

## CyberTorah: The Return of Shavuot

For many years, Shavuot was the forgotten holiday of the Jewish calendar. Lacking any home rituals as compelling as the Passover Seder or the building of a Sukkah, Shavuot tended to languish in the American Jewish psyche. In recent years, and for a while now at Kol Emeth, Shavuot has been making a significant comeback. And nothing could be better.

Shavuot celebrates Matan Torah, the receiving of Torah. By the time of the Middle Ages, it had become the custom to celebrate Torah by studying Torah. People would get together on the evening of Shavuot and study through Biblical and Rabbinical literature. The traditional “*tikkun leyl Shavuot*,” the learning for Shavuot, starts with the Bible, progresses through Midrash and Talmud, and goes through Mystical and Halakhic literature. It tries to give a taste of all the different eras of Jewish learning.

As the sun began to rise, they celebrated the morning service. The first day Shavuot Torah reading is the Exodus account of receiving the Torah. The community spends the night getting ready to receive Torah by studying. Then, as we encounter the majesty of the Torah reading, it is as if we are receiving Torah ourselves. We have immersed ourselves in learning, and now we allow those words to become a part of who we are as people.

As Shavuot has made a comeback, many communities now have large all night study sessions. Kol Emeth will begin at 8pm Sunday night and study all night until a sunrise service at 5am. (Please feel welcome to any part- there are people who stay for a couple of hours and leave, and there are others who arrive just for the sunrise service.) Lots of people come out to learn and a vibrant core group stays throughout the night. Exhausting to the body, but invigorating to the spirit.

I believe Shavuot directly addresses some of the major concerns of Judaism today. First, it is totally Jewish. Hanukkah, partly because of an accident of the calendar, and partly because of secularizing pressures on the Jewish community, has picked up elements of being the Jewish Christmas. Purim too is sometimes thought of as a Jewish Halloween. Shavuot, with its ritual of study, has no easy American analogue. Quite the reverse! Shavuot opposes the anti-intellectualism that pervades our culture. It also challenges the autonomy of the individual by understanding learning and faith to have a significant communal dimension.

Second, Shavuot lacks a family element. It is focused on adult learning and spirituality. Maimonides teaches that communities need to invest in Adult Education first and then in the education of children. He says this because investing in the education of adults creates parents able to teach their children and ready to grow Jewishly themselves. American Judaism has forgotten this truth.

The infantilization of American Judaism means that everything rotates around the religious school and the bar or bat mitzvah. Teaching our children is an essential commandment; a bar or bat mitzvah is a wonderful affirmation of Judaism. If we forgot our own spiritual growth and make no time for our own learning, we are sending a message that Judaism is something for kids. Shavuot reminds us to learn and grow as adults.

Finally, Shavuot is about directly confronting our tradition. It is about learning and reminding ourselves of the spiritual riches to be found through Jewish practice. This is why our Tikkun Leyl at Kol Emeth includes the study of Bible and Talmud, but also of Yiddish and art. We are celebrating the panoply of Jewish learning and being energized spiritually by the quality and richness of that tradition.

The return of Shavuot reflects the growing maturity of the Jewish community. The growing numbers of people who study reflect a growing core of Jews passionate about Jewish learning and open to spiritual growth. Where the re-emergence of Sukkot argues for the continued strength of the Jewish family, the return of Shavuot reflects a growing passion by adult Jews for learning and for Torah.

Find a place to celebrate Shavuot this year and take the time to learn and to grow, to be influenced by the words of our traditions of learning and then to hear of Torah.

Hag Shavuot Samech & Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi David Booth

Please note that I am leaving for Israel on June 15<sup>th</sup> for a Synagogue trip. I will also be studying at the Hartman Rabbinic Institute for two weeks in Jerusalem as well as spending some vacation time with my family in Israel. I am returning July 24<sup>th</sup>. I hope to send a couple of trip and study updates while I am there, but CyberTorah will otherwise be on hiatus until Elul. Have a wonderful summer!



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