

Shavuot

Chag Hakatzir, Chag Ha-bikkurim

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Class of 2019

In season two of the 90's sitcom *Murphy Brown*, Murphy, a news show anchor played by Candice Bergen is forced by her stereotypical Jewish producer Miles, played by Grant Shaud, to engage in relaxation exercises to combat the stress and tension in the news room. The exercises unfortunately do not relax Murphy and instead cause her to herniate a disc in her back. While laid up in the hospital, her producer Miles bursts into her room in a panic and exclaims, "Oy, Murphy! You are going to be here to Shavuot!"

While I laughed at this line, I was pretty sure at that moment that I was one of the very few viewers who even had a slight inkling about what this 'Shavuot' was all about. But even for someone like me, who has a somewhat decent Jewish background and education, Shavuot is probably the most ambiguous of Torah prescribed holidays. It is the lackluster triplet of the Pilgrimage holidays, Pesach and Sukkot. Per the Torah text, it is not directly linked to a historical event such as Exodus or traveling in the Desert. There is no communal ritual attached to it, such as a seder or sitting in a Sukkah. There isn't even an exact date given for this holiday- again unlike Pesach and Sukkot.

According to Torah text, what exactly is Shavuot? As the name implies, one aspect refers to the counting of seven weeks at the beginning of the barley (Omer) harvest, commencing in the 50th day and the beginning of the wheat harvest. As stated in Vayikra- (23:15-21)

15 And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering--the day after the sabbath--you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: **16** you must count until the day after the seventh week-fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord. **17** You shall bring from your settlements two loaves of bread as an elevation offering; each shall be made of two-tenths of a measure of choice flour, baked after leavening as first fruit to the Lord. **18** With the bread you shall present, as burnt offerings to the Lord, seven yearling lambs without blemish, one bull of the herd, and two rams, with their meal offerings and libations, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord. **19** You shall also offer one he-goat as a sin offering and two yearling lambs as a sacrifice of well-being. **20** The priest shall elevate these--the two lambs--together with the bread of the first fruits as an elevation offering before the Lord; they shall be holy to the Lord, for the priest. **21** On that same day you shall hold a celebration; it

טו וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבֻעוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: **טז** עַד מִמִּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה': **יז** מִמּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם תָּבִיאוּ | לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִי עֶשְׂרִינִים סֵלֶת תִּהְיֶינָה חֲמִץ תֹּאפִינָה בַּכֹּרִים לַה': **יח** וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עַל־הַלֶּחֶם שְׁבַעַת כֶּבֶשִׂים תְּמִימִם בְּנֵי שָׁנָה וּפָר בֶּן־בָּקָר אֶחָד וְאֵילִם שְׁנַיִם יִהְיוּ עֲלֶיהָ וּמִנְחָתָם וְנִסְכֵיהֶם אִשֶׁה רִיח־בַּיִחַח לַה': **יט** וְעֲשִׂיתֶם שְׁעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לַחֲטָאת וּשְׁנֵי כֶבֶשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה לְזִבְחַ שְׁלָמִים: **כ** וְהִנִּיף הַכֹּהֵן | אֹתָם עַל לֶחֶם הַבְּכֹרִים תְּנוּפָה לִפְנֵי ה' עַל־שְׁנֵי כֶבֶשִׂים קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיוּ לַה' לְכֹהֵן: **כא** וְקִרְאתֶם בְּעֶצְמָם | הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה מִקְרָא־קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מְלֶאכֶת עַבְדָּה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:

shall be a sacred occasion for you; you shall not work at your occupations. This is a law for all time in all your settlements throughout the ages. (JPS translation) חֲקַת עוֹלָם בְּכָל-מוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם:

Okay- let's get this straight- you count off seven weeks, bring an offering of new grain, then bring two loaves of bread along with burnt offerings of seven lambs, one bull, two rams. Then priest elevates the bread and the lambs and maybe first fruits. Meanwhile the congregation observes a sacred , Yom Tov day and does not do any work. In Shemot, this Holiday is understood to be the Chag Hakatzir - The Holiday of the Harvest. In B'midbar it is referred to as Chag Ha-bikkurim, the holiday of the first fruits. The Torah text provides many names and priest based/Temple based rituals for this holiday. The only clear thread is the agricultural nature of the festival--in any of its incarnations.

Even the date is unclear. As stated, the Torah gives no exact date for Shavuot. It does give some guideposts however- as it states again in Vayikra-- 'And from the day on which you bring the sheaf of elevation offering--the day after the sabbath--you shall count off seven weeks.'

The day of the sheaf elevation offering--Omer Ha't'nufah--has become to be understood to be the day after the 'shabbat'. This 'shabbat' is the first day of Yom Tov of Pesach. The day may not necessarily be a Saturday but just a Yom Tov day. Yom Tov is described as Shabbat Shabbaton. Thus, Shavuot would fall out 50 days after this day. In ancient times, however, that did not lead to the clear date of the 6th of Sivan that we celebrate this holiday today. The Sadducees understood the term 'Shabbat' in that verse in Vayikra to refer not exclusively to Yom Tov but whenever during the course of the seven days of Pesach, an actual Shabbat, a Saturday would occur. This would then mean that Shavuot would always fall out on a Sunday. The Pharisees counted in the manner that has become the norm for today. Even with the Pharisee understanding of Shabbat being adopted, it didn't always result in an absolute reliable fixed date on the Jewish calendar. Since actual months were determined by human witnesses, this determination could vary from year to year and result in the holiday being celebrated anywhere from the 6-8th of Sivan.

So per Torah text and subsequent Temple ritual-- Shavuot consisted of a Temple based agricultural holiday-not linked to any historical event, without a clear date and without any clear rituals outside the priestly service.

If things weren't bad enough for Shavuot, with the destruction of the Temple and subsequent exile, our sages, were faced with a huge dilemma. Other holidays could survive without direct Temple service because there were so many other aspects that could still be performed either by the congregation as a whole or individuals and families. Additionally, each holiday had an other aspect outside of its agricultural origins to hang its hat--namely pivotal historical events in the history of the Jewish People. So, you could still have a Seder--albeit minus the Korban Pesach, the Pascal sacrifice. You could still sit in a Sukkah and wave the Lulav and Etrog. Even for Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur the aspects of prayer and the blowing of the Shofar could be maintained. But what to do

with Shavuot? It could not be dispatched so easily as other Temple based customs as it was-- although vaguely--Torah mandated, *d'oraitah*. Shavuot couldn't be thrown onto the trash heap of Jewish history.

But here, I would argue, the very ambiguous nature of Shavuot comes in handy. Our sages, in trying to reimagine what Shavuot would look like, had a chance to make a Tikkun, a repair so to speak, to Shavuot and give it all the things it lacked---a link to a historical event, an actual date and a communal ritual to reflect the new historical nature of the holiday. They had a chance to make Shavuot as weighty as its pilgrimage sisters.

So what are the elements of this extreme Shavuot makeover? Probably the first, most important piece was not only establishing a set date but also linking with a historical element. Additionally, the historical event had to mesh together nicely with the other two Pilgrimage holidays. Since Pesach and Sukkot primarily deal with the Exodus event and subsequent travel, our sages focused on one of the great purposes of the Exodus--not only freedom, but also God giving the Jewish people the Torah.

Based on a pasuk in Shemot (19:1) that states: 'On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai', the Chachamim set out to prop up Shavuot. The continuation of this section of Shemot, Parashat Yitro, describes the Revelation at Sinai. The sixth of Sivan, then, was the day understood to be the day of the Giving of the Torah, the culmination of the Exodus event. Now with a date and a historical event, Shavuot was transformed into all things Torah--albeit still tinged with an element of Tikkun, repair. I would imagine the sages looking at our history and the reasons for our holidays and exclaim-- 'Why on earth don't we have holiday to commemorate --some would --argue the single most important event in our history?--the Giving of Our Torah? If we already have holidays and almost all rituals to commemorate Exodus, certainly the Giving of the Torah, possibly the very purpose of the Exodus in and of itself, merits its own holiday. Of the customs adopted, many reflect the preparation and eventual Giving of the Torah-- and in some ways do a better job of it than our ancestors. Many of you were up late last night (or not so late) studying Torah, normally referred to as a Tikkun Leil Shavuot. What exactly is the repair, the Tikkun here?

The Magen Avraham- R. Avraham Abele Gombiner in his 17th Polish commentary on the Shulkhan Arukh beautifully states:

It is written in the Zohar, that the early Chassidim would stay awake the entire night (of Shavuot) and study Torah. The matter has already become customary among the students. A simple explanation for this may be the fact that the Jews [at Har Sinai] were asleep all night and God had to awaken them... therefore we must rectify (literally repair) that.

So, we will reenact the Giving of the Torah, but we will do it one better. We will now refer to this holiday of Shavuot as Z'man Matan Torateinu--The Time of the Giving of the Torah.- Now with this designation, the old ambiguous nature of the holiday seems to come back. Why is the holiday referred to as Matan (Giving) of the Torah and not Kabbalat (receipt or acceptance) Torateinu? Why again with the ambiguity?

To answer these questions, let's take a look at today's Torah reading. Here we are standing again at Sinai and the experience is overwhelming.

Quote ' Shemot (20:15) All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. 16: 'You speak to us,' they said to Moshe, 'and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.'

The whole experience of being in the presence of God elicits immediate obedience and acceptance of revelation. We famously said, quote (19:8) All the people answered as one, saying, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we will do!' *Na'aseh v'nishmah*.- Literally, we will do and we will listen. There was no deliberation and no discussion. This B'rit, this covenant was thrust upon us and frankly we are given an offer we cannot refuse. As the famous midrash in the Babylonian Talmud tractate of Shabbat (88a) relates:

'Said R. Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa: This teaches us that the Holy One held the mountain over them like a cask and said, 'If you accept the Torah, then fine; but if not, I will bury you here.'" Said R. Acha bar Yaakov. This serves notice that the Torah was accepted under duress --and thus, essentially, is not legally binding.'

Many commentators and scholars have tried to understand this dilemma. Some argue that since the generation of the Giving of the Torah were slaves, they were lacking the theological and intellectual ability to form a willing covenant. As essentially children, God was simply forcing them to do what was truly for their own good. However, this problem of initial revelation remained in our sages' consciences.

This reality of the involuntary revelatory experience is reflected in the very name now given to Shavuot. It is Zeman Matan Torateinu -the time of the Giving of the Torah and **not**, Zeman Kabbalat Torateinu, the time of the Acceptance of the Torah. But while the name does not include acceptance, the customs and the way we observe Shavuot imply our willing and more importantly *voluntary* acceptance of Torah and covenant. But when and how exactly does this voluntary acceptance occur and how can it fit into the new definition of Shavuot?

David Novak, in his book 'The Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theory' posits the idea that the very act of the Temple's destruction and subsequent exile provided the necessary conditions for this voluntary acceptance of the Torah. Novak states: The difference between having to confirm the

Torah and wanting to affirm it for oneself is that confirmation often means that there is no real alternative to obedience, whereas in affirmation (or voluntary acceptance) there is a real alternative to voluntary service to the covenant and its maker.' (p. 71)

Our initial acceptance was almost a reflex. When we accepted at Sinai, we had no alternative. Even during the time of Jewish sovereignty in Israel up until the destruction of the first temple and following exile, Jews had no real alternative to the way they worshipped. Sure, there was idol worship and deviations, but they were seen as crimes and sins not valid religious choices. It is only when the Jews end up in a place where they can practice their religion--and their religion is not the state religion--, they are surrounded by other religions and a place where assimilation is truly possible, that their acceptance can truly be voluntary. In Jewish history, that place would be Babylonia and the Persian empire which then followed.

The Chachamim themselves recognized this irony as they interpreted Megillat Esther, the Book of Esther. Rava, continuing on the discussion of forced revelation in Masechet Shabbat 88a states: 'Despite all of this (referring to the seemingly coerced and therefore illegal forcing of the Jewish people to accept the Torah), the generation at the time of Ahasuerus did accept it as it is written 'they upheld it and accepted it' (Esther 9:27), namely they upheld what they had already accepted.'

Novak notes that the Megillah should have read accepted-*kiblu* and then upheld-*kিয়amu*. Rava, he suggests changes the word order to indicate that the acceptance is retrospective. To retrieve the past acceptance, requires a renewed acceptance in the present. The exercise is not to remember a historic event, but to imbue it with real energy so that the dynamic of acceptance of the Torah and covenant is ongoing. So on Shavuot, a holiday forever changed by destruction and exile, we emphasize the effect those two events had on Jewish thought and practice-- the ability to accept the Torah willingly and without dread. (Novak)

There are other Shavuot practices that also seem to emphasize this point. Today's haftarah describes Yehezkel's, Ezekiel's poetic vision that is parallel to the Jewish people's God experience at Sinai. It is interesting to note that Ezekiel's vision does not take place in Israel, but in exile--perhaps a foreshadowing of the Acceptance of Torah--the more voluntary and thereby more legally binding Torah acceptance that would occur later in exile.

Even the reading of Megillat Ruth, The Book of Ruth, illustrates the realities of the new voluntary acceptance of the Torah. While in exile, a new perception of the Jewish religion--voluntary and not place bound-- also had the most interesting effect of influencing a number of Gentiles to become Jews. Here now was an attractive, self affirming, liberating portable way of life available to those by their own choosing. These were Jews who as converts were truly Jews by their Own Choice. Ruth is the paradigm of the convert who decided of her own free will to change her life and refused to be persuaded to do otherwise. It is no accident that we read a book about someone who voluntarily chose Torah on the very holiday where we are reaffirming the same. (Novak, 76)

So, now let's go back to the beginning. The Torah presents a Shavuot that pales by comparison to other holidays. Its very ritual is difficult to understand and is not necessarily inclusive. While practically and historically, the nature of this holiday had to change, I would like to suggest, perhaps this was the Divine intent all along. As Tamar Ross would deem 'the inevitable meaning of the Torah.'

Perhaps the very involuntary nature of Revelation was something that was designed to be fixed all along. It was a conundrum that the Chachamim recognized when linking the new and improved Shavuot to a holiday of the Giving of the Torah and initiating 'fixes' 'tikkunim' that emphasized the continual and now voluntary acceptance of the Torah. It is way to understand this holiday's evolution as being more than an invention because the necessity presented itself. The destruction of the Temple and exile required a Shavuot re-do, but it is those very factors that precipitated the necessary changes to the holiday that also reinforced the true nature of what the holiday has become.

Suffice it to say, Shavuot, as currently observed, is not a made-up holidays by the Rabbis who had to find a way to keep a Torah required and albeit vague holiday in the face of historical realities. Perhaps, Shavuot now, is they way God and the Torah always meant it to be.

Chag Sameach!



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