

Shavuot & Pentecost

The Jewish Festival of Shavuot (*shavuot* is Hebrew for ‘weeks’) occurs fifty days after Passover. (‘Fiftieth day’ in Greek is *pentekoste*: ‘Pentecost.’)

Here we explore Shavuot’s themes under four headings: *Reaping the Harvest, Giving the Torah, Counting the Days, Pondering the Text*. Before reading further, open your Bible to Deut. 16:9-11 and read about this ancient, joyous harvest festival in the Torah.

At its core, Shavuot celebrates the ‘Giving of the Torah,’ that dramatic event on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20) from which Moses emerges with the two stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments. In the process of translation, the Mount Sinai revelation became known as the giving of the ‘Law.’

Unfortunately, ‘Law’ is often heard in the popular Christian mindset as ‘legalistic,’ restrictive and oppressive, in contrast to a spirit of love promoted by Christianity. But this is a misunderstanding. For the Jewish people, the giving of the Torah at Sinai—the gift of a ‘teaching,’ a spiritual and moral ‘road map’ from God’s very Self—expresses a relationship with a loving God to be joyfully embraced with gratitude and wonder. It is a sign of being chosen, called, gifted, entrusted with a divine undertaking.

Join us here as we explore the Jewish festival of *Shavuot*, and at the same time enliven our appreciation of the Church’s celebration of Pentecost.

Reaping the Harvest

Originating as an agricultural feast, Shavuot was celebrated in ancient Israel as the culmination of the harvest period. The harvest began around Passover with the barley crop, and concluded seven *weeks* (*shavuot*) later with

the wheat harvest. Shavuot involved a pilgrimage to the Temple to offer to God the ‘first fruits’ of the harvest in thanksgiving for the earth’s produce. Note the link here with the Christian Pentecost: the Church celebrates the ‘first fruits’ of the Spirit’s transformation of the earth as the redemptive work of Christ continues to unfold in history and all creation.

Giving of the Torah

In Judaism today, the focus of Shavuot has shifted to thanksgiving for God’s gift of Torah. Rabbinic teachings hold that fifty days after the Israelites left Egypt, God gave the Torah to Moses at Sinai. If the Exodus was a physical deliverance, the gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai is considered a spiritual liberation changing the course of Judaism forever. On that day, a community of Hebrew refugees was galvanized as a nation, entering a radically new phase in their covenantal relationship with God. Jewish tradition speaks of this event as God’s ‘betrothal’ to Israel, and Shavuot is compared to a wedding day.

Shavuot, then, is the anniversary of the ‘Giving of the Torah’ and ‘the birth of Israel.’ For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the newness of God’s saving presence in Jesus (‘God’s living Torah’), and the birth of the Church.

Counting the Days

In Jewish practice, the fifty days leading up to Shavuot are ‘counted.’ This is known as ‘The counting of the Omer.’ ‘Omer’ refers to a cultic offering of barley, associated with the Jerusalem Temple. Although this died out with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the practice of counting the days continued, the focus now being to anticipate the Giving of the Law. This ‘counting’ of days between Passover and Shavuot highlights the fact that Shavuot is

the extension and conclusion of Passover. Similarly, for the Church, Pentecost marks the conclusion of the Easter season.

The 'counting' of fifty days in Jewish custom enhances the sense of excited anticipation of Shavuot, likened to a bride and groom looking forward to their special day. Even after having celebrated the events of the Exodus, there is a longing for the 'something more to come.' Similarly, even after revelling in the wonder of the Resurrection at Easter, Christians look forward to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Pondering the Text

In greeting Shavuot, there is a Jewish practice of staying up all night reading Torah. Study halls are filled on this night. Come dawn, in Jerusalem, Jews stream to the Western Wall for special prayers. What are some key Torah texts relating to this festival? Exodus 34:18-26, Leviticus 23:9-21, and Deuteronomy 16:9-11 all refer to Shavuot. Exodus 19:1-20:23 recounts the story of Moses and the 'Ten Words/Commandments.'

***'Your people will be my people,
and your God my God.'***

The Book of Ruth is also read on Shavuot, telling of the faith of a Gentile woman who converts to Judaism. Although born an 'outsider,' Ruth's choice for the people and land of the Torah is celebrated as a witness to the cleaving to the God of Israel to which every Jew is called. Conversion of the Gentiles (as heralding the messianic age) is also a powerful theme for Christians celebrating Pentecost.

Texts like these are part of our Christian Bible, although escaping the notice of many Christians. An awareness of Shavuot can stimulate our love for Torah and reconnect us with the depths of our own sacred story.

5 Ways to Celebrate Pentecost

Jewish traditions and Christian life

How can Jewish Shavuot practices influence Christians in their celebration of Pentecost? Certainly, we can count the days till Pentecost with holy anticipation, preparing our hearts for the dramatic liturgical conclusion of the Easter season. Five more suggestions follow.

1. **Bible.** The night before (all night if you wish!) pray and reflect on Scripture: the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1-11 as well as from the Old Testament texts that are part of Jewish Shavuot.
2. **Eucharist.** Come morning, celebrate the Sunday Eucharist with joy. Remember your Confirmation. Renew your faith commitment, praying that the gifts of the Holy Spirit be activated afresh in your life.
3. **Fire.** Christians are familiar with the Pentecost symbol of fire, but perhaps don't connect it with the lightning flashes and smoking mountain at Sinai! Read the drama of Exodus 19:16-18; 20:15 as well as Acts 2:2-3.
4. **Tongues.** In Jewish midrash, it is said that at Sinai God's voice was heard in seventy languages; Torah is destined for all peoples. In what language (and culture) has the Lord's voice reached your ears?
5. **Decor.** At Shavuot, Jews decorate with flowers/greenery and include dairy foods (the 'sweetness' of Torah) in festive meals. What décor and festive foods might you include in Pentecost celebrations at home? e.g., red tablecloth, candles, ice-cream.

Works consulted: Murray Watson, 'The Pentecost Before Pentecost', unpublished article, 2008. Website: www.jewishencyclopedia.com. The assistance of Br Jack Driscoll's work is gratefully acknowledged.

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