

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shavuot

The holiday of Shavuot begins on the sixth day of the month of Sivan. Shavuot is best known as the anniversary of receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai, despite the fact that this reason is not mentioned anywhere in the Torah. The first mention of the background of Shavuot can only be found in the Talmud (Pesachim 68b). This seems very puzzling. Why did G-d fail to teach the reason for this holiday? How could the Torah set forth a commandment to celebrate a holiday without describing what we are celebrating?

Rabbi Samsom Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) has an eye-opening approach to explain this difficulty. He explains that G-d did not, in fact, leave out the reason for the Shavuot celebration in the Torah. It is only missing from the Written Law. However, the Torah is not limited to the Written Torah. When G-d gave the Jewish people the written Law, He gave them the Oral Law as well, which was not written down and was only transmitted orally. The Oral Law explains and elaborates on what is mentioned briefly in the Written Law.

Rabbi Hirsch explains that the reason G-d chose to give the Torah in two parts, is because this is best way to ensure the validity of the Torah. While the Written Law may seem more reliable than the Oral Law, due to its static state versus the need to rely on humans to transmit it properly, the opposite, in fact, is true. The validity of the Written Law, itself, is dependent on the Oral Law. The document is worthless without the oral tradition that it is authentic. If one denies the validity of the Oral Law, he cannot accept the oral tradition which testifies to the validity of the Written Law either. Furthermore, the fact that the Jewish people still live their lives based on this tradition, even after three thousand years, is the greatest proof of its authenticity. This tradition, which miraculously survived against all odds, through every persecution imaginable, is more trustworthy than any text will ever be.

It is, therefore, in this part of the Torah that G-d disclosed the reason for the holiday of Shavuot. In doing so, G-d is sending a very clear message. The Written Law should never be mistaken for a complete work. It is impossible to understand and keep the Written Law without the aid of the Oral Law. What better way to teach this important lesson, than its silence about its own holiday, as a glaring proof the connection between these two works?



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The Kli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (1550–1619), offers another explanation to the deafening silence of the Torah's description of the holiday of Shavuot. A declaration that the Torah was given on the sixth of Sivan can be a very misleading statement. In reality, the Torah was not merely given on the sixth of Sivan. Rather, there is a new part of the Torah that is given to us every single day. One can study a portion of the Torah many times, yet finds new meaning and depth to the same words each time he reviews it. This must be a person's attitude when he studies Torah. It is for this reason that the offering brought in the Temple on Shavuot is referred to as the "new-offering," because it represents the Torah that was given on this day that is new forever.

The Midrash (Sifre 33) learns this same idea from a verse recited daily in the Shema: *And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart.* (Deuteronomy 6:6) The verse does not say "the day which I commanded you." Rather it says "this day," for every day is the day G-d commanded us to keep the ways of the Torah.

Shavuot is a time to celebrate and rejoice the first time the Jews heard the words of the Torah. However, this was, by no means, the only time the Torah was given. It was just the first time it was given, leading to many opportunities to accept a new part of the Torah every day.

Chag Samayach!

