

Shavuot – 5783

This week's Torah reading, chosen specifically by the sages, for the second day of the chag, begins with the reminder that the spring month originally called Abib is when we harvest the winter wheat crop. Then, the text goes on to tell us to count off seven weeks until the harvest of the barley crop. We are to make a special offering at the Temple Mount of the first fruits of the harvest at the end of the seventh week. This is why the holiday of Shavuot was originally called the Festival of Weeks, shavua being the Hebrew word for week and sheva for seven. Once the temple was destroyed, the obligations for this particular harvest festival could no longer be fulfilled. That is when Shavuot became known as Zman Matan Torah, because tradition teaches that the Ten Commandments were given on the seventh day of Sivan. Once upon a time, we held services both days of Shavuot and then on the first day we read the section from Parshat Yitro dealing with the giving of the Ten Commandments, but today we only get to do that when Shabbat and the first day of Shavuot coincide. By the way, we are supposed to eat milk meals during the festival because the sages also teach that Torah is like milk because it sustains the Jewish people.

It is very interesting that, by coincidence, a very controversial bill brought to the floor of the Texas statehouse did not pass because it sought to ensure that EVERY classroom in EVERY school, elementary and secondary, public, and private, displayed prominently The Ten Commandments. The bill did not define what teachers were supposed to do with that display, only that it had to be there, much like when most of us were growing up, our classrooms had a picture of the Queen, Elizabeth the Second. The bill did not pass because it represented a breach of the

separation of Church and State which is foundational to the Constitution of the United States. I would like to suggest that we ponder for a few minutes why we Jews don't ever see a conflict over our observance of Zman Matan Torateinu, and why the lesson of how we view the Ten Commandments within our faith has been so totally ignored by the wider society within which we find ourselves today. To do that please turn with me to page 255 in our siddurim. Before we read responsively together, I want to draw attention to the structure of our daily and Shabbat Shacharit prayers. We begin with Berachot HaShachar each morning which literally translates as Blessings of the morning. Then we continue with Psukei DeZimra which literally means lines of Song, hymns of praise of various origin, thanking HaShem for our life on earth and as humans. Together collectively, these are warm up prayers, supposed to lead us into our prayers individually and deepen our intention to pray and praise. Towards the end, we come to the recitation of our principal of faith, the Shema but before we do, we read now with me on page 255 responsively.

Notice that the Torah is central here. As we come to the Amida for the Shacharit service we are coming from a place where we accept the sovereignty of HaShem and our faith in him as well as our commitment to the observance of the Torah which stems from the Ten Commandments. We don't need a plaque in our classrooms because we say it in our prayers EVERY single day. It is foundational to who we are, whether we are orthodox, conservative, reconstructionist or reform, these essential elements are always there. They are not something we point to but something we believe deeply and without really uttering the actual words. Think about how theologically, it is accepted that the observance of the Shabbat has kept the

Jewish people's sense of collective identity through even the most difficult of circumstances. Think about how, even in the most unobservant of Jewish families, family is still central to life. We don't say it because we practice it. We accept the fact that every family has its problems, but most of us strive all our lives to keep our families together and cohesive.

That is why it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand the political troubles occurring in Israel between the ultra-right wing and the rest of the country. Anshel Pfeffer, one of the newspaper HaAretz's best journalists, wrote this week about how what is happening in Israel runs so contrary to Jewish faith and practice. He explains how the decimation of Europe's religious Jewish communities has led to the belief that that world and its behaviours has to be recreated and protected now to show the world that Hitler and the Nazis could not defeat the Jewish people. But like all reactions to tragedy, the pendulum has swung back too far the other way.

We are supposed to read the Book of Ruth today as part of our religious observances of Shavuot. The link to Ruth is the way in which Ruth bonded with her mother-in-law at the time of the harvest festival. The Torah commands us to set aside a part of our crop for those who cannot find food any other way. Ruth seeks sustenance this way and she is trying to provide for the mother of her deceased husband, and she tells Naomi that she will go wherever her mother-in-law goes. She will become her family and adopt her faith and practice. We are commanded to accept those who want to join us in our journey through life if they seek to be Jewish like us. WE are to treat the other fairly and with dignity. All of this comes from our Torah, which we celebrate our receiving of this holiday. Our lives are bound up in the principles of Torah and we learn them from birth. We learn them at home, and we learn them at school, and we learn them at Synagogue. We do not

need a sign hanging in a classroom to achieve that end. If only the Americans who see their religious faith under threat because of the politics in their country realized that what is happening is that they don't have to be ultrareligious to follow the principles of faith. They just have to accept, as we have, that we have obligations to the rest of society that sometimes require us put aside our own desires so that the needs of others can be met. It is because we show humility through our faith that we have lasted all this time. In my opinion, just another way to be a light unto the nations, and to seek justice above all else. That is how this very chapter that we read from today ends. Shoftim Ve Shotrim – Justices and magistrates shall you appoint and justice for all shall you seek. Shabbat Shalom.