

SHOVUOS — שבועות

The Yom Tov of Shovuos, on the sixth (and, outside of Eretz Yisroel, also the seventh) of Sivvan, traditionally commemorates our Receiving the Holy Torah from HaShem at Mount Sinai. On Shovuos, Jewish people everywhere are united in their belief and trust in HaShem and in our loyalty to His Torah.

As just said, Shovuos “traditionally commemorates” our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. It’s rather odd, that. Isn’t it much more usual to say about a Yom Tov that it marks a specific event or that it’s the date of the anniversary of a happening? It’s more convincing, more factual, more clear and unambiguous. Pessach is the day of our going out from Egypt; Channukah marks the anniversary of our resting from our enemies after the victory by the Chashmono’im over the Syrian Hellenists; Purim is the day when we were at last saved from the plot of Hommon in the time of Mordechai and Esther. By contrast, “traditionally commemorates” sounds rather vague; “traditionally” is not quite the same as “historically.” Why not say that Shovuos is the anniversary of the day of our Receiving the Torah?

Furthermore, it is interesting that in the Torah itself there is no mention of Shovuos as the Yom Tov of Receiving the Torah. In the Torah itself, Shovuos is called the Festival of Weeks; it’s called the Harvest Festival; it’s called the Festival of the First Fruits — but it’s not called the Day of the Giving of the Torah! More surprising than that, there is a dispute in the Gemorrah (in Tractate Shabbos, 86b) about the exact date of the Giving of the Torah. One opinion holds that it was on the sixth of Sivvan and the other says it was on the seventh (which nowadays is the second day of Shovuos outside Eretz Yisroel). It all depends on how to understand the report of the events of the Giving of the Torah in the Chumash. Odd, no? Here we are talking about what is probably the greatest event in our history, when we received the Torah which makes us into the People of HaShem — and yet we don’t know the date! Sure, there’s a “tradition” that the Torah was given on Shovuos but how come that this event does not have an anniversary actually fixed in time with clarity and certainty. Why not?

Another interesting fact is that the Mountain of Sinai, upon which HaShem descended to give us His Holy Torah, cannot today be identified with any certainty. In any case, even if we were sure which of those mountains in that locality was the Mountain of Sinai it wouldn’t make any difference. Because even though during the actual Giving of the Torah nobody was allowed to come near to that mountain, as soon as the event of the Giving of the Torah was over, it was permitted for anybody to go up that mountain, “sheep may safely graze” on its slopes — it’s not any more a holy mountain. But this presents another mystery. The mountain which served as the physical stage for the greatest event in our history — indeed in the history of the world! — when HaShem’s Torah was given to us and through us to benefit all of Mankind — and we don’t even know for sure exactly where this happened. Surely such basic information about the most important event in our history as a People should be known to us with absolute certainty?

The answer is that the Torah is not bound to any one Yom Tov or to any one place or to any one date. The Torah is given continually by HaShem (in the morning Birchas HaTorah, He is called “the One Who teaches Torah to His People Yisroel” — present tense) and it can be received by any Jew, on any day of the year, in any place in the world, just so long as he or she makes himself ready to receive it, to learn it, to study it, to toil in it, and commits himself to observe its Mitzvos. No boundaries or time limits apply to the Torah of HaShem. The Torah is beyond the limitations or constraints of space or time and this is symbolically shown by the deliberate apparent vagueness of the time and place of the Giving of the Torah.

It is the Torah that defines the Jewish People. In the words of Rav Sadiah Gaon, “This People is a People only by virtue of the Torah.” Those Jews who have sadly turned their backs on Torah observance and in

its place have put some reformed or reconstructed “religion” or their own made-up brand of Jewishness and called it “Judaism” should consider this: in which way is a Jew a Jew if not through Torah, that is, learning the Torah and keeping the Mitzvos of the Torah?

Belief in G-d? Two and a half thousand million Christians and one and a half million Muslims believe in G-d, the same as our G-d, the G-d of the Hebrews (they learned this from us) even if they have very different ideas about how to serve Him.

Is it the colour of our skin, is it our race, perhaps? Well, look around you in a room of Jews and you will see all colours of skin and all different racial features! Besides, anyone, of any race, of any people, can convert to be a Jew, so long as he or she accepts the Mitzvos of the Torah. So it's not race. (Incidentally, this fact gives the lie to the charge that the Jewish religion is racist. Exclusive? Perhaps. Racist? Absolutely not!)

Is it perhaps a preference for particular foods? Which foods? East European Cholent? Gefilte fish? Oriental food? Or Levi's rye bread, perhaps? No, it's not that which makes a person a Jew.

Is it perhaps a strong social conscience that makes one a Jew? O yea? Is every Civil Rights marcher a Jew? There are many non-Jews who have a strong social conscience and who do a lot of good for the rest of humanity. Mother Theresa was not Jewish, nor was Albert Schweitzer — and the list is almost endless.

Is it perhaps support of the State of Israel? Well, that would mean then that the Christian Zionists of the suburban “Bible Belt” of the United States are Jews!

Maybe if someone fights in the Israeli army? But that would include the Christian and Muslim army volunteers! So that's out. And that also knocks out the idea that maybe volunteering to work on a Kibbutz makes you Jewish. It doesn't. And what if a Jew does not fight in the Israeli army (because, let's say, he happens not to live in Israel) would they say he's not a Jew?

No! There is only one thing that defines a Jew, that a person can proudly say, “I am a Hebrew!” and that is adherence to the Torah and the Mitzvos of HaShem. A true Jew is someone who to the best of his ability accepts upon himself the Mitzvos of HaShem and undertakes to guard against committing any of the transgressions forbidden by the Torah. (Without getting all legal and at the risk of oversimplification, being born from a Jewish mother means that one does not need to go through a process of conversion and it also automatically passes on the obligation and duties of being Jewish.)

When HaShem gave us the Torah on the sixth of Sivvan in the year 2448 after Creation (no, there is no doubt of the date after all) the event made a great impression in the timeline of history. Of course, the date of the Yom Tov of Shovuos became a major anniversary in our calendar, just like Pessach and Yom Kippur and to be sure, Shovuos is an ideal time for us to renew our commitment to HaShem and His Torah. But the reason why Shovuos is not spoken of in the Torah as the Day of our Receiving the Torah is to teach us that there is no need to wait till Shovuos! Indeed, our Chachommim tell us that we should feel towards the Torah as if it was given anew **every day**, to do each Mitzvah with the eagerness and the excitement of when we did it the first time. Imagine! Learning Torah, putting on Tefillin, lighting the Shabbos Lights, with the freshness and enthusiasm of the first time! **That's** how the Torah should be to us!

The Yom Tov of Shovuos is the purpose and culmination of our being taken out from Egypt, because it's through the Torah that we can “be a treasure to HaShem, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Through our commitment to learning the Torah and keeping the Mitzvos of HaShem we, and through us all the nations of the world, too, will be blessed with all the blessings of the Torah.