

# Preparation הכנה

May 2010

Iyar - Sivan 5770

## **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion**

**Kehillat Chovevei Tzion**  
Route 25A at Nicolls Road  
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Visit us on-line at  
[www.kct.org](http://www.kct.org)

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**A Kehillah For Those  
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**Celebrating the Start  
of our Seventeenth Year!**



Preparing  
to  
Celebrate  
Shavuot  
at  
Kehillat  
Chovevei  
Tzion



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**5770**

SCHEDULE  
OF  
SHAVUOT  
AND  
SHABBAT  
SERVICES

TIKKUN  
L'AYL  
SHAVUOT

KEHILLAT  
CHOVEVEI  
TZION

**5 SIVAN**

**EREV SHAVUOT**

.....  
**TUESDAY MAY 18, 2010**

Candle Lighting	7:46 PM
Mincha	7:00 PM
Study Session Aleph	7:15 PM
Ma'ariv	8:15 PM
A Light Dinner	8:30 PM
Study Session Bet	9:30 - 11:00 PM

**6 SIVAN**

**FIRST DAY SHAVUOT**

.....  
**WEDNESDAY MAY 19, 2010**

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Musaf	
Study Session Gimel	

.....  
***The KCT Tradition Renews:***

The Annual Shavuot Dairy Luncheon and  
Cheese Cake Kiddush

Mincha / Ma'ariv	7:30 PM
Candle Lighting	8:52 PM

**7 SIVAN**

**SECOND DAY SHAVUOT**

.....  
**THURSDAY MAY 20, 2010**

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Yizkor and Musaf	
Study Session Daled	

.....  
***The KCT Tradition Deepens:***

The Ice Cream Kiddush

*Yom Tov ends 8:50 PM*

KEHILLAT CHOVEVEI TZION STUDIES WITH DAVID SAIGER

5770

תִּיקּוּן לַאֵיל שְׁבוּעוֹת

**Sessions Aleph and Bet:** .....

Tuesday evening, May 18 . . . Session Aleph: 7:00 PM and Session Bet: 9:30 PM

**Halacha and Common Sense: Worst of Enemies or Best of Friends?**

The corpus of Jewish law includes that which is patently common sensical - "Thou shalt not murder"-and that which is nearly inexplicable - "Thou shalt not wear Shatnez, wool and linen together." Rabbis and philosophers have debated the rationality of the Commandments, and indeed an entire philosophical movement - Ta'amei Hamitzvot, or the Reasons for the Commandments - has developed explaining how (or the extent to which) Jewish law conforms to common sense. Indeed there have even been figures whose infamy/fame resulted from their insistence on the need for the mitzvot to conform to contemporary social or religious thought.

**Session Gimel:** .....

Wednesday morning, May 19, 9:00 AM

**Israel and the Diaspora in Talmudic Stories**

The Talmud records a number of stories describing the visits rabbis take between the two major Jewish communities in the first centuries of the Common Era, the Land of Israel and Babylonia. One of the most famous Talmudic "Aliyya" stories is that of Rav Kahana, who gets into a world of trouble when he arrives in Israel and fails to adapt to their way of life. There are different tellings of the Rav Kahana adventure, each displaying its own attitude toward Israel and the Diaspora.

**Session Daled:** .....

Thursday morning, May 20, 9:00 AM

**Out of the Ghetto**

The Enlightenment of the 18th century brought Jews into contact with science and philosophy at a time when they first had the opportunity to actually leave their communities altogether. One figure of the period - Solomon Maimon - left behind an autobiography describing the Polish Jewish community he tried to leave and his attempt to find a civilized, enlightened community in Berlin. In contemporary America, Jewish communities try to balance the individualism and intellectual freedom of secular society with the responsibility and commitment of Jewish living. Are we finding the right balance? What can we learn from Solomon Maimon and the Enlightenment?

Celebrating, studying and growing together as a community of the committed, the extended member families of **Kehillat Chovevei Zion** will again come together this year, for its compelling seventeenth year, in its Setauket Beit Midrash for the Shavuot holiday period. The KCT Ritual Committee is delighted to provide you with this compendium for self-study, for family and individual use, in preparation for the upcoming holiday.

**Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days.  
And you shall bring a New Grain Offering to Hashem. Vayikra 23:16**

**Chag Sameach !**

### .... The Holiday's Biblical Roots

The laws, dates and celebration of the pilgrimage festival of Shavuot are derived primarily from a brief series of biblical statements by HaShem, which evolved by interpretation and exegesis into the *hilchot* that govern the holiday:



"You shall count for yourselves - from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving - seven weeks, they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count, fifty days; And you shall bring a new-meal offering to Hashem" ..... (Vayikra 23:15-16)

"And you shall declare on that very day, that it is a Holy Day unto you. You shall do no manner of work; It is an Eternal Statute, in all your habitations, for all your generations" ..... (Vayikra 23:21)

"You shall count for yourselves seven weeks, from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you will observe the Festival of Shavu'ot for the LORD, your God" ..... (Devarim 16:9-10)

**Shavuot  
5770  
at  
Kehillat Chovevei Zion**

### .... Counting the Omer

## סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

According to the Torah, we are obligated to count the days from Passover to Shavu'ot. This period is known as the Counting of the Omer, an omer being a unit of measure. On the second day of Passover, in the days of the Temple, an omer of barley was cut down and brought to the Temple as an offering. This daily grain offering was referred to as the Omer. ~K~

### .... Tzedakah and Yizkor

Shavuot offers an opportunity for both *tzedakah* remembrance . . . the *Yizkor* donation associated with recalling and sanctifying the memories of departed family members adds to the personally compelling nature of the *Yizkor* service.

The essence of *Yizkor* is an act of *tzedakah*, a contribution made on behalf of loved ones, of which the *Kodosh Baruch* takes note, to earn merit for the deceased in His eyes. Our Kehillah has made a significant, ever-growing commitment to *tzedakah* over the years. We encourage you, as you plan your individual *tzedakot*, for whatever contributions are within your means and family custom, to consider **Kehillat Chovevei Zion** as a worthy beneficiary of your generosity and support at this time and throughout the year. ~K~

### .... The KCT Memorial Wall

In the KCT Beit Midrash, the Memorial Wall represents the *Kehillah's* commemoration of our loved ones. Each plaque contains the name of the person recalled, in Hebrew and English, and the date of death in both the secular and Hebrew

calendars. *Yahrzeit* lamps at each plaque are lit during the week of the appropriate date and for *Yizkor*. New additions to the Memorial Panel are specially dedicated at the next *Yizkor* service following placement, and each is individually remembered at every *Yizkor* service that follows. Please let us know if you'd like to order a plaque or if you have any questions about the Memorial Wall.  
~K~

### .... The Kehillah Remembers

The *Yizkor* service is recited on the morning of the the second day of Shavuot, Thursday May 20<sup>th</sup>. The Kehillah remembers with great fondness and respect all the loved ones whom we have individually lost over the years and those whose names have been inscribed in the Kehillah's Book of Remembrance, which will be available at services. *Yizkor* is at once both a collective experience and an individual one, and is the timeless prayer of personal memory of the Jewish people. *Yizkor* is recited on Yom Kippur, on Shmini Atzeret, and then again on the last day of each of Pesach and Shavuot.  
~K~

### .... Shavuot Scholar: David Saiger

**Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 5770:**  
**Scholar-in-Residence David Saiger**

**Halacha and Common Sense**  
**Israel and the Diaspora**  
**Freedom and Responsibility**

The next installment in the continuing exploration of topics of Jewish ethics, values and perspectives brings us to a broad-based conversation guided by Jewish texts and scholarly thinkers, in areas including the environment, interpersonal relations, and economic interactions.

David Saiger is entering his fifth year of Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), where he is also working on a Masters in Jewish Literature. At the Seminary, David participates in a special program in Talmud and Codes, and is part of the inaugural cohort of Tikvah Fellows in Jewish Thought. David hails from Los Angeles, studied philosophy at Emory University in Atlanta, and spent a year at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem before arriving in NYC. He currently serves as a Rabbinic Intern at the NYU Hillel, and in the fall he will be a

Legacy Heritage Rabbinic Fellow, serving a small congregation in Reno, NV. He enjoys reading, running, playing tennis, hiking, Camp Ramah in CA, and other fun things.  
~K~

**Please ask us about how you  
can assure the future of KCT**

### .... Preparation Through Study

*Drawn from various sources, ancient, historic and modern, the following section of personal study materials is presented by the editors with a view toward stimulating thought, study, discussion, agreement and disagreement, and evaluation approaching and leading into the days of Shavuot.*

### .... Providing Shavuot its Distinctiveness

*Written by Rabbi Beryl Wein, who is a maggid shiur at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, and an historian, lecturer and author. In this overview of the holiday's customs and practices, Rabbi Wein emphasizes the human origin and construct of the many customs and expectations associated with the joy of Shavuot.*

Shavuot is singular in the calendar of Jewish holidays. It, unlike all of the other Jewish holidays, has no special mitzvot attached to it, nor does it possess a unique holiday presence. Though the holiday of Shavuot has great historical significance, being the anniversary of the revelation at Sinai and of the gift of Torah to Israel, it nevertheless was left bereft of special biblical ritual to celebrate the event. In fact, in the Bible we find the holiday of Shavuot referred to as the "Holiday of Bikkurim" -- the bringing of the first fruits of the year's crop to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple and the entry into our long exile, the Jewish people refused to leave the holiday of Shavuot unadorned of distinctiveness. The holiday of Shavuot was therefore invested with customs and rituals that have preserved the beauty and uniqueness of the holiday to our day.

One of those customs is the eating of dairy food at the holiday meal. This is an exception to the talmudic rule that "holiday joy requires meat and wine." Shavuot cheesecake and cheese blintzes have become beloved and fattening staples in Jewish homes for centuries.

The origins of this custom are grounded in the commemoration of the receiving of the Torah on this day. The Torah itself is compared to milk -- "Honey and milk under your tongue" -- and thus dairy products are symbolic of that great day of Sinai. The Jewish people after receiving the Torah could not eat meat products immediately, since the meat that they had was not prepared in accordance with the newly-given laws of the ritual of animal slaughter and the dietary laws. Hence they ate only dairy products on the day of revelation, the holiday of Shavuot.

A further source of the custom of dairy foods on Shavuot lay in the description in the Torah, given to Israel on Shavuot, of the Land of Israel as being "a land that flows with milk and honey." Thus, the dairy foods came not only to remind the Jewish people of the Torah given at Sinai, but also of their beloved homeland, the Land of Israel.

Another Shavuot custom arose, that of decorating one's home, the synagogue and even the Torah scroll itself with greens and flowers in honor of the holiday. This custom of flowers and greens was based upon a statement in Midrash that the foot of Mount Sinai (where the Jews stood in awe, awaiting the granting of the Torah) was carpeted with greens and sweet smelling flowers.

Even in Eastern Europe, where Jews in the main lived in squalor and poverty, flowers in the synagogue on Shavuot was a widely practiced societal custom. However, the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, opposed the custom vigorously. His contention was that a custom, even if its origin was Jewish and based on Jewish tradition, had been adopted by the non-Jewish world as a custom in their houses of worship, then Jews should forego their further observance of that custom. Since flowers and greens were widely used in church services and in non-Jewish cemeteries, the custom of flowers and greens in the synagogue on Shavuot should be abandoned.

The Gaon's opinion was widely followed in Lithuanian Jewry but was ignored almost everywhere else in the Jewish world. Thus, the decorating with flowers on Shavuot remains a strong custom among Jews until today.

In fact, the supplying of the flowers and green decorations for the synagogue was deemed an honor that people vied for. One therefore paid not

only for the flowers and greens themselves, but also paid the synagogue for the honor of paying for those flowers and greens. Honor is an addictive elixir!

So enjoy the flowers and the cheesecake and revel in the fact that the Lord has given us the Torah, and through it, the task of creating a better world for us and all mankind. ~K~

### . . . . "Love Letters from Sinai"

*Rabbi Dr. Elliot Cosgrove, the rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, delivered this sermon last year, which is shared here in its entirety.*

Of late, I have found myself returning again and again, to a song translated from Spanish to Hebrew by Yehonatan Geffen and sung, famously, by David Broza. It is called Sigalot or Violets, and it is one of the saddest songs I have ever heard.

It tells the story of a husband and wife, married for many years, a marriage with its ups and downs, basically functional - a cold peace. One day, a love letter is slipped under the woman's door, with the author unknown. "*Mi zeh kotev lach*" -- "who is it that writes to you?" She treasures these romantic letters as they come, they lighten her spirit, thoughts of them keep her up at night as she lays beside her estranged husband. She hides the letters, anxiety ridden that her husband will find them. Every so often she takes the letters out to read, daydreaming about the man who wrote them. Her suffering continues, caught horribly between two worlds, the day-to-day of her flawed existence and imperfect marriage, and the imaginings of her mysterious letter writer.

And then, in the last stanza, the real tragedy is revealed. Who is her letter writer, but own husband - the very man who comes home to her every day. "*Zeh hu shekotev eleyha*" -- "it's him that writes to her". "*Hu ha'ahuv hu chalmoteiha*" - "he is the lover, e is the subject of her dreams".

It is a sad tale, a song whose tragedy extends in every direction. A couple wedged into a rocky marriage, bad enough to be unhappy, but not bad enough to snap. A wife so distant from her uncommunicative husband. A husband, unable to communicate to his wife, except by way of his gruff demeanor and anonymous love letters.

As we celebrate Shavuot, I want to talk to you about love letters, not so much love letters between husbands and wives, though we will touch on those too, but I want to discuss "Love Letters from Sinai." The love letter we have from God to the Children of Israel. Our love letter as a Jewish people was delivered on Shavuot, the Torah itself, God's affections for Israel in written form. God's voice expressed in a pitch and language accessible to humanity - a human document expressing the Divine Will. The Torah is our love letter from Sinai. In the rabbinic imagination, God and Israel are lovers, God the groom, Israel the bride. From Jeremiah, to Hosea, to the poetry of the Song of Songs, God and Israel are Lovers. And here on Shavuot, we are asked to imagine a husband and wife under the *chuppah*, the marriage canopy of Mount Sinai. The Torah, is the marriage document, the *Ketubah*, drafted that day and entrusted into the possession of the bride.

And yet it is in spite of, or more precisely, because our primary image as a people is God and Israel as husband and wife with a love letter shared between them, that I continue to be drawn to the Broza's song. If I were to characterize the condition of our age, of the American Jewish community, it is that we are dangerously close to mirroring the dysfunction of the couple in the mournful ballad. We exist in a rocky relationship with God, good, but flawed enough to fill us with doubt and restlessness. We exist in the presence of a distant God who can't quite communicate a relationship. We do have a love letter in our possession and we daydream about that relationship, but questions of attribution and ownership have gone awry and horribly skewed. We do not realize that the love letter in our possession is from the very God to whom we stand so distant. Our God is inexplicably reticent to be identified as the letter writer. Our sense of loss all the more excruciating, because we know how we can feel, how we want to feel, we just don't, at least not towards our covenantal partner.

Love letters, of any kind, are a fascinating, uplifting genre of writing, but also one that is full of potentially prickly implications. About a year ago, Debbie and I were clearing out some boxes and drawers in preparation for our move to NY. We found our letters that we have written to each other over the years. I mourn for young lovers whose present courtships will evaporate into the ether of the internet. These letters were wonderful. We laughed

reading them, sometimes cringed, and occasionally we regretted. But no matter the content, we were and are grateful for it. Letters between two individuals in an ongoing relationship, in this case, me and my wife, may be dated, but they are far from old - they are forever dear to one's heart. It is a correspondence, an organic and evolving exchange between the two of us, a constant and constantly developing love, steady and unflinching throughout a variety of circumstances.

To put it plainly, as Jews, it is by way of engagement with the Torah by which we express our relationship to God. By any measure, the relationship between God and humanity is a rocky one. We have good days and we have bad days and sometimes, we have very bad days. I don't have, nor does anyone for that matter, have a direct line of communication to God. Humanity, thankfully, is forever removed from fully knowing God's Will. But what I do have, what you have, what the Jewish people have is a love letter. I have the Torah, given to me in my people's youth, and I take it out and I read it every day, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of my people, but always in the presence of a God whose Will is forever beyond my reach. As a community we take it out of the ark, as did Moses, as did generations before us, and we teach it diligently to our children - after all, it is written to them as much as it is written to me. And it is in this reading and in following its contents and commandments that I act on my relationship with God. A sunset is nice, so is jogging in Central Park, certainly treating another human being kindly is a Godly act. But as Jews, it is by way of Torah, by deed, prayer and study that we come to know and struggle with God's Will. There is no higher or nobler pursuit for us than to seek to know God's Will by way of Torah.

Think about how you would read a love letter. You read it so carefully, put it away and then you come back to it, thinking about it even when you are not reading it. Why was this word chosen and not another? It is the very act of study which is the essence of the project. We read and reread the Torah steeped in tradition and critical thinking, treating the Torah as a palimpsest, discovering in it again and again traces of the original Word of God. We are reading the Torah, but what we are really doing, is committing to a quest to know and do God's will.

Sadly, sometimes, and for some of us, more often than not, we find something displeasing in that letter. The text we possess both reveals and ironically conceals the word of God. It was the snake in the Garden of Eden who first asked the question "Did God really say?" and we have been asking this question every since. Did God really say exterminate the Midianites? Did God really say homosexuality is an abomination?

Given what I see and experience every day, how can I possibly believe that the wicked are always punished and the good are always rewarded? Did God really say all those things? As Jews we never read Torah outside of the experience of the Jewish people. If we tear Torah out of our experiences it becomes as lifeless as a rose pressed between the pages of a book. The power of the Torah is derived not merely by who gave it when, but in the setting or context in which it is read. If we read the Torah as a static document, then that is all it is, a cold, lifeless artifact. When we read the Torah through the prism of our own humanity, as a reflection of a relationship that we are currently in, then that is what gives it authority - that is what signals its dynamic nature.

And yes, that is what sometimes prompts us to find in it something wholly objectionable to what we believe. And so what do we do? We do what any lover would do – we write a letter back. Jewish identity is a two way street, a dialogue between God and Israel. The history of rabbinic literature is a record of human response to God's will. Did you really mean that? Could you clarify that passage? What precisely did you, God, mean in that verse from Leviticus? It may sound like I am being irreverent, but my point is to explain the critical importance of rabbinic literature, the legal process of *Halacha*. Our *midrashim*, the rabbinic legends and lore serve as an overlay, a gloss over the Torah's narrative that is a compendium of our love letters back to God. The Talmud, the codes, the centuries old process of *halakhic responsa* literature reflects every age's opportunity to respond to the ever elusive Divine will. We are not Biblical Israelites; we are not Talmudic rabbis or medieval sages. We are Jews living in North America in 2009 and it is our turn to write our letters. Their letters are ours, and they provide guidance in our own compositions. But it is our right and responsibility to draft our own responses. To paraphrase Solomon Schechter, we can't be satisfied reading the love letters of the past, we need to write our own.

On this festival of Shavuot, we stand at the canopy of Mount Sinai, committing ourselves to our relationship with God. The Torah is not a letter surreptitiously slipped beneath our door by an unknown lover, but the open declaration of our covenantal partner. We have to realize that the one we are looking for is no further than right beside us. To be Jewish means you have to at least be willing to meet God half way. That relationship will still have good days and bad days, and there are parts of that letter that need to be clarified, but we do so together, openly, actively, fully invested in the history of that relationship and more importantly, in its future vitality.

My charge and challenge to you is simple: commit yourself to reading the love letter that has been sent to you. Read it and respond, in word, in prayer and in deed. God and Israel, Israel and God, a dynamic and enduring relationship, with love letters shared throughout Jewish history. ~K~

### ... Names, Names, What's in a Name?

*Excerpted from materials produced by the Hillel Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.*

Shavuot has several names . . . some say five, some even say eight . . . most often referred to as:

- Chag HaShavuot** (the Festival of Weeks)
- Chag HaKatzir** (the Festival of the Harvest)
- Yom HaBikurim** (the Day of First Fruits)
- Chag Ha'Atzeret** (the Festival of Conclusion)
- Chag Mattan Torah** (the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah).

Originally an agricultural festival in the month of Sivan, Shavuot was celebrated in accordance with biblical requirement by pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jews offered the first fruits of their harvest. The Torah was received by the Children of Israel on Shavuot. As it was queried in the Talmud: "Why is the sixth day singled out among the days of creation?" For the sixth day has a special article preceding it, noting it as "the day." It is to teach that the creation made a deal with the Holy One: "If Israel accepts the Torah, all will be well. If not I'll return the world back to chaos." (*Talmud Shabbat 88a*) Rashi comments that "the day" is the Sixth of Sivan, the Festival of Shavuot. ~K~



### ... Eating Dairy Foods

*There are probably as many explanations for the practice of eating dairy on Shavuot as there are recipes - some quite plausible, others requiring a willing stretch. This one is offered by Chabad Lubavitch. Please note that in some Chasidish communities, no holiday seudah celebration is thought to be complete without a meat meal, on any occasion, even on Shavuot.*

Here are three of the many reasons traditionally offered for the custom of eating dairy foods on the first day of Shavuot. Some even extend the practice to the entire holiday.

On the holiday of Shavuot, a two-loaf bread offering was brought in the Temple. To commemorate this, we eat two meals on Shavuot -- first a dairy meal, and then, after a short interruption, we eat the traditional meat holiday meal.

With the giving of the Torah the Jews now became obligated to observe the laws of Kashrut. As the Torah was given on Shabbat, no cattle could be slaughtered nor could utensils be koshered, and thus on that day they ate dairy.

Another reason is that the Torah is likened to nourishing milk. Also, the Hebrew word for milk is *chalav*. When the numerical value of each of the letters in the word *chalav* are added together - 8; 30; 2 - the total is forty. Forty is the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai when receiving the Torah; hence the association between dairy and the culmination of the 40-day wait. ~K~

### ... Why the Book of Ruth?

In many synagogues the Book of Ruth is read on the second day of Shavuot. The Book of Ruth was recorded by the prophet Samuel. There are three main reasons most often offered for this custom:

1. Shavuot is both the birthday and *yahrzeit* of King David, and the Book of Ruth records his ancestry. Ruth and her husband Boaz were King David's great-grandparents.

2. The scenes of harvesting described in the book of Ruth are appropriate to the Festival of Harvest, especially how the poor were treated in the harvest season with sympathy and love.

3. Ruth was a sincere convert (a *ger tzedek*) who embraced Judaism with all her heart. On Shavuot all Jews were converts -- having accepted the Torah and all of its precepts. ~K~

### ... Shavuot Meaning: Mass Revelation

*Rabbi Dr. Moshe P. Weisblum is the spiritual leader of Congregation Knesset Israel of Annapolis, MD. This article appeared in the Baltimore Jewish Times in May of 2007.*

Shavuot means "weeks" and represents the seven weeks (7X7=49 days) between the exodus from Egypt and the receiving of the Torah. Following the second day of Passover, we count the 49 days of the Omer. Shavuot is the fiftieth day. Thousands of years ago, those fifty days signified the merging of our spiritual selves with the spirit of the Divine. Three million witnesses, who could only imagine the Almighty in their hearts, heard the voice of G-d as He gave forth the laws of ethical and moral conduct, thereby changing human behavior and civilization forever. Today, Shavuot marks the time when we fortify our souls, as if we too, were hearing the Torah anew. It is a time of reaffirming our historical declaration to G-d, answering His call, "We will do and we will listen".

As over three million people congregated at the foot of Mount Sinai, after forty years of trudging through the desert, the defining moment in Jewish history occurred. Through dust and clouds, G-d's voice emanated across the masses and transmitted the complete Torah. Each person heard and understood the commandments. This single event was a great mass revelation, which we celebrate with the holiday of Shavuot.

King Solomon described the gift of Torah as "sweet as honey and milk under the tongue." With these words as inspiration, many traditional customs have been attributed to the joyous festival of Shavuot. Each evening the candles are lit with the recitation of the blessing of "Yom Tov" followed by the *Shehecheyonu* prayer - thanking the Almighty, who has kept us alive and sustain us and enabled us to reach this occasion. [ . . . ] Jews around the world assemble, just as they did over three thousand years ago, to hear the recitation of the Ten Commandments. During the morning festival services, the Book of Ruth is read. The similarity is drawn between the acceptance of the Torah at

Mount Sinai and Ruth's acceptance of the Torah, demonstrating her true yearning to convert to Judaism. Moreover, Ruth was a paragon of kindness. The Book of Ruth begins and ends with kindness. The story opens with Elimelech, who was known for his kind deeds and closes with Boaz's heroic marriage to Ruth and the miraculous birth of their son Obed.

It is no coincidence that the Book of Ruth is read on Shavuot. Our sages said that it is the same date that King David, Ruth's great-grandson was born and died. Furthermore, our sages wrote that Samuel, the exulted biblical prophet, wrote the Book of Ruth as a testament to the divine claim of Israel by King David and genealogical proof of his fine character.

Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi is depicted in her most memorable passage, "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d, my G-d." The story relates how Ruth, a young Moabite princess, whose eventual conversion to Judaism, earned her an important place in Jewish history. The union between the young Ruth and the 80-year-old Boaz would produce the brave King David, three generations later and was the precursor for building the First Temple. Ruth's conversion and unconditional acceptance of the Torah parallels the time when the Torah Laws were established at the foot of Mount Sinai. The story of Ruth becomes a powerful account of self-transformation filled with elements of love, hope, destiny and Tikkun Olam. Hopefully, the reader will find uplifting meaning in the nuances of the words, emotions and challenges that our ancestors faced.

~K~

### ... So, What Happened at Mount Sinai?

*By Rabbi Susan Grossman, spiritual leader of Beth Shalom Congregation in Columbia, MD. She serves on the prestigious Committee for Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement (CJLS). Several of her responsa (rabbinic decisions) on women and other matters have been accepted as official positions of the Conservative Movement. Rabbi Grossman was one of the first women ordained as a rabbi by Jewish Theological Seminary and the first woman to lead her own congregation. She holds a doctorate in Hebrew Literature from JTS.*

According to tradition, God gave the people of Israel the Torah at Mount Sinai on Shavuot.

There is no way to truly know what – if anything – happened at Mount Sinai. Ultimately, it is a matter of faith to believe God revealed the Torah to Moses and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai.

Faith and reason, however, need not be incompatible.

In the current debate over the factual accuracy of the Bible, scholars debate whether or not archaeology can prove, or disprove, the historicity of the text. As with many such debates, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Clearly the Torah text we have today does include anachronisms that point to a later editorial hand. However, that does not necessarily deny the antiquity and authority of much of the text.

Take, for example, the story of the golden calf. I don't think it is an accident that the panicked Jews choose to build a golden calf, symbol of the Canaanite storm god, while awaiting Moses' return from a mountain filled with thunder and lightning. In such a little detail, faith and reason converge: the confluence of a Biblical story and an Ancient Near East fact confirms the contextualization of Torah within the time the story is supposed to have taken place. This is just one of many details we know from modern archaeology but which would have been unavailable to someone writing hundreds of years after the purported events (at the time many date the current Biblical text), unless that person was working from much older material. That's why I'm not so ready to write off Sinai as mere myth.

That doesn't mean we know what actually happened at Sinai, though whatever it was, certainly changed the course of history.

It might be comforting to know that we are not the first generation to wonder what happened at Sinai. The Talmudic sages wondered whether God uttered only the first commandment, the first word, the first letter, the first aspiration of the soundless Hebrew letter aleph, before the people quailed and begged Moses to intercede, in effect to take notes for them.

They asked whether the Jewish people willingly accepted the covenant, crying out "*naaseh vnishmah* . . . we will do and then we will hear the details" (the ancient equivalent of signing a contract from someone you trust without reading the fine print), or whether their ambivalence was so great that God had to threaten them with annihilation before they accepted the covenant.

Sinai raises other questions as well: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asked how could any limited human being, even one as spiritually capable as Moses, contain the infinity of God's revelation? Think about God trying to download the enormity of Torah, and Moses' hard drive not being large enough to contain it!

In other words, even if the Torah was transmitted through Moses, Moses could only "get" what made sense to a 13th-century BCE man. For example, he would not have been able to conceive of a religion in which men and women were social and legal equals, as hinted at in the opening scenes where God created the first Adam as equally male and female.

Furthermore, God, being all-knowing, would have known just how much the Israelites of that time could have handled. Therefore, while rejecting human sacrifice, God included animal sacrifices, because God knew that the Israelites would not be able to cope without this mainstay of ancient religion. Lest this sound heretical, Maimonides said something similar when he wrote that, if the Temple were rebuilt, animal sacrifices would not be resumed. Such musings open the way for evolution of observance while still embracing the commanding voice of Torah in our lives.

That is why the most important question is not what actually happened at Sinai, which we cannot recover, but how does Sinai live on in us. According to Rabbi Heschel, the discrete historical moment of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, was only part of revelation. Revelation continues through Kabbalat Torah, the accepting of the Torah.

Each generation and every individual has the opportunity to continue to receive Torah, not only through Torah study but through applying what Torah teaches to the new conditions of our lives. Every time we ask ourselves WWTD, "What Would Torah (have us) Do?" we find ourselves back at Sinai. ~K~

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