

SHAVUOS: SEVEN SPECIAL WEEKS

by Rabbi Naphtali Hoff

Of the primary festivals within the Jewish year, Shavuos possesses what seems at first to be the most uninspiring and perplexing name. Pesach declares that G-d passed over Jewish homes as He slaughtered all Egyptian first-borns, heralding in the great Exodus. Succos reminds us of the miraculous preservation of the Jewish people - three million strong - for forty years in a barren desert.

The name "Shavuos" (lit. Weeks - i.e. the seven weeks between leaving Egypt and receiving the Torah), on the other hand, invokes none of these glorious thoughts. Rather, it leaves us scratching our heads in confusion. Why is it that for this great holiday, through which we celebrate our receiving the Torah at Sinai - the single most important event in all of Jewish history - we lack a more powerful and seemingly relevant name than Shavuos?

Perhaps more importantly, our festivals are typically named after a primary event or theme, not the process leading up to that event or concept! Why then, when it comes to Shavuos, do we name the day after the weeks leading up to the special day and not use a name that describes the day itself?

Further compounding our problem is the fact that Shavuos is practically eclipsed by the ongoing mitzvah of sefiras ha'omer, the counting sequence that begins immediately after the barley offering of 16 Nissan (see Leviticus 23:15-16) and ends literally moments before Shavuos is set to commence. Why must this great day of Shavuos be forced to share so much of its limelight with another, ostensibly unrelated mitzvah?

Atzeres: Developing the Special Bond

Another name for Shavuos is "Atzeres" - the name most commonly used by the Torah and our sages. Its name is derived from the Hebrew atzor, which means to remain behind, separate from the rest of the group. Thus we find with regards to the "other" Atzeres, Shemini Atzeres (which follows immediately after Succos):

G-d says to Israel, *"I have detained you to remain with Me (on Shemini Atzeres)."* This is analogous to a king who invited his sons to feast with him for a certain number of days. When the time came for them to leave, he said, "My sons, please, stay with me just one more day, for it is difficult for me to part with you!" (Rashi to Leviticus 23:36)

Rashi's comments are based on the words of the Talmud, found in Sukkah 55b.

To what do the seventy bulls that were offered during the seven days of (Succos) correspond? To the seventy (gentile) nations. To what does the single bullock (of Shemini Atzeres) correspond? To the unique nation (i.e. the Jewish people.) This may be compared to a king who said to his servants, 'Prepare for me a great banquet', but on the last day he said to his beloved friend, 'Prepare for me a simple meal that I may derive benefit from you'.

As the Talmud makes clear, the idea of atzeres is to add a special, intimate dimension to the primary, preceding festival. Following the seven day period of Succos comes a special addendum, to help solidify our relationship with our Maker.

The same is true of Shavuos, the atzeres to the previous holiday of Pesach. When the Jewish people unquestioningly accepted the Torah, declaring that we will first do (the mitzvos) and then we will hear (i.e. to achieve understanding - Exodus 22:7), we widened the gap that separated our nation from all others. G-d responded in kind, by reserving that day as an Atzeres, giving us an opportunity to reaffirm our connection to the single most precious gift ever bestowed upon the Jewish people, His Torah.

The Process is the Goal

Despite this basic connection between the two "Atzeres", there is a fundamental distinction. Shemini Atzeres is celebrated immediately upon the conclusion of Succos. In contrast, before we celebrate Shavuos, we are told to count "*seven complete weeks*" (Leviticus 23:15). Why the difference?

The Midrash (Shir HaShirim Rabbah 7:4) offers the following insight:

In truth, Shemini Atzeres should have followed Succos after an interval of fifty days, just as Shavuos follows Pesach. However in the weeks following Shemini Atzeres, the time is not suitable for traveling (the roads are dusty or muddy and difficult for walking). G-d was like a king who had several married daughters, some who lived nearby, while others resided at a great distance away. One day they all came to visit their father the king. The king said, "Those who live nearby are able to travel at any time. But those who live at a distance are not able to travel at any time. So while they are all here with me, let us make one feast for all of them and rejoice with them." (However) with regard to Shavuos... G-d says, "This season is fit for traveling."

It seems clear that in order for an atzeres to have the maximal effect, some time should exist between the primary holiday and its respective atzeres, as is the case between Pesach and Shavuos. The only reason as to why Shemini Atzeres is celebrated immediately upon the conclusion of Succos, without any such gap, is out of compassion for the pilgrims, to avoid them trekking back to Jerusalem under difficult, possibly inclement circumstances.

But why should this be so? Why, under perfect circumstances would we require such a separation? What is the benefit of this delay? One likely explanation is the fact that delay allows for preparation of upcoming events. The Jewish people needed time to prepare for receiving the Torah. Had they

arrived at Mount Sinai immediately after leaving Egypt - a land steeped in idolatry and immorality - they would not have been able to fully appreciate the gift which was being bestowed upon them.

Let us now return to our earlier questions. Why the seemingly unimpressive name of "Shavuos", which focuses more on the process which led up to the event rather than the event itself?

The answer is that when it comes to Shavuos, the process itself - the seven weeks of spiritual preparation - is also a cause for commemoration and celebration! Without such efforts, our nation would have been unable to properly receive its special gift, the Torah, greatly minimizing its impact.

Where's the Date?

It is with this in mind that we can hope to understand another peculiarity related to Shavuos. With regards to both Pesach and Succos, the Torah (Leviticus 23:6-7 and 23:34, respectively) clearly identifies their exact dates of celebration, the fifteenth of Nissan and the fifteenth of Tishrei, respectively. Yet, when it comes to Shavuos, no date is mentioned. Instead, the Torah declares its celebration to be contingent upon Pesach and the sefirah period that follows:

And you shall count from the next day after the rest day... seven weeks shall be complete. To the next day after the seventh week shall you count fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord.... And you shall proclaim on the same day, that it may be a holy gathering to you; you shall do no labor in it; it shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. (Leviticus 23:15-16, 21)

Why is it that no date is mentioned regarding Shavuos, forcing us to calculate it through alternative means? If anything, this holiday, one that celebrates our receiving the Torah, should be identified directly by its own date. Why does the Torah instead go out of its way to connect Shavuos to Pesach in this peculiar manner?

The answer again is that the process leading up to our receiving the Torah is an invaluable aspect of the actual experience. Without it, no meaningful transference could take place. Hence, the date of Shavuos is only significant if it is viewed as being the end of fifty days of preparation! Thus it (and its date) is not an independent entity, but rather the outgrowth of an entire process of transition from Pesach to Shavuos.

From Physical to Spiritual

Let us develop this idea a bit further. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes in his masterpiece Horeb (pp.84-90) that there is a special link between the word atzeres and the spiritual development of our people. Each of the festivals represents a different aspect within the development of the Jewish nation. Pesach represents the physical birth of our nation. For the first time, after centuries of servitude, we were able to begin developing as an independent nation.

Succos symbolizes the physical survival of the Jewish people. Following the Exodus from Egypt, our

nation, three million strong, survived in the desert for forty years without natural sources of food, drink, or shelter. They managed to do so only because G-d provided for our needs. Food fell from heaven in the form of man, water poured forth from the well. Our clothes and our shoes never wore out. The heavenly clouds provided us with protection from the elements.

Atzeres, on the other hand, both in the form of Shavuos and as Shmini Atzeres, places a greater emphasis on the spiritual side of our relationship with G-d. Shavuos was in effect the spiritual birth of our nation. Only with the acceptance of the Torah could we recognize our true, spiritual essence, fundamentally separating ourselves from all other nations.

Shmini Atzeres represents our spiritual survival. It highlights our ability to continue to grow and develop spiritually, to live amongst the gentile nations and still be able to preserve a close connection with G-d - "it is difficult for me to part with you".

It is possibly for this reason that neither day of atzeres possesses its own, unique commandments. Instead, we focus on the source of all mitzvos, G-d and His Torah, learning from it on Shavuos and dancing with it on Shemini Atzeres (Simchas Torah). We reaffirm our commitment to Torah in the most basic of ways, intellectually, physically, and emotionally, without the assistance of any outside motivators.

Why Fifty?

One question still remains. Why did G-d specifically designate that there be fifty days for the above mentioned process of preparation? Why not forty, or sixty days, or some other number? To this the Maharal of Prague gives a fascinating explanation. In order for us to fully appreciate his answer, however, we need to first ask ourselves another, seemingly unrelated question. Why is it that we celebrate eight days of Chanuka? Certainly we are familiar with the fact that the oil of the single flask burned for eight days instead of one, giving the Jews enough time to produce new oil. But what is the deeper message behind the number eight?

In his work *Ner Mitzvah* (page 23), Maharal explains that in the area of Jewish symbolism the number eight possesses special significance. This importance stems from the fact that eight is one more than seven, the number which symbolizes Nature, as in the seven days of creation. That which comes "after nature" in reality transcends nature, elevating the physical reality to a new spiritual realm. Thus, we circumcise our sons on the eighth day so as to elevate the uncircumcised child from a purely physical state to a new spiritual dimension. We also kindle Chanuka lights for eight days, to underscore the spiritual basis of the Chanuka miracle.

For this same reason we were instructed to celebrate Shavuos on the fiftieth day. Following seven weeks of preparation, the Jewish people were finally ready to accept the Torah, having achieved the spiritual transcendence necessary to properly receive it. The fiftieth day, one day after the seven weeks were completed, symbolizes the other worldly concept expressed by the number eight.

Torah is infinite. It cannot be associated with a number that symbolizes the limitations of nature. Rather, it must be expressed as eight. For seven weeks, the Jewish people moved steadily closer to their goal of being ready to receive the Torah. On the fiftieth day - a higher expression of the number eight - we transcended the limitations of nature and rose to an almost G-d-like level. Only then were we ready to receive the Torah.

Sefiras HaOmer: The End is Just the Beginning

Rav Hirsch (commentary to Leviticus 23:15-16) offers a similar explanation. He suggests that Pesach, as the festival of freedom, represents not only freedom, but the first step towards "self-supporting national prosperity". However, this is merely the first step in the spiritual weltanschauung of a Torah nation.

The true goal is to achieve Shavuos, to receive the Torah from the one G-d. The way to accomplish this is to experience the "purification and (spiritual) adjustment" of Shabbos even times over, with each experience serving to detoxify us further from the impurities and moral challenges which routinely confront us. Once we have experienced such a process, we have reached the level of fifty, and can be considered ready to re-receive our holy Torah.

This is the message of sefirah. Any successful harvest is cause for celebration, the culmination of much effort and toil. But how are we to view our newfound material bounty? Is it to be seen as an end unto itself, or the means by which we can achieve our lofty goals in life? G-d instructs us at this exact moment of material success to begin counting seven weeks towards Shavuos. Keep your eyes focused on the true, spiritual goals. Work hard to achieve slow, steady growth, bringing us closer, day by day, to our lofty mission of accepting the Torah. It is a process that allows us to transcend the physical world that surrounds us and partake in our special audience with G-d, our Atzeres.

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