



Bamidbar / Shavuot

This week, we are fortunate to begin the fourth book of the Torah, with Parshat Bamidbar. Right at the beginning, G-d asks Moshe to take a count of all the Jewish people. The word used for counting, "Naso," literally means to "raise up." Firstly, why that choice of words, as opposed to just plain "count?" And secondly, why does Moshe have to do this task? Can't a lesser individual take care of it?

The answer is that this counting is not just a "census," like that performed every ten years by the government. When individuals would appear before Moshe and Aaron to be "counted," they would be receiving personal attention from the great leaders of the nation. They would receive a blessing from them; they would receive advice, and if necessary, rebuke from them. By means of this process, each person became that much more spiritually "uplifted," hence the choice of the word meaning to lift up. When the general masses of the country are counted, it serves solely as a statistic, a point of information that may or may not prove valuable to anybody. But when the Jews are counted, it is an expression of love by G-d, and an opportunity to raise ourselves to even greater heights!

Shavuot

Shavuot is one of the most important days of the Jewish year. On Shavuot the whole nation stood together at Mount Sinai and God gave them the Torah. The same Torah we have today!

A wonderful thing happened when they stood together at that mountain. They felt an awesome unity. In the presence of God, everyone forgot their selfish feelings and they all cared about each other just as much as they cared about themselves. They were like "one person with one heart."

Every year since then, for over 3000 years, we try to recreate these feelings of unity on Shavuot. We try to appreciate the special gift of the Torah, and remember that when we all look out for each other, amazing things can happen.

HOW TO CELEBRATE

Perhaps the reason for the relative obscurity of Shavuot is because this holiday has no obvious "symbols" of the day -- i.e. no Shofar, no Sukkah, no Chanukah Menorah.

On Shavuot, there are no symbols to distract us from the central focus of Jewish life, the Torah. So how do we commemorate Shavuot? It is a widespread custom to stay up the entire night (the first night) learning Torah. And since Torah is the way to self-perfection, the Shavuot night learning is called Tikkun Leil Shavuot, which means "an act of self-perfection on the night of Shavuot."



At synagogue services on the second morning of Shavuot, we read the Biblical book of Ruth. Ruth was a non-Jewish woman whose love for God and Torah led her to convert to Judaism. The Torah intimates that the souls of eventual converts were also present at Sinai, as it says, "I am making [the covenant] both with those here today before the Lord our God, and also with those not here today." (Deut. 29:13)

Ruth has a further connection to Shavuot, in that she became the ancestor of King David, who was born on Shavuot, and died on Shavuot.

On Shavuot, it is customary to decorate the synagogue with branches and flowers. This is because Mount Sinai blossomed with flowers on the day the Torah was given. The Bible also associates Shavuot with the harvest of wheat and fruits, and marks the bringing of the first fruits to the Holy Temple as an expression of thanksgiving.

DAIRY FOODS

There is a commonly practiced Jewish tradition of eating dairy foods on Shavuot. There are a few reasons given, the following is one of the main ones. Upon receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, the Jews immediately became obligated in the laws of Sh'chita – the proper, kosher slaughter of animals. Since they did not have time to prepare kosher meat nor did they know how to do it properly, they ate dairy instead.

Enjoy the holiday!

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!
Rabbi Cohen