

## **The Time of the Giving of Our Torah**

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In a few days from now we will celebrate Shavuot, known to us by various names in the Bible: the Harvest Festival (Exodus 23) – since we have reached the harvest season; Shavuot, literally Weeks, (Exodus 34, Deuteronomy 16) – after having counted seven weeks from Pesach; without a specific name, but with reference to counting the Omer, the harvest and bringing the first fruits (Leviticus 23); and the Day of the First Fruits (Numbers 28) – referring to the unique commandment of this festival, to bring the first fruits.

The Rabbis also added other names, including Atzeret (assembly) and Zman Matan Torateinu (the time of the giving of our Torah). This last name appears in all the holiday prayers as a subtitle to Shavuot. It is apparently clear why the Rabbis attached this name to Shavuot: to commemorate the unparalleled event of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Similar to the idea that on Passover we are all obligated to see ourselves as if we, too, left Egypt, so too, according to tradition, we all stood at the foot of the mountain when we received the Torah.

But why the time of the giving of our Torah, rather than the time of the acceptance of our Torah? In the prayers of the two other pilgrimage festivals, the subtitles relate directly to us: Pesach is the time of our freedom and Sukkot is the time of our joy. If so, surely the subtitle on Shavuot should be the time of the acceptance of our Torah?

We are supposed to accept Torah every day through study, observing mitzvot and behaving ethically. Twice a day we read the Shema prayer, which the Rabbis understood as an act of accepting the yoke of the God's dominion and the yoke of fulfilling the mitzvot (commandments). There is no need for a special holiday in order to remind us of the need to accept the Torah, for the daily acceptance of Torah is our way of life.

A wonderful idea, expressed by two great men of the last century, Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, is shrouded within the name Matan Torah (the giving of the Torah). Both men emphasized the personal relationship between the God and humanity. No less

than we ourselves search for meaning in our lives, God, too, wishes to be part of our lives. Therefore, God gave us the Torah in order to draw us near, and even so God could draw near to us. This is also the festival of the Lord on High, who seeks interaction with humanity. On this day, we remember how God gave us the Torah as a gift and also awaits our acceptance of this gift.

The name Atzeret, which the Rabbis also gave to this holiday, points to the special relationship between God and the Jewish People. We are familiar with this name from the Torah, which thus designates the last days of Pesach and Sukkot (Shemini Atzeret). Aside from the idea of 'ceasing' (work or perhaps the festivities), in the language of the Rabbis, the word Atzeret also denotes a wedding. This festival, during which we remember the giving of the Torah, symbolizes the intimate relationship between God and Israel, who chose us, to give us the Torah and to spread its messages – God's messages – to all humanity.