

CHIZKUNI

- *Jacob Solomon*

You shall observe the Festival of Shavuot... You shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt, so you shall observe and perform these statutes (16:10-12).

Why is Shavuot distinguished as being the only Festival with the attachment of: "You shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt"?

Chizkuni explains that Shavuot occurs at a point in the year when people are exceptionally busy. Shavuot is when the harvest season is getting into full swing, with the wheat at the top of the list. It is not like Pesach when it is just beginning, or like Sukkot when it is almost finished. Thus Shavuot would have been the occasion when people would have found ALIYA LA-REGEL, going up to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival, most difficult. It disrupts the activities. Therefore the Torah reminds: remember, it is only because you are no longer slaves in Egypt that you have fields to harvest in the first place. "You shall observe and perform these statutes" willingly, with the faith that your regular activities will not suffer.

[I'd add that this might sound familiar

today with those whose final exams are at about this time of the year. The Torah is telling you "observe and perform these statutes" and celebrate Shavuot to the full, in the faith your final grade will not suffer because of it.]

Another possible explanation is elsewhere, where the Torah connects Shavuot with something close to slavery: poverty. A poor person is pre-occupied with day-to-day survival, which in itself may be seen as close to slavery. In that context:

'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not gather in all that grows in the corner of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger - I am HaShem your G-d...' (Vayikra 23:22).

And this commandment of gifts from the landowner to the poor is placed within the section concerning the Festival of Shavuot in Sefer Vayikra. Shavuot's falling in the late spring does put it in the natural period of the opening of the main harvest season, exemplified by the bringing of the First Fruits (26:1-12) to the Beit HaMikdash from that day onwards.

The Torah, however, circumscribes how these gifts to the poor may be presented to the poor. The poor do

not form an orderly queue and wait for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table. Indeed, they are not likely to meet the landowner at all, nor, for that matter, each other. For the Torah tells the farmer to 'leave' (Vayikra 23:22) produce at the corners of the field, and not take the trouble to pick up what is dropped in the harvesting process. Thus the needy may help themselves to the leftovers discreetly, and without anyone knowing. So the poor receive support discreetly, without going through what slaves suffer, fundamental loss of human dignity. [This is notwithstanding that by Talmudic times, the Rabbis instituted a routine by which such gifts to the poor were distributed on a more formal basis to prevent the then greater degree of inhumanity where too many people struggle for scarce resources.]

As a postscript: perhaps the words: 'You shall observe and perform these statutes' (16:10-12) hint at the practice of learning Torah on Shavuot night, as learning Torah is a key to observing and performing the way of life of the Torah. ✎