



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Shavuot 5768

By Rabbi Gordon Tucker

What we are accustomed to calling “Shavuot” or “Chag Ha-Shavuot” (“The Pilgrimage of Weeks,” since it falls seven weeks after the first day of Passover) was known in the Torah by two additional names:

- (1) “Chag Ha-Katzir” (“The Harvest Pilgrimage”¹), because it came at the time of year when the work of harvesting the year’s produce was beginning; and
- (2) “Yom Ha-Bikkurim” (“The Day of First Fruits”), because it was the occasion on which the first yields of the major crops were set aside to be brought on a pilgrimage to the Temple and presented to the priests with a declaration of acknowledgment to God.

Both of these alternate names for the festival turn our attention to deeply important ethical lessons associated with Shavuot, and we shall look at each of them in turn.

The Shavuot season was actually inaugurated on the second day of Passover, with the offering at the Temple of a token amount of the early barley harvest and the launching of the seven week count. When many more crops had begun to ripen seven weeks later, the farmer’s obligation to offer the first fruits took effect. This ritual (beautifully and movingly spelled out in the 26th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy) was clearly meant to be a timely reminder that we are neither outright owners of our land, nor as self-sufficient as our self-flattery suggests. Yes, we may be blessed with some control over the means of production (it was land in the ancient world, and it is both that and many other things today). And we may work long, hard hours to produce the income that we enjoy (just as farmers have always done in ancient and modern times). But precisely at the time in the cycle of production when a person’s mastery over his or her resources and destiny were liable to loom large in self-satisfaction, the ancient Israelite was asked to make a journey (in both space and time) in order to give up the first of the year’s produce. Most important, the gift was accompanied by an acknowledgment: “My father was a fugitive Aramean...he went down to Egypt...the Egyptians dealt harshly with us...The Lord freed us from Egypt... wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, O Lord, have given me” (Deuteronomy 26:5-10). The land is a gift, its ability to produce life and sustenance is a gift, and our own freedom, strength and intelligence to bend the world’s resources to our benefit are gifts as well, and they need to be ritually acknowledged. This is an ancient model for all time.

But there’s more. The Torah (in Leviticus 23), in the very midst of laying out the ritual requirements associated with the celebration of this festival, added the following exhortation: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.” Now most of the traditional commentators were puzzled by this verse, which seemed both redundant (Leviticus 19 had already given this command almost verbatim) and out of place in an enumeration of ritual/sacrificial observances. An astute and far-reaching solution to this puzzle, which I shall now paraphrase, was offered by Nahmanides (Moses ben Nahman – 13th Century). He noted – as we have above – that the rituals of this festival included those relating to the produce of the field (such as the offering of the

¹ A note to avoid confusion: Sukkot is often erroneously referred to as a harvest festival, but it is actually called by the Torah the Ingathering Pilgrimage, because it celebrates the *aftermath* of the harvest, the end of all agricultural work and the ingathering of the year’s inventory. It is Shavuot that is called the Harvest Pilgrimage, because it occurs during the time of the actual reaping of the crops

early barley grain and the offering of the first fruits of each crop). The concern of the Torah, said Nahmanides, was that one might conclude that since those ritual obligations had already been fulfilled from the harvest, no further obligations – such as those related to the poor – needed to be fulfilled, as if the field and its produce were now fully redeemed. Therefore, the apparent redundancy in the midst of the ritual obligations comes to remind us that although we may feel virtuous as a result of having properly acknowledged God's favor and gifts through the harvest offerings, our own piety can never be a substitute for the ultimate point of religion, which is care and concern for God's creatures. The corner of the field, and the gleanings, must still be left for those in need.

Judaism was – and is – eternally concerned that human nature will cause those of us who are well off to say “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me” (Deuteronomy 8:17). The rituals of Shavuot forced the beneficiaries of the blessings of affluence to acknowledge the true source of those gifts. But more than that: Shavuot came with a profound ethical reminder that those gifts are rarely, if ever, earned *before* the fact, since they are largely the result of chance and inheritance. They can be earned only *after* the fact, by proving ourselves to be good stewards of the wealth with which we have been entrusted. And that we can do in only one way – by never forgetting God's less fortunate children, and by using our resources to lift them up. That, to paraphrase another famous prophecy, is “the kind of festival that God has chosen” (Isaiah 58:6-8).



Gordon Tucker has been the Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY since August 1994. He is, concurrently, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Jewish Philosophy at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He is also Honorary Chairman of the Board of the Masorti Foundation for Conservative Judaism in Israel. Rabbi Tucker is married to Amy E. Cohn, and has three children – Ethan (married to Ariela Migdal), Becky, and Micah, and two grandchildren.

For more information, educational resources and the latest ways to take action:

www.ajws.org

45 W. 36th Street New York, NY 10018

212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/holidays.

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.