climactic moments in our spiritual past. Passover represents the freedom from exile. But Passover does not stand on its own; freedom and individual autonomy are not worthy causes in and of themselves. After all, consider what God instructs Moses to say, “Let My people go that they may serve me.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, note Viktor Frankl’s description of the lesson he learned from his experience in a concentration camp:

Being human always points, or is directed to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is.<sup>2</sup>

Freedom needs a cause and Passover needs Shavuot (the time of the giving of our Torah or *z’man matan Torateinu*) in order to become fulfilled. Shavuot represents the purpose of our freedom by taking the autonomous freedom of the Jewish people, celebrated at Passover, and injects into it a sacred relationship, indeed a covenant. Shavuot, therefore, imbues Judaism and the lives of those who embrace it, with the meaning of Torah itself – the meaning of being bound to the divine, the connection and responsibility toward community, and the shared collective hopes and ideals that direct us toward the future.

## FROM THE EARTH TO HEAVEN

In the Torah itself, Shavuot – unlike the other festivals of Passover and Sukkot – lacks a historical narrative. Instead, it is described solely as an agricultural festival. Its well-known association with the giving of the Torah (the Revelation at Mount Sinai), the festival’s most poignant source of significance for us today, is not expressed until the Rabbinic Era, after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.

The Torah refers to Shavuot in three different ways: 1) *Chag Ha-Katzir* or the Feast of the Harvest, found in the Book of Exodus (23:16), referring to Shavuot’s seasonal association in May-June (the Hebrew month of Sivan), when it is the time to reap the harvest of the newly ripened wheat and bring two wheat loaves to the Temple as an offering<sup>3</sup>; 2) *Chag Ha-Bikkurim* or Feast of the First Fruits (Num. 28:26), referring to Shavuot as the point in the year with which to start to bring first fruits from any of the “seven species” to the Temple as an offering of gratitude; and 3) *Chag Ha-Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks (Deut. 16:10), referring to the holiday as the culmination of counting the seven weeks after bringing the Omer (sheaves or bundles of grain), which began on the second day of Passover.

The association of Shavuot as the day when the Torah was given actually stems from a Talmudic debate, which deals with how to fulfill the Torah’s dictum: “the day after the sabbath – you shall count off seven weeks... [Y]ou must count until the day after the seventh week – fifty days” (Lev. 23:15-16). That is, the rabbinic sages were trying to calculate when to begin this counting based upon the enigmatic phrase “the day after the sabbath”. Their question was, “What and when is this ‘sabbath’?” The answer would determine on what date Shavuot, the fiftieth day marking the culmination of the counting, would fall. Ultimately, the Rabbis concluded that the “day after the sabbath” is the second day of Passover, which establishes Shavuot on the 6th of Sivan, fifty days later.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Exodus 7:26.

<sup>2</sup> Viktor E Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Books, 1984), 133. Originally published in 1946.

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 23:17.

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 65-66; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Temidim u’Musafin* 7:11.



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The Rabbis also looked to another verse in the Torah pertinent to the date of Shavuot, which would answer the question as to when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai: “On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.”<sup>5</sup> Since we know that the Israelites left Egypt in the Hebrew month of Nisan, they deduced that this verse indicates that the Israelites arrived at Sinai on Rosh Chodesh (“The Head of the Month”) of Sivan. Moreover, since they also determined that the Torah was given on Shabbat,<sup>6</sup> some assumed that the giving of the Torah must a week after the start of the month on either the 6th or 7th of Sivan. After much more Talmudic and even post-Talmudic Rabbinic quarreling, the 6th of Sivan gained consensus as both Shavuot as the culmination of the counting of the seven full weeks from Passover and the date of the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.

## THE OMER: A BRIDGE OF TIME

Passover and Shavuot are inexorably bound to one another. Separated by only seven weeks, these holidays form the backbone of Jewish identity. Because of their proximity and profound association, the seven weeks that separate Passover and Shavuot also have their own significance.

Originally, these 49 days between Passover and Shavuot were given their significance from a directive in the book of Leviticus (23:15-17), which instructs Jews to count each day of the seven complete weeks from the second night of Passover until Shavuot (literally, “Weeks”). This segment of the calendar is called *Sefirat Ha-Omer* (“The Counting of the Omer”) or, more colloquially, “the Omer” or “the Sefirah. The Hebrew word *omer* refers to the sheaf or bundle of barley grain used to bake an unleavened offering for the second day of Passover. By contrast, at Shavuot, the festival offering consisted of two loaves of bread baked from new wheat. Shavuot, which occurred at the end of the Omer period coincided with the wheat harvest, and as such was the first time each year when wheat, the most desirable of grains, was included in the Temple service.

It would seem reasonable that the period of time that connects the Exodus from Egypt at Passover to the giving of the Torah at Shavuot would be a time of joy and excitement. On the contrary, the Omer is period of solemnity and mourning. This may be a remnant from our agrarian past, when farmers were anxious and uncertain as to whether their springtime fruits would ripen or survive for summer. Rabbinic literature reflects this doubt and yearning as it renders Shavuot as the “day of judgment for the fruit trees.”<sup>7</sup> Of course, however, we understand that the judgment is not upon the trees, but upon us. We bear the burdens and suffer most when trees do not bear their fruit. These weeks of the Omer are therefore dedicated to improving our behavior and raising our spiritual worthiness through prayer and self-reflection, so that we might influence the outcome.<sup>8</sup>

A more traditional explanation for the solemnity during the Omer is from an account in the Talmud that describes 24,000 disciples of Rabbi Akiva dying during this period of time because, as the Talmud puts it, “they did not treat each other with respect.”<sup>9</sup> Although this story is striking, many scholars find it difficult to accept as historical fact. Nevertheless, it is the commonly cited reason for the Omer’s mournful aura.

The Omer is an especially meaningful time for Kabbalists and mystics. They emphasize the counting of the seven weeks from Passover to Shavuot as a time of spiritual preparation and readiness. In other words, the mystical way of understanding of the calendar is not by reference to that which it hearkens back to in the past, but rather remains focused in the present: we must prepare to receive the Torah this very year. Consequently, each day leading up to Shavuot, the day of revelation, provides an opportunity to improve oneself through meditation and proper intention.

Kabbalists align these 49 days with their conception of the dimensions of God, known as the *sefirot* (plural of *sefirah*). There are ten *sefirot*, but only the seven “lower” *sefirot*, sometimes called the “emotional *Sefirot*,” are

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 19:1.

<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 86-88.

<sup>7</sup> B. Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b.

<sup>8</sup> Sefer Abudraham, 271.

<sup>9</sup> B. Talmud, Yevamot 62b; see also Genesis Rabbah 61:3.



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stressed during each of the seven weeks leading up to Shavuot. The *sefirot* are *chesed* (lovingkindness), *gevurah* (strength), *tiferet* (harmony), *netzach* (eternity), *hod* (glory), *yesod* (foundation), and *malchut* (God's presence or kingdom on earth).<sup>10</sup> Of course, however, these *sefirot* are not only the spiritual dimensions that comprise God, but also our own spiritual make-up. Therefore, by concentrating on each of these spiritual dimensions, we work to strengthen our own spirit and prepare ourselves for the responsibility and joy of accepting the gift of Torah on Shavuot.

## SHAVUOT CUSTOMS

Although Shavuot shares the same religious status as the other festivals of Passover and Sukkot, its unique customs and observances pale in comparison. However, there are few noteworthy practices that add depth the celebration.

### *Flowers and Greenery*

One of the most prominent and oldest Shavuot customs is decorating the home and synagogue with flowers and greenery.<sup>11</sup> There are several reasons for this custom. The first harkens back to the biblical and agricultural associations with the holiday, when first fruits (*bikkurim*) were brought to the sanctuary. The *bikkurim* were the realization of weeks of reliance upon God's partnership through agriculture, relating to the Mishnah's assertion that Shavuot is the day on which God judges the trees and their fruits and determines scarcity or abundance.<sup>12</sup>

Another explanation for the floral motif relates the story of Passover to Shavuot through the life of Moses. According to the Rabbis, Moses was born on the 7th of Adar – 3 months before Shavuot – and then hidden in a basket amongst the reeds of the Nile River. Therefore, the plant green décor reminds us of those reeds and the subsequent events that led from the liberation from Egypt to the giving of the Torah on Shavuot.

The Shavuot decorations are also intended to remind us of Mount Sinai itself, the place where the Torah was given.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that Sinai is located in the heart of a desert peninsula, some Rabbinic interpretations hold that when the Torah was given it was a lush, blooming oasis. This interpretation is based on the verse in Exodus (34:3), wherein God commands Moses to prohibit flocks and herds from grazing at the base of the mountain.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, if God had to prohibit grazing, it must have been grassy and fertile, rather than dry and barren.

### *Tikun Leil Shavuot*

The first night of Shavuot is marked by the Shavuot custom of *Tikun Leil Shavuot*, “Set Order of Study for the Night of Shavuot.” In order to meet the Torah's requirement of counting seven complete weeks prior to Shavuot,<sup>15</sup> we wait until the stars are out to begin the evening service (similar to the way we end Shabbat) and ensure that the 49<sup>th</sup> day is undeniably completed.<sup>16</sup>

The observation of the *Tikun* as an all-night study marathon was created by kabbalists who claimed that the custom was of ancient origin, wherein “The early Hasidim did not sleep on this night and occupied themselves with the Torah.”<sup>17</sup> As Kabbalah's popularity spread, so too did the custom of the *Tikun* and some communities began to create texts to study that were especially designated for custom. Eventually, printers were able to gather and compile materials for the *Tikun*, which would traditionally include passages from each of the 54 *parshiyot* (portions) in the Torah, each

<sup>10</sup> The other *sefirot* are *keter* (crown), *hokhmah* (wisdom), and *binah* (understanding). These three *sefirot* are the upper, or supernal, *sefirot*, which are understood to form “God's head.” According to Kabbalah, these three *sefirot* represent spiritual characteristics that are beyond this world and beyond our human ability to fully access. Therefore, these are not a part of the Omer count, as the intention of this period is to ready ourselves within our lower *sefirot* for the giving of the Torah.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that 18th century, Lithuanian rabbi Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman (known as the “Vilna Gaon”) banned this custom, believing it to have originated from pagan and Christian rites (Chaye Adam 131:13). Anthropologist Theodor Gaster also suggests that the floral decorations were based on European Christian customs (which themselves came from pagan customs) of decorating churches during this festival. See Theodor Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (NY: Morrow Quill, 1952), 75-6.

<sup>12</sup> Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 1:2; B. Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 16b.

<sup>13</sup> Mapa, Orach Chayyim 494:3.

<sup>14</sup> Arukh Ha-Shulchan 494:6.

<sup>15</sup> Lev. 23:15.

<sup>16</sup> Mishnah Berurah 494:1.

<sup>17</sup> Zohar, Emor 98a.



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tractate of the Mishnah, the entire Book of Ruth (which is customarily read on Shavuot), and excerpts from the Zohar. Early sources that mention the *Tikun* hold that the custom is meant to inspire a sense of restless anticipation and awe on the night preceding the giving of the Torah. One of the sources shares a legend of the Israelites sleeping so soundly the night before the Torah was given that they had to be awakened for the momentous event.<sup>18</sup> Therefore today, we should do just the opposite, remaining alert and awake all night on Shavuot to show how just how much we appreciate and care for the gift the Torah.

Additionally, the Zohar portrays Shavuot at the wedding day between the Israelites (the bride) and God (the groom).<sup>19</sup> Just as a bride and groom prepare for their ceremony of union, we prepare spiritually for our moment of accepting Torah and divine covenant by spending the night studying Torah – the document of covenant. In fact, some Sephardic communities have further developed this image of Shavuot as a wedding day by conducting public readings of a “Shavuot *ketubah*” (marriage contract).<sup>20</sup>

## **Going Dairy**

The traditional Shavuot meal is meatless and dairy. Reasons vary for this custom, but the most commonly cited one contends that once the Israelites received the Torah at Mount Sinai they realized that the meat they were eating was not slaughtered or prepared according to the Torah dietary laws (*kashrut*). With this new knowledge, our ancestors had no choice at that moment but to eat a dairy meal.<sup>21</sup>

Another reason for the Shavuot dairy faire is found in a medieval collection of Jewish ritual and civil law, *Kol Bo* (literally, “All Is in It”). It interprets verse in The Song of Songs, “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:11)<sup>22</sup> as alluding to the Torah itself. Thus on this day celebrating the giving of the Torah, its words should be as pleasing to our minds and hearts as milk and honey are to our tongues.

A third explanation by the 16th century Ashkenazic authority Moses Isserles links the giving of the Torah on Shavuot with the Exodus from Egypt on Passover.<sup>23</sup> He states that just as we have the shank bone and the egg on the Passover seder plate to contrast different sacrifices (i.e., the paschal sacrifice and the festival sacrifice), Shavuot’s emphasis on dairy highlights its own contrasting sacrifice. Thus, eating dairy reminds us of the contrast with the Passover sacrifices and upholds Shavuot’s unique status in the tradition.

Finally, limiting ourselves to a dairy meal may simply be an expression of self-control and discipline. The Torah and Rabbinic literature identifies several aspects of life that are separated in spiritual categories, such as sin and virtue, pleasure and suffering, kosher and non-kosher, blessing and curse. Acknowledging these categories helps us to rise above the more visceral experiences of life (e.g., eating and sex) and to actively sanctify them. Sometimes this process demands us to demonstrate our spiritual strength and will by exercising self-control and placing limits on our behavior. By limiting ourselves to a dairy meal on Shavuot, we underscore the spiritual value of a life guided by the Torah’s value of moderation rather than by unbridled limitlessness and gluttony.

<sup>18</sup> *Midrash Rabbah, Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:57; *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Zohar, Prologue* 8a, *Emor* 98a.

<sup>20</sup> *The Book of Our Heritage (Sefer Ha-Toda’ah)* 3:780–81. The most commonly used *ketubah* was composed by the mystic and poet Israel ben Moses Najara, who lived in Tzfat, Israel, from about 1550 to 1625. A translation of Najara’s *Shavuot ketubah* can be found in Philip Goodman, *The Shavuot Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 99–101.

<sup>21</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 494: 12. It should be noted that many scholars have criticized this reason for the custom as being “facetious”; see Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 151.

<sup>22</sup> *Kol Bo*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Mapa, Orach Chayyim*, 494:3.



רות פרק א

(ג) וַיָּמָת אֱלִימֶלֶךְ אִישׁ נַעֲמִי וּתְשָׂאֵר הָיָא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ: (ד) וַיִּשָּׂאוּ לָהֶם נָשִׁים מֵאֲבוֹת שָׁם הָאֶחָת עֲרַפָּה וְנָשָׁם הַשְּׁנִית רֹוּת וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם כְּעֶשְׂרֵ שָׁנִים: (ה) וַיָּמָוּתוּ גַם שְׁנֵיהֶם מִחִלּוֹן וְכִלְיוֹן וּתְשָׂאֵר הָאִשָּׁה מְשֻׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ וּמְאִישָׁהּ: (ו) וַתָּקָם הָיָא וְכָל תִּיהָ וַתָּשָׁב מִשְׁדֵי מוֹאָב כִּי שָׁמְעָה בַשָּׂדֶה מוֹאָב כִּי פָקַד ה' אֶת עַמּוֹ לְתַת לָהֶם לָחֶם: (ז) וַתֵּצֵא מִן הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הָיְתָה שָׁמָּה וּשְׁתֵי כָל תִּיהָ עִמָּה וַתֵּלַכְנָה בַדְרֹךְ לָשׁוּב אֶל אַרְצָן יְהוּדָה: (ח) וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי לְשְׁתֵי כָל תִּיהָ לָכְנָה שׁ בְּנָה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אִמָּה יַעֲשֶׂה יַעֲשֶׂה ה' עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד פְּאֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם עִם הַמֵּתִים וְעַמְדִי: (ט) יִתֵּן ה' לָכֶם וּמְצָאֵן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁה וַתִּשָּׂק לָהֶן וַתִּשָּׂאנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה: (י) וַתֹּאמְרָנָה לָהּ כִּי אַתְּךָ נָשׁוּב לְעַמְּךָ: (יא) וַתֹּאמֶר נַעֲמִי שׁ בְּנָה בְנֵי לָמָּה תֵלַכְנָה עִמִּי הַעוֹד לִי בָנִים בְּמַעַי וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְאָנָשִׁים: (יב) שׁ בְּנָה בְנֵי לָכֶן כִּי זָקַנְתִּי מִהָיִוֹת לְאִישׁ כִּי אִמְרַתִּי יֵשׁ לִי תִקְוָה גַם הַיִּיתִי הַלְלִילָה לְאִישׁ וְגַם יְלָדַתִּי בָנִים: (יג) הִלְהֵן תִּשְׁבְּרָנָה עַד אֲשֶׁר יִגְדְּלוּ הִלְהֵן תַּעֲגִנָּה לְבַלְתִּי הָיִוֹת לְאִישׁ אֶל בְּנֵי תִי כִי מַר לִי מְאֹד מִכֶּם כִּי יֵצְאָה בִי יָד ה': (יד) וַתִּשָּׁנָה קוֹלָן וַתִּבְכְּינָה עוֹד וַתִּשָּׂק עֲרַפָּה לְחַמּוֹתָהּ וְרוּת דָּבְקָה בָּהּ: (טו) וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה שָׁבָה יְבַמְתְּךָ אֶל עַמָּה וְאֶל אֶל הִיָּה שׁוֹבֵי אַחֲרַי יְבַמְתְּךָ: (טז) וַתֹּאמֶר רֹוּת אֶל תַּפְּגְעֵי בִי לְעִזְבְּךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרֶיךָ כִּי אֶל אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכִי אֶלְךָ וּבְאֲשֶׁר תִּלְיִנִי אֶלְיִן עִמָּךְ עִמִּי וְאֶל הַיֵּךְ אֶל הִי: (יז) בְּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְנָשָׁם אֶקְבֹּר כִּי הַ יַעֲשֶׂה ה' לִי וְכִי הַ יִסִּיף כִּי הַמָּוֹת יִפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ:

RUTH 1:3-17

Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one name Orpah and the Ruth, and they lived there about ten years. Then those two – Mahlon and Chilion – also died; so the woman was left with her two sons and without her husband... Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house..." And she kissed them farewell...

They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law. But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you."



## SHAVUOT – TEXT 1 (CONT.)

ילקוט שמעוני רות רמז תקצו  
ומה ענין רות אצל עֶצְרַת שְׁנִקְרָאת בְּעֶצְרַת בְּזִמְן מָתָן תּוֹרָה, לְלַמֶּדְךָ שֶׁלֹּא נִתְּנָה תּוֹרָה אֶלָּא  
עַל יְדֵי יְסוּרִין וְעוֹנֵי:

### YALKUT SHIMONI, RUTH 596

What is the relationship between Ruth and *Atzeret* [i.e., Shavuot], such that it is read on *Atzeret*, the time of the giving of the Torah? It is to teach you that the Torah is only acquired by means of suffering and poverty.”

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

- The Book of Ruth is customarily read on Shavuot. According to this poignant passage from the first chapter, why might it be appropriate for this holiday of the giving of the Torah?
- What is the rationale for reading the Book of Ruth according to the rabbinic text (Yalkut Shimoni)? Does this imply something personal or psychological? Does it apply to the passage in Ruth? Do you agree with this reason? Why or why not?
- Ruth is considered the paradigm of a Jew by Choice because she is understood to be the first Jew by choice (she also King David’s great-grandmother). How might this point add further meaning to the reading of Ruth on Shavuot?



## SHAVUOT – TEXT 2

### ZOHAR, LEVITICUS 96A

Rabbi Yehudah [bar Illai] said to him, “Why is it that Passover and Sukkot have seven days [in the Torah], but not Shavuot, which really ought to have more than the others [since the Torah was given on that day].”

He replied, “It is written, *And who is like Your people Israel, a unique* [literally, “one”] *nation on earth...?* (2 Sam. 7:23). Now why is Israel called ‘one’ here as opposed to in any other place? It is because the text here is praising Israel, because it is the pride of Israel to be ‘one.’ Furthermore, the junction of the upper and the lower takes place at the place called ‘Israel,’ which is linked with what is above and what is below, and with the community of Israel. It is there that the whole is called ‘one,’ and in this place faith becomes manifest complete union and supernal holy unity. The Tree of Life [the Torah] is also called ‘one,’ and its day therefore is one. Therefore, we have Passover and Sukkot and [Shavuot] between them [uniting them]. This is the manner in which the Torah is honored, that it should have this *one* day and no more.”

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- **Today, Shavuot is often less regarded than other Jewish festivals. Why, according to this text, should that not be the case?**
- **How does this text explain the significance of the number of days of the holiday?**
- **According to this text, what is the spiritual consequence of Shavuot, i.e., what is the spirit of the holiday for the Jewish people? For each of us as individuals?**





## SHAVUOT – TEXT 3

### תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד א

וַיִּתְּצֻבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הַהָר, אָמַר רַבִּי אֲבָדִימִי בַר חָמָא בַר חָסָא: מְלִמַּד לְשִׁכְפָּה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא  
עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הַהָר פְּגִיגִית, וְאָמַר לָהֶם: אִם אַתֶּם מְקַבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה - מוֹטָב, וְאִם לֹא - לֹא שֵׁם תִּהְיֶה  
קְבוּרַתְכֶם.

### TALMUD BAVLI, MASECHET SHABBAT 88A

... *and they took their places at the foot of the mountain* (Exod. 19:17). Rabbi Abdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said, “This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, turned the mountain on its head like an upturned barrel and held it over them, and said to them, ‘If you accept the Torah, all will be well; if not, this will be your grave.’”

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- There are many rabbinic interpretations as to why and how the Jews became the people who were designated to receive the Torah. How does this interpretation describe the event?
- Is this a positive or negative approach to understanding the receiving of the Torah? Explain.
- Do you believe that this kind of description of “giving” the Torah is indicative of how Torah is “given” or transmitted today in contexts of Jewish education (i.e., do we coerce unwilling children and students to “accept” Torah)? Should it be an approach to Jewish education? If not, what should our approach be to gaining acceptance of Torah?



## SHAVUOT – TEXT 4

רמב"ם, מורה נבוכים חלק ג פרק מג  
ימים טובים נועדו כולם לשמחות ולהתכנסויות מענגות ההכרחיות לאדם לרוב. הם גם מועילים  
להתיידדויות אשר מבקשים שתקיינה בין האנשים בהתאגדויות

### **MAIMONIDES, *GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED* 3:43**

[Shavuot] is the day of the *giving of the Torah*. In order to glorify and exalt that day, the days are counted from the first of the festivals up to it, as is done by one who waits for the coming of the human being he loves best and counts the days and the hours. This is the reason for the *counting of the Omer* from the day when they left Egypt till the day of the *giving of the Torah*, which was the purpose and the end of their leaving.

(Translated by Shlomo Pines in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, vol. 2, p. 571)

שפת אמת, אמר ג'  
ולכן אין אדם זוכה לתורה רק כפי הטהרה שנמצא בו. לכן ניתקנו ימי הספירה להיות מטהרים  
ומוכנים לקבל דברי תורה. כי הגם שכל אחד לומד, אבל להיות לו דביקות בפנימיות התורה  
שנקרא "אמרות ה'" כמו שכתוב "ודבק לבנו בתורתך" דייקא, זה תלוי בטהרה. וזה עצמו  
העדות שאמרותיו טהורין על ידי שכל אחד כפי הטהרה שבו כך זוכה לתורה.

### **SEFAT EMET, *EMOR* 3:173**

It is only in accord with one's personal purity that one can deserve to attain Torah. That is why the days of the Omer counting were given, as a period of purification to make us ready to receive the Torah. While it is true that anyone may study Torah, attachment to the innermost Torah, "utterances of the Lord" (Ps. 12:7), of which we say "Cause our hearts to cling to our Torah," indeed requires purity. This [inward attachment] in itself bears witness to the purity of the person's words for this Torah is attained only through purity.

(Translated by Arthur Green in *The Language of Truth*, pp.194–95).

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- How do these texts understand the association between the Omer and Shavuot? How do they differ and how are they the same? Could we say that Shavuot is really a seven-week-long holiday?
- According to these texts, which is more important: the period of the Omer or Shavuot itself?
- What is the spiritual significance of preparing for an important moment? How does the process relate to the event itself?
- Aside from counting the Omer as an observance, is there something else we can and should do to bring meaning and fulfill the spirit of these texts?



# SHAVUOT – TEXT FOR GROUP STUDY

## מדרש תנחומא (בובר) פרשת דברים סימן ב

בְּשִׁעָה שֶׁהַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְגַלֵּה שְׂכִינְתּוֹ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵינוֹ נֹגֵלָה עֲלֵיהֶם כָּל טוֹבָתוֹ כְּאַחַת, מִפְּנֵי שְׂאֵינָן יְכוּלִין לְעֲמוֹד בְּאוֹתָהּ טוֹבָה, שְׂאֵם יִגְלֶה עֲלֵיהֶם טוֹבָתוֹ בְּפַעַם אַחַת יְמוּתוֹ כּוֹלָם, רָאָה מַה כְּתִיב, וּמַעוֹלָם ל' א' שְׁמַעוּ ל' א' הֶאֱזִינוּ עֵינַי ל' א' רְאֵתָהּ וְגו' (ישעיה סד ג), צֵא וּלְמַד מִיּוֹסֵף, שֶׁבְּשִׁעָה שֶׁנִּתְּנוּדָע לְאַחֵיו לְאַחַר כְּמָה שְׁנִים, אָמַר לָהֶם יוֹסֵף, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחֵיכֶם (בראשית מה ג), וְל' א' יָכְלוּ אֲחֵיו לְעֲנוֹת אוֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנֵיו, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה.

## TANCHUMA BUBER, DEUTERONOMY, SECTION 2

When God revealed His presence to the Israelites, He did not display all His goodness at once, because they could not have borne so much good; for had He revealed His goodness to them at one time they would have died .... When Joseph made himself known to his brothers, they were unable to answer him because they were astounded by him (Gen. 45:3). If God were to reveal Himself all at once, how much more powerful would be the effect. So He shows Himself little by little.

*(Translated by Elliot Dorff in The Unfolding Tradition: Jewish Law After Sinai. New York: Aviv Press, 2005, p. 38)*

## TORAH SHELEMAH 20:420

“All the people saw the voices...” (Ex. 20:15): not “the voice” but “the voices.” R. Yohanan said: when the voice came forth it did so only according to the strength of each individual Israelite, according to what he could bear. So, it says, “The voice of God is in strength” (Ps. 29:4) – according to the strength of each individual. Said R. Yossi bar Hanina: If this surprises you, learn from the manna which fell for the Israelites in the wilderness: its taste was adapted to each individual taste, so that they should be able to bear it; if this was so with the manna, how much more so with the voice of God – that it should not cause injury.

*(Translated by Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg in The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus. New York, Doubleday, 2001 p. 269).*

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- These texts present two different understandings of how God reveals God's self. How do they differ and how are they similar?
- If we accept the first understanding about the process of revelation, what are the implications for us today as a people? Is this a source text for the legitimacy of Conservative Judaism and its willingness to adapt and change Jewish law?
- Does the second text necessarily contradict the first? Explain.
- Considering the fact that we observe Shavuot – the giving of the Torah – each year, how might these texts help to bring meaning and a refreshed outlook upon each year's celebration?





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