



A lesson from
Aleph Learning Institute

Lesson 5//Series 4

Holiday of Shavuot June 9 & 10 2019

The שלש רגלים three pilgrimage holidays (to the Temple in Jerusalem, by foot) of Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, share two general dimensions. On the one hand they are patterned on the agricultural cycle in the Land of Israel; produce begins to ripen by the springtime, then harvested and finally gathered into silos. On the other hand, they each refer to specific historical or testimonial events. The holiday of **Shavuot, Matan Torah**, the giving of the Torah, seems to be distinctly different.

Leviticus 23:15: And you shall count for yourselves-from the morrow of the rest of the day, you bring the Omer as a wave offering-seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh week, [namely], the fiftieth day, on which you shall bring a new meal offering to G-d. **Deut.16:9-12:** You shall count seven weeks for yourself; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing crop, you shall begin to count seven weeks. And you shall perform the festival of weeks (Shavuot) to G-d, your G-d...And you shall rejoice before G-d, your G-d.

The following passages will help to explain the direct link between the 50th day being the sixth of Sivan, the day that is Matan Torah, Shavuot Holiday, when the Torah was given to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Orach Chayim 494:1: The fiftieth day of the Omer count, which is the 6th of Sivan, is the Festival of Shavuot, referred to as “עצרת,” by the sages (calculated by the month of Nissan always being a complete month of 30 days and the month of Iyar an incomplete month of 29 days, beginning the Omer count on 16th of Nissan-15+29+5=49).

Rabbi Yehudah Loew, Maharal of Prague 1525-1609: “When the Jewish people left Egypt, the Israelites were as if in their baby stage, newly emerged from its mother’s womb. Its capacity for intellect had not yet combined or attached with the body. Therefore the Jewish people needed the counting process until they reached 50, at which point they could access the level of Torah, which is a state of abstract intellect. The Torah is associated with the spiritual dimension known as the 50th Gate, a dimension detached from man. Therefore, the number 50 is a fitting representation of this state, since the number 50 is separated from the preceding number, it is an appropriate day to receive the Torah, detached as it is from the corporeal plane. Therefore

we must count until 50, but without including 50 in the count. For if it were included in the count, it would be joined with the preceding number of 49, but this cannot be: 50 is not included in 49, but is separate unto itself, just like the state of detached intellect.”

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Thank you!

So in effect, the counting of the Omer is not just a countdown to Shavuot, but serves as a preparation for Matan Torah; by way of a 49 step progression, incremental day by day, week by week. To properly prepare ourselves to receive this wisdom, we have to make a kind of leap beyond our ordinary capacities-toward transcendence-a movement beyond oneself- a leap represented by the number 50.

Contemporary scholar Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz fleshes out the Maharal's ideas a little further. That the figure 49 is reached only after 7 sets of 7-day weeks, regularly occurring, natural order. Fifty occurs after, and outside, this system. The final, culminating point of the counting depends not on us but on G-d- only He can bring us to the 50th day.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi expounds the point in Likutei Torah, Bamidbar 10d: To reach this state, on Shavuot, the Time of the Giving of our Torah, one must count the Omer, for there are 50 Gates of Understanding or degrees of revelation of G-d. There is a state of meditating on the greatness of G-d, which is comprised of 49 levels, which are the 7 supernal midot, each of which consists of 7, and all of which comprises 49. Then there is the 50th Gate, the Upper Gate, which includes all other levels. This gate comprises all of the 49 levels, united together in total oneness as opposed to branching outward. This gate joins all of the 49 gates, to their source and root, in G-d. Through this gate, the very core of G-d Himself is drawn down and revealed to all of the 49 gates. Thus it is written, "count 50 days," that is, to adhere to the 50th gate, for in and through it, is G-d's Essence revealed.

Rabbi M.M. Schneerson: When a Jew concludes his/her efforts to refine one's character, from on high, he/she is bestowed with the aspect of Torah which is beyond. This is one aspect of the giving of Torah. There is however another aspect not connected with human effort, a dimension completely beyond the person, the sixth day of Sivan, a dimension that is the same for all.

Shavuot, Matan Torah, is the fusion of heaven and earth. It's a gift to us here on earth, while being incorrigibly, essentially, and transcendently divine, all at the same time. As a piece of His blessed infinite light, the Torah has an endless capacity to elude us, to satiate as it frustrates us, to challenge our ethical intuitions and understanding of the world, to push us ever upward and higher.

If part of the Divine Energy available on Shavuot is unconnected to our efforts, that means it exists, and remains available, regardless of our frame of mind, or how we prepared until this point. The meaning of Shavuot-and Judaism in general- is neither constituted solely by what we do, nor limited by what we fail to do. No matter what you feel or understand, it's more than that, and if you're feeling left out, don't worry! This is your story. With this in mind, go study.

This lesson is gleaned from JLI Torah Studies taught at Aleph Learning Institute

Dear Friend:

As we approach Shavuot, we renew our commitment to the Torah, when the Jewish people unequivocally proclaimed, "נעשה ונשמע-We will do and we will understand." Our commitment to Almighty G-d's Torah is first and foremost in the observance of his commandments-to do and to keep- is to keep the Jewish people strong and eternal, despite how small we are. Proverbs 14:34 "Righteousness", i.e. mitzvot, "exalts a nation". Torah is the wisdom of the Jewish people before the nations of the world. The Torah is G-d's will and wisdom and is infinite. When we connect to The Infinite G-d we can overcome everything.

May we accept the Torah this Shavuot with Joy and integrate its teachings to become one people.

Happy Shavuot to all!

Rochel Kaplan

Founder & Director, Aleph Learning Institute