

Shavuot

The Masorti Movement, represented by Noam, Marom, Mercaz and Masorti AmLat, wishes Chag Sameach and hopes that each one would take place in a Tikkun Leil Shavuot, not to stay out of this experience that shakes the soul, body and intellect.

Chag Shavuot is celebrated on 6th Sivan (also 7th Sivan in the Diaspora). Shavuot is the Festival of Weeks, which together with Pesach and Succot make up the three pilgrimage festivals, or 'foot festivals'. Its name comes from the 7-week counting of the Omer, which starts on the second night of Pesach, as described in Leviticus 23:16.

Other names for this festival which appear in the Torah include Chag Hakatzir – the festival of harvest and Yom Habikurim - day of the first fruits, a name given because of the first crop of corn which appears at this time of the year.

Atzeret is another name for Shavuot, which is given in the Mishna, the first code of rabbinical literature. Atzeret means 'conclusion', and refers to concluding the counting of the Omer. In the same spirit, Flavio Yosefo (1st Century BCE) called Shavuot, Yom HaChamishim – the fiftieth day, alluding to the fiftieth day of the Omer.

All these facts refer to Shavuot as a purely agricultural celebration, but during the post-biblical period, Shavuot became Z'man Matan Torateinu – the time when we celebrate the giving of the Torah. The Jubilee Book (2nd Century CE) is the oldest known source which states that the revelation of the Torah occurred at Chag HaShavuot. Thus, this festival acquired a religious and spiritual dimension.

Due to the fact that Shavuot is not mentioned in the Torah, Rabbi Isaac ben Moisés Arama (Spain, 15th Century) stated that "The commemoration of the giving of the Torah is not limited to a particular time, unlike other customs which relate to specific festivals. Instead, we should celebrate receiving the Torah all the time. We have been told that the contents of the Torah should be as fresh and beloved by us, as the day that we were given it".

It is interesting to note that although the chachamim (wise men) in the Talmud agree on the fact that the Torah

was given on Shavuot, they disagree on the exact date (Shabbat 86 b and 87 a). In this text, as they discuss the part of the Torah which describes the preparations for the Sinai Revelation, a difference of opinion is given. Whereas the majority believe that the date was 6 Sivan, Rabbi Yosi states that it was the 7th. This dissent is not a minor issue when speaking of such a special event.

On the other hand, it is clear that the giving of the Torah occurred in the desert, while on the way to Israel. The Midrash of BaMidvar Raba 1:6 asks why the Torah had to be given in the desert? The reply is given that "just as the desert is open to all, so is the Torah, to all who wish to study it".

We also know that the Torah was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, however, so far, we are unable to determine exactly where that is. Several theories identify different mountains as Mount Sinai, but it seems unlikely that we will come to an agreement allowing us to visit the place where our ancestors heard God's voice.

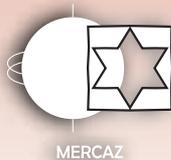
We therefore face a rather particular situation on Shavuot: We do not know exactly what date to celebrate, nor do we know the location where this holiest of revelation occurred.

We can only wonder then why it was given to us at a time we do not accurately know, and in an uncertain place. Perhaps the answer to the conundrum is that it teaches us that the Torah is for all times, and any place is a Torah place.

Let us accept this challenge, and transform the "here and now" into a Torah Time and a Torah Place.

Chag Sameach !

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