

SHAVUOT IS A HOLIDAY, ISN'T IT?

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

Shavuot is the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. (You know-God, Charlton Heston, the Ten Commandments, the whole bit.)

The Torah (also known as the Five Books of Moses or the Bible) is the basic source of Judaism. Jewish law, practice, holidays, and all the essentials of Jewish identity that have molded, guided, and preserved the Jewish people over the millennia are rooted in the Torah.

An Essay

Y2K and Shavuot: The Ultimate Nonevents

As December 31, 1999, drew closer and closer, the world held its collective breath.

Would darkness descend upon the face of the earth? Would food and water supplies dry up? Would armed bands of looters roam the streets preying on defenseless idiots who neglected the warnings of everyone from Ed Yardeni to Jerry Falwell? Worst of all, would Amazon.com be lost to us forever?

And then nothing happened. Without missing a beat, life as we know it went full steam ahead. It was business as usual all around.

That's kind of like what happened with Shavuot. Think about it. For over two hundred years, the Jewish people were enslaved in Egypt. The bitterness and brutality seemed to know no end. Then finally, along came Moses with his trusty staff. God told Moses that he would redeem the people from bondage and that once they were out of Egypt, they would head straight for Mount Sinai where they would receive the Torah from none other than God Himself. Having received the Torah -- the Jewish nation's Magna Carta,

Constitution, and corporate mission statement all rolled into one -- they would then set out for the Promised Land of Israel, where they would set up house and live happily ever after with the Torah as their guiding source of Divine law, ethics, spirituality, and wisdom.

As part of the life that the Jews would live in Israel, or wherever else they found themselves, they would celebrate certain holidays to commemorate seminal historical events. Since you can't find a more central event in all of Jewish history than the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it only makes sense that this event would be marked by a major holiday. And so it is -- the great and holy day of Shavuot.

And then came the big letdown. The same God who told us to eat matzah and bitter herbs on Passover to commemorate the Exodus, the same God who told us to live in little huts for a week to recall our Divinely protected travels in the desert, the same God who told us to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, forgot to give us anything to do on Shavuot. Zip, nada, nothing. When it came to the holiday of Shavuot -- the holiday that marks the giving of the Torah itself, the very source of all the other holidays and their unique practices (not to mention hundreds of other Jewish things to do), God came up empty-handed. No *mitzvot*, no special observances, activities, or foods -- nothing.

So what's going on? Couldn't a God who came up with stuff like shaking a palm branch, blowing a ram's horn, and eating oversized saltines think of anything for us to do on Shavuot? How about building models of Mount Sinai, drawing a picture of the tablets -- something, anything! After all, what's a holiday with nothing to do?

It's All About Preparation

The Time of the Giving of Our Torah

In the Shavuot prayers, we acknowledge the personality of the holiday with the words *z'man matan torateynu*, "the time of the giving of our Torah." The emphasis here is on the giving of the Torah. In Hebrew, the word for giving, *matan*, is also the word for a gift, *matana*. The perspective this

wording asks us to consider is twofold. The focus is firstly on God, the giver, and secondly on the fact that what He gave us-the Torah-is a gift.

On Shavuot, God is the active party, so to speak, and our job is to be receptive to His gift. As we have seen, there aren't any special *mitzvot* that we are supposed to do on Shavuot. We don't *do* anything other than sit back, wait for God to present us with His gift, and then accept it.

There is one little catch to all this, however. This gift of the Torah requires some preparation in order for us to be capable of accepting and holding on to it. In that sense, it's more like an academic university scholarship than a plain old birthday present. Universities offer scholarships not only to students who have proven scholastic abilities but also to those who demonstrate that they will genuinely value the opportunity and will be motivated to make the most out of their gift. To offer a full academic scholarship to someone who is loaded with intelligence and ability but doesn't appreciate the value of higher education is simply a waste.

Now we can more fully understand the riddle of this holiday's name. The Hebrew word *Shavuot* means "weeks." This is a reference to the seven weeks that begin with Passover and culminate on Shavuot. Isn't it curious, though, that a holiday would be named after what takes place *before* it instead of what actually takes place *on* it? The answer to this riddle is that from our perspective, Shavuot can be fully meaningful only if the time that proceeds it is meaningful. There isn't much to do on Shavuot because the essence of Shavuot lies in the realm of preparation. We prepare to accept God's gift of the Torah so that on Shavuot He can give it to us.

The curious name of the holiday tips us off to the fact that if we are to access the rich spiritual opportunities that exist within Shavuot, then we must pay close attention to the time that precedes the holiday. The essential preparation for Shavuot is attitudinal. It's about how we view the gift.

We will now examine three of the essential factors of Shavuot preparations.

1. It's a gift.

If the Torah is a gift, then the question is, How does this inform and guide our preparation? The answer lies in the following perspective.

To view the Torah as a gift means that, in essence, it is for us. Just like when I buy my daughter a new bicycle or computer, it's for her, not for me. 's for her pleasure, not mine; for her good, not mine. I give her gifts because I love *her*, not myself. The same is true with the Torah. That the Torah is a gift implies that it's for us: it's for our pleasure, our good. It is meant to facilitate our success in life, our achievement of meaning.

Think about it: If the Torah's instructions include a *mitzva* to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of a widow or an orphan, then who are our acts of empathy and kindness for? Are they for us, for God, or for the widow and orphan? Clearly they are for the beneficiaries of our kind deeds because they are the ones in need. It can also be said that when we go out of our way to assist others, these acts are also for us because we need to learn to be more sensitive, responsive, and giving. But what about God? Does He need us to be sensitive? Certainly not, because God has no needs. God is complete and perfect in and of Himself. As such, he lacks nothing, has no deficiencies, and therefore doesn't gain anything when we are kind to one another. The same is true with giving charity, fasting on Yom Kippur, eating matzah, and not spreading gossip about people-everything the Torah asks us to do is for *us*, not God.

In truth, this perspective of giftness is the bedrock of all spirituality. Ultimate spirituality is found in a relationship with God, the transcendental source of all, and that relationship begins with a gift.

2. Days count

We're fairly used to life the way it is, but imagine if our situation were a little different. Imagine if we were born knowing exactly how long we would live, right down to the last minute on the last day of our lives. Do you think we would look at life differently? How about every day of our lives? Certainly as the final months of life ticked away, we would begin to relate to our allotted time a little differently than we would otherwise.

One day in San Francisco, a dentist friend, while working on my teeth, told me that it was his fiftieth birthday. `Well then, just ten more years to live. to really live!' I joked through the nitrous oxide. Knowing his delight in physical sport, I floated the possibility that his body might have only another ten years of the energy and stamina necessary for his favorite endeavors, backpacking and wild-river rafting. Though I was only half-kidding, and fifty-five years old myself at the time, he was apparently ripe to hear this, and a few months later changed his office hours to a four-day week, finalized his divorce, and bought a new pair of skis. I have never seen him so light hearted as when he speaks about how much more time he has to live by giving himself one extra day each week.

From, A Year to Live, by Stephen Levine

*Now Abraham was quite old, he came with **his** days, and God blessed him in every way.*

Genesis 24:1

*Now these were **the days of the years** of the life lived by Abraham; one hundred years and seventy years and five years.*

Genesis 25:7

When reflecting on the life of Abraham, founder of the Jewish people, the Torah makes a point of highlighting the *days* of his life. A man who was aware of his days, and made each of them count, launched the Jewish presence on the stage of history. Six hundred years after the passing of Abraham, his descendants were liberated from Egyptian bondage; forty-nine days later they received the Torah. From that time forth, the Jewish people would commemorate the holiday of Shavuot by counting the forty-nine days that precede the holiday. This path of counting that returns all Jews to the foot of Mount Sinai is known as the *Sefira*, the counting period.

To Abraham, every day of life possessed great value, meaning, and

potential. Abraham's attitude toward the days of his life belied an all-encompassing love and value for life itself.

The Torah is for people who have a deep regard for days, a deep regard for life.

When we count the days leading to Shavuot, it's not a "countdown" (we don't count from forty-nine backwards until we get to one) rather, we count up. The first day of the sefira counting period is day one, the second day is day two, and so forth all the way until day forty-nine.

Some people collect seashells, others collect antiques-Jews collect days.

An essential prerequisite to Shavuot is striving to become a collector of days. To cherish not only life, but days. To embrace each day as a fresh opportunity for achievement, for meaning, for growth-for connection to God. After all, isn't that what really counts?

3. A Goal, a direction, a purpose.

We take for granted that people need goals in life, something to strive for.

We take for granted that people without any sense of direction in life, people who see life as an aimless meandering path to nowhere, are in deep trouble.

We take for granted that the difference between a person who lives with a sense of purpose and one who feels that he has no purpose at all, is greater than the difference between night and day.

A powerful way to conceive of the cognitive, cultural, and even, in part, the political life of a society is as a conversation. All we know of social reality is taken from the stream of unending conversations, which constitute it. How could it be otherwise, since people never hear or learn anything else? With the exception of a few strikingly original people, individuals view the world in a manner that is in consonance with their society's conversation.

Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, [Hitler's Willing Executioners](#)

We live in a society, a global society, whose conversation is built on the foundation of notions like purpose and goals and direction; on concepts like striving to better oneself and the world one lives in; on dreaming—even attempting—to forge a brighter future for the generations that will inherit the world we leave behind.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine a society devoid of these ideas. If we were asked to conceive of people living not just without a sense of purpose but without even the concept of purpose, we would imagine some Borg-like race of aliens devoid of heart and soul.

Yet, once upon a time, that is precisely what mankind's conversation was like.

*All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different in their assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: 'No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once ... every event has been enacted, is enacted and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear and will appear at every turn of the circle.'*

Thomas Cahill, The Gifts of the Jews

In the ancient world, people saw all of history as nothing more than one big Broadway theatre and all of human life as nothing more than playing one role or another in Broadway's longest-running production. Whether you were an actress playing Grizabella in the original cast of Cats or Grizabella in a high school production, your lines were still the same, your part the same, and your future the same. You were just going through the same motions that countless others before you had gone through, uttering the same words that many more would echo after you.

If we had lived in the second millennium BC, the millennium of Avram (Abraham), and could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, ... On every continent, in every society, Avram (Abraham) would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao-Tsu and Siddhartha would one day give their followers: do not journey but sit; compose yourself by the river of life, meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow-on all that is past or passing or to come-until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the Great Wheel and with your own death and the death of all things ...

Thomas Cahill, The Gifts of the Jews

The Jewish nation left Egypt and headed out into the wilderness. But this was not a people without a purpose or a goal or a mission. This was a people who knew that, despite hundreds of years of brutal oppression, one day their situation would be different. This was a people who saw a mountain called Sinai not as just another resting place in the wilderness

but as an ideal to strive for, as the embodiment of a mission to whose calling they would have to rise.

In Egypt, the Jews were subjected not only to backbreaking labor but also to spirit-breaking labor. They were ordered to build cities on unstable ground only to watch the product of their efforts crumble and then have to start the same work all over again. But this was a people who carried an ancient promise, a promise that one day, not only would they be free from, but they would be free to. For forty-nine days the Jewish people traveled; not just away from Egypt but to Mount Sinai. With each passing day, they moved closer and closer to their goal. But even more, with each passing day, they reaffirmed their belief that life could have a goal. That life didn't have to remain the way it had always been. That one doesn't have to be a prisoner of one's past. That there is no script called fate and that, in fact, the scenes of a much brighter future are waiting to be written.

The Torah that we received at Mount Sinai is nothing less than a revolutionary manifesto for changing the world. Our people have the great task of teaching humanity that we have just begun to scratch the surface of human greatness. In biomedicine and molecular physics, as in so many other fields, we are just beginning to realize that while we have come so far, there is still much farther to go. In the realms of morality and spirituality, human dignity and human consciousness, the same is true.

The Jews started it all-and by "it" I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and Gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes ... think with a different mind ... And we would set a different course for our lives. There is simply no one else remotely like them; theirs is a unique vocation. Indeed, as we shall see, the very idea of a vocation, of a personal destiny, is a Jewish idea.

Thomas Cahill, [The Gifts of the Jews](#)

The Torah, our gift from Sinai, is a never-ending call to reach for more and more of our ultimate potential.

So the name of the holiday is Shavuot, weeks. And the soul of the holiday can be found in the days that precede it, days during which we strive to lift our vision. With each passing day we look for yet another way to ready ourselves to accept God's gift, and to embrace the privilege of being part of a people capable of inspiring the entire world.

This article was written by Shimon Apisdorf, award-winning author of the Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit, the Survival Kit Family Haggadah and other informative and thought-provoking books that prepare their readers to appreciate and enjoy the Jewish holidays unlike ever before. For more about these books, see www.leviathanpress.com.

Text Copyright © Shimon Apisdorf and [Leviathan Press](http://www.leviathanpress.com), Inc.