When the Torah wishes to inform us of the ‘historical’ reason for a holiday, it certainly knows how to do so. Take for example the two other pilgrimage holidays – Chag HaMatzot and Sukkot: even though these holidays, as Shavuot, are first presented in Shemot 23:14-17 from their ‘agricultural’ perspective, in other instances, the Torah informs us of their historical perspectives as well.¹

Therefore, it is simply baffling that the Torah, in each of the five instances² when it discusses Shavuot, presents the holiday solely from its agricultural aspect, and never even mentions any connection to the events of Matan Torah!

Should we conclude that it is only coincidental that Shavuot falls out on the same date as Matan Torah? Would that explain why Chumash makes no connection at all between that event and our grain harvest holiday in the Land of Israel?

To answer this question, we must first take issue with our original assumption that the Biblical date of Matan Torah indeed coincides with the holiday of Shavuot.

When the Torah wishes to inform us of the precise date of a certain event, it certainly knows how to do so.³ However, in regard to Matan Torah, the Torah is quite vague. Note how that story begins: “In the third month of Bnei Yisrael’s departure from Egypt, on this day, they came to Midbar Sinai.”⁴

Even if we assume Bnei Yisrael arrived on the first day of the month,⁵ the lack of a clear chronology in the subsequent events makes it impossible to determine precisely how many days transpire between their arrival at Har Sinai and Matan Torah.

Indeed, the Midrash⁶ calculates that the Torah must have been given on either the sixth or seventh day of Sivan, yet the Torah itself never explicitly mentions that date, even though it has ample opportunities to do so! Furthermore, we never find a specific mitzvah whose explicit purpose is to commemorate that date or event.⁷

To answer this question, we must consider a fundamental difference between the very nature of two monumental events in our history, i.e. the Exodus and Matan Torah.

One could suggest that the Torah’s deliberate obfuscation of the date of Matan Torah may suggest that we should not treat it as a historically bound event. Instead, the Torah wants one to feel as though the Torah has just been given each and every day. This concept is reflected by the famous Rashi on 19:1: “... it should have been written: ‘on that day.’ Why does the pasuk say: ‘on this day’? This comes to teach us that the words of the Torah should be considered new to you, as though they were given today!”⁸

In other words, we should not view Matan Torah as a one-time event. Rather, every generation must feel as though G-d’s words were spoken directly to them, no less than they were to the first generation. Hence, a celebration of its anniversary as a singular moment in our history might diminish from its eternal meta-historical dimension.

In contrast, the Exodus – the birth of our nation – was, and should remain, a one-time event in our history. As such, it becomes an event that must be constantly remembered, but not necessarily relived.

So why do we commemorate Matan Torah on Shavuot? In this regard, we find a beautiful balance between our oral and written traditions. Even though the Torah’s obfuscation of this event may reflect the inherent danger of its commemoration, our oral tradition could not possibly totally neglect its anniversary.

Therefore, unlike Passover eve, when we gather at the Seder to ‘retell’ the story of the Exodus, on the evening of Shavuot, we ‘relive’ that experience by engaging in Torah study, a most appropriate expression of our gratitude for G-d’s most precious gift.

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¹ See Shemot 12:17 and Vayikra 23:43.
⁴ Shemot 19:1.
⁵ See Rashi 19:1, “b’yom hazeh.”
⁶ Shabbat 86b.
⁷ In Devarim 4:9-11 we are instructed never to forget what happened on that day, but there is no commemorative action.
⁸ See Rashi Shemot 19:1.