

THE 'WEEK' LINK

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Passover has its seder. Purim has its Megillah reading. Chanukah has its menorah. Sukkot has its sukkah.

Shavuot, however, seems to be quite a barren holiday in terms of rituals and commandments. True, many have a custom to remain awake the entire night studying Torah on Shavuot, but this is a custom and not an obligatory law. The Torah does not prescribe any particular directive to be performed on Shavuot. This unique aspect of Shavuot, in contrast to the other festivals, is extremely surprising.

Shavuot is certainly a more significant, more inspirational festival than any of the others. The others derive their validity, both legal and spiritual, from the giving of the Torah, which occurred on Shavuot. Why then must we struggle to find meaning in Shavuot? Beyond the special sacrifices brought on the festival, why shouldn't the Torah assist us, as it characteristically does, by requiring an observance of some kind that would call to mind the giving of the Torah? Why isn't there an obligation to recant the story of the Sinai Revelation on Shavuot, similar to the commandment on Passover to tell of the Exodus?

More questions:

The name Shavuot means "Festival of Weeks." We refer to it as such in the prayers of the holiday. This name is derived from verses in various places in the Torah, which states: "You should count seven weeks... Then you should observe the Holiday of Weeks."

We see clearly that the name "Weeks" is a descriptive culmination of the 49 days/seven weeks count which began on Passover.

Strange. Wouldn't it have made more sense for the holiday to be called the "Festival of Torah"? Even if, for whatever reason, that name would be rejected, the name "Weeks" seems quite dry and incidental. True, we just completed a count of seven weeks, but why is it important to call the

festival "Weeks"? Are we celebrating the weeks counted, or the day of the giving of the Torah?

In addition, the Torah never refers to Shavuot by a particular calendar date as it does with all other holidays. Passover is described as the 15th of Nissan, Sukkot the 15th of Tishrei, and so on. Yet Shavuot is mentioned as "seven weeks or 49 days after Passover." The Torah implies that if theoretically no one would count the seven weeks, Shavuot would not take place that year. Shavuot can only exist when and if the counting preparations have occurred. Why is this so?

PREPARING TO RECEIVE

It would appear, evidently, that we are indeed rejoicing in the "weeks." This is because without the preparatory weeks, we could not accept the Torah.

The purpose of the counting period is to enable us to prepare for receiving the Torah. We cannot expect to accept the Torah without adequate preparation.

In receiving the Torah, we are entering into a marriage with God. Any good marriage consists of a man and woman who have grown spiritually and emotionally throughout their lives as individuals, thus preparing themselves for bonding with another person. Without proper preparation, a marriage begins on shaky ground.

Similarly, we must prepare ourselves for God's giving of the Torah. If we would not prepare for receiving the Torah, it would be impossible for the Torah's goals, directives, and instructions to stick to us and make an impact. We must first become people worthy of hearing the Torah's sophisticated message. We must work on our character and only then can we utilize and apply the Torah. This idea is expressed in the Talmud: "Without proper character, there is no Torah."

So God established a holiday in which we rejoice in the weeks spent in preparation for the giving of the Torah. We revel in the beautiful and refined people that we have become as a result of the previous seven weeks, knowing that it is only due to this tremendous self-improvement that we merit receiving His instructions for living, carrying out God's plans for the world through the Torah.

Celebrating the counting and preparations also brings to life the concept of the application of Torah being primary, and not just the intellectual study, even if one studies with sincere and holy intentions. The goal of study is to impact upon all of our actions and thoughts in fulfilling the entirety of the Torah's 613 laws. On Shavuot we accept and recommit ourselves to the wholeness of Torah.

COMPLETE CONNECTION

This clarifies a common misconception regarding Shavuot and returns us to our opening question as to why Shavuot has no specific mitzvah or observance prescribed.

Generally, it is understood that the focus of Shavuot is the commandment to study Torah. While this may be true if measured by a standard of time, since we do spend the entire Shavuot night studying Torah, it is inaccurate, nonetheless. Rather, the focus of Shavuot should be a reestablishment of our

connection to the entire Torah, with all of its laws.

Whenever we experience a festival, we are not simply commemorating an event; we are reliving it. Every festival is an opportunity for growth because the festival is infused with spiritual forces that were unleashed due to some historical event.

On Shavuot, the Jewish people received and accepted the Torah. Thus, every year we accept the Torah anew, and we must find ways in our personal service of God to strengthen our commitment to all of Torah.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the Torah does not prescribe a specific ritual observance for Shavuot. On other holidays, the Torah gives specific directions both in the letter and the spirit of the laws. At times, one can "get lost" in the performance of the ritual and fail to achieve significant general growth due to a lack of focus on the general meaning of the festival. The Torah accounts for this, but for most holidays allows the fulfillment of an observance to suffice.

On Shavuot, however, the Torah does not want us to become "distracted" by the performance of any specific commandment. The giving of the Torah is far too powerful and all encompassing to enable any expression of specific ritual through physical action to be meaningful. The Torah includes all commandments. A mitzvah ritual obligation would actually detract from, not enhance, the general goal of a recommitment to the entire Torah on Shavuot.

We learn all night and as much as possible on Shavuot to show how precious the Torah is to us and to express our great desire to know all of God's Torah. It is only with knowledge of the Torah that we can begin to allow it to impact upon us as people. Only through the knowledge of Torah will our character improve, and only through study will we become familiar with all its laws. But we can't allow Torah study alone to "steal" the day. We must realize that the focus of Shavuot must be to recommit ourselves to the entirety of Torah and its laws.

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