

# Faith Matters: Chanting of the Torah on Shavuot an emotional experience

Jewish festival commemorates revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai

By Moshe Meirovich | Contributing columnist  
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The Jewish festival of Shavuot commemorating the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai is marked seven weeks following the holiday of Passover.

This year it is celebrated on May 26 and 27.

In Judaism, the public reading of the Torah served as a concrete reminder of

the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in the year 586 BCE by the Babylonians, many Jews living in exile gradually forgot the spiritual experience of hearing the public reading of the Torah. Consequently, following the Declaration of Cyrus of Persia (539 BCE) encouraging the Jewish people to return to the Holy Land, the Book of Nehemiah 8:8 records that Ezra, accompanied by an entourage of learned men including the Levites, “read from Scroll the Teaching of God, translating it and providing the deeper sense, so that they understood the reading of the Torah.”

The words “they understood the reading of the Torah,” according to rabbinic tradition, refers to the melodic sounds the people heard listening to the chanting of the Torah.

How so? Nehemiah 8:9 continues: “This day is holy to the Lord your God: you must not mourn or weep for all the people wept as they listened to the words of the Torah.”

How very strange. Why were the people crying? It’s certainly possible the reading evoked a reminder to once again fulfill the commandments of the Torah, an obligation they may have found difficult to observe while in exile. Or, could it be that the words referring to “they understood the reading of the Torah” conjured up a more dramatic, visceral response?

Many years later I understood how such a reaction could occur upon listening to the chanting of the Torah through its unique biblical musical motifs.

Insight into this *sui generis* moment occurred when I heard from a teacher engaged in a weekday prayer service had abruptly exited the service while listening to the Torah reading. Noticing her quick departure, some students ran after the teacher to find out why she wept.

Her answer: “I grew up in a Jewish community in Lebanon when as a child I often listened to the chanting of the Torah with its ancient and memorable melodies. When I heard the cantillation in the same musical motifs during the worship service, it brought tears to my eyes evoking such powerful memories from my childhood.”

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**The historic, biblical verses from Nehemiah came to life.**

**In the words of the ancient sage Rabbi Levi: “Whoever reads the Torah with its delightful tone and tune, of him it is said, milk and honey are under his tongue.”**

**Neither time nor space could erase the precious memories linked to the liturgical sounds connected to the chanting of the Torah.**

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