

The Festival of Uncertainty

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Shavuot

Shavuot may be the strangest of our Scripturally mandated Festivals. Unlike Pesah and Succot (the other “pilgrimage” Festivals), it does not appear to have a connection with the agricultural cycle of the year. (Technically, it does; it’s the conclusion of the spring harvest season, but that’s, at the very least, a somewhat more subtle link than those of Pesah and Succot, which mark, respectively, the beginnings of the spring and fall harvests.) Unlike all the other Festivals, it does not have a fixed date.

Wait a moment! Of course Shavuot has a fixed date; it is observed on the sixth and (outside the Land of Israel) the seventh of the month of Sivan. Well, yes, that is true today, but it was not always so. The Scriptural text tells us (Leviticus 23:15-16, echoed in Deuteronomy 16:9-10) only that Shavuot is to be celebrated fifty days after Pesah. Well, yes, but, since the date of Pesah is fixed as the fifteenth of Nisan, does that not in turn fix the date of Shavuot?

Again, it does so today, but it did not do so before our religious calendar was fixed by the formula established by Hillel II in the fourth century and modified by the rabbis in the tenth century. Before Hillel, while Shavuot was certainly fifty days after Pesah (hence its English name of Pentecost, derived from the Greek word meaning *fifty*), that did not necessarily fix its date. Why not? Because the day of Rosh Hodesh (the first day of the month) was not fixed but depended upon actual observation of the New Moon. It could thus vary by one day, either earlier or later than the formula would eventually make it. Shavuot, thus, could have been observed on the fifth, sixth, or seventh of Sivan, according to when the New Moon was actually sighted and when the Sanhedrin proclaimed the month of Sivan.

Well, okay, but so what? What difference does it make to us? Well, we seek answers. We want assurance. We think that we should know things precisely. And, indeed, ever since our calendar was established by formula, we have been able to set forth the dates and their corresponding Gregorian (or, in earlier centuries, Julian) dates and the weekly Torah readings and everything else about the calendar as far in the future as we like, and, anachronistically, we can even project the correspondence back to before the time of Hillel. But modern science has taught us that not everything is or needs to be definite and precise. Albert Einstein taught us that travel at extremely high speeds can

alter the passage of time. (No; you won't live longer if you run constantly; Einstein was talking about extremely subtle changes in the passage of time when the speeds are measured in tens of thousands of miles per second and significant changes only with speeds of hundreds of thousands of kilometers per second.) Werner Heisenberg taught us that the very act of measuring alters the reality being measured. (Measuring the velocity of a particle alters its position and measuring its position alters its velocity, so position and velocity cannot both be measured precisely.) And Erwin Schroedinger showed us that a coherent description of reality (quantum mechanics) could be based on the simultaneous truths of two or more mutually contradictory truths and on probabilities rather than precisely determined facts.

The Torah anticipated Schroedinger, Heisenberg, and Einstein by making Shavuot the Festival whose date can vary, and therein lies a most important lesson for us. Uncertainty can be as holy as certainty. Indeed, since Shavuot is the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, it seems that we can receive the Torah, that we can tap into the Divine Wisdom, only in our uncertainty. When we are sure of ourselves, when we are certain of what we know, we feel no need to be open to new truths. And when we are that sure of ourselves, we affirm the lesson taught – perhaps only partially in jest – by Mark Twain (sometimes credited either to Jean-Jacques Rousseau or to the great American cynic Ambrose Bierce), who said, “G*d created man in His Image, and man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”

We are also reminded of “The King and I,” in which Yul Brynner sings, “It puzzles me to think that, though a man may be in doubt of what he knows, very quickly will he fight; he'll fight to prove that what he does not know is so.” When we seek certainty, we often feel the need to fight to prove the truths of which we are unsure. When we accept the uncertainty, when we become comfortable in the uncertainty, we can far more easily accept the validity and legitimacy of opinions and beliefs at variance with ours; we need not feel threatened by others' holding other opinions and beliefs.

Our sages teach us that G*d's giving of the Torah and our receiving of the Torah are not acts that occurred once, long ago, but that G*d gives and we must receive the Torah every day. The uncertainty of Shavuot, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, teaches us that we can do so only through our uncertainty.

May Shavuot lead us to the holiness of uncertainty.

Shalom.