Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Shavuot
May 22 & 23, 2026 *** 6 & 7 Sivan, 5786

Shavuot Portions: (Etz Chaim)

May 22

1: Exodus 19:1-6.....p. 436

2: Exodus 19:7-13.....p. 438

3: Exodus 19:14-19.....p. 439

4: Exodus 19:20-20:14.....p. 440

5: Exodus 20:15-23.....p. 449

maf: Numbers 28:26-31….p. 932

Haftarah: Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12.....p. 1320

May 23

1: Deut. 14:22-29.....p. 1074

2: Deut. 15:1-18.....p. 1076

3: Deut. 15:19-23.....p. 1080

4: Deut.16:1-3.....p. 1081

5: Deut.16:4-8.....p. 1082

6: Deut.16:9-12.....p. 1083

7: Deut.16:13-17.....p. 1084

maf: Numbers 28:26-31….p. 932

Haftarah: Habakkuk 2:20 – 3:19...p. 1325

Shavuot

Shavuot coincides with the date that G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai more than 3,000 years ago. It comes after 49 days of eager counting, as we prepared ourselves for this special day.

It is celebrated by lighting candles, staying up all night to learn Torah, hearing the reading of the Ten Commandments in synagogue, feasting on dairy foods and more.

Shavuot is also the celebration of the wheat harvest and the ripening of the first fruits, which is the reason for the other two biblical names for this holiday: 1) "Yom Habikurim" or the "Day of the First Fruits." 2) "Chag HaKatzir," the "Harvest Festival."

In the Talmud, Shavuot is also called "Atzeret," which means "The Stoppage," a reference to the prohibition against work on this holiday.

In the holiday prayer service, we refer to it as “Zeman Matan Torahteinu,” the "Time of the Giving of Our Torah."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Three Mysteries of Shavuot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l
https://rabbisacks.org/archive/the-three-mysteries-of-shavuot/

In this Jewish Chronicle essay from 21 May 1999, Rabbi Sacks draws modern lessons from the bitter feuds of Temple times.

Great arguments, like old soldiers, never die. Nor do they fade away. One of the most fateful arguments in Israel today, on which the character and identity of the state will ultimately turn, is itself a replay of one of the most bitterly contested questions of the Second Temple period.

On the surface, the terms of the debate are quite different. But

the underlying issue is the same. Two thousand years ago, the subject at hand was Shavuot. But at stake was something more fundamental. To understand what it was, we need to undertake an historical investigation into the foundations of an ancient dispute about the meaning of the festival and of Jewish identity.

Even the most cursory reading of the Torah reveals something strange about Shavuot. Unlike the other festivals, it comes wrapped in three layers of mystery.

The first is the question of what it commemorates. The festivals each have a seasonal dimension, and in this respect Shavuot is no exception. Pesach is a celebration of spring, Succot of autumn, and Shavuot is described by the Torah as yom habikkurim, "the day of the first-fruits", and chag hakatzir, "the harvest feast". So far, so good. Shavuot, like the other pilgrimage festivals, marks a turning point in the cycle of the year – in this case, as spring ends and summer begins.

The problem arises when we turn to the historical dimension of the festival. About Pesach and Succot, the Torah is explicit. Pesach commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Succot recalls the booths in which the Israelites lived as they wandered through the desert. But what of Shavuot? Alone of the three, it has no explicit historical reference. We know it, of course, as *zeman matan torateinu*, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, which took place, according to the Torah, "in the third month" – in other words, during Sivan, the month in which Shavuot falls. However, the connection between Shavuot and the revelation at Sinai is nowhere made in the Torah itself. It belongs, instead, to our Oral Tradition.

The second mystery is the date of Shavuot. Every other festival is given a calendar date in the Torah. Not so Shavuot.

Instead, in a curiously roundabout way; we are commanded to count 50 days, “until the day after the seventh week,” and then bring an offering of new grain. Indeed, in early times, before the calendar was fixed by calculation, one could not predict in advance whether the months of Nisan and Iyar would be short (29 days) or long (30 days), and there was therefore no guarantee that it would fall on 6th Sivan, as it does today. One way or another, the silence of the Torah on the calendar date of Shavuot is conspicuous.

But it was the third mystery that created schism. We are commanded to count 50 days and then celebrate Shavuot. The question is: when does the count begin? The Torah uses the phrase, mimochorat haShabbat – literally, “the day after Shabbat”. The Sadducees interpreted the words literally. For them, if the Torah says, “the day after Shabbat”, it must mean the day after Shabbat. So they began counting the Omer on Sunday and celebrated Shavuot on Sunday, seven weeks later. The Pharisees, however, relied on an ancient tradition that, in this case, the word “Shabbat” meant “festival” – specifically, the first day of Pesach. That, of course, is the rule we observe today.

Stated this way, the argument sounds local, even minor. But arguments about the calendar are never minor. David Ewing Duncan produced a fascinating study of how the change from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar created mayhem throughout Europe for centuries.[1] Disputes about dates are even more fundamental for Jews, for a fascinating reason.

Since the Babylonian exile, Jews have never been concentrated in a single country. Thousands of years before the internet was invented, and the word “globalisation” was coined, the Jewish people became the world’s first “virtual

community" – a community in time rather than space. Jews were a nation not because they lived in the same land but because, wherever they were, they kept the same laws and observed the same holy days at the same time. A split in the calendar, with some Jews keeping Shavuot on one day, some on another, was nothing less than a rift in the nation, as if a chasm had opened up between Jew and Jew.

What, then, was at stake between the Sadducees and the Pharisees? Historians have tended to concentrate on the obvious disagreement between them. The Pharisees believed in the Oral Law; the Sadducees did not. According to the Sadducees, only the written text of the Torah was binding. The Pharisees pointed out that the written text was full of gaps and ambiguities. From the outset, it had been supplemented by a set of unwritten traditions, passed down from teacher to disciple since the days of Moses.

So, when it came to the meaning of the word "Shabbat" in the context of Shavuot, the Sadducees, in effect, turned to a dictionary. The Pharisees turned to tradition. At this level, the debate was about the authority of the Oral Law. It was a theological rift.

But the argument, I suspect, went further. After all, in retrospect, the Pharisaic case seems overwhelming. Judaism is a religion of historical remembrance. To this day, we still commemorate such events as the assassination of Gedaliah, commander of Judea at the time of the Babylonian exile.

Is it conceivable that the calendar would not celebrate the anniversary of the greatest day of all in Jewish history – the revelation at Mount Sinai, our birth as a nation under the sovereignty of God? How could there not be a festival of "the Giving of the Law"? An anniversary – any anniversary – needs

a fixed date in the calendar, which is precisely what the Sadducees denied. What, then, did Shavuot mean for them?

Well, who were the Sadducees? The late Louis Finkelstein made much of the fact that they were the land-owning class, the squires and farmers of Israel. For them, Shavuot was precisely what the Torah said it was: a festival of the harvest.

We have indirect evidence for this. The Talmud (Menachot 65a) records a debate between Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and a Sadducee, who gave a novel explanation why, in his view, Shavuot always falls on Sunday. What is the best gift you can give a farmer after seven hard weeks of gathering in the crops? Answer: a long weekend.

Moses, having compassion for the farmers, arranged for Shavuot to be on Sunday to give them a two-day break at the end of the season. So, argued Finkelstein, the debate was part of the class war between Sadducean landowners, with their harvest festival, and the urban Pharisees, who had no land to celebrate.

Maybe so. But I prefer the more profound distinction drawn by Professor Daniel Elazar, of Bar-Ilan University, in his studies of Jewish political theory. The Sadducees, he says, were the party of the State. They dominated the priesthood. They controlled most of the positions of political power. For them, Jewish identity was predicated on national institutions – the Temple and the seat of government in Jerusalem. For the Pharisees, by contrast, Jewish life rested on quite different institutions – the synagogue, the school, and the bet midrash (the house of study).

On the basis of this distinction, we can mount a large hypothesis. We know precisely the historical event Shavuot commemorated for the Pharisees: the giving of the Torah at

Mount Sinai. What event of comparable significance might it have represented for the Sadducees? The answer is obvious. If Pesach represents the exodus from Egypt, and Succot the 40 years in the wilderness, what else could Shavuot have meant for the party of the State but the arrival at, and conquest of, the land of Israel? It was the festival of national independence – the Yom Ha'atzmaut of biblical times. And what better time to celebrate it than at the end of the harvest, when the land flowed with milk and honey?

If so, what was at issue was not just a theological schism or a class divide but the most fundamental question of Jewish identity.

For the Pharisees, Jews were the people of Torah. For the Sadducees, they were the people of the land and State of Israel. Both celebrated their supreme value on Shavuot. But it was a different value in the two camps.

For one, it was a spiritual-ethical vocation that could be pursued even in exile. For the other, it was a matter of land and independent nationhood. To be sure, this was a matter of emphasis rather than exclusion. Both groups valued Torah. Both cherished the land of Israel. The question was: which was supreme? Israel, the State? Or Torah, the way of life? The Sadducees made their wager and lost. With the destruction of the Second Temple and the collapse of the Bar Kochba rebellion, Jews were left without a State for 1,800 years. The Sadducees disappeared, almost without trace. Had it not been for the Pharisees, their belief in the Oral Law, and their dedication to Torah, there would be no Jewish people today.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The debate did not die. It merely went into hibernation. Today, the Jewish people has a State again. The question is: what will become of

Jewish identity? Professor Elazar estimates that some 80 percent of Jews worldwide are what he calls “neo-Sadduceans,” identifying with Israel and the Jewish people but not necessarily with the Torah.

Meanwhile, in Israel itself, the “post-Zionists” have taken Sadduceanism a stage further, arguing that statehood is enough. Israel requires no specifically Jewish character. If you have a land, what need have you of Torah?

This view was wrong 2,000 years ago, and it is wrong today. But the divide goes as deep now as it went then, and there is even less of a common language between today’s secularists and religious than there was between Sadducees and Pharisees, who at least had a written Torah in common.

We long for peace in the Middle East. But we know that peace is not entirely in Israel’s hands. It depends equally on Israel’s neighbours. What is entirely in Israel’s hands – and ours – is peace between Jew and Jew. We must begin a deep and urgent conversation about the nature of Jewish identity and the place of Torah in a Jewish State and the Jewish People. That will require openness and generosity on the part of religious and secular alike. It will take us back, inevitably, to Shavuot, and to a new understanding of the ancient covenant between God and the Jewish people. [1] David Ewing Duncan, Calendar: Humanity’s Epic Struggle to Determine a True and Accurate Year: New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1998.

We Were All Converts at Sinai: Shavuot by David C. Kraemer
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/we-were-all-converts-at-sinai/

One of the few age-old rituals that distinguishes the holiday of Shavuot is the public reading of the Book of Ruth. The reason for this association may be no more than that the narrative of

Ruth describes its events as taking place “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (1:22), that is to say, at the time of Shavuot. But there is another association, deeper and more fundamental, that ties Ruth to Shavuot in instructive and inspiring ways.

Ruth, who was a Moabite, is often described as a model convert, on account of her declaration to her mother-in-law, Naomi, “where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (1:16). Indeed, Ruth is referenced as one of the first “converts” to Judaism, after Abraham and Sarah (well, before their “conversion,” Abram and Sarai). It is for this reason that we in the Library of JTS feature Ruth prominently in our current exhibition, “Your People Shall Be My People: Conversion to Judaism through the Centuries,” even naming the exhibition after Ruth’s declaration to Naomi. We chose to create an exhibition about conversion to Judaism at this time because in the modern age, many people have made that choice. In an age of fluid identities, when conscious choice becomes crucial, more people than ever (and there were such converts in the past, even despite laws that forbade such transitions) have chosen to affiliate with the Jewish path. But what do Ruth and what she represents have to do with Shavuot?

Shavuot—biblically a holiday marking the first harvest—came to be associated with the revelation of the law at Mt. Sinai. Indeed, it is described in our prayers as “the time of the giving of our Torah.” At Sinai, the people of Israel stood at the foot of the mountain, ready to accept the Law given to Moses as instruction for Israel for all generations. What kind of transition did the people undergo at Sinai? In what ways were the people different after that revelation than they were before?

In the view of the Talmudic rabbis, the people of Israel converted at Sinai. Since, for the rabbis, to be a Jew is to be a person of the Torah, before the revelation the children of Israel were not “Jews” (the term is anachronistic here). They only became “Jews” when, at Sinai, they did what converts to Judaism must do: they immersed (the Talmud imagines this), the men were circumcised (the Torah reports this explicitly), and they accepted the “yoke of the commandments,” that is, the Torah. Indeed, as the Talmud, in tractate Yebamot, makes clear (and there is a fine 16th century volume showing this in the Library exhibition), the children of Israel serve, for the rabbis, as the models for later conversions. The rituals a convert must undertake are precisely those executed by the people at Sinai.

Now, it is true that Jewish tradition also identified others as models for conversion. The model offered by Abraham (and, we would say, Sarah) is well known, and as we can see in the names of converts written on ketubbot (Jewish marriage contracts) in the exhibition, all converts are ultimately the sons or daughters of Abraham. And, of course, Ruth was also seen as a model for conversion. But the association of Ruth and Shavuot subtly makes another point: that there is no conversion without standing at Sinai. Because Shavuot is about the revelation at Sinai, it is also, inescapably, about conversion. It is this of which the reading of Ruth also reminds us.

There is a well-known rabbinic teaching claiming that all Jews, of all generations, stood at Sinai. Hence, we are all converts. The term the rabbis adopted for “convert” was the biblical word “ger”—“resident alien” or “stranger.” The Torah commands that we not oppress the ger, because we too were gerim in the land of Egypt. Whether converts or

strangers, we have been both, and thanks to what we have learned from our experiences, we are obligated to welcome and protect the strangers and newcomers among us, for we are they. On this Shavuot, when we all stand again at Sinai, let us rededicate ourselves to this value, for ours is a world where it is often neglected. *(David C. Kraemer is the Joseph J and Dora Abbell Librarian and Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics)*

Shavuot: Cleave to Your Neighbor by Rabbi Adam Graubart
https://truah.org/resources/adam-graubart-shavuot-moraltorah_2026_/

The story of Ruth, traditionally read during Shavuot, strikes a chord with me at this political moment. Ruth's dedication to her mother-in-law, Naomi, models what it means to commit to solidarity between one human being to another.

We can imagine Naomi's dread. In a short period of time, she loses her husband and both of her sons. Amidst her grief, Naomi needs to make a long journey alone, and her social and economic opportunities as a widow are limited. In contrast, Ruth, who is also in mourning, can return to her own clan and rebuild her life on the path of least resistance.

In fact, Ruth's sister Orpah (who also married one of Naomi's sons and became a widow) wishes Naomi well while acknowledging the divergence of their lives. Remarkably, our text says Rut davka bah — Ruth cleaved to Naomi. Instead of moving past the scary thing facing someone else, Ruth draws from her place of relative security and affixes herself to the person she deems more vulnerable. Recognizing the precarity of another person's situation, she refuses to relinquish herself of responsibility.

Cleaving to another human being means that the two entities are entangled — not easily separated. In the oft-quoted sentiment of "wherever you go, I shall go," Ruth intertwines her entire universe of being with Naomi's. Despite what's best for Ruth's short-term self-interest, she ties the outcomes of their lives to their combined power. Ruth's solidarity not only enables both of them to survive the trip but also presents them with the opportunity to reencounter love, joy, and family as the story progresses.

Although we need to safeguard our own health and well-being, we learn from the creation narrative that it is not good for a human being to dwell alone. Solidarity channels the strengths of the self to the benefit of the collective, and it provides us a lifeline when we need extra care. One person audaciously cleaves their universe of being to that of another person so that no one faces the forthcoming challenges alone. The group will prosper and falter along the way, but they will do so while exchanging assets and support.

When I imagine the fear of immigrants today, I think of Naomi. Every day must feel like an unknown journey. Our leaders are seizing our neighbors, whether or not they have a criminal record or legal status. There is no clear timeline or due process, and the conditions are frequently inhumane. I agonize thinking that people in my city stare down these perilous possibilities every day when they wake up. Nothing in the future is certain. Nothing stands on firm footing.God said to Moses before telling him to conduct the census. It says that God opened the book of Bamidbar by proclaiming the words of Psalm 36:7: "Your justice is like the great depths."

When I wonder about the adequate response to ICE's cruelty, I think of Ruth's solidarity. At 26 Federal Plaza in New York

City, volunteers have taken shifts as immigrants go to required hearings. For immigrants, it's a lose-lose situation. Going to court risks encountering ICE, but skipping a hearing may mean losing the means to gain legal status. When I volunteered for a shift, I introduced myself to a man and asked for his consent to keep him company with the intention of keeping him safe and watching out for ICE. I waited with him and witnessed him speak before the judge. Now, for the hardest part, we left for the subway platform. In my own version of "wherever you go, I shall go," I kept saying, "I'm right here. We're almost there." Even if ICE detained him, I had his name and emergency contact so our legal team could continue to account for his whereabouts and well-being. When we reached the stairs to the 4 train, we both sighed in relief. Seeing someone else in the community in danger, I used what power I had to face the challenges in our midst and help him return home.

Even as so much feels out of control or dependent on the next election, there are ways for us to practice solidarity right now. We can listen, bear witness, refuse to normalize cruelty, offer material or emotional support, check in regularly, or accompany someone on a journey. In doing so, we cleave together our separate existences so that all of us persevere. As our story progresses, we continue to encounter the diversity of strengths, cultures, and perspectives that fill our lives with richness.

The more traditional reading of Ruth's commitment to Naomi is that it represents her acceptance of Torah. We read it on Shavuot as we celebrate receiving Torah and the responsibilities we derive from wrestling with it. Let us not forget that the Torah mentions caring for the migrant among us more than any other mitzvah. This Shavuot, I pray that these

sentiments of solidarity inspire us anew with Ruth's example as our guide. *(Rabbi Adam Graubart is the Director of Education and Family Outreach at SAJ – Judaism that Stands for All in New York City. He was ordained from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in May 2025.)*

Pirkei Avot as Spiritual Cultivation: Shavuot 5786
by Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler
https://yeshivatmaharat.org/pirkei-avot-as-spiritual-cultivation-shavuot-5786/

The Omer contains cycles within cycles. Night after night, we count days. Week after week, we learn—one chapter of Pirkei Avot over each of six Shabbatot. Beginning in the Geonic period and becoming widespread in Medieval times, the relationship between Sefirat HaOmer and Pirkei Avot was codified in the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 292). Long languid Shabbat afternoons are to be oriented around study. Our journey from Pesach to Shavuot has a textual soundtrack and it is the Ethics of our Ancestors.

Why is Pirkei Avot the spiritual literature for the moment? Perhaps because Shavuot celebrates matan Torah, the giving of Torah, and Pirkei Avot is a tractate devoted to ethics and character refinement. Torah requires not only intellectual preparation, but moral and spiritual preparation. Before revelation comes cultivation.

The early Hasidic masters deepened this idea considerably. For them, Pirkei Avot is not merely a collection of ethical sayings. It is a manual for spiritual formation. A guide to becoming the kind of person capable of receiving Torah.

Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye (c. 1710–1784), in Tzofnat Paneach, describes Avot as a text designed "to prepare a person

through the cultivation of good and upright qualities, beyond the strict demands of law, into the realm of piety." The distinction is important. Halakha may govern behavior, but Avot is concerned with disposition. It asks not simply what a person should do, but what kind of person one must become.

In light of this lofty aspiration, Pirkei Avot begins in a surprising place. The opening mishnah famously traces the chain of transmission:

> Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate (hevu metunim) in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples, and make a fence round the Torah (Avot 1:1).

On the surface, this reads like an assertion of authority. The ethical teachings that follow are not mere folk wisdom or personal musings; they are rooted in Sinai itself. But the Hasidic rebbes ask a different question: if Pirkei Avot is intended as spiritual practice, why begin here? Why open a manual of ethical cultivation with mesorah, with transmission?

The Sefat Emet, R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905), suggests that the answer lies in the tension between inheritance and effort. Torah, he says, exists in two modes. One is yerushah, inheritance. We are born into covenant, memory, language, tradition. Torah belongs to us before we do anything at all. But there is another mode: yegiah, toil. Torah must also be struggled for, cultivated, earned through yearning and effort.

The Sefat Emet plays on the rabbinic rereading of the verse "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe, morashah kehilat Yaakov"—"Moses

commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Devarim 33:4). The Talmud (Pesachim 49b) says: Do not read morashah (inheritance), but me'orasah (betrothed). Inheritance is passive; betrothal demands reciprocity and relationship. One may inherit Torah automatically, but one must actively enter into relationship with it.

This is the start of the spiritual journey of the Omer. We begin by acknowledging that tradition alone is insufficient. We may possess a legacy, but revelation still requires participation. Torah must be received anew. Transmission is not merely preservation; it is transformation.

The Kedushat Levi, R. Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev (1740–1809), reads the opening mishnah differently. He focuses on a single word in Avot 1:1, noting that Moshe did not receive the Torah at Sinai (beSinai), but from Sinai (miSinai). In what sense did he receive Torah from a mountain?

The midrashic tradition teaches that Sinai was chosen because it was the smallest of mountains. Moshe, says the Kedushat Levi, understood that Torah can only truly be received through humility, through a willingness to become small enough to listen. And so Moshe accepted his role precisely because he saw himself as least worthy of it.

Humility here is not self-erasure. It is spiritual permeability, radical openness. The ability to learn from what appears insignificant. The capacity to stand before revelation without certainty and without hubris. If the Omer is a journey toward Torah, then humility is one of its first prerequisites. Revelation cannot enter a self already full.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) takes the mishnah in yet another direction in Likutei Moharan II, 7:8. "Hevu metunim badin"—"Be deliberate in judgment"—becomes for him not

primarily a legal instruction, but a spiritual discipline. Metinut means patience, restraint, measuredness. It shares a root with lehamtin, to wait.

Wait before reacting.
Wait before despairing.
Wait before assuming clarity.

Rebbe Nachman imagines the spiritual teacher as someone who must speak differently to different souls: humbling the arrogant while encouraging the despondent. Judgment, in this sense, is not condemnation but discernment. The ability to respond with care rather than reflex. Spiritual maturity often begins with interrupting impulsivity, with learning not to be governed immediately by fear, anger, certainty, or shame.

The Omer itself is an exercise in this kind of waiting. We count, but we do not yet arrive. We move toward revelation slowly, one measured day at a time. The spiritual life is not built through immediacy. It is cultivated through sustained attention.

Finally, Rebbe Nachman turns to the mishnah's closing words: "Asu siyag laTorah, Make a fence around the Torah." He links this to another teaching from Avot 3:13: "Siyag l'chochmah shetikah, A fence for wisdom is silence." Sometimes the necessary boundary around wisdom is restraint in speech. Sometimes the holiest response is none at all. Silence is difficult for many of us. We rush to interpretation, declaration, opinion. But spiritual cultivation requires a tolerance for opacity. Not every question can be resolved immediately. Not every silence must be filled. Perhaps this, too, is preparation for Sinai.

After all, revelation itself emerges from silence. Before the voice at Sinai comes the stillness of waiting at the mountain's

base. Before articulation comes receptivity.

From the opening mishnah onwards, Pirkei Avot offers tools miSinai to help us get to Sinai, to help us learn from a mountain how to scale The Mountain. Torah requires both inheritance and effort; humility and openness; patience and discernment; speech, but also silence. To study Pirkei Avot during the Omer, then, is not merely to learn ethical maxims on the way to Shavuot. It is to practice becoming a vessel for revelation.

Or perhaps more accurately: to cultivate the self slowly enough, honestly enough, humbly enough, that revelation might still find us. Ken yehi ratzon.

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We Were There: Shavuot 5786 By Cantor Sandy Horowitz
https://ajr.edu/shavuot-5786/

But not only with you am I making this covenant and this oath. But both with those standing here with us today before Adonai our God, and [also] with those who are not here with us, this day. Deuteronomy 29:13-14

We're nearly there. We've been counting the days for weeks, through chaos, and fear, and the anxiety of not knowing what lies ahead.

Wait, are we talking about then, or now? Our biblical ancestors traipsing towards an unknown promised land? Or ourselves here in our own uncertain time, as we count the Omer? Ah,

well that's the point, isn't it?

That's been the point since we sat around our seder tables nearly seven weeks ago and retold the story of our ancestors' liberation from Egypt. At Pesah the point is to tell and retell, like the five rabbis who stayed up all night until it was time for the morning Shema. Since Pesah we've more or less returned to our daily lives — except for the counting. The agricultural Omer count from a single sheaf of barley to a fully formed loaf of wheat bread. The reinvented counting from liberation at Pesah to revelation at Shavuot, inviting us to recall our biblical heritage as we count. Their story is our story.

And then the counting ends as we arrive at Shavuot, at Sinai, at the moment of hearing the Ten Commandments.

The two verses from Deuteronomy cited at the beginning of this reflection remind us that when the Divine Voice spoke to the Israelites at Sinai, those words were intended for all of us – past, present, and future. As written in Midrash Tanhuma, Nitzavim 3 with regard to Deuteronomy 29:14,

"But with those who are [standing ('md)] here with us [today… and with those who are not here with us today]." R. Abahu said in the name of R. Samuel bar Nahmani, "Why does it say, 'those who are [standing ('md)] here […]; and those who are not here' (without using the word, standing)? Because all the souls were there, [even] when [their] bodies had still not been created.

Each year in synagogue on Shavuot, the congregation is invited to stand for the reading of the Ten Commandments, just as our ancestors stood at Sinai. At Passover we remember and retell. On Shavuot we re-create and re-enact.

The system of cantillation – the way the Ten Commandments are chanted – supports our effort to re-create and re-enact the

moment of revelation at Sinai.

Traditionally, there are two ways to chant the Ten Commandments. For purposes of private study, we use the cantillation format known as “ta’amei ha’tahton” or “lower accents”. With this format, the verses are similar in length to other verses in the Torah.

What this means with regard to this particular text, is that the two longest commandments, the second (“You shall have no other gods…”) and fourth (“Remember Shabbat…”) comprise three and four verses respectively. The shortest commandments, which are two or three words in length, are bundled together into a single verse.

However, when we chant these same verses publicly such as on Shavuot morning, we use a different cantillation format, known as “ta’amei ha’elion”, or “upper accents”. With ta’amei ha’elion, we chant one verse for each commandment, regardless of word length.

This public rendition therefore offers a more dramatic reading. With regard to ta’amei ha’elion Joshua R. Jacobson writes, “This structure lends the public performance a certain theatrical realism: the ba’al kriah recreates the sound of the theophany at Sinai.” (p365, Chanting the Hebrew Bible)

In an article from JewishEncyclopedia.com the word “theophany” is described as “Manifestation of a god to man; the sensible sign [of the senses] by which the presence of a divinity is revealed.” In this article the authors Kaufmann Kohler and M. Richtmann elaborate on the theophany of revelation at Sinai in this way: “The manifestation is accompanied by thunder and lightning; there is a fiery flame, reaching to the sky; the loud notes of a trumpet are heard; and the whole mountain smokes and quakes. Out of the midst of

the flame and the cloud a voice reveals the Ten Commandments."

When Jacobson refers to the theophany at Sinai as recreated by the ba'al kriah, he suggests that when we hear the Ten Commandments chanted using ta'amei ha'elion, the intention is to provide a sensual re-enactment of the moment of revelation, the moment when our biblical ancestors became one people, Am Yisrael.

Today, particularly in this fractured time within the Jewish community, it helps to be reminded that we were all there at Sinai. However, we choose to interpret the words we received, however we choose to live by those words, it began with this moment of revelation. This coming Shavuot, when the Ten Commandments will be recited in synagogues all over this country and around the world, perhaps we can take a moment and imagine the thunder and lightning, the flame and the trumpet that preceded the Divine Words; and may we be reminded of our single point of origin as a people. *(Sandy Horowitz (AJR '14) (cantorhorowitz.org) is Cantor Emerita of Beth Am the Peoples' Temple in Washington Heights, New York.)*

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Yahrtzeits

Lisa Small remembers her mother Ruby Small on Sun. May 24
Gail Yazersky remembers her father Martin Yazersky on Sun. May 24
Mel Zwillenberg remembers Susan's father Gerald Altman on Mon. May 25
Debra Rubin remembers her mother Beatrice Kaplan on Thursday May 28th