



MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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PREPARE FOR SHAVUOT

Shrouded in Mystery

Finally, having completed the Omer count, we arrive at Shavuot, the festival that is widely seen as commemorating Matan Torah, the Revelation at Sinai.

Things, however, are not as simple as they seem...

By all rights, we should encounter a festival that is clear and direct. Revelation is the single most important event in Jewish history, marking the moment of God's closest contact with man. The fundamental character of our nation and the foundation of the world's moral code emerge from Matan Torah, as Divine law is handed to man.

We would expect this monumental event to be clearly demarcated in the Torah and the festival that marks its onset to be unambiguously defined.

Instead...

We are confronted with a festival and a historical event shrouded in mystery. A series of enigmas surrounds both the festival of Shavuot and the onset of Revelation, clouding what should have been the clear commemoration of a monumental event:

Consider the following:

- Nowhere in the Torah do we find a linkage between Shavuot and Revelation. It remains for the rabbis, generations later, to clearly identify the festival as *Zman Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah.
- Nowhere in the Torah do we find a specified calendar date for the festival of Shavuot. Most glaringly, when the Torah lists the festivals and their offerings in Sefer Bamidbar, calendar dates are given for all, with one exception. Shavuot is the only festival listed with no calendric reference, at all.
- Strikingly, the Torah is also vague concerning the facts surrounding revelation, itself. The arrival of the Israelites to the Wilderness of Sinai, is simply recorded as follows: "In the third month from the Exodus of the children of Israel from the Land of Egypt, *on this day*, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. It is left for the rabbis to determine exactly "which day" is the narrative's "this day."
- To complicate matters further, debate emerges concerning the timetable of events immediately prior to Revelation. At issue is whether or not Moshe "adds an additional day" to the divinely mandated three days of preparation for Revelation."

The majority opinion maintains that Moshe, following God's instructions to the letter, retains the count of three days. Rabbi Yossi argues, however, that Moshe



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added a fourth day to God's three.

- This disagreement leads to an even more significant divergence of opinion concerning the exact date of Revelation. According to the majority view, three days of preparation directly lead to Revelation's onset on the sixth day of Sivan, the date of the Shavuot festival. According to Rabbi Yossi, however, an extra day of preparations delays Revelation by a day, moving its onset to the seventh day of Sivan, the day after Shavuot. We are thus faced with the startling conclusion that, according to Rabbi Yossi, the festival commemorating Matan Torah does not correspond to the day of the actual event.
- Finally, the Festival of Shavuot is noteworthy for what it lacks. In our time, there is no unique mitzvah associated with this day. Shavuot is governed solely by the generic mitzvot common to every Biblical Festival.¹

In short, there seems to be a deliberate attempt, Biblical and beyond, to surround both the festival of Shavuot and the historical event upon which it is based with mystery. Why should this be so? As we have noted, one would think that the single most important event in Jewish history would be clearly and decisively marked.

A fascinating, far-reaching answer is hinted at in a well-known Midrashic observation and elaborated upon by later authorities.

The Midrash focuses on the aforementioned Torah passage that describes the arrival of

the Israelites at the site of Revelation: "In the third month from the Exodus of the children of Israel from the Land of Egypt, *on this day*, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai."

How strange! The Torah is clear about the calendar date of numerous other events. Why is it conspicuously silent in this case, leaving it up to the rabbis to determine which day is "this day"?

This text, however, is even more puzzling than it seems at first. Not only is the Torah ambiguous concerning the timing of the nation's arrival at Sinai, but the terminology actually used by the text is inherently problematic. The Torah does not say, as we would expect: "*on that day* [*ba'yom hahu*], they came to the Wilderness of Sinai." Instead, as indicated above, the text reads: "*on this day* [*ba'yom hazeh*], they came to the Wilderness of Sinai."

Why does the Torah refer to a millennia-old moment as "*this day*"?

Because, suggest the rabbis, the text means to convey an overarching message: "When you study Torah, [its words] should not be ancient in your eyes, but as if they were given to you 'this day.'"

Or, as Rashi puts it: "At all times, the Torah's words should seem as new to you [variant: as dear to you] as if they were given to you today."

There is, I believe, much more to these rabbinic observations than meets the eye. In essence, the rabbis are emphasizing that:

Revelation is not a historical event.

The Patriarchal era, the Exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, the entry into the land of Canaan, and so much more are periods and incidents rooted in the past. They are meant to be learned from, reexamined, reexperienced, even seen as prototypes for the present – but they are all past events.

1. For the sake of completeness, I would point out that there is another festival that arguably features this phenomenon—Shemini Atzeret. A full discussion of the relationship between these two festivals and the place of each in the flow of the calendar, however, is beyond the parameters of this study.

Revelation is different. Matan Torah is a process that continues to this day and beyond. Every time we study a text, ask a halachic question, or share a Torah thought, we stand again at Sinai receiving the Torah. Every time the rabbis apply the law to changing circumstances, suggest new insight into an age-old text, or enact new legislation to protect the community, we participate in Revelation. When concerns ranging from in vitro fertilization to stem cell research to the definition of death and its impact on organ donation are actively addressed and debated within Jewish law, Matan Torah unfolds.

We can now understand the Torah's reluctance to pinpoint both the date and the holiday marking Revelation. Either of these two acts would root Matan Torah in the past. Like so many other historical events, Revelation would become an event to celebrate and commemorate, rather than a process in which to participate.

The Torah, therefore, leaves it to the rabbis to determine the date on which the Israelites actually stood at Sinai and to draw the inevitable conclusion that the Shavuot festival marks that date.

The text itself remains silent concerning these issues in order to remind us that we stand at Sinai today

We can now understand, as well, why no unique mitzvah populates this festival. *Shavuot is a celebration of the entire Torah and all of its mitzvot.*

To the uninitiated, the allure of Torah study is often difficult to comprehend. What is this fascination with age-old, seemingly archaic text? What satisfaction can be found in poring over rabbinic observations authored centuries ago?

The following story begins to answer these

questions.

Many years ago, I made the acquaintance of a young man who came to Talmud study late in his educational development. One day, he turned to me and said: "You know why I love the Talmud? Because when I begin to study Talmud, *the boundaries of time disappear*. Suddenly I am sitting at a table, present at a discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, dating back to the beginning of the Common Era.

"As the conversation continues, Rav Huna [third century] offers a thought; Abbaye [fourth century] makes a comment, only to be countered by Rava [fourth century], as Rav Ashi [fifth century] joins in.

"Then Rashi [1040–1105] makes an observation and is immediately challenged by his descendants, the Tosafists [twelfth–thirteenth centuries]. Others soon join the discussion, including the Rambam [1135–1204] and Rabbi Yosef Karo [1488–1575], all making their positions known...

"And I, I am there too, at the table, asking my questions and adding my thoughts to a dialogue that will continue long after I am gone, as well."²

To be part of an eternal conversation, to connect both with God's will and with generations long gone, *to stand at Sinai in our day*: that, in essence, is the adventure that the Torah provides...and that the Festival of Shavuot celebrates. ■

2. Many of you may be familiar with an essay recorded in the name of Rabbi Soloveichik in which he eloquently describes a similar experience. I have chosen to record this version, because of my personal involvement.

Rabbi Goldin is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."