

Kol THE VOICE OF Barrack

Sivan: Ascending the mountain, with empty hands

The month of Sivan began last night, Tuesday evening, May 11th. The holiday of Shavuot follows close behind, starting on this coming Sunday night, May 16th. Unlike the other pilgrimage festivals Sukkot and Pesach, Shavuot has no special mitzvot besides the observance of the holiday. Pesach is associated with matzah, the seder and the prohibition against eating leaven. Sukkot has the sukkah and the lulav and etrog. Shavuot, however, provides no objects to take into our hands, nor any specific obligations.

I would like to suggest some thoughts about the absence of any obligatory acts. First and foremost, it is the Torah itself that is the focus of the holiday. We received the Torah on Shavuot on the 6th of Sivan at Mount Sinai. In fact, the name by which the holiday is referred to in our prayers is *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of our Torah. We ascend the mountain with empty hands in order to be able to accept the Torah. Carrying anything would only serve as a distraction.

The Torah portion that follows the giving of the Decalogue is *Mishpatim*, which offers instruction in civil law. We discover that we also need our hands free in order to help our fellow human beings, to lend a hand to others. We need hands that are ready to receive the Torah and hands extended to assist others. To me, this is the essence of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, Torah with a way in the world. (*Pirkei Avot* 2:2) The study of Torah is a means to an end. Our study is intended to drive us to perform *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds. Without our hands extended to our fellow human beings, our study of Torah is meaningless.

Unity - Shavuot traditionally marks the end of *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of the *Omer*. It commemorates the arrival at Mount Sinai and the receiving of the Decalogue, the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the ten commandments. In Exodus 19:8, the Torah states "the people answered together: All that the Lord has spoken we will do." The Jewish people were united in their acceptance of the Torah because only as a unified people could they become a Jewish nation. Too often we see our differences more than our similarities, and find fault in others before discovering the good in them. Unity may be destructive or redemptive. Shavuot offers the type of unity that helps lead to strong communal life.

Though there are no specific objects associated with Shavuot (to leave our hands empty for the acceptance of the Torah) there are a number of customs associated with this chag.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot - Across all denominations of Judaism, Shavuot designates a time set aside for extra Torah study. There are those who remain awake throughout the night, studying until they reach the earliest time to recite the morning prayers. There are some who say that we remain awake throughout the night to correct the behavior of the Jews at Mount Sinai, who overslept and had to be awakened by Moshe in order to receive the Torah.

Eating Dairy Foods - There are a number of explanations regarding the practice of eating dairy on Shavuot. One is the idea that the Jews were

Kol Barrack (The Voice of Barrack) is a periodic publication that recognizes the new month in the Jewish calendar. In this edition, Judaic Studies Teacher Rabbi Michael Yondorf shares his thoughts with our school community.



Rabbi Michael Yondorf

JUDAIC STUDIES TEACHER

Rabbi Michael Yondorf is in his thirty-third year at Barrack as a Judaic Studies teacher. Previously, he taught at Abrams Hebrew Academy and the Hebrew Academy of Atlanta. Rabbi Yondorf is a past-president of Congregation Beth HaMedrosh in Wynnewood and currently serves a *gabbai*. He and his wife, Debbie '77, are the proud parents of three adult children, including Elisheva '10. Rabbi Yondorf plans to spend his Shavuot holiday learning Torah with his grandchildren.

myondorf@jbha.org

instructed in the laws of ritual slaughter. Their pots, pans and dishes were no longer acceptable for use. Meat was not an option, so they consumed dairy foods. Some propose the exact opposite: before the time that the Torah was given, there were seven laws that were given to the descendants of Noah. One was the prohibition of consuming a limb from a living being. The Jewish people thought that milk from a live animal fell under this restriction. We received the laws of kashrut and learned that this does not apply to milk from an animal. Thus, we are able to happily enjoy our cheesecake. There are some who maintain that one must eat meat on a holiday. They are fulfilling the principle that joy comes from the consumption of meat. Those who follow this idea begin with a dairy meal, recite the grace after meals and start once again with a meat meal. One must wait after having meat before one eats anything dairy. Aside from rinsing one's mouth, there is no need to wait after dairy before one eats meat (with the exception of an aged cheese).

Decorating our homes and synagogues with flowers - It is said that despite being a desert setting, Mount Sinai was covered with lush vegetation. That explains why the Torah prohibited flocks from grazing on the mountain. We decorate our synagogues and home with flowers and plants to represent the conditions of Mount Sinai. This is also the holiday of the first fruits, *Chag HaBikkurim*. The people would bring their first fruits to the Temple in *Yerushalayim* in baskets that were decorated according to one's financial means.

Reciting the Book of Ruth - On the holiday of Shavuot, it is traditional to chant the Book of Ruth. Ruth is a convert to Judaism. Ruth declares "your people are my people, your God is my God". We read her story on the day we celebrate receiving the Torah. There is one Torah for those who were born Jewish and those who made the decision to join the ranks of the Jewish people. Judaism does not actively seek converts, but readily accepts them into our ranks. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David.

The Torah that we received on Shavuot was not a tangible object. It was much more than a mere item. The word *Torah* means law. It is the lessons that guide us in our lives. To strive to be "a nation of priests and a holy people" (Exodus 19:6). We must go beyond the letter of the law. We ascend the mountain with empty hands, but we descend with full hearts for all humanity and minds open to all truths.