

## Happy Sivan – Month of Revelation, Reaping, and Renewal

The new month (Rosh Hodesh) of Sivan starts at Havdalah, when Shabbat ends. Every month's character is defined largely by its key holiday, and next week is Shavuot -- Festival of Revelation, and of the late spring harvest. Sivan is the month of Torah, and of produce!

Those twinned themes of this time – Torah, and tillage – are separate concepts sharing many connections, which ultimately are one: “Without sustenance, there is no Torah; without Torah, there is no sustenance.” Instead of endless debates over the primacy of the physical or the spiritual realm, this great aphorism from Pirkei Avot reminds us that the two are equally necessary, and interdependent. *“Im ein kemach, ein Torah; im ein Torah, ein kemach!”*

Most of all, as we prepare for our shelter-in-place Shavuot, both Torah and tillage are symbols of **renewal**. (Join us next Thursday night, at the movement-wide Tikkun Leil Shavuot, for a deep dive into the renewing power of Torah; details below).

Agriculture bears daily witness to the ongoing miracle of life – how sun and Earth and water enable tiny seeds to become a mighty tree, a fresh vegetable, or a nourishing grain. While home-bound, many of us are experiencing this up close, with our own backyard or windowsill gardens. The oldest name for Shavuot is *Chag Ha-Asif*, the Festival of the Gathering, of the harvest.

Torah, too, is a symbol of renewal. At Sinai, when our ancestors (and supposedly all our souls, across time and space) mythically stood together and received Torah, the Tree of Life / Etz Chayim was implanted in our midst. That event took place, we're told, on the Sixth of Sivan – an annual anniversary celebrated with *Chag Matan Torah*, the Festival of the Giving of Torah, the later name given to Shavuot.

Etz Chayim: Like a tree, the Torah is majestic and miraculous; It roots us in the fertile soil of our history, with taproots strong enough to crack through clay and stone, while it offers a verdant life-supporting canopy toward which we reach. We luxuriate in its shade, and are captivated by its beauty; we build our homes from it, and write our poetry on it; we enjoy nutrition and inspiration from its fruits. Etz Chayim: Like a tree, Torah is alive.

Living things embody the tension of continuity and change. It's hard to tell one stalk of wheat from another, and thanks to genetics, that's how it's been for millions of years. Yet this timeless quality depends on each individual organism being temporary, ephemeral. And slowly, intergenerationally, that species adapts and evolves so it can be best suited for changing conditions. This is so for tillage and Torah alike. Consider just these three evolutionary examples of criminal justice, sustainable agriculture, and relating to God:

**Criminal justice:** The Torah imposes capital punishment for gathering wood on Shabbat, and for a stubborn rebellious child insulting their parent, much less for murder. But the rabbis of subsequent centuries, in shaping the normative interpretation, define a “stubborn and rebellious child” out of existence so that no early adolescent can ever be found guilty in this way. They play legalistic gymnastics to ensure that justice will be just, and that few if any people must ever be put to death in the name of the law – finding ultimately that any court which applies the death penalty once in seven years (another says once in seventy!) is ‘bloodthirsty.’

**Sustainable Agriculture:** Our ancestors understood that the renewing power of plants would be limited by our agricultural interventions, especially by tilling the soil which invites erosion, and by annual monocultures which diminish the land's fertility. So they decreed that every seventh year (and again every fiftieth), invasive agriculture would cease – so that short-term needs for food for a growing populace would never impede the long-term need for fertile land for future generations. The rabbis, in the proto-capitalist Roman era, reduced the sabbatical's power through a legal fiction called *prozbul*; then, with exile, the entire practice faded away. But today, focused on “shmita consciousness” rather than on the letter of sabbatical law, evolution comes full-circle. We again embrace Torah as the source of bedrock values which are both timeless and eminently timely – values like resilience, sustainability, neighborliness, long-term planning, equity and justice.

**Relating to God:** Poet Ruth Brin has many chestnuts sprinkled through our Reconstructionist prayer book series. This one, “A Woman's Meditation,” speaks powerfully to the many evolutionary forces at play in our liturgy:

When men were children, they thought of God as a father;  
When men were slaves, they thought of God as a master;  
When men were subjects, they thought of God as a king.  
But I am a woman, not a slave, not a subject,  
not a child who longs for God as father or mother.

I might imagine God as teacher or friend, but  
those images, like king, master, father or mother,  
are too small for me know.

God is the force of motion and light in the universe;  
God is the strength of life on our planet;  
God is the power moving us to do good;  
God is the source of love springing up in us.  
God is far beyond what we can comprehend.

Just a few decades ago, we thought nothing of “He/Him/His” as God's sole pronouns; we accepted outdated metaphors like “Lord” and “King” unquestioningly. Meanwhile religion and worship, feeling irrelevant, became ever less popular and central in American Jewish life. A clarion exception was the poet, scholar, and liturgist Marcia Falk (another key contributor to our Reconstructionist siddur). She sought to reunite the language of prayer with our reality, and to open new doors (or in many cases to rediscover and uncover ancient ones) for naming and relating to the Divine. She banished patriarchy and hierarchy, added lyricism, and returned the power of blessing back to us in her brilliant prayer formulation, *N'varech et Ein HaChayim* – “Let us bless the Source of Life.”

For many of us, and for even more of our children and students, who find the old language not just irrelevant but immoral, Falk and her colleagues have offered the lifeline to prayer. They are contemporary agents of Torah's eternal renewal.

And while Ruth Brin (z”l) can now be accessed only on the printed page, Marcia Falk can be “in your living room,” on your computer screen, **live, next Thursday night!** As can be Rabbi Sandy Sasso, pioneering pulpit presence and prolific influential author, just the second woman rabbi ordained in America – Rabbi Dr. Deborah Waxman, scholar of Reconstructionist history and first woman to lead a major Jewish denomination and seminary – our own Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, another great liturgist whose work enlivens our siddur and our community – and so many more.

Next Thursday night, after our own Adat Shalom 7:15pm communal maariv and yizkor gathering, please join the Reconstructionist movement-wide Tikkun Leil Shavuot – our into-the-night learning session – where these and other giants of Torah will be sharing the harvest of their life’s work. Register in advance, to receive the link, at [https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN\\_7fjhW6acT5mW9CauZ9vCvg](https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_7fjhW6acT5mW9CauZ9vCvg).

This Sivan, while we’re all still stuck in our abodes (privileged as most of us are to have them, and to have the people and resources around us in this challenging time), let’s plant seeds in our gardens and our patio pots – and, let’s plant Torah in our homes, too. Join our many online opportunities to **learn** Torah, including Jewish Values every Friday, and midweek midrash, and Idan’s Israel offerings, and more. Read one of the many Jewish books you may have at home, or download a new one. Go through the chumash and the siddur – despite the countless times you’ve opened them, new information and new insights await us all in those sacred pages. **Practice** Torah, through tzedakah and solidarity, holiday observances and ethical consumption, religion and righteousness. **Share** Torah. And **celebrate** Torah, this Shavuot, together.

Hodesh Tov – blessings for a good month – to all.