



MACCABI WORLD UNION

Department of Education

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Kfar HaMaccabiah, June 2019
סיון תשע"ט

Shavuot: between Theory and Practice

Dear friends,

The central theme of the Festival that begins tomorrow is without doubt, the central pillar which sustains Judaism and our existence as a people: the delivery of the Torah. From the slopes of Mt. Sinai on the 6th day of the month of Sivan¹, God gave the Torah, His Word to the Children of Israel, the path in which the People of Israel have *journeyed* for more than 3 millennia, the way of *mitzvot*, of morality based on ethical monotheism, of our first national memory, of our first essence as a People.

The divine act we celebrate during Shavuot marks a revolution in human life, because the Torah is the first recognizably modern code of morality, the first that appeared amongst any of the Peoples of ancient times, carrying messages of total relevance and application in human life for eternity. Shavuot celebrates our entrance into maturity as a People, our birth as a *free and responsible national entity*, the beginning of our national *raison d'être*: from that point on the Jews are a People with a Book - ***The Book***. Pessach, which precedes Shavuot and gives meaning to its name (Shavuot = "Weeks": the 7 weeks between Pessach and Celebration of the Giving of the Torah), can thus be seen as only *the prelude* to the great moment of Shavuot. Our physical freedom only acquires a final sense, is complete, only when it is invested in the clothes of the Torah, of that map that gives direction to our lives, the compendium of orders and prohibitions that transforms us into beings who use our freedom to improve the world, to achieve self-perfection and mutual caring. Pessach is momentous, because Shavuot is its true significance; Pessach opens the way but Shavuot points in the direction and sets our trajectory.

How is it, then, that Pessach is so strong a presence in the minds and hearts of most Jews, yet Shavuot seems to occupy a lesser space in our consciousness? If, indeed, Pessach is the *overture* and Shavuot is the grand *finale*... how come Pessach is so predominant, and Shavuot seems so minor?

The simplest and most correct answer to these questions is one of the *open secrets* of the longevity and permanence of Judaism and our national success as People among the Nations of the World: **our practice**. We remember Pessach more than Shavuot because on Pessach **we practice more** -- 7 times more in the 7 days of the Festivity (and 8 in the Diaspora). Pessach is the more memorable because we begin it with the Pessach Seder, that extraordinary Family supper ritual when we read and declaim how God

¹ In the Talmudic Treatise of Shabbat 86b there is a discussion in which a minority opinion states that Shavuot happened on the 7th of Sivan.



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redeemed us from Egyptian slavery and made us free, sing poems of exquisite beauty, regard symbols of great visual power, the whole stimulating all our senses. Pesach is the more memorable in our perceptions because it demands that we change one of our most fundamental activities - eating - imposing upon us a restructuring of our usual order and customs. Pessach is "more" than Shavuot... because *we do more* during Pesach than we do during Shavuot.

To a very great extent, ***we are what we do***. Our practice defines the essence of our being. People we love are dear to us because we share *acts* of deep affection, remembered gestures, expressions we love. We remember ritual so strongly precisely because they are rituals, repeated time and time again. The game of our lives takes place in the action -- in the *practice* -- where we show who we are and what makes us be what we are. From the Jewish point of view, this cannot be clearer: our practices are those which decide if we are strongly connected to the destiny of our People, or if we are headed surely and decisively towards assimilation. Jews engaged in fortifying the State of Israel, who fight anti-Semitism in the media, universities and state policies, who multiply the inclusion of our Tradition in their families and Communities, who share most of their most important time (their free time) with others of our People (something so characteristic of our Maccabi Movement)... these men and women grow in real, concrete, tangible and significant Judaism – they become the product of their transforming actions. The continuity of Judaism demands practice, because everything which is truly important to us imposes a variety of practices for its support or its consummation.

The fact that we remember Pessach more than Shavuot even though Shavuot lends *ultimate* sense to Pessach, should not worry us. To be sure, we *should* make more practice of Shavuot in order to keep it closer us, make it more memorable and beloved. This is perhaps the reason why our Sages have ordered us to make a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, one "white night", a whole night without sleep in which we study the words of that same Torah whose Giving we celebrate in Shavuot, so that through the practice of *study* we learn to recognize the necessity of the Torah's transcendent messages.

May God inspire us to meet again in many practices of our Jewish *being*, observing the rituals and wholeheartedly doing the deeds that embody those messages we say we value. May our spoken Zionism be transformed into constructive acts for the State of Israel, and may our Judaism be expressed in unity with our brothers and sisters, in more Festivities and more study - *Talmud Torah*.

May this Shavuot Celebration be practiced and enjoyed by all,

**Chag Shavuot Sameach!
Chazak ve'ematz!**



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