

Law of Responsibility

שְׁלֹשׁ רִגְלִים תִּהְיֶה לְךָ בַּשָּׁנָה – You shall celebrate three pilgrimage holidays a year (Ex. 23:14)

We all know the three pilgrimage holidays, Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot. Do we also know how Shavuot differs from the other two? Well, to begin with, Shavuot has no set day in the Torah, but is rather celebrated fifty days after Pesah and could potentially occur on the 5th, 6th, or 7th of Iyyar. Another, deeper difference, is that on Pesah and Sukkot we reenact the events of the Exodus, while there is no such reenactment on Shavuot. On Pesah we eat the same ingredients our forefathers ate on the night of leaving Egypt, and on Sukkot we dwell in temporary structures, similar to those used by our forefathers when they were in the desert, but Shavuot is referred to in the Torah only as the holiday marking the harvest season. Why is the date of Shavuot not mentioned, and why is there no special physical act to mark that holiday as the day of the Giving of the Law?

The answer is that Pesah and Sukkot commemorate a single, albeit important, historical event, so the date serves as temporal tie to the original event. The reenactment validates the contract, or covenant, between the nation and God for one more year. On Pesah, the reenactment reminds us of the elements of slavery and freedom, thus prompting us to protect the rights of others. On Sukkot we dwell in booths to show our confidence in the power of God to provide us shelter, and to unite as one nation without boundaries. The Giving of the Law, however, though associated with Shavuot, cannot be limited to a date, since we must adhere to the Torah constantly, every day.

As to the reenactment, it is right there in front of us, in this week's Parasha. Instead of creating a yearly event to celebrate the Giving of the Law, the Torah provides us with endless opportunities to do so daily. The purpose of the Ten Concepts, aka the Ten Commandments, was to educate the Israelites to respect and protect the rights of others, and to cherish their own blessings.

In that vein, the Torah presents us, immediately after the momentous revelation at Mount Sinai, not with a list of ritualistic acts, but with a set of rules revolving around the theme of personal responsibility. The Parasha starts with the laws of slavery, which the Torah sets out to abolish by granting slaves unprecedented rights. A slave is encouraged to seek freedom, and a master is warned against causing slaves physical harm. The Parasha also speaks about damages caused by one's property, mainly his animals, and indirect actions, as setting fire or digging a pit in public property. There are also regulations regarding money-lending, taking specific care to protect the rights of the weaker strata of society, such as widows and orphans, and distortion of justice. Even the famous warning "do not eat a kid in its mother's milk" carries a message of personal awareness and responsibility. It tells us that although God allows the consumption of meat, we should understand that killing an animal is a cruel act, and we should not add to that cruelty by cooking the meat of a mammal in the liquid which sustained it when it was alive.

Almost a thousand years after the Giving of the Law, those admonitions were forgotten, and the Israelites resorted to celebrating their relationship with God and the Torah by offering sacrifices. They were then harshly rebuked by the prophets, among them Isaiah, who reminded the people that true enactment and reenactment of the Giving of the Law lie elsewhere (Is. 1:15-17):

וּבְכַרְשֵׁיכֶם כַּפְיֹכֶם אֲעֲלִים עֵינַי מִכֶּם גַּם כִּי־תִרְבּוּ תַפְלָה אֵינְנִי שֹׁמֵעַ יְדֵיכֶם דְּמַיִם מְלֹאוּ. רַחֲצוּ הַזְּכוֹת הַסִּירוּ רֵעַ מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם
מִנְגִּיד עֵינַי חֲדָלוּ הַרְעוּ. לִמְדוּ הַיָּטֵב דַּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁר־וְהַמּוֹץ שִׁפְטוּ יְתוֹם רִיבוּ אֶלְמָנָה

When you raise your palms in prayer I will look away, pray as you wish, I will pay no heed, as your hands are stained with theft and corruption. Cleanse yourself [not by water, but] by mending your ways and ceasing from doing evil. Learn well, seek justice, rectify wrongdoing, protect and defend orphans and widows.

The Torah did not create a special event to commemorate the Giving of the Law, nor did it give us a specific date for that happening, so that our religious awareness will not be manifested by ritualistic acts performed annually. Instead, the Torah offers a system in which each act of responsible behavior, protecting justice, and avoiding infringement upon the rights of others, is an act of devotion and inspiration. According to this worldview, righteousness and piety are not achieved by constant prayer or Torah study, but rather by honesty, respect for others, and a deep sense of responsibility.

Shabbat Shalom