

## The Mysteries of Zman Matan Torateinu

Josh Katzin

Shavuot, which we refer to as Zman Matan Torateinu, is a holiday of mysteries, notably the following:

1. The Torah never explicitly connects Shavuot with Matan Torah. Uniquely among the Shalosh Regalim, the Torah describes the holiday solely in terms of its agricultural context but not in terms of its association with any historical event. In contrast, Pesach is celebrated in the Spring “for in the month of Aviv, at night, did Hashem take you out of Egypt” (Devarim 16:1). Similarly, Sukkot is a holiday celebrated at the time of year “when you have gathered in the yield of your land”, and we are told to sit in booths for seven days “so that future generations may know that I housed Bnei Yisrael in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Vayikra 23:43). But Shavuot is described solely in terms of its agricultural aspect: “You shall observe Chag Ha-Shavuot, of the first fruits of the wheat harvest” (Shemot 34:22). The holiday’s association with the giving of the Torah-- Zman Matan Torateinu—is never mentioned in the Torah itself.
2. The connection between the date of Shavuot and the date of the revelation at Sinai is not obvious. It is notable that the date of Shavuot itself is not specified in the Torah. By way of comparison, the Pesach sacrifice is always to be brought on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan and the celebration continues for seven days starting on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Sukkot very clearly starts on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei. About Shavuot’s date, we are told vaguely: “Start to count the seven weeks from when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks for Hashem” (Devarim 16:9-10). Or an alternative formulation: “And from the day on which you bring the sheaf elevation offering [i.e. the Omer]—the day after the sabbath—you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete: you must count until the day after the seventh week—fifty days; then you shall bring an offering of new grain to Hashem.” (Vayikra 23:15-16). Essentially, Shavuot comes 50 days after Pesach but there is no specific date associated with it. In fact, we are told that a controversy emerged in the days of the Beit Hamikdash, with the Boethusian sect (affiliated with the Sadducees) arguing that the rabbis had the date of Shavuot wrong (see Menachot 10:3).

The connection between the date of Shavuot and the date of Matan Torah is further complicated by the fact that the Torah at best indirectly gives us the date of the revelation at Mt Sinai. It takes a fair amount of close-reading to figure out that Matan Torah took place on the date of Shavuot. In fact, the Talmud records a disagreement between Rabbi Yossi and the Chachamim about whether the Ten Commandments were given on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan (the date on which Shavuot falls under our fixed calendar) or

the 7<sup>th</sup> (Shabbat 86b). The dispute arises because the date of the revelation at Mt Sinai must be calculated indirectly based on various other dates provided in the text, with some additional assumptions mixed in.

Perhaps these anomalies give us some insight into what it means to celebrate Shavuot as Zman Matan Torateinu. A key principle of the Shalosh Regalim is that we celebrate these holidays by re-living them. Every Pesach, we re-enact the exodus from Egypt on the Seder night. Every Sukkot, we share the temporary dwellings of our wandering forefathers. How do we re-live the experience of Matan Torah?

Turns out that receiving the Torah doesn't mean standing at the foot of a mountain and listening. It means engaging, challenging, and studying the material in a way that makes it your own. It means interpreting and unlocking the text's mysteries. Matan Torah cannot be reduced to a download from the divine on one particular day in our history. Perhaps that is why the Torah downplays the association of Shavuot with the events at Sinai, omits a fixed date for the holiday, and even obscures the date of the revelation itself. Experiencing Zman Matan Torateinu does not mean simply commemorating a one-time event.

No text in our tradition gets across this idea that Matan Torah is about more than that fateful day at Sinai than a poignant story recounted in the Gemara in Menachot (29b). Moshe Rabbeinu is transported by God to the study hall of the great Rabbi Akiva. As Moshe listens to the discussion between the students and their teacher, he becomes confused by the unfamiliar subject matter. Imagine Moshe coming to see the future of Torah study and finding that he cannot follow the debate! At first, Moshe is saddened, until the students ask their master, "from where do you derive this?" To which Rabbi Akiva answers: "It is a halacha transmitted to Moshe from Sinai." When Moshe heard this, the Talmud tells us, his mind was put at ease. Matan Torah is an ongoing event that continues to this day through our active engagement with the Torah itself.