

SHAVUOT *...in a nutshell*

TUESDAY, JUNE 11 - THURSDAY JUNE 13TH

The Omer Count to Shavuot

The holiday of Shavuot - which literally means "weeks" -- is connected to Passover. From the second day of Passover, we count 49 days (7 weeks) to reach Shavuot. This corresponds to the 49 days the Israelites traveled from Egypt through the desert until they received the Torah on the 50th day on Mount Sinai. It also represents the journey from slavery to freedom. The Israelites were not fully free until they chose to accept the mandate of the Torah. Every year we have the chance to re-enact this journey from the slavery of our own lives to the recognition that our own freedom comes from embracing our Jewishness. Other commentaries have noticed that Passover is at the time of the barley harvest, but the wheat harvest only ripens at Shavuot. Hence, we make the journey from animal food (barley) to human food (wheat), or from our own animal instincts to our higher humanity, from immaturity to maturity, from physicality to spirituality. A final image from Chassidic sources -- is that of a courtship and engagement. The omer period is when the Jewish people were betrothed to God and Shavuot is the ceremony of the wedding. This adds to the element of passion and excitement of this holiday.

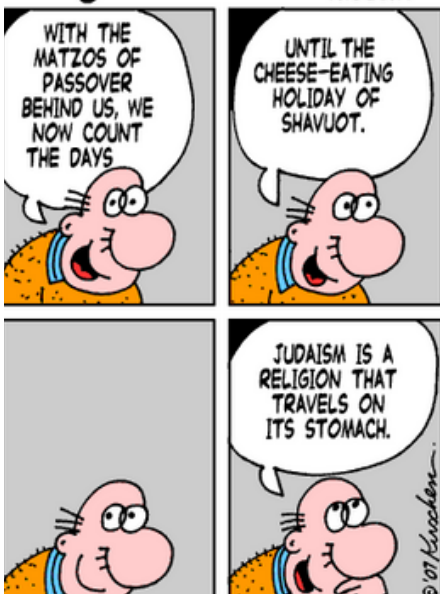
The Giving of the Torah

Shavuot is called "the time of the giving of our Torah" and the holiday commemorates this unique gift of love. The synagogue Torah reading for Shavuot is the Ten Commandments, which were given to us on this day as our ancestors stood before Mount Sinai. These incredibly important messages have profoundly changed the world. As we rise to listen to them, we can imagine the fear and excitement of watching God's presence dwelling on Mount Sinai and Moshe ascending into the cloud to receive the two tablets. This is also an auspicious time to re-affirm our commitment to the Torah and to learning by starting a learning program at whatever level we are on. Whether it is reading one section of the weekly parsha in English each week, going to a Torah class or starting a tractate of Talmud, we can all make a learning commitment to last us from Shavuot to Yom Kippur.

A Holiday Without "Stuff"

Passover has matza and a seder. Sukkot has the Four Species and sukkahs. But Shavuot has no "stuff" to go with it. Some suggest that this is because it is ALL about the Torah. In other words, we don't need any other stuff, just the words of the Torah.

Dry Bones FOOD FOR THOUGHT



Staying up all Night

Contrary to popular belief, staying up all night on Shavuot is not to show how tough you are (5 am, baby - I am still awake!) or how young you are (it's like being an undergraduate again!) but to study the Torah. We should try to spend less time socializing or visiting and more time learning something new and profound. In Kabbalistic thought, the night has a special potential for deep study and understanding; many kabbalists stay up all night frequently to pray and learn, tapping into this spiritual energy. It was the mystics of Tzfat who first started the custom in the 16th century of staying up all Shavuot night.

Another reason we stay up all night is because the Jewish people overslept! Like missing the most important job interview of your life, our ancestors were late Shavuot morning to get to the mountain. As a sort of apology or message that WE are eager to receive the Torah, we stay up all night, excited about the morning and unwilling to take the risk of not waking up. Some oppose the practice of staying up all night as it messes up your schedule and makes it hard to stay awake for morning prayers, but what the practice lacks in wisdom, it makes up for in enthusiasm.

Eating Dairy

Some people, think God commanded us to eat cheesecake on Shavuot and - while it would be an amazing mitzva to fulfill scrupulously - I have checked and the word 'cheesecake' is not found in the Torah. Rather, there is an ancient custom of eating dairy on Shavuot. Many reasons have been given -- here are two: a) The Torah is sometimes said to be as sweet as milk and honey, so the verse from Song of Songs that says "milk and honey are under your tongue" is interpreted to mean the sweetness of receiving and learning the Torah. b) After the giving of the Torah, the laws of kosher were in full effect, but they did not have time (it was Shabbat) to prepare meat until later. Hence, their first meals as Torah-observing Jews were dairy meals. Interestingly the custom is really only to eat one dairy meal over the holiday and - in order to celebrate the holiday properly - other meals should be meat affairs.

The Scroll of Ruth

It is customary to read about Ruth on this holiday, as it happened at this time of the year. Ruth was a Moabite woman who showed deep conviction in coming to Israel (with her mother-in-law Naomi) and becoming a Jewess. Since everyone "converted" to Judaism when they stood at Sinai and accepted the Torah, we relate to Ruth's journey. Among the honors due to Ruth's greatness is that she was the forebearer of King David and, ultimately, the Messiah. The scroll of Ruth is read on the second day of Shavuot. This year it is read on Monday, June 6th..

Basic Practices of the Shavuot holiday

- 1) Shavuot is 1 day in Israel, but celebrated for 2 days in the Diaspora.
- 2) Shavuot, like all holidays, begins at night. This year, it begins at nightfall on Saturday night, June 4 and continues until Monday night, June 6th.
- 3) There are many activities which are forbidden on Shabbat but permissible on a holiday. All such activities must wait until one verbally "separates" between Shabbat and the holiday. This is done by adding the paragraph of "Vatodi'enu" inn to the paragraph of Shemona Esrei or one can say: "Baruch hamavdil bayn kodesh likodesh" – "Blessed is the One who separates between (the) holiness (of Shabbat) and (the) holiness (of the holiday)."
- 3) On Saturday night, when the candles are lit, the blessing of "I'hadlik ner shel yom tov." is said, along with the blessing of Shehecheyanu. On Sunday night, the candles are lit from an existing flame and the same blessing of "I'hadlik ner shel Yom tov" is said, along with along with the blessing of Shehecheyanu.
- 4) The order of Saturday night's kiddush/havdalah is: a) The wine blessing. b) The holiday kiddush blessing. c) The blessing on the candle. For the havdalah candle-we use the standard holiday candles which are on the table. It is not necessary to conjoin two candles. d) The havdalah blessing – which is different than the standard Shabbat havdalah blessing. e) The Shehecheyanu blessing
- 5) Like all holidays, one may cook and carry on Shavuot as long as the food is to be eaten on the same day of the festival as it is being cooked.
- 6) One may not light a flame, but may transfer fire from an existing flame.
- 7) There are synagogue services and Torah readings for both days of Shavuot. Festival meals are eaten as on Shabbat.
- 8) The special insertion of ya'aleh v'yavo is added in Grace After Meals.
- 9) The amida (silent devotion) is a special one for festivals.
- 10) Havdala is made on Monday night, June 6, and it is a Holiday Havdala. Only wine is used (no spices or flame).
- 11) Yizkor, the prayer for the deceased, is said on Monday, June 6th, after Shachrit/Morning Services.

*partially adapted from Chabad.org

Advanced topics

If you would like to know more about the Shavuot holiday, please consult these classic volumes:

- 1) To Be a Jew - by Donin
 - 2) The Book of Our Heritage - by Kitov
- They will discuss topics such as:
- a) the 3 days of encirclement,
 - b) The poem akdamut,
 - c) the 2 special loaves
 - d) the custom of spreading grass and flowers in the synagogue, and others.

Have a meaningful and Torah-filled Shavuot!

"And Israel encamped there' - like one person with one heart"

(Rashi, Exodus 19:2)

Got Food?

In need of food for Shavuot? Check out these great options (who deliver near and far):

- **KOSHER MARKET PLACE (UWS)**- <https://www.thekoshermarketplace.com>
- **RKM- RIVERDALE KOSHER MARKET** - <https://www.riverdalekoshermarket.com/product-tags/2270/products>
- **BAGELS & CO- UWS & UES**- <https://bagelskosher.com/>
- **PAEK EAST KOSHER (LES)**- <https://bit.ly/parkeastshavuot2022>
- **TALIA'S STEAKHOUSE**-<https://taliassteakhouse.com/shavuot/>
- **SHARMEL CATERERS**- <https://sharmelcaterers.com/pesach-2021-take-out-and-delivery/>
- **Butterflake bakery** - <https://shopbutterflake.com/collections/delivery-pickup>
- **My Most Favorite Food**- <https://mymostfavorite.com/shavuot-holiday-menu-2/>
- **Zami Caterers**- <https://store.zamicaterers.com/Shavout-Dairy-Fish-c109194758>
- **A LIST OF PLACES IN NY TO ORDER FROM**- <https://www.greatkosherrestaurants.com/blog/shavuos-specials-2022>

MJE SHAVUOT VIDEOS

All the following videos can be found here:

<https://bit.ly/3uJddR6>

- **Rabbi Mark Wildes: Celebrating Shavuot**
<https://bit.ly/3obE5Xc>
- **Rabbi Mark Wildes: Celebrating the Greatest Moment in History: A Crash Course in Shavuot**
<https://bit.ly/3eHK0As>
- **Rabbi Mark Wildes-Shavuot Workshop**
<https://bit.ly/3oiYjOX>
- **Rabbi Wildes- Shavuot & Starbucks: A Custom to Eat Dairy** <https://bit.ly/2RP1ku2>
- **Rabbi Avi Heller-10 Commandments**
<https://bit.ly/3boqs1L>
- **Rabbi Avi Heller- Top 10 "How To Celebrate Shavuot during the Corona-Era!"** <https://bit.ly/3hzEO3x>
- **Allison Reich-Soul Searching with Allison : Customize Your Shavuot** <https://bit.ly/2SDgOIm>
- **Zahava Schwartz- Shavuot: Should You Be A Risk Taker**
<https://bit.ly/3uHV1k9>
- **Allison Reich-Tasty Kitchen- Shavuot - Chocolate Chip Cheesecake for Shavuot**
<https://bit.ly/3vZFram>
- **Ask the MJE Educators: Shavuot Edition**
<https://bit.ly/2RMtTsn>
- **Guest Speaker- Rabbi Zachary Schwartz- pre-Shavuot Torah focused on Rabbi Schneerson (Lubavitcher Rebbe) and Rabbi Soloveitchik**
<https://bit.ly/3ocyJLI>

MJE

SHABBAT/SHAVUOT 2024

SCHEDULE

TUESDAY, JUNE 11
OMER DAY 49
SHAVUOT NIGHT 1

8:10 PM Candle Lighting for the Holiday & leave candle burning for Shavuot

8:15 PM Evening Services with MJE followed by Holiday Dinner, RSVP required

10:30 PM All night learning with MJE- open to all

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 12
SHAVUOT DAY 1

4:45 AM Sunrise Rooftop Service and Breakfast

8:15 PM Mincha Services with the Jewish Center

9:10 PM Candle Lighting from existing flame

THURSDAY, JUNE 13
SHAVUOT DAY 2

9:30 AM Shacharit/Morning Services with MJE, Rabbi Mark & Jill Wildes, Aaron & Leora Blustein

9:11 PM Yom Tov Concludes

PERSEVERANCE: NASA'S MARS PROJECT **AND PREPARING FOR SHAVUOT**

Rabbi Benjamin Blech

Together with Jews around the world I've been busy since Passover counting the days. No, I don't mean how long I've been confined to my home or how many weeks it's been since I was able to pray in a synagogue. I've been fulfilling the mitzvah to count the 49 days between the holiday marking our deliverance from Egypt to the magnificent moment when we received the Torah on Mount Sinai.

The Counting of the Omer is a meaningful way to link the festival of freedom with its ultimate purpose of receiving the Torah on the holiday of Shavuot. The midrash compares it to a bride counting the days from her engagement to the ultimate joy of her wedding. The count expresses our anticipation of our marriage to God under the chuppah of Mount Sinai which miraculously hovered over our heads as we listened to the thunderous voice of the Almighty proclaiming the 10 Commandments.

Interestingly, the name selected by NASA for its next rover headed to Mars expresses the key lesson we need to take to heart as we prepare to receive the Torah.

NASA is the scientific embodiment of the human effort to transcend our earthly limitations. Somehow, from the depths of our souls, we know there must be more than the globe on which we live. The profound quest for probing the mysteries of the universe is testament to our spiritual awareness of a greater universe – and of a Divine creator.

NASA's missions deserve names worthy of their historic significance. In its early years, NASA failed this challenge. The seven landers to survey the surface of the moon between 1966 and 1968 in preparation for the landings of Apollo astronauts were simply the word Surveyor followed by a number. The probes that flew past Mars, Venus and Mercury were Mariner 1 through 10, and Viking 1 and Viking 2 were the rockets that NASA successfully landed on Mars in 1976.

Then NASA had a great idea. Beginning with the Pathfinder mission in 1997, NASA turned to schoolchildren with a naming contest. In 2003, the choices of Sofi Collis, a precocious nine-year-old who was born in Siberia, gave us the emotionally moving names Spirit and Opportunity because, as Sofi wrote, "I used to live in an orphanage. At night, I looked up at the sparkly sky and felt better. I dreamed I could fly there. In America, I can make all my dreams come true. Thank you for the Spirit and the Opportunity."

This year as well, as NASA was completing plans for the Mars mission scheduled for the red planet this summer, a contest was held for children ranging from kindergartners to high schoolers. There were 28,000 entries and 155 semifinalists. The winner was a seventh grader from Springfield, Virginia. The winning name? One word: Perseverance.

Alexander Mather, in his winning essay, explained: "Curiosity. Insight. Spirit. Opportunity. If you think about it, all of these names of past Mars rovers are qualities we possess as humans. We are always curious and seek opportunity. We have the spirit and insight to explore the moon, Mars and beyond. But, if rovers are to be the qualities of us as a race, we missed the most important thing. Perseverance."

Perseverance is what will allow us to reach beyond our physical limitations – and get closer to God.

Perseverance is what will bring us to Mars this summer. Perseverance is what will permit us to escape our earthly confines. Perseverance is what will allow us to reach beyond our physical limitations – and get closer to God.

It is true for space travel, just as it is true for our spiritual journey as well.

How do we make the trip from Egypt to Sinai, from the confines of physical bondage to the soaring liberation of holiness? It is not easy to reach the top of a mountain. Living up to the demands of Mount Sinai is a harder climb than reaching the top of Mount Everest. It requires commitment. It requires dedication. But most of all it requires perseverance. Benjamin Disraeli summed it up best: "Through perseverance people win success out of what seemed destined to be certain failure."

That is the real meaning of counting the days until Shavuot. It is fascinating that the very name of the holiday commemorating our acceptance of the Torah is a word that does not mention the event of that day but rather the preparation for it in the days preceding. Shavuot means weeks – the weeks of perseverance leading up to it which make our commitment to Torah possible.

How can every one of us achieve the ideal of lives committed to holiness, of lives exemplifying the best and the noblest as defined by God himself? It is by way of the one word, perseverance, that will take us to Mars – and beyond that, to Heaven itself.

THE SOUND OF SILENCE (BAMIDBAR 5776)

Rabbi Sacks

Bamidbar is usually read on the Shabbat before Shavuot. So the sages connected the two. Shavuot is the time of the giving of the Torah. Bamidbar means, "In the desert." What then is the connection between the desert and the Torah, the wilderness and God's word?

The sages gave several interpretations. According to the Mekhilta the Torah was given publicly, openly and in a place no one owns because had it been given in the land of Israel, Jews would have said to the nations of the world, "You have no share in it." Instead, whoever wants to come and accept it, let them come and accept it.

Another explanation: Had the Torah been given in Israel the nations of the world would have had an excuse for not accepting it. This follows the rabbinic tradition that before God gave the Torah to the Israelites he offered it to all the other nations and each found a reason to decline.

Yet another: Just as the wilderness is free – it costs nothing to enter – so the Torah is free. It is God's gift to us.

But there is another, more spiritual reason. The desert is a place of silence. There is nothing visually to distract you, and there is no ambient noise to muffle sound. To be sure, when the Israelites received the Torah, there was thunder and lightning and the sound of a shofar. The earth felt as if it were shaking at its foundations. But in a later age, when the prophet Elijah stood at the same mountain after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal, he encountered God not in the whirlwind or the fire or the earthquake but in the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice, literally "the sound of a slender silence." I define this as the sound you can only hear if you are listening. In the silence of the midbar, the desert, you can hear the Medaber, the Speaker, and the medubar, that which is spoken. To hear the voice of God you need a listening silence in the soul. Many years ago British television produced a documentary series, *The Long Search*, on the world's great religions.[5] When it came to Judaism, the presenter Ronald Eyre seemed surprised by its blooming, buzzing confusion, especially the loud, argumentative voices in the Bet Midrash, the house of study. Remarking on this to Elie Wiesel, he asked, "Is there such a thing as a silence in Judaism?" Wiesel replied: "Judaism is full of silences ... but we don't talk about them."

Judaism is a very verbal culture, a religion of holy words. Through words, God created the universe: "And God said, Let there be ... and there was." According to the Targum, it is our ability to speak that makes us human. It translates the phrase, "and man became a living soul" (Gen. 2:7) as "and man became a speaking soul." Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds.

So silence in Tanakh often has a negative connotation. "Aaron was silent," says the Torah, after the death of his two sons Nadav and Avihu (Lev. 10:3). "The dead do not praise you," says Psalm 115, "nor do those who go down to the silence [of the grave]." When Job's friends came to comfort him after the loss of his children and other afflictions, "Then they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights, yet no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great." (Job 2:13).

But not all silence is sad. Psalms tells us that "to You, silence is praise" (Ps. 65:2). If we are truly in awe at the greatness of God, the vastness of the universe and the almost infinite extent of time, our deepest emotions will indeed lie too deep for words. We will experience silent communion. The sages valued silence. They called it "a fence to wisdom." [6] If words are worth a coin, silence is worth two. [7] R. Shimon ben Gamliel said, "All my days I have grown up among the wise, and I have found nothing better than silence." [8]

The service of the priests in the Temple was accompanied by silence. The Levites sang in the courtyard, but the priests – unlike their counterparts in other ancient religions – neither sang nor spoke while offering the sacrifices. One scholar [9] has accordingly spoken of "the silence of the sanctuary." The Zohar (2a) speaks of silence as the medium in which both the Sanctuary above and the Sanctuary below are made.

There were Jews who cultivated silence as a spiritual discipline. Bratslav Hassidim meditate in the fields. There are Jews who practise taanit dibbur, a "fast of words." Our most profound prayer, the private saying of the Amidah, is called tefillah be-lachash, the "silent prayer." It is based on the precedent of Hannah, praying for a child. "She spoke in her heart. Her lips moved but her voice was not heard" (1 Sam. 1:13).

God hears our silent cry. In the agonising tale of how Sarah told Abraham to send Hagar and her son away, the Torah tells us that when their water ran out and the young Ishmael was at the point of dying, Hagar cried, yet God heard "the voice of the child" (Gen. 21:16-17). Earlier when the angels came to visit Abraham and told him that Sarah would have a child, Sarah laughed inwardly, that is, silently, yet she was heard by God (Gen. 18:12-13). God hears our thoughts even when they are not expressed in speech.

The silence that counts, in Judaism, is thus a listening silence – and listening is the supreme religious art. Listening means making space for others to speak and be heard. As I point out in my commentary to the Siddur, there is no English word that remotely equals the Hebrew verb *sh-m-a* in its wide range of senses: to listen, to hear, to pay attention, to understand, to internalise and to respond in deed.

This was one of the key elements in the Sinai covenant, when the Israelites, having already said twice, "All that God says, we will do," then said, "All that God says, we will do and we will hear [ve-nishma]" (Ex. 24:7). It is the *nishma* – listening, hearing, heeding, responding – that is the key religious act.

Thus Judaism is not only a religion of doing-and-speaking; it is also a religion of listening. Faith is the ability to hear the music beneath the noise. There is the silent music of the spheres, about which Psalm 19 speaks:

The heavens declare the glory of God

The skies proclaim the work of His hands.

Day to day they pour forth speech,

Night to night they communicate knowledge.

There is no speech, there are no words,

Their voice is not heard.

Yet their music carries throughout the earth.

There is the voice of history that was heard by the prophets. And there is the commanding voice of Sinai, that continues to speak to us across the abyss of time. I sometimes think that people in the modern age have found the concept of "Torah from heaven" problematic, not because of some new archaeological discovery but because we have lost the habit of listening to the sound of transcendence, a voice beyond the merely human.

It is fascinating that despite his often fractured relationship with Judaism, Sigmund Freud created in psychoanalysis a deeply Jewish form of healing. He himself called it the "speaking cure", but it is in fact a listening cure. Almost all effective forms of psychotherapy involve deep listening.

Is there enough listening in the Jewish world today? Do we, in marriage, really listen to our spouses? Do we as parents truly listen to our children? Do we, as leaders, hear the unspoken fears of those we seek to lead? Do we internalise the sense of hurt of the people who feel excluded from the community? Can we really claim to be listening to the voice of God if we fail to listen to the voices of our fellow humans?

In his poem, 'In memory of W B Yeats,' W H Auden wrote:

In the deserts of the heart

Let the healing fountain start.

From time to time we need to step back from the noise and hubbub of the social world and create in our hearts the stillness of the desert where, within the silence, we can hear the kol demamah dakah, the still, small voice of God, telling us we are loved, we are heard, we are embraced by God's everlasting arms, we are not alone.

CHEESE AND FLOWERS

Rabbi Berel Wein

Shavuot is singular in the calendar of Jewish holidays. It, unlike all of the other Jewish holidays, has no special mitzvot attached to it, nor does it possess a unique holiday presence. Perhaps this is one of the causes why Shavuot has become almost a forgotten holiday for many in the Jewish world.

Though the holiday of Shavuot has great historical significance, being the anniversary of the revelation at Sinai and of the gift of Torah to Israel, it nevertheless was left bereft of special biblical ritual to celebrate the event. In fact, in the Bible we find the holiday of Shavuot referred to as the "Holiday of Bikkurim" -- the bringing of the first fruits of the year's crop to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple and the entry into our long exile, the Jewish people refused to leave the holiday of Shavuot unadorned of distinctiveness. The holiday of Shavuot was therefore invested with customs and rituals that have preserved the beauty and uniqueness of the holiday to our day.

Dairy Foods

One of those customs is the eating of dairy food at the holiday meal. This is an exception to the talmudic rule that "holiday joy requires meat and wine." Shavuot cheesecake and cheese blintzes have become beloved and fattening staples in Jewish homes for centuries.

The origins of this custom are grounded in the commemoration of the receiving of the Torah on this day. The Torah itself is compared to milk -- "Honey and milk under your tongue" -- and thus dairy products are symbolic of that great day of Sinai. The Jewish people after receiving the Torah could not eat meat products immediately, since the meat that they had was not prepared in accordance with the newly-given laws of the ritual of animal slaughter and the dietary laws. Hence they ate only dairy products on the day of revelation, the holiday of Shavuot.

A further source of the custom of dairy foods on Shavuot lay in the description in the Torah, given to Israel on Shavuot, of the Land of Israel as being "a land that flows with milk and honey." Thus, the dairy foods came not only to remind the Jewish people of the Torah given at Sinai, but also of their beloved homeland, the Land of Israel.

Synagogue Decoration

Another Shavuot custom arose, that of decorating one's home, the synagogue and even the Torah scroll itself with greens and flowers in honor of the holiday. This custom of flowers and greens was based upon a statement in Midrash that the foot of Mount Sinai (where the Jews stood in awe, awaiting the granting of the Torah) was carpeted with greens and sweet smelling flowers.

Even in Eastern Europe, where Jews in the main lived in squalor and poverty, flowers in the synagogue on Shavuot was a widely practiced societal custom. However, the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, opposed the custom vigorously. His contention was that a custom, even if its origin was Jewish and based on Jewish tradition, had been adopted by the non-Jewish world as a custom in their houses of worship, then Jews should forego their further observance of that custom. Since flowers and greens were widely used in church services and in non-Jewish cemeteries, the custom of flowers and greens in the synagogue on Shavuot should be abandoned.

The Gaon's opinion was widely followed in Lithuanian Jewry but was ignored almost everywhere else in the Jewish world. Thus, the decorating of the synagogue and the home with flowers on Shavuot remains a strong custom among Jews until today.

In fact, the supplying of the flowers and green decorations for the synagogue was deemed an honor that people vied for. One therefore paid not only for the flowers and greens themselves, but also paid the synagogue for the honor of paying for those flowers and greens. Honor is an addictive elixir!

So enjoy the flowers and the cheesecake and revel in the fact that the Lord has given us the Torah, and through it, the task of creating a better world for us and all mankind.

THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA: SHAVUOT

By Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Shavuot For those of us living outside the State of Israel, there is no "portion of the week", parshat hashavua, this coming Sabbath. The two-day holiday of Shavuot falls on Friday and Saturday and preempts the regular reading. Instead, I will devote this weekly column to the book of Ruth, which is read in the synagogue this Sabbath. There is hardly an example of human tragedy, which is not a part of the story of Ruth. Famine, exile, bereavement, widowhood, loneliness and poverty all occur to Naomi and Ruth. But there is one aspect of human life, not at all a tragic one, which I think is the central theme of the story and which I would like to discuss as a worthy example of "the person in the parsha". I refer to the act of personal choice, of making a decision. We have all had numerous occasions to choose between two courses of action, between seemingly equally beneficial options for our future. Sometimes these have been of momentous importance, and other times, as trivial as deciding between chocolate and vanilla ice cream. For me, the phenomenon of choice defines the human condition. Only humans choose. Choice and decision distinguish us from the rest of the animal world. It has been claimed that what makes human beings distinct is our capacity to think and speak; homo sapiens. Others maintain that it is our ability to use tools which distinguishes us; homo faber. And others even go so far as to claim that it is our ability to play which renders us unique; homo ludens. But if the popular philosophical movement of existentialism taught us anything about the special nature of the human person, it is that we are creatures who choose. We are "condemned" to make choices. Nevertheless, the responsibility of making decisions is something we try to avoid. In the catchy phrase of Erich Fromm's book, we wish to "escape from freedom". We wish to escape, but we have no choice but to choose. Ruth is a perfect example of someone who faced the choices in her life and made some very painful ones. They turned out to be part of her heroic destiny and proved to be of singular importance to the Jewish people and to all humanity. Rabbinic legend tells us that Ruth and her sister-in-law, Orpah, were Moabite princesses. They could have married anyone in their society, but they chose to marry the Jewish "greenhorns", albeit noble "greenhorns", and thus made a choice which distinguished them from their sister princesses. They both bucked the tide and married members of the minority in their land. But they exercised choice, and that begins the story. Their husbands, Machlon and Kilyon, then died, confronting them with yet another crucial life decision. Would they remarry? Would they now conform to their peers and marry Moabite men, or would they continue to irrationally seek Jewish mates – even if that meant choosing to leave their homeland? Choice, painful choice. It has been said that all important decisions are made on the basis of insufficient data. Of course this is true, because when there is truly adequate information, choices are obvious and apparent, and the decision-making process is of little consequence. But if it is true that all important decisions depend upon insufficient data, then all heroic decisions are made on the basis of contrary data. The realistic data which lay before Ruth and Orpah certainly would have justified very different choices for them. The data would argue, "stay home"; remain within a familiar culture; marry someone who is socially and religiously compatible with you. Do not marry a stranger, and certainly do not enter voluntary exile in the attempt to find a mate equal to your first love in a distant and alien environment. This was essentially Naomi's argument to both women. She urged them to consider the data and to make "realistic" choices. Orpah initially persisted in her choice. But then, her rational, practical nature understandably prevailed. She chose to return home. Ruth, on the other hand, persisted beyond that point. And she chose, consciously and courageously, another nation, another people, and another god. What an awesome choice! What a dazzling, truly unpredictable decision! Moment by moment, each of us faces a range of options and choices. We struggle to base our decisions upon sufficient data, although disappointingly, such data is usually not forthcoming. In the absence of sufficient data, our choices must sometimes be "leaps of faith". Occasionally, they must be based upon an inner voice, the voice of our conscience, or perhaps the voice of our dreams. Ruth provides a model for those of us who, when we reach a crossroads in our lives, understand that our decisions cannot just be based upon lists of pros and cons, upon rationally weighing advantages versus disadvantages. Rather, we look within, or look Above, for guidance, recognizing that we have no guarantees that these voices are authentic. The lesson of Ruth, the person and the book, is that such choices, guided by intuition and inspiration, if not by certainty and information, result in significance to the person, and can determine the course of history: Ruth was the ancestress of King David. Like the poet Robert Frost, we may look back with regret at "the road not taken", but alternatively, we may find that the "less travelled road" is the most meaningful one of all.

STEPH CURRY'S SHAVUOT MESSAGE

Rabbi Daniel Cohen

What does one of the best NBA basketball players on the planet have to do with the upcoming holiday of Shavuot?

Stephan Curry captured the imagination of die hard and novice fans alike. His almost magical touch from beyond the three point line and skilled handling of the ball transcends the norm. He led the Golden State Warriors to the best record in the NBA and back from a 3-1 deficit in the Western Championships into the NBA finals.

Curry's work ethic offers a window into one of the most important messages of the upcoming holiday of Shavuot. The name of the holiday, translated as "weeks" does not describe the seminal event of the revelation of the Torah; it focuses on the build up to the day. There is no holiness without preparation. We cannot simply celebrate the gift of the Torah without the daily dedication to be worthy recipients. An Olympian prepares years for one moment of glory. In the spiritual realm, if we truly want to grow and embrace the Torah as a living guide for life, we must develop habits of spiritual growth each and every day.

Shavuot is not a one-day, climactic event; it's a culmination of prior dedication and devotion that expresses itself day in and day out.

The least recognized player there was Stephen Curry, but I knew that he was going to be an NBA superstar.

In the world of basketball, Stephan Curry reflects this ideal. His success did not happen overnight. Alan Klein, one of most esteemed strength and conditioning coach in the basketball world, remembers Steph at 16 when he worked with him as part of the first ever Kobe Bryant Nike Skills Academy. He writes, "The least recognized player there was Stephen Curry, but I knew immediately that he was the most impressive and that thinking long term, he was going to be a future NBA superstar, and here's how I knew that: it was all because of his work habits.

"When most players were still in their flip flops, Stephen Curry had already started doing some form shooting. By the time the workout officially started he'd probably already made 100-150 shots, almost in a full sweat. He made sure that he had perfect foot work, he made sure he had perfect shooting form. If he did anything and it wasn't perfect, he did it over again, and he didn't need a coach to tell him, he just did it.

"The moral of that story is that success is not an accident; success is actually a choice. Stephen Curry is one of the best shooters on the planet today because he has made the choice to create great habits"

Klein concludes by asking, "Are the habits that you have today on par with the dreams you have for tomorrow. That's something you need to ask yourself every single day. Because whatever you do on a regular basis today will determine where you will be tomorrow."

What are we doing today and every day spiritually to determine our tomorrow? Take a lesson from Steph. Develop holy habits. Success is not an accident; it's a daily choice.

Thank you to Rabbi Yisrael Motzen for his inspiration.

SHAVUOT: THE HOLIDAY FOR

THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Rabbi Jonathan Feldman, PhD

Shavuot could be considered the holiday of the book. Unlike Rosh Hashanah which has the shofar, Chanukah which has the menorah and Sukkot which has the four species and the sukkah, Shavuot has no concrete symbol. Since it is the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the custom is to engage in Torah study. More recently the custom is to stay up all night studying Torah.

We sometimes hear Jews referred to as 'The People of the Book.' Paradoxically this term actually comes from the Koran, not from Jewish sources. For many it emphasizes the Jewish focus on education, and achievement in education. Jews, until recently, made up 25% of many Ivy League schools. The People of the Book have garnered over 20% of Nobel prizes even though Jews make up only .02% of the population. It is difficult to determine the figures for Jewish literacy in the past, however it does appear that historically it was well above that of the general population. Eighteen hundred years before the Western world, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Gamliel instituted universal education for children in Jewish communities (see Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 21a).

It has been suggested that Jewish success in education, and as a result in general society, is largely a result of the importance placed on education in Jewish society and culture. My grandmother's mantra to me was to acquire as much education as I could because "they cannot take it away from you." This was spoken from first-hand experience; before WWII she and my grandfather had their home and business taken away from them in Austria when they were in their fifties and had to start over again in America. I absorbed the message and wound up with two advanced degrees.

Yet if we trace it back, we see that the Jewish emphasis on education does not come from a cultural value; it comes from the importance placed upon Torah study. This is embodied in the Rabbinic statement that we recite daily in the morning prayers, "Talmud Torah is equal to them all [honoring one's parents, acts of kindness and other primary mitzvot]" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127a).

One of the features of a religious Jewish home is the prominent display of books. Having Torah books in a central place in the home projects a message of the primary importance of Torah study in our lives.

Rabbi Judah Halevy, the Spanish philosopher, physician, and poet expressed his love of books this way: "My pen is my harp and my lyre, my library is my garden and orchard" (Brodi p.166). Implicit is the message that the garden is meant to be harvested. The Talmud tells us that this means incorporating Torah study into the pattern of our lives.

Shammai tells us that we should make Torah a consistent part of our lives (Avot 1:15). One of the top five questions we will be asked when we reach the world to come is "Did you set aside regular times for Torah study?" (Shabbat 31a) Torah study is not a mere hobby; it is the primary activity of a Jew's life.

Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai over 3000 years ago, and our transmission of the teachings over 3000 years of Jewish history. Jewish holidays are not just commemorations of the past. Like the Passover Haggadah tells us to actually re-experience the Exodus, so too on Shavuot, we bring ourselves to re-experience the receiving of the Torah, and we re-dedicated ourselves to our commitment to Torah by studying Torah. This opportunity can extend the rest of the year as reflected in this teaching of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: every day a voice comes out from Mount Horeb (Mt. Sinai, Avot 6:2).

So whether you stay up all night studying Torah, or find time to do some studying your own, this Shavuot, let's recommit ourselves to learning Torah and making it a consistent part of our daily life throughout the year.

SHABBAT SHALOM: PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

Rabbi Riskin

- "And these are the names of the men that shall stand with you: of Reuven, Elizur the son of Shedeur. Of Shimon, Shelimuiel the son of Zurishaddai. Of Judah, Nachshon the son of Aminadav..." (Numbers 1:5-7).

For as long as I can remember, Orthodox Judaism has been perceived by much of the world – even the Orthodox world – as a conservative, sheltered, old-fashioned way of life unwilling to take risks in the face of new challenges, preferring to retreat into its own shell like a turtle.

A Midrashic comment on this week's portion of Bamidbar makes the point that a conservative, risk-free existence is not a genuine Torah value. Certainly standing by on the sidelines is hardly a characteristic to be found in the person of Nachshon, prince of the tribe of Judah, who jumped into the Reed Sea in advance of the Egyptians. It was only after his demonstration of faith that the Almighty went the next step and split the Reed Sea.

The Midrash (also recorded in B.T. Bava Batra 91a) points out that this courageous Nachshon had four sons, including Elimelech, husband of Naomi, and Shalmon, father of Boaz; hence Nachshon was father and grand-father of two major personalities in the Scroll of Ruth, which we will be reading shortly on Shavuot.

In presenting such a genealogy, the Midrash stresses not only the characteristics of risk-taking by the descendants of Nachshon, but also what kind of risks are favored by the Torah and what kind are not.

The fact is that courage and risk-taking, or the lack of it, may be seen as an underlying theme of the whole book of Bamidbar, records the history of the Israelites' forty years of wandering in the desert. When the spies return with a frightening report about the Promised Land and the ability to conquer it (Num. 13-14), the Israelites demonstrate a total lack of resolve, fortitude and faith. They wail, they tremble, they plead not to go on with the mission. They are not prepared to take the risk of war even for the conquest of the Promised Land.

Nachshon at the shore of the Reed Sea shines as the antithesis of a cowardly "desert generation." Because of his fearless daring, the people were saved. Indeed, the Gaon of Vilna points out that the Torah first describes the Israelites as having gone "into the midst of the sea on the dry land" (Ex. 14:22), and later "on dry land in the midst of the sea" (Ex. 14:29). The initial description refers to Nachshon and his followers who risked their lives by jumping into the raging waters. God made a miracle for them, the waters splitting into dry land and serving as a wall, homa, on the right and the left. The latter description refers to the rest of the Israelites who only entered after the dry land appeared; for them the waters also became a wall, but this time written without the letter vuv, which forms the alternate reading of hema, or anger!

Nachshon's remarkable ability to take risks was transmitted to his son Elimelech and grandson Boaz. Hence, the Scroll of Ruth closes with the names of ten generations from Peretz (son of Judah) to King David, and Nachshon appears right in the center, the pivotal figure between the age of the patriarchs and the generation of monarchy-messiah. But while Nachshon and Boaz are to be praised for their risk-taking, Elimelech can only be reviled for his.

When a terrible famine descends upon Bethlehem, the home of Elimelech, he packs up and decides to start a new life in the land of Moab. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates courage on the part of Elimelech, the ability to risk the unknown in a strange environment.

But his motivation was greed. He refused to share his bounty with his starving kinsmen, and he was willing to leave his homeland and his ancestral roots for the sake of his wealth. Hence, tragedy strikes.

Elimelech dies, and his sons, inevitably, marry Moabite women. His progeny die as well, causing Elimelech to have reaped as his harvest only oblivion – from a Jewish point of view.

In contrast, Boaz does not leave Bethlehem during the famine. And when the challenge arises to do an act of loving-kindness for Naomi and redeem Elimelech's land, as well as to marry the stranger – Ruth, a convert – Boaz assumes the financial obligation and the social risk involved in the marriage. The descendant from this union turns out to be none other than King David, from whom the messianic line emerges.

Elimelech's risk was based upon greed, and forsaking his tradition; it ends in his death and destruction. Boaz's risk was based upon loving-kindness, and results in redemption. The Elimelech-Boaz dialectic is a perennial theme in the Jewish world. Risk is positive, and even mandatory, from a Jewish perspective. The question we have to ask ourselves is the motivation, and that determines the result.

Magic of Shavuot 1967

Larry Domnitch

1967 200,000 Jews converged on the Western Wall that day. Over the last two millennia, Jews have visited Jerusalem in honor of the festivals, in lieu of the biblically-ordained pilgrimages. On the holiday of Shavuot, there was also the custom to visit the purported grave of King David on Mount Zion, since the date of his death was on Shavuot. When Shavuot arrived in 1948, it was a month after the establishment of the State of Israel, and Jews could no longer continue to make the pilgrimage to the Western Wall. The Jordanians, who occupied the eastern half of the city since the War of Independence, blocked all rights of passage to the Jews. However, the pilgrimage to King David's tomb on nearby Mount Zion, located on the Israeli side of divided Jerusalem, continued. Over the next 19 years, crowds made their way to Mount Zion, where across barbed wire they could view the Old City and the Temple Mount. On the morning of Shavuot, June 15, 1967 – just six days after the liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six Day War – the Old City was officially opened to the Israeli public. (The army wanted to be sure there were no landmines or snipers still in the Old City.) For the first time in almost 2,000 years, masses of Jews could visit the Western Wall and walk through the cherished streets of Judaism's capital city as members of the sovereign Jewish nation. Each Jew who ventured to the Western Wall on that unforgettable day was realizing their ancestors' dreams over the millennia. It was one of those rare, euphoric moments in history. From the late hours of the night, thousands of Jerusalem residents streamed toward the Zion gate, eagerly awaiting entry into the Old City. At 4 a.m., the accumulating crowds were finally allowed to enter the area of the Western Wall. As the sun continued to rise, there was a steady flow of thousands who made their way to the Old City. The Jerusalem Post described the epic scene: Every section of the population was represented. Kibbutz members and soldiers rubbing shoulders with Neturei Karta. Mothers came with children in prams, and old men trudged steeply up Mount Zion, supported by youngsters on either side, to see the wall of the Temple before the end of their days. Some wept, but most faces were wreathed in smiles. For 13 continuous hours, a colorful variety of all peoples trudged along in perfect order, stepping patiently when told to do so at each of six successive barriers set up by the police to regulate the flow. In total, 200,000 visited the Western Wall that day. It was the first pilgrimage, en masse, of Jews to Jewish-controlled Jerusalem on a Jewish festival in 2,000 years, since the pilgrimages for the festivals in Temple times. An eyewitness described the moment: "I've never known so electric an atmosphere before or since. Wherever we stopped, we began to dance. Holding aloft Torah scrolls we swayed and danced and sang at the tops of our voices. So many of the Psalms and songs are about Jerusalem and Zion, and the words reached into us a new life. As the sky lightened, we reached the Zion gate. Still singing and dancing, we poured into the narrow alleyways beyond." On Shavuot, 3,279 years earlier, the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and forged a unique relationship with their Creator. On the day of Shavuot following Israel's amazing victory in the Six Day War, multitudes ascended to the Western Wall, and they, too, felt the eternal magic of this moment. After all, "For from Zion shall come forth Torah, and the Word of God from Jerusalem." This "pedestrian pilgrimage" has now become a recurring tradition. And on this year as well, early on Shavuot morning – after a full night of Torah learning – the streets of Jerusalem will be filled with tens of thousands of Jews, walking with and anticipation and awe to the Western Wall.