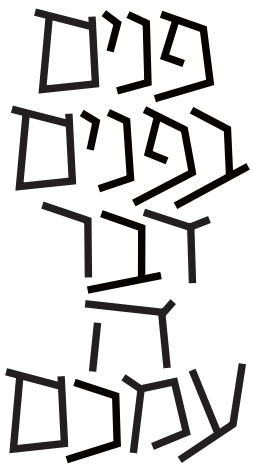
מחזור קורן לשבועות • מנהג אנגליה

The Koren Shavuot Maḥzor • Minhag Anglia

THE WEINSTEIN FAMILY EDITION

מחזור קורן לשבועות
THE KOREN SHAVUOT MAḤZOR



WITH INTRODUCTION, TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks שליט"א

MINHAG ANGLIA

Dayan Ivan Binstock שליט"א

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Dedicated

in loving memory of our dear parents

Nellie & Solo Grinberg ז״ל **Stella & Ernest Weinstein** ז״ל

תנצב״ה

by

Linda and Michael Weinstein

Adar Sheni 5776 (March 2016)

CONTENTS

זמן מתן תורתנו

The time of the giving of our Torah

Why does the Torah not explicitly associate the holiday of Shavuot with the giving of the Torah? The answer, says the Maharal, lies in the fact that Shavuot is a *ḥag* – a holiday on which we celebrate and rejoice. An explicit association of Shavuot with the giving of the Torah would constitute a commandment to rejoice about our having received the Torah. But happiness cannot be legislated – it must originate within us. Salvation from slavery is marked by Pesaḥ, and God's protection in the wilderness which we celebrate on Sukkot is obvious grounds for joy. Receiving the Torah might not appear to the casual observer as a reason to rejoice. It was left to the Jewish people, as a community and as individuals, to reach this conclusion on our own, to appreciate and celebrate the privilege of *Matan Torah* (Rabbi Yehuda Amital, זצ"ל). It is our hope that this *Koren Shavuot Maḥzor*, with its elucidating translations and thought-provoking commentaries, will help *Klal Yisrael* reach the understanding of the enormity of the gift we have received, enabling us to rejoice as that gift warrants.

The *Koren Shavuot Maḥzor* is a project of such scope, that it would have been virtually impossible without the partnership of Linda and Michael Weinstein of London who have dedicated this Maḥzor in memory of their late parents, of blessed memory, and to honour their tremendous commitment to Jewish education and practice. This commitment was handed down to Linda and Michael and the next generations of their family, whose own unassuming dedication to Jewish causes is not only a credit to their parents but also a great blessing to the Finchley Synagogue and the wider British community.

We could not have embarked on this project without the moral leadership and intellectual spark of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks provides an invaluable guide to the liturgy through his remarkable introduction, translation, and commentary. His work not only clarifies the text and explains the teachings of our sages, but uniquely and seamlessly weaves profound concepts of Judaism into the reality of contemporary life. It was our distinct privilege to work with Rabbi Sacks to create a Maḥzor that we believe appropriately reflects the complexity and depth of Jewish prayer.

Our gratitude also goes to Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, for his

Foreword to the *Minhag Anglia* edition as well as his support and friendship over the last twenty-five years. This edition owes much to Dayan Ivan Binstock, whose immense scholarship and understanding are exemplified in this restoration and modern evolution of *Minhag Anglia*. This distinct and important *Minhag* has been revitalised over the centuries, from the David Levi edition of 1794 and the Routledge Maḥzor of 1906. We are honoured that the Koren Maḥzor of 2016 joins this distinguished tradition. We thank the Dayan for his historic and remarkable achievement.

We only hope that all these contributions are matched by the scholarship, design, and typography that have been hallmarks of Koren Publishers Jerusalem for more than fifty years. Koren is privileged to have a small, but remarkably talented team of consummate and dedicated professionals. Rabbi David Fuchs supervised the textual aspects of the work. Rachel Meghnagi edited the English texts and Efrat Gross the Hebrew texts. Jessica Sacks supplied the superb translations of *Megillat Rut*, the Torah readings, and many of the *piyutim*. The text of the *mishnayot* for *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* was taken from the Noé edition of the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, with commentary and elucidation by Rav Adin (Even-Israel) Steinsaltz. Rabbi Eli Clark contributed the informative and useful Halakha Guide. We thank Esther Be'er for assembling and typesetting the texts.

This new edition of the Koren Maḥzor continues the Koren tradition of making the language of prayer more accessible, thus enhancing the prayer experience. One of the unique features of the Maḥzor is the use of typesetting to break up a prayer phrase-by-phrase – rather than using a block paragraph format – so that the reader will naturally pause at the correct places. No commas appear in the Hebrew text at the end of lines, but in the English translation, where linguistic clarity requires, we have retained the use of commas at the end of lines. Unlike other Hebrew/English *maḥzorim*, the Hebrew text is on the left-hand page and the English on the right. This arrangement preserves the distinctive "fanning out" effect of the Koren text and the beauty of the Koren layout.

We hope and pray that this Maḥzor, like all our publications, extends the vision of Koren's founder, Eliyahu Koren, to a new generation, to further *Avodat HaShem* for Jews everywhere.

Matthew Miller, Publisher
Jerusalem, 5776 (2016)

PREFACE TO THE MINHAG ANGLIA EDITION

The publication of the Koren Maḥzorim for Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur, Pesaḥ and Sukkot has made a significant impact on communities worldwide. The clarity of the Koren layout combined with Rabbi Lord Sacks' elegant translation and lucid and profound commentary, have transformed the synagogue prayer experience.

It has been a privilege to work with the Emeritus Chief Rabbi and the Koren team in preparing this Shavuot Maḥzor for the British community. As in the previous Maḥzorim, I have sought to retain the essential features of *Minhag Anglia* by basing myself on the Routledge Maḥzor, and updating it in line with the usages of the Singer's Prayer Book. At the same time I have tried to accommodate changes that have taken place in many communities over the years. I have benefited from the observations of many colleagues who shared their insights after the publication of the previous Maḥzorim and have helped tailor this Maḥzor to best serve the needs of Anglo-Jewry. In particular I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Rabbi Shlomo Katanka (author of *Sefer Makom Shenahagu*) whose extensive knowledge of *minhag* has helped in the clarification of some points.

Notwithstanding the fact that this is a Maḥzor for Anglo-Jewry, there are a number of instances where options are included for the visitor to Israel, in accordance with the Koren policy that their Maḥzorim should be fully suitable for those who find themselves in Israel for the *Ḥagim*.

As in the Maḥzorim for Pesaḥ and Sukkot, whilst the *Kerovot* (the *piyutim* inserted into the repetition of the Amida) have long been omitted in Anglo-Jewry, many communities say the *Ma'aravot* and these have been inserted in the main body of the Maḥzor.

There is a minor departure in this Maḥzor for the insertion of *Yatziv Pitgam*, in the Haftara for the second day of Shavuot, as compared with the Koren North American edition and some other contemporary Maḥzorim. In this Maḥzor, in line with the Routledge, *Yatziv Pitgam* is inserted after the first verse of the Haftara, not after the second verse. The Haftara for the second day of Shavuot is taken from the book of Habakkuk (*Megilla* 31a). Whereas the *Shulḥan Arukh* (494:2) has the Haftara beginning from chapter 2:20, the *Magen Avraham* (ad loc.) states

◂ that the custom

that the custom is to begin from the following verse, the beginning of chapter 3. The insertion of an Aramaic *piyut* is built on the old practice of reciting a *reshut* (a poetic request for permission) before beginning a *Targum* or translation in Aramaic by the *Meturgeman* (see commentary on page 377). This was done after the first verse that was read (*Megilla* 23b). Indeed, there are still communities today who insert *Akdamut* after the first verse of the first day's Torah reading, although the majority practice is to recite *Akdamut* before the Kohen makes his *berakha*. Even though the practice of reciting the Targum has lapsed, the *reshut* has remained for *Akdamut* and *Yatziv Pitgam*. Although the Talmud states that for a Haftara a *Meturgeman* would begin after three verses, this was not the case if the passage went over a paragraph break (ibid. 24a). Many older Maḥzorim began the Haftara at chapter 3 and inserted *Yatziv Pitgam* after the first verse. Indeed this was probably the original practice in England, as is evidenced in the *Memorbuch* of the Hambro Synagogue (1785). However, since it became the practice to start the Haftara with the last verse of chapter 2, it is deemed better to insert *Yatziv Pitgam* after the "new" first verse which is where a *Meturgeman* would have begun. This is the case in the Routledge Maḥzor and has been incorporated here. (See C. Tessler, *Hapiyut Yatziv Pitgam*, London 5772.)

Whereas there is a common practice from the time of the Rishonim to recite Ma'ariv before nightfall on Shabbat and Yom Tov in the summertime, there is a well-known custom of holding Ma'ariv after nightfall on the first night of Shavuot (see Guide to Shavuot, law 4). This originated in Poland and became widespread under the influence of the Shela (R. Isaiah Horowitz, 1565–1630). Nevertheless, many communities in Germany did not accept this ruling and continued to recite Ma'ariv at the earlier time on the first night of Shavuot. (This subject is discussed at length in B. Hamburger, *Sharashei Minhag Ashkenaz*, vol. 4, pp. 344–369.) A number of communities in Anglo-Jewry also continued the practice of an earlier service on the first night of Shavuot.

The second night of Shavuot poses particular questions with regard to the time of Ma'ariv, candle lighting, Kiddush and cooking. The ideal is to wait till nightfall (*Levush, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, 489:7). Nevertheless, given that Shavuot occurs in the summer, and nightfall in London at this time of year is never earlier than 9:30 p.m. and can be even later than 10:15 p.m.,

◂ many communities

many communities are challenged to attract more than a small number of people to a service at this time. There are indications that it was not a universal practice in earlier generations in Germany to wait till nightfall. The custom of the Maharil in Mainz was to recite Ma'ariv immediately after Minḥa (Maharil, *Seder HaTefillot Shel Pesaḥ*, 6).

The serious question is one of preparing food on one day of Yom Tov for the next. A solution, endorsed by the London Beth Din, is that it is possible to light candles and recite Ma'ariv immediately after *plag haminḥa*, and to cook food to be eaten before sunset. For example, in 2016, the year of publication of this Maḥzor, this means reciting Ma'ariv, in London, at 7:34 p.m. and aiming to finish food that has been cooked for the evening meal by 9:18 p.m. (See also, Responsa *Hitorerut Teshuva*, 299.) It is not possible, within the confines of this Preface, to address other scenarios.

The rich tapestry of prayer and commentary offered by the Koren Maḥzorim affords many opportunities for deep spiritual engagement. There will be those who begin their prayers at an earlier time and those who will begin later. There are those who will say more *piyutim* and those who will say fewer. As our sages have said (*Berakhot* 5b):

אחד המרבה ואחד הממעיט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים

"One who does much and one who does less [have equal merit], as long as he directs his heart towards Heaven."

Dayan Ivan Binstock
London, 5776 (2016)

FOREWORD

אקדמות מלין – *An introduction to the words…*

Akdamut, chanted on first day Shavuot, is a majestic introduction to our deeply profound Torah reading for the festival. Fascinatingly, although it is written in Aramaic, which would indicate ancient origins, this most beautiful of our *piyutim* (liturgical poems) was, in fact, composed by Rabbi Meir ben Isaac Nehorai of the eleventh century. Its inclusion became widespread as a way of setting the tone for the Ten Commandments and in order to glorify and enhance a day of immeasurable significance for us.

Similarly, our near universal custom to hold a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, whereby Jewish communities stay awake all night learning Torah, cannot be traced back much further than Safed in the sixteenth century, where it was adopted on the basis of Kabbalistic teachings. Such is our love for Torah and our appreciation of its centrality in our lives, that we voluntarily celebrate the privilege of receiving it afresh and correct the error of the Israelites prior to the divine revelation at Mount Sinai who had to be woken by the sound of the shofar.

Why were these relatively recent innovations conceived particularly for Shavuot?

Shavuot is the only festival in the year that is not directly designated for a specific date – we are simply told that the festival occurs seven weeks after Pesaḥ. Whereas Sukkot and Pesaḥ last for seven (or eight) days and have become popular opportunities for families to get together in great festive spirit, perhaps even for an extended holiday, Shavuot lasts for just one (or two) days. Most significantly, while our other major festivals feature notable traditions and practices, such as a seder, the blowing of the shofar or a sukka and the four species, Shavuot, in our post-Temple times, is strikingly bare. For this reason, its name in Talmudic literature is *Atzeret* – a day earmarked for the cessation of weekday activity; not for any well-known practices.

Yet, our deep appreciation of the significance of *zeman matan Torateinu* (the time of the giving of our Torah) and our desire to fulfil the commandment, *vesamaḥta beḥagekha* (you shall rejoice in your festival) has prompted us to fill the void in the most meaningful of ways.

◂ In this

In this very spirit, my predecessor, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, has filled a void by producing a much-needed and deeply insightful translation and commentary for the Shavuot Maḥzor. Thanks to his inimitable approach, profundity and clarity of thought, our Shavuot experience will be enhanced significantly.

This much anticipated work constitutes yet another major contribution by Rabbi Lord Sacks to Jewish devotion and prayer which sustains our precious "Minhag Anglia," as overseen by my distinguished colleague, Dayan Ivan Binstock. In addition, the great scholarship and expertise of Matthew Miller and Koren Publishers Jerusalem have elevated this publication to the heights with which Koren has become synonymous.

May Rabbi Lord Sacks, together with all who have contributed to the development of this Maḥzor, and indeed all who shall benefit from using it, be blessed to celebrate Shavuot with much meaning, joy and pride. I have no doubt that this Maḥzor will inspire generations לְהַגְדִּיל תּוֹרָה וּלְהַאְדִּירָהּ – to magnify Torah and bring glory to its name.

וַאֲנִי תְפִלָּתִי־לְךָ ה׳, עֵת רָצוֹן
May all our prayers be found to be acceptable
and may the Almighty hearken to the devotion of our hearts.

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis
Adar Sheni 5776 (March 2016)

INTRODUCTION

THE GREATEST GIFT:
Essays on the themes and concepts of Shavuot

by

RABBI LORD
JONATHAN SACKS

INTRODUCTION

THE GREATEST GIFT

1. The Enigma of Shavuot

Shavuot is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

It is the only festival in the Torah without a specific date in the Jewish calendar. We know exactly when Pesaḥ and Sukkot occur. The same is true for Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. Each has its given day or days in the cycle of the year. Not so Shavuot. Nowhere does the Torah say that we should celebrate it on such-and-such a day in a specific month. Instead it says: "And you shall count seven complete weeks from the day following the first day of the festival, when you brought the omer as a wave-offering… And you shall proclaim on that day – it shall be a sacred assembly for you: you may not perform any laborious work" (Lev. 23:15–21). The text in Deuteronomy is even less specific: "Count for yourselves seven weeks; when the sickle begins to cut the standing grain" (Deut. 16:9).

Not only does the Torah not specify a date: for a prolonged period, until the calendar was fixed by calculation in the fourth century, it could fall on three *different* days, depending on whether in any given year Nisan and Iyar were both short months of twenty-nine days, or both long, of thirty days, or one was long, the other short. If both were long, Shavuot fell on the fifth of Sivan. If one was long and one short, it was celebrated on the sixth, and if both were short, it occurred on the seventh. This makes it difficult to understand how it could be a commemoration of any historical event, since events happen on particular days of the year, while Shavuot did not.

These, though, are minor problems when it comes to dating Shavuot. The larger problem lies in the phrase the Torah uses to describe the day on which the seven-week count begins. Above, we translated it as "the day following the first day of the festival." However, the text actually says *mimoḥorat haShabbat*, literally "the day after the Sabbath." Reading the phrase literally, this means Sunday, from which it follows that Shavuot, the fiftieth day, also falls on a Sunday. This gave rise to an extraordinary range of interpretations, reflecting the deep schisms in Jewish life in the late Second Temple period between Pharisees and other groups like the

◂ Boethusians

Boethusians, Sadducees, Samaritans and the Qumran sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Later in the age of the Geonim, from the eighth century onward, a similar controversy arose between the followers of the rabbis and the Karaites. The Pharisees and the rabbis held, as we do, that there is an Oral tradition, the *Torah shebe'al peh*, of equal authority with the Torah's written text, the *Torah shebikhtav*. That tradition said that in this case, "the day after the Sabbath" means "the day after the first day of the festival," which, being a day of rest, could also be called Shabbat.

The other groups, denying the oral tradition, held that the "Shabbat" was to be construed literally. For them the Omer – the sheaf of the wave offering – was to be offered on a Sunday, and Shavuot fell on Sunday seven weeks later. The Boethusians, Sadducees and Karaites understood the phrase as "the day after the Shabbat *during* Pesaḥ." The Qumran sect understood it to refer to the Shabbat *after* Pesaḥ. Both the sect and the Book of Jubilees (second century BCE) had a fixed solar calendar, according to which Shavuot always fell on the fifteenth of Sivan. The Jews of Ethiopia held a fourth view, understanding it to mean the last day of the festival, so for them Shavuot fell six days later than for the Pharisees and rabbis.

The result was chaos, at least one mark of which is still evident today in the institution known as *Yom Tov sheni shel galuyot*, the second day of the festival observed outside Israel. Often this is thought of as the result of the ancient system by which the new moon was determined, month by month, on the basis of eye-witness testimony. No one could tell in advance of the court's decision when the new month would begin. Immediately the month had been fixed, messengers were sent out to notify communities, and since it took them a long time to make the journey, Diaspora communities had to keep festivals for two days because of the doubt as to whether the previous month was long or short.

In fact, the real reason is significantly different. During the Second Temple period there was no need for a second day even in Babylonia because the decision of the court was conveyed that night by the lighting of a series of bonfires that stretched from Israel to Babylonia. However, as a result of controversies about the calendar, one of which was about the determination of the date of Shavuot, the bonfires were sabotaged. Thereafter, the news had to be conveyed by messengers instead (Mishna,

Rosh HaShana 2:2). So the second day owes its existence not to the absence of a system of rapid communication, but rather to a lack of unity and mutual respect within the Jewish people itself. Ironically, serving one God did not always create one nation.

The second strange fact about Shavuot is that nowhere does the Torah link it to a specific historical event. Pesaḥ recalls the exodus from Egypt. Sukkot is a reminder of the forty years in the desert when the Israelites lived in temporary dwellings. Shavuot is given, explicitly in the Torah, no such historical dimension. We know it as *zeman matan torateinu*, "the time of the giving of our Torah," the anniversary of the revelation at Mount Sinai. But this identification appears nowhere in the Torah or elsewhere in Tanakh. Only in the Talmud (see for example, *Pesaḥim* 68b, among others) do we begin to find this connection.

What is more, until the fourth century, as we have seen, Shavuot could occur on the fifth, sixth or seventh of Sivan. So whichever date the Torah was given, Shavuot did not necessarily fall on that day. Nor was there agreement as to which day the Torah was in fact given. The Talmud records a dispute between the other sages and Rabbi Yose. The sages held that it was given on the sixth of Sivan. Rabbi Yose disagreed and argued that it was given on the seventh (*Shabbat* 86b; see page 153). His view could not be lightly dismissed, since Rabbi Yose had a reputation for clarity and precision that often gave his rulings authority (*Eiruvin* 46b; *Gittin* 67a). It follows that, at least in Israel where Shavuot is observed for only one day, the sixth of Sivan, in Rabbi Yose's view Shavuot falls *not* on the day the Torah was given, but the day before.

So, according to the written sources, biblical and post-biblical, there was intense debate as to when Shavuot is celebrated and why. That is what makes the study of this particular festival so fascinating, for the conflict of interpretations has to do not just with the wording of the Torah and its connection with historical events. It has to do with one of the most fundamental questions of all: what it is to be a Jew and why. Shavuot will turn out to be, among other things, the festival of Jewish identity.

CELEBRATING THE LAND

One fact emerges with great clarity from the biblical sources. Shavuot is an agricultural celebration. Exodus calls it the "time of the first wheat

◂ harvest

harvest" (Ex. 23:16). Numbers calls it "the day of the first fruits" (Num. 28:26). Deuteronomy defines the start of the seven-week count as "when the sickle begins to cut the standing grain" (Deut. 16:9). Leviticus 23 interrupts its account of holy days to add, immediately after giving the details of Shavuot, a command that has nothing to do with festivals: "And when you reap the grain of your land, do not finish reaping the corner of your field, and do not collect the fallen remnants of your harvest: you must leave them for the poor and for the stranger." This is the practice vividly described in the book of Ruth. Whenever Shavuot is mentioned in the Torah, we can almost smell the fragrance of fields, feel the open air, and see the harvested grain. It is supremely the farmers' festival.

According to one Talmudic passage (*Menaḥot* 65a), this was the logic behind the sectarians' practice of always celebrating Shavuot on a Sunday. Challenged by Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai as to why, unlike all the other festivals, Shavuot should have a fixed day in the week rather than in the month, an elderly Boethusian gave the explanation that Moses was "a lover of Israel." Realising that after seven exhausting weeks in the field, farmers would be tired, he (or rather, God) had compassion on them and gave them a long weekend! Since Shavuot, unlike Pesaḥ and Sukkot, lasts for only one day, ensuring that it always fell on Sunday gave weary farmers two consecutive days of rest.

However, the problem remains. Pesaḥ and Sukkot are also agricultural and seasonal. Pesaḥ is the festival of spring. Sukkot is the festival of ingathering, the autumn harvest. But each also had a historical dimension. That is what made these festivals unique in the ancient world. Every society had agricultural festivals. There was nothing odd in seeing God in nature. None before Israel, though, had seen God in history or regarded collective memory as a religious obligation. It may therefore have been that Shavuot also had a historical dimension from the outset, but one that had to do with the land. It was the day that celebrated the gift of the Promised Land.

This is purely speculative, but it is supported by several considerations. First is the seven-week countdown that we find in no other festival. The obvious analogy is with the seven-year cycle of *shemitta*, the year of release, culminating in the fiftieth or Jubilee year. These had primarily (though not exclusively) to do with fields, produce, agricultural labour

◂ and the ownership

and the ownership of land. The count was set in motion by the offering of the Omer from the first of the barley harvest, while on Shavuot itself the key offering was two loaves of bread from the wheat harvest. So the seven weeks were the time when the people were most conscious of God's blessing in "bringing forth bread from the earth." R. Yehuda HeḤasid (Germany, twelfth–thirteenth century) suggested that the fifty-day count was instituted because people were so busy and preoccupied in the fields that they might otherwise forget to celebrate the festival on time. It was the obvious time to celebrate the land promised, and blessed, by God.

Second, there is an obvious lacuna in the pilgrimage festivals themselves. Pesaḥ is about the start of the journey from Egypt. Sukkot recalls the forty years of the journey itself. What is missing is a festival celebrating journey's end, the arrival at the destination. Logic would suggest that this was Shavuot. Interestingly, this is what it became again in the kibbutzim during the early years of the modern state. Secular Israelis reappropriated Shavuot precisely as a celebration of the land.

Third, the theme of the Mosaic books as a whole is *the promise of the land*. In Genesis, God makes the promise seven times to Abraham, once to Isaac and three times to Jacob. Jewish history begins with Abraham leaving his family and travelling to "the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1) The rest of the Torah from Exodus to Deuteronomy is about the Israelites' journey from Egypt towards it. If the gift of the land is the supreme divine promise, it would be extraordinary *not* to have a festival marking its fulfilment.

Fourth, the book of Joshua tells us that it was *the act of eating the grain of the land* that made the Israelites vividly aware that the wilderness era had ended. We read that "They ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Pesaḥ, matzot and roasted grain, on that very day. And the manna ceased [to come down] the next day, when they ate of the produce of the land, and the children of Israel no longer had manna; they ate of the crops of the land of Canaan that year" (Josh. 5:11–12). The manna stopped, in other words, on the day that became fixed as the offering of the Omer that began the seven-week count to Shavuot. Historically, therefore, the new grain each year was a reminder of how the Israelites first tasted the produce of what Moses described as "a land of wheat and barley" (Deut. 8:8).

◂ We know

We know precisely how this history was celebrated. The Torah defines Shavuot as "the festival of the first fruits," and tells us that on bringing first fruits to the central Sanctuary, each farmer was to make a declaration:

> "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt … And the Egyptians dealt cruelly with us and made us and imposed hard labour… And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm … He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that You, LORD, have given me." (Deuteronomy 26:5–10)

We are familiar with this passage because, for at least the last two thousand years, it has occupied a central place in the Haggada on Pesaḥ, but its original context was the bringing of first fruits to the Temple on Shavuot. *The first regular historical declaration made by the people as a whole had to do with the gift of the land.* This then is the most likely historical dimension of the festival during some periods of the biblical age. It was the day when once a year, coupled with an act of thanksgiving for the grain harvest, the Israelites came to the Temple and told the story of their arrival at the land itself. It was when the nation gave expression to the sense of gratitude Moses believed they ought to have:

> For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with brooks, streams, and deep springs gushing out into the valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing … You will eat and be satisfied, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land He has given you. (Deuteronomy 8:7–10)

This was traditionally understood as the biblical source of the command to say Grace after Meals, but it is not impossible that it was also the basis for an annual celebration on Shavuot. This, to repeat, is pure conjecture. What gives it force, however, is that were it not so, there would have been no annual celebration of the single most important fact about Israel's existence as a nation, namely that it lived in the land given

◂ by God

by God in fulfilment of the promise He had made to their ancestors at the dawn of their history. Neither Pesaḥ nor Sukkot are about this. They are festivals of exodus and exile. Shavuot completes the cycle by being the festival of homecoming. That was its historical dimension, made explicit in the *Vidui bikkurim*, the declaration accompanying the first fruits, and symbolised in the two loaves of wheat that were the special offering of Shavuot.

If so, we can understand two longstanding customs of Shavuot: eating dairy food and decorating the synagogue with flowers and foliage. The milk recalls the phrase most associated with Israel – "a land flowing with milk and honey" – that appears no fewer than fifteen times in the Torah. The flowers and foliage recall God's blessing if the people follow Him: "I will give grass in your field for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied" (Deut. 11:15).

It would also follow that the three pilgrimage festivals correspond to three different kinds of bread. Pesaḥ is about "the bread of oppression" our ancestors ate in Egypt. Sukkot is about the manna, the "bread from heaven" they ate for forty years in the wilderness, the sukka itself symbolising the clouds of glory that appeared just before the manna fell for the first time (Ex. 13:21; 16:10). Shavuot, with its offering of "two loaves" (Lev. 23:17), is about the bread of freedom made with the grain of the land itself. So it might once have been. But something happened that decisively changed people's understanding of the day itself.

EXILE AND IDENTITY

What changed was that Israel lost the land. In 722 BCE Assyria conquered the northern kingdom and transported its population, known to history as the Lost Ten Tribes. In 597 BCE Babylonia defeated Judah, the kingdom of the south, taking its king and other leaders captive. In 588–586 BCE it attacked again, this time, after a prolonged siege, destroying the Temple. In the book of Lamentations we can still sense the trauma, undiminished by time.

You cannot celebrate the land when you have lost it. You cannot rejoice over the produce of the fields if the fields are no longer yours. You cannot thank God for the gift of home when you are in exile. "How can we sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?" asked the people, weeping by

◂ the waters

the waters of Babylon (Ps. 137:4). All the hopes that had accompanied Abraham's descendants since he and Sarah began their journey to the Promised Land lay in ruins. It was the worst crisis of the biblical age.

It was then that a curious feature of Israelite history played a decisive role. In the normal experience of nations, first comes the land and only then, the law. People settle a region. They evolve from group to clan to tribe. They take up agriculture. They build villages, then towns and cities, then nations and sometimes empires. Only relatively late in this process do structures of governance emerge and with them, laws governing relationships in society. The "where" precedes the "how." When it comes to the history of nations, connections with the land are primal, visceral. Legislation is secondary and contingent.

In Israel's case, uniquely, it was the other way around. First came the law, and only then the land. At Mount Sinai, a mere seven weeks after leaving Egypt, the Israelites underwent a unique experience that transformed their identity. They made a covenant with God. They accepted Him as their sovereign. They pledged themselves to live by His laws. This was their foundational moment as a body politic.

The consequence could not have been more far reaching. *If the law preceded the land, then even when they lost the land, they still had the law. If the covenant came before they had achieved political independence as a territorial state, it might still be in force even when they had lost their independence and state.* That is what God had promised even before they entered the land. The terrifying curses at the end of Leviticus contain a remarkable promise:

> Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking My covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. (Leviticus 26:44)

That became the message of all the prophets who lived through or foresaw conquest and exile. "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away?" asked God through Isaiah (Is. 50:1). Only if the sun, moon and stars cease to shine, said Jeremiah in God's name, will Israel cease to be a nation (Jer. 31:34–35). "I shall open your graves and lift you out of your graves, My people; I shall bring you to the land

◂ of Israel

of Israel," said God through Ezekiel in his chilling vision of the nation as a valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:12).

In Babylonia, through individuals like the prophet Ezekiel, the exiles began to understand that they had lost their country but they still had the covenant. They were still God's people. He was still their King. That was when the Torah became, in Heinrich Heine's famous words, "the portable homeland of the Jew." It was their country of the mind, their extraterritorial landscape, their metaphysical refuge. The Torah was the record of their past and their assurance of a future. Never have a people owed more to a book.

What happened in the Babylonian exile we do not know but we can reasonably infer. It was there that they rediscovered Torah as the key to Jewish identity. We know this because of what happened when two major Jewish figures, Ezra the scribe and Nehemiah the politician-administrator, left Babylon to return to Israel in the mid-fifth century BCE. Dismayed at the low ebb of Jewish life, they undertook an initiative with far-reaching consequences. They assembled a national gathering at the Water Gate in Jerusalem and conducted the first-recorded adult education seminar in history.

The book of Nehemiah describes how Ezra stood on a wooden platform in the Temple courtyard and read Torah to the people:

> Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites … instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. (Nehemiah 8:5–8)

Shortly thereafter, the people formally rededicated themselves to the covenant. It was the start of a movement that gathered pace over the next five hundred years, turning Jewry into the people of Torah for whom, when the Temple was destroyed a second time, scholars took

◂ the place

the place of priests and prophets, and study became a substitute for acrifice.

What Ezra and Nehemiah understood was that the spiritual battle was ultimately more consequential than the military one. This became clear in the second century BCE, when the Seleucid Greeks under Antiochus IV attempted to force the pace of Hellenisation, banning the public practice of Judaism and introducing pagan practices into the Temple. The Maccabees, a pietistic group led by the sons of an elderly priest, Mattityahu, fought back and won, rededicating the Temple in the ceremony we still commemorate on Ḥanukka.

However, their successors, the Hasmonean kings, rapidly became Hellenised themselves, choosing Greek names and combining kingship with priesthood in a way incompatible with the separation of powers implicit in the Bible. It was probably at this time that a group of priests disgusted by what they saw as the corruption of the Temple decided to leave Jerusalem and live in seclusion in Qumran, the sect we have come to know through the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The religious fragmentation of Jewry in the last days of the Second Temple was extreme and tragic. The people were religiously divided, says Josephus, into Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes. The Pharisees themselves were fragmented to the point at which the sages said that the split between the schools of Hillel and Shammai threatened to divide the Torah into two (*Sotah* 47b; *Sanhedrin* 88b). A political rift grew among the population as to whether to live with or rebel against the increasingly repressive Roman rule. There were moderates, zealots, and terrorists known as the Sicarii. Josephus, an eye-witness of those events, paints a terrifying picture of Jews inside the besieged Jerusalem more intent on fighting one another than the enemy outside. A house divided against itself cannot stand, and so Jerusalem fell again, as it was to do a third time sixty-five years later with the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

These were devastating blows, and unlike the Babylonian exile, this time there were no prophets to offer a compelling vision of imminent hope. It was the end of Israel as an actor on the historical stage for almost two thousand years. Tradition has left us a famous story about how Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai arranged to have himself smuggled outside the besieged city and taken to Vespasian, the Roman general leading the

campaign. Correctly predicting that the general would soon be made Caesar, he extracted a promise in return: "Give me the academy of Yavneh and its sages" (*Gittin* 56b). This became the best-known memory of Jewish survival after catastrophe. From here onward Judaism would become a religion of teachers, schools and houses of study, the faith of a people dedicated to the book, not the sword.

The years following the destruction of the Second Temple proved to be the definitive test as to which form of Judaism would survive the loss of the land and its institutions. Within a remarkably short time, the Sadducees had disappeared along with the Qumran sectarians. We hear no more of the Essenes. The Samaritans persisted but in small numbers. The survivors were the rabbis, heirs to the Pharisees, who saw Torah study as a higher religious experience than even prayer and who created in the form of the Mishna, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud, and the halakhic and aggadic midrashim, a heavenly city of the mind. Celebrating scholarship, "dispute for the sake of Heaven" (Ethics of the Fathers 5:21), and intense focus on the divine will as translated into halakha, they became co-architects with the Torah itself of the rich, variegated and intensely detailed universe of Jewish law. Thus Jewry survived, despite persecutions, expulsions, and occasional sectarian schisms, until the late eighteenth century.

It was an astonishing achievement. The rabbis achieved what no other leadership group has done in all of religious history. They had shaped a way of life capable of surviving in the most adverse environments, turning every setback into a catalyst for new creativity. It was they who spoke of Shavuot as *zeman matan torateinu*, the "time of the giving of our Law (Torah)," the anniversary of the revelation and covenant at Mount Sinai.

Life is lived forward but understood only backward, in retrospect. It was in the aftermath of the two great historical catastrophes, the Babylonian conquest and the failed rebellion against Rome, that the nature of Jewish history became clear. *The law did not exist for the sake of the land.* It was the other way round: *the land existed for the sake of the law.* It was in order that the Israelites should create a sacred society of justice and compassion that God gave Israel the land. You do not need a territorial base to encounter God in the private recesses of the soul, but you do

◂ need a land

need a land to create a society in which the Divine Presence is real in the public square.

It was only when they lost the land but knew they still had the Torah that Jews fully realised that this is what Shavuot had been about from the very beginning.

THE DAY OF COVENANT

There is evidence that Shavuot was, from the outset, the anniversary of the giving of the Torah.

First, on all the several views as to the date of Shavuot, it took place in the third month, and there is only one significant event in the Torah that happened then. The Israelites arrived at the Sinai desert "on the third new moon" after they had left Egypt (Ex. 19:1). There then follows a series of exchanges between Moses and God, and Moses and the people, each of which involved ascending and descending the mountain. God then told Moses to tell the people to prepare for a revelation that would take place on the third day. Then we read, "On the third day, in the early morning – thunder and lightning; heavy cloud covered the mountain, there was a very loud sound of the shofar, and all of the people in the camp quaked" (Ex. 19:16). There are different ways of calculating the chronology of these events, but the revelation at Sinai clearly took place in the third month, and there is only one festival in the third month: Shavuot.

Nor can we doubt the centrality of the Sinai event. We can see this by the sheer space the Torah dedicates to it. The Israelites arrived at Sinai at the beginning of Exodus 19, and not until Numbers 10:11, "On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year," did they leave. *They spent less than a year at Sinai, but the Torah devotes approximately one third of its entire text to it*, while passing over thirty-eight of the forty wilderness years in silence other than to record the places where the Israelites stopped. It would be astonishing if this event were not commemorated in the Jewish calendar while a relatively minor feature of the wilderness years, the fact that the Israelites lived in *sukkot*, booths, has a seven-day festival dedicated to it.

There is other evidence. We read in the second book of Chronicles about how King Asa, after cleansing the land of idols, convened a national covenant renewal ceremony:

◂ They assembled

> They assembled at Jerusalem *in the third month* of the fifteenth year of Asa's reign … They entered into a covenant to seek the LORD, the God of their ancestors, with all their heart and soul … They *took an oath* to the LORD with loud acclamation, with shouting and with trumpets and horns. All Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly. They sought God eagerly, and He was found by them. So the LORD gave them rest on every side. (II Chronicles 15:10–15)

The fact that the ceremony was held in the third month suggests that it coincided with Shavuot, and that the festival itself was associated with the covenant at Mount Sinai. There is even a hint in the text of an early association between the word *Shavuot*, "weeks," and *shevua*, "oath," used here to mean commitment to the covenant.

Then there is the fascinating evidence of the Book of Jubilees. This is a text written in the middle of the second century BCE, author unknown but almost certainly a priest, which retells the whole of biblical history in terms of fifty-year, jubilee cycles. It was not accepted as part of Tanakh, but it occasionally records traditions unknown elsewhere, and that is the case here. According to Jubilees (6:15–19), Shavuot was first celebrated *by Noah* to celebrate the covenant God made with him, and through him with all humanity, after the flood. "For his reason it has been ordained and written on the heavenly tablets that they should celebrate the Festival of Weeks during this month, once a year, to renew the covenant each and every year" (6:17). Jubilees goes on to say that God made His covenant *with Abraham* on the same date in the third month (14:20). Thus there was an early tradition that held that Shavuot was supremely the covenant-making and renewal day for all three biblical covenants between God and human beings: with Noah, Abraham, and the Israelites in the days of Moses.

R. David Zvi Hoffman (*Commentary to Leviticus*, vol. 2, 158–168) adds that the rabbinical name for the festival – *Atzeret*, or in Aramaic, *Atzarta* – meaning "assembly" or "gathering," may be related to Moses' own description of the day the Torah was given as *Yom haKahal*, "the day of the assembly" (Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). He also suggests that the reason the Torah relates the festivals to historical events is simply to explain why we perform certain acts, such as sitting in a booth on Sukkot. Since Shavuot has no distinctive mitzva, it needed no historical explanation. As to why

◂ As to why

there is no distinctive mitzva on Shavuot, he argues that it is to emphasise that at Sinai the Israelites "saw no image; there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12). There is no symbolic action that could capture the experience of hearing the voice of the invisible God.

Why then, if Shavuot is the anniversary of the covenant at Sinai, does it not have a fixed date in the calendar? The answer was set out by Nahmanides in his Commentary to the Torah (Lev. 23:36). The relationship between Shavuot and Pesaḥ, he says, is like that between Shemini Atzeret and Sukkot. In both cases there is a count of seven – seven days in the case of Sukkot, seven weeks in the case of Pesaḥ and the counting of the Omer – followed by a concluding festival. That is how he understands *Atzeret*, the name the Torah gives to the eighth day of Sukkot, and that the rabbis called Shavuot, deriving it from the verb ע-צ-ר meaning "stop, close, cease, conclude." Though both are festivals in their own right, both celebrate the end of something; they are not stand-alone celebrations. They are defined in terms of what went before.

Thus the days of counting the Omer between Pesaḥ and Shavuot are like Ḥol HaMo'ed, the intermediate days of a festival. *Pesaḥ and Shavuot are the beginning and end of a single extended festival.* That is why Shavuot is not given a date in the Jewish calendar because what matters is not what day of the week or month it falls but the fact that it marks the conclusion of the seven weeks initiated by the Omer. That, in fact, is why the Oral tradition held that the Omer begins not on a Sunday (the literal meaning of "the day following the rest day") but after the first day of Pesaḥ, because the Omer is not a free-standing institution but the start of a seven-week count linking Pesaḥ to Shavuot.

The nature of that link was stated at the very beginning of the exodus narrative, when Moses met God at the burning bush. God told Moses his mission and then said, "*And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain*" (Ex. 3:12). The exodus from Egypt, in other words, was only the beginning of a process that would reach its culmination when the people worshipped God at Mount Sinai.

Pesaḥ and Shavuot are inseparable. Revelation without the exodus was impossible. But exodus without revelation was meaningless. God did not bring the people out of Egypt only to leave them to the hazards of

fate. They were His people, "My child, My firstborn, Israel," as He told Moses to say to Pharaoh (Ex. 4:22).

Why then the forty-nine days? Maimonides and the *Zohar* give subtly different explanations. The *Zohar* (*Emor* 97a) sees the giving of the Torah at Sinai as a marriage between God and the people. Just as a bride must purify herself by keeping seven "clean" days and then going to the *mikveh*, so the Israelites, defiled by the impurities of Egypt, had to keep seven "clean" weeks, each day purifying one of the forty-nine combinations of *sefirot*, the sacred emanations linking creation with God.

Maimonides says that since the giving of the Torah was anticipated by the Israelites as the supreme culmination of the exodus, they counted the days "just as one who expects his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours" (*Guide for the Perplexed*, III:43).

The most significant hint, though, lies in the name tradition gave to Pesaḥ: *zeman ḥeruteinu*, "the time of our freedom." Freedom in Judaism means more than release from slavery: individual freedom. It means law-governed liberty, "the rule of laws not men": collective freedom. Thus the Israelites did not achieve freedom on Pesaḥ when they left Egypt. They acquired it on Shavuot when, standing at the foot of the mountain, they accepted the covenant and became a holy nation under the sovereignty of God. That is why Pesaḥ and Shavuot are not two separate festivals but the beginning and end of a single stretch of time – the time it took for them to cease to be slaves to Pharaoh and to become instead the servants of God.

FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

The real question is not when or why Shavuot became *zeman matan torateinu*, "the time of the giving of our Torah." It is, rather, why it ever ceased to be.

At the core of Israel's collective memory, at the heart of its self-definition, is the idea that faithfulness to the covenant at Sinai is its raison d'être and the key to its survival and flourishing. That is the moral of almost every book in Tanakh and the burden of all the prophets. They, especially Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, told the people candidly and with great passion that faithlessness to God would lead to military defeat and political disaster. The closer this came, the more the prophets

◂ were ignored

were ignored, culminating with Jeremiah who was ridiculed, mocked, insulted, abused, sentenced to death and thrown into a pit for telling the people what they did not want to hear.

The story we read in Tanakh of the centuries in which the Israelites were in possession of the land, from the time of Joshua to the Babylonian conquest, is not a happy one. Time and again the people find themselves drawn to the local gods and to pagan practices, and this goes hand in hand with political corruption, the abuse of power, sharp practices in business and mistreatment of the poor. Amos speaks of those who "have sold for silver those whose cause was just, and the needy for a pair of sandals, trampling the heads of the poor into the dust of the ground" (Amos 2:6–7). Isaiah declares, "Your rulers are rogues and cronies of thieves, every one avid for presents and greedy for gifts; they do not judge the cause of the orphan and the widow's cause never reaches them" (Is. 1:23).

To be sure, there were reforming kings – among them Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah – but the impression we receive is that their efforts, however well-intentioned, were too little, too late. Repeatedly in the narratives of Israel's and Judah's kings, we read the verdict that "he did evil in the eyes of the LORD." The overriding question that comes to mind when reading the Hebrew Bible is: why did the people so often ignore the warnings of the prophets, the teachings of Moses and the lessons of their own history? Isaiah well expresses this sense of amazement when he says, "An ox knows its owner, an ass its master's crib: Israel does not know, My people take no thought" (Is. 1:3). Animals know to whom they belong; Israel sometimes forgets.

It should be obvious from every syllable of Jewish history, the prophets say, that faith and fate, loyalty and liberty, go hand in hand. Yet the people continue to ignore the message. Ironically, one of the few instances in Tanakh where an entire people heeds the words of a prophet occurs in the book of Jonah, where the people concerned are Israel's enemies, the Assyrians in the military city of Nineveh.

Why was it so hard to persuade people that idolatry was their weakness and faith in the God of Abraham and the covenant of Sinai their strength? Because we are seeing history with hindsight. We have read the book. We know how it ends. At the time it did not seem that way at all.

One passage sheds light on the whole era of Israel's kings. It occurs

in the book of Jeremiah. The prophet had been warning the people that they faced disaster. If they continued on their present course they would be conquered by the Babylonians and the result would be national catastrophe. So it happened. Jerusalem and Judah lay in ruins. Now, once again, he addresses the people, begging them finally to acknowledge their error and return to God. Defiantly, the people refuse:

> "We will not listen to the message you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD. We will certainly do everything we said we would: We will burn incense to the Queen of Heaven and will pour out libations to her just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials did in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. *At that time we had plenty of food and were well off and suffered no harm. But ever since we stopped burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have had nothing and have been perishing by sword and famine.*" (Jeremiah 44:16–18)

As far as the people were concerned, as long as they served idols (the Queen of Heaven was probably Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of fertility, love and war), they prospered. When they stopped doing so (the reference is probably to the reforms of Josiah) they began to suffer. We need to let these words sink in.

There is no immediate short-term correlation between faithfulness to God and national success in the arena of history. That is the problem. Jeroboam II was one of the northern kingdom's most successful kings. He reigned for forty-one years and "restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea" (II Kings 14:25). Yet he "did evil in the eyes of the LORD," (ibid. 24), perpetuating the sins of his namesake, Jeroboam son of Nebat. Manasseh, Hezekiah's son, reversed the religious reforms of his father and reintroduced idolatry into the kingdom, leading the people astray "so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites" (II Kings 21:2). He is also said to have "shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem from end to end" (ibid. 16). Yet he ruled, apparently, successfully, for fifty-five years, while his grandson, Josiah, one of Tanakh's most righteous kings, died prematurely in battle.

◂ A contemporary