

Hearing God's Voice

RABBI MARC J. MARGOLIUS, CONG. BETH AM ISRAEL

The ancient sage Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi once compared the idea of God speaking to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai to a hammer striking an anvil, causing sparks to fly off in all directions. Each and every person at Sinai—from the oldest to the youngest, from the wisest to the simplest—heard God speaking to them personally, according to their unique capacity. More than this, taught Rabbi Joshua: each and every day, God's voice goes forth from Sinai. Revelation, the giving of Torah, is eternal and ongoing.

Judaism teaches that God's "voice" is accessible to all people at all times, if we are willing and able to truly hear. The giving of Torah was not a "one-time" event, reducible to a single text; it is a continual process, constantly unfolding through our personal engagement with our community, past and present. But we cannot truly "hear" God as individuals in isolation. Our personal revelation is only one of the sparks flying off the anvil. To "hear" God, we must seek out the other sparks, past and present. This is the essence of studying Torah—seeking out God's voice through engagement with each other and with our tradition.

In each age, the particular understanding of Torah may change over time, sometimes in startling ways making it unrecognizable to past generations. The text of the Torah is the starting point of a moral conversation echoing through generations. What imbues Jewish morality with legitimacy and sanctity—and what ultimately satisfies Moses—is that it is constantly developed with an ear tuned to the voice of our past. Without coherence and continuity to our moral conversation, our words are nothing but soliloquy.

So what does it mean, as tradition says, that even today we are all standing at Mount Sinai? It means that we stand before the hundreds of generations that have carried the conversation to us. All their voices echo through the ages, beckoning us to join them, as it were, around a cosmic dinner table where we might learn together. As modern Jews, we must train our ears to hear and to respect each and every voice, pull our chairs to the table, and finally, to venture a word of our own.

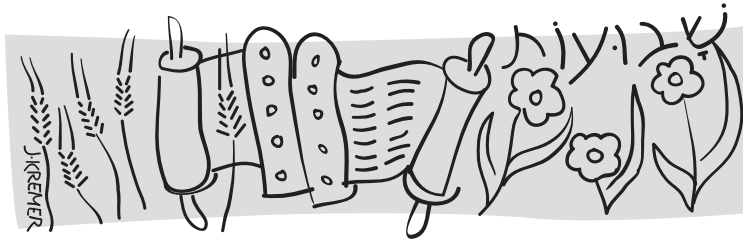
Beyond Blintzes

SORA LANDES, PRINCIPAL, PERELMAN JEWISH DAY SCHOOL, FORMAN CENTER

Like many families, we enjoy blintzes and other dairy foods on Shavuot. Why is it traditional to eat dairy on Shavuot?

1. "Honey and milk shall be under your tongue" (Song of Songs) refers, according to tradition, to the study of Torah. The book of Exodus calls Israel "a land of milk and honey."
2. One tradition teaches that after standing for hours in the hot sun at Mount Sinai, the Israelites ate dairy foods, which could be prepared more quickly than meat.
3. The numerical value of the letters of HALAV, milk, equals forty—the days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai. Eating dairy foods reminds us of this Biblical event.

SHAVUOT



The Best Kept Secret

RABBI DAVID ACKERMAN, TIFERET BET ISRAEL

Shavuot is a festival with multiple identities. It is:

- a Biblical pilgrimage festival marking the first harvest of spring;
- a Rabbinic telling of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai;
- a Kabbalistic (mystical) celebration of Israel's love for Torah;
- and a community confirmation of the importance of Jewish learning for young adults.

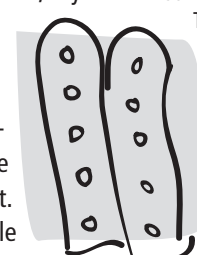
Shavuot is all of these, yet it is still the best kept secret of all Jewish holidays. Shavuot combines biblical, rabbinic, mystical and modern traditions that celebrate the giving of the Torah, God's gift to the Jewish people, guiding us to practice what is good and just.

The Biblical celebration, described as YOM HABIKKURIM (the day of first fruits) centers on the grateful presentation of the first spring harvest. The Rabbinic observance, suggested by the title Z'MAN MATAN TORATEINU (the time of the giving of our Torah) focuses on the meeting between God and the people of Israel, declared by our tradition to have taken place exactly seven weeks (the word SHAVUOT means "weeks") after the Exodus from Egypt. That meeting, the Rabbis suggest, resembled a wedding—a joining together in love of a people and their God.

The Kabbalistic tradition of a TIKKUN LEYL SHAVUOT (the repair of the night of Shavuot) expands the wedding theme by viewing the festival's first night as a time to prepare the bride (Israel) for the ceremony set to take place the next morning. In this mystical tradition, adopted by many synagogues, people stay up all night studying and teaching Torah as a way of getting ready for the big event—the reading of the Ten Commandments from the Torah—at the morning service.

Today, we have transformed the ancient ritual of presenting the first fruits to the community on Shavout with the Confirmation ceremony, at which we recognize young people who demonstrate the depth and strength of their learning.

A sense of partnership between God and the people of Israel unites all of the traditions of this festival. In these Shavuot themes—harvest, learning, receiving Torah, and joining God under a wedding canopy—each of us can find inspiration for our Jewish lives. HAG SAMEACH!



The Book of Ruth

RABBI JOSEPH FORMAN, ASSOCIATE RABBI, REFORM CONGREGATION KENESETH ISRAEL

The Biblical book of Ruth, traditionally read on Shavuot, contains the story of Naomi, a Jewish woman whose husband and two sons die, leaving her with two non-Jewish daughters-in-law. Naomi tells her sons' widows to return to their families. One takes her advice while the other, Ruth, in a profound moment, declares to her mother-in-law: "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16-17)

The story takes place during the harvest season, which is often cited as the reason for linking it to Shavuot. Perhaps, though, there is a deeper meaning. Shavuot, usually translated as "weeks," can also mean "vows," reminding us of Ruth's vow to Naomi to live her life as a Jew—which captures the essence of this holiday. Ruth's words link her with the ancient Israelites who vowed to follow the Ten Commandments. Shavuot is then the festival on which we reassert our vows, our commitment to Jewish theology and Jewish community.

Today, we look to Ruth as the model for GERUT (conversion to Judaism). Across the globe Jews-by-choice recite Ruth's words to Naomi, recalling her devotion and her personal decision to link herself with a new people. These men and women vow their own commitments—their SHAVUOT—to Judaism, they profess their new identity as members of the Jewish people.

Love of Learning

MERLE SALKIN, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION, SOCIETY HILL SYNAGOGUE

The Confirmation ceremony celebrates the commitment of students who have continued their Jewish learning beyond Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Confirmation and Shavuot go hand in hand: Shavuot reminds us of the giving of the Ten Commandments, Confirmation is a public affirmation of the Torah as the basis for living Jewishly.

Many congregations have made Confirmation the centerpiece of their Shavuot observance and provide an opportunity for students to create part or all of the holiday service. Often students are given the opportunity to express their thoughts about God, Jewish practice and their future roles as active members of the Jewish community. Like Bar/Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation represents another milestone in Jewish learning; it is a gateway to a meaningful, informed, adult Jewish life.

For information on Making Connections please... phone us: 215-635-2202; fax us: 215-635-2344; or e-mail us: Connect18@aol.com

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