

Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

Shavuot



Context

Celebrating the giving of Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai may not sound like the most Reform friendly festival of the year, and across the Jewish community it has, as **Rabbi Debbie Young-Somers** writes below, been one of the most neglected festivals of the year.

Yet it has seen a resurgence of observance in the last 10-20 years, with Tikkun Leyl Shavuot (all night learning events) gaining in popularity, and could just be the perfect chance for communities to explore the long tradition of diverse Torah interpretation that makes up the colourful weave of Jewish tradition through the centuries, and encourages us to add our voices too.

Content

Shavuot could be seen as the big loser in the Jewish calendar: It is not nearly as well-known as festivals like Chanukah (a relatively minor festival that isn't even mentioned in Tanakh) despite being one of the most important festivals of the year. As one of the Biblically mandated Pilgrim festivals when all of Israel would flock to the Temple to offer their first fruits (bikkurim), Shavuot represents a major moment in the Jewish calendar, and is clearly tied into the agricultural cycles of the Land of Israel.

Perhaps the problem began when the Temple was destroyed in 70CE, and people could no longer take their offerings to the Temple. There was a need to discover new meaning in the ancient festivals and customs which up until that point had been very much focussed on the produce of the land and the wheat harvest. Once the Temple was gone, perhaps more than any other Biblical festival, the Rabbinic tradition had to do some hard work to re-invent and bring new meaning to the festival.

Thus Shavuot came to be the festival celebrating the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai, and became connected to the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, celebrated 7 weeks earlier at Pesach. Pesach symbolises our freedom, and Shavuot the responsibility that comes with that, with the receiving of law and revelation. Freedom is therefore tethered to responsibility by the counting of the omer – a custom rooted in the agricultural cycles of an ancient farming community. Counting the omer is instructed in Leviticus 23:15-16, but has grown from a custom connected to sheafs of wheat, to being a process of spiritual preparation, taking us from Pesach's freedom and getting us ready for receiving the law at Shavuot– a connection made relatively early, in Midrash Rabbah.

The evening of the festival is often marked with a full night of study, keeping participants up until morning prayers can be said at dawn. This night of learning Torah is known as Tikkun Leyl Shavuot, and is first mentioned in the Kabbalistic text The Zohar in the 13th Century, as a way of preserving purity and honouring the Torah before we symbolically receive it once again on the festival. Progressive communities often collaborate to create a night of learning offering a range of approaches from Torah study to poetry, current affairs through Jewish texts to musical performances. Dedicating a night to learning and praying as the sun rises can create a unique moment in the Jewish year, though certainly not one that appeals to all!

No Jewish festival is complete without special foods being associated with it, and Shavuot is often a time people enjoy dairy foods such as cheesecake, blintzes or kahi.

There are lots of explanations for why we eat dairy on Shavuot. These are just a few: The gematria (numerical

value) of the Hebrew word for milk-chalav, is 40, corresponding to the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving Torah. Some say Mount Sinai is Har Gav'nunim, the mountain of majestic peaks. The Hebrew for cheese is gevina, etymologically related to Gav'nunim. Plus the gematria of gevina (cheese) is 70, corresponding to the "70 faces of Torah." And if that isn't random enough: Midrash says that when the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai, they also received the oral law, and so wanted to separate milk and meat. Rather than carry two sets of dishes around the desert, they opted to eat only dairy. These various explanations may also lend meaning to an agricultural reality, that these late spring –early summer months are a time when crops are growing but not yet fully ripe, and thus dairy produce would become a staple to see communities through this time of potential hungerⁱ.

Tradition also suggests that when Torah was given at Mount Sinai the whole mountain was covered in flowers, and so it has become customary to fill synagogues with flowers and to give flowers as gifts, though it is possible that this custom has its roots in Christian customs around Whitsun and Pentecost. Yet as with all things we continue to layer meanings and spiritual understanding on customs, for example Rabbi Nicole Guzik suggests that:

"Exodus Rabbah teaches that the apple tree brings out its blossom before its leaves. The people of Israel are likened to apple blossoms, for we declared our faith to God before hearing or understanding God's Torah."ⁱⁱ

Shavuot and its celebration of the giving of Torah also present us as Reform Jews with an opportunity to explore the multi-vocality of Torah. As we recall the mythic narrative our ancestors have used for thousands of years to understand the world through, we find within it reminders that we cannot know Truth fully. 600,000 individuals stood at Sinai, and observed revelation. Each one of them would have seen something different, from where they were standing both literally and metaphorically. Pesikta d'Rav Kahanna 12:25 reminds us that we each experience different faces of God as we are capable of grasping. We would need to hear 600,000 different voices telling us what happened at Sinai to get a full picture, and this has been the Jewish process of unpacking and interpreting Torah through the centuries. Thus Shavuot is a chance not just to celebrate Torah, but its 70 faces, and the unique interpretive processes that both keep Torah alive, and help us to find our own stories in its narratives.

Contemplation

Everyone loves a cheesecake at Shavuot, but engaging with the why of the custom opens up, as with so many of these traditions when explored, a cacophony of explanations that allow us to understand the diverse ways Judaism has attempted to layer spiritual and moral meaning on Jewish practice through the ages. This is a living, engaging tradition that is designed to evolve and grow through time, so that it might speak to each generation and come alive anew for you in your life. How will you find your story in Torah this year?

ⁱ With thanks to Sara Moon, **Sheffield** and District Reform Jewish Community Development Worker for making this connection

ⁱⁱ http://www.jewishjournal.com/mount_sinai/article/secret_garden_blossoms_of_the_apple_tree_20100324/