

# The Gift of Freedom

Rabbi Reuven Mann

In the week that follows the reading of Parshat Bamidbar in synagogue, we celebrate the *Chag* (holiday) of Shavuot, which means “weeks”—a strange name for a unique day. The titles of other special occasions reflect their basic theme, 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...” (Leviticus 23:6). 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, however, 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 religious institution. Rather, it must be seen as the culmination of the festival of Passover.

When Hashem instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh, He told him, “This will be for you the sign that I have sent you, when you take the nation out of Egypt, they will worship Me on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12).

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 isn’t Pesach 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 resides 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” (Talmud Shabbos 88a).

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’” (Exodus 19:8).

In my opinion 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 intend 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 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” (Talmud Makkot 10b). Moreover, Jewish 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 lifestyle 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.

That is why the anniversary of *Maamad Har Sinai* (Revelation at Mount Sinai) is known as the Holiday of Weeks. This indicates that this special day is the culmination of a process that began with the Exodus from Egypt but concluded with *Matan Torah*. The Torah is thereby communicating its special concept of human freedom.

Contrary to contemporary thinking, the absence of practical restraints and the enjoyment of unlimited political rights does not add up to genuine freedom. For man can very easily slide into a state of moral subservience to false ideals and empty fantasies.

Only the person who is rooted in study of true ideas and energetic practice of righteous behavior liberates himself from a life of falsehood and irrational goals.

Of course we celebrate the obtainment of practical liberty which was achieved with the Exodus. However, the holiday of *Weeks* teaches us that human autonomy is not an end in itself but only the necessary condition enabling us to pursue the liberation of the soul contained in the ideas and way of life prescribed in the Torah. May we merit to achieve it.