



the Message Behind Shavuot

by Tim Kelley

Fifty-one days ago, we met together in various homes throughout east Texas to celebrate the Passover. As part of our individual Passover sedars, we probably talked about how the Israelite firstborn were spared because their parents had taken the blood of an innocent lamb and spread it on the door post of their homes as a sign to YHVH to protect their homes from the destroyer.

But Passover did not end on that fateful night. We know that as a result of that night's trauma, the Israelite people were forced out of their homes, but before they truly became free, they and the mixed multitude that came with them, were faced with a life-or-death decision . . . either walk between two huge walls of water, walls that could cave in at any time and crush them in an instant, or turn back and face being massacred by the Egyptian army. As the story goes, the Israelites trusted in Moses their deliverer and walked thru the water until they reached freedom on the other side. But that's still not the end of the story . . .

When God began working with Moses, He told him that not only would He deliver them from the Egyptians, He would also take them to the Mountain of God. We see this in Exodus 3 where God provided Moses the very first sign to confirm that He would indeed deliver Israel.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 3:11-12** ¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who *am* I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² So He said, "I will certainly be with you. And this *shall be* a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain."

For Moses, the confirmation that God had indeed used him for a great purpose would be when he returned to Mount Sinai to serve God on the mountain. Thus we can safely assume that returning to the mountain was very important to Moses. What's more, we can see that serving God on the Mountain was the purpose for Passover, and therefore Passover and Shavuot are connected. God makes that even clearer by the fact that that we can only determine the day Shavuot is to be observed by counting 50 days from Passover.

Shavuot is obviously important to God. He has instructed us to set it apart as one of His yearly "moedim", His festivals.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 16:10-12** ¹⁰ "Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you. ¹¹ "You shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who *is* within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who *are* among you, at the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide. ¹² "And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.

From this we can see that Shavuot, or the "Feast of Weeks" as it's called here, is to be a joyous festival where we, along with our Hebrew family and our non-Israelite companions, rejoice in the sight of YHVH and remember that He has redeemed us from our former lives. But like most of the other festivals, God provides us little insight into the meaning of these days. It is only by tradition that we understand that Shavuot is the day Israel accepted YHVH's proposal to betroth Himself to them and be their "only" god; and it's only by tradition that Shavuot is the day that both Israel and the "mixed multitude" that accompanied them accepted His Torah and agreed to live by it. Though it's likely these events did take place on Shavuot, the scripture simply does not clearly state such.

In fact, other than the four short references to it in the Torah, Shavuot is never again mentioned by name until the book of Acts.

So what is the purpose of Shavuot? Is there a message behind this festival that's not readily understood? Is it important that we, the "redeemed" of Israel, be like Moses and symbolically "return to the Mountain"? I believe it is, and I'm going to give you four examples to help explain why I do. These examples are 1) the Hebrew wedding, 2) the story of Gideon, 3) the story of Boaz and Ruth, and 4) Yeshua's last words to His disciples.

The Hebrew Wedding

To better grasp the understanding of Shavuot, we must first see its place in the traditional Jewish wedding custom. Today's Jewish weddings are in many ways patterned after that of the ancient Hebrews. It's a pattern that is built from the examples of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah, and many other Biblical stories including that of Israel's betrothal to YHVH. To summarize the pattern, a man and woman (or their parents) join into a betrothal "covenant" that is just as binding as the actual marriage itself, even though they have yet to consummate the marriage. During the period of betrothal, the man becomes the woman's covering and is responsible for her well-being even though she is still in her father's house.

Shortly after the betrothal, the husband will leave her for a period of time as he prepares a place for her, a "chuppah" or wedding chamber, in which they will reside for the first seven days of their lives together. The length of this preparation time is dependent on the husband's father who will make the determination when those preparations are complete. While the husband is preparing the chuppah, the bride is preparing herself to be his wife. Because she has no idea when he will return, she cannot waste any time in completing her preparations . . . she must be ready when he arrives. So it is with the husband. He doesn't know when he will be returning because that decision is left to his father.

As soon as that determination is made, the husband leaves his father's house and returns to "fetch" his bride, after which he takes her to the "chuppah" for seven days. This seven-day period is followed by the wedding supper and the couple's return to the place they intend to call "home".

That's a short synopsis of the wedding custom which I hope sets the stage for what we will be seeing.

It's commonly understood that YHVH asked for Israel's hand in marriage during the early summer wheat harvest on the festival of Shavuot. This betrothal is illustrated in Jeremiah's prophecy -

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 2:2** "Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD: "I remember you, The kindness of your youth, The love of your betrothal, When you went after Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown.

As the "rock" that followed them in the wilderness¹, Yeshua was the one to whom Israel was betrothed. We can see that relationship when we read some of the words He gave to His disciples on the night before He was crucified -

^{NKJ} **John 14:2** "In My Father's house are many mansions; if *it were* not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.

With our knowledge of the Hebrew wedding, we can understand Him to be saying that He will be returning to His father to build the wedding chamber – the "chuppah" – with the full understanding that He will return when it's complete.

¹ 1 Cor. 10:4

We know that Yeshua did return to His Father exactly 40 days after He was resurrected², just a few days prior to Shavuot. We also understand that His return will be on Yom Teruah, thus there's this period of time between Shavuot and Yom Teruah where we cannot be with Him. Never-the-less, in His absence, there is work that needs to be done, specifically the preparation of the bride. As we will see later in this study, Shavuot began that time of the bride's preparation, but for now, let's go to the book of Judges where we'll find another point that will help us better understand Shavuot.

Gideon's Story

The story of Gideon begins with him threshing wheat during the time of the wheat harvest . . . sometime around Shavuot. Because Israel had turned from YHVH and had put their trust in the gods of the Canaanites, YHVH used the Midianites to chasten them. What the Midianites would do is overrun the Israelite farms with people and animals, completely consuming or destroying their crops, leaving them nothing to eat or feed to their animals. That's why we see Gideon threshing wheat in a wine press . . . he's trying to avoid being discovered by the Midianites.

As he was threshing away, the Angel of YHVH appeared showing Gideon that he would soon become Israel's deliverer, but before he could be that deliverer, he first had to rid his family of the idolatrous practices of his father.

Joash, Gideon's father had built an altar for Baal, the chief Canaanite god, and set up beside it an Asherah pole. The male god Baal as well as the female goddess Asherah were both pagan fertility gods. Those who worshipped them believed they had control over all things living as well as control over the weather. Obviously, this was an affront to YHVH who had created all things, including all life and the systems that support life.

So YHVH instructed Gideon to destroy the altar by pulling it down using one of his father's bulls. Once it was dismantled, he was to then build a proper altar to YHVH and sacrifice on it a different bull. He also told him to cut down the Asherah pole and use it for firewood on the altar.

^{ESV} **Judges 6:25** That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it.

So Gideon did as instructed, though he waited till nightfall out of fear of his father's household and the men of the city who apparently used the altar as part of their worship. But Gideon's fears were for nothing. It appears that his father came to his senses after seeing the altar and Asherah pole torn down. He then realized the foolishness of worshipping a carved image. The next morning, the townspeople saw their pagan goddess cut down and serving as firewood on the new altar. They were understandably enraged, wishing to kill the one who had done this deed, but Gideon had apparently taken refuge in his father's house. When the people demanded Joash turn him over, he replied in such a way as to show the worthlessness of the pagan gods. He asked them -

^{NKJ} **Judges 6:31** . . . "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he *is* a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!"

As the story continues, Gideon went on to deliver Israel from the Midianites after which he judged Israel for 40 years. For Gideon, Shavuot and the time of the wheat harvest was the time when idol worship was removed from his family which in turn allowed the spirit of YHVH to come upon him so he could be used to rid the land of the Midianite plague. For a brief moment in history, Israel forsook idol worship and symbolically returned to the mountain of God.

² Acts 1:3

Boaz and Ruth

The story of Ruth is one of love, commitment, and honor, and is one of the most loved stories in the Bible. It began in the barley harvest (Passover) and concluded in the wheat harvest, i.e. Shavuot. I'm sure we're all very familiar with the story, so I want to focus on just one aspect of it, that being Boaz's ability to cross racial and social lines and see the heart of the people of God. To better understand where I'm going, let's look at a mitzvah³ that's considered part of Shavuot.

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 23:15-22** ¹⁵ ' And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. ¹⁶ 'Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD . . . ²¹ 'And you shall proclaim on the same day *that* it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work *on it*. *It shall be* a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations. ²² ' When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I *am* the LORD your God.'

Verse 22 of the above passage is sandwiched between the instructions for Shavuot and those for the fall festivals and is understood to be a part of the instructions for Shavuot. In that verse, the Hebrew word for “stranger” is “ger” (גֵּר – Strong’s 1616). The instruction is simply that an Israelite may not collect for himself all the produce of the field, but must leave some in the field so that the poor Israelites as well as the poor non-Israelites dwelling among them (the ‘ger’) can reap food for themselves. It’s implied that the non-Israelite “stranger” is a believer in the God of Israel, yet because he’s not a native Israelite, he lacks inheritance rights.

As the story goes, Ruth’s mother-in-law decided to depart Moab and return to Israel after both her husband and her sons had died. Ruth, obviously because of the example of her mother-in-law, did not want to return to the worship of the Moabite gods, but instead - wanted to go with her and become part of the people of Israel.

When they returned, they were poor and needy, thus Ruth began to glean from the fields around Bethlehem. As she was gleaning, she eventually worked her way into the field of Boaz. Noticing a woman gleaning in the vicinity of his hired reapers, Boaz asked the reapers about her and they said -

^{NKJ} **Ruth 2:6** " . . . (she) *is* the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.

Knowing the circumstances around Naomi’s return, Boaz immediately took Ruth under his “wing” so to speak, and asked her to glean only in his fields and alongside the women of his household. Her reaction was that -

^{NKJ} **Ruth 2:10** . . . she fell on her face, bowed down to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes that you should take notice of me, since I *am* a foreigner?"

A simple reading of this passage combined with an understanding of the above passage in Leviticus would lead one to believe that the kindness that Boaz had displayed was simply what was expected of the Israelites. After all, was it not expected that the corners of the fields be left for the poor and stranger – the “ger”? Sure it was! But Ruth wasn’t a “ger”, at least not in her humble opinion. Knowing Israel’s laws pertaining to the Moabites, she did not consider herself a “ger”, but instead,

³ מִצְוָה (Strong 4687) “commandment”

identified herself as a “nokriy” (נְכַרִי) – Strong’s 5237). A “nokriy” was a non-Israelite who had no regards for Israel’s God and His ways; and because he had no regard for YHVH, it was permissible for an Israelite to:

- sell him to eat animals that had died naturally (Deut.14:21),
- expect him to pay his debts even after the year of release (Deut. 15:3), and
- charge interest even if he’s poor (Deut.23:20).

Ruth, being of Moabite lineage, understood that to the typical Israelite, she was at best “second-class”, not even able to be considered a part of the Israelite people⁴. But Boaz saw something in Ruth that exceeded her Moabite bloodline. He saw that she had a reputation of love and care for not only her mother-in-law, but also a trust in the God of Israel that probably surpassed that of his neighbors. So he replied to her humble response by saying -

^{ESV} **Ruth 2:11-12** . . . "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. The LORD repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!"

Boaz knew what it meant to be a true Israelite. He looked beyond ethnic and social lines, and peered into the heart of those he came in contact with. Boaz’s example was followed by great men like King David – who surrounded himself with men from all nationalities, Paul – who opposed racial barriers that divided God’s people, and Messiah Yeshua himself. Boaz’s story was probably a significant influence on Peter and the disciples as they saw the myriad of faces of the people who had come from different lands to observe that first Shavuot after the resurrection of the Messiah.

Yeshua’s Last Words to His Disciples

Let’s return now to the Hebrew Wedding. We’ll remember that the custom included the betrothed husband leaving behind his bride for a period of time as he returns to his father’s house to build the “chuppah” - the wedding chamber that would receive him and his bride as they consummate the marriage. Yeshua was just getting ready to make that departure when he said to His disciples –

^{NKJ} **Luke 24:49** ⁴⁹ "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high."

Luke provided a parallel passage to confirm what Yeshua had said –

Acts 1:4-5 ⁴ And (Yeshua) being assembled together with *them*, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, "which," *He said*, "you have heard from Me; ⁵ "for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Knowing that the festival of Shavuot was just days away, and that Shavuot marked the day Israel became a nation, Yeshua’s disciples asked if the restoration of the kingdom would begin on that day. Yeshua answered them neither “Yes” nor “No”, but instead stated that –

Acts 1:8 ⁸ ". . . you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

⁴ The Moabites were never to be allowed to become a part of the congregation of Israel (Deut. 23:4)

Thus Yeshua made it quite clear, they were going to be immersed⁵ in the Holy Spirit for the purpose of being witnesses of Yeshua, or more specifically, witnesses of His Gospel message. That message was to be carried throughout Judea, then to Samaria, and finally to wherever God's people were scattered. Just a few days later - on Shavuot - people from all over the known world were gathered in Jerusalem to hear their witness. After Peter's sermon, they were convicted that Yeshua was indeed the Messiah, and they asked –

^{NKJ} **Acts 2:37** . . . "Men *and* brethren, what shall we do?"

Peter's reply was for them to repent and turn back to the God of their fathers, but it implies more . . .

Peter and the other disciples were called to be disciples of Messiah Yeshua, and to in turn were to make more disciples of Yeshua⁶. They began that job on Shavuot. Yeshua had spent three and a half years removing the "idols" for their house. He had shown them the results of serving the "idol" of pride and lust⁷, and He taught them that the real believers may very well be found in places they might not expect⁸. Thus, when Shavuot arrived, they were able to perform their job.

This is the role we've been called to ourselves as we wait for our Messiah to return from His father's house. We – the bride – must be making preparations for His return. We need to be busy doing the work of God, be it teaching, publishing, or simply being a light to others by our words and good works. But before we can become an effective tool in God's hands, we – like Gideon - need to leave our old self behind and remove the idols of our fathers, be it false beliefs, misguided traditions, personal preferences, or anything else that would separate us as a people. We must also be like Boaz, looking beyond a person's past, and instead looking upon what they are today, striving to see their heart. We too must come to see that a true Israelite is one who loves the God of Israel, loves His Torah, and shows it by how he treats his neighbor.

Thirty-five hundred years ago, on this day, God called Moses to deliver his people to the mountain. Those of us here today have that same calling, and we each have a part in delivering his people.

This, I believe, is a big part of the message behind Shavuot.

Shalom Alecheim

⁵ The Greek word "baptize" (Strong's 907) means "to dip repeatedly, to immerse"

⁶ Matt. 28:19

⁷ John 8:44

⁸ Matt. 9:10; Luke 15:1