

Thoughts on Shavuot

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Yom Tov in One Simple Lesson

And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: The appointed times of Hashem that you should declare them as sacred events; these are My appointed times. (Sefer VaYikra 23:1-2)

We have diverse attitudes toward Shabbat and our festivals. Some of us look forward to them and enjoy them. Some find meaning in Shabbat and festivals as opportunities to reconnect with family and friends. Others struggle to find meaning in their observance. Deprived of the opportunity to engage in professional activities or to pursue amusements, they are overcome with boredom.

In this discussion, we will explore the meaning of our festivals. In order to appreciate our Sages' understanding of their meaning we must be willing to make an honest acknowledgement and to give ourselves the opportunity to challenge our fundamental perspectives.

First, we must acknowledge that our lives are very much devoted to material accomplishments and material pleasures. Consequently, we assess activities or behaviors from the perspective of their material benefits. We define an activity and worthwhile if it contributes to our material wellbeing. An activity is pleasurable if it provides material pleasure.

Second, because of this orientation, we do not consider the possibility that activities that do not provide material benefit or pleasure may nonetheless be worthwhile. We are not open to the possibility that reward and pleasure can be found in activities that are spiritual.

Part of the reason that our minds are closed to this possibility is that achieving spiritual benefits and pleasures requires an investment of time and energy. Spiritual experiences are not like eating a cookie. One pops a cookie into one's mouth and pleasure follows. The capacity to appreciate and fully engage in a spiritual activity, benefit from it, and enjoy it must be developed. We respond to the challenge of developing this capacity like a child who refuses to learn how to swim because the challenge seems too great. But when that child gives him/herself permission to learn to swim, benefit, reward, and pleasure follow.

I speak of "we" and "us" in the above as a literary convenience. But I recognize that the challenge I describe does not apply to all of us and those facing this challenge are handicapped by various degrees of resistance. Read the comments of our Sages that follow with an open mind and hopefully they will provide direction in developing a greater appreciation for our festivals.

Sefer VaYikra describes the festivals

Shavuot is closely associated with Sefer VaYikra. In Parshat Emor the Torah describes Shabbat and the festivals. Shavuot is included in this section. Each festival has its own theme and message. Our festivals also have a shared meaning and significance. In the following discussion we will focus upon this shared character. The discussion is relevant to our observance of Shavuot and our observance of our other festivals.

The above passages introduce the section of Parshat Emor that discusses our festivals. Two terms are used to describe these festivals. They are described as *moed* and as *mikra kodesh*. The exact meaning of these terms is not self-evident. In the above

translation *moed* is translated as an appointed time.¹ The term *mikra kodesh* is translated as a sacred event. These translations are based upon Unkelus' rendering of the terms as understood by Rashbam² and others.

In summary, the festivals are times that have a special designation (*moed*). They are designated as sacred events (*mikra kodesh*). In what way are these festivals sacred? In other words, what characteristic of the festivals endows them with their sanctity?

Withdrawal from material engagement

The simplest response is provided by Rambam – Maimonides. He explains that the sanctity of the festivals is derived from their prohibition against performing *melachah* – creative work. This restriction fundamentally distinguishes the festivals from typical days. On other days we are permitted and encouraged to fully engage with the material world. On festivals, we withdraw from this engagement. This withdrawal is intended to encourage us to focus upon our spiritual lives. According to Rambam, this withdrawal from material engagement – the prohibition against *melachah* – endows our festivals with their sanctity.³

Rambam's position is that sanctity is created by differentiating something or creating a separateness for some higher purpose. Our festivals are endowed with sanctity through the prohibition against *melechah*. How does this prohibition accomplish this? It creates the separateness that is fundamental to sanctity. Along with the higher purpose of this

separateness – to focus upon our spiritual lives – it infuses our festivals with sanctity.

Three elements of festival sanctity

Ramban – Nachmanides – suggests an alternative description of the sanctity of the festivals. Let's consider his comments:

The meaning of "sacred events" is that on this day we are collectively summoned and gather together to sanctify it. For it is a commandment upon Israel to gather together in the house of Hashem on the day of the festival and to sanctify the day publicly through prayer and praise to the L-rd and (through wearing) a clean garment.⁴ And to make it a day of a festive meal...⁵

According to Ramban, our festivals derive their sanctity from a number of sources. He acknowledges in a previous comment that the prohibition against *melachah* is a fundamental source of their sanctity. However, he adds that the sanctity of the festivals is also tied to their identity as a time of assembly in the house of Hashem and engagement in communal prayer and praise. Also, we sanctify our festivals through our treatment of them as celebrations. We wear special clothing and enjoy a festive meal. In other words, Ramban suggests the sanctity of our festivals is derived from three sources:

- The prohibition against *melachah* differentiates these days through designating them as times in which we withdraw from engagement in the material world.

¹ The commentators disagree over whether the term *moed* can be applied to Shabbat or only to the festivals. According to Rashi, the term *moed* suggests a designation created by man. The term applies to festivals. We are charged with the responsibility of declaring each month and thereby, establishing the day on which each festival will occur. In contrast, Shabbat occurs on its appointed day and does not require our declaration. Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra asserts that the term *moed* does apply to Shabbat. *Moed* means a time that has a designation. This designation need not be created by human beings. Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno further develops this position.

² Rabbaynu Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam) *Commentary on Sefer VaYikra* 23:2. This understanding of Unkelus is also suggested by Ramban. See also Rav Raphael Binyamin Pozen, *Parshagen, Sefer VaYikra* 23:2 and 23:4.

³ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Sefer HaMitzvot, Mitzvat Aseh* 159.

⁴ The exact text on Ramban's comments is not certain. This text is based upon the source of his comments – *Torah Kohanim*. See Rav Pinchas Yehudah Liberman, *Pnai Yerushayalim – Notes and Clarifications on the Commentary of Ramban on the Torah*.

⁵ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer VaYikra* 23:2. According to Ramban, the term *mikra* suggests an assembly. Based on this interpretation, he concludes that the festival is observed through the assembly of the people in a public gathering.

- We assemble as a community in the house of Hashem to engage in prayer and praise of Hashem.
- We celebrate these occasions through our clothing and meals.

Communal prayer on festivals

Let's further consider these three elements. How are they related? How does each contribute to the character of our festivals? Let's begin by more carefully considering the second of these elements. Ramban explains that we assemble to pray to and praise Hashem. This element of our festivals requires further consideration. It seems that according to Ramban, on our festivals we are required to pray to Hashem as a congregation. Does this suggest that we are not required to come together as a congregation of typical days?

Rambam – Maimonides – discusses this issue and explains that the requirement that we pray within a congregation or *minyán* applies at all times.⁶ He further explains that every community is required to create a *bait ha'hekeneset* – a synagogue – as a place designated for the community to assemble in prayer.⁷ This requirement reflects the importance of praying as a member of an assembly. Rambam's rulings are based upon the discussion of the Talmud in Tractate Berachot.

Now, let us return to Ramban's comments. He asserts that assembling as a community in prayer and praise of Hashem is an activity associated with our festivals. It is difficult to understand this comment. Communal prayer is an ongoing obligation. It is not an obligation specific to our festivals!

Obviously, Ramban acknowledges that praying as part of a congregation is an ongoing obligation. This is not an obligation that is unique to festivals. However, Ramban's point is that on festivals communal prayer has an added meaning and

dimension. On every other day praying with a congregation enhances the prayer experience. Ramban explains that the prayers of the congregation are superior to those of an individual.⁸ However, on the festival communal prayer has an added significance. It is an important aspect of the observance of the festival.

In other words, one should always seek to pray with a congregation or *minyán*. This is because the prayers of the congregation are superior to those of the lone individual. On festivals there is another reason to pray with a congregation. Participation in communal prayer is a fundamental aspect of observance of our festivals.

Festivals are spiritual encounters

We can now understand the relationship between the first two elements of festival sanctity identified by Ramban. Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno explains that our cessation from *melachah* is a withdrawal from engagement in the material world. This withdrawal alone does not endow the day with its spiritual character. A positive engagement is required to complement this withdrawal. Our engagement in communal prayer provides this positive element.⁹

In order to achieve a spiritual experience through prayer to and praise of Hashem an investment must be made in learning how to engage in these activities. Again, this is not like eating a cookie. How can we cultivate the capacity to experience prayer as a positive spiritual activity? First, we need to take the time to read the prayers and consider their content. Second, we need to develop the capacity to maintain our focus during prayer. Third, we need to discipline ourselves. This requires creating an environment that supports our focus on prayer. This may include avoiding friends who tend to distract us. However, if we can take these steps, we can discover meaning in our prayers and praises of Hashem and experience an authentic spiritual encounter.

⁶ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tefilah 8:1.

⁷ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tefilah 11:1.

⁸ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tefilah 8:1.

⁹ Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, *Commentary on Sefer VaYikra*, 23:2. Relevant to this discussion is the comment of the Talmud regarding the overall structure of the festival day. Rambam quotes this comment in his Hilchot Yom Tov, chapter 6. The Talmud explains that prayer is one of the elements of festival observance that provides its spiritual character. Another component is Torah study. According to the Talmud, our festivals are designated as a time for Torah study.

Festivals and celebration

According to Ramban, The final element of our festivals is their celebratory aspect. We wear special garments and engage in festive meals. How does this element relate to the first two elements? This element seems out of place. The cessation of *melachah* and coming together as a community to approach and encounter Hashem are spiritual experiences. How do material expressions – special garments and lavish meals – contribute to this festival experience?

Sforno also addresses this issue. He explains that although the festival's focus is upon the spiritual encounter with Hashem, this experience must be celebrated. The special garments and the festive meal are our demonstration of joy in response to the spiritual encounter.¹⁰

Sforno is asserting that an authentic spiritual experience is a source of joy. We need to actually have a meaningful spiritual experience in order for this assertion to be credible. If we are willing to make the effort and to give ourselves the opportunity to have this encounter, then we can experience the joy Sforno describes.

A shared festival theme

Every festival has its own unique meaning and message. Shavuot celebrates receiving the Torah at Sinai. It is also a harvest festival –a thanksgiving festival for the abundance of the harvest. However, these differences between the festivals coexist with their common theme. All our festivals share the

same essential character. They are a reorientation of our attention from the mundane to a search for spiritual meaning and fulfillment. We engage in this spiritual encounter as a community. We join together in prayer and praise of Hashem. Through this process we come closer to Him as a community and as individuals. The joy that we express during our festivals is a declaration of our values. We are proclaiming the importance of this spiritual experience and recognizing the richness that it brings into our lives.

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¹⁰ Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, *Commentary on Sefer VaYikra* 23:2.