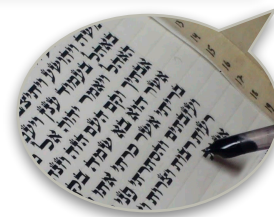




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot, Sefer Devarim

Shavuot

Sivan 5783 / May 2023

The Evolution of Shavuot From Chag HaBikurim to Zeman Matan Torah

By Robert Damast

Mai Shavuot — what is Shavuot?

Shavuot is given to us in the *Torah* as one of three pilgrimage festivals — *Chag HaMatzot*, *Chag HaShavuot* and *Chag HaSukkot*. Although seemingly an equal partner with *Pesach* and *Sukkot* – in certain respects *Shavuot* is the step-child of the pilgrimage holidays — it is one day as opposed to the 7+ days of *Pesach* and *Sukkot*, and it has only a single two-part *Mitzva* — the bringing of *Bikuriim* to the *Bayt HaMikdash* and the recitation of a prescribed passage when presenting the *Bikurim* to the Cohen — versus the variety of *Mitzvot* associated with both *Pesach* and *Sukkot*. Significant in this respect is that the observance of *Pesach* and *Sukkot* had substantial components that took place at home — outside the precincts of the Temple in *Yerushalayim* — whereas *Shavuot*'s sole *Mitzva* required the existence of a *Bayt HaMikdash* for its performance.

The *Torah* refers to *Chag HaShavuot* also as *Chag HaKatzir* and as *Chag HaBikuriim*. The *Torah*'s perspective on *Shavuot* is solely that of an agricultural holiday and **nowhere is that dimension broadened to include *Matan Torah***. *Chag HaBikuriim*, is bound not only to the existence of the *Bayt HaMikdash* – where the *korban bikuriim* could be brought — but to the **ownership** of land in *Eretz Yisrael* and to limiting the *korban bikkuriim* to the *Sheva Miniim*. Thus, what the historical and canonical record reveals is that from the time of the Exodus until late in the Second Temple period the holiday **has only an agricultural dimension** (an exception being the Essene community which viewed *Shavuot* as an annual renewal of the covenant that *Hashem* had made with the Jewish people through Noah, the *Avot* and *Moshe Rabbeinu*). Following the destruction of the *Bayt HaMikdash* it is unclear how the *Chag* was observed and neither the *Mishna* nor the *Talmud* give us insight as to the manner of observance of this agricultural holiday.

Since *Shavuot* is one of the *Shalosh Regaliim* one would naturally look to *Seder Mo'ed* in the *Mishna* where we find *Masechet Pesach* and *Masechet Sukkot* — what is missing there is a *masechet* for the *mo'ed* of *Shavuot*. Rather *Shavuot* is addressed in the *Mishna* at the very end of *Seder Zeraim* — an agricultural treatise. *Masechet Bikkuriim*, since it is only obligated to address one *Mitzva*, is understandably brief primarily addressing questions about the observance of *Mitzvat Bikuriim* – the who, what, where and how. Of note is that *Mishna Bikkuriim* at *Perek 3* sets forth a very visual description of the fulfillment of this *Mitzva* — I think that the *Tannaim* chose to do so — at a time when the absence of the *Bayt HaMikdash* was still a fresh wound — to illustrate **what was lost**.

The *Mishna* refers to *Shavuot* most commonly as *Atzeret* – also the principal name used for the *chag* in the *Talmud*, but also refers to it either as *Chag HaBikkuriim* or *Chag HaKatzir*. *Atzeret* as used in the *Mishna* and *Talmud*, refers to the ending of the counting of the days of the *Omer*; although

some *Rabbeim* suggest it is the culmination of *Pesach* much as *Shemini Atzeret* is the holiday culminating *Sukkot*.

Mishna Megillah sets forth the *Torah* readings for all of the Holidays. Consistent with the uniquely agricultural basis of *Shavuot* presented in the *Mishna* and *Talmud*, the *Torah* reading for *Shavuot* is stated at *Perek 3, Pasook 5*, to be “*BeAtzeret, Shivah Shavuot*” — that on *Atzeret* we should read from *Parshat Re’ay* (*Devarim* 16:9) which sets forth the counting of the *Omer* culminating in the *chag*. What is significant is that NO mention is made in the *Mishna* or *Talmud* of reading the *Aseret HaDibrot* - which later became the traditional *Torah* reading on the first day of *Shavuot*. In this regard *Rambam* notes in his *Mishne Torah* — (Prayer & Priestly Blessing 13:9) that the “*Minhag Pashoot*” - the general custom in his day - was to read on the first day of *Shavuot* the *Aseret HaDibrot* from *Parshat Yitro* (*Shemot* 16:1 et seq.). Of course, *Rambam* is writing toward the end of the 12th century and the *Talmud Bavli* was finished around 500 CE — a gap of 600 years.

We don’t know from our scriptural sources when the transition from *Atzeret* to *Zeman Matan Torataynu* took place. Although the *Talmud* fixes a date for *Matan Torah* as the 6th of *Sivan* – it clearly is not ready to make a break with the observance of *Atzeret* as an agricultural holiday, as set forth in the *Torah*. Many of our *Tannaim* lived at the time of the *Bar Kochba* Rebellion and the promise to rebuild the *Bait HaMikdash*. Our *Amoraim* remembered, or knew, of the unfulfilled promise by Emperor Julian the Apostate in the 4th century to rebuild the Temple. I think that our Sages in the 6th century, at the time the *Talmud Bavli* was finalized, were not yet ready to give up the hope that the *Bayt HaMikdash* would be restored.

What then is our first record of *Shavuot* being observed as *Zeman Matan Torataynu*? That is to be found in the *Siddur* of *Rav Amram HaGaon*. *Rav Amram* lived in the 9th century and was the *Rosh Yeshiva* in *Sura*. His *Siddur* is an authoritative compilation of the *Seder Tefilot* that he wrote in response to a request for such guidance from the Jewish community in *Barcelona, Spain*. There he adds into the recitation of the *Shemona Esrei* in the *VaTeeten* prayer “***Et Yom Chag HaShavuot Hazeh, Zeman Matan Torataynu...***” What we learn from this is that at some point in the 300 year period after the completion of the *Talmud Bavli* in 500 and the writing of *Rav Amram’s Siddur*, *Shavuot* transitioned from the agricultural *Chag HaBikkurium*, to *Zeman Matan Torataynu*. On a certain level *Zeman Matan Torataynu* became a eulogy for the purely agricultural *Chag HaShavuot* set forth in the *Torah, Mishna and Talmud*. No more *Atzeret* — it was a reconciliation with the reality that there was no more *Bayt HaMikdash* and even more so the reality that *Islam* had taken over *Har HaBayit* for its own and that *Atzeret* would not return until *Yemot HaMashiach*.

Bob and Marilyn have been active members at YIS since moving to New Rochelle in 1979. Their 3 children grew up in the community, David now living in Los Angeles, Shari in Stamford and Lisa in Rehovot.

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