

ACCEPTING THE GIFT

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

All Biblical Jewish holidays but one are distinguished by specific mitzvot, or commandments, that attend their celebration: Rosh Hashana's shofar, Yom Kippur's fasting, Sukkot's booths and "four species," Passover's seder and matzah.

The one conspicuous exception is soon-to-arrive Shavuot. Although the standard prohibitions of labor that apply to the other holidays apply no less to Shavuot, and while special sacrifices were brought in Temple times on every Jewish holiday, there is no specific ritual or "objet d'mitzvah" associated with Shavuot.

There are, of course, foods traditionally eaten on the day - specifically dairy delectables like blintzes and cheesecake. And there is a widely-observed custom of spending the entire first night of Shavuot immersed in Torah readings and study. But still, there is no Shavuot equivalent to the shofar or the etrog or the seder.

The early 19th century Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berdichev suggested that perhaps the mitzvahlessness of Shavuot was why it is called throughout the Talmud "Atzeret" - which means "holding back" and refers to the prohibition on labor. The lack of particular Shavuot mitzvot, though, may reflect something sublime.

Shavuot, although characterized by the Torah only as an agricultural celebration, is identified by the Jewish religious tradition with the day on which the Torah was given to our ancestors at Mount Sinai.

That experience involved no particular action; it was, in a sense, the very essence of passivity, acceptance of G-d's Torah and His will. The revelation was initiated by G-d; all that our ancestors had to do - though it was a monumental choice indeed - was to receive, to submit to the Creator and embrace what He was bestowing on them.

Indeed, the Midrash compares the revelation at Sinai to a wedding, with G-d the groom and His people the bride. (Many Jewish wedding customs even have their source in that idea: the canopy, sources note, recalls the mountain held, according to tradition, "over their heads"; the candles, the lightning; the breaking of the glass, the breaking of the tablets of the Law.) And just as a marriage is legally effected in the Jewish tradition by the bride's simple choice to accept the wedding ring or other gift the groom offers, so did the Jewish people at Mount Sinai create its eternal bond with the Creator by accepting His gift of gifts to them.

That acceptance may well be the essential aspect of Shavuot. A positive, active mitzvah for the day - an action or observance - would by definition contradict the day's central theme of receptivity.

And so the order of the day is to reenact our ancestors' acceptance of the Torah - pointedly not through any specific ritual but rather by re-receiving and absorbing it. Which is precisely what we do on Shavuot: open ourselves to the laws, lore and concepts of G-d's Torah, our Torah - and accept them anew, throughout the night, even as our bodies demand that we stop and sleep.

The association of Shavuot with our collective identity as a symbolic bride accepting a divine "marriage gift" may well have something to do with the fact that the holiday's hero is a heroine, Ruth (whose book is read in the synagogue on Shavuot); and with the fact that her story not only concerns her own wholehearted acceptance of the Torah but culminates in her marriage.

It is not quite fashionable these days - indeed it violates the prevailing conception of cultural correctness - to celebrate passivity or submission, even in the words' most basic and positive senses.

But it might be precisely what we Jews are doing on Shavuot.

May the upcoming celebration of our collective wedding anniversary be a happy and meaningful one for us all.

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