



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Shavuot 5771

By Blu Greenberg

At one level, the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals—Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot—celebrate our most intimate communal moments. Beginning with their agricultural origins, the festivals summon up images of tribal relatives working the land together and Israelites traveling to the Jerusalem Temple in family units, arriving en masse at appointed times so as to connect to one another as members of the same covenantal community. On the festivals, echoes of one people sharing a common experience of planting, harvesting and giving thanks to God reverberate in our memories.

The second set of ties that bind us together are the historical narratives of the festivals. Each has its own strong story. Pesach recounts the miracle of liberation of our slave ancestors, a story we not only tell at the *seder*, but also carry with us every day in our prayers and every week in our Shabbat rituals. Sukkot represents our people's journey towards freedom in the Promised Land—a vulnerable minority huddling together in booths and placing our faith in God. Shavuot, too, is understood by the Rabbis of the Talmud to commemorate Revelation at Sinai, that singular event that shaped the lives of our people forever.

All of these themes represent Jewish particularity through its peak experiences. Yet, at another level, the holidays also represent the ways in which Judaism looks outward to the rest of the world. The Talmud records the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer that the 70 sacrifices brought on Sukkot were brought on behalf of the 70 nations of the world (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 55b). Similarly, the experience and memory of slavery that we recall on Pesach serves as the basis for the many commandments that require us to care for the stranger.

Shavuot, too, exemplifies this external focus, both in its agricultural and historical narratives. The Torah links Shavuot to the laws of *leket*, *shich'chah* and *peah*—laws of controlled and compassionate harvesting. Immediately following the laws of Shavuot (related to the harvest, sacrifices, first fruits and the waving of the loaves), the Torah issues this commandment: "When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. Leave it for the poor and the strangers living among you. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:22). Although these laws of *leket* are given elsewhere in the Torah, here they are joined to the very sanctity of the Shavuot festival.

Through this juxtaposition—of laws on holiday observance with laws on how to care for those at the margins—the Torah teaches us that even as we are heady with the harvest, we must focus our attention outward, remembering to take care of those who do not enjoy such gifts. And we must do it not as a handout, but as standard operating procedure, in a manner that maximizes the dignity of the other who relies on our leavings for survival. These are powerful laws that form the basis of Judaism's prescription for social justice.

Their significance is emphasized by a unique universality that transcends time and place. Most of the agricultural laws of the Torah are tied to existence in the Land of Israel. Thus, when the Jewish Temple was ruined, the Commonwealth destroyed and the people driven from the land, these agricultural laws became non-operational. But not so the laws of *leket*, of compassionate harvesting. The Rabbis determined that the laws requiring agricultural gifts

to the poor (*matanot laevyonim*) should remain effective wherever Jews live. These are clearly considered universal principles that must be upheld regardless of whether or not we function as an agricultural society in our own homeland. To emphasize this, the Rabbis also expanded the concept of agricultural gifts to the poor to include monetary ones, with holiday celebration requiring *matanot laevyonim* in any form.

Perhaps the expanded laws of *leket* speak more to our generation than to any other, as the sense of global interdependence, along with the advent of the rapid-information highway, make us aware of the poor and the stranger far beyond our own “fields.” Jews now have the means to be responsible for those less fortunate, even if they do not seek us out for gleanings directly, or don’t ever cross our line of vision.

Shavuot’s historical connection to *Matan Torah*, the giving of the whole Torah, also affirms that responsibility for others is at the core of Jewish faith. With its central reading of the Ten Commandments, half of which are laws of morality, Shavuot confirms our primary obligations to social justice. Indeed, Shavuot reminds us that the Torah teaches us not only the laws of compassionate harvesting but so many other ethical principles: do not be a bystander, do not ignore the cries of the oppressed, do not hold back the day-worker’s pay beyond evening, do not engage in slander, pay heed to those who have no one to speak for them. These and many other laws, along with the laws of *tzedakah* and *chesed*, serve as our ethical standard, reinforcing the need for constant sensitivity to the other in need.

Thus, even as we celebrate our most intimate communal bonds, Shavuot teaches us how to act responsibly in the wider world—to follow the Torah’s instructions to lead ethical lives by extending our definition of community to include the poor, the stranger and all others in need.



Blu Greenberg has long been active in Jewish feminism and is the founder of JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance). She serves on several Jewish organizational boards and is involved in interfaith dialogue. Her books include *On Women and Judaism*, *How to Run A Traditional Jewish Household* and *King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* (with Rev. Linda Tarry-Chard). She is married to Rabbi Irving Greenberg, and they have five children and 21 grandchildren.

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

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

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

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.