

The Holiday of Shavuot  
Melton Gesher at Shearith Israel, May 21, 2012  
JSI at Akiba Academy, May 22, 2012

- A) Biblical sources relating to the holiday
- 1) Exodus chapter 23, verses 14 – 16
    - a) The holiday is called the “Feast of the Harvest of the first fruits of your work”
    - b) No calendar dates in this passage
    - c) Nothing else is said about the meaning of the holiday
  - 2) Exodus chapter 34, verses 18, 22
    - a) The holiday is called the “Feast of Weeks of the first fruits of the wheat harvest”
    - b) No calendar dates in this passage
    - c) Nothing else is said about the meaning of the holiday
  - 3) Numbers chapter 28, verse 26
    - a) The holiday is called “the day of the first fruits, your Feast of Weeks”
    - b) Although the other holidays in this chapter are given calendar dates, this holiday is not given calendar dates. It rather only says “When you bring an offering of new grain to the Lord”
    - c) Nothing else is said about the meaning of the holiday
  - 4) Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 9 – 10
    - a) The holiday is called the “Feast of Weeks”
    - b) No calendar dates in this passage, rather this holiday is to be celebrated according to the following instruction: “You shall count off seven weeks; start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you should celebrate ...”
      - (I) Now at least we know why it is called the “Feast of Weeks”
      - (II) It appears that this holiday would occur on a different calendar every year, depending upon when the early grain – the barley – was ready to be harvested
    - c) Nothing else is said about the meaning of the holiday
  - 5) Leviticus chapter 23, verses 5 – 11, 15 – 17, 20 - 21
    - a) The verse says to hold a celebration but the holiday has no name
    - b) Although the other holidays in this chapter are given calendar dates, this holiday does not have calendar dates, rather it is to take place at the end of the counting of seven weeks. The counting is to begin the day that you bring the first sheaf of the year’s harvest to the priest. That day is to be the “day after the Sabbath”
    - c) All we are told about the holiday is that on it one is to bring an offering of “new grain” in the form of “two loaves of bread” which is called the “bread of first fruits”
    - d) Background
      - (I) The barley harvest took place in mid spring around the time of Passover
      - (II) Barley was not considered to be for human consumption but rather only for livestock
      - (III) The wheat was the first crop of the agricultural year for human consumption
      - (IV) The wheat usually ripened fully about 7 weeks after the barley

- 6) Conclusions
  - a) It appears that this holiday has no calendar date but is to be celebrated the day after the conclusion of the counting of 7 weeks from the beginning of the barley harvest
  - b) The meaning of the holiday seems to be purely agricultural; a celebration of the beginning of the harvest that is for human consumption
- B) Rabbinic tradition; the Oral Law/ Oral Torah
  - 1) Looming questions that the Oral Torah grapples with
    - a) What is the meaning of the “day after the Sabbath”?
    - b) Could it really be that the date of this holiday actually is not tied to a particular date on the calendar, while the other 4 biblical holidays (Passover, Succot, Rosh haShana, Yom Kipur) all have calendar dates?
    - c) Could it really be that this holiday has only agricultural meaning and no historical meaning while the other two pilgrimage festivals (Passover and Succot) have both agricultural and historical significance?
  - 2) Facts and conclusions noted by the Oral Law
    - a) There is biblical precedent for the word “shabat” to be used in the sense of “holiday”
      - (I) Leviticus chapter 23, verse 32
    - b) The holiday mentioned in this passage immediately prior to the mention of the “day after the Shabbat” is Passover
    - c) If the “day after the Shabbat” is interpreted as the day after Passover, then our holiday of Shavuot will fall every year on the same calendar day
    - d) The date of the holiday will then be the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Sivan, the third month of the year
  - 3) Exodus chapter 19, verses 1 – 3, 7 – 11; chapter 20, verse 1
    - a) Unclear what day of this third month was the Torah given; somewhere between the 4<sup>th</sup> day and the 7<sup>th</sup> day
  - 4) Rabbinic tradition concluded that this cannot have been a coincidence
    - a) Shavuot is the holiday of the giving of the Torah
    - b) The Torah intentionally did not make this explicit but left it to the recipients of the Torah to discover
    - c) This teaches that the very meaning of Torah is only revealed through the active search of the Jewish People, the interaction of the Jewish People with the Torah
    - d) In general the meaning of Torah is often non explicit but rather to a certain degree open-ended
    - e) Its meaning is fleshed out by the Jewish People, that is, through a partnership, a covenant, between the Divine and the human
    - f) This holiday therefore celebrates both the Written Torah and its active interpretation by the Jewish People, what we call the Oral Torah
  - 5) Seder Eliahu Zuta chapter, chapter 2
  - 6) Story of Tenur shel Achnai, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Metzi’a, page 59