

Preparation הכנה

May 2012

Sivan 5772

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion
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**A Kehillah For Those
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**Celebrating the Start
of our
Nineteenth Year!**



Counting The Omer: From Pesach to Shavuot



Preparing
to
Celebrate
Shavuot
at
Kehillat
Chovevei
Tzion

Photos and graphics courtesy of Corbis, the OU and the respective artists

5772

תיקון ליל שבועות

5772

SCHEDULE
OF
SHAVUOT
AND
SHABBAT
SERVICES

TIKKUN
L'AYL
SHAVUOT

KEHILLAT
CHOVEVEI
TZION

SHABBAT BAMIDBAR

FRIDAY-SATURDAY MAY 25-26, 2012

Candle Lighting	7:54 PM
Friday Kabbalat Shabbat	6:35 PM
Shabbat Morning	9:00 PM

5 SIVAN

EREV SHAVUOT

SATURDAY MAY 26, 2012

** Even though there is no charge for the dinner, PLEASE RSVP if you are coming to the dinner, to Ritual@KCT.org by Wednesday, May 23 at 2 PM*

Candle Lighting	8:59 PM
Mincha	7:30 PM
Study Session Aleph	8:00 PM
Ma'ariv	9:00 PM
A Light Dinner *	9:15 PM
Study Session Bet	10:00 - 11:30 PM

6 SIVAN

FIRST DAY SHAVUOT

SUNDAY MAY 27, 2012

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	9:00 PM

7 SIVAN

SECOND DAY SHAVUOT

MONDAY MAY 28, 2012

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Yizkor and Musaf	
Study Sessions Daled and Hey	

The KCT Tradition Deepens:
The Ice Cream Kiddush

Yom Tov ends 9:01 PM

Celebrating, studying and growing together as a community of the committed, the extended member families of **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion** will again come together this year, for its compelling nineteenth 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
5772
at
Kehillat Chovevei Tzion**

. . . . Counting the Omer

סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

According to the Torah, we are obligated to count the days from Passover to Shavuot. 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 Baruchu* 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 Tzion** 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, **Monday May 28th**. 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~

.... Our Shavuot Scholar

Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 5772:
Scholar-in-Residence:
Rabbi William Berman

The history and significance of some of the most compelling concepts of the holiday:
Mashiach The Convert
Yizkor The Ten Commandments

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 conversion, interpersonal relations, and messianic traditions in Jewish literature.

Read about this unique and powerful three day Shavuot Kallah in the special **Tikkun Leyl Shavuot** section of this booklet.

PLEASE note that in order to plan appropriately, it is absolutely necessary that all attendees for the opening dinner on Saturday evening May 26th, RSVP to Ritual@KCT.org by Wednesday, May 23rd at 2 PM, if not earlier!

~K~

.... 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.

.... 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~

.... Sleepless Shavuot in Setauket

Extracted from the writings of Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman.

Many, especially in the Yeshiva world, have the custom to stay awake and study Torah the entire night of Shavuot. Many Sefardim and Chasidim follow a special order of study initiated by the Arizal (based on a passage in the introduction to the Zohar) whereby they read selected portions of the entire 24 books of the Tanach, the 613 mitzvot, as well as excerpts from some esoteric texts.

Shavuot celebrates the day when God gave us the Torah on Mount Sinai. By studying all night, we show our love and enthusiasm for this precious gift. Indeed the 24 books of Tanach mentioned above are referred to as 24 bridal ornaments with which the Jewish people decorate themselves in preparation to receive the Torah, their wedding document, from the Groom.

Another explanation for staying up all night is that the Jews at Mount Sinai over-slept on that historic Shavuot morning! G-d had to "wake them up" to teach them the Torah (sound familiar?). We rectify this by staying up all night, to ensure that we won't sleep late on this day.

Staying up all night is not a *halacha* nor a Jewish law, but rather a custom for those who feel they are physically up to it. Even if one was able to stay up, but wouldn't be able to concentrate and enjoy the prayers, the Torah readings, and the other mitzvot of the day such as the holiday meal and making one's family happy, he should not stay up the whole night.

Regarding this type of situation our Sages taught, "Whether one does a lot, or whether one does a little, the main thing is to direct one's heart to Heaven".

*[Be sure to read about the KCT three day Shavuot Kallah in the special **Tikkun Leyl Shavuot** section of this booklet.]* ~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~

.... 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~

... 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 all!

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~

.... Shavuot: Affirmation of Life

This essay is extracted from the Shavuot 2005 sermon by Rabbi Janet Marder of Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, CA, as she introduced the Yizkor service.

A teaching in the Mishna defines the duties of a Jew who is in mourning at the outset of a festival. "*Regalim mafsim* – festivals interrupt" shiva, the seven-day period of mourning following the burial of a close relative [*Mo'ed Katan 3:5*]. Now mourners, according to Jewish tradition, are supposed to step out of normal life when they have suffered a significant loss. They don't pretend to be brave and go on as if nothing had happened. They take time to grieve; their normal pattern of behavior is disrupted as a way of recognizing that a profound change has occurred in their life. Thus the custom is that they stay home during shiva, and people come to be with them, to feed them and take care of them.

But the Mishna is saying that if one of the major Jewish festivals begins while you are in the shiva period, you are supposed to put aside shiva and join with the community in celebrating the festival. You go outside to sit in a sukkah; you gather with family and friends at a Passover seder; you take part in a *leil tikkun* – a night of study – for Shavuot. And for all three you come to the synagogue for a festival service.

This is in some ways a strange teaching – monstrous, unnatural. How can we be expected to put aside our grief and go to a celebration? How can halacha command us to suppress normal human emotions for the sake of going through the motions of a ritual?

The Gemara, the commentary on the Mishna, explains the reason for this ruling: "*aseh d'rabim* – a positive mitzvah incumbent on the community" overrides "*aseh d'yachid* – a positive mitzvah incumbent on the individual" [*Moed Katan 14b*]. In other words, an individual's duty to mourn for a close relative is superceded by our collective duty to celebrate the festivals. Or, to put it another way, Jewish law wants to lift me, as a mourner, out of my own personal reality so that I can experience, with others, a story that is larger and deeper than myself: the drama of the Jewish people's journey through history. For a short while I'm asked to imagine myself fleeing from the darkness of Egypt, wandering yet sheltered in the wilderness, standing at Sinai to receive Torah.

It is not that halacha requires us to deny our natural feelings and to put on a happy face for the festival, but something else entirely. Jewish tradition believes that the festivals have something to say to the mourner. By sharing these days with the community; by opening our hearts to what the festivals can

teach; by seeing ourselves as participants in the core Jewish journey from degradation to dignity, we receive strength to guide us on our own journeys out of grief and loss to the new life that will be ours.

Pesach, in the spring, offers a message of liberation and a fresh start; Sukkot, in the fall, reminds us of the beauty of fragile and perishable things. But what is the particular lesson that Shavuot brings to the mourner?

[. . .] Shavuot celebrates the moments when wisdom and truth come to us, in our own time, in our own way. It is no accident, I think, that Shavuot arrives as summer begins, when the fog burns off into sunshine and the strawberries are ripe and luscious in the farmer's market, and graduates stand tall and proud in their caps and gowns, and loving couples join hands under the chuppah.

It is no accident that Shavuot comes to us when the garden beckons us to come and plant; or that the custom of this holiday is to decorate our homes and synagogues with green plants and beautiful roses; or that on this festival we taste foods that are delicious and sweet. It is no accident that Shavuot comes to teach us about all these things.

Three thousand years ago our people stood in a vast and silent desert, at the foot of a mountain, and in the silence they saw and heard something that convinced them that the universe itself is no accident – that life has beauty and meaning and purpose; and that life must be lived as if it matters.

And so we remember that time, that moment of powerful revelation, with a holy day that instructs us to be open to wisdom even now. For just as Torah came to our ancestors, damaged and hurt as they were by slavery, so wisdom may grow out of pain, like red flowers thrusting out of the dark earth. We learn, as our ancestors did, to channel our loss and our pain into a path of insight and growth.

We learn, to transcend our fear of the unknown and to live life as if it matters – to see and hear and taste and touch the goodness of this life that is still ours. We learn from shoveling the compost heap and kissing sweet-smelling babies; we learn from the blossoming roses and the tall young graduates and the beautiful faces of lovers under the chuppah. We learn from Shavuot, the festival of summer sunshine, that the greatest wisdom is to celebrate the season while it is here.

So we find our small and personal stories in the great story of our people. And so, I close with the words of Abraham our father, who spoke them long ago to Sarah, the wife he loved dearly until the day she died. He told her once, while they were still together, "*Chayta nafshi biglaleich*" – which means "I will remain alive thanks to you" or "Because of you, I will survive" [Gen. 12:13]. So may each of us, in the quiet space of memory, summon the beloved faces of those who, with their lives, taught us that life is a gift, and life is good. So may we say to the ones we loved these words of gratitude and affirmation: "*Chayta nafshi biglaleich.*" I will remain alive, thanks to you. Because of you, I will survive." ~K~

. . . . Jewish Denominational Views

Rabbi Dr. Allen Selis served as a congregational rabbi for eight years in Boulder, CO and Rockville, MD, and most recently as the Head of School of the St. Louis Solomon Schechter Day School. In this essay, Rabbi Selis challenges us to survey the approaches taken by several of the main streams of Judaism, to some essential Jewish fundamentals, even if we find the challenge to be unsettling.

Jewish Denominations on Revelation:
From Sinai to Schism.

How can we understand Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah at Sinai? There are as many answers as there are denominations. As a denominational question, Sinai is an issue of authority and chronology. Does truth come only from God, or can it also come from the community or a principled individual? Does God's ultimate revelation of truth take place each and every day, or did God deliver one authoritative message long ago?

The denomination question examines the thought behind our actions. It asks why we do what we do. This level of "why" gives access to the real meaning of denominational difference, and takes us right back to that fateful encounter at Sinai.revelation

God Changed Her Mind

What does Sinai look like for Reform Jews? For Reform Judaism, "Sinai" takes place every time a Jew makes a serious and conscientious choice. Reform Judaism's Centenary Platform, adopted in San Francisco (1976), makes this simple and clear statement of Reform theology: "Jewish obligation

begins with the informed will of every individual." The individual might consider all the dicta of Jewish tradition that has come before her, but in the moment of deciding whether to order tuna or bacon for lunch, the choice is still hers and hers alone. That moment of individual conscience, regardless of outcome, is sacred to Reform Judaism.

A Reform colleague of mine once described her conviction that rabbis should ritually sanctify gay and lesbian relationships by saying: "I know what it says in the Torah (about homosexuality). But that's not binding. God changed Her mind." My colleague's stance made perfect sense as long as we conceive of Sinai as a re-occurring process, not a fixed encounter. The Reform Movement's 1937 Columbus Platform suggests that the written Torah is a "depository" of Biblical Israel's consciousness of God—a record of past revelation—but certainly not the last word in our ongoing dialogue with God. Instead, "revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and to no one age." Indeed, according to Reform Judaism, God can "change Her mind." As such, Sinai is constantly taking place, and it is the role of the individual to listen closely to what God is saying.

The Authority of Sinai

The Orthodox tradition maintains that God taught everything which the Jewish people needed to know at Mount Sinai. This belief draws upon early Rabbinic literature. In Midrash Tanhuma (Buber-Ki Tisa 17), the Midrash relates:

"When the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-God came to give Torah, He related it to Moshe in order. First Bible, then Mishnah, Aggadah and Talmud . . . even those future questions that a seasoned student would one day ask of his teacher. The Holy-One-Blessed-Be-God related even these things to Moshe at that time, as we find in the Torah: And God spoke of all these things . . ."

This Midrash effectively communicates the most significant aspect of Orthodox thought: God is the only legitimate source of knowledge and truth. No community or individual can take up this role. For the Orthodox Jew, all authority ultimately goes back to God and Sinai.

This belief infuses even the most modern strains of Orthodoxy. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the

founder of modern orthodoxy, allowed for Jewish involvement in secular life and insisted on the need for secular education, but nonetheless maintained that the Torah, as the sum of God's will, is not subject to rational argumentation or proof. Similarly, Rabbi Norman Lamm, chancellor of the modern orthodox Yeshiva University, put forth in an article in Commentary magazine that God most certainly had the ability to communicate whatever He wanted to convey at Mount Sinai, and that it would be absurd to "impose upon (God) a limitation of dumbness that would insult the least of His human creatures."

Perhaps the most interesting contemporary manifestation of the Orthodox notion that all truth comes from Sinai is the idea of Daas Torah (literally "Torah knowledge"). This notion, somewhat contested within Orthodoxy itself, suggests that the Torah is a reliable source of answers to every question, no matter how mundane. Behind this practice is a clear belief that God's revelation at Sinai must have been all encompassing, addressing all individual situations and particular needs for all times.

A Community Encounter

While mainstream Conservative Jews envision a personal God most Conservative rabbis do not believe that God actually gave the Torah, letter by letter, at Mount Sinai. So what did happen? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his *God in Search of Man*, argues that the chronological details of Sinai are irrelevant—since the Torah is a moral, not a chronological text. Rabbi Neil Gillman, in *Sacred Fragments*, argues from Franz Rosenzweig's position that God merely revealed Himself at Sinai—the people of Israel then recorded their response to God's presence in the form of Torah. While God might have initiated the revelation at Sinai, it was the human community which preserved that encounter.

Solomon Schechter (1847-1915) summed up this position in the doctrine of "catholic Israel." The phrase implies that it is the "catholic" or unified body of the people of Israel who are responsible for the development of Judaism in each generation, taking the fruits of the Sinai revelation and adapting them to meet the needs of the day. One Talmudic source illustrates the problem aptly. In the Mishnah (Brachot 6:8), there is a disagreement about what blessing to say when drinking water. The earlier Sages had the tradition that one should say the blessing "over all things..." while Rabbi Tarfon received the tradition to

thank "the Creator of many appetites..." before drinking. What was the Law? In the Talmud, the latter Sages refused to resolve the matter. Instead, they decided to "go out and see what the general populous does." (*Brachot* 45a)

From this approach, Schechter concluded that the general community should be viewed as the true arbiter of God's Law. In theological terms, this means that Sinai takes place in the meeting of community—not the lone grappling of individual conscience. Like Reform, Conservative Jews are open to the idea of change as an authentic manifestation of Torah—but only when that change filters through convictions of community. For Conservative Jews, Sinai happens in the public square, as community members seek to understand God.

Sinai Never Was

As the Conservative position disputes the historicity of the Sinai revelation, so the Reconstructionist stance disavows its divinity—but not its sanctity. Founder Mordechai Kaplan's program for the reconstruction of Judaism rejected the notion of a supernatural God. For him, God was not heavenly being but rather "...the process [in the world] that makes for creativity, integration, love and justice." This stance, by definition, denies the possibility of a Sinai, an event which Kaplan regarded as a mere legend. After all, if there is no personal God, then what's to reveal?

Kaplan identifies the content of Torah as a set of "folk-ways" that the people of Israel constructed and continuously adapted to fit the spirit of their age. The tradition would always have "a voice, but not a veto," as the entire body of tradition was always meant to be in flux. For Kaplan, there could never be a Sinai—instead, the folk-ways of each new generation would reflect the current needs of the Jewish soul. Each new tradition would be sacred—until its time had passed.

Interpreting With Integrity

In the end, I am thankful that each of the movements has invested such energy in grappling with God and Torah. An early Midrash, the *Mechilta*, expresses my thoughts best: "What great praise it is for Israel, that as soon as they heard God's word at Sinai, they began to interpret it..." Our interpretations take us in many different directions, but as long as we continue the work of engaging God's word with integrity, we should profit from the encounter. ~K~

... Sharing the Common Experience

Drawn from the 2011 Holiday Dvar Tzedek of the American Jewish World Service, this essay is written by Blu Greenberg, who has long been active in Jewish feminism and is the founder of JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance). She serves on several Jewish organizational boards and is involved in interfaith dialogue.

At one level, the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals — Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot — celebrate our most intimate communal moments. Beginning with their agricultural origins, the festivals summon up images of tribal relatives working the land together and Israelites traveling to the Jerusalem Temple in family units, arriving en masse at appointed times so as to connect to one another as members of the same covenantal community. On the festivals, echoes of one people sharing a common experience of planting, harvesting and giving thanks to God reverberate in our memories.

The second set of ties that bind us together are the historical narratives of the festivals. Each has its own strong story. Pesach recounts the miracle of liberation of our slave ancestors, a story we not only tell at the seder, but also carry with us every day in our prayers and every week in our Shabbat rituals. Sukkot represents our people's journey towards freedom in the Promised Land—a vulnerable minority huddling together in booths and placing our faith in God. Shavuot, too, is understood by the Rabbis of the Talmud to commemorate Revelation at Sinai, that singular event that shaped the lives of our people forever.

All of these themes represent Jewish particularity through its peak experiences. Yet, at another level, the holidays also represent the ways in which Judaism looks outward to the rest of the world. The Talmud records the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer that the 70 sacrifices brought on Sukkot were brought on behalf of the 70 nations of the world (*Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 55b*). Similarly, the experience and memory of slavery that we recall on Pesach serves as the basis for the many commandments that require us to care for the stranger.

Shavuot, too, exemplifies this external focus, both in its agricultural and historical narratives. The Torah links Shavuot to the laws of *leket*, *shich'chah* and *peah*—laws of controlled and compassionate harvesting. Immediately following the laws of Shavuot (related to the harvest, sacrifices, first fruits

and the waving of the loaves), the Torah issues this commandment: "When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the strangers living among you. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:22). Although these laws of *leket* are given elsewhere in the Torah, here they are joined to the very sanctity of the Shavuot festival.

Through this juxtaposition—of laws on holiday observance with laws on how to care for those at the margins—the Torah teaches us that even as we are heady with the harvest, we must focus our attention outward, remembering to take care of those who do not enjoy such gifts. And we must do it not as a handout, but as standard operating procedure, in a manner that maximizes the dignity of the other who relies on our leavings for survival. These are powerful laws that form the basis of Judaism's prescription for social justice.

Their significance is emphasized by a unique universality that transcends time and place. Most of the agricultural laws of the Torah are tied to existence in the Land of Israel. Thus, when the Jewish Temple was ruined, the Commonwealth destroyed and the people driven from the land, these agricultural laws became non-operational. But not so the laws of *leket*, of compassionate harvesting. The Rabbis determined that the laws requiring agricultural gifts to the poor (*matanot laevyonim*) should remain effective wherever Jews live. These are clearly considered universal principles that must be upheld regardless of whether or not we function as an agricultural society in our own homeland. To emphasize this, the Rabbis also expanded the concept of agricultural gifts to the poor to include monetary ones, with holiday celebration requiring *matanot laevyonim* in any form.

Perhaps the expanded laws of *leket* speak more to our generation than to any other, as the sense of global interdependence, along with the advent of the rapid-information highway, make us aware of the poor and the stranger far beyond our own "fields." Jews now have the means to be responsible for those less fortunate, even if they do not seek us out for gleanings directly, or don't ever cross our line of vision.

Shavuot's historical connection to *Matan Torah*, the giving of the whole Torah, also affirms that responsibility for others is at the core of Jewish faith.

With its central reading of the Ten Commandments, half of which are laws of morality, Shavuot confirms our primary obligations to social justice. Indeed, Shavuot reminds us that the Torah teaches us not only the laws of compassionate harvesting but so many other ethical principles: do not be a bystander, do not ignore the cries of the oppressed, do not hold back the day-worker's pay beyond evening, do not engage in slander, pay heed to those who have no one to speak for them. These and many other laws, along with the laws of *zedakah* and *chesed*, serve as our ethical standard, reinforcing the need for constant sensitivity to the other in need.

Thus, even as we celebrate our most intimate communal bonds, Shavuot teaches us how to act responsibly in the wider world—to follow the Torah's instructions to lead ethical lives by extending our definition of community to include the poor, the stranger and all others in need. -K-

. . . . **The Covenant and God**

Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg was the president of Jewish Life Network/Steinhardt Foundation and founding president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership..

God, too, is bound by this divine agreement.

Many people – some formally religious and some not – agree that an infinite God or power is the source of this vast universe. But some of them are bothered by the Jewish claim that this Divine Being has chosen the Jews to serve as a special vehicle. (As the old anti-Semitic doggerel puts it, "How odd / of God / to choose / the Jews.")

Similarly, Judaism's daughter religions, Christianity and Islam, agree that God binds humans to God's covenant. However, theologians of the other monotheistic religions find it somewhat hard to accept Judaism's affirmation that God is not merely the source of the Torah, but is also bound by it. Opponents argue that such a statement is incredibility piled on top of paradox. Would an infinite, universal, all-powerful One care enough to intervene in "trivial" human concerns? Would that Being then be held to the terms of that intervention? Yes, says the Bible and later Jewish tradition.

It all stems from the biblical assertion that the human is in the image of God. Like God, humans are endowed with freedom, power, and consciousness.

According to Scriptures, God allows for these human qualities. (In biblical language: Adam and Eve sin but are not put to death. Then, after the flood, God self-limits in the first covenant and promises never again to destroy the earth with a deluge.) This means that the process of exercising human freedom, including the doing of evil, is accepted. Perfection may come more slowly, but henceforth it will come only in a partnership--a covenant--of humans and God. In this covenant, the human will not be overwhelmed and forced to do good.

If goodness will not be imposed by power, then the human must be educated toward perfection. The rabbis conceive of God as teacher and pedagogue--teaching Torah to Israel and to the world. This also explains why, in the words of Ethics of the Fathers (chapter 6, Mishnah 2), "The only truly free person is one who studies Torah."

As teacher, God offers a personal model for human behavior. The imitation of God is the basis for ethics. Parents, however warm or spontaneous, cannot enable children to grow unless the parents are prepared to bind themselves--to be available in some committed, dependable way. To teach successfully, teachers must offer a reliable and consistent model. Then God, as parent and teacher, must bind God's own self to humans.
Challenging God

From this understanding of the divine commitment in the covenant stems Abraham's incredible challenge when God seeks to destroy Sodom, "You dare not! Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Genesis 18:25). Out of this comes the Jewish tradition of a *din Torah mit'n Ribbono Shel Olam*--a trial of God. From Moses to Jeremiah and Lamentations through Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev and Elie Wiesel in our time, Jewish religious life has brought forth people who do not fear arraignment even God when there is injustice.

The binding of God in the covenant is the guarantor that redemption is the true fate of humankind. Reality itself does not always seem to operate to ensure the triumph of good. Ultimately, then, it is God's promise that justifies hope. This is the irony and paradox of the "guarantee": It is built on nothing more substantial than the word of God. What could be more ephemeral than a word, especially when the promise of redemption may point to an event hundreds or even thousands of years away?

Yet Jews trusted, waited, and worked. The Torah is no easy, ironclad guarantee against fate or suffering, yet it has outlasted empires. The Jews' testimony is that the covenant will outlast even those societies and cultures that deny its existence. On the other hand, the ethics of asking people to depend on God's word implies that God will truly bind God's own self to keep that promise.

Shavuot Celebrates Partnership

Therefore, Shavuot is not a coronation ceremony. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews blow the shofar [ram's horn] and crown the Lord as ruler of the universe. Shavuot is a more "democratic" holiday. It remembers those who trekked to Sinai to receive the Torah. It celebrates the God who "descended upon the mountain" and bound the divine self permanently to the Jewish people. A ruler issues decrees of life and death. A covenant rests upon "free negotiations, mutual assumption of duties, and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties."

God also becomes a partner in this covenantal community. God joins in human community and shares in its covenantal existence. As Joseph B. Soloveitchik points out, the whole concept of God suffering along with humanity ("I [God] shall be with him in trouble" [Psalm 91:5]) "can only be understood within the perspective of the covenantal community that involves God in the destiny of his fellow members." [Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," in *Tradition: A Journal of Jewish Thought*, vol. 7 no. 21 (Summer 1965) pp. 5-67, especially pp 28-29.]

So Shavuot is the holiday of partnership. The Divine, out of unbounded love, voluntarily puts aside unbounded power; this equalizes the two partners. This idea of partnership has had an immeasurably positive impact on human history even beyond religion. Covenant became the source of morality and ethics, moving humanity away from magical and ritual/mechanical concepts of divine-human interaction. Concern for social justice, compassion for human suffering, and the demand that religious people serve other humans have all flowed from this idea.

-K-

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.... Dating Shavuot

Written by Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Ohev Sholom--The National Synagogue in Washington, DC.

Shavuot is a strange holiday. It's strange in the sense that the Torah does not even give a specific date to this holiday. In today's reading all it states is the phrase, "*shivah shavuot tispar lakh meihakhel chermas ba-kamah*, you should count for yourself seven weeks from the time when you first put the sickle to the standing grain." But this is an ambiguous date, at best. (We know from elsewhere (Lev. 23: 25), that from the day that the omer is brought, which is *mi-macharat ha-shabbat*, we should count fifty days and *shevah shabbatot temimot*.)

This description of the Torah caused great debate and confusion as to the exact date of Shavuot. The Sadducees and later the Kaarites assumed that *Macharat ha-Shabbat* referred to the Sunday after Shabbat Bereishit and not, as our rabbis have taught to the second day of Pesach. Even within Chazal, there was great debate as to when exactly Shavuot was. The Talmud records opinions that Shavuot could occur on either the fifth, sixth or seventh day of Sivan? This, of course, begs the issue: Why did the Torah not give a specific date to Shavuot?

According to R. Yehudah Ha-Chasid, who died in Germany in 1217, the Torah only commands us to count 50 days out of great concern for the farmers working out in the fields. Since Shavuot comes at the time of the year when people were out on the land harvesting their crops, people would be unsure as to when exactly Rosh Chodesh Sivan would occur. Consequently, so as not to worry the farmers the Torah states, just count 50 days from the bringing of the Omer. The Torah is hereby showing its sensitivity to our economic plight, by removing a date from one of its own holidays on behalf of our farmers.

A second answer is recorded in the *Shibbolei Ha-Leket*, a 13th c. Italian work. Tradition records that the Jews were promised that they would receive the Torah fifty days after leaving Egypt. The Jews responded to this promise by everyday counting the number of days that were left till they received the Torah. This great love that they showed for Torah was what motivated the Torah to declare that Shavuot too, should only be determined by counting

50 days. In a nutshell: God responded to our embrace of Torah by embracing our custom. ~K~

... The Bible Cake: The Taste of Learning

This entertaining recipe for learning and eating, comes to us from the "learn@jts" program of the Jewish Theological Seminary. "Jewish Learning Through Distance Education" is a comprehensive and varied program open to everyone, which includes e-mailed Divre Torah and a host of study materials. (www.learn.jtsa.edu)

The Bible Cake: Educational and Delicious

The ingredients for this cake are hidden in many Bible verses. Study first, then bake, and eat.

Ingredients:

1. 1/2 cup of Judges 5:25
2. 2 cups of Jeremiah 6:20
3. 2 tablespoons of I Samuel 14:25
4. 6 of Jeremiah 17:11
5. 1 1/2 cups of I Kings 5:2
6. 2 teaspoons of Amos 4:5
7. 4 teaspoons of II Chronicles 9:9
8. a pinch of Leviticus 2:13
9. 1/2 cup of Judges 4:19
10. 2 cups (chopped) of Nachum 3:12
11. 2 cups of I Samuel 30:12
12. 2 cups (chopped) of Numbers 13:23

Directions:

1. Cream together (1), (2), (3) and the yolks of (4).
2. Sift together (5), (6), (7) and (8).
3. Combine the above together with (9).
4. Add (10), (11) and (12).
5. Add in stiffly beaten whites of (4).
6. Bake in a well greased rectangular (13" X 9") pan at 325 degrees for an hour or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean. ~K~

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