



Week 5: Talmud Torah K'Neced Kulam: Economic Justice and Shavuot **Emily Bell, Class of 2027**

Shavuot often feels like the odd one out of the *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Since the Torah *mitzvot* specific to Shavuot can only be fulfilled when the Temple is standing, the customs we usually associate with the holiday were mostly created by the rabbis. In [Vayikra 23](#), where the *shalosh regalim* are established, we can easily recognize the distinctive *mitzvot* for Pesach and Sukkot that we still practice today. While the Torah commands us to eat matzah on Pesach, and to dwell in *sukkot* and take up the *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot, it gives us no specific commandments for Shavuot itself, though we are instructed to count the Omer from Pesach until Shavuot.

The specific experiential elements commanded on Pesach and Sukkot are important not only because they allow us to embody the experience of observing the *mitzvot*, but also because of the awareness that embodiment generates. They force us to confront issues of economic justice. When we dwell in temporary homes on Sukkot, and when we eat the bread of affliction while inviting all who are hungry to come and eat on Pesach, our ritual practices draw our attention to the vulnerable people both within and outside of our communities. These *mitzvot* remind us of those who always experience the precarity that we are experiencing for just that moment. This theme is a major part of how we experience these holidays. In contrast, the core experience of Shavuot, learning Torah all night at the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, does not have an obvious connection to this theme.

Is there a way for Shavuot to offer us its own embodied experience of vulnerability to create opportunities for connection and solidarity with the oppressed? To answer this question, we can trace the development of the holiday from Vayikra, through the Mishna, to post-exilic rabbinic texts to understand how the rabbis preserved the theme of economic justice in their quest to transform Shavuot after the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash*, and how it might reverberate in our practices today.

Shavuot in the Tanakh and the Temple Era

The Torah offers a series of distinctive *mitzvot* for Shavuot: counting the seven weeks of the Omer; bringing different *korbanot* (sacrifices) to the Temple; and bringing the *bikkurim*, the first fruits, to the Temple as an offering for the priests. Strikingly, and perhaps surprisingly, Vayikra's discussion of Shavuot ends not with a holiday-specific commandment, but instead with a universal one:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I Hashem am your God ([Vayikra 23:22](#)).

These are the *mitzvot* of *peah*, *leket*, and *shikhhah*, which require one to leave the corner of one's field, any ears of grain that fall during harvest, and any forgotten sheaves for the poor to gather, respectively. All farming done in the Land of Israel is subject to these entitlements, and thus there is no explicit tie to Shavuot. It seems that they appear here simply because they have to be done at the end of the harvest season, which roughly coincides with Shavuot.

[The Mishna in Sheviit](#) builds on the connection between Shavuot and the communal obligation to sustain the poor. The first chapter discusses the rabbinic concept of *tosefet sheviit*—adding on to the Sabbatical year by refraining from plowing orchards past a certain point in the sixth year. Beit Hillel says that one may plow their fields “*ad atzeret*,” until *Atzeret*, another name for Shavuot. Therefore, according to Beit Hillel, Shavuot was the beginning of the heightened state of vulnerability created by the Sabbatical year.

Within its original Torah context, there was an obvious connection between the timing of Shavuot, the rhythm of the agricultural calendar, and *tzedakah* as a legislated practice, an association expanded by the mishnah in Sheviit. However, this connection is easily lost on those of us living in the diaspora and who are not engaged in farm labor. Instead, our Torah learning itself must help us connect with this experience, as we will see in Megillat Ruth.

Connecting Human Agency to Embodied Practice in Megillat Ruth

In the wake of the Temple's destruction, the rabbis transformed Shavuot into *Zman Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah. As part of this reframed commemoration, the rabbis instituted the reading of the Book of Ruth, which connects the themes of revelation with the themes of economic justice and vulnerability that were so central in the Torah.

Central to the narrative of the Book of Ruth is the extreme precarity of poverty. The heroines of our story, Ruth and Naomi, struggle to survive as destitute widows who are unable to redeem their late

husbands' land holdings and, thus, to provide for themselves. When Ruth promises her mother-in-law that she will be buried with her, that is not merely a figurative oath of fealty. Instead, it represents a very real possibility due to their extreme poverty.

The midrash in [Rut Rabbah 5:9](#) underscores their poverty and provides a remarkable commentary on the nature of material wealth. This text helps us see the connection between the holiday's agricultural roots, the rabbinic association of Shavuot with the revelation at Sinai, and the theme of justice that resounds throughout the other pilgrimage holidays. The text imagines Ruth and Naomi discussing Ruth's gleaning of Boaz's field, saying:

Her mother-in-law said to her: "Where did you glean today?" It is taught in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua: More than the owner does for the poor person, the poor person does for the owner, as Ruth said to Naomi: "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." She did not say "who worked with me," but rather "with whom I worked." I performed many actions and many favors for him because he gave me one slice of bread. "[They will be punished for their iniquity] because [*ya'an uvya'an*] [they rejected my ordinances]" (Leviticus 26:43), *yaan* is *ani*. Rabbi Shilo of Naveh said: "The destitute [*haevyon*], your wealth is dependent on him [*honakh bei*]."

The *midrash* puns on a verse from *parshat* Bechukotai which, in its context, addresses what will happen to the Israelites if they fail to keep the sabbatical year. By connecting the phrase "*ya'an uv'ya'an*" to the *shoresh anah* (א-נ-ע), poverty, the midrash highlights the connection between the agricultural cycle and the system of obligations and entitlements by way of which the wealthiest Israelites supported the poorest. These practices are all going on in the background of Ruth's story, which takes place during the wheat harvest, the moment of Shavuot.

The midrash continues:

Rav Nahman said: It is written: "[Give to him] because for [*biglal*] this matter [the Lord God will bless you]' (Deuteronomy 15:10)—there is a wheel [*galgal*] that spins over everyone in the world, like a water wheel; one that is full empties and one that is empty becomes filled. Bar Kappara said: "You do not have a person who does not experience this circumstance [poverty], and if not him, his son experiences it, and if not his son, his grandson experiences it."

The midrash's image of a wheel of water imagines material wealth as something that is accrued and lost in a cyclical pattern of vulnerability and reciprocity that mirrors the agricultural cycle. Compare the text's assertion that wealth is not guaranteed from generation to generation to Hashem's promise to the Israelites during the revelation at Mount Sinai to show kindness "to the thousandth generation that loves and keeps My commandments"(Shemot 2:6). With regards to the inherent vulnerability of

the human experience, material wealth only offers temporary security, but God's enduring kindness for those who love and uphold Torah provides sustenance and refuge.

On a more literal level, this juxtaposition of Torah and material wealth also recalls the contrast between Elimelech, Naomi's husband, and Boaz, Ruth's redeemer, two wealthy men with different attitudes towards their obligations to the poor. Rashi reads Elimelech's decision to leave Eretz Yisrael for Moav during a time of famine as reflecting his stinginess towards the poor, and his death as a punishment for abandoning his community in their time of need.

On the other hand, Boaz is one of the heroes of our story precisely because he is learned and careful to observe the *mitzvot* of *peah*, *leket*, and *shikhhah*. The Book of Ruth is notable for the fact that God does not play a direct role in the story until halfway through the last chapter, when God helps Ruth conceive. Instead, Ruth and Naomi's deliverance from financial ruin is orchestrated entirely through human agency via a halakhic framework that mandates wealthy landowners to care for vulnerable neighbors.

Conclusion

In the Tanakh and Mishna, we saw how Shavuot was originally associated with tithes for the poor and *tosefet sheviit* due to its timing at the end of the wheat harvest. Megillat Ruth bridges this context and our material reality as post-Temple Jews by underscoring the role of Torah in building a society that cares for the poor and vulnerable. While on Pesach and Sukkot we celebrate God's direct intervention to bring us out of Egypt and sustain us in the wilderness, Shavuot, as *Zman Matan Torateinu*, commemorates the moment when God gave us the Torah so that we could become co-agents in redeeming the world. Far from being sidelined, the theme of economic justice is at the very heart of this holiday. This year, as we're drinking coffee, eating cheesecake, and flexing our learning, we should have in mind the examples of our ancestors Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, who brought about redemption through their solidarity and observance of the Shavuot-related *mitzvot*.

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