

Shavuot: An Identity Crisis

Plato's theory of ideas and Aristotle's more empirical approach are the foundations of the Western intellectual tradition. The result of this patrimony has been the search for truth, even absolute truth, which I believe has tended to constrict our way of thinking and reflect the desire to find a specific answer to every problem assuming there is one.

In our times we have at last realized that there is such a phenomenon as fuzzy logic and fuzzy mathematics which are, to put it simply, more approximate and less definite. In a similar vein, what is called "chaos theory" offers a different way of looking at empirical data and discovering that there can be various answers. One might not need to choose one specific theory or solution.

I have always sensed an affinity to the fuzzy. I find consistency boring and often self-defeating. The Torah itself gives us conflicting models of management, the Divinely-appointed leader, the hereditary priesthood, and then the monarchy, the prophet, and the Judge. Much later we adopted the idea of the rabbi and scholar. Perhaps the implication is that circumstances may require different models of leadership, and we should be open to such possibilities. There is no single simple answer. So it is with Shavuot.

Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, Pentecost, is a perfect example of a religious institution that defies categorization. Is it a harvest festival, an extension of Passover, or the anniversary of the Revelation of Torah on Mount Sinai? It is all, and I suggest that which aspect we emphasize ourselves, depends on circumstances, history and personality. When it comes to understanding Shavuot, one can, as with other theological issues, embrace several approaches simultaneously and find satisfaction in some or all.

In the Torah, the festival is described first as Chag HaKatzir (Exodus 23:16) , the Harvest Festival as well as the occasion for dedicating Bikurim, the First of the Harvest (23:19). Then a few chapters later it is Chag Shavuot (Exodus 34:22), the Festival of Weeks together with the first of the harvest. In Leviticus (23:16 and 17), the festival is referred to only as the culmination of the 49 days of the Omer, although the term Bikurim is once again specified. In Bamidbar (28:26) again the name HaBikurim appears, but as Yom (day) instead of Chag (festival). And in Devarim (16:9) it is Chag HaShavuot, as in Exodus 34, but with the definite article

Academics will suggest that this variation can be explained as different sources the Torah was originally based on. The theory (and it is after all a theory) has its limitations. It creates as many problems as it solves; not least is the obvious incompetence of the editor. A passive collator might make more sense. One can suggest other possibilities. The Talmud Gittin (60a) suggests another possibility. The text of the revelation was not written down immediately, but extended over a forty-year period. So just as our own vocabulary and usage varies over time, so too may have that of Moses.

It is common for the Torah to repeat narratives and laws. Its context was very different to our modern scientific minimalist approach. Each repetition and variation adds an extra dimension. Rather like "Remembering" and "Keeping" the Shabbat. Two different words used in the Exodus and Deuteronomy text of the Ten Commandments" that do not cancel each other out as much as adding to one's understanding. This variation in the terminology of the festival in the Torah might simply mean that it had multi functions. Just as Passover is sometimes called Chag HaMatzot (the human proactive idea of baking matzot) and sometimes Chag HaPesach (Divine protection). Sucot too is also Chag HaAsif (festival of gathering in, human activity) and Sucot (Divine protection again).

One is left to decide for oneself which answer satisfies. Perhaps all of them!

Zeman Matan Torateynu (the time when our Torah was given)

Post-Biblically, Shavuot became the anniversary of the Revelation of the Torah. There is no explicit mention of this connection at all. It is only implicit. One might well understand the shift in emphasis that the changes in Roman society, migration away from one's early Hebrew agricultural land-based roots (whether forced or by choice) and urbanization must have had. The harvest aspect would no longer have been primary, and as rabbinic emphasis shifted towards study as the acme of Jewish self-identification, the focus on Sinai and Torah would have made sense. So from the period of the Geonim at the end of the first millennium and particularly during the height of the period of Kabbalah, staying up all night to study Torah acquired much more significance than the harvest or first fruits.

But even here we have variations. The actual description of the Sinai theophany in the Torah contains inconsistencies, and indeed apparent contradictions between Exodus 19, Exodus 24:1-11, and Exodus 24:12-18. There are variations in the sequence, in the responses, and in what actually was received or given on Sinai. And there is the question of why the mountain is sometimes called Sinai and sometimes Horeb. In post-Biblical literature, what happened at Sinai is sometimes referred to as Matan Torah (Giving the Torah), Torah MiSinai (Torah from Sinai) and Torah Min HaShamayim (Torah from Heaven). They signify the same concept, but may not mean or were not intended to mean exactly the same thing. We are left to make what sense or derive what significance we want to. And we might each come to different conclusions. Which does not matter so long as we all come together to celebrate the occasion at the same time.

I used to think that the agricultural, like the prayers for rain, were out-of-date and out-of-touch with modernity. I now know much better. The accelerating dangers of climate change, shortage of water, droughts, and ecological tragedies such as deforestation have woken us up to the importance of emphasizing the agricultural and the natural. The circle has come round. Had the Torah only given one reason, we might have been left high and dry. But it consistently gives different names and significances. I find this amazing and empowering. That's why I like the flexibility of the fuzzy, and that's another reason I will celebrate Shavuot!