

A Bright Light Shooting Across the Sky

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An old adage comparing the three Jewish pilgrimage festivals, comes to mind:

On Passover, I can eat where I want, but not what I want.¹

On Sukkot, I can eat what I want, but not where I want.²

On Shavuot, I can eat what I want, and where I want. So why is it only one/two day(s)?³

Although RaMBaM maintains that religious restrictions, such as those associated with Pesach and Sukkot, are intended to increase a sense of holiness and an out-of-the ordinary experience,⁴ it is entirely understandable why some might find manifold rules and regulations difficult to prepare for and fulfill, and consequently prefer religious occasions where less demands are made. While at least one view in Pesachim 6a maintains that one has to prepare for the complexities of Pesach at least thirty days before the Chag,⁵ commentators note that a similar

¹ A reference to the various restrictions associated with avoiding Chametz during the course of the holiday.

² The requirement to eat in a Sukka throughout the festival imposes a different kind of limitation.

³ In the Diaspora, like other Yomim Tovim, two days instead of one are celebrated.

⁴ RaMBaM and RaMBaN had a fundamental disagreement regarding what the sacrificial service in first the Mishkan and then the Temple connoted (see e.g., RaMBaM on Beraishit 4:3; VaYikra 1:9), and by extension, how to interpret the myriad rules and regulations that were associated with this service:

RaMBaM, Moreh Nevuchim III:32

All these restrictions served to limit this type of worship and keep it within those bounds within which God did not Think it necessary to abolish sacrificial service altogether.

RaMBaN, on the other hand, understands that restrictions, rather than serving to limit and discourage a certain type or practice, instead enhance the practice's holiness and spiritual significance. For example, here is his commentary on the need to prepare the Jewish people prior to the giving of the Tora on Sinai:

Shemot 19:10

And the LORD Said unto Moses: 'Go unto the people, and sanctify them to-day and to-morrow, and let them wash their garments.

RaMBaM, d.h. VeKidashtem HaYom U'Machar

... And the proper understanding is that they should be holy, that they should not engage in intimate relations nor expose themselves to ritual impurity, because one who avoids ritual impurity is called "sanctified", as it is said regarding the Kohanim (VaYikra 21:1) "For a (dead) person he should not make himself ritually impure"; (Ibid. 6) "They will be holy to their God"; and it is written, (II Divrei HaYomim 30:3) "Because the Kohanim did not sanctify themselves", i.e., they did not purify themselves...

⁵ Pesachim 6a-b

As it was taught: Questions are asked and lectures are given on the laws of Passover for thirty days before Passover. R. Shimeon b. Gamliel said: Two weeks. What is the reason of the first

requirement is unnecessary for Shavuot since there are no specific preparations to be made.⁶ And since by the Rabbis referring to Shavuot as “Atzeret”,⁷ they are obviously paralleling it to the final day of the fall holiday season, i.e., Shmini Atzeret, nevertheless, from an experiential perspective, just because the Mitzva of Sefirat HaOmer⁸ serves as the bridge between Pesach and Shavuot, does not mean that we feel as if this day marks the end of the spring holiday season and/or that it is an intrinsic part of the observances during Nissan, fifty days before. Perhaps due to Shavuot’s singular and brief nature,^{9 10} it should therefore be thought of as the “Roman Candle”¹¹ of the Chagim!

Tanna? Because lo! Moses was standing on the First Passover and giving instructions about the Second Passover, as it is said, (BaMidbar 9:2) “Moreover, let the children of Israel keep the Passover in its appointed Season”; and it is written, (Ibid. 6) “And there were certain men, who were unclean by the dead body of a Man”.

And R. Shimeon b. Gamliel? — He answers you: Because he was engaged in the laws of Passover, he instructed them in all the laws of Passover. What is R. Simeon b. Gamliel's reason?... Said Rabbah b. Shimi in Rabina's name: [It is deduced] from here: (Ibid. 9:1) “And the Lord Spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year”; and it is written, “Moreover let the children of Israel keep the Passover in its appointed season.” But here too, how do you know that he was standing at the beginning of the month: perhaps he was standing on the fourth or the fifth of the month? — Said R. Nachman b. Isaac: [The implication of] ‘wilderness’ [here] is learned from ‘wilderness’ [elsewhere]. Here it is written, ‘in the wilderness of Sinai’, while there it is written, (Ibid. 1:1) “And the Lord Spake unto Moshe in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month”. Just as there [it was] at the beginning of the month, so here too at the beginning of the month.

⁶ For a summary of the views of various decisors re whether the thirty day study period prior to the holiday applies to other festivals, see Mishna Berura 429, #1.

⁷ See for e.g., Rosh HaShana 4a.

⁸ VaYikra 23:15-6.

And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest (the beginning of Pesach), from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be complete; even unto the morrow after the seventh week shall ye number fifty days (until Shavuot); and ye shall present a new meal-offering unto the LORD.

⁹ R. Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in HaMoadim BeHalacha (Avraham Tzioni, Tel-Aviv, 5727, p. 3??) quotes Chatam Sofer who argued that however short Shavuot might be, the second day of Shavuot in Chutz LaAretz has to be treated more seriously than the second day of other holidays in the Diaspora. Whereas the other “second days” are observed due to a doubt that arose when the system of bonfires used to alert distant communities regarding when Rosh Chodesh was declared in Yerushalayim was discontinued, the timing of Shavuot is never in doubt. Other festivals take place only fifteen days after the beginning of either Nissan or Tishrei, Shavuot is a full fifty days after the beginning of Pesach. Consequently the second day of Shavuot is comparable to the second day of Rosh HaShana, when witnesses came too late on the first day, and the second day would be observed again not because of doubt but rather out of certainty.

¹⁰ There is one Halachic aspect of Shavuot that results in a type of extension of the Chag paralleling the lengths of Pesach and Sukkot. Rosh HaShana 4b notes that during the times when the Temples were functioning, people were hard-pressed on Shavuot to be able to offer up the requisite sacrifices that pilgrims to Jerusalem were required to bring. Whereas on Pesach and Sukkot there were seven and eight days respectively during which these sacrifices could be brought, Shavuot offered a far narrower window of opportunity, i.e., a single day. Consequently, a Tashlumin (make-up) period was appended to Shavuot, extending beyond the actual Chag itself. Although the Talmud invokes the rule “Tofasta Meruba Lo

What might account for Shavuot's brevity?

Facetiously, we might explain that Shavuot's lasting only one day serves as a corrective for the custom of eating dairy during this festival. One of the numerous rationales offered for this practice on Shavuot is based upon the Talmud's observation in Bechorot 6b that the consumption of even Kosher animals' milk by humans would not be permitted without some biblical textual justification. Since milk is drawn from a living animal, one might conceptually think of it as "Eiver Min HaChai" (a limb from a living animal), which is prohibited not only for Jews, but for Noachides as well.¹² Among the Talmud's explanations for establishing a basis for milk being permitted for human consumption is the Tora's characterizing the desirability of the land of Israel on fifteen different occasions,¹³ as "a land flowing with milk and honey". Would the land be aggrandized if one¹⁴ of the elements that distinguishes it could not be easily used

Tafasta) (if you "grab onto" the larger portion, you have not "grabbed onto it", i.e., it does not take effect) in order to explain why the Tashlumin for Shavuot is only seven days (like Pesach) rather than eight days (like Sukkot), nevertheless, in one particular respect—the potential offering of its sacrifices—Shavuot is deemed to be a holiday that begins on the 6th of Sivan, and continues through the 12th of the month.

Two contemporary Halachic implications of Shavuot's days of Tashlumin are:

- a) Those whose custom is not to say Tachanun until the 12th of Sivan will also not recite Tzidkatcha Tzedek (at the conclusion of Mincha on Shabbat afternoon).

-- Luach Minhagei Beit HaKenesset, Hotzoat Ezrat Tora LiShnat 5773, ed. R. Hillel David Litwack, p. 114.

- b) Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 399:8

One hour [observed] before Shavuot is considered as seven days. Shavuot – since, if he did not bring the Shavuot sacrifice on Shavuot, he could make it up all seven days – it is as considered as seven days. This is fourteen days [of Shloshim], and he adds onto it sixteen additional [days], and the second day of Shavuot counts towards the counting of the sixteen days.

¹¹ "A firework that produces a continuous shower of sparks interspersed with colored balls of fire. It is so called because it originated in Italy." (Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable—Fifteenth Edition, rev. Adrian Room, Harper-Collins, New York, 1998, p. 922.

¹² Sanhedrin 56a

Our Rabbis taught: seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: social laws; to refrain from blasphemy, idolatry; adultery; bloodshed; robbery; and eating flesh cut from a living animal.

¹³ Shemot 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; VaYikra 20:24; BaMidbar 13:27; 14:8; 16:13-4; Devarim 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20.

¹⁴ While traditionally, the honey that is mentioned in association with the land of Israel is date and fig honey rather than bee honey, (see for e.g., RaShI on Shemot 13:5) with the former being acceptable to all in terms of Kashrut, the latter however is, like milk, also initially controversial Halachically due to its being processed by a Sheretz (an insect) that is not Kosher.

Bechorot 7b

Why did [the Sages] say that honey from bees is permitted? Because the bees store it up in their bodies but do not drain it from their bodies. — He holds with R. Jacob who said: The Divine Law expressly permitted honey. For it was taught: R. Jacob says: (VaYikra 11:21) "Yet these (an extra exclusionary word) may ye eat of all the winged swarming things." This you may eat, but you are

and consumed? Since Jewish tradition maintains that the Tora that contained these verses was given on Shavuot, we commemorate this event by celebrating with dairy foods.¹⁵ Perhaps it is just as well that the holiday is only one/two day(s) because intense consumption of high cholesterol foods such as cheesecake and blintzes could really prove quite unhealthy!

A more spiritual interpretation for Shavuot's single day commemoration is offered by R. Adin Steinsaltz.¹⁶ Noting that in our liturgy, Shavuot is referred to as "Zeman Matan Toratenu" (the time of the giving of the Tora), in contrast to "Zeman Kabbalat Toratenu" (the time of the receiving of the Tora), R. Steinsaltz writes,

The Giving of the Tora as an act of forming a connection between the Creator and His Creatures is a one-time event...

The Receiving of the Tora is an exceedingly lengthy process...

Even to this day, receiving the Tora remains an "open question". It is not simply a matter of the spiritual and intellectual capacities of one generation or another. As long as human beings possess free will, the problem of accepting the Tora will be posed anew in every generation...

As a personal-individual experience, it continues to this very day...

A Talmudic homiletic support for R. Steinsaltz' distinction between the Giving and Receiving of the Tora, appears in a number of places, including Sanhedrin 59a:

R. Yochanan said: A heathen who studies the Torah deserves death, for it is written, (Devarim 33:4) "Moshe commanded us a law 'Morasha' (for an inheritance); it is *our* inheritance, not theirs. Then why is this not included in the Noachide laws?¹⁷ — On the

forbidden to eat an unclean winged swarming thing. But is not an unclean winged swarming thing expressly mentioned in the Scripture [as forbidden]? Rather we must explain [thus]: An unclean fowl that swarms you must not eat, but you may eat what an unclean fowl casts forth from its body. And what is this? This is bees' honey.

¹⁵ This interpretation would seem to be contradicted by Beraishit 18:8

"And he took curd, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat."

If milk and milk products were not yet permitted to anyone, how could Avraham have served them (aside from the question that commentators wrestle with re the apparent serving of dairy and meat at the same time). "VeTzorech Iyun" (the matter requires further investigation).

¹⁶ Change and Renewal: The Essence of the Jewish Holidays, Festivals & Days of Remembrance, trans. Daniel Haberman, ed. Yehudit Shabta, Maggid Books, Jerusalem, 2011, pp. 327-8.

¹⁷ Sanhedrin 56a

Our Rabbis taught: seven precepts were the sons of Noah commanded: social laws; to refrain from blasphemy, idolatry; bloodshed; robbery; and eating flesh cut from a living animal

reading “Morasha” [an inheritance] he steals it;¹⁸ on the reading “Me'orasa” [betrothed], he is guilty as one who violates a betrothed maiden...¹⁹

MaHaRShA on Pesachim 49b explains the analogy between Tora and a betrothed woman as follows:

...In accordance with the statement (Avot 2:12) “R. Yosi said...Prepare yourself to study Tora, because it is not (Morasha) an inheritance to you...”,²⁰ it (the Tora) is to be found in a “corner”. Whomever wishes to pick it up, can pick it up. This is the reason why it is interpreted as comparable to a betrothed person, because the Tora is compared to a woman in several places. And when it was initially given to Israel, it was like someone betrothed. Only after its study (i.e., its being “received”) will it be considered one’s spouse...

Therefore while the Giving of the Tora can be circumscribed within a single day’s time (Shavuot), the receiving of the Tora will take millennia in the life of a people, and an entire lifetime with respect to a single individual.

And then there is the zen-like explanation that a contemporary Tora teacher includes at the end of an essay devoted to the question, “Size Doesn't Matter--Why Shavuot is Short”.²¹

Finally, we know that in the Torah, size doesn't matter. It is quality rather than quantity that matters. A one day chag is not less kadosh that a seven day chag.

In the Navardok Mussar Yeshiva, students were awoken in the middle of the night in order to study Tora for five minutes before going back to sleep. The exercise was not only to develop self-discipline, but also to demonstrate that no time, however short, should ever be wasted.²²

¹⁸ Stealing (robbery) is included in the seven Noachide laws.

¹⁹ Sexual immorality (adultery) is also included in the Noachide laws.

²⁰ An inheritance comes to the heir without effort on his part; Tora however, does not automatically accrue to those to whom it is reserved.

²¹ Ilana Techer, [Why-aanot](http://why-aanot.blogspot.com/2012/03/size-doesnt-matter-why-shavuot-is-short.html) (a pun based upon a girl’s Yeshiva high school in Teaneck, NJ, “Mayanot”), <http://why-aanot.blogspot.com/2012/03/size-doesnt-matter-why-shavuot-is-short.html>

²² [Vending Machines Dispense Torah Learning](#) Wednesday February 25, 2009 11:51 AM

Learning Torah has replaced chips, candy bars and pretzels at a vending machine on the second floor of the Yerushalayim Central Bus Station. Passengers can receive a small booklet that allows them to cover halacha, Mishnayos, Chumash and more. It takes only five minutes to read the booklet, which costs 15 shekel (\$3.60). The Vesein Chelkeinu project is the brainchild of Meoros HaDaf HaYomi, which for 12 years has attracted an international community of Jews learning Torah. Yehoshua Frei, marketing director of Meoros, explains that the idea is to encourage people to use their time productively and to improve the quality of their spare moments by learning Torah for five minutes a day.

Could Shavuot then serve as an object lesson regarding making the most of whatever time is allotted to something, in this case, be it one day or seven/eight?

If Shavuot can be considered the “roman candle” of Chaggim, we unfortunately know of examples of individuals who, however accomplished, also live for all too briefly a time.

The only people for me...burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”²³

In R. Yisrael Meir Lau’s moving memoir, Out of the Depths, (p. 151), he quotes R. Eliyahu Lopian, who once explained the biblical phrase (Genesis 18:11; I Kings 1:1) “Ba’im BaYomim ” (coming with days):

There are special individuals who when they present themselves before their Creator, They bring with them their entire lives, without one day lost or wasted. They were active each and every day of their lives, expanding their knowledge, Serving the public, and helping others. They made the most of each moment.²⁴

“We made the format for five minutes so that everyone can feel he is learning Torah and Judaism,” he says. The bus station location, between the middle staircase and the escalator, was chosen because of the large volume of passengers who pass through, enabling them to learn while waiting for a bus or sitting during travel.

Frei estimates that hundreds of booklets are snapped up every month, and contacts have been made with officials at Ben Gurion International Airport to install a machine at the terminal there. Malls and supermarkets also are on the list of potential dispensing venues. <http://matzav.com/vending-machines-dispense-torah-learning>

²³ Jack Kerouac, On the Road, pt. 1, ch. 1 (1957), quoted in The Yale Book of Quotations, ed. Fred Shapiro, Yale U. Press, New Haven, 2006, p. 423.

²⁴ R. Zevin, in his volume LeTora U’LeMoadim, (Tel Aviv, 5721, p. 165), concerning Parashat Emor, conveys a similar idea:

(VaYikra 23:15) “And ye shall count unto you from the morrow after the day of rest, from the day that ye brought the sheaf of the waving; seven weeks shall there be ‘Temimot’ (perfect/complete)”.

(BaMidbar Rabba 28) “When will they be perfect/complete? When the Jews carry out the Divine Will.

Everything that we find in the world, has no permanence. All things exist and then are lost. They are created, they exist in the present and in the future, they will disappear from existence. And even concerning the Heavens and the Earth it is said in the biblical text: (Yeshayahu 51:6) “Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look upon the earth beneath; for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner; but My Salvation shall be forever, and My Favor shall not be abolished.” Nevertheless, while all things have some time to exist, there is one thing that has no existence. It no sooner comes about, and it already has past, he moves away and is no longer. And that is—time itself.

Perhaps we should recall such people and their actions more often than a few times per year; nevertheless, Yizkor gives us an opportunity to think about those who lived meaningful lives, whether longer or shorter, and hopefully those eternal memories will inspire us to carry on after them, and give them an even more tangible presence in our lives and those who will come after us.

Every second that comes about in the world, and (Mishlei 23:5) “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon it? it is gone...” The time of the past is no longer, and the present immediately becomes the past. However, man has the capacity to give time permanence and even eternity, by means of the actions and accomplishments that he achieves during those times. As long as his actions continue to exist, it is as if the time during which those actions took place also continues and lasts. And if man engages in Tora, Mitzot and good deeds, which are all intrinsically eternal, “And His Words Live and Exist forever.” In this manner his actions are such that even his time becomes permanent.

And this is what is meant concerning Avraham (Beraishit 24:1) “And Avraham was old, coming with days.” A typical elderly individual does not “come with days”. His early days are no longer in existence. They have passed away, they are gone and won’t return. He does not “come” with them. But Avraham—as well as David for regarding him it is also stated (I Melachim 1:1) “And King David was old, coming with days”—that during all of his days he did righteousness and justice (Beraishit 26:5) “Because that Abraham hearkened to My Voice, and kept My Charge, My Commandments, My Statutes, and My Laws.” And so too David: (Tehillim 119:97) “O how love I Thy Law! It is my meditation all the day.” Therefore they made their time eternal, and when they became elderly, they “came with days”, with all of their early days.

And this is what is meant (by the Midrash): “When are they perfect? When the Jews carry out the Divine Will. According to the mystical books, Sefirat HaOmer corresponds to the years of an individual’s life. The seven weeks hint to (Ibid. 90:10) “The days of our years are threescore years and ten, or even by reason of strength fourscore years; yet is their pride but travail and vanity; for it is speedily gone, and we fly away.” The Mitzva is that they should be “Temimot” (perfect, whole), i.e., that the time not go to waste and amount to nothing, but rather it should remain in its wholeness. And when one complies with the Will of HaShem, time remains forever.