

Although Pesach and Sukkot are beloved holidays even for non-observant Jews, Shavuot, the middle holiday of the *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals, is the least known and least observed. Originally, all three pilgrimage festivals involved traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem to bring offerings from the harvest. “Three times in the year, every one of your males shall appear before the Lord, your God, in the place He will choose: On the Festival of Matzot, and on the Festival of Weeks, and on the Festival of Sukkot, and he shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed. (Deuteronomy 16:16) Unlike Pesach, which commemorates the Exodus as well as planting time and the beginning of the barley harvest, and Sukkot, which commemorates the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land in addition to the final harvest of the season, Shavuot had no religious or historical significance. It was linked to Pesach through the daily offerings of an *omer* of barley, and honored the beginning of the wheat harvest and the first fruits of other food crops. In other words, it was simply a harvest festival, and to ensure its survival after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the rabbis had to find new relevance for it. They found it in Exodus 19, Verse 1: “In the third month of the children of Israel’s departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai.” Chapters 19 and 20 describe the theophany at Mount Sinai, when HaShem reveals what are commonly called the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites. However, there is no mention of a festival to commemorate this event, and other than the laws concerning their corresponding Temple offerings, there are no *mitzvot* connected with Shavuot. The rabbis discuss this in Babylonian Talmud Tractate Rosh HaShanah 16a: “At four times of the year the world is judged: On Pesach grain; on Shavuot concerning fruits that grow on a tree; on Rosh HaShanah, mankind ...; and on Sukkot concerning water. ... And for what reason did the Torah say, ‘Bring the offering of the two loaves from the new wheat on Shavuot?’ It is because Shavuot is the time of the fruits that grow on a tree, when it begins to ripen, and therefore the Holy One of Blessing said, ‘Bring the offerings of the two loaves before Me on Shavuot so that the fruits that grow on a tree will be blessed for you.’” They obviously saw the necessity of continuing to beseech HaShem to guarantee good growing conditions for the food that sustained them by showing gratitude not only for what they already had, but also in advance, for the coming seasons. And by linking Shavuot to the giving of the Torah, they also completed the story of our religious history: Pesach is the beginning of our peoplehood; Shavuot cements our eternal covenant with HaShem through the commandments and teachings of the Torah, and Sukkot commemorates the 40-year trek through the wilderness to the land promised by HaShem to Abraham and his descendants. But in addition to finding a new purpose for this holiday, the rabbis also had to set a date for it, which proved even more difficult before there was a fixed calendar. Lively debates in Tractate Shabbat 86-87 and Menachot 65-66 attest to this. When the calendar was fixed around 350 CE, the date of 6. Sivan was established. However, Shavuot continues to have a bit of a split personality. It is intrinsically linked to Pesach through the *omer* count, and through the words to be said by each man when making his offering of first fruits (Deuteronomy 26:5), which we know well from the Pesach Haggadah: “*arami oved avi*,” translated either as “An Aramean (meaning Lavan) sought to destroy my father,” as the rabbis interpreted it; or “My father was a wandering Aramean.” In this role, as the culmination of Pesach, it is referred to as *Atzeret*. The Torah uses this word, which means to hold back, to define the 8<sup>th</sup> day of Sukkot, or Shemini Atzeret. Both are seen as extra days to linger a bit in order to prolong the joy of the holidays to which they are attached. But the rabbis also consider them to be festivals in their own right. This is especially important for Shavuot, which, despite its obvious connection to Pesach, commemorates the giving of the Torah, without which the other two festivals would have become irrelevant. Sephardic Jews created a beautiful image of Shavuot as the marriage between HaShem and Israel, with the story of Pesach symbolizing HaShem’s courtship of Israel, Shavuot as the wedding ceremony, and Sukkot as establishing a Jewish household. There is even a custom of writing a *ketubah* (marriage contract), to be read during the Torah service between opening the Ark and removing the Torah scroll. In the Book of Jubilees, an early work dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Shavuot was already hotly disputed among the different Jewish sects and in the process of being reshaped as a festival of revelation and establishment of the covenant between HaShem and Israel. Indeed, some scholars read the Hebrew spelling of the holiday’s name there as *shevuot* (vows). But the rabbis of the Talmud chose to emphasize the giving of the Torah, bringing to a close our role as a kingdom of priests and charting a new course as people of the Book – as people who are not just “holy to HaShem,” but also individuals as diverse as the places from which we come and the Jewish traditions we have established, who study HaShem’s Torah in order to find relevance within it for our own lives today. In doing so, we carry on the tradition of those early thinkers, learning from them and adding our own gleanings to the wonderful body of Jewish wisdom.