

## Freedom and Identity

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The Festival of Shavuot, just past, is unique in the Jewish calendar in that the Torah does not specify its date. Instead it is fixed by reference to Pesach, Passover, and the clue is in its English name, Pentecost, which means "fifty" in Greek. It is also unusual in having no special observances – no fasting, feasting, trumpeting, or even al fresco dining! And, as the Chief Rabbi has wryly observed, it is the least observed of the festivals, despite making the fewest demands, whereas the most onerous – the 25-hour fast Yom Kippur and the obsessive dietary restrictions of Pesach – are also the most observed!

There must be a lesson in that, and perhaps it relates to the central theme of Shavuot, which is by tradition the anniversary of the revelation of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Freedom is a burden, whereas slavishly following instructions requires no initiative and is, well, slavish! That is why Jewish tradition emphasises that the Jewish people, newly released from slavery in Egypt, freely submitted to the “yoke of the Torah”. That theme of free acceptance also explains why one of the readings on Shavuot is the Book of Ruth, at whose centre is this young Moabite widow’s free choice to follow her mother-in-law, both literally and figuratively.

Ruth’s declaration is well known: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.” What is fascinating about this intensely moving statement is that it is not primarily a profession of faith, but of belonging: theological commitment comes only third, after country and nation.

More than three thousand years later, these remain intertwined in Jewish consciousness. The UK Supreme Court asserted just last year that Jews, like Sikhs but unlike Muslims, are an ethnic as well as a religious group. The connection that Jews have with the land of Israel is not just because there are few of us who do not have family and friends there, who do not fear for their well-being, and worry about their local concerns just as Scots of Irish original do about affairs over the water.

That is why we flinch when Israel is attacked – not because we, either as individuals or as a community, support any or all of the actions of the Israeli government, but because a three thousand year old leitmotif of Jewish identity is threatened. Denying the historical connection of the Jewish People to the land of the Bible is no different from denying us the right to read that Bible or to follow its teachings.

Perhaps, then, the universal message of Shavuot is that these aspects of identity – nation, place, and culture – are intertwined, not just for Jews but for everyone, and that it is free observance, not mere ritual, that is at the heart of religion.