



Shavuot - Pentecost

By Steve Cohen

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Shavuot Pentecost

In the Bible, Shavuot is called the Festival of Weeks (Exodus 34:22, Deuteronomy 16:10), the Festival of Reaping Hag haKatsir (Exodus 23:16), and Day of the First Fruits Yom ha-Bikkurim (Numbers 28:26). The Mishnah and Talmud refer to Shavuot as Atzeret, a solemn assembly, as it provides closure for the festival activities during and following the holiday of Passover. Since Shavuot occurs 50 days after Passover, Hellenistic Jews gave it the name Pentecost (πεντηκοστή, “fiftieth day”).

The date of Shavuot is directly linked to that of Passover. The Torah mandates the seven-week Counting of the Omer, beginning on the second day of Passover and immediately followed by Shavuot. This counting of days and weeks is understood to express anticipation and desire for the Giving of the Torah. On Passover, the Jewish people were freed from their enslavement to Pharaoh; on Shavuot they were given the Torah and became a nation committed to serving God.

Shavuot today commemorates the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah to the entire Israelite nation assembled at Mount Sinai. The association between the giving of the Torah (Ma-tan Torah) and Shavuot is not explicit in the Biblical text. The holiday is one of the Shalosh Regalim, the three Biblical pilgrimage festivals. It marks the conclusion of the Counting of the Omer.

Besides its significance as the day on which the Torah was revealed by God to the Jewish nation at Mount Sinai (which includes the Ten Commandments), Shavuot is also connected to the season of the grain harvest in Israel. In ancient times, the grain harvest lasted seven weeks and was a season of gladness (Jer. 5:24, Deut. 16:9-11, Isa. 9:2). It began with the harvesting of the barley during Passover and ended with the harvesting of the wheat at Shavuot. Shavuot was thus the concluding festival of the grain harvest, just as the eighth day of Sukkot (Tabernacles) was the concluding festival of the fruit harvest. During the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem, an offering of two loaves of bread from the wheat harvest was made on Shavuot.

Shavuot was also the first day on which individuals could bring the Bikkurim (first fruits) to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Bikkurim were brought from the Seven Species for which the Land of Israel is praised: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (Deut. 8:8). In the largely agrarian society of ancient Israel, Jewish farmers would tie a reed around the first ripening fruits from each of these species in their fields. At the time of harvest, the fruits identified by the reed would be cut and placed in baskets woven of gold and silver. The baskets would then be loaded on oxen whose horns were gilded and laced with garlands of flowers, and who were led in a grand procession to Jerusalem. As the farmer and his entourage passed through cities and towns, they would be accompanied by music and parades.

At the Temple, each farmer would present his Bikkurim to a kohen (priest) in a ceremony that followed the text of Deut. 26:1-10. This text begins by stating, “An Aramean tried to destroy my father,” referring to Laban’s efforts to weaken Jacob and rob him of his progeny—or by an alternate translation, the text states “My father was a wandering Aramean,” referring to the fact that Jacob was a penniless wanderer in the land of Aram for 20 years. The text proceeds to retell the history of the Jewish people as they went into exile in Egypt and were enslaved and oppressed; following which God redeemed them and brought them to the land of Israel. The ceremony of Bikkurim conveys the Jew’s gratitude to God both for the first fruits of the field and for His guidance throughout Jewish history.



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The custom of all night Torah study goes back to 1533 when Rabbi Joseph Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch, then living in Ottoman Salonika, invited his Kabbalistic colleagues to hold a night-long study vigil, in the course of which an angel appeared before them and commanded them to go live in Israel.

According to a story in the Midrash, the night before the Torah was given, the Israelites retired early to be well-rested for the momentous day ahead, but they overslept and Moses had to wake them up because God was already waiting on the mountaintop. To rectify this flaw in the national character, religious Jews stay up all night to learn Torah.

Any subject may be studied, although Talmud, Mishna and Torah typically top the list. In many communities, men and women attend classes and lectures until the early hours of the morning. In Jerusalem, thousands of people finish off the nighttime study session by walking to the Kotel before dawn and joining the sunrise minyan there.

The latter activity is reminiscent of Shavuot's status as one of the three Biblical pilgrimage festivals, when the Jews living in the Land of Israel journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday.

In the New Testament, Pentecost is a mighty time of ingathering, but not just of the harvest brought up to Jerusalem by Jewish people in the diaspora (places outside of Israel), but also of souls.

When the day of Pentecost came, [the disciples] were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? . . . 38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." 40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. – Acts

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The outpouring of the Holy Spirit brought partial fulfillment of the promises made by God of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. The Law of God once given on Mt. Sinai to Israel and written down on tablets of stone and parchment is now implanted on our hearts and minds. This brings full circle God's purpose to redeem lost mankind through the promised Messiah and then through the early church to bring that message with power to the rest of the world.

Today there is a wide range of celebratory styles for Pentecost in the church. The Law once given on Mt. Sinai and perfect in itself could not bring salvation because we could not keep the Law. But God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son who did keep the Law perfectly and carried our sins to the



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cross. This is indeed a time to celebrate God's work in our midst doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Praise His Holy Name!



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