

SHAVUOT, The Festival of Weeks, is also known as PENTECOST, a Greek term meaning “Fiftieth” [i.e. 50th day of counting the Omer as described in Leviticus 23:15-16.]

Shavuot, falling on 6th Sivan, is one of the three Jewish “pilgrimage feasts.” Also called *Hag HaShavuot* [חג שבועות, the literal translation is “Festival of Weeks”] Shavuot has agricultural roots in the “first fruits” of the late harvest, and, in post Temple spirituality, spiritual links to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Shavuot is often called *Hag Matan Torateinu* (*The Festival of the Giving of Our Torah*).

While Shavuot has harvest links it is, at the same time, a festival which has always incorporated an “encounter” spirituality. As with all three Pilgrim festivals this encounter was one in which all people who were able were required to participate. This divine encounter of the person [*nefesh* | soul] and community of Israel with the LORD took place at the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem and in later rabbinic spirituality in the study and exegesis of Scripture.

While the physical act of returning to the Temple just seven weeks after Passover, and following a marathon “counting of the days” which concluded in the offering of wheat harvest first-fruits, the importance of the spiritual encounter with the LORD is only fully realized in the later transformation of Shavuot by the rabbis (after the loss of the Temple) into a festival which links the Exodus from Egypt (*Pesach* / The Passover) with the “Gift of the Torah” at Sinai.

SINAI AND SHAVUOT

In Jewish interpretation, the purpose and completion of the Exodus from *Mitzrayim* [biblical Egypt] was the Covenant of Sinai—the Giving of the Torah. Redemption culminates in the Torah. Shavuot, experienced as *zman matan torateinu* [the Time of the Giving of the Torah] (BT. Pesachim 68b), is not celebrated as an historical event but one which is *continually* alive. Deuteronomy (11:13) teaches, “if you obey the commandments *hayom* (this day)...” “This day,” teaches the *Sifre*, means that we receive the commandments [The Torah] as though we were receiving it for the first time. Thus, while Shavuot is a celebration of encounter at Sinai, it remains a permanent reminder of an encounter which occurs daily in our interaction with, and our living of, the Torah in our lives. Encounter with the word of God, through scripture, is also associated in Jewish tradition with the *Avodah Halev* (Service of the Heart).

SCRIPTURE AND THE DIVINE PRESENCE

An ancient midrash relates that Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua sat and studied Torah, going from the Pentateuch, to the Prophets, to the Writings, and as they did so the words became alive as on the day they were given on Sinai, and fire played about them, as they [the words of Torah] were originally given on Sinai in fire (Ruth Rabbah 6:4). Service of the Heart, here realized in exegesis of the scriptures, is visually (others told the tale) and spiritually experienced by the fire of the divine presence.

SHAVUOT IS ALSO CALLED ATZERET

Atzeret is a term which has a Hebrew root in “to store” or “remain.” *Atzeret* is used in the bible in reference to *Shemini Atzeret* (Num. 29:35) where the understanding in context is “remain with Me another day.” The call to “remain with Me” is remembered at Shavuot and celebrated as an invitation to Torah study.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot—the practice of staying up all night at Shavuot to study Torah is an expression of “remain with Me. This is a practice developed by the mystics in the kabbalistic tradition of the 16th Century.

