

The Story of Shavuot (Exodus 34:22)

Parashat Acharei Mot/K'doshim

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Shabbat Shalom! Over the past several weeks, we have been making our way through the Book of Leviticus. But, there's been one momentous scene from the Book of Exodus on my mind recently, so if it's okay with you, I'd like to take us back there for just a moment tonight. Let me paint the picture for you: the Israelites escape, just barely, the tyranny and oppression of Ancient Egypt. They move forward, making camp some distance away from Mount Sinai, this mysterious and looming mountain set amongst the sandy desert. In its long, extended shadow, they wait. One day, two days, waiting, waiting, waiting, and then finally, on the third day, it begins. The sun rises, out of nowhere; thunder and lightning fill the skies; horns are suddenly blasting everywhere; and a dense cloud subsumes the mighty mountain, covering it in fog. The Israelites move right to the foot of the mountain. Smoke rises high, the horns blare even louder, and the people see the mountain itself tremble and shake. God's booming voice summons Moses to the top of the mountain, and it is here, right here, in which the people receive Torah, receive the Teaching about how to live in this new, free, chaotic, and beautiful world.

This scene from our Torah, of our people receiving the Torah, has been on my mind because in less than a month from now, we will commemorate that moment through the celebration of Shavuot. Shavuot literally means “weeks”, describing the forty-nine days, the seven weeks, between the start of Passover and the holiday of Shavuot. If Passover marks our redemption from Ancient Egypt, finally moving toward freedom, Shavuot marks revelation, the opportunity to receive wisdom for how we are to live our lives. Each day between Passover and Shavuot, we are invited to count the omer, literally a unit of measurement, so that we can be even more mindful during this period and be as spiritually full as possible when we make it to Shavuot.

Fascinatingly, our Torah describes Shavuot as a harvest festival. We read in Exodus:

וַחֵג שָׁבֻעֹת תַעֲשֶׂה לָּךְ...

“You shall observe the Festival of Weeks, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest...”¹

At its core, Shavuot is marking the beginning of the harvest for the Israelites. The Book of Ruth, the megillah connected with this holiday, takes place during a time of famine, and features Ruth the Moabite, collecting gleanings, pieces of the harvest leftover in the field, so that she and her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, may survive.

¹ Exodus 34:22

Despite its initial conception as a harvest holiday, similar to Sukkot, the rabbinic commentary throughout the generations created the connection between Shavuot and the receiving of Torah on Mount Sinai. This tradition seems to be rooted in a short conversation in Talmud Tractate Shabbat in which the rabbis identify the 6th day of Sivan as the day in which Torah was passed to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai; this date corresponds directly with the date specified for Shavuot in the Torah, forty-nine days after Passover.² And just like we build our Passover seder so that we embody the experience, treating it as if we ourselves went out of Egypt, our Shavuot rituals and practices, developed by the rabbis all the way to today, help us recreate that chaotic, swirling, holy day in which the Israelites received Torah.

The first practice that was developed is that we stay up all night long. The Israelites, rabbinic commentary notes, were waiting until the third day, staying up all night so that they would not miss the big moment of revelation. The practice of recreating this feature on Shavuot has existed for at least 500 years. Rabbi Shlomo Alkebetz, a 16th century rabbi in Israel, describes this experience staying up all night long with Rabbi Yosef Karo, one of the most prolific halakhic scholars of our tradition, committing to “keep sleep from our eyes” so that we may praise God, and listen to words of Torah that will revive our soul.”³

² BT Shabbat 88a

³ Shenei Luchot HaBerit, Aseret HaDibrot, Shevuot, Ner Mitzva 13-14.

At the center of their experience on Shavuot, and now ours in the modern day, is the second practice - studying Torah. In many communities around the world, the Ten Commandments are read on Shavuot, again inviting us to imagine as if we were part of that special, holy moment in our peoples' history. But beyond a recitation of the Ten Commandments, Jews all around the world spend the night studying Torah, wrestling with all different facets of our holy texts and exploring how they can impact our lives today. For example, our Torah portion this week, Acharei Mot/Kedoshim, lists many ethical commandments which invite further questions and conversation:

- We are commanded not to insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind⁴; for our lives today, do we only take this commandment literally? Or is it a broader command to not take advantage of people with disabilities?
- When we gather our harvest, we are commanded to leave the edges of the field and the ends of the vines for the poor and strangers who need food (just like Ruth)⁵; what are we to do if we don't have any fields or vines? How does it translate into the modern world?
- And, we are commanded to love our fellow as ourself; but who is considered our "fellow"? People we know? All human beings? And what does it mean to love?

⁴ Leviticus 19:14

⁵ Leviticus 19:9

These are just a few examples, but perhaps you can see how each one of these verses could inspire an entire night's worth of questions, conversations, and exploration. Shavuot invites us to think expansively about Torah, knowing that there is wisdom in our Jewish texts, and that each and every one of us also brings our wisdom and life experience to the conversation. In Bamidbar Rabbah, one of our midrashim, stories that help expand the possibilities of Torah, the rabbis introduce the idea of there being *שבעים פנים בתורה*, seventy faces of Torah.⁶ Seventy different ways of understanding, of conceptualizing the words of our Torah, all rooted in our perspective and way of living. This underscores the meaning of the famous, non-Talmudic expression that feels like it's so rooted in Judaism that it could be from Torah: "Two Jews, three opinions." Torah is for each and every one of us.

Finally, one of the other practices that have come to be emblematic of Shavuot is eating a lot of dairy. Cheese, cheesecake, blintzes, bourekas, anything with dairy. There is evidence of this practice going back hundreds of years, with Jews creating dairy pastries specifically for Shavuot. Here are several reasons for this delicious, but maybe also stomach churning, experience. One idea is that it could align with the story of the Israelites on Mount Sinai. As part of Torah, we receive the commandments around kashrut; however, before receiving Torah, the Israelites didn't know these rules and prepared meat dishes for themselves. So after receiving Torah, they couldn't eat the meat they had made, so they ate dairy instead.

⁶ Bamidbar Rabbah 13:16

Another idea is that this practice aligns with other ethnic groups in the region at the time, in which cheese was produced around their own spring harvest festivals, ours being Shavuot. One other explanation features the Jewish practice of gematria, in which each Hebrew letter has a numerical value. The Hebrew word for milk is חלב, the numerical value of this word is 40, aligning with the number of days Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments from God. Each of these are possibilities, but the most convincing reason for me, and for Bible scholar Dr. Susan Weingarten, comes directly from our Torah itself.⁷ In Deuteronomy, Torah explains that God took the Israelites out of Ancient Egypt and is giving them a special, promised land: אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ, a land flowing with milk and honey. Now, this phrase may be familiar, but it's the next verse in Torah that makes the connection between milk and honey, and Shavuot in particular. We read: וְעַתָּה הֵנָּה הֵבִאתִי אֶת־רֵאשִׁית פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה, "And now I bring the first fruits of the soil..."⁸ This fits exactly the description of Shavuot we explored earlier in Torah and perhaps gives us one answer, among many, for this delicious practice of enjoying dairy on Shavuot.

⁷ <https://www.thetorah.com/article/beyond-cheesecake-foods-of-shavuot>

⁸ Deuteronomy 26:9-10

As we consider all of these different facets of Shavuot, from its origins, to rabbinic rituals and practices, all the way to today, I'll close tonight with an explicit invitation: join us, in a little less than four weeks on May 21st, for Shavuot Across Brooklyn. Each year, we gather hundreds of people, from dozens of Jewish communities to do what our ancestors have done since the days of Torah: stay up all night long, study Torah in the most expansive definition of the word, eat dairy (and enjoy other food and drink too), and revel in the gift that is Torah. This year, for the first time, we will have opportunities to engage in Shavuot earlier in the night, beginning at 6:30 PM with a Shavuot potluck feast and interactive learning sessions. For that to happen, we're asking everyone to bring food, desserts, and drinks, but also flowers and decorations to make the space as festive as possible. We'll have erev Shavuot services, and then we get down to learning. We are right now looking for more teachers to teach throughout the night on a topic that you're knowledgeable and passionate about. We will have many rabbis and cantors from Brooklyn communities teaching, but we need more community members. Even if it's not explicitly rooted in the words of Torah, we want your Torah to be part of the experience. More information will be coming out soon, but let's start preparing ourselves now for this opportunity that comes each year, to truly dwell in Torah, to surround ourselves with its insight, wisdom, and strength. And to do so in community. Shabbat Shalom.