

Shevuos: A Harvest Holiday

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The purpose of this essay is to explore the meaning of the holiday of shevuos. What does shevuos celebrate? According to Chazal shevuos commemorates matan Torah, as we say in the tfilos, “zman matan Toraseinu.” However nowhere in chumash is shevuos associated with matan Torah. Many perushim struggle with this issue and seek to find allusions within shevuos to matan Torah. But what DO the psukim identify shevuos as a holiday of? Only once the theme of the holiday is established can we appreciate the connection to matan Torah, which is built upon the holiday itself.

Shevuos is mentioned five times in the Torah. Three of them occur in the listing the regalim in parshas Mishpatim¹, Ki Sisa² and Re’eh³, the fourth is in parshas Emor⁴ in the list of all the moadim, and the fifth in parshas Pinchas⁵ where the korban musaf is enumerated.

Throughout shevuos is referred to only as chag hakatzir (the harvest holiday) and chag habikurim. Despite this association with bikurim, one is not obligated to bring bikurim to the mikdash specifically on shevuos. Rather shevuos is the beginning of the period when bikurim may be brought. This period extends until channuka; while it is a machlokes tanaim⁶ whether one may do the kria of parshas bikurim when he brings his bikurim only until sukkot or even until channuka. However, what is clear is that shevuos is only the beginning of the zman for bikurim, so that even this dimension of the holiday seems to be part of something larger than shevuos itself. Once again, we are left to ask what exactly about the harvest does shevuos celebrate?

Secondly, there is something strange about the presentation of shevuos on the list of moadim in parshas Emor. After discussing chag hamatzos the Torah goes into a detailed account of the korban/minchas omer, sefiras haomer and the korban/minchas shtei halechem. Only then do the psukim mention the holiday of shevuos itself, almost in passing, before concluding the section with a restatement of the mitzvos of pe’ah and leket. Why does the Torah seemingly interrupt listing the moadim to discuss issues which could have been addressed elsewhere, e.g. listing the details of the korban omer and minchas shtei halechem in parshas Pinchas where it lists the korban musaf as mentioned earlier? Similarly, how are the mitzvos of pe’ah and leket not an interruption of the listing of the moadim even if they are related to the harvest?

¹ Shmos 23:16

² Shmos 34:22

³ Dvarim 16:10

⁴ Vayikra 23:21

⁵ Bamidbar 28:26

⁶ Bikurim 1:6

While it is understandable that sefiras haomer had to be listed amongst the moadim in order to explain when shevuos occurs, this raises another question. Namely why is it that shevuos is given a contingent dating, i.e. 50 days after chag hamatzos, when every other holiday is dated independently?

By making the dating of shevuos dependent on chag hamatzos the Torah is indicating a connection between the two holidays. Chag hamatzos celebrates our freedom from Egyptian slavery and yet the story lacks a complete ending. We are left wondering what happened to the freed slaves? How do they fare after winning their freedom? How do they exercise their newfound liberty?

It is clear from the psukim starting with Moshe's dialogue with HaShem at the sneh, that taking the Jews out of Egypt was only a first step. However, there is a tension in the psukim that runs throughout the story as to what the final objective was. On the one hand the psukim allude to matan Torah as the objective. HaShem tells Moshe that the people will know that He sent him (Moshe) when the people worship at har Sinai, "taavdun es Elokim al hahar hazeh."⁷ We also find Moshe's request of Pharaoh to go on a three-day trip to worship HaShem in the desert. The Hagadah also alludes to Torah and mitzvos as the objective of geulas mitzrayim. On the other hand, during the same discussion at the sneh, HaShem explains that the purpose of geulas mitzrayim is to fulfil His promise to the Avos, to give their descendants the land of Israel as an inheritance. This too is stated clearly in the hagadah.

How should we understand the objective of the geula? Was it primarily to grant freedom to an enslaved people and fulfill the promise to the avos? Or was it to establish a new religion? While not exclusive goals, our understanding of the geula and its aftermath, the criterion by which we can assess the success of the geula, depend on our understanding of what it was designed to accomplish.

As a nation of freed slaves seeking a homeland, the most basic issue facing the nation of Israel was what kind of society they would set up. Specifically, how would the Jews relate to being property owners instead of being property themselves? Would the former slaves seek to become masters in their own right, now that they had power, or would they subordinate their ownership to higher standards of justice?

The Torah warns against letting our wealth go to our heads and attributing our success in the land to our own might lest we say, "chochi veotzem yadi asah li es hachayil hazeh."⁸ Instead we should frame our success and wealth in terms of gratitude to HaShem for the abilities and inheritance He has graciously provided us. So when the first fruits grow, we bring our bikurim to mikdash and acknowledge the great good HaShem has provided us by freeing us from slavery and granting us a land flowing with milk and honey, as stated in the krias parshas bikurim⁹.

⁷ Shmos 3:12

⁸ Dvarim 8:17

⁹ Dvarim 26:9

Shevuos then as a harvest holiday is the positive framing of our sense of ownership that bookends chag hamatzos, which celebrates our freedom from being slaves with no ownership at all. This framing is accomplished on several different levels. The freed slaves would naturally not want to recognize any limits on their freedom or ownership after being denied them by their masters. The most basic sense of possession a person can have is owning food to eat. The Torah confronts this fundamental sense of entitlement by stating that all the new grain you worked to plant and harvest is off limits to you until you first bring the korban omer (isur chadaash). You may not even eat the food you grew until HaShem says you may.

In an agricultural society the harvest was not only a source of food but was also the primary source of wealth. The Torah therefore also requires you to give your first fruits and crops as a truma to the kohen in mikdash and declare your gratitude for the opportunity to own lands and accumulate wealth. Lastly and perhaps most significantly, the Torah demands that you enjoy your wealth with justice. Thus when you harvest your field you must show concern for the needy and leave pe'ah and leket for the ani. Charity is not an act of grace, rather it is an act of justice – Tzedaka. That is the recognition that other people have the same basic needs as you do and that you are of no more objective worth than anyone else. That all people, indeed all creatures, are a part of HaShem's world and have equal claim in it. Thus, if you have the means to supply someone else's needs, you have an obligation to do so.

Tzedaka is emphasized in the Torah's presentation of shevuos in parshas Re'eh, where the psukim stress the importance of sharing your celebration and bounty with those in need, e.g. the ani, ger, yasom, almana and levi.

“Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for the LORD your God, offering your freewill contribution according as the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall rejoice before the LORD your God with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name. Bear in mind that you were slaves in Egypt, and take care to obey these laws.¹⁰”

This theme is further explored by the minhag of reading megilas Rus on shevuos. The story explores the social dynamics of how the powerful relate to the needy. We get a glimpse of the mitzvos of tzeddaka in action and the various attitudes that those in power actually assumed, both properly and improperly, in relating to the ani and the ger. This explains how the treatment of the korban omer, shtei halechem pe'ah and leket are not interruptions in the listing of the moadim, but rather constitute the necessary context for the proper celebration of the harvest holiday. It is through these mitzvos that we reframe our experience of the harvest as we gather in our hard-won wealth. A proper celebration of the harvest then is only possible through the lens of contextualizing our sense of ownership and entitlement with recognition of our dependence on HaShem and securing justice for those in need.

¹⁰ Dvarim 16:10-12

Similarly, this shows why it is appropriate that shevuos is set up as a contingent holiday on chag hamatzos as reflected in the very name of the holiday, “weeks,” i.e. time passed since pesach. Shevuos is part two of the pesach story that teaches us how to live as freemen and exercise our ownership with justice. Unlike every other holiday which commemorates a specific event like geulas mitzraim, or a specific theme like kaparah, shevuos marks the beginning of the harvest season which continues until sukos. The holiday celebrates and frames the entire harvest, not just the commencement of it. This is evident as well in the identification of shevuos as the chag habikurimm, which as noted above isn’t only brought on shevuos, but rather from shevuos on until the end of the harvest season.

What then are chazal getting at by associating shevuos with matan Torah? While it is true that 50 days after pesach has shevuos fall out around when maamad har Sinai occurred, it is only an approximation. This is unavoidable since shevuos does not come out on the same day of Sivan each year, but floats based on whether Iyar is a maleh or chaser month. Further, the exact date of matan Torah is itself a machlokes taanim¹¹, although all agree it happened in early Sivan. The point is that shevuos is NOT the holiday of matan Torah, if it were, the psukim would identify it as such.

However now that we understand shevuos as the celebration of the harvest which completes the pesach story of freedom by framing our sense of ownership, we can appreciate chazal’s presentation of shevuos as zman matan Toraseinu. Liberty, especially for those from whom it was withheld, can be a dangerous thing. For instance, a child who suddenly finds himself on his own will often not act responsibly and instead be blinded by the sheer range of possibilities suddenly open to him. For a people enslaved for several generations this was even more of a concern. Therefore, care had to be taken to manage Israel’s emergence as free people beyond the omnipresent concern for human temptation towards corruption in the absence of boundaries.

One famous example of the exaggerated care for Israel’s state of mind as former slaves is when HaShem shares His thoughts about the route out of Egypt¹². He explains that although traveling through Plishti territory along the Mediterranean coast is the most direct way to Israel, since the Israelites would likely be scared by the prospect of war with the fearsome Plishtim, He would take us on a roundabout way instead.

In an analogous way the Torah did not seek to radically transform the Israelites overnight from assimilated Egyptians to advanced Talmudic scholars dedicated to the abstract contemplation of God’s Oneness. The process of fully incorporating the Torah’s values, such as mishpat, tzedakah, kedusha, tahara, chesed etc. is not only a life-long project for an individual, but it is an historical project that proceeds slowly through the generations. For example¹³, it took the Jewish people until the era of the second Temple to finally abandon outright idol worship. That is to say, 1000 years after matan Torah. Chazal

¹¹ Meseches Shabbos 86b

¹² Shmos 13:17, See also More Nevuchim 3:32

¹³ Meseches Yoma 69b

allude to this transition in connection to the purim story. They say¹⁴ that the nation accepted the Torah out of fear at Sinai and out of love only after the purim story, again 1000 years after leaving Egypt and accepting the Torah.

In this vein shevuos is only a first step in framing what it means to be free from Pharaoh in so far as a just and objective view towards property and wealth is concerned. This is a necessary first step towards the establishment of a just society. Building off this Torah shebichtav understanding of shevuos, chazal apply a Torah shbaal peh lens to expand on how shevuos completes the pesach story of freedom.

The whole Torah is designed to facilitate the development of a society dedicated to avodas HaShem with the above-mentioned values on successively more advanced bases. This is the larger sense in which shevuos is indeed commemorative of matan Torah. The ultimate goal of geulas mitzrayim is indeed the transformation from avdei Pharaoh to avdei HaShem in the full gamut of human development involved in the description “tzelem Elokim.”

However, as tempting as it may be to focus our religious impulses only on kedusha via moadim and kashrus, and on ediyos like matza and tefillin, we must not neglect the more fundamental elements of mishpat and tzedakah that lie at the core of shevuos. We should not think ourselves above the need for the lessons of shevuos the holiday, which curb our sense of greed and entitlement. We cannot lose sight of the primacy of acting justly in our enthusiasm to embrace the Torah in its entirety. We must keep our focus on the needs of our neighbor, and especially on those of the stranger. We are not independent property owners, but stewards of our prosperity who are charged to enjoy our wealth with justice. This ben adam lechaveiro sensitivity is itself a core element of our avodas HaShem. Indeed, Yeshayahu hanavi warns us against the conceit of elevating religious ceremony above justice when he states¹⁵:

“Hear the word of the LORD, You chieftains of Sodom; Give ear to our God’s instruction, You folk of Gomorrah! “What need have I of all your sacrifices?” Says the LORD. “I am sated with burnt offerings of rams, And suet of fatlings, And blood of bulls; And I have no delight In lambs and he-goats. That you come to appear before Me— Who asked that of you? Trample My courts no more; Bringing oblations is futile, Incense is offensive to Me. New moon and sabbath, Proclaiming of solemnities, Assemblies with iniquity, I cannot abide. Your new moons and fixed seasons Fill Me with loathing; They are become a burden to Me, I cannot endure them. And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime— Wash yourselves clean; Put your evil doings Away from My sight. *Cease to do evil; Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow.*”

¹⁴ Meseches Shabbos 88a

¹⁵ Yeshayahu 1:10-17