



PREPARING FOR Shavuot

With Lag BaOmer behind us and Shavuot drawing near, it is traditional to think about the importance and impact of this shortest of the three major festivals of the Jewish calendar year. Here in Israel, we are blessed that Shavuot is not a forgotten holiday. The advertisements of the dairy companies for their holiday wares alone guarantee some sort of public awareness of this holy day. Unfortunately, in the Diaspora, with the exception of the devotedly observant community, Shavuot is a forgotten holiday.

As a lawyer in Chicago many years ago, I remember that I attempted to obtain a new date for a trial in which I was representing my client and the Jewish judge, a scion of a great Eastern European rabbinic family, asked me the reason for my request. I told him that the original trial date was to fall on Shavuot and as such, I would not be able to attend court that day. He sneered at me: "Counselor, there is no such Jewish holiday!" So great is the alienation and assimilation of much of Diaspora Jewry, that his ignorant opinion will find many echoes in secular Jewish society. Of all of the holidays, Shavuot has no distinguishing *mitzvot* or rituals attached to it and is so short that it lacks the "glamour" of the Pesach Seder or the *sukkah* or the *shofar*. Yet, it is Shavuot that is the backbone of all Jewish life and vitality.

According to Jewish tradition and the Talmud, Shavuot marks the anniversary date of the Revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah

to the people of Israel. The Torah itself phrases it thus: "Today you have become a nation!" Jewish nationality is founded upon our shared experience of receiving the Torah at Sinai. This is the import of Saadia Gaon's famous statement that "our nation is a nation only by virtue of the Torah." Shavuot is *the* uniquely Jewish holiday. It does not represent the universal ideal of freedom as does Pesach, nor is it a harbinger of all human happiness, prosperity and bountiful harvest, all of which characterize Sukkot. It stands in splendid isolation as a uniquely Jewish event that attests to our role in society and civilization, as the people who accepted the Torah when others refused.

It is therefore difficult to be assimilated and celebrate Shavuot. Shavuot prevents assimilation by reminding us of the event baked deep into the DNA of the Jewish people – the Revelation at Sinai. Shavuot is therefore not just a commemoration of a historical date but rather a challenge of defining Jewish nationhood and how it relates to each and every one of us. Because of this challenging aspect of the holiday, it is easy (though painful) to understand why Shavuot just does not exist for so many Jews. It is much easier on one's mind and conscience to simply ignore and then even deny its existence.

There are certain questions that have remained constant in Jewish life over the millennia. "Who is a Jew?" "Why be Jewish?" "Why marry Jewish?" and "Why all of the fuss, anger, hatred and

jealousy in the world over the Jews?" are some of these basic ones. Ignoring Shavuot and what it represents allows for seemingly easy answers and evasions of these questions. But all of those answers have never yet been able to stand the test of time and circumstance. Forgetting Shavuot has always led to dire spiritual personal and national consequences. The great Rabbi Yosef celebrated Shavuot with great enthusiasm, saying, "If it were not for this day of Shavuot, I would not feel chosen and unique, for many Yosefs can be found in the market square."

This is certainly true of the Jewish people generally. If it were not for Shavuot we would not be a special people, let alone "a light unto the nations of the world." Shavuot becomes our reason for existence, the justification of our intense role in the development of a better and more civilized world. Shavuot, therefore, demands some sort of mental and spiritual preparation to be truly appreciated. Since we still have some time until its arrival, now would be a good time to start thinking about it and its personal relevance to one's life and family.

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