90 acrostic lines conclude with a description of a great cosmic battle featuring the primeval beasts Leviathan (of the sea) and Behemoth (of the land). God approaches them with sword in hand and then creates a great feast for the righteous, including wine that had been preserved from the day of Creation. The final words of *Akdamut Millin* urge the worshipers to listen to—and to heed—the great commands that will be read following the poem.

Another medieval addition to Shavuot was the kabbalist's creation of the all-night Torah study session called *Tikun Leil Shavuot*. This practice has found new life in recent years as today's Jews embrace many of the mystical practices of Shavuot, although sometimes in blended ways that might be surprising to their creators. One Shavuot in Jerusalem, I participated in such an eclectic observance. In the style of the kabbalists, all night, we went from home to home, studying. And then, in those early morning hours before the sun made itself known, we walked the paths our biblical ancestors, laden with their first fruits, may have taken to the Temple. We joined a huge stream of people heading toward the Kotel. When light came, in our own style, we were praying with men and women side by side. We were, like the generations before us, increasing the spiritual meaning of this once purely agricultural holiday by making it our own.

Speaking in Thunder

by Arthur Green

Among Jews in North America, Shavuot is surely one of the least-known and least-observed Jewish holidays. Here we have another irony of Jewish history: the holiday of the book, forgotten by the People of the Book (*Am Ha-Sefer*).

Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, should, by rights, be the apex of the Jewish festival cycle. Passover, the time of liberation, leads up to it. We count the days from Exodus to Sinai, as though liberation itself were just a prelude. In order to be wedded to our God at the mountain, we have to be free from bondage to all our inner and outer pharaohs. Sukkot, the third partner in the pilgrimage cycle, basks in the afterglow of Sinai. In it we celebrate our wandering through the wilderness and our eternal preparation to enter the Promised Land. Neither of these makes any sense without the main event, the Revelation of God at the holy mountain.

Sinai takes us to the heart of Jewish faith. It claims three things:

- God communicates with humans;
- Such communication took place during the wilderness encounter between Moses and the Israelites and *yud heh vav heh*—the unutterable Hebrew name for God, understood here as an impossible form of the verb "to be," best translated "is-was-will be";
- Revelation makes known the divine will.

In one form or another, this set of claims pervades all of classical Judaism.

If the Revelation and covenant of obligation at Sinai are the heart of Jewish faith, they are also the most difficult and "scandalous" claims made by the religious traditions of Israel. Taken at face value, they form the very essence of Jewish supernaturalism and seeming theological arbitrariness. The Creator of the universe, *yud heh vav heh*, chooses at a particular moment to reveal God's self uniquely to the Jewish people, addressing them in words and pledging eternal loyalty in a covenant with them, if they will accept God's specific will as manifest in the practice of Judaism. Both mind and conscience reel at such a thought! What does it mean to say that God speaks? Does God speak to Israel in a language that Israel understands, commanding through a Torah made up of laws, ethics, rites, and traditions that seem remarkably related to those of the pagan nations in whose midst Israel lives? Can we imagine a God so arbitrary as to choose one nation, one place, and one moment in human history as a set of cirumstances in which the eternal divine will is to be manifest for all time? How can we attribute to *yud heh vav heh*, who becomes personified only through our encounter, this sort of arbitrary willfulness? For these reasons and others, thinking Jews in our time, including many who seek a serious approach to questions of the spirit, balk at accepting the so-called yoke of Sinai.

But hear another voice from within the classical tradition. "Moses spoke and God responded in a voice"[96] (Exod. 19:19). The Rabbinic commentators explain: God responded "in the voice of Moses." This seems to say that the one and only voice heard at Sinai was that of Moses, sometimes speaking on his own and sometimes possessed by the divine spirit—God responding from within Moses's own voice. Rather than a "voice from heaven," the voice was that of a prophet transformed by an inner encounter that can only be characterized as "heaven." Jews over the

centuries have debated how to refine the naive biblical depiction of Sinai and the experience of Revelation. For example, the phrase "*Shekhinah* [Divine Presence] speaks from within his throat" was often applied to prophets. As for the content of Revelation, modern Judaism has buried the truth the Jewish mystics knew centuries ago. All God "reveals" at Sinai is God's own self, the self of the universe. The entire Torah is naught but this, God's own name. All the rest is commentary.

The fact is that any sophisticated theory of Revelation recognizes a moment in which the divine and human minds flow together. Indeed, we speak of the "mind" of the Divine only by analogy with the human mind. If *yud heh vav heh* is the incorporeal essence of the universe and mind or soul is the incorporeal essence of the person, we "call" God the mind or soul of the universe. God as *yud heh vav heh* knows no distinction between matter and spirit. In seeking to comprehend Revelation, we may, however, speak of *yud heh vav heh* as a cosmic mind, present in the depths of each human mind and impressing itself in a unique way upon consciousness. The universal One seeks to be known by the human—this manifestation of its own self that is also, paradoxically, its "other." The "seeking" or "calling out" to its other (the human) is not in the form of language. It is only humans who can make the Divine articulate in words, because words are the human tool for communication. In fact, the most recent translations of Exodus 19:19 render it, "As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder."[97] *Yud heh vav heh* speaks in thunderclaps; it takes a Moses to translate God's thunder into words.

If the Jewish imagination regards the Divine and human as separate, God living in heaven and humans on earth, Revelation is the act that comes closest to bridging this separation. Moses goes up to the top of Sinai, according to the Torah, and God comes down upon the mountain (Exod. 19:3,20). But at that moment, the entire top of Sinai is covered by thick cloud—as though to say that the border between the "upper" and "lower" realms had been lost. (Some later accounts of Revelation are more fanciful; they actually depict Moses as riding on the clouds, entering the heavenly realms, and holding on to God's throne of glory.) Moses returns from Revelation still human, but his face glows with the light of that encounter, in which the upper limits on human spiritual attainment had been momentarily cast aside. He returns from an experience of transcendent unity to the "world of separation." The Torah is now "translated" within Moses: His words and God's thunder are now one.

Throughout its history, the Jewish people has accepted the task of forming a communal religious existence and creating a civilization that stands in response to the events of Sinai. This undertaking is what we mean by "accepting the Torah." What we accept is the reality that divinity is present in humans—manifest in human language and human institutions. We accept the challenge to create a society, with all its institutional trappings, which embodies this presence. We are no less charged with that task today than we were thousands of years ago.

The single commandment to which Jews are most committed is that which comes directly from the teaching of Shavuot: *ve-shinnantam le-vanekha*, "teach them diligently to your children." In general, Jews today care more about giving their children at least some smattering of Jewish education than they do about any aspect of religious observance or about maintaining specifically Jewish values in their own lives. We have an overpowering sense that we come from a long line of tradition, one that has been forged and deepened by much suffering. To break the connection, to let the next generation have nothing of this legacy, is almost unthinkable. That is why mixed marriage remains such a source of heartbreak among many Jews, even those who have little sense of what it is that the tradition actually teaches. This pull to preserve the legacy is a positive aspect of our collective culture, and one that we celebrate on Shavuot. In traditional communities and, recently, far beyond them as well (even in secular Tel Aviv), there is a custom called *Tikun Leil Shavuot*—staying awake all night on Shavuot to study Torah. The kabbalists originated this practice in the Middle Ages. Like *Kabbalat Shabbat* (special prayers and songs to welcome the Sabbath), it is a mystical practice that is now widespread among many Jews who know little of its original meaning.

Tikun Leil Shavuot helps to keep alive another aspect of Shavuot. The receiving of Torah is an experience, not just a body of teachings. A *tikun* for Shavuot night is not a superlong graduate seminar! Sinai is understood by the tradition to be an eternal moment. Precisely because God as *yud heh vav heh* ("is-was-will be") exists beyond time, the moment when Torah is transmitted from the heart of the One to the Jewish people can be re-created in each and every moment of our existence. The "awakeness" of Shavuot night is not just a lack of sleep. It should be a deeper wakefulness as well, a willingness to hear God as the Beloved knocking on the door of each person's heart, waiting to be welcomed in, so that the holy teaching—Torah—is truly "upon your very heart."[98] The great sage Rabbi Akiva insisted that The Song of Songs, the poetic declaration of God's love, was given to Israel at Sinai, at the very heart of Revelation. It takes an open heart as well as an open mind to receive the Torah, which we do again each year on Shavuot.

Out of that openness we are also ready to "hear" a Torah that calls upon us to not only faithfully preserve old traditions, but also to devise ever newer and more creative ways to celebrate God's presence in our midst. Some people interpret this idea as the need for new expressions of faith, created in music or other artistic forms appropriate to our age. Others offer new interpretations to our ancient texts and help remold them to confront new challenges as they arise. Yet others, being no less innovative than the mystics were hundreds of years ago, will create new ritual forms. Every generation has to do this in order to keep the fires of Sinai alive, to keep them from becoming merely ash, merely the memory of a once-vital faith. Maintaining the sense of balance between these two, preserving old traditions while creating new ones, and doing both in awareness of God's eternal voice—that is the challenge of Shavuot, the time when we re-receive our Torah.

Chosen Together

by Bradley Shavit Artson

> Why is the festival of Shavuot called "the time of the giving of our Torah" and not "the time of the receiving of our Torah"? Because the giving of the Torah happened at one specified time, but the receiving of the Torah happens at every time and in every generation.[99]
> —Rabbi Meir Alter of Ger

> Each generation must make its own way back to Sinai, must stand under the mountain and re-appropriate and reinterpret the Revelation, in terms that are both classical and new. We recognize change as part of the continuing process of tradition itself.[100]
> —Rabbi Gerson D. Cohen

The least-known of the *Shalosh Regalim* is Shavuot. A victim of schedule, Shavuot comes at the shift from spring into the recreation time of summer. People are busy with graduations, weddings, and vacation plans. Furthermore, it currently lacks any special rituals to excite widespread observance.

In the biblical period, Shavuot celebrated the conclusion of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. By the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, some thousand years later, the Rabbis expanded Shavuot beyond its agricultural origin to incorporate a foundational event as well, the giving of our Torah—the token, record, and pathway of the special love between God and the Jewish people.

It comes exactly seven weeks after the second day of Passover, the festival that marks the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian slavery. Passover and Shavuot are linked not only by the cycles of the calendar (based on the Torah's insistence that Shavuot occur precisely 50 days after Passover) but also by the nature of the stages of human liberation.

Passover, however popular, is just a beginning: the initiation of Jewish freedom. As our ancestors were liberated from Egyptian slavery, they took their first halting steps toward freedom and independence. No longer saddled with the burdens and oppression of Egyptian taskmasters, the Jews entered the wilderness of Sinai, where they experienced their independence as little less than anarchy. Theirs was a freedom from control, a freedom from limits. Such liberty, by itself, is the freedom of adolescence, one that bridles at any restraint. It is fine as a first step, but it ultimately cannot ensure human growth, creativity, and community. Rather than simply avoiding limits, mature freedom entails living up to one's best potential, meeting responsibilities toward community and toward others with a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Freedom "fulfilled" is freedom to live productively, with meaning, and in relationship to other people.

Just as "freedom from" a restriction finds completion in "freedom to" do something meaningful, so the festival of Passover initiates a process of liberation that culminates in the festival of Shavuot. Shavuot marks the coming-of-age and responsibility of the Jewish people and celebrates the encounter between God and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. That moment of divine–human commitment resulted in a formal link between the two, a *brit* ("covenant") that binds God and the Jewish people forever. This *brit* received its first expression in the writings of the Torah, which has formed the core of all subsequent Jewish identity.

Shavuot, then, marks the special relationship between God and the Jews, celebrates the biblical understanding of the Jews as God's "Chosen People," a concept essential to Jewish identity, and one that has been distorted, by both Jews and non-Jews.

What does it mean to be chosen? Chosen does not mean superior, and it does not mean that God loves the Jewish people better than other people: the Bible itself records God's love for all humanity. Being chosen does, however, imply that God loved the Jewish people first. That love is a matter of historical record: Judaism gave birth to two other monotheistic faiths, Christianity and Islam, which have spread a commitment to biblical values and knowledge through much of the world.

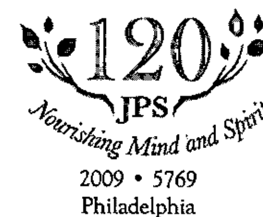
Celebrating the Jewish Year

The Spring and Summer Holidays

Passover ▲ The Omer ▲ Shavuot ▲ Tisha b'Av

Paul Steinberg

Edited by Janet Greenstein Potter



2009 • 5769
Philadelphia