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TODAY'S TORAH



Shavuot

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Chosen Together: The Ethical Significance of Shavuot

By: Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL

Why is the festival of Shavuot called "the time of the giving of our Torah" and not the time of the receiving of our Torah? Because the giving of the Torah happened at one specified time, but the receiving of the Torah happens at every time and in every generation.

– Rabbi Meir Alter of Ger

Each generation must make its own way back to Sinai, must stand under the mountain and re-appropriate and reinterpret the Revelation, in terms that are both classical and new. We recognize change as part of the continuing process of tradition itself.

– Rabbi Ger Cohen

The least-known of the *Shalosh Regalim* is Shavuot, the two-day Festival of Weeks. A victim of schedule, Shavuot comes just before the beginning of summer — unable to fit into the vacation schedule of most contemporaries, and lacking any special rituals to excite widespread observance.

In the biblical period, Shavuot celebrated the conclusion of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. By the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, some thousand years later, the rabbis expanded Shavuot beyond its agricultural origin to incorporate a

foundational event as well. Since the festival comes exactly seven weeks (hence its name) after the second day of Pesah, which marks the liberation of the Jewish slaves from Egypt and their wandering toward Mt. Sinai, the rabbis saw Shavuot as celebrating *z'man mattan Torateinu*, (the season of the giving of our Torah) token, record, and pathway of the special love between God and the Jewish People.

That link between Pesah and Shavuot, based on the Torah's insistence that Shavuot occur precisely 50 days after Pesah, follows a logic of human liberation as well as the cycles of the calendar.

Pesah, however popular, is just a beginning: the initiation of Jewish freedom. As our ancestors were liberated from Egyptian slavery, they took their first halting steps toward freedom and independence. No longer saddled with the burdens and oppression of Egyptian taskmasters, the Jews entered the wilderness of Sinai, experiencing their independence as little less than anarchy. Theirs was a freedom from control, a freedom from limits. Such liberty, by itself, is the freedom of adolescents, one which bristles at restraint.

Such a freedom is fine as a first step, but it ultimately cannot insure human growth, creativity, and community. Rather than simply avoiding limits, mature freedom entails living up to one's best potential, meeting responsibilities towards community, and towards others with a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Freedom fulfilled is freedom to live productively, with meaning, and in relationship.

Just as "freedom from" finds completion in "freedom to", so the festival of Pesah initiates a process of liberation that culminates in the festival of Shavuot. The second of the three pilgrimage festivals of the Torah, Shavuot marks the coming of age and responsibility of the Jewish People, celebrating the encounter between God and the Jewish People at Mt. Sinai. That moment of divine-human commitment resulted in a formal link between the two, a *Brit* (Covenant) that bound God and the Jewish People forever. That brit received its first expression in the writings of the Torah, which has formed the core of all subsequent Jewish identity.

Shavuot, then, marks the special relationship between God and the Jews, celebrates the biblical understanding of the Jews as God's Chosen People, a concept essential to Jewish identity, and one which has been distorted, both by Jews and by non-Jews.

What does it mean to be chosen? Chosen does not mean superior, and it does not mean that God loves the Jewish People better than other people: the Bible itself records God's love for all humanity. Being chosen does, however, imply that God loved the Jewish People first. That love is a matter of historical record: Judaism gave birth to the two monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam, which have spread a commitment to biblical values and knowledge through much of the world.

"To be chosen" is really a grammatical fragment: a person is never simply chosen, but always chosen for something. When we say that the Jews are chosen, we mean that the Jews were selected to embody the practices and values of Judaism as expressed in the Torah and subsequent Jewish writings. God chose us to be a role model--to demonstrate that a society of people dedicated to ritual profundity, moral rigor, and compassionate action could profoundly shape the world. Jews are chosen to live Torah, nothing more and nothing less. In the words of the Siddur, "You have chosen us from among all peoples by giving us Your Torah." To the extent that we make the practices and values of the Torah real in our daily lives and in our communal priorities, we in turn choose God. The Torah is given anew each time we allow it to live through our deeds. To live Torah is far more than an affirmation of ritual commitments, although it certainly includes that. Living Torah means caring for the widow and orphan as an expression of religious obligation. It means loving the stranger as oneself, honoring parents, feeding the hungry, preventing the blind from stumbling, and a whole host of ethical commitments that elevate human relationship and human caring to a pedestal of justice – the truest expression of covenantal love.

Shavuot, then, is a recommitment to our founding purpose. Each year, we remember why there is a Jewish People, why there is Judaism. On this festival, we celebrate, as did our ancestors, in wonder, the fact that God chose our people to live the mitzvot, and we renew our commitment to walk in God's ways, and to help each other to arrive together.



Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, DHL holds the Abner and Roslyn Goldstine Dean's Chair of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and is Vice President of American Jewish University in Los Angeles. Rabbi Artson has long been a passionate advocate for social justice, human dignity, diversity and inclusion. He wrote a book on Jewish teachings on war, peace and nuclear annihilation in the late 80s, became a leading voice advocating for GLBT marriage and ordination in the 90s, and has published and spoken widely on environmental ethics, special needs inclusion, racial and economic justice, cultural and religious dialogue and cooperation, and working for a just and secure peace for Israel and the Middle East. A member of the Philosophy Department, he is particularly interested in

theology, ethics, and the integration of science and religion. He mentors Camp Ramah in California in Ojai and Ramah of Northern California in the Bay Area. He is also dean of the Zacharias Frankel College in Potsdam, Germany, ordaining Conservative rabbis for Europe. A frequent contributor for the Huffington Post, the Times of Israel, and a Contributing Writer for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, he has a public figure [Facebook page](#) with over 70,000 likes. Rabbi Artson is the author of 12 books and over 250 articles, most recently *Renewing the Process of Creation: A Jewish Integration of Science and Spirit*. Married to Elana Artson, they are the proud parents of twins, Jacob and Shira.

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