

# SHAVUOS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Shavuot is represented in the Torah as being the chag habikurim the holiday of the first fruits. In the times of the Temple in Jerusalem, the bikurim offering was an annual event, an obligation placed on the Jewish farmer to bring the first of his crops to the altar in the Temple. There is an entire tractate in Mishna dealing with the ritual and laws of this event of bikurim. An integral part of the ceremony of the bikurim offering was the recitation of a parsha of the Torah, a parsha that appears in Dvarim, Ki Tavo. The parsha that is recited is a concise history of the Jewish people from the time of our patriarchs till the moment of the Jew's appearance at the Temple with his bikurim offering. The Jewish farmer, having worked and sweated his way through the vicissitudes of an always uncertain growing season and having finally successfully harvested his crop, is not only obligated to give thanks to God for His bounty but is also obligated to place the entire "natural" event of growing crops in the Land of Israel into an historical perspective. The Mishna teaches us that there are those who are mayvee v'eino korei who bring the bikurim offering but do not recite the parsha of history. Though, halachically this restriction applies only to gerim = converts and other special cases, there is a moral lesson involved here as well. And the lesson is that unless one appreciates one's place in the greater, broader, longer view of Jewish history and life, even if one brings offerings to God's altar, something is yet incomplete and unfulfilled. One has to aspire to be mayvee v'korei to both bring one's offering to God and to read the parsha that will help give that offering proper meaning and validity.

Shavuot is the anniversary of the giving the Torah to Israel on Sinai over three millennia ago. If a Jew wishes that one's offerings and accomplishments in life should have some eternal meaning then the connection to Torah and Sinai must be plainly evident in one's behavior, actions and attitudes. This is the bond between bikurim and the commemoration of the revelation at Sinai, the twin poles that raise the banner of Shavuot. Without the acceptance and understanding of Torah, without the acknowledgment of the Godly revelation at Sinai, our accomplishments in life are at best only mayvee v'eino korei an offering and sacrifice often made without proper perspective and understanding. Shavuot as chag matan torateinu - the holiday of the giving of our Torah to Israel and as chag habikurim the holiday of the offering of the first of our crops to the Temple is therefore a whole unit. The two components of Shavuot bikurim and Torah complement each other and reinforce our faith and desire to do God's will here on earth. Our physical and life accomplishments are seen as our bikurim, our mayvee, our prime offerings of the best that we have to the service of God and man, and our loyalty to Torah is our korei our recitation of the special Torah parsha that

explains and gives meaning to our actions and behavior. So, Shavuot is seen as the fulfillment of this basic obligation of Jewish life, of behavior and analysis combined.

Shavuot is also called atzeret in Mishna and Talmud. In this sense, it represents the conclusion of the season and holiday of Pesach. It is therefore noteworthy that in the recitation of the Hagada on the Seder night of Pesach, the parsha of bikurim serves as one of the central themes of the Hagada. For Pesach is the epitome of the concept of mayvee v'korei of observance of ritual and proper behavior patterns coupled with a deep sense of history and of Jewish connection to Sinai and its revelation. Therefore, the Hagada analyzes almost every word of the parsha of bikurim, fleshing out its meaning and placing it into proper context and understanding. In so doing, the Hagada unites the two holidays of Pesach and Shavuot into one time frame and spiritual unit. Judaism always advocates seeing all of its aspects of faith and ritual as a whole. The forest is as important as are the trees. The atzeret of Shavuot gives meaning to the holiday of Pesach just as the holiday of Pesach gives the necessary preamble and background for the holiday of Shavuot. May this holiday bring to us health, joy and spiritual meaning.

## **SHAVUOT MEMORIES**

I was preparing myself for conducting part of the all-might learning session held on Shavuot night at my synagogue when I came across a book that contained descriptions of past Shavuot celebrations here in the Land and State of Israel. A great deal of the book was devoted to the new and innovative programs celebrating Shavuot that were all the rage in the kibbutzim and in much of the new Israeli society of the 1920s and 1930s. In that age Shavuot lost all meaning as chag matan torateinu the holiday of the granting of the Torah to Israel on Sinai - and became an almost hedonistic rite of the celebration of Jewish agriculture chag habikurim. Parades, dances, festooned donkeys and waving pretty girls in farm wagons, marches and bands all celebrated the feast of Shavuot and the triumph of the Jewish farmer, now unfettered by the shackles of the Diaspora and Jewish tradition. All of this was accompanied by a mocking attitude towards the old-fashioned Shavuot and a tough and dedicated spirit of the new age of Marxism's triumph that was to be ushered in together with the new fruits of the season. Bialik, Tchernikovsy and others wrote poetry about our new farmers and the pagan glory of the new celebrations. In fact, some of the noted writers and journalists of that time wrote that it was certain that May Day the international holiday of workers and Marxism would replace Shavuot even the new purely chag habikurim Shavuot eventually as the Jewish holiday of the late springtime. Ah, for the good old days of unreal Marxist n'avet, and doctrinaire thinking!

But the new and innovative Shavuot did not stand the test of time. Communism and Marxism collapsed in the detritus of failed economic planning and murderous dictatorial governments. The kibbutzim now are pretty much broke, both economically and socially. Israeli agriculture is currently almost wholly dependent on foreign laborers doing the work. There is no longer a May Day parade in most of the country and the red flags that were the banners of the brave new world are languishing in mothballs. The chag habikurim Shavuot parades and dances, the enactments of the

joys of planting and harvesting, are all passe. The Socialists have turned capitalistic, those who sent the Jews to settle Gaza and the Land of Israel now force them to leave, the Zionists have become post-Zionists, the Israeli patriots have become intoxicated with the civil rights of the Palestinians who are out to destroy the Jewish state, and the archeologists and biblical scholars of the People of the Book are out to prove that there never really was a book. It is not that the "secular wagon" of the new Jew is empty. It is rather that the wagon has hit so many ruts in the road that, for lack of discipline and balance, it has completely overturned.

The Jewish value system, embodied in the Ten Commandments, which Shavuot truly commemorates, is the key to successful Jewish survival in this land. It has always been so in our history and it remains so today. I speak not so much of observance of ritual and Jewish law, which by the way I believe ultimately is the only way to preserve Jewish values in a Jewish society, as I do of having an understanding and appreciation of tradition, custom and proper behavior in Jewish life. The shamelessness and arrogance that infects our political system is anathema to the Jewish value system. The acceptance and approval of rudeness, intolerance, demonization of others, aggressiveness and ruthlessness in our society, as exhibited in social, economic and political behavior is deemed unacceptable in the Jewish value system. All of the ills that plague our society domestic violence, crime and murders, substance abuse, corruption of leaders are traceable to a loss of a value system that would and does inhibit such behavior. These societal ills cross all barriers and affect all groups in Israeli society, though the instance of these ills is statistically lower in religious Jewish society than in the secular section. One can see only the trees of ritual and not view the forest of values that underpins the ritual. Yet, somehow, our schools and homes must regain the ability to teach and train our children in our value system if we are to succeed in our task of building a truly Jewish society here in Israel. Why demand knowledge of the Bible on a bagrut examination if all of its values and tenets are deemed irrelevant and unnecessary in the real world of our daily lives maybe the government and the teachers' unions should discuss this question as they wrangle about reforms in our broken school system. Maybe.

Shavuot the old time worn but ever-fresh Shavuot, represents the Jewish value system. The system emphasizes loyalty and honesty, respect towards elders and our past, sanctity of time (some sort of public sensitivity towards the Sabbath day) and place (Jerusalem and the Temple Mount), and a commitment to try and create a harmonious, not conformist society. Our Jewish value system does not allow for false gods and their utopian ruthlessness. It emphasizes our duties towards the stranger and the foreigner, for we ourselves have been in that position so many times since our first experience in Egypt. It looks to build a more just society, to raise the poor and to temper the rich, to teach the unlettered and humble the scholar, to exalt and save life and to unite Jewish society while preserving the right to be individually different one from another. Shavuot is more than cheesecake and an all-night Torah learning experience. It is rather the reliving of Sinai and its value system, its lofty goals and long road. Only in such a fashion can our Shavuot be memorable and meaningful for us and for future generations as well. Text Copyright © 2005 by [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and [Torah.org](#)