

BS"D

## **"Thunder & Lightning at Mt. Sinai- The Greatness of Shavuot!"**

By Rabbi Shalom Garfinkel- Director Project 613

The main study session is the first 2 pages and 5 sources... then there is an entire section on customs. If you have time, great. If not, it's a great resource. TY.

**INTRO:** This coming Sunday night May 16th at sunset through Tuesday evening May 18th, 2021 is the holiday of Shavuot! Since all American Jews really know it well, we're going to learn about something else tonight.....Well, JUST in case there MIGHT be one or two of us who aren't so familiar, we will be learning about Shavuot, what it represents, & what it means for our lives today. I have included an additional section about 4 special customs we perform on Shavuot. Let's do it!

### **Source 1. Olami Resources- "Shavuot I" p.2 What is Shavuot? A Basic Overview.**

The central theme of the holiday of Shavuot is the *commemoration & reliving* of "Ma'amad Har Sinai," when Hashem gave the Torah on Mount Sinai to the Jewish people. Shavuot comes at the completion of the 7 week Counting of the Omer starting from Pesach. A special offering, two loaves of bread made from wheat, is brought on Shavuot. The Torah also mentions that Shavuot is the holiday when we celebrate the harvest of the first fruits. The Talmud teaches us that Shavuot is one of the days on which Hashem judges the world and specifically decrees how fruitful the trees will be in the coming year. Shavuot is also one of the 3 pilgrimage holidays in which Jews from all locations would travel to Jerusalem & the Temple to worship & to celebrate. The other 2 are Pesach (50 days previous) and Succos which is the last component of the High Holidays in the Fall.

### **Source 2. Vayikra (Leviticus), 23:15-17- Counting the Omer & the offering of Two Loaves on Shavuot.**

You shall count for yourselves from the day after [Pesach], from the day when you bring the Omer of the waving, seven weeks; they shall be complete. Until the day after the seventh week you shall count, fifty days; and you shall offer a new meal offering [of two loaves] to Hashem. From your dwelling places you shall bring bread that shall be waved, two loaves made of two tenth-ephah, they shall be fine flour, they shall be baked leavened.

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָתְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבֻעֹת תְּמִימֹת תִּהְיֶינָה: עַד מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם; וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַה': מִמּוֹשְׁבֵיכֶם תָּבִיאוּ לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שְׁתֵּים נְשִׂי עֶשְׂרִינִים סֵלֶת תִּהְיֶינָה חֲמִץ תִּאֲפִינָה:

### **Questions to ponder:**

1. On Pesach we eat only matzah and are absolutely forbidden to eat any bread. Yet on Shavuot, we are commanded to bring 2 LOAVES of bread and eat them. What changed? What's the significance? Now that's a good question to chew on over a good PB&J sandwich! **You'll have to put up with my corny rabbinic/Abba jokes! Matzah represents simplicity. The total negation of luxury. Flour and water. No fluffing up. No extras. We spend Pesach making our "default setting" that we don't need lots of materialism. Then when we work on ourselves for 7 weeks to implement that message of humility, we can return to materialism symbolized by the very LOAVES of bread we refrained from on Pesach. Now we can and SHOULD use our material success for a Higher Purpose. Without Pesach, we would**

get sunk in the physical world. Larger discussion... we don't shy away from material items... we try to elevate them to a higher purpose.

**Source 3. Menorat HaMaor, Candle 3, Section 5, Ch. 1 – The name Shavuot (Festival of Weeks) refers to the culmination of counting the seven weeks of the Omer.**

This festival is called by the Torah: “The festival of Shavuot (weeks)” because it comes after the completion of seven weeks.

זה החג נקרא בתורה חג שבועות לפי שבא אחר מלאת שבעת שבועות.

The Ramban (VaYikra 23:36) explains that Shavuot is inextricably linked with Pesach, and that the whole period of the Omer, which begins with Pesach and concludes with Shavuot, *is really like one long festival*. Thus, the forty-nine days of the Omer are like the Chol HaMo'ed (Intermediate Days) of the Sukkot festival, which link the first day of Sukkot with Shemini Atzeret (aka Simchas Torah.)

Questions to ponder:

1. If Pesach to Shavuot is like one long holiday, then what does each stage represent? We know that we got our freedom on Pesach...but how does that connect to the giving of the Torah on Shavuot? **Freedom is not an end of itself. It is a tool in our toolbox to dedicate to a higher purpose. On Pesach, we get freedom that we then DEDICATE to accepting Hashem's Torah on Shavuot. We know that our ultimate freedom comes through commitment to a higher ideal and not pursuing limitless freedom. Unchecked freedom results in our becoming slaves to ourselves and to our passions... This is counterintuitive and flies in the face of American culture. BUT, it's true. We are only free when we accept Hashem's obligations upon ourselves.**

2. Why would the holiday of Shavuot be called “Weeks?” The name of a bus, train, or airplane journey is based on the DESTINATION... The Train to Kenosha... or the flight to NY. Why is Shavuot named after the journey of the seven weeks and not the actual event that happened on Shavuot, ie. The Giving of the Torah?! It should be called “Mt. Sinai Day!” or “Torah Day!” **Because the PROCESS is the key. Any great athlete who sustains that greatness over time will clearly say that it boils down to preparation. So too in the spiritual world, we need to prepare for spiritual greatness. So much so that we NAME the holiday after the preparation and not the final result, ie. the giving of the Torah...**

**Source 4. Rabbi Yisroel Miller, A Gift for Yom Tov, p. 109 – The period of the counting of the weeks is a time of spiritual preparation for the revelation of the Torah that takes place on Shavuot.**

Even in our time, the forty-nine days between Pesach and Shavuot are meant to be days of spiritual preparation. After the first Pesach, our ancestors prepared to receive the Torah directly from Hashem. And we, in each generation, are also to use these days to prepare for Shavuot, to personally accept the Torah upon ourselves, each year anew.

**Source 5. Rabbi Akiva Tatz, Living Inspired, pp. 158-160 – The counting of the Omer represents the intense effort that is invested in our efforts toward self-perfection.**

Let us understand. *The novel idea to grasp here is that in Torah terms the act of counting is not a sentimental marking of the passage of time until a goal; it is the building of that goal itself.* Counting is work. Counting means *accounting* for and developing each component of a process fully, responsibly, and in correct sequence. Only when each detail is painstakingly created and assembled into the process can the goal be reached ... The counting of the Omer is such a counting. Receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai is not reached not by a single act but rather by a deliberate painstaking process of building each of the seven days of the seven weeks. When that work is done, *Shavuot results.*

#### Questions to ponder:

1. Usually we think of “hard work” in terms of our careers. What does it mean to “work hard” for our spirituality? What does that look like in your life? What could it look like? **This could be a very fruitful discussion... It means SETTING FIXED TIMES FOR TORAH... and prioritizing Jewish activities both daily and weekly... it means pushing oneself to grow just like one does in the gym. It means taking risks and going out of one's comfort zone... EXAMPLE- SPENDING A FULL SHABBOS IN W. ROGERS PARK is terrifying for many of our Young Professionals. That is a risk but one that is WELL worth the amazing experience it affords...**

The main part of the study session is above. If you have time, please continue. And if not, this will be a good resource for your further study of and preparation for Shavuot! **I am not adding questions or “notes” to the following section...it should be straightforward....**

#### **4 SPECIAL CUSTOMS OF SHAVUOT:**

**CUSTOM 1. Reading of the Megillas (Scroll of) Ruth**- one of the Five Megillos which are among the twenty-four Books of the Tanach (The Jewish Bible).

**SUMMARY:** Megillas Ruth tells the story of Ruth, a non-Jewish princess from the land of Moab. Ruth married a Jew who had fled to Moab to escape a famine in the Land of Israel. When Ruth's husband died, along with her brother-in-law and father-in-law, her impoverished and bereaved mother-in-law Naomi chose to return to Israel, and Ruth forsook her entire upbringing and the land of her birth to convert to Judaism and accompany Naomi back to Israel. In Israel, Ruth and Naomi were penniless so Ruth joined the paupers to collect grain from the fields. She “happened” to choose the field of a wealthy relative named Boaz. Ultimately, Boaz & Ruth got married and had a child named Oved who was the grandfather of King David! Ruth created the Davidic dynasty, the ultimate monarchy of the Jewish people from which the Messiah will one day be born speedily in our days!

**Source 6. Rabbi Yisroel Miller, A Gift for Yom Tov, pp. 123-124 – Why Read Megillas Ruth on Shavuos? To serve as a model for us when we come to accept the Torah anew on Shavuos.**

To discover how each of us as individuals today can bring ourselves to an acceptance of Torah this Shavuos, we must examine the story of a sincere individual convert, someone who accepted the Torah on her own. Mt. Sinai was the entire Jewish people's conversion to Judaism. Our mitzvah today is for each of us to make an effort to "reconvert ourselves." To teach us how, the Jewish Bible devotes an entire volume to the story of one person who did it perhaps better than anyone: Ruth.

**Source 7. Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer – Judaism requires dedication which we learn from Ruth.**

The conversion of Ruth to the Jewish faith was a great act of self-sacrifice. Instead of returning to the physical luxury & status of her Moabite royalty, she clung steadfastly to her Jewish mother-in-law, determined to find her place "beneath the wings of the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence)." One of the reasons that Ruth is read on Shavuos is to demonstrate that Judaism requires sincere dedication.

**CUSTOM 2. Studying throughout the Night of Shavuos**

One of the customs of Shavuos is to put in an "all-nighter" on the first night of the festival. Throughout the world, Jews gather in their synagogues and spend the entire night immersed in Torah study – until dawn, when they conduct an early prayer service. What is the reason for this practice?

**Source 8. Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494 – To rectify the mistake of the generation who received the Torah, we stay up all night on Shavuos learning Torah.**

The Zohar says that the early pious ones would stay awake all night on Shavuos and learn Torah. Nowadays our custom is for most learned people to do so. Perhaps the reason is based on the fact that the Israelites slept all night long and Hashem had to wake them when He wanted to give them the Torah, as it says in the Midrash, and therefore we must repair this.

איתא בזוהר שחסידי הראשונים היו נעורים כל הלילה ועוסקים בתור' וכבר נהגו רוב הלומדים לעשות כן ואפשר לתת טעם ע"פ פשוטו לפי שישראל היו ישנים כל הלילה והוצרך הקב"ה להעיר אותם כדאיתא במדרש לכן אנו צריכים לתקן זה

**Source 9. Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, The Jerusalem Kollel – Demonstrating our dedication to Torah study.**

On Shavuos, there is a special reason to stay up all night learning Torah. Even if one would argue that you can learn more hours during Shavuos by keeping to a regular schedule, the goal here is different. We are showing our uncompromised, extraordinary dedication to the study of Torah on the day on which the Torah was given to the Jewish people.

### **CUSTOM 3. Eating Dairy Foods**

On most festivals, it is preferable to serve meat. On Shavuot, however, there is a custom to serve dairy as well. One explanation for this is that the consumption of both dairy and meat creates an allusion to the offering of the Two Loaves that the Torah prescribes for Shavuot.

#### **Source 10. Shulchan Aruch- Mishnah Berurah 494:13 – Torah is compared to honey and milk.**

Some people also have the custom to eat honey and milk because the Torah is likened to honey and milk, as the verse states: “Honey and milk are under his tongue” (Shir HaShirim 4:11).

גם נוהגין בקצת מקומות לאכול דבש וחלב מפני התורה שנמשלה לדבש וחלב 'כמש"כ דבש וחלב תחת לשונך וגו'.

#### **Source 11. Rabbi Shimon Finkelman in Shavuot published by ArtScroll Publications – Just as a mother’s milk provides an infant with all its nutritional needs, the Torah provides the Jewish people with all or our spiritual needs.**

One cannot live on bread alone, nor can one survive on just water. Yet, one of the miracles of childbirth is that a mother’s milk provides her newborn with all the nourishment it needs. In this sense, Torah is like mother’s milk, for it includes within it all the sustenance that one’s soul needs for spiritual vitality and growth. Thus, the milk foods of Shavuot allude to the Torah itself (Imrei Noam).

### **CUSTOM 4. Decorating the Synagogue with Flowers and Trees**

#### **Source 12. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494 – The decorative plants and flowers are inspired by the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.**

Our custom is to decorate the synagogues and houses with plants and flowers on Shavuot as a reminder of the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.

ונוהגין לשטח עשבים בשבעות בבית הכנסת והבתים, זכר לשמחת מתן תורה.

#### **Source 13. Mishnah Berurah 494:10 – The decorations allude to the fact that Mt. Sinai miraculously sprouted with vegetation at the Giving of the Torah.**

“A reminder of the happiness of the Giving of the Torah.” Because there were plants around Mount Sinai, as the verse states: “The sheep and cattle must not graze ...”

זכר לשמחת מתן תורה - שהיו שם עשבים סביב 'הר סיני כדכתיב הצאן והבקר אל ירעו וגו'.