Shavuot Message
By Rabbi Yamin Levy

Passover and Shavuot are spiritually linked by the counting of the 49 days and evening of the Omer. Maimonides writes:

> The Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) is the day of the giving of the Torah. In order to glorify and exalt that day, the days are counted from the first of the festivals (Passover) up to it as is done by one who waits for the coming of the human being he loves best – and counts the days and the hours. This is the reason for the counting of the *Omer* – from the day they left Egypt till the day of the giving of the Torah. (Guide 3:43)

Maimonides introduces a transcendent dimension to the relationship between Pesach and Shavuot. A sort of reenactment of the emotional anticipation the Jews must have felt leaving Egypt towards their encounter with God at Mount Sinai for the theophany that would change the world forever. Rabbi Soloveitchik of blessed memory introduces in his essay *Kol Dodi Dofek* (The Voice of my Beloved Knocks) yet another powerful spiritual linkage between the two festivals. Judaism Says Rabbi Soloveitchik does not begin at Sinai with the giving of the Torah but rather with the collective experience of oppression the Jewish people shared in Egypt as slaves to Pharaoh. Indeed, the student's love-affair with Judaism does begin with a leap of faith or a moment of spiritual passion but rather with the sober recognition that this community of covenanted-members shares a history of oppression and suffering. The feelings of empathy for oppressed slaves precede the feelings of spiritual exhilaration.

It is Passover that ultimately makes Shavuot and the giving of the Torah possible. God's gift to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai only makes sense if it is given to a people who are united, who gather in unison towards a shared future. That unison was and is forged in the fires of oppression shared by a collective experience. Had the gathering at Sinai been with individuals motivated solely by some intellectual or spiritual quest it would have failed. It was their shared communal history, their Egypt experience, which formed a united people - a national family.

In the only other grand conversion in the Bible, the conversion of Ruth the Moabite woman, the mother of the Davidic dynasty, again community precedes fervent faithful longing. Her embrace of Judaism is preceded by an embrace of the Jewish people. "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16) are her very own words. It is no wonder that we study the book of Ruth on Shavuot.

Maimonides captures this very idea in the following ruling regarding conversion.

> In what manner are righteous proselytes to be received? When a heathen comes forth for the purpose of becoming a proselyte, and upon investigation no ulterior motive is found, the court should say to him, "why do you come forth to be come a proselyte? Do you not know that Israel is at present sorely

> afflicted, oppressed, despised, confounded, and beset by suffering? If he answers: “I know and I am indeed unworthy” he should be accepted immediately. He should then be acquainted with the principles of faith. (Maimonides MT Book of Holiness 14:1-2)

Identifying with the community’s past and present paves the way for entry into the covenantal community’s future. Sinai was an experience of the community not of the individual. Our primary challenge today is to create a broad and inclusive community that identifies with a common history, language, tradition and land. The faith commitment, important as it may be, is preceded by the love of *Am Israel* no matter where they may be on the faith barometer.