

Relating the Message of Shavuot to Today

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Another name for Shavuot is Chag HaKatzir, or the harvesting holiday. Specifically, it is about harvesting our first fruits and eventually giving them to God. Leading up to Shavuot, we count the Omer, which was meant to be a countdown from the bringing of the Korban Omer to the Korban Shte'i Halechem. As we all know, the Torah teaches transcendent ideas that can apply to any time period. So how can a holiday centered around the harvest, sacrifices and cheesecake uplift us and bring us closer to God in the age of the iPhone?

This question becomes more complex when looking at how the Torah describes Shavuot in Parashat Re'eh. Deuteronomy 16:9-12 describes the obligations of Shavuot. We have to make a holiday for God and give everything that He has blessed us with back to him. After giving God all our valuable possessions, we are supposed to rejoice before God with all the underprivileged people we know (likely going out of our way to help them) and remember that we were slaves in Egypt. So although these Pesukim seem to indicate that we will end up happy, the command to lose so much could lead to depression rather than joy.

Rashi famously says (Deuteronomy 16:11) that if we care for God's charges (the underprivileged), then he will care for our people. Still, how does this apply to us nowadays and how can we really get Simcha from losing our valuables.

The Simcha question can be answered by using the Rambam's definition of Simcha as opposed to Freud's accepted definition of happiness. While Freud says that happiness is satisfying one's needs or wants, the Rambam defines Simcha as a positive energy. In order to attain a positive energy, people need to be giving. When someone gets a new toy, it's really cool for a little while and then it wears off, and can even make people self-centered as opposed to happy. When people give, they are more content and carry around a positive energy. So while to Freud getting a sports car may be the best way to satisfy a desire and stimulate happiness, the Rambam would support giving as a primary way to achieve Simcha, or a positive energy. So now we see that God's commandment to care for the underprivileged and to give Him our stuff is meant to result in happiness. The more we are able to give the more happiness we get.

But still, why is this holiday centered around agriculture and korbanot? How are those relevant to us? The answer lies in the hope that these spiritual connections of the past can give us. By reading about the obligation to bring Korbanot, we are reminded of the opportunities that we once had, and that we will have in the future. We are reminded to keep hoping for Moshiach so that one day, we too can offer these Korbanot to Hashem and achieve the Simcha of giving.