



Parshat Bemidbar/Shavuot: Torah vs. Cheesecake

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Unlike the other two major Biblical festivals of Pesach and Sukkot, the upcoming holiday of Shavuot has no specific mitzvot designated for its celebration. No symbolic foods must be eaten, no huts built and no formal seder. Shavuot, from a straightforward reading of the Biblical verses, is a Yom Tov, a simple holiday devoid of any particular rituals.

Even though Shavuot does not come with listed laws or rituals in the Torah, the Talmud in Masechet [Pesachim \(68b\)](#) points to one halakha which is unique to Shavuot. In delineating the rules of the holidays, the Torah at times refers to them as “holidays for you,” and at times as “holidays for God.” Picking up on this seeming inconsistency, the Talmud suggests that these two terms are in fact complementary, inasmuch as they indicate to us how we are meant to spend our holidays.

R' Eliezer claims that one should choose either to devote one's time and energy over the holidays to the study of Torah (“holidays for God”) OR to focus on the eating, drinking, and festivities of the day (“holidays for you”). R' Yehoshua, on the other hand, argues that time must be made for both activities, studying and feasting, over the course of every holiday.

Following this argument, the Talmud states that regardless of the view one adopts in the previous debate, it is universally accepted that on Shavuot one must make time for feasting, for Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah.

This last halakhic ruling seems odd. Specifically on the day the Torah was given we are meant to make time for eating and drinking? Does that make eating cheesecake, marketed in bakeries all over Israel this time of year, a real mitzvah?!

We would expect just the opposite: Of all the holidays on the calendar, Shavuot should have been designated to focus purely on Torah study. In fact, in Jewish communities around the world, there is a well-established custom to study Torah all night long!

Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Pri Tzadik, Shavuot #12), offers an amazing interpretation of this ruling. Shavuot is, indeed, the time that we celebrate the giving of the Torah. But the Torah is not merely a text to be studied in the beit midrash, as meaningful as that is. The Torah is a way of life, the core and essence of how we live and breathe within the world. All of life, says Rav Tzadok, emanates from Torah and takes inspiration from it.



As such, there is no better day than Shavuot to eat and drink – with the express intent to sanctify our lives and our world through engaging with the physical. Not through relegating celebration through a special mitzvah, like matza or lulav, do we mark the commemoration of the giving of the Torah, but through the act of engaging with the physical, like eating. This is how we recognize the place that the Torah holds in everything that we do.

The Talmud's approach to how we celebrate Shavuot, as interpreted by Rav Tzadok, reflects a fundamental idea in our Jewish observance. The Torah is not restricted to the spiritual or the cerebral, or boxed off into the space in which we perform ritual commands.

Rather, the Torah calls on us to find holiness in our every action – our meals, our work, our everyday interactions with others, and beyond. Every part of life offers us the chance to fill the world with the splendor of Torah, by acting in accordance with its letter and with its spirit. The everyday, the mundane – these are not the opposite of holiness, but simply the open space that invites holiness in at every moment. It is about bringing holiness into the mundane and the recognition that without the mundane, holiness is unimportant.

As we once again accept the Torah, let us take it upon ourselves to find new ways to infuse holiness into the routines that make up our daily lives, to feel the presence and the relevance of Torah wherever we may travel, in whatever we may do.