

Shavuot:
A Day of National Judgement
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The reading of the פרשת בחוקותי always takes place two shabbatot before Shavuot. The Rabbis explain that the תוכחות (rebuke) must be read in close proximity to a major Jewish Holiday - either Shavuot or Rosh ha-Shanna. In fact they make a strong comparison between these two different times of the year. I would like to offer that Shavuot presents us with a unique opportunity for renewal through Torah study, which is different than the religious experience of repentance that we undergo before Rosh ha-Shanna.

This first text helps us understand why the weekly Torah reading cycle is out of sync between Israel and the Diaspora:

Source #1:

Bavli, Megila 31b

Our rabbis taught: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar said, "Ezra established that the Jewish People should always read the curses of Leviticus before Shavuot and the curses of Deuteronomy before Rosh ha-Shanna."

Why did they do this? Abayye, and some say Reish Lakish, said, "In order that the year conclude together with its curses."

As it related to Deuteronomy I understand "In order that the year conclude together with its curses" [because it comes before Rosh ha-Shanna], however, in regards to Vayikra, is Shavuot considered a New Year? Yes, Shavuot is also considered a new year as it is taught: And on Shavuot [we are judged] on the fruit of the tree.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף לא עמוד ב

תניא רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר עזרא תיקן להן לישראל שיהו קורין קללות שבתורת כהנים קודם עצרת ושבמשנה תורה קודם ראש השנה.

מאי טעמא? אמר אביי ואיתימא ריש לקיש כדי שתכלה השנה וקללותיה.

בשלמא שבמשנה תורה איכא כדי שתכלה שנה וקללותיה, אלא שבתורת כהנים אטו עצרת ראש השנה היא? אין עצרת נמי ראש השנה היא דתנן ובעצרת על פירות האילן.

It is based on this *takana* of Ezra that Tosafot explains that we do not read this immediately before Shavuot, but two weeks prior (Tosafot Megilla 31b s.v. *klalot*). In an attempt to maintain this custom, we in America keep *parshiyot* separate and stay a week ahead of Israel until the first week of August, *parshiyot Matot- Masei*. Because of the second Adar and since all of the Jewish Holidays (in Israel) fell in the middle of the week, Israel is not able to fulfill this *takana*.

Rabbi Yosef of Trani (1568 - 1639) wrote a beautiful *teshuva* about a calendar year that exactly maps onto 5776 in which the eighth day of Pesach fell on Shabbat and there was a second Adar¹. He lays out all the various customs and reflects that some of the Torah reading practices were still not yet set in stone. There was a time when these customs were much more fluid. In a world in which it was not simple to travel from one community to the next and there were no internet based sites to calculate and standardize these practices, people lived with more unknowns (See *Shu't ha-Maharit* 2:4, and *Levush* OH 428:4, *Magen Avraham* 428:4).

This may explain a strange calendrical quirk, but what is the deeper meaning of 'ending the year together with its curses?' What does it mean to refer to Shavuot as a kind of Rosh ha-Shanna?

I think that there is a deep lesson about the nature of this season embedded in the notion that Shavuot is considered like a New Year. The process of *teshuva* in Elul and Tishrei makes us like new creations, בריה חדשה, the renewal on Shavuot provides us with a chance to get back to a pre sin edenic world.

The special sacrifice on Shavuot was known as the שתי הלחם, two loaves of wheat bread. This was one of the only times when *chametz* was permitted on the altar. Just seven weeks after we worked hard to rid ourselves of *chametz* we now offer it up to God as gift. What does that mean? What does wheat symbolize? Source #2 gives us a clue as to what is going on at this time of year.

After elaborating on how Pesach may be seen as a time of judgement for the grain, the Talmud continues:

Source #2

Bavli, Rosh ha-Shanna 16a

And why did the Torah say to bring the "two loaves" on Shavuot? Because Shavuot is the time of the fruit of the tree. The Holy Blessed One said, "Bring before me the 'two loaves' on Shavuot so that I will bless on your behalf the fruit of the tree."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף טז עמוד א

ומפני מה אמרה תורה הביאו שתי הלחם בעצרת?
מפני שעצרת זמן פירות האילן הוא. אמר הקודש
ברוך הוא הביאו לפני שתי הלחם בעצרת כדי
שיתברכו לכם פירות האילן.

This passage sets up Shavuot as moment of national judgment. However, it seems curious to refer to wheat as a fruit of the tree. However, the *Midrash* below (Source #3, given in parallel in *Bireishit Rabba* 15) sets up wheat as the 'fruit' of the tree of knowledge. What does it mean to say that the tree that Adam and Chava ate from was actually a stalk of wheat?

Source #3

Bavli, Sanhedrin 70a

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף ע עמוד א

¹ In this *teshuva* he refers to "שחל ז' של פסח בשבת שבני א"י קראו פרי אחרי מות בו ביום ובה"ל לשבת" However, there must be a typo and he meant to refer to the eighth day of Pesach falling on Shabbat or there would be no implication for the Diaspora vs. Israel (thank you to my student Brach Jaffe for pointing this out to me when we were learning this together).

It was taught in a *berayta*: Rabbi Meir said, "That tree from which the first human ate was a grape-vine."

דתניא רבי מאיר אומר אותו אילן שאכל אדם הראשון ממנו גפן היה (ע עמוד ב)...

Rebbi Yehuda said, "[That tree from which the first human ate] was wheat, for the baby does not yet know how to say 'dad' or 'mom' until it tastes the taste of grain.

רבי יהודה אומר חטה היה, שאין התינוק יודע לקרוא אבא ואימא עד שיטעום טעם דגן.

Rebbi Nechemia said, "[That tree from which the first human ate] was a fig tree..."

רבי נחמיה אומר תאנה היה...

The Midrash links the consumption of wheat to the ability to speak. That which makes us human beings is our ability to communicate with complex language (See Onkelos, Bereishit 2:7). As a baby begins to form words, they assert a fundamental human trait. By linking the power of speech to the consumption of grain and the acquisition of language, the Midrash implies that until the moment of the sin humanity had not yet matured. There was a certain kind of child-like innocence and purity that existed in the Garden before the sin. The eating of the 'fruit' of grain represents taking a step forward in the process of human maturation.

However, there is a holiness in the pre-sin reality of Adam and Eve. They were living in a world in which they could connect directly to the Creator of the world. God was walking with them in the garden. That kind of relationship with God represents a certain path of purity that is difficult attain in the Modern world. On Shavuot, a New Year in its own right, we bring two wheat loaves on the altar to serve as a *tikkun* for the sin of Adam and Eve.

Today, when we no longer engage with the world of sacrifices, it is our Torah study over the course of the Holiday of Shavuot that brings us back to the garden before the sin. In order to renew ourselves, we need to read Torah with fresh eyes and allow our Torah to be renewed as well.

This year, as we sit down to study the Torah anew on Shavuot, may we all be blessed with a שנה טובה ומחודשת, a happy and renewed year.



Rabbi Jeffrey S. Fox, Rosh HaYeshiva of Maharat, was the first graduate of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. Upon graduation he served as the Rabbi of Kehilat Keshet: The Community Synagogue of Tenafly and Englewood for seven years. In Rabbi Fox's tenure at Keshet, the community grew three-fold from thirty families to nearly one hundred. During that time Rabbi Fox also taught at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Bergen County. He also served on the board of the Synagogue Leadership Initiative of the UJA of NNJ. Rabbi Fox is a Senior Rabbinic Fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute and has also been a member of the faculty of the Drisha Institute, the Florence Melton Adult Education School in Westchester County, and Hadar.