

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Israel's Wedding

In Judaism, mysteries have a habit of becoming controversies, none more so than in the case of Shavuot, otherwise known as Pentecost or "the Feast of Weeks". Shavuot generated one of the great arguments in Jewish history. It is not too much to say that on its outcome the future of Jewish people turned.

The mystery of Shavuot is twofold. First is that uniquely among the Jewish festivals it has no date; the Bible gives it no explicit place in the Jewish calendar. Instead, it is to be arrived at by counting seven weeks after the beginning of the Omer, the offering brought from the barley harvest, the first crop to ripen in the spring. "And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the wave offering – the day after the Sabbath – you shall count seven weeks" (Leviticus 23:15).

The second is that alone of the pilgrimage festivals it has no overt historical content. The Jewish festivals have a double character. They belong to cyclical time – the seasons of the year. And they belong to linear time – they recall formative moments in Jewish history. So Pesach is the festival of spring and also the time when we re-enact the Exodus from Egypt. Sukkot is the festival of the autumn harvest and the time when we re-live the journey through the wilderness in temporary dwellings or tabernacles. But as we read the biblical description of Shavuot, half of the festival seems to be missing. Its seasonal significance is clear. It is called the "Feast of the Harvest" and the "Day of First-Fruits." But the historical dimension is absent. So Shavuot raised two questions that were to become the subject of deep controversy: when was it celebrated, and why?

The argument became acute in the days of the second Temple when Jews were divided into several groups, most notably the Sadducees and Pharisees. We know all too little about this period, but we can say this. Of the two groups, the Sadducees were the more affluent and influential. They were closely connected to the Temple hierarchy and to the political elite. They were as near as Jewry came to a governing class.

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated in memory of  
Cynthia (Cindy) Galler Levin z"l  
איידל חיה בת צבי הערש הכהן ע"ה  
on her 15<sup>th</sup> yartzeit  
May her Neshama have an aliya!

The Pharisees drew their support from the poorer groups of the population, and they had a distinctive ethos. Whilst the Sadducees saw Jewish identity in terms of the State and its institutions, the Pharisees saw it in terms of personal piety and scrupulous observance of the Law. In particular, they had a passion for education. They built academies and schools and devoted their days to the study of Torah.

There were several doctrinal differences between the two groups, but one in particular was crucial. The Pharisees gave equal authority to the twin sources of Judaism, the Written Torah (especially the Mosaic books) and the Oral Torah, the unwritten traditions which accompanied the biblical text, interpreting and supplementing it. The Sadducees accepted only the Written Torah, not oral tradition. This was to become the key issue in the debate over the date of Shavuot.

The Torah had specified that the counting of seven weeks should begin on "the day after the sabbath." The Sadducees took this literally. The counting should begin on Sunday, so that Shavuot would always fall on Sunday seven weeks later. The Pharisees invoked tradition and argued instead that in this case "sabbath" meant "festival," specifically the first day of Pesach. The counting should begin on the second day of Pesach, so that the dates of Pesach and Shavuot were linked. The argument between them became acute – inevitably so, since there can be few more divisive situations than one in which two sections of the population are celebrating the same festival on different days.

When we read about religious controversies, we are often surprised and even dismayed that so much passion should be spent on matters that seem so slight. This is usually because we fail to understand the deeper issues at stake, issues rarely spelled out by the protagonists at the time. Between the Sadducees and the Pharisees, I suspect, lay an argument that had little to do with the meaning of the word "sabbath" and everything to do with the nature of Jewish history and character.

The Sadducees read the message on the surface of the Bible. This said that Shavuot was an agricultural festival whose date was determined by the barley harvest. There were even Sadducees who argued that the Almighty must have had farmers in mind when He decided to fix Shavuot on Sunday: at the end of the

harvest it gave weary workers a long weekend! The religion of Israel was the religion of a people in and on its own land. It was about kings and priests, the Temple and sacrifices, farmers and fields, the seasons and their celebrations.

The Pharisees, though, read not only the text but also the subtext. They sensed the link between the two great events with which the history of Israel began: exodus and Sinai, liberation and revelation, the going out from Egypt and the giving and receiving of the Law. That was what the mysterious counting of seven weeks was about. It represented not the duration of the harvest, but the forty-nine days between Moses leading the people out of Egypt and their assembly at the foot of the mountain to receive the Torah. Shavuot was not simply an agricultural festival. It was a historical festival with a precise date and content. It was the anniversary of the revelation at Mount Sinai, the day of the Giving of the Law.

Occasionally there are arguments that are decided by history, and this was one. In the year 70 of the Common Era, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans. Jewish autonomy in the land of Israel came to an end and a millennial exile began. The movement represented by the Pharisees became the dominant force in Jewish life for the next eighteen hundred years. Of the Sadducees almost nothing remained: no literature or philosophy, no lasting trace of their influence. The once ruling class vanished within a generation. It could hardly have been otherwise. The things on which they based their identity – the Temple and its priesthood, the land and its farmers, Jerusalem and its seat of power – were gone. Had Judaism been nothing but these, it too would have disappeared.

Jews would have argued (as Spinoza did, many centuries later) that the end of their sovereignty meant the end of the covenant. God had given Israel a law and a land, a law for the land. The loss of one spelled the demise of the other. You could not celebrate Shavuot, the harvest festival, when you had no fields to harvest. You could not observe your own law when you had no country over which you ruled.

Judaism owes its continued existence to the fact that, two thousand years ago, the Sadducees were not the only force in Jewish life. There were others, the Pharisees, who did more than read the Torah's written text. They listened to it with an inner ear. In it they heard Moses' warning that the people of Israel would suffer exiles. They understood that the Law had been given in the wilderness to signal that it applied everywhere, outside the promised land as well as within. They knew that this was the crucial fact about Israel, that even without a land it still had a Law, and even in exile it still had the covenant. When you can no longer celebrate Shavuot as an agricultural festival, you can still observe it as the anniversary of the giving of the Law.

The controversy over the date and significance

of Shavuot – fought over the meaning of a single word – was nothing less than an argument about the terms of Jewish history, about whether the key event in the Hebrew Bible was the giving of the land or the Law. That there has been Jewish history for the past two thousand years is due in no small measure to those who successfully argued that Shavuot was more than a celebration of the land. There is something left even when the land is lost, and that is what Shavuot recalls: the giving of the Torah, text of the eternal covenant between God and His people.

My earliest memories are of the time when we lived together with my grandparents in Finsbury Park. My maternal grandfather, a stout and gentle man with a rich head of silver hair, owned his own synagogue – I never discovered why. He was not a rabbi, though he was the son of one, and he presided over a little house of prayer a few doors away from where we lived. As his grandson I was given a special privilege during the Sabbath morning services. When the reading from the Torah scroll was over, and the scroll had been raised and rebound in its velvet covering, I would take the silver bells which were its ornamentation and, lifted by my father (I was two at the time), I would place them on its wooden handles. The scroll was then ready to be placed back in the ark.

From that day to this I have been awed by the love Jews have for the Torah. Generally speaking, we are not a reverential people nor is ours a religion of holy objects – with one exception: the Torah scroll itself. In its presence we rise. On the day we complete its reading, we dance with it as if it were a bride. The Torah alone comes near to the sanctity we attach to human beings. If, God forbid, a Torah scroll is dropped, the congregation fasts. If, even worse, a scroll is desecrated or destroyed we mourn as if someone had died and we bury it as if it were a person. My great-grandfather once travelled, in the 1870s, from Lithuania to Jerusalem, a long and hazardous journey in those days, carrying with him a Torah scroll he had commissioned so that he would have one from which to read in the Holy Land. He spent the whole journey carrying it, never letting it out of his sight so that it should not fall. It stayed there, in one of the little synagogues in the Old City, until the Jordanians destroyed it and the synagogue in 1949. I never knew my great-grandfather. He died before I was born. But from photographs (he had stern eyebrows but otherworldly eyes) I can imagine him cradling the scroll in his arms as if it were a child.

Jewish spirituality is quite simply the story of a tempestuous love affair between God and a people: the story of a marriage whose contract is the Torah. Every weekday, Jewish men bind the strap of their phylacteries around their finger as if it were a wedding ring, and recite the moving words of Hosea:

I will betroth you to me forever

I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,

In love and compassion I will betroth you in faithfulness  
And you will know the Lord. (Hosea 2:21–22)

But it has not been an easy marriage. The prophets speak of Israel's infidelities, and were they alive today they would do so again. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah and Job contend with God for His apparent injustices, and had they foreseen the Holocaust what would they have said? There is argument, even long periods of estrangement. Yet, said Isaiah, there is no divorce. And for the prophets and the rabbis the Torah itself was the proof. It was Israel's never-to-be-rescinded marriage contract with God.

So Jews studied it and wrote commentaries to it. Wherever they were, and however harried and distressed, they gathered together to debate and meditate on its words. In the shtetl, the small township of Eastern Europe, when Jews met, one would say to the other: "Zog mir a shtickl Torah – Tell me a little Torah." Its words were their intimations of infinity, its letters the solid shapes of mysteries to be decoded. They would stay up long into the night arguing over its meaning, each hoping to hear a chiddush, a "new" interpretation, "new" in inverted commas because all true interpretations had already been revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai. But especially on Shavuot they would stay awake all night, for as the mystical treatise, the Zohar, said: All the wedding guests must stay with the bride on the night before her wedding, rejoicing with her in her preparations for the great day. Shavuot was the wedding day between God and Israel.

In our prayers every day we say: Blessed be our God...Who gave us the Torah of truth and planted in us everlasting life. (Blessing after the Reading of the Torah)

Those who study Torah become part of an unbroken conversation that has continued throughout the centuries in which all Israel's prophets and sages participated. To become a sentence in that conversation, a letter in the scroll, is what we and our ancestors understood as everlasting life. *Extract on the Festival of Shavuot, from Faith in the Future, published in March 1995 © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

**T**he Scroll of Ruth contains one of the most idyllic stories in the Bible, a tale of "autumnal love" between a widow (Ruth) and a widower (Boaz), within the backdrop of diaspora inter-marriage, conversion to Judaism, and the agricultural life in ancient Israel. The Rabbinic Sages ordained that we read this Scroll on Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, the anniversary of the Torah Revelation at Sinai and the celebration of the first fruits brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. And since Shavuot is the climatic zenith of Passover, the development of a newly-freed group of slaves in the Sinai desert into a Torah-imbued nation firmly ensconced in their own homeland of Israel, the

reasons for this special reading are many: Boaz and Ruth are the great – grandparents of David, the Psalm-singing military hero who united the tribes of Israel and first envisioned the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Ruth the Moabite is Jew-by-choice whose commitment to Torah Judaism makes her worthy of being the great grandmother of the prototype of the eventual Messiah-King, and the last three chapters of the story takes place between the beginning of the barley harvest (just before Passover) and the very end of the wheat harvest (not long after Shavuot). I would wish to ask three questions on the Scroll of Ruth, the answer to which I believe will provide an extra dimension of our understanding as to why we read this particular Scroll on Shavuot, the festival which serves as harbinger to redemption.

Firstly, from a narrative perspective: the first chapter spans the ten years the family of Naomi is in Moab, and the last three chapters describe the happenings of the three month period between the barley and wheat harvests. Why did the author give so much text space to such a small span of times?

Secondly, the midrash (Ruth Rabbah) tells us that Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the precise time of the funeral of Boaz's wife, and that Boaz died immediately after he impregnated Ruth; that is how the Rabbinic Sages account for the fact that Boaz is not mentioned in the last verses of the Scroll (Ruth 4:14-22), which specifically deal with the birth of Oved, son to Boaz and Ruth as well as father to Jesse. Why do the Sages see fit to sandwich these joyous verses recounting such a significant love story between two seemingly tragic deaths – without the text itself mentioning those deaths explicitly or even hinting at a mournful mood? And finally, can we possibly glean from between the lines of the Scroll what precisely occurred between Boaz and Ruth during the night they spent together on the threshing floor. What did her mother-in-law Naomi suggest that she do – and what did she do in actuality?

If Shavuot is truly the Festival of Redemption – and redemption links humanity to the Eternal G-d of all eternity – the period which is eternally Sabbath – then the Scroll of Ruth must deal with the eternal rather than the temporal. Israel is the eternal homeland of the Jewish people – and any diaspora experience can only be temporal at best and destructive at worst. The first chapter opens with a famine in Israel, and an important personage (Elimelech) who leaves Bethlehem (literally the house of bread) with his wife and sons to seek "greener pastures" in the idolatrous Moab. As happened with Father Abraham, Diaspora proved far more dangerous (Genesis 12:10-20), the two sons, Mahlon (lit. sickness) and Kilion (lit. destruction) marry Hittite wives – and since the children follow the religion of the mother, the Israelite line of Elimelech and Naomi – seems to have ended! The father and his sons all die in Moab – their earlier spiritual demise expressing itself physically; fortunately one daughter-in-law clings to her mother-in-

law Naomi, converts to Judaism (“Where you will go” – to Israel – “there shall I go, where you will lodge, there shall I lodge,” – maintaining the same sexual purity as you – “Your people shall be my people, your God my God” – Ruth 1:16), and returns to Bethlehem. Only now – in Israel – can eternal history begin, and so the next three chapters, and the next three months, are far more significant than the previous ten years, which had almost destroyed the family line.

The midrash tells us that Boaz’s wife has died just as Naomi and Ruth return – and that Boaz will die three months later. But death in itself is not tragic for Judaism: after all, every individual must die sooner or later. The only relevant question is to what extent the individual, when alive, participates in Jewish eternity. Naomi sends Ruth to glean the forgotten grain and harvest the produce in the corner of the field – agricultural provision which the Torah provides for the poor Israelites. Divine Providence sent Ruth to Boaz’s field – and Boaz was a Kinsman of Elimelekh. Boaz seems to be attracted to this comely proselyte –stranger and gives her his protection. Naomi understands that participation in Jewish eternity means having a child with Jewish parentage in Israel; she therefore instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, dress in special finery, visit the place on the threshing floor where Boaz will be spending the night at the height of the harvest season, and lie down at his feet. She also warns Ruth not to reveal who she is (Ruth 3:3,4). In effect, she is suggesting that Ruth tempt Boaz as Tamar had tempted Boaz’s forbear Judah generations earlier – and at least enter Jewish history by bearing his child (see Genesis, chapter 38).

Ruth senses that Boaz loves her – and so she holds out for higher stakes than a mere “one night stand.” She tells him exactly who she is, and she asks that he “redeem” her by marriage and by restoring to her Elimelekh’s previously sold homestead in Israel. Ruth understands that true eternity means bearing a child on your own piece of land in Israel – not in the sly, but as a respected wife and householder. Boaz complies, and Oved, the grandfather of King David, is born. Ruth’s commitment to Torah – the land of Torah, the laws of Torah, the loving-kindness of Torah, the modesty of Torah – catapults this convert into the center stage of Jewish eternity.

And this for a very important reason. According to the Midrash of R. Yishmael, the reason the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai – a desert galut – and not on Mt. Moriah in Jerusalem, is because had the Torah been given in Israel the Jews may have thought that the Gentiles have no place in Torah. The truth is the very opposite: Rav Shimon ben Elazar maintains that in the future (Days of the Messiah) the Gentiles will all convert, and Maimonides, at the very conclusion of his Mishneh Torah, rules that at the End of the Days “everyone will return to the true religion”, which for him was certainly

Judaism. The truth is that to a partial extent the issue is in dispute between two Prophets, Isaiah (chapter 2) maintaining that all the nations will rush to our Jerusalem Temple, declaring “Let us learn from the Jewish ways, let us walk in the Jewish paths, for from Zion will go forth Torah and the word of God from Jerusalem” (to the entire world), while the Prophet Micha quotes Isaiah’s words almost verbatim, and then concluding, “each nation will walk in the Name of its (individual) god and we will walk in the name of the Living Lord our God forever” – ethical absolutism (in accordance with the Torah demands of ethical absolutism – compassionate righteousness, moral justice, universal peace) and ritual pluralism!

I am ready to accept either view, and according to everyone at least the Biblical ethic will reign supreme. And the truth is that God initially blessed Abraham with becoming a great nation through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed with peace and security (Gen 12:1-3) – the Gentiles will certainly adopt our ethical outlook!

This is the vision of Shavuot and this is why we read about the righteous proselyte Ruth on Shavuot!  
© 2020 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT”L**

### **Wein Online**

**E**very biblical narrative has at its heart a main character, a hero or heroine. Even though the book and the scroll of Ruth is named for her, the true main character and heroine of the story is Naomi. This is confirmed in the book itself when the prophet Samuel, the author of the book, relates that when Ruth gave birth to Oved, the women of Bethlehem declared; “A male child has been born to Naomi.”

It is obvious that they did not mean this literally, for Naomi was widowed and no longer of child-bearing age. Nevertheless, the wise women of the town recognized that if it were not for Naomi, Ruth would never have met Boaz in a matrimonial relationship. It was Naomi who planned the entire series of events that would lead to the birth of this child and the beginning of the dynastic monarchy of the Jewish people.

The book instructs us not to view things in a superficial manner but rather to analyze and understand the causes and circumstances that eventually lead to the details of the narrative. The whole linchpin of the story is the steadfast commitment of Naomi, and her determination not to be crushed by the tragedies that engulfed her. Because of her, there can be a Ruth, a Boaz and eventually, a King David.

Life is oftentimes very difficult, and its burdens can be crushing. For many of us, we are passing through such a time currently. Everything that was familiar, and in fact taken for granted, has been struck from our daily lives. Our future is certainly murky and mysterious. Because of this, strength of character and an iron will to persevere and overcome is vitally

necessary.

Naomi is the symbol of these strengths that we desire for ourselves and our community. It is her resourcefulness and true understanding of human nature that will stand us in good stead in our hour of difficulty and adjustment that is upon us. The challenge is how to summon up these characteristics and apply them to our own lives.

In this we can also be instructed by Ruth herself. Her selfless devotion to Naomi even though it meant the forsaking of everything she had known, and of her worldly positions, became her strongest asset. Her commitment was complete and boundless. Her determination not to abandon Naomi, and the faith and tradition of Naomi, became the turning point in her life and brought her to unimagined glory and success. Sometimes in life, forsaking everything becomes the key to acquiring greater things. Judaism teaches that we are measured not by what we take and acquire but by what we give, donate, and forsake.

This is a difficult lesson to put into practice since it runs counter to much of our innate nature, but both Naomi and Ruth rise to greatness on the basis of what they were willing to give up for a higher and nobler goal in life. One has to be willing to humble oneself and to sit amongst the gleaners of fallen grain to become, eventually, the matriarch of Jewish eternal monarchy. © 2020 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

## Shavuot

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

**W**hen the Jewish people received the first set of Tablets, they were warned: "Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its border" (*Shemot* 19:12). Similarly, before G-d gave the second set of Tablets, He instructed Moshe: "No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain" (*Shemot* 34:3). This second warning was even more sweeping than the first. This time, the people were warned away from the entire mountain, even its base (where they had stood the first time). Furthermore, even cattle were prohibited from grazing. Finally, the first time the elders ascended part-way with Moshe, while the second time no one else joined him.

The first warning about the mountain continued: "No hand shall touch it" (*Shemot* 19:13). The *Mechilta* offers a homiletic reading: "No hand shall touch it" – this applies to the mountain only, but not to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Thus, according to this view a person is allowed to touch the stones of the *Kotel*, which is the remnant of the retaining wall around the Temple. Even

though it is possible that it is forbidden to enter the area behind the *Kotel* as we are all impure, touching is still allowed. Some, though, are so strict about not entering that they avoid getting too close to the *Kotel*. This is because then they might end up putting their fingers between the stones of the wall, which might count as forbidden entering.

It should be noted that some interpret the *Mechilta* as saying that the admonition "No hand shall touch it" comes to include the Tabernacle and the Temple in the prohibition of touching. However, the straightforward reading of the *Mechilta* is as we explained above, that these are excluded from the prohibition. © 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

### RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

## Migdal Ohr

**"H**ashem descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, and Hashem called to Moshe to the top of the mountain, and Moshe ascended." (*Shmos* 19:20) Prior to the giving of the Torah, Hashem gave Moshe instructions on how to prepare the Jewish People for this momentous event. The Jews were to purify themselves and clean their clothing. They were to remain at a distance from the mountain and not touch it.

Here, the Torah tells us that Hashem summoned Moshe to the top of the mountain of Sinai, because He had a very important mission for him. Moshe was to go back down to the people and warn them of the severe nature of the boundaries around the mountain. Anyone who ascended inappropriately would die. Only Moshe and Aharon were to ascend, with the elders and then the population in specified areas.

Moshe countered that they already knew they couldn't ascend the mountain, and since at the time of giving the Torah, he and Aharon would be on the ground with the people, they would warn everyone to stay back and not endanger their lives. Hashem responded by saying that Moshe and Aharon would be ascending the mountain and not with the people, so they had to be warned now. Moshe immediately went down and did so.

It is curious, though, that Hashem called Moshe up to the mountaintop, just to send him back down immediately. He had spoken to Moshe before, either on the mountain or in the camp, so why did this warning have to come through Moshe's ascension of the mountain, requiring him to go back down? Hashem could have told him to warn everyone BEFORE he climbed the mountain.

Perhaps the answer is something necessary for us to understand about the Yetzer Hara, the evil inclination. Had Moshe been in the camp when he got this message, and issued a warning to the Jews then, they would not have seen it as a difficult task. "Of course, we won't try to climb the mountain; we weren't

summoned there." They were fine waiting at the bottom and not in danger.

However, once Moshe would be called to the mountaintop, and Hashem would speak directly to the Jewish People, they would feel inextricably drawn to the holiness and seek to come closer to it. They would not expect this powerful temptation, and wouldn't recognize it as a negative concept. This would be them cleaving to Hashem!

Therefore, Hashem called Moshe to the mountaintop. The people recognized that Hashem's Shechina, His Divine Presence, was hovering over the mountain. They were drawn to it, waiting for the moment when He would speak to them – and they could ascend!

At that point, Hashem said to Moshe, "Go down to speak to the people." They should be warned that this was their Yetzer Hara speaking, urging them to do what they had been forbidden to do, thinking it was a great and holy thing. Having experienced the draw for themselves, they would understand Moshe's words in a new light. Then they could heed them and not forfeit their lives.

*A woman once came to Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik wanting to enhance her Tefila experience. She asked him if she could wear a Talis. Sensing her sincerity, the Rav told her that wearing a Talis wasn't something she should jump into. He suggested starting with just the beged, the garment alone, without tzitzis. Then she should come back to him.*

*She returned a few weeks later, gushing about the spiritual high she felt and how she was ready for the next step. Rav Soloveitchik told her, "What you did was no mitzvah, and if you were a man, it would have been a grave sin. The high you felt was unrelated to achieving any true closeness to Hashem, but rather was in your own mind. A Talis is not what you need to enhance your prayer." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr*

### YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

## Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Summarized by Shaul Barth

Translated by Kaeren Fish

**O**n Shavuot, we celebrate kabbalat ha-Torah; but the word "kabbala" can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, we "received" the Torah as a gift. Indeed, the Torah is "more precious than fine gold and pearls;" on Shavuot, we must thank God for the gift that He has bestowed on us and for granting us the privilege of this great treasure.

On the other hand, we "accepted" the Torah. "Acceptance" can be understood as the internalization of a value or idea. The expression "kabbala le-atid"-accepting a resolution upon oneself for the future-implies the internalization of one's repentance and an attempt to live accordingly in the future. According to this

interpretation, we must explain what exactly it was that Am Yisrael accepted at that exalted occasion at Sinai. What was given to the nation as a legacy for the future, continuing many generations after God's revelation?

This question assumes special significance in light of the fact that Ramban, in his glosses on Rambam's Sefer Ha-Mitzvot (prohibitions, addition #2), counts the remembering of the revelation at Sinai as a commandment: "Take heed to yourself, and guard your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life, but teach them to your children and your children's children: the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev..." (Devarim 4:9-10). According to this understanding, we must understand what it is that we are meant to remember. Which values are we meant to internalize as part of our remembrance of the acceptance of Torah?

There are a number of points to which Am Yisrael committed themselves and which they accepted upon themselves at Sinai.

As we know, there are commandments that are not set down explicitly in the Torah; the Sages throughout the generations have interpreted the Torah and revealed these commandments. Seemingly, a person could claim that the system of Halakha as we know it is not what he committed himself to at Sinai. There, we accepted the obligation of a certain number of commandments, but we never committed ourselves to the obligations imposed later by the Sages, such as, for example, the reading of the megilla on Purim!

We therefore must understand that at Sinai, the nation did not accept each individual commandment, but rather the entire body of commandments as their subjugation to God. The very first commitment of Am Yisrael at Sinai was towards the fulfillment of that general system of Halakha, not each law individually. This idea is proposed by R. Yosef Baer Soloveitchik (the Beit Ha-Levi) to resolve the difficulties that he discerns in the obligation of Am Yisrael to all of the commandments.

The gemara (Shabbat 88b), in discussing the revelation at Sinai, tells us: "They stood at the foot of the mountain"-R. Avdimi bar Hama said: This teaches that God held the mountain over them like a cask, and said to them: "If you accept the Torah [ -- then well and good]; and if not-there you will be buried"-Rava said: [Although it would seem that the Torah was accepted because of coercion], nevertheless it was re-accepted [willingly] in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written: "The Jews fulfilled and accepted"-they fulfilled that which they had already accepted [at Sinai].

The generally accepted meaning of this gemara is that at the time of Mordekhai and Esther, the Jews willingly accepted upon themselves the Torah that they had accepted through coercion at the time of the revelation at Sinai. However, we may perhaps propose another interpretation which, to my view, reflects the

simple, literal meaning of the gemara. At the time of Mordekhai and Esther, "the Jews fulfilled that which they had already accepted." Until the time of Esther, Am Yisrael fulfilled the commandments as part of the overall subjugation to God to which they had committed themselves at the time of accepting the Torah; from that time onward, they also committed themselves to each and every individual law, so as to fulfill that which they had already accepted in the general sense.

Furthermore, at Sinai, the nation accepted upon itself not only the laws, but also God as Creator and Master of the world; the nation accepted the Kingship of God, and since that time this faith has been "the pillar of all wisdom and the foundation of all foundations." The faith that the nation took upon itself was not limited to the acceptance of God's existence, but also other beliefs that are integral to Judaism. At Sinai, Am Yisrael accepted fundamental beliefs that remain binding to this day, as part of the concepts and principles that are the "red lines," the definitive framework of faith, in which every Jew believes.

The last element that we may list as a commitment by every Jew at Sinai is the belonging to the nation of Israel and the concept of the nation of Israel as a single body, with everyone connected to everyone else. At Sinai, the status of Am Yisrael was established as a special nation in which every individual is meant to feel a part of, and connected to, his fellow; thus, a collection of individuals is forged into a nation. From that time on, every individual Jew is obligated to accept upon himself his belonging to the nation of Israel and to recognize that all of us belong to the same entity, with each responsible for the other.

All of these elements are contained in the command "Take heed-lest you forget-the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev" (*This sicha was delivered on Shavuot 5763 [2003].*)

#### **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**T**his week we experience a unique quirk of the Jewish calendar that throws Jewish communities into misalignment.

The holiday of Shavuot begins this week on Thursday, May 21st at sundown. In Israel, Shavuot is a one-day holiday, meaning it ends at sundown on Friday and then a regular Shabbat begins. However, outside of Israel the major Biblical holidays are observed for two days (as discussed in prior columns). Thus, the rest of the Jewish world will be celebrating it also as the second day of Shavuot, as opposed to a "regular" Shabbat.

This results in a divergence in the congregational readings of the weekly Torah portions. In Israel, because Shabbat is not Shavuot, the portion Naso is read, while the rest of the world's Jewish communities read a special Torah portion for the holiday. This results in congregations in Israel moving ahead by

one weekly Torah portion while in the diaspora congregations fall one week behind Israel.

Those traveling to or from Israel during this period suddenly find themselves either "ahead" or "behind" the local Torah reading cycle. It is also a little disorienting for those who are not traveling. For example, if I want to discuss the weekly Torah portion with my son who is studying in Israel it can be confusing as our Torah portions are not aligned.

On the other hand, people who regularly feel that they are a week behind the rest of civilization might feel right at home during this divergence.

This year the misalignment lasts about a month; on the Shabbat of June 27th Israeli communities read the Torah portion Balak. Meanwhile, the rest of the Jewish world will read two portions that week: Chukat and Balak. After that, everyone is back in alignment. Believe it or not, this alignment discussion is particularly relevant to the theme of Shavuot.

Of the three "major" festivals, Shavuot is perhaps the least appreciated. The Torah refers to it as a "harvest festival," which commemorates the end of the grain harvest that began with barley during Passover and ends with the wheat harvest at the time of Shavuot.

In Jewish tradition Shavuot also has several, interchangeable, nomenclatures; each representing a different aspect of the holiday. The literal translation of Shavuot is "weeks," and this name first appears in the verse: "You shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of wheat harvest [...]" (Exodus 34:22).

The reason it is called "weeks" is because we are commanded to count seven days of seven weeks from the second day of Passover and the fiftieth day is celebrated as a holiday (Leviticus 23:15). This also explains why the English name for Shavuot is "Pentecost," which in Greek means fiftieth.

(As an aside: this is also the source for the Christian day of Pentecost. Early Christianity was preoccupied with establishing a religion that was familiar to the people they were trying to convert – the local Jewish population. Thus, they copied many of the traditions that were already familiar to Judaism; Passover therefore became Easter and in Spanish the similarity in name is unmistakable – Easter is "Pascua," a clear derivative of "Pesach." So too, just as in the Jewish tradition, the Christian day called Pentecost is the fiftieth day from Easter.)

Because it is a harvest festival it is also known by its Hebrew equivalent "Chag Hakatzir" (Exodus 22:16). In the times of the Holy Temple, the Jewish nation was charged with gathering the "bikkurim – first fruits" of the Seven Species for which the land of Israel is specifically blessed: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil, and date honey. These first fruits were brought to the Temple and offered to the priests there. Thus, the holiday is also called "Yom HaBikkurim – Day of First Fruits."

But the most significant aspect of the holiday of Shavuot is that it is the day that the Almighty gave the Torah to the Jewish nation. On this day Moses ascended Mount Sinai and received The Ten Commandments (according to the dates in Exodus 19:1-20 and clearly articulated in the Talmud).

Thus, another name – the one we use most prominently in the liturgy – is “Zman Matan Toraseinu – The Time of the Giving of Our Torah.” Clearly, it is impossible to overstate the significance of this holiday.

According to Jewish tradition, The Ten Commandments listed in the book of Exodus are purposefully made up of 620 letters (yes, I counted them). There are 613 letters until the last two words of The Ten Commandments: “asher l'reiecha – those of your friend.” According to our sages, this corresponds to the 613 mitzvot or “commandments” in the Torah, which the Jewish nation accepted upon themselves at Mount Sinai. Various reasons have been suggested as to the significance of the remaining seven letters that make up The Ten Commandments.

Rabbi Yaakov Ben Asher (1269-1343) said that these seven letters represent the seven Noachide Laws: (1) the prohibition against idol worship; (2) the prohibition against murder; (3) the prohibition against adultery; (4) the prohibition against blasphemy; (5) the prohibition against theft; (6) the prohibition against certain forms of animal cruelty; (7) the obligation to establish courts of justice (Bal Haturim Exodus 20:14).

Fascinatingly, the last two words of The Ten Commandments that comprise the seven letters (“asher l'reyecha – those of your friend”) now take on a deeper meaning.

Included within the scope of Torah is a universal obligation of morality for the entire world. Even though the Torah was only accepted as a sacred responsibility by the Jewish people, we are not the only ones bound to live by God's laws. In fact, the laws of the nations of the world are referred to here as “those of your friend.”

This unifying aspect of Torah is actually the basis on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people. When the Jewish people arrived at Mount Sinai we find a remarkable attitude among the newly formed nation; “and there Israel camped before the mountain” (Shemos 19:2). Rashi (ad loc) explains that the people had adopted a rather unique mindset to one another – “It was like a single man with a single purpose.”

In general, there are two methods in which groups of people can unify. The first is when a disparate set of personalities unite because they have a singular purpose; this is how Rashi describes Pharaoh rallying his Egyptian nation to chase down the Jewish people who were escaping Egypt – “a single purpose, a single man” (Shemos 14:10).

The second way is when people come together and unite as individuals and merge their identities into “a one,” and then afterwards

find a common purpose to fulfill the desires of the merged identity. This second method is what happened at Mount Sinai. Rashi explains that the encampment at Mount Sinai was without any fighting or bickering; there was no feeling of imposing on another's space.

Often when we come into close physical proximity with strangers, we feel uncomfortable. For example, it is very awkward to come into physical contact with the passenger beside you on a plane or bus. However, if the passenger beside you is a relative, then it is common to lean on one another given the lack of space. When there is a unique connection there is no feeling of imposition.

So too, at Mount Sinai the Jewish people merged their identities into a unified oneness that allowed them to live together in absolute harmony as one big happy family. This was the backdrop for the events leading to God gifting the Torah to the Jewish people, and their unity was a key element of the story.

One of the more painful experiences for parents is watching their adult children not get along and fight. This truth may be applied to the Almighty as well. After all, the Master of the Universe is also known as our Father. The Talmud asks (Yoma 9b); “Why was the Second Temple destroyed, seeing that in its time they occupied themselves with Torah, mitzvot, and acts of kindness? Because baseless hatred prevailed.”

According to the Talmud, the Second Temple was destroyed for baseless hatred between Jews. Two millennia later we are in the very same exile stretching back to that terrible tragedy. But what exactly is baseless hatred? After all, there must be some reason for hatred!

Baseless hatred is loathing someone simply because they are different from you. You begin to rationalize that they are evil and thus worthy of your scorn. An egocentric person begins to believe that everything revolves around him and that he alone knows the just path. He begins to disparage, discredit, and delegitimize anything that is different from him.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who was the Chief Ashkenazi rabbi of Jerusalem in the 1920's, writes about this very issue. Rabbi Kook himself was a target of much derision and animosity – he suffered greatly for being one of the first religious Zionists and for trying to see the good in all types of Jews. He writes; “The Temple was destroyed because of baseless hatred, and it will only be rebuilt through baseless love!” Quite tellingly, the numerical value of the Hebrew word for love (ahava) is the same as the numerical value as the Hebrew word for one (echad).

That is the message of Shavuot. We received the Torah as a unified entity, and we must once again unify to fulfill God's plan for the world. We must never forget that we are all in the service of the Almighty and we must therefore strive to fulfill God's mission for the world together. © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & [shabbatshalom.org](http://shabbatshalom.org)

