

Torah is Freedom

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This coming week, we will celebrate the *Chag* (holiday) of Shavuot, which means “weeks,” a strange name for a holy day. The titles of other special occasions reflect their basic themes, such as Passover, Yom Kippur, and Rosh Hashanah. Whence does Shavuot derive its unusual designation?

While it falls on the 6th of Sivan, that date is not listed in the Torah. The dates of the other holidays are explicitly mentioned in the Torah as, for example, regarding Pesach, it says, “On the fifteenth of this month (Nisan), there shall be a festival of *Matzot* unto Hashem...”. The same is true for the other holy days.

Shavuot is not assigned a special date. Rather, we are instructed to count seven weeks and proclaim the next day as the holiday of Shavuot. Inevitably, this will fall on the 6th of Sivan. Its holiness does not derive from anything unique about that particular date, but only because it is the day that follows the seven-week count.

What is the reason for this seeming anomaly? Shavuot is not an entirely independent institution. Rather, it must be seen as the culmination of the festival of Passover.

When Hashem instructed Moshe to go to Pharaoh, He told him, “This is the sign that I have sent you, when you take the nation out of Egypt, they will worship Me on this mountain.”

The Exodus was not an end in itself, but the means for the Jews to experience the Revelation at Mount Sinai and become Hashem’s special nation. Thus, the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot form one unit. The bridge that connects them is the seven-week count.

Why is Pesach not a stand-alone phenomenon? Aren’t the events we recount at the *Seder* so monumental that they warrant a celebration of their own, without association with another significant happening?

The answer lies in the unique Jewish concept of freedom. The Rabbis say, that at Sinai Hashem hung the mountain over them and declared that “If you accept the Torah, it will be good but if you reject it, this will be your burial place.”

We cannot take literally the implication that the Jews received the Torah not voluntarily, but only out of coercion. That would contradict the plain sense of the verse, which tells that—in response to Hashem’s offer—“the entire nation responded as one and said ‘everything that Hashem says, we will do.’”

The Rabbis do not mean that Hashem pressured the Jews with death threats to keep His commandments. Such religious observance would have no spiritual value, as it would not emanate from man’s free will.

What the Rabbis mean to convey is, that on a certain psychological level, the Jews had “no choice.” Put yourself in their position. They had witnessed at first hand Hashem’s awesome power, most significantly in His utter destruction of the Egyptian army at the *Yam Suf* (Sea of Reeds). How then could anyone entertain the thought of refusing His offer to give them His Torah? Out of a profound sense of awe at the might of Hashem, the Jews said *yes* to the Torah.

So why did the Rabbis use language that implies coercion? What is the meaning of the threat that, if they refuse, “This will be your burial place”?

The words didn’t mean that Hashem would slay them for refusing. After all, He has given us free will and allows us to chart our own course. As the Rabbis comment, “To the place a person seeks to go, there we bring him.” Moreover, tradition also teaches that Hashem offered the Torah to all the nations, and they refused it. There is no indication that *these* recalcitrants were destroyed.

In my opinion, the words “your burial place” are not intended literally. Instead, they mean that if you accept the Torah you will achieve the true purpose of life; but if you do not, you will be “as good as dead.” A life without the enlightenment of Torah and the pleasantness of its philosophy and ideals, is *not worth living*.

Consequently, Passover, which celebrates the physical liberation from Egypt, cannot be a holiday by itself. The enslavement was evil because it prevented the Jews from exercising their minds and pursuing a life of understanding and moral perfection. Hashem extricated us from the servitude to Pharaoh only so we could become *His* servants.

We count the days from the Exodus to the Revelation at Sinai, because this is the season to reflect on the purpose of life and the true meaning of freedom. It is the time when we seek to break the bonds of our numerous enslavements and embrace the service of Hashem, which embodies true freedom.

Chag Sameiach.