

SHAVUOT שבועות (Feast of Weeks/ Pentecost)

Exodus 19:1 – 20:23, Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12, John 1:32-34, Matthew 3:11 – 17

A Messianic Jewish commentary
By Hannah Nesher www.voiceforisrael.net

"You shall celebrate the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), that is, the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the turn of the year." (Exodus 34:22)

The festival of Shavuot is one of the most amazing and wonderful of God's appointed times (moadim); since on this day God gave us not just one, but two of His most precious gifts: The Torah and the Spirit.

Yeshua promised that there would come a day when true worshippers would worship God - in spirit and in truth. These are the kind of worshippers God is seeking. (John 4:23)



We need both Truth and Spirit. I've heard it said, "If we have only the Word we *dry up*; if only the Spirit we *blow up*; but if we have both the Word and the Spirit we *grow up*." How true!

The Torah is the Word of Truth (D'var Emet); but it is the Spirit that gives us the grace to live out that Truth in our daily lives. God said to the nation of Israel, **"And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."** (Ezekiel 36:27)

While many Christians celebrate Pentecost as the time of the 'pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the church'; many do not realize that this special day originates in the ancient biblical festival called Shavuot (meaning 'weeks' in Hebrew).

What is Shavuot all about?

Shavuot (Festival of Weeks) commemorates the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah (*Matan Torah*) to the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai¹. It is one of the three pilgrimage festivals ('*Shalosh Regalim*' שלוש רגלים) in which the Israelites living in Judah would make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem as commanded in the Torah.²

¹ Although not explicitly stated in the biblical text, Shavuot is traditionally considered to be the day Israel received the Torah at Mt. Sinai

² Exodus 23:14-17

It is also an agricultural festival which marks the end of the ‘counting of the Omer’ which is the seven week period beginning on the day after the first Sabbath of Passover and ending on Shavuot.

“From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven Shabbatot.” (Leviticus 23:15)

The Torah commanded the Jewish people to count the days - from the time of this ‘wave offering’ seven weeks ($7 \times 7 = 49$ days) - until the evening of the festival of **Shavuot** on day 50. Fifty is the number of Jubilee, representing freedom and liberation.



Modern day wheat sheaves.

What is the connection between Passover and Shavuot? Why is this day so amazing that we would be commanded to ‘count the days’ until it arrives? It was on Passover that the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt; but on Shavuot that they received the Torah and became a nation committed to serving God.

As worshippers of the one true God, and followers of the Messiah Yeshua, we must also go through the same process. Once we receive eternal salvation, we cannot miss this essential pit stop at Mount Sinai on our way to the Promised Land. We are set free from slavery to the Kingdom of darkness on the day we receive Yeshua as our Passover Lamb who was slain; but then we must also receive God’s Torah and become committed to living according to His commandments.

“But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children’s children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them.” (Psalm 103:17-18)

Shavuot – Giving of the Torah (Matan Torah)

Traditionally, Shavuot is considered the time of the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. If Passover (Pesach) was the birth of the nation of Israel, then Shavuot is its Bar Mitzvah .

This is the coming of age ceremony by which a Jewish son or daughter of Israel accepts, as part of their own personal faith, the commandments (mitzvot) of God as written in the Torah.



Bar Mitzvah boy reads from Torah scroll Jerusalem (photo: www.goisrael.com)

Seven weeks after their miraculous exodus from Egypt, Israel received the Torah at Mt. Sinai, which meant not only accepting the privilege but also the responsibility as living as God's set-apart people. The Torah became the agreed upon standard of behavior or code of conduct for both the native born Israelite and the stranger who came to join them.

“One law (torah achat) and one custom shall be for you and for the stranger who dwells with you.” (Numbers 15:16)



Moses on Mount Sinai by Jean-Léon Gérôme

The Torah is God's written instructions to His people. The entirety of Psalm 119 extols the beauty, blessing and liberty contained in living according to God's word in the Torah.

“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the Torah of the Lord....so I shall keep Your Torah continually, forever and ever, and I will walk at liberty...I delight in Your Torah...Great peace have those who love Your Torah and nothing causes them to stumble.” (Psalm 119)

When we meditate upon and observe to keep the ways of Torah, we will enjoy prosperity and good success. (Joshua 1:8) Keeping Torah is not how we may be saved; it is how we live because we are saved.

The Torah, however, is so much more than a list of rules. Mount Sinai was not simply a place to receive the law, but rather the sealing of a Covenant between God and His people, as a Bridegroom with His beloved Bride. Love is the whole point of the Torah.

The Bridegroom and the Bride

Far from a legalistic directive handed down to Moses from the mountain top, this Divine encounter between God and His people contains many elements of a traditional Jewish wedding, including the chuppah (marriage canopy), ketubah (marriage contract), shofar, wedding ring and wedding gift.

- The cloud covering represented the Jewish wedding canopy – the chuppah



Timothy & Victoria standing under the chuppah



The Ketubah

- The shofar call announced the arrival of the Bridegroom
- The Ketubah – the Marriage contract outlining privileges and responsibilities of each party
- The vows – “I do!”
- The wedding ring (sign of betrothal) – 7th day Sabbath
- The wedding gift – the Land of Israel

Now that God has given us the Torah, He has entrusted us with a sacred mission – to spread the light of Torah to all the nations. The message of Shavuot is that we are significant; we have been chosen, appointed, and anointed to promote God’s purposes in this world.

We have each been given a holy calling to bring more love, peace, kindness, and justice to this world – to be a shining light in the midst of a dark and perverse generation. When we understand and come to realize that we have actually been selected by God to reveal God’s beauty and wonderful attributes to the world, then we have discovered the secret to a truly meaningful and fulfilling life.

Yeshua’s final words to us were to go and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them all God has commanded us in the Torah. Let us fulfill that holy commission in the power of the Holy Spirit.

“Go and make disciples of all nations, immersing them in the mikvah in the name of the Father (Av) and Son (Ben) and Holy Spirit (Ruach Hakodesh), teaching them to observe all the things I have commanded you.....” (Matthew 28:19-20)

SHAVUOT – A TIME OF GIVING

Shavuot is primarily about giving. God is a great giver! On Shavuot He gave us the Torah and the Spirit - priceless gifts! He also gave us His beloved Son: “God so loved the world that HE GAVE His only begotten son that whoever shall believe in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

What greater gifts could God have possibly given us? God gave us His very best and He asks us to give back out of all He has blessed us with. Seven weeks after the start of the harvest, at Shavuot, the ancient people of Israel were commanded to bring a free will offering to the Lord in proportion with how much God had blessed their harvest.

“Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.” (Deuteronomy 16:9-10)



Giving of First-Fruits (Bikkurim)

Shavuot was the appointed time for the Jewish people to bring their First-fruits (*Bikkurim*) offerings to the Temple. No one was to appear empty handed.

“Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) and the Festival of Tabernacles.

No one should appear before the LORD empty-handed: Each of you must bring a gift in proportion to the way the LORD your God has blessed you.” (Deuteronomy 16:16-17)



Israeli school children re-enact bringing the First-fruits to Jerusalem

Shavuot is also the time for us also to give a special free-will offering or gift to the Lord through our home kehilla (congregation) or a ministry that we support materially according to how the Lord has blessed us. The apostle Paul told the Gentile church that they have an obligation to give materially toward the Jewish ‘saints’ (believers in Yeshua) in exchange for all they have received materially through the Jewish people.

“For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things.” (Romans 15:26-27)

The *Bikkurim* (*first-fruits*) were brought from the Seven Species for which the Land of Israel is praised: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates (Deuteronomy 8:8).

The first-fruits of each of these species would be placed in decorated baskets and loaded onto oxen whose horns would be laced with garlands of flowers.

As the farmer would lead his entourage through cities and town enroute to Jerusalem, there would be music and dancing to accompany the grand procession.



The Seven Agricultural Species of Israel



Hannah wearing zer prachim

Wearing these garlands of flowers (called ‘zer prachim’ – floral head-wreath) is a Shavuot custom practiced in the Land of Israel.

Although the Israelites were intended to rejoice over the goodness of God to their own families, God repeatedly exhorted His people to remember the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows.

“And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you.” (Deuteronomy 16:11)

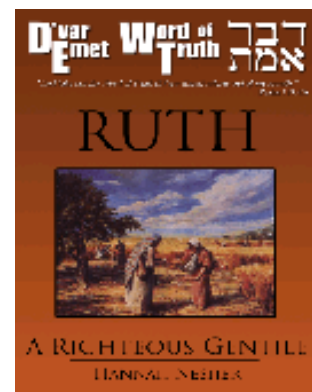
The blessings God has blessed us with are not for us to hoard or use only for our own families, but to share with others who are in need. It was for this reason that God commanded the people not to harvest the entire field but to leave the corners of their fields for the poor.

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 23:22)

Shavuot and the Book of Ruth

Because of its agricultural theme, the traditional Scripture reading for Shavuot is the entire book of Ruth. The story of this Moabite who gleaned in the fields of Boaz and eventually married him is one of the most beautiful and romantic love stories in the Bible. A Jewish tradition, therefore, is to stay up all night studying the book of Ruth on the first night of Shavuot.

Some Christians are unfamiliar with this brief book from the Old Testament, but the story of Ruth is so rich in prophetic meaning for the Church regarding their relationship with Israel and the Jewish people.³



Ruth DVD

In a nutshell, Naomi represents the Jewish people who left the land, lived in exile, and lost their entire families there (in the Holocaust). They have returned with nothing but bitterness and sorrow.

Ruth and Orpah, Naomi's two Gentile daughters-in-law represent the two types of the Christian Church – one who agrees to abandon Naomi in her time of need; and the other who refuses to leave her. Ruth pleads with her mother-in-law to be allowed to stay with her even until death. Boaz represents our Kinsmen-Redeemer, Yeshua Hamashiach (the Messiah).

Ruth came back to Israel with her Jewish mother in law, Naomi, and vowed to her, **“Your people will be my people and your God my God.”** (Ruth 1:16)



Ruth in Boaz's Field

Naomi's other daughter in law, Orpah, kissed her goodbye and left her. Ruth means 'faithful friend' but Orpah, in contrast, means 'back of the neck'.

³ This message is available on a DVD, Ruth a Righteous Gentile, or in the book, Messiah Revealed in Shavuot by the author through our website or by request: www.voiceforisrael.net

These two Gentile women, related to Naomi through marriage, may represent the two types of the Gentile, Christian Church and their relationship to Israel. One sticks with her to the end; but the other walks away in her time of greatest need.

Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz, her ‘kinsmen redeemer’, who represents Yeshua, our Redeemer. When Ruth asked why he had taken special notice of her, a foreigner, Boaz replied,

“It has been fully reported to me the kindness you have shown to your mother in law...”
(Ruth 2:11)

Our Kinsmen-Redeemer, Yeshua, also takes notice of the kindness you show to the Jewish people, like Naomi, who have lost everyone and everything in exile and have come back to the Land. Thank you for being a faithful friend like Ruth to the people of Israel.

“May a full reward be given you by the God of Israel under whose wings you have taken refuge” (Ruth 2:12)

Give and it Shall be Given

In ancient, Biblical times, there were two types of harvesters in the fields: those hired workers who harvested the main crops in the center of the fields and the poor who gleaned in the corners. The primary harvesters would fill their baskets, carry them over to the barn or wagon, dump them and go back for another load.

They didn’t really care how full their baskets were, as they were paid by the hour, and therefore only needed to look like they were keeping busy. With the poor, however, it was a different story. Most had likely walked quite a long distance to arrive at the field and would have an equally long ways to carry back the grain they had gleaned from the field.

Whatever amount of food they could stuff into their baskets would be the amount of food available to feed their families. It could be a matter of life and death if they could sufficiently fill their baskets. Therefore they first made sure to put in a good measure (filled to the brim); then they would press it down to make room for more. After adding more to the basket, it would then be shaken together and then heaped up until it spilled over the sides.

This is the true meaning of “**good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over...**” Anyone listening to Yeshua’s words in ancient Israel would have understood the meaning of these words.⁴ He was saying that whatever we give, we’re going to get a whole lot more of the same in return. We always receive back more than we give.

“Give and it shall be given unto you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Luke 6:38)

⁴ The Blessed Life, Robert Morris

This scripture does not simply refer to material giving; but also and perhaps primarily, about giving mercy, grace, patience, forgiveness and love to others. Then it will come back running over and abundant into our lives. This is the context in which Yeshua gave us these Scriptures.

“Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”
(Luke 6: 36-37)

Other Shavuot Customs

Besides engaging in all night Torah study, there are several other Shavuot customs (called minhagim) which are not biblically mandated but simply Jewish traditions. One delicious custom is the eating of dairy products such as cheesecake, cheese blintzes and other Jewish delicacies.



Cheese [blintzes](#), typically eaten by [Ashkenazi Jews](#) on Shavuot.

My eldest daughter, Courtney, and her husband, Emanuel, actually fell in love at a Shavuot picnic in Israel. We think it was because of the delicious cheesecake she made for him! Maybe it was love at first *bite*. 😊

Another custom is to decorate homes and synagogues with greenery to remind us of Nature.

I still remember my mother bringing in leafy branches of trees to adorn the house and serving fish with dairy products for our festive meal rather than the usual beef or chicken.



Synagogue decorated with greenery for Shavuot

Shavuot in the New Testament

Most Christians are more familiar with the Greek name of Shavuot - ‘*Pentecost*’ – from the word ‘*pente*’, which means fifty (50). It was the fiftieth day when the Holy Spirit fell upon the Jews waiting in the upper room. Here the disciples and women waited and prayed in one accord:

"And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room...These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren." (Acts 1:13-14)



It is believed to have been this upper room where Yeshua held his 'last supper' of Passover with his disciples and where His followers waited for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them, as they had been instructed.

"And when the day of SHAVUOT was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." (Acts 2:1-2)

Yeshua told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit which the Father had promised.

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:4,5 &8)



We simply cannot be a light and witness for the Lord without the power of the Holy Spirit (Ruach Hakodesh). This power of the Holy Spirit came on Shavuot with rushing mighty wind and tongues of fire and they began to speak in other tongues (languages).

"When the day of Shavuot came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them." (Acts 2:2-4)



Pentecost Painting by Jean II Restout, photo Wikipedia

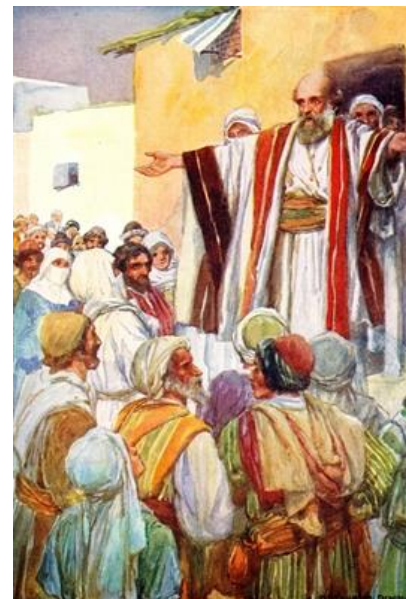
Although Shavuot is considered by many as the ‘birth of the Church’, the people who experienced the Holy Spirit (Ruach Hakodesh) at this time were God-fearing Jews from many nations: “**Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.**” (Acts 2:5)



One of the most amazing lessons from Shavuot in the New Testament shows how the law, used wrongly, can bring death, but with the Spirit, it brings life.

After receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai, three thousand souls perished because of the sin of the golden calf (Exodus 32:28)

However, on the same day of Shavuot, when the Ruach Hakodesh came, this same number of souls were saved! **Over three thousand souls were added to the community of Believers at Shavuot.** (Acts 2:41)



Worship of the Calf, by W. C. Simmonds

Peter addresses the Jews By Author Dixon

The Spirit of God reversed the destruction caused by the sin of man! Halleluyah!

Sharing all Things in Common – A Messianic Kibbutz

The first thing the new disciples did after receiving the Spirit of God was to form a **Messianic kibbutz** (communal lifestyle) where they shared all things in common. (Acts 2:44, 4:32) No one lived for their own selfish desires anymore but shared all they had with anyone in need.



Shavuot Celebration at Kibbutz Gan Shmuel

It has long been the vision of Messianic believers in the Land (including myself) to build a Messianic kibbutz based on this model of the first disciples. “Not by power or by might but by the Holy Spirit.” (Zechariah 4:6)

May we each experience the Holy Spirit in a fresh, new and powerful way this year on Shavuot, transforming our hearts, and making us more generous givers – as created in the image of God.

Messianic Believers in Israel traditionally hold nation-wide Shavuot picnics where Believers from all over the country come to worship the Lord together in one accord and celebrate the goodness of God, thanking Him for how much He has blessed us and our families.

Often, worship bands play music all day long; and in some congregations, people are invited to bring their offering to the Lord in the form of a song, a dance, or any other expression of gratitude.



Annual Messianic Shavuot picnic at Yad Hashmona, a Messianic moshav (village) near Jerusalem. The sign says, “In the day of the fullness of Shavuot they were gathered together with one heart”

May your Shavuot be filled to overflowing with the Spirit of the Living God, His power, His love, His mercy and forgiveness. And may we extend that same grace, out of gratitude for all He has blessed us with, to those around us.

Shalom from the land of Israel and Chag Shavuot Sameach (happy holidays).



About the Author:

Hannah Nesher grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and received her education in a religious Hebrew school in Canada. During a crisis pregnancy, she came to know Jesus (Yeshua) as her Messiah and Savior. She made aliyah (immigrated to Israel) and now teaches about the Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

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