

# **SHAVUOT - THE FEAST OF WEEKS**

As many within Messianic Judaism seek to reclaim a biblically-based lifestyle, we are rediscovering the importance of the biblical holidays. The holidays bring order to our lives. Through them we pace ourselves; on a weekly basis, as on Shabbat we enter into God's perfect rest, and seasonally, as we mark our place during the year. God appointed these times to help us stay in touch with Him, with our Jewish roots, with our ancestors, with our families, and with the eternal purposes that God has for His people.

The calendar begins in the spring with Passover, as we remember the blood of the lamb placed on the doorposts of our houses. We eat the bitter herbs of slavery, remembering God's deliverance of our people out of Egypt. We remember the death of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We also celebrate the feast of firstfruits of the harvest, symbolically referring to the resurrection of the Messiah. Fifty days (seven weeks) later, we come to Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. However, many Jews and Christians are particularly "weak" on the Feast of Weeks!

Shavuot is one of the three major festivals that all Jewish men were required to make the journey to Jerusalem to attend. It marks the end of spring, and the beginning of summer and the harvest.

## **Shavuot - a time for both physical and spiritual harvest**

In ancient Israel agriculture was the basis of the economy, and the nation's wealth and welfare were tied to the Land. God wanted Israel's approach to agricultural success to be different from that of all the other nations. If we obeyed God and His Word, there would be plenty of rain and an abundant harvest. If we disobeyed, we would find a shortfall at harvest time.

On Shavuot the nation of Israel was expected to bring the first fruits of the wheat crop to God. Giving the Lord the firstfruits of the harvest was a way of showing Him our gratitude and declaring that all our wealth ultimately comes from Him. It is right to offer to God the firstfruits, the beginning and the best of the harvest. Therefore Shavuot teaches us to regard all of God's gifts with gratitude, returning to Him, in the form of the firstfruits, that which we receive.

During Passover we offered to God the firstfruits of the barley harvest. That was symbolic of Yeshua's resurrection. Fifty days later we returned to Jerusalem to offer the firstfruits of the wheat harvest. The harvest was extended from the barley to the wheat. Fifty days after Yeshua rose from death His first Jewish followers were gathered together in Jerusalem and the Spirit that raised Him from the dead was poured out on His first disciples. The Messianic Community, the Body of Messiah, came into being. God's harvest was extended to more of humanity. That happened on the day of Shavuot, in fulfillment of Shavuot.

One name for Shavuot is "Atzeret shel Pesach," the completion of Passover. Messiah Yeshua died on Passover to atone for sin, then He rose from death to overcome death. Forty days later He ascended to heaven, and from there He sent His Spirit on Shavuot to enable us to overcome sin and experience victory in our lives. The coming of the Ruach HaKodesh (the Holy Spirit) completes the work of the Passover Lamb's death on the cross. The Spirit of God indwelling us gives us the power we need to overcome our tendency to evil and completes the work of salvation.

Though marvelous in its own right, God knew that the death of the Passover Lamb and the redemption from sin was not enough. Just as the cycle of the Spring festivals would be incomplete without Shavuot, the work of salvation is not complete until a man's sin nature has been dealt with and the power to overcome it has been granted.

Therefore Shavuot is a time when we thank God for His gracious provisions in our life, both for His material provision, the firstfruits of the wheat harvest, and for His spiritual provision - the Holy Spirit which brought a rich harvest among those first Messianic Jews in Jerusalem.

## **Shavuot - a time for union between Jews and Gentiles**

The Megillah of Ruth is one of the texts that is read on this holiday. Megillat Ruth is about the harvest, but also included the message of gathering Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel. Ruth, a Gentile, joins herself to the Jewish people. Speaking to Naomi she says, "Your people will be my people, your God will be my God." Ruth later marries a Jewish man by the name of Boaz, and from that union, in the third generation, came King David, and through him, King Yeshua.

On Shavuot, the High Priest waved two loaves of wheat bread made with leaven. This is the only offering in all of Scripture that included leaven. In general the biblical principle is that offerings had to be without leaven, which is usually symbolic of sin. By waving the two loaves of wheat bread, Israel's High Priest was praying: "Lord, thank you for extending the harvest to the wheat. We offer up to you the first fruits, the beginning, the best of this crop, and Lord, we ask you to bring in the rest of the harvest throughout the year."

Why were two loaves of bread waved and not just one big loaf? These two loaves of bread can be understood to be symbolic of the two peoples that make up the Messianic Community. In Romans 11 Rabbi Paul talks about the Olive Tree of salvation and blessing made up of the original branches, the Jewish people. Then wild olive

branches, the Gentiles, were grafted into the olive tree. It could be that the two loaves represent the original branches, the Jewish people, and the wild branches, the gentiles that we grafted into the Olive Tree. Each one is incomplete without the other. The Jewish loaf needs the Gentile loaf to be complete, and the Gentile loaf needs the Jewish branch to be complete.

### **Shavuot - a time of empowerment**

On Shavuot we remember and thank God for "Mattan Torah," the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, one of God's greatest gifts to us. It was about this time that the Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people. Torah means more than just "Law;" it means "teaching or "instruction." Through the Torah God clearly communicated to us His ways, His nature, and His will for us. Today, Shavuot is a time when religious Jews will stay up late into the night studying the Torah and reading from the Psalms.

On Shavuot we also remember "Mattan Ruach," the giving of the Spirit, the One through whom God writes His law on our hearts. The Spirit gives us the power to live out the full spiritual intent of the Torah. We don't dismiss the Law when we have the Spirit. On the contrary, the Law becomes alive to us. At the deepest level of our hearts, it becomes our desire to please God and to fulfill all His commandments.

Law, by itself, has an inherent weakness. It lacks power. Lawmakers may pass laws, but that doesn't mean the people will have the desire or the ability to comply with them.

The rabbis determined that Shavuot was the same time when the Jewish people received the Torah on Mt. Sinai. While Moses was up on Sinai receiving the Torah, Israel was at the bottom of Sinai worshipping the golden calf and breaking the Law. Moses came down from the Sinai, saw what was happening and called out, "whoever is for the Lord, come to me." The Levites came to Moses and they went throughout the camp of Israel and killed three thousand Jewish men who lead that rebellion of false worship. Three thousand Jewish men were killed on Shavuot when the law was given. When the Holy Spirit was given another three thousand Jewish people came alive!

At the time the Law was given (Exodus 32:19-29), three thousand Jewish men were put to death because their actions were now deemed "illegal," they were weak, and the giving of the Torah alone didn't strengthen them. But the Spirit gives us a new desire to fulfill God's Torah and the power to do so. The Spirit gives us power to live, power to witness, power to please God, and power to have victory over the world, the flesh and the devil. It is hardly coincidental that, on the day of Shavuot when the Spirit was given, three thousand Jewish men were empowered to witness to Yeshua and His Resurrection Life.

### **Shavuot - a time to grow in the Spirit**

Prior to the coming of Messiah, the ministry of the Spirit was limited. He seems to have come upon fewer people, to a lesser extent and for a shorter duration of time. King David had to pray, "Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." The full indwelling of God's Spirit was not to be realized before Yeshua died.

The indwelling of the Spirit is the greatest gift we can receive in this life. He regenerates us when we are spiritually dead, and revives us when we are spiritually cold. If it weren't for the work of the Spirit none of us would have any spiritual life at all.

The Spirit also baptizes us into the body of Messiah. He joins us, both to the Father and to one another. Believers in Yeshua all share the same Spirit. We have a new unity and oneness with each other. We are no longer alone, but are part of an eternal community.

The Spirit assures us of eternal life and that we truly belong to God. "You have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16). Do you have that inner witness of the Spirit that God is your Father, and that you are truly one of His?

The Spirit of God guides our prayers. "We do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." (Romans 8:26).

The Spirit gives gifts to every child of God. Every believer has at least one gift from the Spirit, and you are expected to put yours to good use. Ask Him to reveal what your gifts are and then start using them.

### **The Holy Spirit as portrayed in the Scriptures**

The Holy Spirit is like a seal (imprint): A seal demonstrates ownership. We are owned by God. Thus He has a vested interest in our well-being. The Holy Spirit seals us, and there is no force in the universe that can break that seal. He will see us safely and securely to our final rendezvous with the Father on the day of redemption. We are protected, we are secure, because of the indwelling of God's Spirit (2 Corinthians 1:22, Ephesians 1:13, 4:30).

The Holy Spirit is like a pledge (earnest money): He is the pledge, the down payment of our inheritance (2 Corinthians 1:22). The presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart is God's guarantee that he will receive all the promised blessings of salvation, including those yet future. In human affairs, once a down payment has

been made, the purchaser is pledged to go through with the transaction. The deal is closed. The presence of the Spirit is a sure guarantee that God will never fail in any of His promises connected with our salvation.

The Holy Spirit is like a Friend: Before His ascension to heaven, Yeshua said that He would send us another Comforter ("Paraklete" see John 16:7), the same kind of Comforter that He was. Comforter corresponds to the Hebrew word "Menachem" - in fact, a name given by the rabbis as one of the names of the Messiah. The Spirit is a comforter of the very same sort as Yeshua. The Greek word "Paraklete" includes the concepts of One who is called alongside, an Adviser, Corrector, Lawyer, Counsel for the Defense, Legal Assistant, Helper, Strengthened, Encourager.

Why was it to the disciples' advantage that Yeshua left? It is because the Holy Spirit continues Yeshua's ministry to us, but brings His life and ministry to us in a deeper way; one that is able to transform us from within. We can be even closer to Yeshua now than the disciples were who walked with Him.

In one sense, Yeshua's ministry to the disciples was incomplete. There was more that He wanted to teach them, but they weren't able to understand it at that point. But the Spirit is like Yeshua, the Master Teacher, the chief Rabbi, the Guide, who illumines us and enables us to understand and apply Yeshua's teachings, His miracles, His unique birth, death and resurrection to our lives.

The Spirit guides us, leads us and teaches us all things. He brings to remembrance all the things that Yeshua taught, and guides us into all the truth. Further, He even transforms us into the image of Yeshua. He convicts us when we sin. He corrects us when we err.

The Spirit also has a prophetic teaching ministry. He can and will reveal the future to God's people. He does this through the Scriptures and through New Testament prophets and revelation.

The Holy Spirit is like clothing: "I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). The Holy Spirit covers and protects us. He clothes us with God's divine power and wisdom from on high.

The Holy Spirit is like a dove: The dove is a symbol of purity, it flies in the heavens, and is a symbol of peace. God's Spirit is pure and holy. He comes from heaven and is the source of peace. Doves were used as sacrifices for the very poorest people. God's Spirit is gracious and sacrificial. Consider that the Holiest Spirit is willing to come to the unholy, to the weakest, to the most unseemly, to the most poverty-stricken among mankind, and especially to those who are poor in spirit.

The Holy Spirit is like fire: Fire is an indicator of the presence of God. Our God is a consuming fire. The Lord was in the burning bush. The Lord was in the pillar of fire that protected Israel from the Egyptians and lead us through the wilderness. Tongues of fire appeared above the disciples' heads in the upper room on the day of Shavuot.

Fire, when applied to metal, separates dross from ore, the impure from the pure. Fire, when applied to anything organic, separates the organic from the inorganic during combustion. Fire purifies and cleanses. The Holy Spirit cleanses and makes holy. The Holy Spirit will not abide with unholiness. The Spirit will not abide with lies. If your life is unholy or if you are given to lying you cannot legitimately claim to be operating in the Spirit.

Fire can melt the hardest material on earth, even solid rock. The Holy Spirit can melt and mold the toughest human heart.

Fires makes it possible for man to live in the coldest regions on earth. It cooks our food and heats our homes. Without fire man would be reduced to a near animal existence. With fire man becomes a little more like God, no longer forced to concentrate all his energies on mere survival, but able to contemplate the deeper issues of life.

Fire sometimes indicated the approval of the Lord, like fire being sent from heaven to consume a sacrifice, as in the account of the "showdown" of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). When we have the Spirit we have God's blessing and approval.

The Holy Spirit is like oil: Oil was used for anointing. The prophet Samuel anointed young David with oil, announcing that he would one day be king of Israel. Yeshua was anointed with the Spirit. That is what makes Him the Messiah. We need to be anointed with the Spirit if we are to be Messianic; "little anointed ones" as it were.

Oil was burned and gave light. The Spirit of truth enlightens us, gives us knowledge. Oil was also used to cleanse, heal and sanctify. The Holy Spirit brings cleansing, healing and holiness. Just as there should always be a good supply of oil in any lamp, so we need to be daily being filled with the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is like water: Water holds fascination for man. People will travel hundreds of miles to view great downpourings of water, like the Niagara Falls. Water is relatively simple yet mysterious. It is tasteless, odorless, colorless, transparent, and buoyant. It holds up heavy objects like a metal ship or a tree. The Holy Spirit holds us up.

Water enables us to transport things, such as shipments brought on barges. The Holy Spirit transports us, His precious cargo, through life and ultimately all the way to the world to come.

Water makes life possible, and many a human being has died for want of it. The most fertile land without water is a desert, just as the most talented or gifted people without God's Spirit ultimately miss out on life.

Where there is water there is life, growth, and fruitfulness. Without God's Spirit your life will be a spiritual desert. With water it will be a flourishing garden. The Spirit makes life more abundant.

We use water to cleanse our bodies, to our clothes, our homes. God's Spirit cleanses us. Water is also refreshing. There is nothing like a cool glass of water on a hot day. The Spirit gives refreshment, as Yeshua said, "He who believes in Me, from his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38).

The Holy Spirit is like wine: On the day of Shavuot (Acts 2) when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples, some mocked and said, "They are full of sweet wine" (perhaps because of their obvious joy and zeal). Peter stood up and said that the men were not drunk, but that it was what had been spoken of through the prophet Joel, "I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind". Wine is a symbol of joy. God's Spirit brings joy into our innermost being. You will never find true joy and happiness without receiving the Spirit - the source of all joy.

The Holy Spirit is like wind: The Hebrew word for Spirit, Ruach, can be translated as wind (John 3:8, Acts 2:1-2). On the day of Shavuot the coming of the Spirit was accompanied by the sound of a violent rushing wind.

Like wind His work may not be visible, but the results certainly are. We can't see the Spirit, but we can easily see the effect of His transforming work in people's lives. And the Spirit's work is Sovereign. He touches whom He will and gives gifts as He sees fit. You can no more govern the moving of the Spirit than you can control the wind.

Wind can be powerful, like a tornado or hurricane. It can carve exquisite structures out of solid rock. Arches National Monument is a good example of what wind can do. It will destroy those structures that oppose it, but not destroy those things that bend and yield to it. Allow the Spirit to have His way in your life, and He will make something beautiful of it.

Wind can also be a cool, refreshing breeze. The Holy Spirit is like a cool breeze that comforts and refreshes; and just as the wind is from the heavens, so the new birth is from above.

The Holy Spirit is like breath: Ruach is also translated breath. Without breath we die. God's Spirit, His "Breath" gives us life. We have life and tremendous intimacy with God due to His indwelling Spirit. Our breath is close to us. God's Ruach is as close to us as our own breath.

### **How to be filled with the Spirit**

We receive the Spirit by faith and prayer. We continue to be filled with the Spirit by faith and prayer. Being filled with the Spirit is not something that God wants to be difficult. It is as simple as breathing. Simply pray to be filled with the Spirit. If you sin or grieve the Spirit, pray out a prayer of confession and pray to be filled anew with the Spirit, and you will be.

Pray for more of the Spirit. "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to them that ask?" Don't grieve the Holy Spirit by continuing in sin. Be sensitive to the Spirit. Learn to hear His gentle, quiet voice. Be sensitive to His prompting and leadings.

### **Shavuot - a time for feasting**

We eat the festive loaves after the service, especially with milk dishes such as blintzes. One tradition states that after receiving the Torah, the Jewish people were too hungry to wait for meat to be cooked, so we simply made a dairy meal instead. According to another rabbinic interpretation, dairy foods are eaten at this time because the Bible compares the Torah to milk and honey.

### **Other Shavuot customs**

Reading the Ten Commandments: This reminds us of the giving of the Law.

Reading the Megillah of Ruth: This is done for three reasons:

- 1) The setting of the Book of Ruth is the harvest.
- 2) She became a follower of the God of Israel, just as Israel became a follower of the Almighty at Mount Sinai.

The Book of Ruth announces the ancestry of King David, Ruth's great grandson (who according to Jewish tradition, was born and died on Shavuot). From the line of King David came Messiah Yeshua.

Decorating the home: It is customary to decorate the home and synagogue with green plants and flowers. Grass grew on Mount Sinai, and the green plants remind us of the trimming used to adorn the people's baskets of first fruits that they gave to the Priests. It also reminds us that the Torah is a tree of life. As a tree provides fruit and nourishment, so does the Word of God.

May this Shavuot be a time of great joy for you and your family. May our hearts be as one in Messiah Yeshua, and may we experience the presence of the Ruach HaKodesh in our lives in a new way!