

Preparation הַכְנָה

June 2011 Sivan 5771

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion

Kehillat Chovevei Tzion
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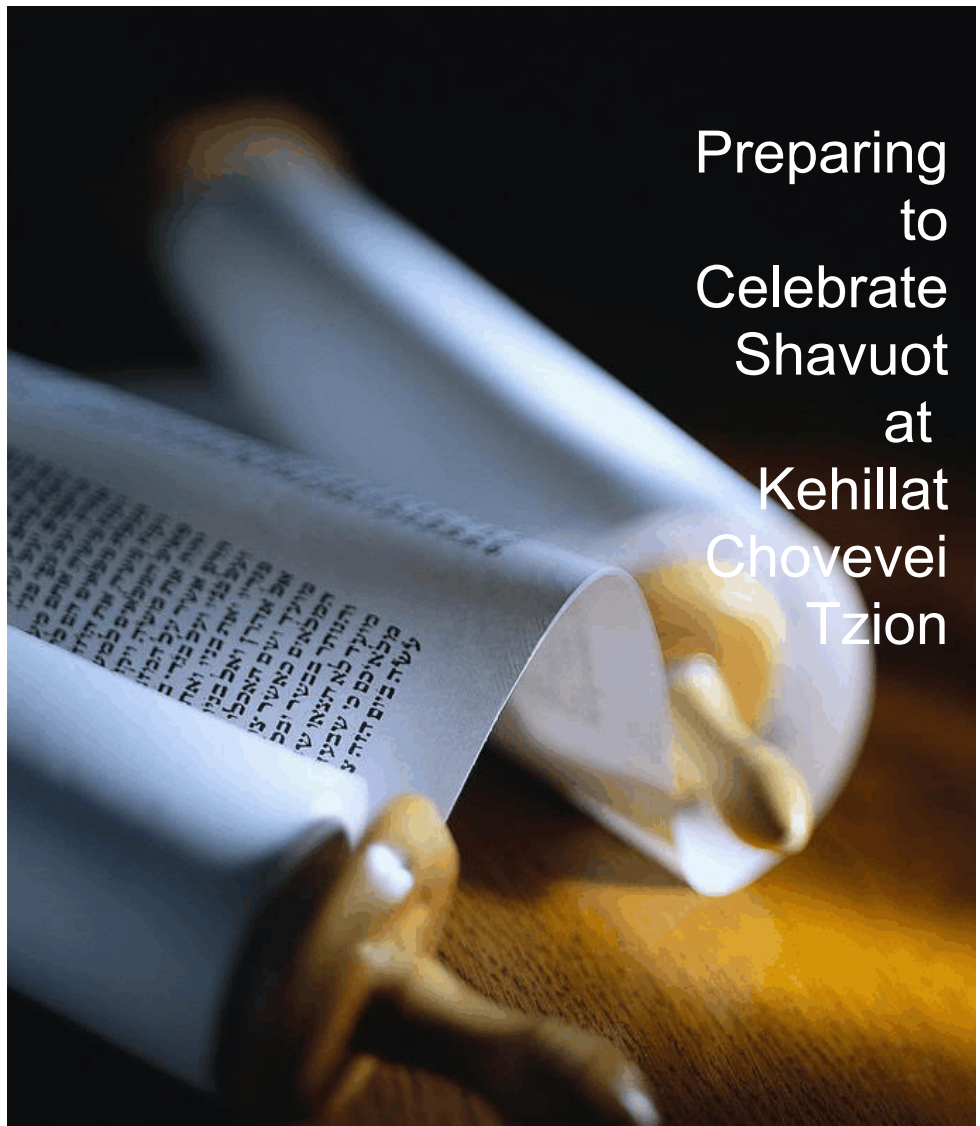
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**A Kehillah For Those
Wishing To Participate
In Traditional Religious
Service On Shabbat
And Yom Tov**

**Celebrating the Start
of our Eighteenth Year!**



Preparing
to
Celebrate
Shavuot
at
Kehillat
Chovevei
Tzion

Photos and graphics courtesy of Corbis, the OU and the respective artists

5771

תיקון ליל שבועות

5771

SCHEDULE
OF
SHAVUOT
AND
SHABBAT
SERVICES

TIKKUN
L'AYL
SHAVUOT

KEHILLAT
CHOVEVEI
TZION

5 SIVAN

EREV SHAVUOT

TUESDAY JUNE 7, 2011

[* Even though there is no charge for the dinner, PLEASE RSVP if you are coming to the dinner, to Ritual@KCT.org by Friday, June 3 at 2 PM]

Candle Lighting	8:01 PM
Mincha	7:00 PM
Study Session Aleph	7:15 PM
Ma'ariv	8:15 PM
A Light Dinner *	8:30 PM
Study Session Bet	9:30 - 11:00 PM

6 SIVAN

FIRST DAY SHAVUOT

WEDNESDAY JUNE 8, 2011

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Musaf	
Study Session Gimel	

.....
The KCT Tradition Renews:

The Annual Shavuot Dairy Luncheon and
Cheese Cake Kiddush

Mincha / Ma'ariv	7:30 PM
Candle Lighting	9:09 PM

7 SIVAN

SECOND DAY SHAVUOT

THURSDAY JUNE 9, 2011

Shacharit	9:00 AM
Yizkor and Musaf	
Study Session Dalet	

.....
The KCT Tradition Deepens:

The Ice Cream Kiddush

Yom Tov ends 9:03 PM



TIKKUN L'AYL SHAVUOT

A special holiday
gathering for
learning, growing,
sharing and
celebrating
together

KCT
5771

KEHILLAT CHOVEVEI TZION STUDIES WITH RABBI JEFFREY HOFFMAN

Sessions Aleph and Bet:

Tuesday evening, May 7 . . . Session Aleph: 7:00 PM and Session Bet: 9:30 PM

Session Aleph: Akdamut

The history and meaning of *Akdamut* is quite fantastic. *Akdamut*, a 90-line Aramaic *piyyut* (liturgical poem), was originally composed in 11th century Worms, Germany as an introduction to the *Targum* (Aramaic translation) for the Torah reading on the first day of Shavuot (the Ten Commandments). Although this is only one of several *piyyutim* composed for introducing the *Targum* on Shavuot, it is the only one to remain part of the service to this day. Our goals are to determine what accounts for the popularity of *Akdamut* even though congregations have not chanted the Aramaic translation of the Torah reading for almost a thousand years and what its connection to Shavuot actually is (there are no strong connections to the Ten Commandments). Ultimately, the answer to these questions will involve a medieval Yiddish folk-tale and the massacres of Jews in Rhineland by the Crusaders.

Session Bet: Hallel

Hallel is chanted on most Jewish holidays, and most Jews who attend synagogue regularly are quite familiar with it. However, how many of us have actually done a close reading of its six psalms? Serious attention to its content reveals that its themes include not only joy and thanksgiving – which are quite appropriate for the holidays – but also other emotions which seem very unusual for celebrations of the festivals. We will survey the content of these psalms as well as study Talmudic sources on the history of *Hallel* in our worship services.

Session Gimel:

Wednesday morning, May 8, 9:00 AM

Session Gimel: Musaf

We are so used to the language of certain prayers which we say all the time that it can be difficult to analyze those familiar prayers accurately. *Musaf shel Shabbat* is a case in point. Most anyone who knows anything about Jewish liturgy will say that *Musaf* is recited in remembrance of the additional (=“*musaf*”) sacrifice brought on Shabbat on holidays which explains why the theme of all of the passages unique to this *Amidah* discuss sacrifices. However, the *Amidot* of *Shaharit* (morning) and *Minhah* (dusk) are equally based upon the ancient sacrifice brought every morning and dusk in the Temple. The fact that the *Amidah* of *Ma’ariv* (evening) was not considered obligatory helps drive this point home: The reason the *Amidah* of *Ma’ariv* was not considered obligatory was because no parallel sacrifice was offered in the Temple! How it is that the *Amidah* of *Musaf* became the focus of so much language about sacrifices, and whether or not such language makes sense, is the topic of this session.

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תיקון ליל שבועות



Session Daled:**Thursday morning, May 9, 9:00 AM****Session Daled: Mourner's Kaddish**

The Mourner's *Kaddish* contains no mention of death or the dead. This prayer has very long and very interesting history. It appears in the Talmud as an extremely important prayer, but with no connection to mourners. It wasn't until a medieval Hebrew story concerning Rabbi Akiva and the soul of an incredibly sinful dead man that the connection began. And it wasn't until after the time of the *Shulhan Arukh* (16th century) that it became the custom for everyone to recite the *Kaddish* in memory of the five relatives for whom one must sit *shiva* (father, mother, sister, brother, spouse). We will survey some amazing sources on the history and meaning of this prayer.

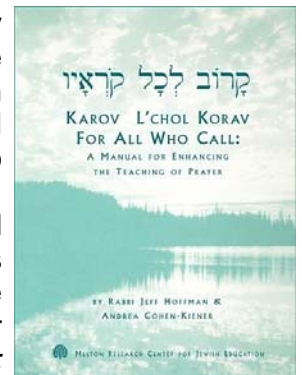
~

About our Teacher: Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman

Rabbi Hoffman is Rabbi-In-Residence and Professor of Liturgy at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Riverdale, NY, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1988. Rabbi Hoffman holds a doctorate in Jewish Liturgy from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He has taught courses in Jewish Liturgy to Rabbinical, Cantorial, Graduate, and Undergraduate students. His approach is to explore the history, literary structure, and theological meaning of any given liturgical text. He served as



editor of *Siddur Tisha B'Av* (for the Conservative Movement), as co-author of *Karov L'Chol Korav, For All Who Call: A Manual for Enhancing The Teaching of Prayer*, as well as author of several articles and reviews in Jewish liturgy.



Rabbi Hoffman has also served Conservative congregations in Vancouver, British Columbia and Nyack, NY. Rabbi Hoffman lives in White Plains, is married to Laurie, (who will be joining us for *yom tov*), and has three grown children.

Dedication and Endowment Opportunities Remain Available

Learning, Praying and Celebrating Together in our Eighteenth Year

We express our deepest appreciation for the generosity of KCT members and families who have over the years underwritten special-occasion programming for the benefit of the entire Kehillah community. Opportunities to underwrite exciting Shabbat and Yom Tov programming including Kallot and Scholar-in-Residence Weekends along with accompanying meals and kiddushim remain available. Please inquire how you can assure the continuation of such popular programs and celebrations, honoring family or occasions, or memorializing loved ones.

Celebrating, studying and growing together as a community of the committed, the extended member families of **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion** will again come together this year, for its compelling eighteenth year, in its Setauket Beit Midrash for the Shavuot holiday period. The KCT Ritual Committee is delighted to provide you with this compendium for self-study, for family and individual use, in preparation for the upcoming holiday.

**Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days.
And you shall bring a New Grain Offering to Hashem. Vayikra 23:16**

Chag Sameach !

.... The Holiday's Biblical Roots

The laws, dates and celebration of the pilgrimage festival of Shavuot are derived primarily from a brief series of biblical statements by HaShem, which evolved by interpretation and exegesis into the *hilchot* that govern the holiday:



“You shall count for yourselves - from the morrow of the rest day, from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving - seven weeks, they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count, fifty days; And you shall bring a new-meal offering to Hashem” (Vayikra 23:15-16)

“And you shall declare on that very day, that it is a Holy Day unto you. You shall do no manner of work; It is an Eternal Statute, in all your habitations, for all your generations” (Vayikra 23:21)

“You shall count for yourselves seven weeks, from when the sickle is first put to the standing crop shall you begin counting seven weeks. Then you will observe the Festival of Shavu'ot for the LORD, your God” (Devarim 16:9-10)

**Shavuot
5771
at
Kehillat Chovevei Tzion**

.... Counting the Omer

סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

According to the Torah, we are obligated to count the days from Passover to Shavuot. This period is known as the **Counting of the Omer**, an omer being a unit of measure. On the second day of Passover, in the days of the Temple, an omer of barley was cut down and brought to the Temple as an offering. This daily grain offering was referred to as the Omer. ~K~

.... Tzedakah and Yizkor

Shavuot offers an opportunity for both *tzedakah* remembrance . . . the *Yizkor* donation associated with recalling and sanctifying the memories of departed family members adds to the personally compelling nature of the *Yizkor* service.

The essence of *Yizkor* is an act of *tzedakah*, a contribution made on behalf of loved ones, of which the *Kodosh Baruch* takes note, to earn merit for the deceased in His eyes. Our Kehillah has made a significant, ever-growing commitment to *tzedakah* over the years. We encourage you, as you plan your individual *tzedakot*, for whatever contributions are within your means and family custom, to consider **Kehillat Chovevei Tzion** as a worthy beneficiary of your generosity and support at this time and throughout the year. ~K~

.... The KCT Memorial Wall

In the KCT Beit Midrash, the Memorial Wall represents the *Kehillah's* commemoration of our loved ones. Each plaque contains the name of the person recalled, in Hebrew and English, and the date of death in both the secular and Hebrew

calendars. *Yahrzeit* lamps at each plaque are lit during the week of the appropriate date and for *Yizkor*. New additions to the Memorial Panel are specially dedicated at the next *Yizkor* service following placement, and each is individually remembered at every *Yizkor* service that follows. Please let us know if you'd like to order a plaque or if you have any questions about the Memorial Wall.

~K~

.... The Kehillah Remembers

The **Yizkor** service is recited on the morning of the the second day of Shavuot, **Thursday June 9th**. The Kehillah remembers with great fondness and respect all the loved ones whom we have individually lost over the years and those whose names have been inscribed in the Kehillah's Book of Remembrance, which will be available at services. *Yizkor* is at once both a collective experience and an individual one, and is the timeless prayer of personal memory of the Jewish people. *Yizkor* is recited on Yom Kippur, on Shmini Atzeret, and then again on the last day of each of Pesach and Shavuot.

~K~

.... *Shavuot Scholar*: Jeffrey Hoffman

Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 5771:
Scholar-in-Residence Rabbi Jeffrey Hoffman

The history and significance of some of the most compelling prayers in the siddur:

Akdamut	Hallel
Musaf	Mourners Kaddish

The next installment in the continuing exploration of topics of Jewish ethics, values and perspectives brings us to a broad-based conversation guided by Jewish texts and scholarly thinkers, in areas including the environment, interpersonal relations, and economic interactions.

Read about this unique and powerful three day Shavuot Kallah in the special **Tikkun Leyl Shavuot** section of this booklet.

PLEASE note that in order to plan appropriately, it is absolutely necessary that all attendees for the opening dinner on Tuesday evening June 7th, RSVP to Ritual@KCT.org by Friday, June 3rd at 2 PM, if not earlier!

~K~

.... Preparation Through Study

Drawn from various sources, ancient, historic and modern, the following section of personal study materials is presented by the editors with a view toward stimulating thought, study, discussion, agreement and disagreement, and evaluation approaching and leading into the days of Shavuot.

.... Names, Names, What's in a Name?

Excerpted from materials produced by the Hillel Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.

Shavuot has several names . . . some say five, some even say eight . . . most often referred to as:

Chag HaShavuot (the Festival of Weeks)
Chag HaKatzir (the Festival of the Harvest)
Yom HaBikurim (the Day of First Fruits)
Chag Ha'Atzeret (the Festival of Conclusion)
Chag Mattan Torah (the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah).

Originally an agricultural festival in the month of Sivan, Shavuot was celebrated in accordance with biblical requirement by pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jews offered the first fruits of their harvest. The Torah was received by the Children of Israel on Shavuot. As it was queried in the Talmud: "Why is the sixth day singled out among the days of creation?" For the sixth day has a special article preceding it, noting it as "the day." It is to teach that the creation made a deal with the Holy One: "If Israel accepts the Torah, all will be well. If not I'll return the world back to chaos." (*Talmud Shabbat 88a*) Rashi comments that "the day" is the Sixth of Sivan, the Festival of Shavuot.

~K~

.... Shavuot at Home

Compiled by the editors of "My Jewish Learning" (www.myjewishlearning.com), this presentation offers another view of how foods contribute to the "multi-sensory" appreciation of the holidays.

Shavuot is a festival with both agricultural and historical significance. The most ancient references to Shavuot, in the Torah, refer to a harvest festival, the "festival of first fruits." Both of these are reflected

in the various alternative names for Shavuot, *Hag HaKatzir* (harvest festival), and *Yom HaBikkurim* (day of the first fruits). Another name is *Zeman Matan Torataynu* (time of the giving of Torah), as it was calculated to be upon this day that the Israelites received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. All of the above have a part to play in the home rituals and food eaten on the festival of Shavuot.

There is no Jewish law regarding home practices or rituals on Shavuot. Jewish practice regarding food on Shavuot is the result of customs and traditions. The main custom is the eating of dairy dishes, mainly dishes containing milk products and cheese. There are a number of theories about how this practice developed. In Song of Songs, chapter four, which is a beautiful love poem containing wonderful descriptions of Spring in the holy land, it states that "honey and milk are under your tongue." The poem was interpreted by the ancient rabbis to be a metaphor for the love between God and Israel and the "honey and milk" of that verse were interpreted to mean Torah. Consequently Jews eat milk products on Shavuot, the commemoration of the time they received Torah on Mt. Sinai; many traditional Jews eat dairy as the main meal on the first day of Shavuot and meat as the main meal on the second day.

Some other reasons for eating milk-containing products are as follows: At the Passover seder there were two sacrificial offerings on the seder plate, the shankbone and the egg. Likewise, Shavuot focuses on two food items, milk and meat, to reflect the sacrificial offerings of Shavuot. The custom for those who mark two days of Shavuot is to eat milk products on the first day and meat on the second day.

An alternative reason for milk on the first day and meat on the second is linked to Exodus 23:19, which states, "You shall not seethe a kid in it's mother's milk." This was extrapolated to mean that dairy and meat and milk products should not be eaten at the same meal--one of the basic laws of keeping kosher. Another compelling reason for consumption of dairy rather than meat products on Shavuot is so that the Jews will not be reminded of the sin of the golden calf, when Moses was so angry with the people that he broke the sacred tablets he dictated from God's direct revelation.

Finally, there is an explanation that focuses on the reception of the kashrut (dietary) laws. It is only after

the revelation that the Israelites would have been aware of laws of kashrut and thus aware that they had no immediately available kosher meat to eat. Consequently, they ate dairy products. The Torah was gained by giving up excess, showing restraint and self-control. It is thus more fitting to commemorate its reception by showing restraint and giving up meat for that day.

Two special challot are baked for Shavuot. As there were two breads offered in the Temple, so Jews eat two challot. It is a special feature of Shavuot to place a braid in the shape of a ladder on top of the bread. In Hebrew, letters all have numerical values assigned to them; the word for ladder in Hebrew, "*sulam*," adds up to the same number as "*Sinai*."

One of the old Eastern European customs associated with Shavuot is that young children between three and five were introduced to yeshivah study, the study of Torah, at this time of year. They were given cakes, honey and candy to associate Torah study with sweetness and joy.

Another dietary practice of Shavuot was to eat triangular "kreplach," or dumplings. The three-cornered shape reflects the three patriarchs by whose merit the Israelites received the Torah. It also reflects the three categories of Jews; Kohen, Levi and Israel, as well as the three sections the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) - *Torah*, *Neviim* (prophets) and *Ketuvim* (writings).

In addition to triangles, round shapes also play a symbolic role on Shavuot. The circle manifested in round *challot* may be interpreted as a symbol of *shelemut*, spiritual integrity, that Jews achieved on Shavuot when they were given the Torah. This fits with the Rabbinic reading of the Sinaitic revelation as the day when the two types of Torahs – the written and the oral – were given to the Jewish people, the circle representing the unity of two diverse parts of Judaism. ~K~

... Sleepless Shavuot in Setauket

Extracted from the writings of Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman

Many, especially in the Yeshiva world, have the custom to stay awake and study Torah the entire night of Shavuot. Many Sefardim and Chasidim follow a special order of study initiated by the Arizal (based on a passage in the introduction to the

Zohar) whereby they read selected portions of the entire 24 books of the Tanach, the 613 mitzvot, as well excerpts from some esoteric texts.

Shavuot celebrates the day when God gave us the Torah on Mount Sinai. By studying all night, we show our love and enthusiasm for this precious gift. Indeed the 24 books of Tanach mentioned above are referred to as 24 bridal ornaments with which the Jewish people decorate themselves in preparation to receive the Torah, their wedding document, from the Groom.

Another explanation for staying up all night is that the Jews at Mount Sinai over-slept on that historic Shavuot morning! G-d had to "wake them up" to teach them the Torah (sound familiar?). We rectify this by staying up all night, to ensure that we won't sleep late on this day.

Staying up all night is not a *halacha* nor a Jewish law, but rather a custom for those who feel they are physically up to it. If staying up all night may cause one to sleep late, what was intended to rectify would be ruined. Even if one was able to stay up, but wouldn't be able to concentrate and enjoy the prayers, the Torah readings, and the other mitzvot of the day such as the holiday meal and making one's family happy, he should not stay up the whole night.

Regarding this type of situation our Sages taught, "Whether one does a lot, or whether one does a little, the main thing is to direct one's heart to Heaven".

[Be sure to read about the KCT three day Shavuot Kallah in the special **Tikkun Leyl Shavuot** section of this booklet.]

-K-

... Shavuot: From Coercion to Love

Rabbi Mark Ankorn (a 2002 graduate of the Zeigler Rabbinic School of the AJU) investigates how a relationship based on threat and fear develops into one of love, by taking a closer look at the Talmudic midrash of the mountain held over the heads of Bnai Yisroel.

There are a number of different conceptions of what happened at Mount Sinai on the day the Torah was given to us. One famous midrash from the Talmud, Shabbat 88a, reads:

"They stood at the foot of the Mountain"
(Shemot / Exodus 19:17) Rav Avdimi bar

Hama bar Hasa said, This teaches that the Kadosh Baruch Hu [God] covered them with the mountain as though it were an upturned vat, and said to them "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here will be your graves!" Rav Acha bar Yaakov said, This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.

The verb "covered them" has its root in כָּפַה, the same as *kippah*—dome or yarmulke, the headcovering we wear in shul and at other times during the day. Thus, God turned the mountain into a dome over the people and threatened them with it.

Rav Avdimi is trying to make sense of the language of the verse. It reads *b'takh'tit ha'har*, literally "inside the bottom of the mountain," instead of *tachat ha'har*, "at the foot of the mountain."

This is extremely disturbing, the idea that Torah was not given to us and we accepted with a full heart, but rather that our eternal covenant with the Creator was forced upon us.

The sugya from the Talmud concludes thusly:

Rava said, Nevertheless, they accepted it again in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written "The Jews established and accepted [the holiday of Purim. Esther 9:27]" They established that which they had already accepted.

In other words, it might have been a shotgun wedding, but we renewed our vows, so everything's fine. Ignore, of course, the plain text of Esther 9:27 which is very clearly only about the holiday of Purim and in no way makes reference to Torah.

What I find comforting is the underlying urge to shake off the yoke of the mitzvot. Why else does this Midrash exist, if not to subtly defend the idea that no rational person would accept these strictures without coercion? And if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that on occasion, sometimes, in the three o'clock in the morning of our souls, we wish we didn't have this task of being called to higher service by God. As Tevye puts it in Fiddler on the Roof, "Can't you choose somebody else just once?"

Second, it shows that even the early rabbis were bothered by a lack of consent to the *mitzvot*, seeing it as a kind of contract. We, the Jewish People, agree to keep kosher and observe Shabbat and not wear garments of linen and wool mixed together,

and You, Oh Great and Merciful Ruler, agree to give us the land of Israel as our heritage and make our offspring as numerous as the stars in the sky. One might argue that consent just doesn't matter—we're just obligated. God gave us the Torah, chose us for holiness, and that's it. After all, did we consent to the Constitution? In any real sense, was there consent? In 1789, women couldn't vote, neither could free African Americans, let alone slaves. In some states, a man had to be a registered property owner in order to vote. Even putting that aside, the ratification of the Constitution was a close run thing. Yet we still find our deepest expression of democracy and the core values of our Republic embedded in that document.

Does the lack of consent matter? Fundamentally, it does. This is Torah and theology . . . the idea that God cannot command our love and obedience is essential to Judaism. As we say every morning in the *birkot hashachar*, we are free people, not slaves. Free to choose not to love God, free to be fools about our lives—suffering the consequences of our actions, certainly, but free to opt out.

Finally, the last bit of the Talmud passage that twists around the Esther story is ultimately an expression of love. It tries to find every possible way to salvage the traditional understanding of the relationship.

But it's also acceptance at a moment of triumph. Having defeated Haman and his ilk, we are victorious. Not slaves on the run, escaping from the world's largest army, scared and desperate. Not people with seven weeks of freedom after 430 years of slavery. Instead, at the end of the Esther story, we are triumphant, exultant, victorious. And if we accept the Torah at that moment, it's an entirely different thing than standing at Sinai.

This vision, as a-historical and as a-texual as it may be, of embracing Torah and mitzvot after victory—which came as we'll recall without divine intervention; the name of God is nowhere mentioned in the Book of Esther—is a beautiful idea. It reframes Torah as not a yoke and a burden, but as our greatest treasure: what other people would have the courage to set before themselves such a task? What other nation in the world would proudly take on the challenge of being God's partner?

Maybe at the outset, Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa is right. Nobody with a brain would agree to this

stuff. But after generations of living Jewishly, embracing *mitzvot* as pathways to God, having those commandments open up vistas of meaning impossible to imagine, then Torah truly does become a triumph and a treasure.

Let us celebrate this day a holiday of renewal, when we stand once again as an entire people and with one voice reaffirm our commitment to being God's sacred, beloved, special partner. It's a huge, daunting task, but one we are uniquely qualified to fulfill. Chag Sameach! ~K~

... Why the Book of Ruth?

In many synagogues the Book of Ruth is read on the second day of Shavuot. The Book of Ruth was recorded by the prophet Samuel. There are three main reasons most often offered for this custom:

1. Shavuot is both the birthday and *yahrzeit* of King David, and the Book of Ruth records his ancestry. Ruth and her husband Boaz were King David's great-grandparents.
2. The scenes of harvesting described in the book of Ruth are appropriate to the Festival of Harvest, especially how the poor were treated in the harvest season with sympathy and love.
3. Ruth was a sincere convert (a *ger tzedek*) who embraced Judaism with all her heart. On Shavuot all Jews were converts -- having accepted the Torah and all of its precepts. ~K~

... Choosing to be Chosen

Rabbi Steven Saks of Adas Kodesh Shel Emeth in Wilmington, DE, and also affiliated with the UTJ, the Union for Traditional Judaism, delivered this Shavuot sermon in 2009.

Jews have often been criticized for referring to themselves as “the Chosen People.” After all, the referring to oneself as “chosen” does sound pompous and elitist.

The idea of choice is central to the holiday of Shavuot. God chose to reveal Himself at Mount Sinai to the Israelites and the Israelites chose to accept the Torah. The Israelites, when offered the

Torah, accepted with enthusiasm, responding na'aseh v'nishmah, literally "we will do and we will listen." In other words, the Israelites were so eager to accept the Torah, they pledged to fulfill its precepts before they had the opportunity to hear them. (It's like signing a contract first, and then reading it.) The Israelites accepted upon themselves God's mitzvot, commandments, as spelled out in the Torah.

Through the performance of the mitzvot, the Israelites were to become a Goy Kadosh, a holy nation. In other words, simply being an Israelite does not make one a holy person. Rather, the Israelite becomes holy by acting in a holy manner, by performing the mitzvot. The idea that the Israelite is holy simply because he is a member of the chosen people is firmly rejected by the prophet Amos.

Bible Scholar Bernard Anderson points out that the prophet Amos repudiated the idea that the God of Israel was a national God that Israel could mobilize in the service of the nation's own interest. According to Amos, being chosen by God did not entitle Israel to special privilege and protection; rather, it meant that Israel had accepted upon herself the responsibility to serve God.

According to Amos, God is a universal God who is active in the histories of all nations: "Are you not like the Kushites to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel out of the land of Egypt? And the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7). The other nations have not realized this because they have not shared the intimate relationship with God that Israel has been allowed to.

Rabbi Hertz, in his commentary on the Bible, explains that two teachings are enunciated through Amos 9:7. The first is that God has guided all other nations as well as Israel. All peoples are equally dear to Him, and the hand of providence is evident not only in the migration of Israel but in every historical movement. The second teaching is that God's special relationship with Israel rests on moral foundations. A degenerate Israel is of no more worth to God than other immoral nations.

Amos is believed to have prophesied between the years 765-750 B.C.E. during the reign of Jeroboam the Second, a time of great affluence for the

northern Kingdom of Israel. The prophet condemns the people for engaging in hollow religious ritual while failing to care for the poor.

So we see that choosing to be "the chosen" means accepting additional responsibility. Potential converts are discouraged from converting to Judaism, in part because of this added responsibility. Yet one can choose to become a member of "the chosen people" if he or she desires.

The Rabbis teach that the Torah was given in the desert, in a barren area, because it is hefker, unclaimed property. In other words, anyone can accept the yoke of the Torah upon him- or herself. The Book of Ruth, which is read on Shavuot, tells the story of Ruth the Moabite who is considered the quintessential convert to Judaism. Many female converts choose Ruth as their Hebrew name. Ruth did not have yichus – an impressive lineage. The Moabites were enemies of Israel and descended from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter, as detailed in Genesis 19.

Yet Ruth chooses to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel and becomes an Israelite. Ruth is not shunned for becoming an Israelite; rather, Jewish history views her as an exalted figure. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David from whom the Messiah will emerge. So we see that the Messiah will be a descendant of a woman who was born a non-Jew.

Anyone who believes that he/she is superior to others because of his/her Jewish birth misses the message of the Book of Ruth. Being chosen does not confer any sort of genetic superiority; rather, being chosen means that we choose to develop our relationship with God.

As we celebrate the giving of the Torah, let us choose to strengthen our relationship with God by climbing the ladder of mitzvot. No matter how we identify, Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, or other, we can climb the ladder of mitzvot by increasing our ritual observance. Just as importantly, we can climb the ladder of mitzvot by increasing our observance of the laws that govern our relationships with fellow human beings, such as giving charity and conducting business honestly.

By climbing the ladder of mitzvot, we are ascending the heights of Mount Sinai and in the process

become better individuals. May we all reach new heights this Shavuot. Chag Sameach! ~K~

... Mystic Moments

Written by Rabbi Jeremy Gordon of the New London Synagogue in Great Britain, who is a 2004 graduate of the JTS Rabbinical School.

Of the three pilgrim festivals (actually four counting Sh'mini Atzeret), Shavuot has always been the most problematic and seemingly the least attractive. It lacks the sensory impact of Sukkot with its *lulav*, *etrog* and *sukkah*, and the drama of Pesach with the Seder and the Haggadah. The kabbalah-influenced Tikkun has been a plus, but also has its drawbacks. Not everyone is interested in staying up all night. The early *halutzim* tried to revive its agricultural flavor with *bikkurim* (first fruit) ceremonies, but that has diminished as agricultural has become less and less important to Israel.

The problematics of Shavuot are not new. They have a long history. In the Torah Shavuot is the only one of the festivals that is lacking a historical explanation. The connection that the Pharisees made between Shavuot and the events at Sinai gave Shavuot new importance during the Second Temple period.

The question that truly begs answering, however, is not so much why Shavuot is without historical connection, but why the Torah did not designate any holy day to commemorate the events at Sinai. I suppose one can argue whether Sinai is as important as the Exodus. The Exodus is the seminal event of our history. Without it there would be nothing else. We owe our very being to the Exodus. On the other hand it could be argued that Sinai is even more important. The Exodus leads up to Sinai. The events there are the very purpose of the Exodus, predicted in God's first revelation to Moses: And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain (Exodus 3:12). Furthermore the timing of Shavuot, seven weeks after Pesach, seems to naturally fit the chronology of the events. The theophany at Sinai began according to the Torah "On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt" (Exodus 19:1). It is almost as if the Torah goes out of its way to avoid any commemoration of that event. Were it not for the

determination of the Pharisees to connect Shavuot with *zman matan Toraneinu* – the time of the giving of our Torah – there would be nothing on the Jewish calendar to remind us of Sinai.

It seems to me that the answer to this conundrum lies in the nature of the Sinai event itself. Compare it for a moment to the Exodus. The Exodus is an event within history. It is something that can be described and grasped. In a sense it can also be replicated. Remember Amos' statement, "Have I not brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt and the Philistines from Caftor and the Syrians from Kir?" Sinai, on the other hand, is a mysterious experience that even the Torah does not seem able to adequately describe. It is a subjective event, rather than objective. It belongs to the realm of the mystic, rather than to the realm of the historic. To grasp it seems impossible. What exactly happened there? What was heard? The descriptions in the text in the book of Exodus are impossible to decipher. They are impressions, almost deliberately inconsistent because they are description of the indescribable – a collective mystical experience. As a unique event, they are not duplicatable in any way. And so the Torah leaves us to ponder this strange encounter, but not to re-enact it. To do so would be to cheapen it.

For the Pharisees, on the other hand, living long after the event, at a time when the Torah, the eventual product that had developed from the Sinai revelation, was at the very center of Jewish life and belief, it seemed impossible that this important event should not be celebrated and commemorated each year and so they drew the logical conclusion that Shavuot, a holiday with no connection to an event, and Sinai, an event with no connection to a holiday, must belong together.

There are three ways in which we may experience God: in history, in nature and in the personal, mystic, encounter. Pesach emphasizes God in history, Sukkot stresses God in nature and Shavuot – the mystical encounter. It is hardly accidental that these three modes are also reflected in the three opening paragraphs of the *Amidah*. The first paragraph- *Avot* (Ancestors) – is devoted to the encounter with God in history. The second – *G'vurot* (Mighty powers) – talks about God's role in nature, sustaining the world. The third – *K'dushah* (Holiness) – is a reflection of the personal, direct, mystical encounter

But the end result of the mystic encounter is a practical one: the making of a covenant between God and Israel: If you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). It is this covenantal relationship that lies at the very heart of Judaism and it is one that must be constantly reaffirmed if Judaism is to be meaningful. Remembering Sinai on Shavuot, therefore, is a crucial element of Jewish belief.

Mysticism is definitely a part of the heritage of Judaism as it has come down through the ages – if we did not know this before we learned it through the work of Gershon Scholem who demonstrated its ancient roots. But there has also always been a certain amount of caution about mysticism and even opposition to it. Rules were made about who could stuffy mysticism – only married men aged 40 or more. The story of the 4 who entered the orchard showed the dangers of mysticism. Only one of four emerged unscathed. And I shall never forget Lieberman’s introduction of Scholem: Mysticism is nonsense – but the study of nonsense is scholarship! We have seen that a desire for mysticism can lead indeed to nonsense – be it kabbalah water or the use of crystals and I don’t know what to say nothing of the spells and curses and protective blessings and amulets and scarlet strings that are peddled as if they were authentic parts of religious belief. Indeed the line between true mysticism and superstitious nonsense is at times very fine indeed.

Jewish mysticism has never attempted to find the way for a union of human beings and god – unlike Christian mysticism. It has, however, looked for ways in which human beings could feel closer to God and be in the presence of God. To that I have no objections. It would be wonderful if in our prayers and meditations we could feel that we were somehow closer to God and imbued with a sense of the divine. Hasidism at its finest attempts to achieve that. But for most of us it would be sufficient if we could achieve what Kadushin called normal mysticism or normative mysticism – which meant that at such moments as the Kedushah we would feel closer to God or that whenever we pray or recite a blessing we become more aware of God’s presence in the world.

Shavuot is the most mystical moment of the year because it takes us back to the mysterious events at Sinai. But let it not lead us into strange paths, but rather into a determination to live up to the words of Torah and to actualize the covenant made with God to be His holy people. ~K~

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