

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

Shavuot: The Holiday That Nurtures the Soul



This Saturday evening, Jews worldwide will commence the celebration of the holiday of Shavuot and increase their prayers for peace in Israel. Shavuot is one of three major Jewish festivals. It commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai 3,334 years ago. This event took place fifty days after Passover when the Jews were freed from Egyptian slavery.

The word Shavuot means “weeks” and marks the completion of the seven weeks [the 49 days] between Passover and Shavuot, during which the Jewish people prepared to receive the Torah. During this period, they refined themselves spiritually to enter into an eternal covenant with God with the receiving of the Torah on the fiftieth day.

Shavuot also means “oaths,” which alludes to the giving of the Torah when the Jewish people and God exchanged oaths to establish an everlasting covenant that will never be forsaken. Each year on this day, we celebrate and renew our acceptance of God's gift of the Torah and our eternal bond with Him.

There are several interesting customs associated with this holiday. On the first evening of the holiday, we stay up all night learning Torah. The next day, we read the Ten Commandments and the book of Ruth. There is also a custom to eat dairy milk products, especially cheesecake. The custom of learning is appropriate for the holiday that commemorates the giving of the Torah. Staying up all night is considered a “rectification” [tikun] for the Jewish people having fallen asleep the night before receiving the Torah, rather than staying awake in anticipation.

However, the custom of eating dairy products is surprising. There are several explanations for this custom. Our sages point out that the numerical value of the letters which form the Hebrew word for milk [חלב-*chalav*] is forty, alluding to the 40 days Moses was on Mount Sinai to receive the entire Torah.

Like milk, the Torah nourishes our essence.

I would like to suggest what I consider a more personal and spiritual reason for this custom. Unlike meat that nourishes the flesh, milk is full of calcium, which nourishes the bones. The Hebrew for bones is “עצמות-*atzmot*” which is also the word that means “essence.” Therefore, the custom of eating dairy products on Shavuot signifies that we absorb the Torah, which nourishes our “essence.”

Additionally, milk is the most basic food a mother can share with her baby. While nursing, a mother literally gives of her essence and nurtures the essence of her child. This relationship between mother and child parallels God's personal bond with and love for His children, the Jewish people.

On Shavuot, we celebrate this personal relationship with God when He gives over His essence [the Torah] and we absorb it into the essence of our soul. May God bless the Jewish people and bring peace to Israel.

Happy Holiday and Chag Sameach,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

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