



Shavuot Sinai Summons *Torah Reflections for Shavuot* May 4-5, 2014 6-7 Sivan 5774

Two dozen years ago as a rabbinic student I remember climbing Mt Sinai. Israel had just given back much of the Sinai desert in its quest for peace and Sinai was now in Egyptian hands. After spending a restless night at the rundown youth hostel, we awoke at two in the morning in order to hike up the mountain in time for sunrise. I remember the long and arduous hike up the mountain and the pressure to hurry as dawn approached. We sprinted the last quarter mile to greet the first rays of sun striking the horizon. From the summit, I was awestruck with wonder as I experienced the majesty of Sinai's dawn. I reflected on what it was like for our ancestors to experience the miracle of the giving of the Torah at Sinai over 3200 years ago at this season when we celebrate the festival of Shavuot.

Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, might easily be overlooked in the gloriousness of late spring. And yet Shavuot, alias *Hag Ha-Bikurim*--Festival of the First Fruits, *Hag HaKatsir*--Festival of the Harvest, and *Zeman Matan Torateinu*--The time of the Giving of our Torah, has a timeless message of healing for those willing to delve into its essence.

In Biblical times, people made a special pilgrimage to Jerusalem bringing *bikurim* or first fruits of their crops in special baskets to the Temple as an offering of their blessings to God. They also celebrated the late spring wheat harvest with this Festival of thanksgiving. Today, on the sixth and seventh of the Hebrew month of Sivan, the Book of Ruth is read. Like the Book of Ruth, Shavuot is connected to Passover in both its agricultural and historical aspects: as the end of the grain harvest season and as the celebration of a free people receiving the Torah (which as we know from singing together all those *dayeinu's* was the *raison d'être* of the Exodus). According to our tradition, the entire Israelite people stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai to witness God's revelation and receive the Torah. We all stood at Sinai; and through the transcendent nature of that epic moment, we all stand at Sinai again today to receive the Torah directly.

But how do we relate to Sinai when we are all out of sorts with illness, tragedies or disappointments? The timeless wisdom of revelation can easily be overlooked in times of trouble. Why does a God who revealed Himself over three millennia ago seem so far away to us just when we

need God? Maybe we need to give of our first fruits by giving to others with deeds of loving kindness or harvesting our blessings with gratitude, or occupying ourselves in sacred study, as a pathway toward the majesty of divine revelation. For the Torah was given to the Israelite people as a holy community and we need relationship to make it live. Unmitigated kindness to others, thankfulness for what we have, and lifelong learning, are keys to experiencing Sinai, ever-new, today.

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The Festival of Shavuot is observed this year beginning Tuesday, May 3rd, in the evening.



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