

It's All A Matter Of Luck

Why is Shavuos an unlucky holiday, and what could we do about it?

Lucky Holidays

There is a well-known saying in the Zohar that “everything depends on luck, even a Sefer Torah in the synagogue” (Bamidbar 134). Everything needs luck. There are those Torahs that people like to read from and are used constantly while there are others that only get used when two Torahs are needed at the same time.

The same is true with prayers. There are those which are always said with great devotion and concentration while there are those which barely get mumbled. The story goes that the Aleinu prayer once complained to G-d over being the last prayer in every service. By the time Aleinu comes around, hardly anyone is still in the synagogue, and most of those who are, are in the back talking and folding their Tallis, and the people who are actually saying Aleinu are saying it quickly and impatiently. In response to this complaint, G-d gave Aleinu the special privilege of being said out loud and with much to-do, in the middle of Musaf on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

This rule of ‘luck’ applies to holidays, too. Every holiday has its specific mitzvah. Sukkot is sitting in the Sukkah and reciting the blessing over the four species. Pesach is eating matzo; Yom Kippur is fasting. Even the Rabbinical holidays, Chanukah and

Purim, have their special mitzvot. Only one holiday doesn't have its own mitzvah — the holiday of Shavuot. The Rebbe tells, in the name of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, that Shavuot is called Atzeret, literally 'restraint' because, though every holiday has two ways of serving G-d, doing the mitzvah of the day and the prohibition against doing work, Shavuot has only the prohibition against doing work — hence the name 'restraint' (Shavuot 5743, Toras Menachem pg. 1551). Eating dairy foods and staying awake all night studying Torah are all customs, not mitzvot.

What is Wrong With Shavuot?

So, we need to ask, why did Shavuot get such "bad luck" not to have its own mitzvah and as a result it is the least celebrated and least popular of the holidays.

There are more questions:

1. We see that neither of the two names we use for Shavuot in the prayers, "Shavuot" and "the Time of the Giving of the Torah," is used at all in the Torah.
2. The Torah gives an exact date for every holiday except Shavuot. The only information that we get from the Torah is that 50 days from the start of Pesach is the "holiday of Bikkurim," first fruits.
3. Nowhere in the Torah does it say that "the Holiday of Bikkurim" is the time that we received the Torah.
4. Why didn't G-d give the time that we received the Torah even a few words, thereby giving it some importance?

The Answer

There is another holiday that celebrates the Torah; Simchas Torah. On Simchas Torah we finish reading the Torah and start again from the beginning. Not only is Simchas Torah not mentioned in the Torah, we find no mention of it in the Talmud either. This holiday is a custom from top to bottom and specifically this holiday is the most joyous of all the holidays!!

We can give the following answer:

G-d gave us the Torah and commanded us to fulfill its mitzvot, but He couldn't command us to rejoice with it. The joy and love we will have for the Torah can't be dependent on a command from G-d, but on us. It's not logical for G-d to command us to love a gift that He gave to us. A father who buys a gift for his child can't force the child to be happy with it. If he likes it, he'll be happy and if he doesn't, commands won't help. A parent also can't request a surprise party from a child. Something like that will come from the child's love for the parent. It's impossible to love on command.

In this same way, Simchas Torah needs to come from us. If G-d were to command us to rejoice with the Torah, we'd be celebrating because we were commanded to, not because we were truly happy with the Torah.

The same is true regarding Shavuot. The holiday itself is given to us by G-d, "The Holiday of Bikkurim." However, the part where we celebrate that we were given the Torah was introduced by the Jews as a natural and spontaneous response. A Jew needs to know that without Torah he'd be no different

than any other person off the streets. This should cause him great happiness and excitement, to the point where “he cannot sleep nor doesn’t want to sleep” the night before receiving the Torah.

The Lesson

We can take a practical lesson from this. The Torah itself can be handed down to our children, whether through the teachers at Hebrew school, what they pick up on their own or through the internet. But the joy that comes from Torah and a passion for fulfilling its mitzvot is something only the parents can give. Information one can find anywhere, but enthusiasm for a holiday can only come from home. This, G-d cannot command from above; it needs to come from us, from our essence.