

## Shavuot: The Zeppo Marx of Jewish Holidays

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Of all the major Jewish holidays, the least familiar to the general, synagogue-avoiding Jewish public is the festival of Shavuot, which commences Tuesday evening, May 18. In fact, its obscurity is so striking that discussions of the holiday commonly start by noting its obscurity, as I did. As a result, it's probably best known for being little-known, if you follow me. Basically, Shavuot is to Jewish holidays what Zeppo is to the Marx Brothers.

It deserves better, but we'll get to that.

The usual explanation for Shavuot's low profile is that it lacks pageantry. It used to be a real contender — the Bible ranks it up there with Passover and Sukkot as one of the three pilgrimage festivals, mega-holidays when work was forbidden and sacrifices were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. Sadly, though, Shavuot didn't fare as well as the others in the transition from ancient kingdom to modern Diaspora. Passover became the big family get-together of the year. Sukkot had those little straw shacks with the hanging fruit and Chinese lanterns. And what did Shavuot end up with? All-night Torah study and a piece of cheesecake.

The pomp deficit is only a symptom, however, of Shavuot's larger problem: its dour message. Passover celebrates the Exodus from slavery to freedom. You don't need an advanced degree to get on board with that. Sukkot isn't quite as transparent, but it's not too hard to see the lean-to as a symbol of the fragility and impermanence of life, especially when you're wandering in the desert. Also, it's like eating in a playhouse. It's fun.

Shavuot, on the other hand, commemorates the Giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. This is the day we celebrate the handing out of the rulebook, with its bounty of Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots. Yay.

Rabbis and Hebrew school teachers have been trying for centuries to give Shavuot more pizzazz by emphasizing the joys of exploring the Good Book, as distinct from simply obeying it. In the old country, 4-year-olds were introduced to Torah learning on Shavuot with pieces of honey cake shaped into Hebrew letters. The early Reform movement chose Shavuot as religious-school graduation day. At the Jewish Community Center on Manhattan's Upper West Side, the all-night Shavuot Torah teach-in includes a midnight swim.

Ultimately, though, it's hard to mask Shavuot's brooding gravitas. It hits you in the face like a desert wind the moment you start reading the day's Torah portion, which features chapters 19 and 20 of Exodus. The scene: the foot of Mount Sinai, where the Israelites are camped a few weeks after leaving Egypt. The mountain is engulfed in smoke and thunder and lightning. The people are terrified. They're warned not to come too close, on pain of death.

As they watch, Moses ascends the peak, alone. The thunder and lightning increase. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and sends him back down to read them

aloud: I am the Lord. Thou shalt not make an image, for I am a Jealous God and I'll come after your children. And your grandchildren. (Exodus 20:5) Thou shalt not bear false witness, murder, steal or covet thy neighbor's wife. Also, keep the Sabbath and honor your parents. More thunder, lightning and smoke.

The people are more scared than ever now. They're begging Moses: Please, we'll do anything you say — just don't let Him kill us. (Exodus 20:16)

If there's a direct line leading from this to cheesecake, it's not immediately apparent.

The plain truth is that this holiday's message begins with obedience. That's why it attracts so little attention from your freewheeling, skeptical Average American Jew. This fellow — let's call him Jew Sixpack — isn't big on rules and authority. If he does wander into a shul on Shavuot morning, he's likely to slip out halfway through the Shalt Nots and leave the rest of the service to the regulars, the hard-core types who are drawn to structure and authority and probably enjoyed spending their Sunday mornings in Hebrew school.

Which is a pity. If Jew Sixpack stuck around, he'd find there's another side of Shavuot that's right up his alley. This is the part where we're reminded of how the rulebook can be our friend. On the holiday's second morning (well, some synagogues actually did this earlier on the first morning, while Jew Sixpack was still sleeping) there's a shift in tone from foreboding to romance, as the Book of Ruth is recited.

It's a tale, alert readers recall, about a gentile woman from Moab, today's Jordan, who marries a nice Jewish man, quickly finds herself widowed but stays with her mother-in-law, embraces mom's people and God and moves with her to Bethlehem, where she falls into poverty and goes to a nearby farm to pick gleanings. (That's the portion of the crop that farmers were required to leave in the field for the poor, quite literally redistributing income through a rough sort of progressive tax. The Torah reading on Shavuot Day Two details some of the Shalts and Shalt Nots behind the system. And people wonder why Jews are liberals.)

Back on the farm, meanwhile, Ruth meets the farmer himself, sweeps him off his feet and marries her second Jewish husband. All that without a hint of any conversion ceremony, halachic or otherwise. She merely settles in, the very model of a modern non-Jewish spouse. No pedigree, no documents. And yet her great-grandson turns out to be Israel's greatest leader, King David.

That's the other reason for Shavuot's obscurity: It's subversive. The most intriguing parts of its message — Intermarriage! Open borders! Socialism! — don't get advertised because they don't follow today's approved script.

Memo to our current authorities: Relax. Laws evolve, and borders were meant to be permeable. That's worth a slice of cheesecake, with maybe a glass of schnapps. Bottoms up.

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