

Shavuot and Memorial Day

by Rabbi David Hartley Mark

As a boy and young man, Shavuote always seemed to sneak up on me. It is always grouped with its sister holidays, into what I call the “Big Three”: Pesach, Sukkot, and Shavuote. Anyone with a modicum of Jewish Education, whether the childhood or the self-taught kind, has no trouble coming up with the meaning of the first two: Pesach is matzo and freedom; Sukkot is the Little Grass Shack and the lulav and etrog. What is Shavuote? Shavuote is—is—a cheese kugel and the Giving of the Torah.

How can we celebrate the Torah, the most sacred object we possess? Well, by studying it—except Torah Learning (Limud Torah) is a perpetual mitzvah. Why should we need a special holiday to emphasize an ongoing mitzvah?

In addition, we have Memorial Day, a day precious to us Americans, as a time of commemoration for those who made the supreme sacrifice for our freedom. (Israel has its equivalent on Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance. No one who has ever witnessed the countrywide Moment of Silence can ever forget it.) As one of the oldest democratic nations in the world, we must always cherish our liberty, and resist mightily those who would raise the spectres of racism, ethnic or religious hatred, or divisiveness of any kind.

Could there possibly be a link between Memorial Day and Shavuot? I would like to think so. Consider: we as Jews celebrate the study of Torah, a majestic combination of story and law. Memorial Day is one on which we quietly (or noisily) reflect on the high cost of freedom, and its continuing weight on our national conscience and purse. As a teacher, I will not miss any opportunity to promote learning of all kinds, extending the meaning of Torah beyond the Five Books of Moses, beyond the entire corpus of Jewish learning, to include worldly and spiritual learning of all kinds.

We do this to celebrate our freedom as Americans to read and study whatever we wish; we observe Shavuot to study not only Torah, but any subject area which serves to make us better human beings. This idea may appear radical, and I do not wish it so. Raised as I was in a highly parochial atmosphere, I nonetheless found other areas that interested me. During my first year of high school, when I was plunged into the “Sea of Talmud,” I also found a small text on Greek Mythology on a shelf at Yeshiva High School, and memorized virtually the entire book.

Most Jews are bookish by nature: it is part of our genetic makeup. Today, we are able to peruse the length and breadth of worldly wisdom, via the Internet. Television is fine—I am not a snob; there are programs I enjoy—but, as I tell my students, too much is useless. It is chewing gum for the mind.

This Shavuot, therefore, please find the time to “gib ah kuk in ah sefer” that is, take a look into a holy book about our faith. But do not shy away from learning something new, some subject outside your comfort zone. There is no better shelter from the cares of the world than between the covers of a book, whether real or virtual. Chag Same’ach!