

## Facts of Shevuot

The festival of Shevuot is an illustration of the evolutionary principle that a religious community survives only by periodic changes of its festivals and rituals, and these in turn survive only by developing new and relevant meanings and functions. Three different periods may be discerned in the history of Shevuot: the biblical rabbinic, and modern. In each period, the character of the Shevuot has reflected the ritual needs of the time.

In the biblical period, Shevuot was an agricultural holiday, affording the Israelites of ancient Israel a religious vehicle through which they could express their feelings and emotions after the grain harvest had been completed. The biblical names of Shevuot reflect its agricultural character: Day of the First Fruits (Num. 28:26); Feast of Harvest (Exod. 23:16); and **Chag Shevuot**, or Feast of Weeks, (Exod. 34:22; Deut. 16:10). The last name, Feast of Weeks, is derived from the counting of "weeks" by which the time of the Shevuot celebration was reckoned. In Lev. 23:15,16 (cf. Deut. 16:9) the date is given this way, "From the day following the Sabbath . . . you must count seven full weeks, counting fifty days . . . then you must offer a cereal-offering of new grain . . ." (The name "Pentecost," Greek for "fiftieth," comes from Shevuot falling on the fiftieth day.) The exact time of the Shevuot is not clear from this biblical text, (which was to lead in future times to controversy among Jewish sects over the date,) since the term "sabbath" can refer either to the weekly celebration, or just generally to a "festival," such as Passover. Still, it is apparent that the Shevuot was a late spring or early summer festival. The seven week period which was counted off before the Shevuot corresponded to the grain harvest season in ancient Israel, which began with the harvesting of barley during Passover, and ended with the wheat harvest at Shevuot. The Shevuot then, in biblical times, was an organic part of the people's lives, integrated with nature's rhythms, and the psychic rhythms of those who harvested her bounty. The details of the Shevuot celebration varied at different stages of the biblical period, but generally, grain and animal offerings of various kinds were brought to the Temple.

In the rabbinic period, under the Pharisees, two developments took place regarding Shevuot. The first, a minor one, was setting the date of the festival as occurring fifty days from the second day of Passover, which is the time it is presently celebrated in the Jewish calendar. The second development constituted a major change in the meaning of the Shevuot. Whereas in the biblical period, Shevuot was purely an agricultural festival, in the rabbinic period, it became the anniversary of a significant event in the history of the Israelites, as this history was understood by the Pharisees. It was on Shevuot, the Pharisees maintained, that the Torah was given at Sinai to Moses. There is no basis in the Bible, where the story of Sinai appears, for the belief that the revelation of the Torah occurred on Shevuot. As late as the first century (C.E.), Josephus and Philo say nothing of Shevuot as the time of the giving of the Torah; and even in the rabbinic literature, none of the references to this belief appear earlier than the second century (C.E.). The notion that the revelation of the Torah took place on Shevuot is simply one of those beliefs that, although without foundation, eventually comes to be accepted because it possesses ideological and social value. Which brings us to the point that festivals survive only if their meanings change when



times change. Why was the Shevuot changed by the Pharisees from an agricultural festival to the anniversary of the giving of the Torah? The most convincing answer that has been given is that the social and economic conditions of the Pharisaic Jews were far different from those of the biblical Israelites. Whereas the biblical Israelites lived mainly on farms, and their major economic resource was agriculture, the Pharisaic Jews were mostly townspeople who engaged primarily in commerce. There would be little interest on the part of townspeople and merchants in a purely agricultural festival, so the Pharisees transformed the Shevuot to what was in fact an entirely different holiday, the birthday of the Torah.

In the modern period Shevuot is facing its greatest challenge. In Orthodox Judaism, the rabbinic understanding of Shevuot as the anniversary of the giving of the Torah is continued. For the majority of modern Jews, however, who are not Orthodox, and who do not believe in the supernatural revelation of the Torah, the Sinaitic interpretation is of little significance. Certainly, the original agricultural celebration of the Shevuot has little meaning for the Jew living in our contemporary industrialized and technological society. It would seem that except for a fortuitous historical circumstance Shevuot would now be confined to oblivion by modern Jewry. This circumstance was setting the date for the Confirmation of religious school graduates on Shevuot. (See Credo above.) As a Confirmation celebration, the Shevuot serves a life-history event that gives it importance, even though its historical meanings have been largely rejected. Whether Confirmation graduation will be the only use for Shevuot in the contemporary world, or whether new meanings and functions can be assigned this festival whose roots are so deep in antiquity, is a question only the polydox Jew can answer. For polydoxy provides the freedom to recreate old festivals in new and meaningful forms. The ancients kept festivals only because they were relevant to their lives; we can find no greater challenge than to do the same.