

# The Significance of *Matan Torah*

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## Three Names of Shavuot in the Torah

The written Torah gives three names for the holiday of *Shavuot*, none of them specifically related to *Matan Torah*. Each name corresponds to a different aspect of *Shavuot*.

One name of the holiday is "Feast of Harvest".

*And the **feast of harvest**, the first-fruits of thy labours, which thou sowest in the field...*

**Exodus 23:16**

והג הקציר בכורי מעשיך אשר תזרע בשדה...  
שמות כג:טז

When the *Beit Hamikdash* stood, a special sacrifice, the *minhah hadashah* "new meal-offering" was brought on *Shavuot*. Consisting of two loaves of leavened bread made from the recently harvested wheat, the *minhah hadashah* celebrated the successful harvest.<sup>34</sup>

Another characterization of *Shavuot* is "Day of the First Fruits."

*Also in the **day of the first-fruits**, when ye bring a new meal-offering unto the Lord in your feast of weeks, ye shall have a holy convocation: ye shall do no manner of servile work;*

**Numbers 28:26**

וביום הבכורים בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה  
לה' בשבעתיםכם מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל  
מלאכת עבודה לא תעשו:  
במדבר כח:כו

*Shavuot* began the season of *Bikkurim*, the bringing of the first fruits. The first, ripe fruits of *shivat haminim*, the seven species with which the *Eretz Israel* is blessed, were brought ceremoniously to the *Mikdash*.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, we find *Shavuot* referred to as a "Feast of Weeks".

<sup>34</sup> Several animals were sacrificed along with the breads. See Lev 23:15-21 and *Sefer ha-Hinuch*, Commandment 307.

<sup>35</sup> See Deut 26 and *Sefer ha-Hinuch*, Commandment 91.

You should make for yourself a **feast of weeks** [at the time] that the wheat harvest yields its first fruits...

**Exodus 34:22**

והג שבעת תעשה לך בכורי קציר חטים...  
**שמות לד:כב**

Shavuot is called “the feast of weeks” because of the seven weeks of counting the *Omer* that precede it.

## Two Names of Shavuot in Chazal

*Chazal* commemorate the seven-week prelude to Shavuot with another name, *Azeret* “a solemn gathering.”<sup>36</sup> Just as *Shemini Azeret*, the eighth day from the start of *Succoth*, is a solemn gathering extending from the first seven days of *Succoth*, so too *Shavuot* extends from *Pesach*. The days of counting the *Omer* parallel the intermediate days of *Succoth*.

*Chazal* note that the end of the seven weeks of the counting of the *Omer* corresponds to the day of *Matan Torah*. According to *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:2, “from the day the Jews left Egypt until they received the Torah was 50 days.” Similarly, *Ruth Zuta* (Buber) 1 explains that the Book of Ruth is read aloud on *Azeret*, which is the time of the giving of the Torah, to show that Torah was and is acquired through suffering and hardship. This aspect gives *Shavuot* yet another appellation, *Zman Matan Torateinu* “the day of the giving of our Torah.”<sup>37</sup>

The first two aspects of *Shavuot* – the harvest time and the *Bikkurim* – can not be celebrated completely in the present era. While we can and must study and discuss these aspects of the *Chag*, we are sadly not privileged to perform these mitzvot completely, owing to our lack of a Beit Mikdash. However, commemoration of *Azeret*, the conclusion of the counting of the *Omer*, which coincides with *Zman Matan Torateinu*, is well within our reach. In fact, the choice of Torah portion for the holiday reflects this reality.<sup>38</sup> In what follows, we will focus on the significance of this aspect of *Shavuot*.

## *Matan Torah*: The Cornerstone of Belief

The written Torah abounds with statements proclaiming the momentousness of *Matan Torah*.<sup>39</sup> Exodus 19:9 identifies the purpose in *Matan Torah* as “I come unto thee in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with thee, and may also believe thee forever.” The experience at Sinai would imprint belief onto the hearts of the Jewish nation – the revelation at Sinai would enable them to believe forever in Moshe and the Torah he delivered.

Similarly, the Torah poignantly points to the uniqueness of *Klal Yisrael*, who experienced the revelation at Sinai.

<sup>36</sup> Mishnah *Bikkurim* 1:3.

<sup>37</sup> See M. Breuer, *Pirkei ha-Moadot*, volume 2:347-78, for a full discussion of these multiple aspects of the holiday.

<sup>38</sup> See *Megillah* 31a.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Exod 19-20 and Deut 4-5.

*“For ask now of the days past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it? Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live?... Unto thee it was shown, that thou mightest know that the Lord, He is God; there is none else beside Him. Out of heaven He made thee to hear His voice, that He might instruct thee; and upon earth He made thee to see His great fire; and thou didst hear His words out of the midst of the fire.”*

**Deuteronomy 4:32-36**

כי שאל נא לימים ראשנים אשר היו לפניך למן היום אשר ברא אלהים אדם על הארץ ולמקצה השמים ועד קצה השמים הנהיה כדבר הגדול הזה או הנשמע כמהו: השמע עם קול אלהים מדבר מתוך האש כאשר שמעת אתה ויחי: או הנסה אלהים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסת באתת ובמופתים ובמלחמה וביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובמוראים גדלים ככל אשר עשה לכם ה' אלהיכם במצרים לעיניך: אתה הראת לדעת כי ה' הוא האלהים אין עוד מלבדו: מן השמים השמיעך את קלו ליסרך ועל הארץ הראך את אשו הגדולה ודבריו שמעת מתוך האש:

**דברים ד:לב-לו**

Although medieval Jewish thinkers subscribed to a range of views regarding the exact content and depth of the experience at Sinai, all agreed to its centrality in Jewish thought. Following is a modern characterization of the *Kuzari's* view:

“The revelation at Sinai is the cornerstone upon which Halevi builds his defense of Judaism against all the challenges facing it... Rational skepticism concerning the possibility of God communicating to humanity ... is silenced by this miraculous event. An entire people attested to the veracity of this event, together with those miraculous events preceding and following it. Halevi argues that rational proofs attempting to establish the existence of God and the truths of Judaism based on God’s creation of the world ... are far less conclusive than the certainty provided by these historical events reflecting God’s supernatural activity.”<sup>40</sup>

Maimonides characterizes the critical role of *Matan Torah* as follows:

*What were the grounds for the faith in him [Moses]? The Revelation on Sinai, which we saw with our own eyes, and heard with our own ears, not having to depend on the testimony of others, we ourselves witnessing the fire ... And so it is said, “The Lord spoke with you, face to face” (Deut 5:4); and furthermore, “The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers only, [but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day]” (Deut 5:3)... Hence the inference that before that event they did not believe with a faith that would endure forever, but only with a faith followed by hesitating and doubting speculation.*

**Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 8:1<sup>41</sup>**

ובמה האמינו בו במעמד הר סיני שעיינינו ראו ולא זר ואזנינו שמעו ולא אחר האש והקולות והלפידים והוא נגש אל הערפל והקול מדבר אליו ואנו שומעים משה משה לך אמור להן כך וכך, וכן הוא אומר פנים בפנים דבר ה' עמכם, ונאמר לא את אבותינו כרת ה' את הברית הזאת ... מכלל שקודם דבר זה לא האמינו בו נאמנות שהיא עומדת לעולם אלא נאמנות שיש אחריה הרהור ומחשבה.

**רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ח:א**

<sup>40</sup> H. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 2001), 100.

<sup>41</sup> *The Code of Maimonides* (Yale: Yale Judaica Series, 1949), *Hilchot Yesodei Hatorah*, 8:1.

According to Nahmanides, there is a specific negative commandment not to forget the revelation at Sinai.

*This verse, in my opinion, is a negative commandment in which He admonishes severely "... that you should not forget the revelation on Mount Sinai, nor all the things which your eyes saw there – the thunderings, and the lightnings, His glory and His greatness, and His words that you have heard there out of the midst of the fire. And you should convey all the things which your eyes saw at that glorious revelation unto thy children and thy children's children forever." ... The benefit of this commandment is very great ... for when we shall also transmit the matter to our children they will know that the thing was true without doubt as if all the generations had seen it, for we would not testify falsely to our children ... and they will not doubt at all the testimony we will give them. Instead they will believe for a certainty that all of us saw it with our eyes, and likewise [they will believe] all that we told them.*

**Nachmanides, Deuteronomy 4:9<sup>42</sup>**

אבל הכתוב הזה לפי דעתי מצות לא תעשה, הזהיר בה מאד ... שלא תשכח מעמד הר סיני מכל הדברים אשר ראו שם עיניך הקולות והלפידים את כבודו ואת גדלו ודבריו אשר שמעת שם מתוך האש, ותודיע כל הדברים אשר ראו עיניך במעמד הנכבד ההוא לבניך ולבני בניך עד עולם ... והתועלת במצוה הזאת גדולה מאד ... כי כשנעתיק גם כן הדבר לבנינו ידעו שהיה הדבר אמת בלא ספק כאלו ראוהו כל הדורות, כי לא נעיד שקר לבנינו ... והם לא יסתפקו כלל בעדותנו שנעיד להם, אבל יאמינו בודאי שראינו כולנו בעינינו, וכל מה שספרנו להם.

**רמב"ן דברים ד:ט**

The views of these thinkers represent the consensus that the revelation at Sinai is vital to Jewish belief. To summarize them - according to Halevi, the revelation at Sinai is more conclusive proof of the existence of God and the truth of Judaism than rational argument. For Maimonides, the Jewish nation's belief in Moses and the Torah was not absolute until the Sinaitic revelation. Nahmanides stresses the importance of the transmission of this belief to future generations, because of the patent veracity of eyewitness testimony coupled with received tradition.

Even as we live in the modern world and attempt to approach it rationally in the philosophical sense, let us rejoice in the underlying basis of our faith. Through the study and discussion of Torah, we must strengthen the memory of the revelation at Sinai, this cornerstone of our faith. At the same time, we look forward to the day when we will celebrate fully *all* aspects of *Shavuot* - the *minhah hadashah* commemorating the harvest, the *Bikkurim* when we will bring our first fruits, as well as *Azeret*, the conclusion of the counting of the *Omer*, and *Matan Torah*.

<sup>42</sup> Ch. B. Chavel, *Commentary on the Torah by Ramban*, Vol 5: 53-54.