The Omer count and Shavuot

— Shavuot — which is included in the description of the regulations concerning the counting of the Omer. The regulations concerning every festival are preceded by the introductory phrase: “and the Lord spoke unto Moses saying,” except in the case of Shavuot. More puzzling still is the fact that the feast that we know as “Shavuot” is not explicitly mentioned by this name or by its other familiar and distinctive title of the “Feast of the Giving of the Law”. Moreover, every feast is given its exact date, for example: “On the first of the month on the fourteenth of the month”; “in the seventh month on the first of the month”; “on the tenth day of the seventh month”, etc. The date of Shavuot is, however, only fixed quite indirectly by the time that is to elapse between it and Pesah:

This chapter termed by our Sages: The Order of the Festivals (Seder Ha-mo‘adim), lists them in the following order: Pesah, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Shemini Azeret. Closer study indicates that this order of festivals comprises two sections, each one (at verses 22 and 43 respectively) ending with the phrase “I am the Lord thy God”. The first section comprises the festivals of Pesah and Shavuot, and the second, the rest. Further, we may note that there is no traditional spacing at all between the paragraph dealing with Pesah and the verses treating of the succeeding festival

And you shall count for yourselves from the morrow of the sabbath, from the day you brought the sheaf of the wave-offering; seven complete sabbaths:
Even unto the morrow of the seventh sabbath you shall count fifty days...
And proclaim on the selfsame day, a holy convocation unto you: you shall do no servile work therein...

(23, 15, 16, 21)

These anomalies, like every slight deviation in the wording of the
Torah, must have some special significance. Evidently there must be some integral connection between the concept of Pesah and the counting of the Omer and Shavuot, accounting for the latter's subordinate position as an appendage to the former two. Let us cite here the explanation given in the Sefer Ha-Ḥinukh on the precept of counting the Omer:

Israel is indissolubly bound up with the Torah, and for the sake of the Torah the heavens and earth and Israel were created... This is the principle and reason governing their redemption and departure from Egypt to receive the Torah on Sinai and observe it.... This was the great principle for which they were redeemed, their summa bonum and a matter of far more importance to them than the freedom from bondage. Because of this we were commanded to count from the second day of Pesah to the day of the giving of the Torah, to give expression to our deepest and most yearnings for the arrival of this day "as a slave panteth after the shade." The act of counting the days demonstrates that man's whole desires and attention are devoted to waiting for the time to draw nearer. If you will ask why then do we not begin to count from the first day of Pesah rather than wait for the second? The answer to this is that on the first day his whole being is concentrated on commemorating the great miracle of the departure from Egypt which constitutes a sign and wonder bearing witness to divine Creativity and Providence, and we are not to divert our attention from this by introducing another source of joy. This is reserved therefore for the second day. Similarly, it would not be appropriate to count thus: "so many days from the second day of Pesah." The Torah therefore enacts that we number from something that is distinctive to that day, and that is the offering of the Omer, which symbolizes our trust in the Providence of God Who wishes to sustain mankind and renew for them every year the seed of corn to nourish them therewith.

Indeed this subordination of Shavuot to the preceding festival of Pesah finds its expression in the name given in the Talmud to it (by R. Joshua B. Levi) where it is known as the "Conclusion of the Passover" עריה של פסח, the crowning glory of the feast of the departure from Egypt. This is true to the idea expressed in the first divine Revelation to Moses at the burning bush:

When you bring forth the people from Egypt you shall serve God on this mount.

(Exodus 3, 12)

The Exodus was therefore not an end in itself but purely the means of freeing Israel from human bondage, enabling them to shoulder the divine yoke of the Torah and its commandments. "The truly free person is the one committed to Torah" runs a well-known rabbinic dictum.

But we have not yet discovered an adequate reason for the fact that no mention is made of the name or motive for the festival in our chapter. Only its connection with Pesah has been explained. Isaac Arama in his Akedat Yitzḥak phrases the difficulty as follows:

Regarding the sanctity of the great and holy day on which the Torah was given, it is merely stated that "thou shalt proclaim on that very same day, a holy convocation shall it be to you, no manner of work shall you do, a perpetual statute....". Reference is made to the completion of the counting, the offering of the two loaves. But why did not the Torah explain that it was on this day that we received the divine Torah, a theme which is central in our liturgy and customs from time immemorial?

Here we quote the answer given by Isaac Arama from the many that have been suggested.

The commemoration of the giving of the Torah cannot be limited to a particular time like other matters connected with the festivals but it is a precept that applies at all hours and at all times, as it is written: (Joshua 1) "This book of the Law shall not move from thy mouth, and thou shalt meditate in it day and night". Every day we are commanded that its contents should remain as fresh and as dear to us, as on the day they were given, as it is written: "This day the Lord thy God hath commanded thee to do these statutes and judgments: "thou shalt therefore keep and do them...".

In connection with this, the following Midrash from Tanḥuma (Ki Tavo) is cited:
What is meant by “This day”? Had the Holy One blessed be He not ordained these precepts for Israel till now? Surely the year in which this verse was stated was the fortieth? Why does Scripture therefore state: “This day”? This is what Moses meant when he addressed Israel: “Every day let the Torah be as dear to you as if you had received it this day from Mt. Sinai.

We may now find an answer to another question related to our topic. Why were no symbolic rites or precepts ordained in commemoration of Shavuot just the same as, for instance, the institution of the eating of matzah to mark the haste with which our ancestors left Egypt, or the dwelling in the sukkah, recalling the divine protection and guardianship that the Children of Israel enjoyed in the wilderness, when they had no permanent abode? Hoffman in his Commentary to Leviticus states as follows in this connection:

No symbolic ritual was instituted for Shavuot to mark the Sinaitic Revelation, for the reason that it cannot be translated into the tangible language of symbol. The Children of Israel had been commanded to take heed “that you saw no likeness on the day that the Lord spoke unto you at Horeb from the midst of the fire”, so as not to become involved in any idolatrous, anthropomorphic conception of the divinity. They were simply bidden to commemorate the historic experience. They would celebrate on the day of the giving of the Law the conclusion of the harvest as well, to give thanks to Him on bringing their first-fruits to the Sanctuary and acknowledge that He is the Lord of all to Whom it was meet to pay homage and Whose commandments they were to obey. By this they would reenact the promise they made on Sinai “we shall do and hearken” (Exodus 24, 7).

We have noted in our chapter the twin symbolism of both Pesah and Shavuot. Both festivals commemorate natural phenomena, the former, the beginning of the harvest, the latter its conclusion and the offering of the new corn. But we have also noted that both commemorate milestones in our spiritual history, the beginning of our freedom and its consummation in the giving of the Torah. Those who wish, to emphasise the “nature” content of the festival, regarding it purely a harvest celebration linking it to those celebrated by the peoples of the world, from idolatrous epochs down to the present day, ignoring or belittling its religious character as commemorating the giving of the Law, are merely replacing a lofty spiritual conception by primitive motifs. They are, in effect, putting the clock back, before the Children of Israel came into the world and accepted the precedence of mind over matter. Strange and pitiful indeed is the spectacle of these modern representatives of the People of the Book, cherishing a material and transitory interpretation of their festival rather than its spiritual and eternal message.