

Chosen Together: The Ethical Significance of Shavuot **By: Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL**

Why is the festival of Shavuot called "the time of the giving of our Torah" and not the time of the receiving of our Torah? Because the giving of the Torah happened at one specified time, but the receiving of the Torah happens at every time and in every generation.

– Rabbi Meir Alter of Ger

Each generation must make its own way back to Sinai, must stand under the mountain and re-appropriate and reinterpret the Revelation, in terms that are both classical and new. We recognize change as part of the continuing process of tradition itself.

– Rabbi Ger Cohen

The least-known of the *Shalosh Regalim* is Shavuot, the two-day Festival of Weeks. A victim of schedule, Shavuot comes just before the beginning of summer — unable to fit into the vacation schedule of most contemporaries, and lacking any special rituals to excite widespread observance.

In the biblical period, Shavuot celebrated the conclusion of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. By the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, some thousand years later, the rabbis expanded Shavuot beyond its agricultural origin to incorporate a

foundational event as well. Since the festival comes exactly seven weeks (hence its name) after the second day of Pesah, which marks the liberation of the Jewish slaves from Egypt and their wandering toward Mt. Sinai, the rabbis saw Shavuot as celebrating *z'man mattan Torateinu*, (the season of the giving of our Torah) token, record, and pathway of the special love between God and the Jewish People.

That link between Pesah and Shavuot, based on the Torah's insistence that Shavuot occur precisely 50 days after Pesah, follows a logic of human liberation as well as the cycles of the calendar.

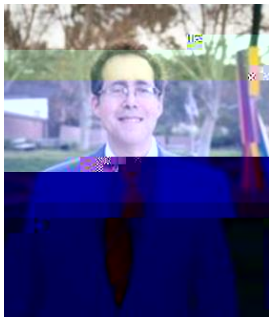
Pesah, however popular, is just a beginning: the initiation of Jewish freedom. As our ancestors were liberated from Egyptian slavery, they took their first halting steps toward freedom and independence. No longer saddled with the burdens and oppression of Egyptian taskmasters, the Jews entered the wilderness of Sinai, experiencing their independence as little less than anarchy. There was a freedom from control, a freedom from limits. Such liberty, by itself, is the freedom of adolescents, one which bristles at restraint.

Such a freedom is fine as a first step, but it ultimately cannot insure human growth, creativity, and community. Rather than simply avoiding limits, mature freedom entails living up to one's best potential, meeting responsibilities towards community, and towards others with a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Freedom fulfilled is freedom to live productively, with meaning, and in relationship.

Just as "freedom from" finds completion in "freedom to", so the festival of Pesah initiates a process of liberation that culminates in the festival of Shavuot. The second of the three pilgrimage festivals of the Torah, Shavuot marks the coming of age and responsibility of the Jewish People, celebrating the encounter between God and the Jewish People at Mt. Sinai.

moment

"To be chosen" is really a grammatical fragment: a person is never simply chosen, but always chosen for something. When we say that the Jews are chosen, we mean that the Jews were selected to embody the practices and values of Judaism as expressed in the Torah and subsequent Jewish writings. God chose us to be a role model--to demonstrate that a society of people dedicated to ritual profundity, moral



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