

Harvest Festivals

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Once we used to celebrate Shavuot as the harvest festival that linked the first barley crop, which was dedicated on Pesach, with the wheat harvest 49 days later.

I often hear people say pejoratively that our festivals and laws are based on earlier, primitive systems and are therefore somehow inauthentic. They may be, in the way that a modern automobile is based on earlier horseless carriages. Or jet planes on those that used propellers. It is not a criticism or defect. On the contrary, it is a tribute to the creativity and adaptability of a religion such as ours, where individuals and innovation can coexist with tradition and conformity. Even if there is a constant battle over how to change, how to add, or how to modify.

Shavuot was the early summer harvest festival. We tend to think of harvest festivals as opportunities that our more primitive forebears had for dancing around maypoles, having fun, and misbehaving. Harvest festivals of different sorts go back thousands of years. When early humans began animal husbandry and cultivating the land, they would celebrate harvests and fertility, praying in the spring for good, and rejoicing in the autumn when the season was over and everything gathered in. Which usually involved an orgy or two. If ancient gods enjoyed sex, why wouldn't they approve of humans doing the same?

The ancients worshipped the sun, the moon, different deities, and a host of spirits and phantoms that they believed controlled their world. If we laugh at them, we ought to stop and think for a moment about the level of superstition that survives and thrives to this day, which is little different. There is no more limit to the extent of human credibility and gullibility now than then.

As we find out more and more about our earliest forbears, we see how, long before the Torah, people marked the recovery of the earth, metaphorically, from its winter sleep and then later bid it farewell in preparation for returning to its cold darkness. All Jewish festivals were based on earlier iterations. Just as many of the laws of the Torah, both civil and ritual, are reminiscent of or based on earlier codes, like Hammurabi, possibly a contemporary of Abraham. It is not surprising. Human nature doesn't change much, and the universe still runs according to its laws. We humans are great borrowers.

But the Torah transformed these earlier attempts to formulate ethical and spiritual societies. Whereas Hammurabi treated the poor, the peasants, and women differently than the aristocracy, the Torah's civil rules treated life within its system equally. Whereas kings, rulers, and priests were always above the law, the Torah insisted they be subject to it. Even so, the influence of male-dominated patriarchal societies is clearly there. It would

take time for changes. The Torah reflected earlier rules of holy spaces, holy states, holy dress and habits that set the priesthood apart as a class devoted exclusively to servicing sanctuaries on behalf of the nation, while kings spent their time fighting and amassing wealth and wives.

The same thread can be seen in ancient stories of creation, floods, and intertribal and national fighting. It is all there in Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures that predate the Israelites. But instead of gods killing each other and fornicating to produce the world, or rescuing their favorites from other rebellious rivals, the Torah transforms and understands the narrative in terms of one natural universe with an order and system accessible to everyone. It is human behavior that mediates, not spells, magic, or randomness. Praying to gods, to forces beyond our control, remains a pervasive human practice and need. Some see this need as a necessary therapeutic process. Others see it as a weakness, while many think it works in getting God to change God's mind.

Judaism has changed over its 3,000 years of recognizable continuity. Partly through changing circumstances, partly through subjugation, and partly through internal decisions. Maimonides affirms that many of the accepted contemporary religious ways of worship were borrowed and adapted as a way of weaning the Israelites off them in stages. Indeed we see in the Bible how hard they always found it to abandon pagan worship. The Torah, in its wisdom, kept and modified those practices to help wean people away in stages from what they were used to. Sacrifices were as automatic a feature of religions then as praying or meditation is today. Perhaps one day we will evolve towards extrasensory perception. Or our genetically modified brains will be able to speak to God in code.

Such transitions are part of the development of humans and their societies. Even so, we will always need systems of ethics and patterns of therapeutic behavior. No country, culture, or religion bursts onto the world from nowhere or starts in a vacuum. They all emerge from earlier forms, added and adapted and removed different parts. It is not disrespectful, or in any way derogatory, to suggest this. Quite the contrary. It illustrates progress and creativity.

We have all come from earlier forms and stages, whether you call them Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, or Neanderthals or cavemen. It is no more an insult to a modern-day religion than it is to say that we contain genes from earlier forms of homo sapiens and share genes with other forms of life. We are what we have become and so is religion.

Shavuot as a harvest festival might well have come about because earlier peoples celebrated a pagan festival of fertility and boiled calves in mother's milk. But it has turned into the anniversary of the birth of Torah and the texts that emerged from it. Our constitution and the object of veneration and study which reflect the Judaism of some 2,500 years ago and the way it has come down to us today. After all, there were no Chasidim in the time of Moses, no Kabbalists, but nowadays we have them alongside our rationalists and legalists.

Once upon time there was no such notion of an individual doing what he or she wanted to. The religion or the state insisted on its hierarchies, obedience, and ceremonials, the way Chasidim do today. They found ways of enforcing them. You had no option but to conform, to know your place, if you wanted to survive in such societies. Unless of course you were a rebel, a Ghengis Khan, a Napoleon—but then you created your own conformities.

Now a new paradigm is emerging—that of individuality. It is a burden and a blessing that we are so much freer in modern societies. Very few people are prepared now to say that “this is how things have always been and this is how they should remain.”

I don't know if this what Moses had in mind on Sinai, this interaction and conflict. On the one hand was the declaration that we obey first, and then we can ask questions. On the other, he said before he died that each one of us stood at Sinai as an individual who had to make individual decisions and acts of commitment. Moses also came from two worlds, and that must have influenced him. I believe this struggle between individuality and conformity is a good thing. But it is challenging. And twice as difficult as opting only for one.

But that is what Shavuot celebrates—an acceptance of our constitution, of Torah, regardless of what we think. But at the same time, we are invited to metaphorically stand at Sinai and declare a personal commitment. To decide how each one of us will worship our God and how much we want to keep and to what depth of our way of life will be animated by Judaism as opposed to secularism. We who are bound by tradition and are free to choose want the best of both worlds.