

PREPARING FOR SHAVUOS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

With Lag B'Omer behind us and Shavuot drawing near, it is traditional to think about the importance and impact of this shortest of the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar year. Here in Israel, we are blessed that Shavuot is not a forgotten holiday. The advertisements of the dairy companies for their holiday wares alone guarantee some sort of public awareness of this holy day. Unfortunately, in the Diaspora, with the exception of the devotedly observant community, Shavuot is a forgotten holiday.

I remember that as a lawyer in Chicago over thirty-five years ago I attempted to obtain a new date for a trial in which I was representing my client and the Jewish judge, a scion of a great Eastern European rabbinic family, asked me the reason for my request. I told him that the original trial date was to fall on the holiday of Shavuot and as such I would not be able to attend court that day. He sneered at me: "Counselor, there is no such Jewish holiday!" So great is the alienation and assimilation of much of Diasporan Jewry, that his ignorant opinion will find many echoes in the secular Jewish society. Out of all of the holidays, Shavuot has no distinguishing *mitzvot* or ritual attached to it and is of such short duration that it lacks the "glamour" of the Pesach Seder or the *succah* or the *shofar*. Yet, it is the Shavuot holiday that is the backbone of all Jewish life and vitality.

According to Jewish tradition and the Talmud, Shavuot marks the anniversary date of the revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah to the people of Israel. The Torah itself phrases it thusly: "Today you have become a nation!" The nationality of the Jews is founded upon its shared experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai thirty three hundred and nineteen years ago. This is the import of Saadya Gaon's famous statement that our "our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah." Shavuot is *the* uniquely Jewish holiday. It does not represent the universal ideal of freedom as does Pesach, nor is it a harbinger of all human happiness, prosperity and bountiful harvest, all of which characterize the Succot holiday. It stands in splendid isolation as a uniquely Jewish event that attests to our role in society and civilization, as the people who accepted the Torah when others refused.

It is therefore difficult to be assimilated and celebrate Shavuot. Shavuot prevents assimilation by reminding us of the event that is baked deep into the DNA of the Jewish people - the revelation at Sinai. Shavuot is therefore not just a commemoration of an historical date but rather it poses the challenge of defining Jewish nationhood and of its relation to each and every one of us. Because of

this challenging aspect of the holiday, it is easy (though painful) to understand why Shavuot just does not exist for so many Jews. It is much easier on one's mind and conscience to simply ignore and then even deny its existence.

There are certain questions that have remained constant in Jewish life over the millennia. "Who is a Jew?" "Why be Jewish?" "Why marry Jewish?" and "Why all of the fuss, anger, hatred and jealousy in the world over the Jews?" are some of these basic age-old questions. Ignoring Shavuot and what it represents allows for seemingly easy answers and evasions of these questions. But all of those answers have never yet been able to stand the test of time and circumstance. Forgetting Shavuot has always led to spiritually dire personal and national consequences. The great Rabi Yosef of the times of the Babylonian Talmud celebrated Shavuot with great enthusiasm, saying "if it were not for this day of Shavuot, I would not feel chosen and unique, for many Yosefs can be found in the market square."

This is certainly true of the Jewish people generally. If it were not for Shavuot we would not be a special people, let alone "a light unto the nations of the world." Shavuot therefore becomes our reason for existence, the justification of our intense role in the development of a better and more civilized world. Shavuot therefore demands some sort of mental and spiritual preparation to be truly appreciated. Since we still have some time until its arrival, now would be a good time to start thinking about it and its personal relevance to one's life and family.

Shabat shalom.

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