

Shavuot Jews vs. Pesach Jews



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When I was in public high school, I had trouble getting time off from class for Shavuot. No one believed that it was a “real holiday.” The other Jewish kids, they argued, were not taking time off. I was accused of making up yet another holiday. I understand where the sentiment came from. The chag lacks the external rituals that are associated with other holidays. There is no shofar to blow or lulav to wave. There is no Seder to sit at, no costumes to revel in, and no dreidels to spin. Shavuot is most often associated with the date when we received the Torah (*Zeman Matan Torateinu*), yet even this theme is masked in the Torah.

The Torah informs us of both the agricultural and historical significance of the other pilgrimage festival. For Pesach we learn (Exodus 13:3):

זְכוֹר אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם...

Remember this day that you were taken out of Egypt...

The holiday of Sukkot is celebrated so we remember that our ancestors erected booths (*sukkot*) after they left Egypt (Leviticus 23:42-43):

לְמַעַן יִדְעוּ דִרְתִּיכֶם כִּי בְּסֻכּוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאִי אוֹתָם מִצֶּרֶת מִצְרָיִם

However, the Torah does not mention any historical significance of Shavuot. The fact that the Children of Israel received the Torah at Sinai on Shavuot is nowhere to be found. In each of the five places that the Torah mentions the holiday of Shavuot, only the agricultural significance is mentioned. (For example: וחג הקציר—the

harvest holiday, וחג שבועות—the Feast of Weeks, וביום הבכורים, the day of the first fruit offering). The historical significance and its connection to *Zeman Matan Torateinu* is glaringly absent.

Furthermore, even the Gemara (Pesachim 68b) neglects to call Shavuot by its historical name, describing the holiday as *Atzeret* (עצרת). The word *atzeret* means “closing,” and connotes the conclusion of Pesach. Just as Shemini Atzeret concludes Sukkot, so too does Shavuot conclude Pesach, and the seven weeks in between are seen as an extended Chol HaMoed, linking the first part with the summation. It is the *atzeret* of Pesach.

In *Parashat Emor*, where the Torah speaks of the special obligations of the festivals, Shavuot is not mentioned by name at all. It is only mentioned within the description of Pesach, as if it is merely the conclusion to Pesach. The Shulhan Arukh does not even give the holiday of Shavuot its own section, and includes the scant few laws particular to the holiday within the section of Pesach. Shavuot, it seems, is nothing more than an extension of Pesach, and lacks its own identity.

Furthermore, the Torah enumerates many commandments by which we commemorate Pesach. The Exodus is mentioned on the anniversary of the Exodus, and the rituals of Pesach, such as eating matzah, telling of the story of the Exodus, and the *Korban Pesach* help us remember our march to freedom. In addition, the Exodus is mentioned all year round in the daily recital of the Shema, tefillin, Shabbat, all of which the Torah relates to the Exodus, fulfilling the mitzvah of *zecher litzit'at Mitzrayim*.

In contrast, we do not find even one specific mitzvah whose explicit purpose is to commemorate the events of *Matan Torah*. We don't say the Ten Commandments, in our daily service. We don't say the words *na'aseh v'nishma* ("we will do and we will obey"), and even on its anniversary on Shavuot, we don't re-enact the Sinaitic experience with thunder and shofar blowing as part of our shul liturgy.

Shavuot is the hidden holiday, obscured and overpowered by the rituals of Pesach. If Pesach is a Broadway show, Shavuot is an off-off Broadway production, lacking the fire and brimstone of the Exodus, the crashing waters as the Sea splits, the taste and smells associated with the holiday.

Why does the Torah call upon us to commemorate these two events in such dramatically different ways?

I believe there are two kinds of people in this world: there are Pesach Jews, and there are Shavuot Jews.

Pesach and Shavuot represent two distinct modes of religious experience. There are those who need to express their religiosity in an outward, showy, and confident way. This is Pesach. Then there are those who need a more quiet, inward, and personal religious expression. This is Shavuot, without any tangible ritual.

The paradigm of Shavuot is not the fire and brimstone of the Exodus. Rather, it is quiet and private. Shavuot is the image of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai, picked for being a small modest mountain, where he communed with God alone (מדרש תהלים על תהלים סח:יז). God has warned the people several times not to ascend or even touch the mountain; only Moses must go up and engage in a transcendent, but quiet, personal experience with God.

As Maimonides (Rambam), in *Moreh Nevuchim* (ב:לז) explains:

It is clear to me that what Moses experienced at the Revelation on Mt. Sinai was different from that which was experienced by all the other Israelites, for Moses alone was addressed by God, and for this reason the second person singular is used in the Ten Commandments; Moses then went down to the foot of the mount and told his fellow men what he had heard.

Rambam suggests that the moment of revelation was an entirely private one, where God spoke directly to Moses.

Rebbe Nachman (ליקוטי מוהר"ן א, נב:ג) suggests that each of us should have a special room set aside for prayer, for secluded meditation, and conversation with God. He teaches that sometimes it is beneficial to sit in that room and do nothing else. And if you don't have a special room, he says, find a place to seclude yourself

and converse alone with God.

Shavuot, with all its hiddenness and modesty is an opportunity for us to create that special room or space our own personal and modest "Mt. Sinais," where we can usher in God's presence. It is this kind of religious experience that I strive to capture and revel in. I think back to those few moments in my life where I was able to shut out the noise, the humdrum of everyday life, and see God's miracles, and quietly just be in God's presence. Sometimes I am uplifted by the joyous noise of song, or by the loud weeping of our community. Often, in order to feel God's presence, I need to touch and feel ritual in order to experience God. But then there are times when I yearn to be able to feel God's closeness in the silence.

"Rav Abbahu said in the name of R' Yochanan: When God gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no ox made a sound, the celestial angels remained in place, and the seraphim refrained from saying kadosh, the oceans did not stir, and no part of creation spoke. The whole world was utterly silent, and then a voice was heard: I am God your Lord" (*Legends of the Jews* 3:2:52). ❁

