



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Shavuot 5769 By Rabbi Dov Linzer

The holiday of Shavuot is generally assumed to commemorate the giving of the Torah, which occurred on the sixth of Sivan. In the Torah, however, Shavuot is only described as an agricultural holiday and occurs not on any particular calendrical date, but at the culmination of seven weeks from the beginning of the harvest season that occurs on the second day of Pesach. Shavuot is *chag hakatzir*, the holiday of harvest, and is closely linked with Sukkot, *chag ha'asif*, the holiday of the ingathering of the crops. These are the two holidays on which the Torah commands us to be joyous—*v'samachta lifnei Hashem*, “and you shall be joyous before God” (Deuteronomy 16:11) and *v'samachta bi'chagekha*, “and you shall be joyous on your festivals” (Deuteronomy 16:14), respectively.

A year of agricultural bounty naturally evokes a sense of joy over one's accomplishment, security and success. The Torah insists, however, that this joy not be focused merely on oneself, as this could lead to self-satisfaction and arrogance. Rather, the joy is to be directed to God (Deuteronomy 16:11), recognizing that it is only with God's assistance that we have achieved this success.

However, thanksgiving to God is not the only, nor even the primary, theme of this Festival of the Harvest. As exemplified vividly in the book of Ruth, it was during this time of year that the entire Israelite nation, individually and collectively, provided for the poor who had no land of their own and no crops to harvest. In accordance with the Torah's *mitzvot*, which appear immediately in the context of the holiday of Shavuot (Leviticus 23:22), landed farmers left an uncut corner of the field, together with whatever was dropped and forgotten during the harvest, for the poor to reap and glean for themselves.

These two themes—thanksgiving to God and support of the poor—are interconnected, and the Torah states so explicitly, “You shall rejoice before God . . . you, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst” (Deuteronomy 16:11). If we recognize our material success as coming from God, then we will understand that religious responsibilities attach to that wealth. Just as God is described as caring for the poor and orphan, just as God's compassion extends to all of God's creatures, so too, as beneficiaries of God's beneficence, we must use our means to similarly care for those who are poor and downtrodden.

This framing emphasizes the Jewish value of *chesed*, the magnanimous act of helping others. There is, however, a more important theme at play here, and that is the value of *tzedek*, of doing what is just and right toward other members of society. In commanding us to leave the gleanings for the poor, the Torah concludes, “and you shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 16:12). As slaves, we learned what it meant to be strangers, to be marginalized and vulnerable people in society. As free people, we must create a society that is based on *tzedek*, on the equal protection of all of its members: “Like a citizen among you shall be the stranger who is dwelling among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). Now that we have been redeemed and have gone from slaves to free people, from strangers to citizens, we must make sure to not follow in the ways of our past oppressors. This is a basic responsibility of being a citizen: to take responsibility for all of the members of society, its citizens and its strangers, its strong and its weak.

As an expression of *tzedek*, this obligation relates to how we structure our society, and thus taking care of the poor has always been recognized as a communal responsibility. The Mishnah tractate of Peah is devoted to the agricultural gifts of Shavuot, and it is here that we are introduced to the rabbinic institution of the soup kitchen (*tamchoi*), for the town's visiting poor and the charity box (*kanon*), for the town's local poor. These rabbinic institutions were thus

modeled after the communal, agricultural gifts of Shavuot, and, I believe, these communal gifts later served as a model for the Hebrew Free Loan Societies which began as local, communal institutions.

Since caring for the poor is a communal obligation, it is understandable that priority is given to the community's own poor (as is highlighted by Ruth's astonishment that Boaz has recognized her, given that she "is a foreigner"), but our responsibilities extend to the larger world as well. *Halakha* specifically mandates a responsibility to the non-Jewish poor, under the rubric of *darkhei shalom*, ways of peace. While often interpreted as a form of enlightened self-interest, this is more properly understood as a fundamental, religious obligation and as the responsibility of reciprocity—what it means to be citizens not only of the Jewish community, but of the world (see, for example, Maimonides, Laws of Kings 10:12).

In these times of economic downturn and hardship, it may be hard to feel the joy of bounty that is normally associated with Shavuot. However, this is also a time to be even more acutely aware of the needs of those who have lost their jobs and their homes and who are struggling to put food on their tables and clothes on their backs. Those of us who have suffered economically, but who are still supporting ourselves and our families, need, firstly, to be thankful to God for our relative success, for our ongoing ability to provide for ourselves and our families, and to recognize the obligations of *chesed* that attend such success, however relative it may be. As members of the Jewish community and as members of the world community, we must live up to the demands of *tzedek* to do everything in our power to ensure that all members of our various communities—religious, local and global—are protected and cared for, are given the dignity that they deserve and are empowered so that they can take their rightful place as full, participating members of our community.



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