



SHAVUOS – IT'S ALL IN THE NAME

The names of Jewish holidays typically express the essence of what the holiday represents. Passover celebrates the time that God delivered the Jewish People by “passing” over our houses. On Succos, we dwell in booths to commemorate our faith in God who protected us in the desert.

We know that Shavuos marks perhaps the most central element of our entire religion – the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai after we left Egypt. Yet, look at how the Torah describes the festival in the Biblical portion Emor which discusses all of our holiday celebrations:

SOURCE 1: Vayikra (Leviticus), 23:15-17– Shavuos - Counting the Omer and Offering Two Loaves

You shall count for yourselves from the day after Shabbat [Pesach], 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 offer a new meal offering [of two loaves] to God... You shall gather on this very day, there shall be a holy convocation for yourselves. You shall do no work; it is an eternal decree.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם
הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַ
שָׁבוֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: עַד מַמְחֲרַת
הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׂבִיעִת תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם;
וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה

If you follow the Exodus story closely (with some help from the Talmud) we received the Torah 50 days after Passover. As the above source explains, we will count those 50 days throughout the generations through a mitzvah called “Counting the Omer.” At the conclusion of this 49-day count, we will celebrate with a holiday on the 50th day. This day is Shavuos! (We will also bring an offering of wheat loaves that we call Bikkurim.)

Q: Why do you think we require this mitzvah of the Counting of the Omer, seemingly unrelated to Shavuos, to determine the date of the holiday?

Q: Also, what does the mitzvah of Counting the Omer have to do with Shavuos?

Q: Finally, why doesn't the Torah identify this holiday with a name in this source?

In other places we do find names:

Surprisingly, the Torah calls the holiday in different places by several different names: **Festival of the Harvest** (Hag HaKatzir-Exodus 23:14), **Day of First-Fruits** (Yom HaBikkurim-Numbers 28:26) and (drum roll) **Festival of Weeks** (**Hag Shavuos**- Deuteronomy 16:10).

Well, one thing is for sure; this festival seems to be somehow related to the agricultural cycle in which it is ensconced. The bringing of the Omer, a barley offering, begins the process. Then we count 49 days and on the 50th day we bring the first of the wheat crop, called Bikkurim, and almost as an afterthought, we celebrate that very day as a holiday!

Q: Doesn't it seem really odd that the agricultural aspects of the time period, assume the central stage when describing the holiday? Why do you think that is?

We are not going to answer this question just yet. We'll get back to it. Instead, let's take a look at the source in the Torah which finally describes the holiday as the Festival of Shavuos, as we know it:

SOURCE 2: *Devarim (Deuteronomy), 16:9-11 – Counting the Weeks from Pesach to Shavuos.*

You shall **count seven weeks** for yourselves; from when the **sickle is first put to the standing crop** shall you begin counting seven weeks. **Then you shall observe the festival of Shavuos** for the Lord, your God; the voluntary offerings that you give should be commensurate with how much the Lord, your God, will have blessed you. You shall rejoice before the Lord, your God ...

שְׁבַע שָׁבָעַת תִּסְפֹּר לָךְ: מִהַחֵל חֲרִמְשׁ
בְּקֶמֶה תַחֵל לִסְפֹּר שְׁבַעַת שָׁבָעוֹת:
וְעָשִׂיתָ חַג שָׁבָעוֹת לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִסֵּת
נִדְבַת יְדָךְ אֲשֶׁר תִּתֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר יְבָרְכֶךָ ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ: וְשִׂמְחֵת לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ...

Q: Though we finally discover that this holiday is called Shavuos, why is it permanently tethered to the mitzvah of Counting the Omer?

Q: And perhaps most perplexing of all, Shavuos, literally means “weeks.” What does that have to do with the Giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai?

Before we begin to answer our questions, a little background. The idea of weeks really goes back to the mitzvah of Counting the Omer that we discussed in source #1, since we count for 7 complete weeks - 49 days from the second day of Passover. The next day after this 7-week count is the holiday of Shavuos as described above in source #2

Q: Why do you think we count up to the holiday of Shavuos through the mitzvah of Counting the Omer rather than just giving a specific date in the Torah for observing the holiday?

Consider the following source which hints at the answer:

SOURCE 3: *Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #306 in the Torah – The Omer and Torah at Mt. Sinai.*

For the entire essence of the Jewish people is only the Torah, and the heavens and earth and the Jewish people were created for its sake ... **and it is the reason that [the Jews] were redeemed from Egypt so that they would receive the Torah on Sinai and fulfill it**, as God told Moshe: **“And this will be for you a sign that I have sent you: When you take the nation out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.”** . . . Therefore, since the Torah is the essence of the Jewish people and for its sake they were redeemed and reached the level of greatness that they attained, we were commanded to count from after the first day of Pesach until the day that the Torah was given, to **show our great desire for the day that our hearts yearn for, as a slave yearns and counts the days until he will go free, because counting demonstrates that a person's whole desire is to reach that time.**

לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא . . . התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל . . . והיא העיקר והסיבה שנגאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה בסיני ויקימוה, וכמו שאמר ה' למשה "זוה לך האות כי אנכי שלחתיך, בהוציאך את העם ממצרים תעבדון את האלקים על ההר הזה" . . . ומפני כן, כי היא כל עקרן של ישראל ובעבורה נגאלו ועלו לכל הגדולה שעלו אליה, נצטוו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשינו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד ללבינו, כעבד ישאף צל וימנה תמיד מתי יבוא העת הנכסף אליו שיצא לחרות, כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא

Q: This source seems to link Passover and Shavuos together. In what way?

Our tradition points out that Moshe first meets God at Mt. Sinai and He makes it quite clear that the end-game of leaving Egypt is to serve God on this mountain, where, as the famous commentator Rashi explains, they will receive the Torah!

Q: What does this have to say about the relationship between Passover and Shavuos?

They are inextricably linked. Many commentators go further saying that the Giving of the Torah at Sinai was actually the culmination of the physical freedom gained on Passover, as the Chinuch writes above, "For the entire essence of the Jewish People is only the Torah."

Q: How do you see receiving the Torah as the culmination of our freedom?

One might say that physical freedom without spiritual freedom can be an ongoing form of slavery. Only, when one is free to aspire to become the best person they can be, (which involves a myriad of spiritual achievements,) are they truly free.

Q: Torah is most certainly the goal. What is it about counting the Omer that makes it the vehicle to achieving this goal?

SOURCE 4: *Rabbi Yisroel Miller, A Gift for Yom Tov, p. 109 – The Omer: A Time of Preparation*

Even in our time, the forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuos are meant to be days of spiritual preparation. After the first Pesach, our ancestors prepared to receive the Torah directly from God. And we, in each generation, are also to use these days to prepare for Shavuos, to personally accept the Torah upon ourselves, each year anew.

The Jewish People traditionally work on character development during this time. It's almost as if the Torah is a fine wine, which can only retain its refined taste in a pure, uncontaminated vessel. We spend 49 days purifying ourselves so that we are a fitting zivug "soulmate" for the Torah.

There is another aspect of the Omer to consider, and that is its relationship to the Manna which fell from Heaven daily, on the journey to Sinai and throughout the 40 years in the desert. The Torah tells us that the Israelites are to collect exactly an "Omer" of the Manna each day, no more no less.

Q: What was the basic lesson of the Manna?

That G-d provides for all that we need on a daily basis. And just as this is true regarding our physical life, how much more in our spiritual life?

Q: How do you think this concept relates to the Giving of the Torah?

Consider the following source from a 20th-century Rabbi and philosopher, commenting on the impact of the Revelation at Mt. Sinai on the faith of the Jewish People:

SOURCE 5: *Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, Sifsei Chaim, Vol. III, p. 55 Faith/Belief Forged Through a National Prophetic Experience*

This was **faith based on prophetic, tangible, vision**: [as the verse states,] **"All the people saw the sounds."** As our Sages explained, they saw things that are normally only heard. Something which is heard is more distant [conceptually] from a person than something which is seen. **In their prophecy, they saw the Revelation of God to Moshe without any barriers and impediments that would prevent them from seeing this revelation.** Therefore, the Torah testifies that: **"Also in you [Moshe], they will believe forever."** Someone who has seen the Revelation of God in this tangible way has eternal faith.

היתה זו אמונה מתוך ראייה נבואית וחושית "וכל העם רואים את הקולות" (שמות כ,טו), וכדברי חז"ל "רואין את הנשמע". (מכילתא שם והובא ברש"י). דבר הנשמע הוא כרגיל דבר רחוק יותר מדבר הנראה, והם בנבואתם ראו את הדבר הרחוק באופן מוחשי וקרוב, ראו את גילוי ה' אל משה בלא מחיצה וחציצה שתמנעם מראיית גילוי זה. ועל כן מעידה התורה - "וגם בך יאמינו לעולם", מי שראה גילוי ה' בכזו ראייה חושית, אמונתו היא "לעולם".

Just as the Manna gave them tangible proof that God takes care of us physically, Sinai gave them tangible proof that G-d - through his Torah – would take care of them spiritually. As it says in Devarim:

SOURCE 6: *Deuteronomy, (Devarim 8:3) Not By Bread Alone...*

..Then **He fed you, Manna**, that you did not know, nor did your forefathers know, in order to make you know that **not by bread alone does man live, rather by everything that emanates from the mouth of God does man live.**

Q: What is the verse teaching us about the Manna/Counting of the Omer?

Although we are able to see through the Manna/Counting of the Omer G-d's hand in our daily sustenance, it all leads to Sinai, where we learn the lesson that it's God's Torah that truly gives us life! That's our Emunah – faith-, a living connection to our God.

Though we now have a better understanding of how the Omer relates to Shavuos, what about our question of why there is such a big emphasis on agriculture in this holiday?

Let's take a look at a final source from the Talmud:

SOURCE 7: *Talmud Tractate Shabbos 31a | Seder Zeraim (planting) is about Faith/Belief*

Reish Lakish said: **What** is the meaning of **that which is written: "And the faith of your times shall be a strength of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge, the fear of the Lord is his treasure"** (Isaiah 33:6)? **Faith; that is the order of Zera'im, Seeds.** (In the Mishna)
(Because **a person has faith in God and plants his seeds** (Jerusalem Talmud.)

אָמַר רִישׁ לְקִישׁ: מַאי דְכָתִיב "וְהִיא
אֱמוּנַת עַתִּיק חוֹסֵן יְשׁוּעוֹת חֶכְמַת יָדְעַת
וְגו'". "אֱמוּנַת" - זֶה סֵדֶר זְרָעִים

What greater act of Emunah (faith/belief) in God could there possibly be than throwing the good grain into the ground with the hope that it will grow?

It's nice to talk about Emunah, but agriculture is where the rubber meets the road, particularly in the earlier stages of our history. It's these very agricultural components that give the holiday of Shavuos a context of practical and down-to-earth Emunah. What a fitting introduction to the holiday of Shavous, which ingrained within the Jewish People Emunah for all time, and expands it within us yearly!