



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## Shavuot 5772 By Jerry Silverman

Judaism's core lies in community. On Shavuot, the "time of the giving of our law," we gather together to receive the Torah, making a covenant with God, in the name of the Jewish People. We are given the Torah and 613 commandments to build our community, our relationship with God and our relationships with one another.

The commandments themselves further expand upon the notion of community, culminating in the 613<sup>th</sup> commandment, which says that every Jew is responsible for writing part of the *Sefer Torah* (Deuteronomy 31:19). In a long list of *mitzvot*, filled with the quintessential laws of Judaism, God chose to conclude with the commandment for us all to play a role in laying the foundation of the Jewish People. No one person can write the *Sefer Torah* alone; God commands each one of us to participate in the process, and to be a part of building the Jewish community.

On Shavuot we read the Book of Ruth, where we learn what it means to be part of that community, and to care for one other and for the strangers among us. As the story goes, Ruth, a Moabite, is a foreigner who discovers a sense of belonging among a people not her own. After the death of her Jewish husband she finds kindness in Naomi, her mother-in-law, and love in Boaz, an Israelite farmer who allows her to gather from his crop to prevent her from going hungry. The Jewish people offer Ruth compassion, protection and goodwill, and welcome her into the community.

The story of Shavuot is as meaningful today as it has been across the generations. The world is filled with religions, cultures and populations that observe different laws and follow different traditions. Yet, we are all part of a global community. No matter where we live, what language we speak or what religion we follow, we all deserve life, integrity and security. We cannot avert our eyes when somebody lacks those basic needs.

Like Judaism itself, the core of Jewish Federations is about community. As I read about today's profound challenges around the world—famines that take the lives of children, disease that threatens entire communities, violence that is robbing so many millions of their right to live peacefully—I am reminded of our duty to care for those in our own community, and in the world at large. The Torah both obligates us to take care of our own, and also to reach out to the stranger who may be suffering.

The Torah reminds us to "remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 16:12). We should all see ourselves as if we had just set forth from Egypt, and feel the pain of those who suffer and remain enslaved today. This, in essence, is the mission of Jewish Federations and of American Jewish

World Service: to protect and enhance our global community, to mobilize our financial and social resources for those in need, and to take responsibility for each other today in order to prevent suffering and enslavement tomorrow.

On Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates the receiving of the Torah, let us renew our covenant with God; let us be inspired by the story of Ruth; let us help those who face incredible challenges; and let us care for those in need throughout our community and around the world.



**Jerry (Gerrald) Silverman** is president and CEO of The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA). He is a highly experienced leader in the North American Jewish community and a longtime corporate executive. Before joining JFNA, Jerry served as president of the Foundation for Jewish Camp, which is dedicated to supporting nonprofit Jewish summer camps. Prior to that, he held executive positions at the Stride Rite Corp. and Levi Strauss & Co. Over the years, he has served on the boards of a range of Jewish organizations. Jerry is married to Erica Silverman and is the father of five children.

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