

Parashat Naso - Shavuot, 5774, 2014:

Torah, Shavuot, and the Oral Law

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

Rav Natronai bar Hilai was the Gaon of Sura, Babylonia from 853-858. He was one of the most prolific responsa (*shailot u'teshuvot*) writers of his age. His particular area of expertise was that of Jewish liturgy. As such, he is an invaluable post-Talmudic source for authenticating the content and order of our prayers. Rav Amram ben Sheshna (died approximately 875) was the Gaon in Sura in the following generation. He is most famous for his long and detailed responsum on the entire order of prayer that has become known as the *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*. Therein, he quotes a segment of a responsum from Rav Natronai Gaon that delineates the order and content of *tefilah* (prayer) on Shavuot:

And we stand in *tehilah* (i.e. the *Amidah*) and we pray *Avot*, *Gevurot*, and *Kedushat Hashem* (i.e. the first three blessings). [They are followed by] *Atah bachartanu* (and You, G-d, have chosen us). Unlike [Passover, however,] one says “*v'yom chag haShavuot hazeh – zeman matan Toratainu mikra kodesh zacher l'yitziat mitzraim*” (“and the day of this Festival of Shavuot – the time of the Giving of our Torah, that is called holy and is a reminder of the Departure from Egypt.”)

Herein we discover that the well-known appellation of Shavuot, as “the time of the Giving of our Torah,” even though it is not found in any Mishnaic or Talmudic period sources, is at least as old as the ninth century. Moreover, it may well be from an even earlier time, since Rav Natronai Gaon was not prescribing the text to use on Shavuot, rather, he was describing the practice that was extant in Sura.

Given the above, it is clear that the identities of Shavuot and the Torah are closely intermingled. Fascinatingly, they share a unique aspect, namely, that of “hiddenness.” Unlike the other *chagim* (Festivals and holy days), Shavuot’s date is not stated in the Torah. Similarly, the actual date of *Matan Torah* is not specified in the Torah. Let us now examine some of the sources that bear upon our topic.

Sefer Vayikra 23:15-16, 21 teaches us that Shavuot is uniquely act-driven, rather than calendrically-driven:

And you shall **count** for yourselves, from the morrow of the rest day (*mi'macharat haShabbat*) from the day you bring the omer as a wave offering seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall **count** until the day after the seventh week, [namely,] the fiftieth day, [on which] you shall bring a new meal offering to the L-rd. And you shall designate on this very day a **holy occasion** it shall be for you; you shall not perform any work of labor. [This is] an eternal statute in all your dwelling places throughout your generations. (This and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The motive force behind the fixing of the day of Shavuot is the act of counting the Omer. Therefore, the biblical formula for ascertaining the day upon which Shavuot is observed can be stated in this manner: “**Count** from the day you bring the omer (i.e. *mi'macharat haShabbat*, interpreted as the second day of Pesach, *Talmud Bavli, Menachot* 65b) seven complete weeks, and on the fiftieth day you shall bring a new meal offering to the L-rd and it shall be designated as a **holy occasion** – i.e. Shavuot.” The glaring omission here is the actual date itself – it remains concealed.

The Torah’s narrative regarding the actual date of the Revelation at Mount Sinai is even sparser than that provided in the case of Shavuot:

In the third month of the children of Israel's departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived in the desert of Sinai. Moses ascended to G-d, and the L-rd called to him from the mountain... And all the people replied in unison and said, “All that the L-rd has spoken we shall do!” ... and Moses took the words of the people [i.e. returned] back to

the L-rd. And Moses relayed the words of the people to the L-rd. And the L-rd said to Moses, “Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their garments. And they shall be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, the L-rd will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai.” It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunderclaps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered. (*Sefer Shemot* 19:1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11, 16)

The Torah counts Nissan as the first month of the year (*Sefer Shemot* 12:2). Therefore, the third month of the year is Sivan. Several phrases including “on this day,” “today and tomorrow,” and “the third day,” however, remain undefined. Fortunately, we can turn to the *Torah shel Ba’al Peh* (Oral Law) to explain the chronology and meaning of our passage.

- “On this day” = Rosh Chodesh Sivan (*Midrash Mechilta, Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 86b)
- “Moses ascended to G-d” = On the second of Sivan (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 86a)
- “... and Moses took the words of the people back to the L-rd” = On the third of Sivan (*Ibid.*)
- “And Moses relayed” = “on the following day, which was the fourth day of the month” (Rashi 1040-1105, based upon *Targum Yonatan*)
- “Go to the people and prepare them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their garments” = this also took place on the fourth, as well as on the fifth, of Sivan (*Midrash Mechilta, Mesechta d’b’Chodesh III*)
- “And they shall be prepared for the third day, for on the third day, the L-rd will descend before the eyes of all the people upon Mount Sinai” = “This is the sixth day, upon which the Torah was given” (*Ibid.*)

We are now ready to ask two fundamental and inseparable questions: “Why was Shavuot’s date hidden – unlike all of the other *chagim*? ” and “Why is there no explicit mention of Shavuot in the Torah as “*zeman matan Toratainu*? ” Allow me to suggest the following broad-based answer to both of them: Hashem, so to speak,

wanted to emphasize the incalculable import of *Torah shel Ba'al Peh* in understanding *Torah Shebichtav* (the Written Torah). In both instances, we would be at a total loss without the Oral Law's exegesis and explication of our texts. Little wonder, then, that almost all *meforshim* (commentators) explain the first four words of *Pirkei Avot*, "Moshe kibale Torah mi'Sinai" ("Moshe received the Torah at Mount Sinai") as referring to both the Written Torah and the Oral Law. Together, they constitute the dynamic entity about which joyfully declare each evening: "*ki heim chayeinu, v'orech yameinu u'vahem nehgeh yomam valailah*" ("for they – the words of the Torah – are the essence and measure of our lives and they occupy our most singular efforts both day and night").

May this Shavuot inspire us anew to re-embrace the *Torah Shebichtav* and the *Torah shel Ba'al Peh* in all their holiness and glory. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and *Chag Sameach*

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