

Yom ha-Atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day Yom ha-Atzma'ut also lacks home customs or special liturgy. Some communities recite Hallel and have a Torah reading for the day. Parades and cultural events also mark the holiday. In Israel, this is a national holiday. As we develop new conceptions of our relationship to the State of Israel, an underlying theology will be the foundation for practices for Yom ha-Atzma'ut. For one suggested theology, see "Israel: Toward a Torah of Zion," pp. 467-74.

SHAVUOT

The holiday of Shavuot marks the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Actually, the biblical texts never refer to its historical context. Rather it is described as an agricultural holiday during which the first fruits of the new growing season were brought as offerings in the Temple. Shavuot means "weeks"; its name derives from the fact that it falls on the fiftieth day, the climax of the seven weeks of counting the Omer. Over time, the agricultural nature of the holiday faded and the connection with the Revelation at Sinai became the central focus of the holiday.

Perhaps because of its origins in agriculture, Shavuot has a paucity of rituals as compared to Pesah or Sukkot. Some have suggested that the experience of Sinai cannot be re-created. The image of God descending upon the mountain amid the horns and noises, the people gathered below, and the act of revelation itself are almost beyond human experience. Even the Israelites, who gathered at Sinai, fled the Presence of God, asking Moses to listen and relate God's words to them. Perhaps, then, it is appropriate that there are few rituals for Shavuot. Perhaps, too, all we need is the Torah itself. On Shavuot, we engage in Torah. We literally embrace it by holding the scroll. We hear the words of Torah (specifically the description of Sinai) read to us as part of Shavuot services. We need no symbol of Torah, for we have the Torah itself.

In another sense, the moment of Revelation at Sinai is not an event that only happened in the past. Rather Sinai, the giving and receiving of Torah, is an ongoing experience. God's voice calls from Sinai every day.

The Torah is given every day. The difference between Passover and Shavuot is that the Exodus is over, while revelation continues. Thus Sinai needs fulfillment, not reexperiencing; enactment, not reenactment. Sinai is part of the dynamic of our lives. Our task is to hear anew and renew the Torah each day. *Any* time a person studies Torah with devotion and holiness is a *zeman matan Torah*, “moment of the giving of the Torah.” As the rabbis said: “Anything any student in any age will say was already given to Moses at Sinai.” This means anything we add to the Torah is considered part of what was originally transmitted to Moses. Revelation of the Torah began at Sinai and has never ceased.

How are we to hear the voice of Sinai? One possibility is suggested by the puzzling verse describing the experience at Sinai: “and all the people saw the sounds” (Exod. 20:15). What does it mean that the people *saw* rather than heard the sounds? Imagine a deaf person entering a room filled with music and dancing people. At first it might seem that the dancers are crazy. Yet, with some awareness, even a deaf person can realize that the people are dancing to music.

It might be said that we are all deaf when it comes to the voice of Sinai. The first step is to realize that the music is playing; that is, that God is calling us. Looking at the world that way, we can at least see the *effects* of that voice, in such things as nature and acts of loving-kindness. Perhaps, by seeing the sounds, we may eventually come to hear them, too (based on the *Degel Mahaneh Efraim*).

For more on the Torah and its meaning, see pp. 139–75.

The Reading of Ruth

Among Ashkenazic Jews, it is customary to read the Book of Ruth as part of Shavuot services. The reason most commonly given is that Ruth’s voluntary acceptance of Judaism is like our acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. The book also recalls the agricultural setting of the biblical Shavuot.

Tikkun leil Shavuot: All-Night Study Vigil

Studying Torah the entire night of Shavuot is a Kabbalistic custom that has been increasingly observed. The mystical background and the order of study ordained by the Kabbalists have been dropped. Instead, study normally focuses on texts chosen specially for the occasion. The all-night study is sometimes attributed to a midrash that says the Israelites slept late that morning until awoken by Moses. To demonstrate our love for and eagerness to get Torah, we stay up all night. The custom is to follow the all-night study with a sunrise service.

Other lesser customs for Shavuot include eating dairy foods such as blintzes and decorating the synagogue with greens.