

# How is this holiday different than all others?

Mrs. Deena Rabinovich

Director, Legacy Heritage Scholars/Jewish Educators Project, Stern College for Women

The laws of Pesach dorot - Passover for the ages - are set out in some detail as part of the recounting of the Exodus story itself (Ex. 12:14-20). In the collection of laws, civil and religious, in parashat Mishpatim, which are situated between the Exodus story and the Mishkan/Golden calf narrative, we learn that Pesach is to be one of three annual pilgrim festivals. This is the first that we hear of the other two festivals.

*Three times thou shalt keep a feast unto Me in the year. The feast of unleavened bread shalt thou keep; seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, as I commanded thee, at the time appointed in the month Abib--for in it thou camest out from Egypt; and none shall appear before Me empty; and the feast of harvest, the first-fruits of thy labours, which thou sowest in the field; and the feast of ingathering, at the end of the year, when thou gatherest in thy labours out of the field. Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord GOD.<sup>50</sup>*

**Ex. 23: 14 -17**

שלוש רגלים תחג לי בשנה: את חג  
המצות תשמר שבעת ימים תאכל  
מצות כאשר צויתך למועד חדש  
האביב כי בו יצאת ממצרים ולא יראו  
פני ריקם: וחג הקציר בכורי מעשיך  
אשר תזרע בשדה וחג האסף בצאת  
השנה באספך את מעשיך מן השדה:  
שלוש פעמים בשנה יראה כל זכורך  
אל פני האדן ה':  
שמות כג: יד-יז

In this initial description of the cycle of three festivals, the festival of the Matzot (no mention of the Pesach here unless the end of verse 15 is an oblique reference: but cf. Rashi, *ad loc*) recalls the historical events of the Exodus, while the introduction of the feasts of the early harvest and of the ultimate gathering of the crops presents no historical markers. As we read the other sections of the Torah that deal with the pilgrim festivals (Lev. 23: 1-44, which includes a discussion of all of the holidays of the seventh month (Tishrei); Num. 28 :16-31 and 29:12-38, detailing the sacrifices to be brought on the festivals; and Deut. 1-18 focusing, as in Ex. 23 only on the three festivals and in the same order) the gathering holiday- Sukkot - begins to come into clearer

<sup>50</sup> The translations of Biblical verses throughout follow those of the New Jewish Publication Society (Philadelphia, 1985). Other translations are by the author.

focus. It, too, commemorates the Exodus by requiring one to relocate, for a week, from one's house to a temporary structure recalling the encampment of the Jews in the wilderness. Our tradition has connected the early harvest festival – Shavuot – with the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, but there is no mention of this in the text itself.

Certain parallels emerge between Pesach and Sukkot in parashat Pinhas:

*And in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, is the LORD'S passover. And on the fifteenth day of this month shall be a feast; seven days shall unleavened bread be eaten. In the first day shall be a holy convocation; ye shall do no manner of servile work;*

**Num. 28: 16 -18**

ובחדש הראשון בארבעה עשר יום  
לחדש פסח לה': ובחמשה עשר יום  
לחדש הזה חג שבעת ימים מצות  
יאכל: ביום הראשון מקרא קדש כל  
מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו:

**במדבר כח: טז-יח**

*And on the fifteenth day of the seventh month ye shall have a holy convocation: ye shall do no manner of servile work, and ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days;*

**Num. 29: 12**

ובחמשה עשר יום לחדש השביעי מקרא  
קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכת עבדה לא  
תעשו והגתם חג לה' שבעת ימים:

**במדבר כט: יב**

*Also in the day of the first-fruits, when ye bring a new meal-offering unto the LORD in your feast of weeks, ye shall have a holy convocation: ye shall do no manner of servile work;*

**Num. 28: 26**

וביום הבכורים בהקריבכם מנחה חדשה  
לה' בשבעתיכם מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל  
מלאכת עבדה לא תעשו:

**במדבר כח: כו**

In the verses from parashat Emor we again sense a certain consonance between the laws of Pesach and Sukkot. On Pesach one refrains, for a week, from eating breads and other leavened products – mainstays of the diet – while on Sukkot one moves out of one's home; both of these laws relate to the Exodus as does the commandment to eat Matzah on the first night of Pesach, which matches up with the obligation to eat a meal in the Sukkah on the first night of Sukkot. Sukkot is also enhanced by the arba minim which connect the holiday to the agricultural cycle. Here, the connection to Pesach is not as clear, but we are told (Mishna Rosh Hashana 1:2) that the time of divine judgment (or confirmation of that judgment) for grains is on Pesach, connecting a key Pesach symbol with the agricultural cycle. Shavuot lacks the memorable symbols of the other two pilgrim festivals.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Pesach begins on the fifteenth of the month, when the moon is at its fullest. It lasts for seven days with the first and last a *מקרא קודש*, a day on which no *מלאכה* is performed. Sukkot also begins on the fifteenth of the month also lasts for seven days, and also begins and ends with a *מקרא קודש*. Of course, Pesach is in the first month (Nissan) and Sukkot in the seventh month

<sup>51</sup> Shavuot is also mentioned in the Mishna Rosh Ha-Shana 2:2 as a time period in which judgment is made on the year's fruit crop, and that could tie in with the commandment regarding Bikkurim, particularly since the holiday is called Hag ha-Bikkurim and Shavuot is the opening of the season for Bikkurim (Mishna Bikkurim 1:3). There was also mention of Bikkurim in some Yotzrot or Ma'aravot for Shavuot (See, e.g., Shu"t *Havvoth Yair* no. 238.) But the majority of the Yotzrot deal with the giving of the Torah or the Ten Commandments (See, A.Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and its Development* (1995 reprint) p. 330 and ff), and there is no traditional focus on Bikkurim as a mitzvah tied to Shavuot.

(Tishrei). Pesach is identified as a holiday in the first month of the year; Sukkot is identified as a holiday in the seventh month of the year. Rabbi Yohanan (*Sukkah* 27a) cites an earlier gezerah shava centered on the common date (the 15<sup>th</sup> of the month) that Pesach and Sukkot share.

By contrast, Shavuot lasts for only one day and is not marked by any particular mitzvot by the general public. (There was the “Two Loaves” (Shetei ha-Lehem) presented in the Temple to which we will return). Shavuot, most remarkably, is not set for a particular date. This, of course, set the stage for generations of dispute between the Rabbis and the Sadducees, discussed below, and between traditionalists and various sectarian groups on the timing of Shavuot.<sup>52</sup>

The various descriptions of the festivals that we have looked at also make historical references. In the verses in Shemot we are reminded that we celebrate Pesach in the spring since that is when we left Egypt, [שמות כג:טו]. In Va-Yikra we are told to dwell in Sukkot so that our children will know how God housed us in temporary structures when He took us out of Egypt [ויקרא כג:מג]. There is no historic aspect listed for the holiday of Shavuot, though we are told that the mitzvah of עומר from when we begin to count towards Shavuot begins when [ויקרא כג:מג]

So, Shavuot is a holiday of a different length than the other festivals, at an undetermined time, for an undetermined historic reason, perhaps connected to our arrival in the land of Israel.

There are, though, a series of links between Pesach and Shavuot. The famously ambiguous Lev. 23:15 featuring the phrase “mi-maharat ha-Shabbat” as the date when the countdown to Shavuot begins was the occasion for a celebrated controversy between Hazal and the Sadducees.<sup>53</sup> An example of “inner biblical exegesis” is found in Joshua 5:11 where the phrase “Mi-maharat ha-Pesach” (the day after the Pesach) is substituted, tying the date of Shavuot to that of Pesach. Here are the verses from Emor:

*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 complete; even unto the morrow after the seventh week shall ye number fifty days; and ye shall present a new meal-offering unto the LORD*

**Lev. 23:15-16**

וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום  
הביאכם את עמר התנופה שבע שבתות  
תמימת תהיינה: עד ממחרת השבת  
השביעת תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם  
מנחה חדשה לה':  
ויקרא כג:טו-טז

<sup>52</sup> Book of Jubilees and Qumran list the holiday as occurring on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the third month, an interesting parallel to Pesach and Sukkot which the Torah prescribes, respectively, for the fifteenth day of the first and seventh months. There is a large literature on this question and the significance of the calendar to the struggles between the various groups in Second Temple times. See, for instance, Steven D. Fraade, “Theory, Practice, and Polemic in Ancient Jewish Calendars,” in *Dine Israel: Studies in Halakha and Jewish Law*, Vol. 26-27 (Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University and Tel Aviv University Law School, 2009-2010), pp. 147- 181; Liora Ravid, “The Book of Jubilees and its Calendar,” *Dead Sea Discoveries*, Vol. 10, number 3 (2003), pp. 371-394.

<sup>53</sup> The Sadducees believed that the word שבת should be taken at face value and placed the date for the Korban Omer on the Sunday following the beginning of Pesach. The Talmud (Menahot 65a-66a) sets out various responses by the Rabbis to the Sadducean approach.

The descriptions we have seen for Pesach and Sukkot distinguish between the dates (including the months) on which the festival falls and the respective seasons of the year. The Jewish calendar is famously and uniquely a hybrid of the lunar and solar systems. The lunar approach, ostensibly determined by the rotations of the moon and the earth, must be confirmed by the Sanhedrin on the basis of human testimony. Two witnesses must observe the new moon in its correct position in the sky and come to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem so that the rabbis can dedicate the day as the first of the month. There is, to be sure, at most a choice of two days on which the new month can be declared and if it is not declared by Sanhedrin on the first of the two days, it will automatically be declared for the second, but the human element is unmistakable in the legal process.

The seasons of the years are based on the revolution of the earth around the sun. We see indications of four seasons- spring, summer, fall and winter [though ancient civilizations tended to think in terms of three seasons (Assyria) or two (Mesopotamia)]. There is no human intervention in their determination. The seasons of the year appear, inevitably, as days with no human confirmation required.

This distinction between months and seasons follows a pattern with respect to the Torah's description of the festivals. The designation of the month is identified with the historic component of the holiday. Thus, Pesach takes place in the first month and reminds us of the fact that God took us out of Egypt in that very month. Sukkot takes place in the seventh month and reminds us of the houses God provided for us during our sojourn in the desert. The agricultural element of the holiday, on the other hand, is reflected in the season in which the holiday occurs. Pesach takes place in the spring and the unique mitzvah is to make an offering, mi-maharat ha-Shabbat, of barley, the first grain to ripen in the field. Sukkot takes place in what we call the fall, at the end of the agricultural year when we celebrate the bountiful harvest with which we have been blessed. The two aspects of the calendar are represented by the two luminaries that were created on the fourth day of creation, and reflect the division of labor, so to speak, in our partnership with God. Lunar, we dedicate, based on the moon. Solar, God dedicates, with no human intervention. We see this partnership alluded to for Sukkot and Pesach - but since Shavuot must follow naturally fifty days after Pesach, where is the human element? Moreover, if Shavuot requires no reference to a month or date - no human involvement - why do the others?

Let us examine the commentary of R. David Zvi Hoffman to the verses in Mishpatim where he explains the necessity of incorporating both calendars into the celebration of our holidays.

*Here (Ex. 23:14-17) it is specifically emphasized that each holiday is to be celebrated in its particular season of the year, and that there is an agricultural component to the holiday as well. The arrival of a recognizable change of seasons mandates Israel to gather around God in the Place that is called by His Blessed Name, in order to recognize Him as the Creator of Nature and Nature's Master... Nature and history must join together to determine the timing of the holiday, for God who*

כאן מודגש במיוחד שכל חג ייחגג בעונה מסוימת השנה, ושיש בכל גם משום משמעות חקלאית. כל עת שמגיעה עונה חשובה לטבע, על ישראל להתאסף סביב אלוהיו במקום אשר בו ייקרא שמו יתברך, כדי להכיר בו כבורא הטבע ואדוניו... טבע והיסטוריה גם יחד צריכים לקבוע את מועד החג, כי אותו הא-ל אשר ברא את הטבע, המפעיל את כוחותיו על פיקוחים נצחיים, הוא גם זה המכוון את גורל יושבי תבל באחראי להתרחשויות המגוונות

created nature and directs eternal intelligences is the same One who determines the fate of mankind and guides the varied events of history.

**Commentary on Ex. 23:14-17**

של ההיסטוריה.  
רב דוד צבי הופמן על ספר שמות כג: יד-יז

Rav Hoffman explains why Israel must come together to celebrate. The fact that the historic events are connected to the lunar calendar and the agricultural events connected to the solar calendar help remind us that history and nature are connected.

How does this help us understand the lack of both calendar references for the holiday of Shavuot? Perhaps the answer can be seen in the answer to another question-what is the purpose of counting the fifty days to Shavuot? Sefer ha-Chinuch sees it as the fulfillment of the original promise made to Moshe in the beginning of parashat Va'erah

*The reason behind this mitzvah, in terms of its simple meaning, is that the main purpose of Israel is the Torah. It is for the sake of the Torah that the Heavens, and the Earth, and the People of Israel were created... and this is the main reason for which they were redeemed from Egypt- in order to receive the Torah on Har Sinai and to keep its precepts... And for this reason, we have been commanded to count from the day following the Yomtov of Pesach until the day of the Giving of the Torah, to show in our souls how strong the desire is for this honored day, ... since counting shows man that all of his salvation and hope will come at the designated time.*

**Sefer ha-Chinuch Mitzvah 306: Sefirat HaOmer**

משרשי המצוה על צד הפשט, לפי שכל עיקרן של ישראל אינו אלא התורה, ומפני התורה נבראו שמים וארץ וישראל... והיא העיקר והסיבה שנגאלו ויצאו ממצרים כדי שיקבלו התורה בסיני ויקיימוה... ומפני כן, ... נצטוינו למנות ממחרת יום טוב של פסח עד יום נתינת התורה, להראות בנפשנו החפץ הגדול אל היום הנכבד הנכסף ללבנו, ... כי המנין מראה לאדם כי כל ישעו וכל חפצו להגיע אל הזמן ההוא.  
ספר החינוך מצוה שו: ספירת העומר

Pesach was only the beginning of the redemption process. We are not truly free until we have accepted the Torah and entered into a covenant with God. We show this connection by counting from one to the other, and by linking the date of Shavuot to the holiday of Pesach.

Rav Hirsch sees another reason. He combines two observations- the fact that Shavuot is named after the act of counting of weeks in preparation for the holiday, and the fact that the Talmud (in one view, anyway) dated the original Shavuot as the seventh of Sivan, the fifty-first (!) day following the Exodus. He notes:

*It is not the fact of the revelation of the Torah, but our making ourselves worthy to receive it, that our מתן תורה Festival celebrates. It is the day before the Lawgiving, the last day of the הגבלה and פרישה, the day on which the nation finally presented itself as ready and worthy for the great mission to the world, to be the receivers and bearers of the Law of God, it is that day which the fiftieth day of the counting of the עומר represents. As we have remarked elsewhere, this Festival, differently to all the others, is not called after that which characteristically has to be done on it, but שבועות, after the counting of the weeks which preparatorily lead up to it. The Lawgiving, too, was in no way concentrated on the day of Sinai. The Lawgiving and the receipt of the laws lasted during forty years, and the Ten Commandments received at Sinai have no greater divinity or holiness than any of the other six*

*hundred and three commands and prohibitions which God gave through Moses. Quite clearly God Himself has explained the meaning and importance of the revelation on Sinai as being only an introduction to the laws, which were to be transmitted through Moses. This Sinai-day was to be a proof by personal experience that God can speak to Man and had spoken to Moses, so that we would receive the whole Torah from the mouth of Moses with full confidence that it was the Word of God... So that as the "Ten Commandments" received no special place in the order of the daily public divine services, מפני תרעומת העם, so as to give no support to the non-Jewish idea that the 'Ten Commandments' form the whole of God's laws, or even that they had only a greater degree of godliness and holiness. [Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Sefer Vayikra, 23:21]*

Shavuot, then, is an extension of Pesach, a culmination of the original promise of redemption. It is not only about receiving the Torah; after all, we received various mitzvot over the next forty years. Rather Shavuot is about the beginning of receiving the commandments and, more importantly, our preparations to receive the mitzvot.

That helps to put into perspective the ambiguity of when Shavuot is to fall, and why it is relatively unimportant whether the date is the fifth, sixth, or the seventh of Sivan. But why the ambiguity over when to start counting the fifty days? Why leave open for debate the date of bringing the Korban Omer and with it the first of the fifty days by designating the first day of counting as ממחרת השבת? Rav Hirsch suggests:

*Perhaps the whole difficulty may be solved by the following consideration. In the verse immediately preceding, the עומר is called: ראשית קצירכם. Thereby, before it is brought, or at any rate before it is cut, any cutting of the new produce of the land is forbidden, as well as also up to this day, eating or using this new produce in any form is prohibited. So that up to the day of the עומר, a pause in the agricultural activity is called, the grain stands ready on the stalks, but may not be cut or used. Such a stop in agriculture is simply called שבת... On the 15<sup>th</sup> ניסן it was still שבת הארץ, and the 16<sup>th</sup>, the day after of the עומר, with which this 'Sabbath' came to an end was in quite a literal sense, מחרת השבת. [Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Sefer Vayikra, 23:11]*

The word Shabbat in the pasuk highlights the fact that there is a point in time where the grain is ready to be harvested but we must wait for the designated time before we can use it.

Rav Soloveitchik, in a recently published collection, offers another approach by looking at the more generally understood concept of Shabbat as the seventh day of the week and connecting it to the different manners in which we praise God. We praise God through recitation of the Hallel, known as Hallel HaMitzri, for the "supernatural disruption of the natural order for our benefit."<sup>54</sup> We also praise God to "emphasize God's revelation to us through natural law, through the daily sunrise and sunset, through the sustenance that He provides daily for all creatures."<sup>55</sup> To confuse the two, to believe that we can only perceive the wonder of God through the reversal of the natural world, is akin to blaspheming the name

<sup>54</sup> David Shapiro ed., *Rav Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat ha-Omer and Shavuot*, (Urim Publications 2005) p. 198.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 200

of God, as the Gemara (Shabbat 118b) says, one who recites Hallel every day blasphemes God.

On Shabbat, the end of the natural week, we add to our recitation of Tehillim in Pesukay Dezimrah, extolling further the work of God in nature. Thus,

*Pesach and Shabbat symbolize, respectively, these two types of Hallel. Pesach symbolizes cosmic disorder, cosmic chaos, abrogation by Hakadosh Baruch Hu of the laws of nature. Shabbat on the other hand, represents cosmic order, a lawful world, a predictable world. [Ibid, p. 200-201]*

The fact that Shavuot is listed as ממחרת השבת, and not ממחרת החג, notes the Rav, highlights the fact that Benai Yisrael are to realize the transition from the open miracles that were done for them during the Exodus and their lives in the desert, and the natural or unrecognized miracles that will occur once they enter the land of Israel. They will eat from the bread of the land, and no longer be provided with Manna. They will need to fight their own battles. They will have to replace their worn out clothing and provide financial support for their families.

We began looking at three holidays and noting that two seemed similar and one stood out. Perhaps it is time to reexamine the initial question. Rather than look at three holidays, perhaps what we are actually experiencing is a set of two holidays, each with an extension. We have the holiday of Sukkot and its culmination, Shmini Atzeret (which is described as “Yom tov bifnei atzmo,” a separate holiday). As suggested earlier, Shavuot is the culmination of the Exodus as the giving of the Torah- or the preparation for the receipt of the Torah- is what gives true significance to the removal of the bonds of slavery to Pharaoh. Hazal (Menahot 68a) compared the Minhat haOmer brought on Pesach to the shte ha-lehem, the two loaves brought on Shavuot. There is a unified theme running through Pesach and Shavuot which perhaps explains the absence of both historical context and unique mitzvot in the Torah’s description of Shavuot. Shavuot completes and perfects the themes of Pesach.

Why, though, is Shmini Atzeret only seven days removed from its ‘parent’ holiday while Shavuot is fifty days removed from its?

*You will find that the same way that the Atzeret of Pesach is fifty days away, so too the Atzeret of [Sukkot] should have been fifty days removed [from Sukkot]. Why then does it follow Sukkot immediately? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, to what can this be compared? To a king who had many sons. Some were married and lived in a far away place and some were married and lived nearby. When he would ask the sons who lived close to come and visit, they would come, and when they would seek to go home and return, they would go back and return since the journey was short. Every day that they would seek to go they would go and return. But the married sons who lived at a greater distance- when they would seek to return home, the king would insist that they remain another day. So, too, when they departed following Pesach, which is in*

אתה מוצא כשם שעצרת של פסח רחוקה חמשים יום אף זאת היתה צריך להיות רחוקה חמשים יום, ולמה היא סמוכה לחג, אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שהיו לו בנים הרבה מהן נשואין [במקום רחוק ומהם נשואין] במקום קרוב [כשהיו מבקשים אותם שהיו נשואים במקום קרוב] באין אצלו וכשהיו מבקשין לילך ולחזור היו הולכין ובאין ומניחין, למה כך שהדרך קרובה, וכל יום שהן מבקשין לילך [היו הולכין ובאין] אבל אותן שהיו נשואין במקום רחוק באין אצלו וכשהיו מבקשין לילך היה כובשן עוד יום אחד אצלו, כך בפסח ימי הקיץ והן עולין

*the spring, Benai Yisrael could expect to return to Yerushalayim for the Atzeret fifty days later. But since the Chag [the holiday of Sukkot] occurs in the rainy season (i.e., winter) and travel is difficult, God decreed that Atzeret should immediately follow [Sukkot].*

**Yalkut Shimoni Pinchas 782**

בעצרת לירושלים אחר חמשים יום אבל  
עכשיו אחר החג ימות הגשמים הן  
והדרכים טרחות, לפיכך אמר הקב"ה  
עד שהן כאן יעשו את העצרת.<sup>56</sup>  
**ילקוט שמעוני פרשת פינחס רמז  
תשפב**

There are then three “regalim,” three annual occasions for the pilgrim to celebrate in Jerusalem. But there are four holidays which break into two pairs. The differences that we have highlighted between Shavuot on the one hand, and Pesach and Sukkot, which offer the primary mitzvot and themes, serve to remind us that there is no fixed date for receiving the Torah, that we are never truly done receiving the Torah, but we must always prepare ourselves for rising to new spiritual heights and facing new challenges. They remind us that God’s glory is not just seen in the נסים גלויים, the supernatural miracles, but in the נסים נסתרים, the natural miracles that occur on a daily basis. And they remind us that our redemption is not complete until we have reached the Land of Israel where we put aside the Manna and the miraculous and begin to live by both the sweat of our brows and the light of the Torah.

<sup>56</sup>An alternate version of the midrash is found in Pesikta deRav Cahana:

פסיקתא דרב כהנא (מנדלבוים) פיסקא כה - ביום השמיני עצרת א"ר יהוש' /יהושע/ בן לוי ראוייה היתה עצרת של חג להיות רחוקה חמשים יום. מושלו משל למה הדבר דומה, למלך שהיו לו בנות נשואו' במקום קרוב ובנות נשואות במקו' רחוק, אילו שנשואות במקום קרוב אית ביומא דייזלון וייתון, ואלו שהן במקום רחוק לית ביומא דייזלון וייתון, א' המלך אני ואתם נשמה יום אחד. כך בפסח על ידי שישר' יוצאין מן החורף לקייץ ואינה טרחות דרכים קשה לפיכך היא רחוקה ממנו חמשים יום, דאית ביומא דייזלון וייתון, אבל בהג על ידי שישר' נכנסין מן הקייץ לחורף וטרחות דרכים קשה לפיכך אינה רחוקה ממנו חמשים, דלית ביומא דאזלון וייתון. א' הקב"ה אני ואתם נשמה יום אחד. לפיכך צריך לומר ביום השמיני עצרת תהיה לכם במדבר כט: לה