

Feast of Weeks - What's in the Name?¹

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What is the real significance of the Festival of Shavuot, the only Festival of the bible without a name which truly defines its essence?! Unlike Pesah, which refers to the Pascal lamb sacrifice which was the defining moment of Israelite commitment to the G-d of Abraham in defiance of the gods of Egypt, thereby making them worthy of, and setting the stage for, their exodus from Egyptian slavery, and Sukkot which refers to the booths in which the Israelites dwelt during their miraculous sojourn in the desert, Shavuot connotes the weeks leading up to a specific day rather than to the day itself! Is it not mandatory for us to attempt to truly understand the message of this second - and major - "pilgrim" festivals (the second of our shalosh regalim)?

Fascinatingly enough, both the precise date as well as the true meaning of this "mystery" Festival of Shavuot is dependant upon a famous historical controversy which raged between the Pharisees and Saducees, two ideological "parties" which vied for ascendancy during the Mishnaic period (c. 200 BCE - 200 CE). The Sadducees, who traced their origins to the well-known priestly clan of Zadok and were committed to the plain meaning of the Bible without the inclusion of the Oral Traditions, maintained that the Biblical command to count seven weeks (Sefirah), "You shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the Sabbath" (Lev. 3:15), refers to the first Sunday after the onset of Passover, from when you must continue to count seven complete weeks (from Sunday to Sunday), at the conclusion of which "you shall make the Festival of Shavuot" (Deut.16:10).

These seven weeks fall out during the first harvest period in Israel, beginning with the harvest of the barley (which is the initial omer sacrifice to be brought on that Saturday night) and culminating in the wheat harvest which is expressed by the two loaves of wheat which is the central vegetation Temple sacrifice and "first-fruits" gift of Shavuot.

The Pharisees, who are the forerunners of the Talmudic Sages and who endowed "last-word" authority to the Oral Tradition of Biblical interpretation (Hebrew *perush*), insisted that the Biblical phrase "the morrow of the Sabbath" refers to the day following the first day of the Passover Festival (taking the Hebrew Shabbat to be identified in this context with Shabbaton, which is Biblically used for Festival elsewhere in that very same Biblical passage of Lev. 23). It is apparent that the date for the Shavuot Festival would differ, depending upon which ideological position determined from when you begin your count!

So divisive did this difference of opinion prove itself to be- after all, the unity of the Jewish people is clearly dependent upon the commonality of the Hebrew calendar - that the day in which this controversy was settled (obviously in accordance with the Pharisees, which is our current practice) was declared to be a semi-Festival upon which one should neither fast nor recite a eulogy (B.T. Ta'anit 17b, Menahot 65a, based on Megillat Ta'anit).

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What was the real significance of their debate? I heard from my revered teacher Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik the following interpretation. According to the Sadducees, the Festival of Shavuot is completely separate and apart from the Festival of Passover, relating not at all to the exodus from Egypt but only to the agricultural reality of the Land of Israel; hence a unit of seven complete weeks - from Sunday to Sunday, beginning the first Sunday from the onset of Passover only because Passover also happens to fall out in the harvesting season - spans the barley to wheat harvest, which is to be seen as a separate period of thanksgiving to G-d, for an agricultural rather than an historical reason. From this perspective, Shavuot is a separate agricultural Festival specifically celebrating the climax of the period with the wheat harvest, but logically incorporating within its name the entire 7-week period of harvest, from barley to wheat.

The Pharisees have a totally different interpretation. The very fact that the Oral Tradition insists that the sefirah count begin on the night following the first day of Passover- even if it falls out in the middle of the week (as it usually does) - links the seven week count inextricably to the Festival of Passover, with the Biblical “until the day following the seventh week you shall count, fifty days” coming out 50 days from the onset of Passover! This indissoluble bond between Passover and Shavuot is not all necessarily true according to the Sadducees.

For the Pharisees, Shavuot contains an historical as well as an agricultural significance; the Oral Law defines Shavuot as the time in which we received the Torah from Mount Sinai. Indeed, from the perspective of the Pharisees, Passover is an incomplete Festival, awaiting its completion in the Festival of Shavuot. Passover is merely our freedom from physical bondage, awaiting our freedom from spiritual bondage (the internal blandishments of temptations and addictions) which only comes with the giving of the Torah on Shavuot; Passover is “freedom from” (*herut*), which, unchannelled, can lead to wild recklessness and licentiousness, awaiting the mission of Torah which will provide us with “freedom for” (*aharayut*). On Passover we only get as far as the desert, an alien, hostile and undeveloped expanse, awaiting our entrance into Israel and construction of our Holy Temple which the Bible identifies with Shavuot, the Festival of the First Fruits Temple sacrifice; Passover is the first step, our Festival of Fate when G-d forced us out of Egypt with His “outstretched arm and strong hand,” whereas Shavuot is our Festival of Destiny, when - by our truly choosing to follow the dictates of Torah - we will lead the world to peace and redemption from the backdrop of Israel and Jerusalem (Isaiah 2, Micah 4).

Hence, Shavuot is named by the Pharisaic Sages of the Talmud Atzeret, which means “conclusion”, with the days of the omer count serving as a connective “holo shel mo`ed” between the beginning of our freedom on Passover and freedom’s culmination in redemption on Shavuot. The progression from the one to the other demands rigorous introspection and repentance, commitment to our Torah and its ideals for world repair; the days of the Sefirah must be days of perseverance, preparation, penitence and purification. After all, did not the sanctity of G-d’s heavenly throne appear to the elders of Israel at the Sinai Revelation as “white-blue sapphire,” and are not the mystical sefirot the emanations of the Divine with which we must sanctify ourselves and our world?

Therefore the culminating Festival of this period is known by the days of preparation, Shavuot; it itself does not yet have a name because we have not yet reached the level of complete redemption. And we read the Book of Ruth, the last chapter of which takes

place between the barley and wheat harvest, and which tells of a Moabite woman inspired by the loving Torah of the land of Israel and from whose womb will eventually come the king/redeemer - but only when we become truly worthy!

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