

The true first-fruits of our generation

By
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On the eve of Shavuot 2012, sixty-four years after the founding of the State of Israel, like its founding generation we too are subjected to an endless struggle on multiple fronts, contending with myriad issues. But different persons take different issues close to heart. The Independence Day just past has made me think of the issue close to mine – Jewish secular identity – and of one of the foremost challenges that the State of Israel is facing today: the attempt to shape a sustainable Jewish secular identity. Notably, this challenge is closely related to the meaning of the festival of Shavuot in this day and age.

The Bible famously stages Shavuot as an agricultural festival. It constructs the festival's character as part of the fundamental cycle of the ripening of the cereals with which the Land of Israel has been blessed. Following the harvesting of the first-fruits of barley during Passover, the Bible prescribes a count of seven whole weeks until the appearance of the first-fruits of wheat on Shavuot. Only then the fresh yield of the soil was to be served at the Temple. In the late Second Temple period, upon the separation of the People of Israel from its land and, most dramatically, from the Temple in Jerusalem, Talmudic literature began introducing new content to Shavuot. The rupture in the geographical and religious heart of Judaism had made the yearning for mending – *tikkun* – central to the faith. And it is certainly linked to the Talmud's transformation of Shavuot into the festival of the giving of the Torah.

The sages of the Talmud did not have explicit evidence with which to associate Shavuot with the day on which the revelation at Mount Sinai took place. Therefore, they had to rely on the biblical account, according to which the giving of the Torah at Sinai took place "on the third month," which is the month of Nissan. Such radical transformation of the character and identity of Shavuot was undoubtedly a part of the dramatic upheaval that the Talmudic sages had initiated. Judaism was transformed from a religion of rite and ritual with a principal site of worship, to a religion without essential links to particular land and location.

On Passover too, a festival that the Bible already associates with Shavuot, we come across the same fascinating dialogue between the biblical and Talmudic strands of Judaism. Seder night changed from a ritual with a material and geographical center – paschal sacrifice at the Temple, eating *matzah* and *marror*, and making pilgrimage to Jerusalem – to an evening on which ritual mainly consists of storytelling: words and speech. Contrary to Shavuot, however, on Passover this fascinating and

intricate dialogue is implicit in the various parts of the Haggadah, which presents both traditions. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon who tell of the story of the Exodus all night long, are conflated with the tradition of Rabban Gamliel, who wants to preserve ancient ritual as much as possible. And in Gamliel's own words: "Whoever does not discuss the following three things has not fulfilled his duty, namely: *Pesach*, *matzah*, and *marror*.

In this sense, Shavuot became the most curious festival of the renewing Jewish culture in the Land of Israel. The first pioneers of the settlement efforts, the founders of kibbutzim and moshavim, instituted Shavuot as a major celebration. And so, out of a need for and absolute identification with the initial meaning of Shavuot, they reinstated it as the festival of first-fruits. Every Israeli surely has memories from the impressive first-fruits celebrations in kibbutzim, which put on display the newness and renewal of the settlement of the holy land. The yield of the soil, firstlings of cattle and man, babies and toddlers heaved joyfully as a sign of renewal and newness. In the decades during which the pioneering movement was the engine of State and settlement, celebrations of the first-fruits festival became sharply divided. In opposition to the bountiful festivities of soil-working settlers, their brethren in the religious and *haredi* camp continued celebrating Shavuot as the festival of the giving of the Torah. As years went by, this mutual splendid isolation prevailed, turning Shavuot into the most divided festival in Jewish culture.

One of the expressions of the profound social processes that Israel has been undergoing of late is the return to the Talmudic character of Shavuot. This is no longer a fleeting episode or a fad. *Tikkun leil Shavuot* (literally: the mending of Shavuot night) has become a popular title for events that every community or educational institution in the country develops according to its needs and agenda. This is an expression of a deep undercurrent in Israeli society, which is manifested by the dedication of Shavuot night to the study of Jewish sources in an abundance of ways, approaches and methods. It is impossible to summarize or survey here the myriad social processes that this renewed practice expresses. To an extent, it stems from the crumbling of the Zionist establishment that had founded the state and of the settlement movement, the decline of the kibbutz and other complex social processes. In any event, one of the salient reasons for the emergence of this situation is the desire of an increasingly growing number of non-observant Israeli Jews to partake in the Jewish experience, and to be better acquainted with its rich cultural heritage, on its Talmudic, Kabbalistic and Hassidic facets.

This new state that Israeli culture has entered into is exciting. While an expression of a crisis, it also holds many opportunities and

genuine occasions for renewal. Its manifestations abound in forms of Israeli art and culture such as music, literature, and film.

In this sense, we are witnessing a situation whereby Shavuot has become a paradigm for a confluence of approaches that is closely linked to the confluence of the festival of the giving of the Torah with the festival of first-fruits. The celebration of Shavuot as the festival of the giving of the Torah by a secular culture on a search for new ways into Jewish life, is in fact the first-fruits of our generation. The Jewish identity that is now taking shape before our very eyes is not a new form of Judaism. And yet it is not the Judaism of old either. It is a sincere and searing quest. Spurred by the tangle of conflicts that Israeli citizens face, and by history's powerful sway, we feel compelled to reshape our views and identity each day anew. This quest has crises and dangers in store on the foggy path that lies ahead. But this is probably true of any process of renewal.

Translated from the Hebrew by Orr Scharf