

POST-SHAVUOS THOUGHTS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Now that the great holiday of Shavuot has passed, the cheesecake has been safely digested, and the summer is right around the bend, I am struck by certain ideas that the holiday inspired within me. Firstly, I am always impressed by the fact that Shavuot is celebrated here in Israel by all sections of Jewish society. Shavuot is a live thing here. In the Diaspora, outside of the observant Orthodox world, the rest of Jewish society treats the holiday as practically being non-existent. Pesach has a Seder and Chanuka falls in December and the High Holy Days still exist for many Jews not otherwise really connected to Jewish tradition. But Shavuot is a lost holiday, one that does not exist for many Jews.

But here in Israel, Tnuva and the Strauss have a vested interest in keeping Shavuot alive and present. And even though this preoccupation with dairy products is not really the essence of the holiday it does serve to notify all and sundry that there is such a holiday. Eventually, thinking Jews will ask themselves what all this fuss concerning dairy goods is about and out of that simple question, a world of Jewish thought, tradition and knowledge can blessedly flow.

For that small triumph of memory and Jewish identification - that there is such a wonderful holiday as Shavuot in the Jewish calendar and psyche - the State of Israel has fulfilled an important mission. Often it is the supposedly small and side-issue triumphs of a sovereign Jewish society that pass unnoticed in the noisy distractions of our daily national life. But in the long run of Jewish life it is these small triumphs that are the most influential and long lasting of our manifold accomplishments.

All night study groups and lectures are also now very much in vogue for Shavuot night. Again, this type of mishmar - all night study session - was originally the exclusive province of the Orthodox yeshiva world. For those less committed or youthful, Jewish tradition provided a series of Torah lessons called Tikun Leil Shavuot that allowed one to have a short review of Torah knowledge with excerpts from the Bible, Mishna, Talmud, etc. However over the past few decades, the all night, mishmar, learning program has spread outside of the walls of the yeshiva.

Synagogues, social groups, schools, adult educational centers, Orthodox, non-Orthodox and secular venues have all adopted the all night mishmar learning model as the main commemoration of Shavuot in this country. This is truly a remarkable occurrence. There was a time here that the Zionist movement dwelt upon Shavuot as being a purely agricultural holiday - chag habikurim - the holiday of the first ripened fruits and crops as described in the Bible and Mishna. Elaborate agricultural

pageants were the norm and no mention of the Torah and its study appeared in the programs then planned for Shavuot.

Though the Bible does call Shavuot chag habikurim, Jewish prayer and tradition has shifted the emphasis to the day of the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Sinai over thirty-three hundred years ago. As is always the case, the Torah eventually wins out over staged, currently cutting-edge but eventually slightly ridiculous pageantry. There are many Jews who are truly interested in knowing about their faith and traditions. Shavuot night mishmar sessions are a great way to foster this interest and to unite Jews - and not to divide them unnecessarily.

The Shavuot holiday is also used in Jewish tradition to mark the day of the death of King David. A very large yahrzeit candle was traditionally erected in the synagogue and the occasion was marked by the recitation of the book of Tehilim - Psalms, of which he was the principal contributor and author. King David is intimately associated with the holiday of Shavuot since he is a direct descendant of Ruth whose story from the Book of Ruth is read in the synagogue service of the day of Shavuot.

So Shavuot, like all of the Jewish holidays, comes to remind us of our past and, at the same time, of our future. King David is the past great king of Israel and the man who established Jerusalem as our spiritual and national capital. But he is also the symbol of the messianic age, of the better world that we hope and pray for to be revealed yet, before our eyes. I think that Shavuot represents this as well. It represents the eternal Torah that has guided our past and present lives and will guide our future as well. But it is also chag habikurim when we will be able to offer our best and finest contributions to the God of Israel in the future as well. I am always grateful to be here in Israel. On Shavuot, I am especially grateful.

Shabat Shalom.

Berel Wein

Reprinted with permission from Rabbi Wein