



Torah Reflections for Shavuot

May 19-20, 2010 6-7 Sivan, 5770

We are approaching the holiday of Shavuot, the Jewish holiday that celebrates both the first fruits of the springtime and receiving the gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This gift of revelation is arguably the most significant moment in Jewish history. God's covenant with the Jewish people is realized, and we receive the Torah which has offered ethical guidance, wisdom, and a sense of purpose for generations.

Shavuot is commemorated based on the date of the biblical agricultural festival when the first fruits of the spring were offered to the Temple in ancient Jerusalem. It is striking that we do not learn from the biblical text itself exactly when the revelation of the Torah should be commemorated. Shavuot, as we know it, was a festival added later on in our history. While one might feel frustrated about this ambiguity, there is a Hasidic teaching that suggests that this gap in knowledge about the timing of the revelation of the Torah offers a great spiritual gift. It invites us to imagine that the experience of revelation, and ultimately nearness and intimacy with God, is not relegated to one particular place, time or generation. Revelation is available to us again and again in our lives.

Likewise, Shavuot is also a holiday without prescribed mitzvot, commandments, attached to it beyond the generic observance of restricting work which applies to all holy days. There are meaningful cultural customs for Shavuot such as staying up all night to study or eating dairy foods, but there are no laws or prohibitions about what we can and cannot do in order to observe and commemorate the revelation of the Torah. Both the date and the practices of Shavuot, the holiday of revelation, are ambiguous.

Shavuot is a paradox. On the one hand, it is a holiday that is all about receiving clear divine direction through the revelation of the Torah and all the commandments on Mt Sinai. On the other hand, commandments about how and when to celebrate Shavuot itself are absent from the biblical text.

Likewise, in our own lives, some of the most powerful moments are ambiguous. For most people, a life altering illness in ourselves or a loved one is a shocking interruption that propels us into renegotiating our relationships to the world and people around us, to our bodies, to our identities, and also to God. In the midst of our suffering there is uncertainty, loss of control and perhaps a feeling that a moment of re-revelation, some kind of reconnection with a divine message, could not be any farther away.

In parallel to the holiday of Shavuot, our tradition is also somewhat vague about what practices are incumbent upon a person who is suffering with an illness. It is puzzling that there is so little explicit guidance from God available to guide us in these most disorienting of experiences, being ill and God's revelation of the Torah.

Can there be value in ambiguity? Although the holiday of Shavuot and times of illness lack clear instructions from God, might they actually bring us nearer to the divine and help us glimpse revelation?

In the absence of divine directions, there is an invitation to discover the sacred potential in each of our own selves. God may feel absent, and yet God is always present, holding a divine space that allows our unique ways of coping to take shape and hopefully, flourish. As we forge ahead, aspects of our own inner wisdom, strength and spiritual resources are often revealed to us. When we are stripped of the comforts and solace that were sufficient when we were healthy, we may have an opening that leads us to search for the parts of ourselves that were present at Mount Sinai, at the moment of revelation. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, we are offered the opportunity to recognize and fulfill our own inner spiritual potential, and the potential which exists in other people who are present to help care for and love us.

The fact that our celebration of the revelation of the Torah corresponds with a festival that marks the reaping and offering of the first fruits and grains suggests just how productive seasons of ambiguity can be. This Shavuot whether we have a tradition of staying up through the night to learn with our community, or are currently moving through a dark uncertain period because of an illness, may each of us be able to reap our own first fruits from our seasons of uncertainty and find spiritual sustenance in them.

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Allison Kestenbaum



This Torah Reflection was written by Allison Kestenbaum, BCC, a chaplain and Clinical Pastoral Education Supervisory Candidate at the University of California at San Francisco Medical Center. The Torah Reflections series is published by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.



3330 Geary Boulevard, 3rd Floor West, San Francisco, CA 94118 (415) 750-4197
www.Jewishhealingcenter.org