

# Shavuot: Firstfruit of Harvest & Resurrection

by Michael Rudolph

Delivered to Ohev Yisrael May 26, 2012

If you ask a Christian if he or she observes the holy day of *Shavuot*, you will probably get a blank stare and be asked: "What's *Shavuot*? Then you'll remember that "*Shavuot*" is a Hebrew word, so you change your question and ask: "I mean the Feast of Weeks that is commanded in Leviticus 23; you know; the firstfruits harvest that comes seven weeks after Passover?" Still no recognition, so you try once more: "I mean Pentecost! Eyes light up. "Oh! You mean the time after Jesus ascended to His Father and sent back the Holy Spirit!"

This hypothetical conversation illuminates a major difference between Christianity and Messianic Judaism. In the life of the typical Christian, most things in the Bible that are of practical importance begin with Jesus, whereas for the Messianic believer, practical importance begins at Genesis and builds through all the covenants – through Abraham, through Moses, and finally comes to fruition in Yeshua.

If the hypothetical Christian to whom you are speaking knows what the Feast of Weeks is, you can ask another question: "What do you think is the most important reason for us to remember and observe the Feast of Weeks?" The Christian will most likely say: "Because the Holy Spirit came to earth in power on that day." I would hope that the Messianic believer will say: "That is true, but the most important reason is that God gave us the day through Moses, and commanded that we keep it throughout all our generations!" In thus saying, he will, of course, be referring to Leviticus 23: 15-21, which reads:

*From the day after the day of rest- that is, from the day you bring the sheaf for waving- you are to count seven full weeks, until the day after the seventh week; you are to count fifty days; and then you are to present a new grain offering to ADONAI. You must bring bread from your homes for waving- two loaves made with one gallon of fine flour, baked with leaven- as firstfruits for ADONAI. Along with the bread, present seven lambs without defect one year old, one young bull and two rams; these will be a burnt offering for ADONAI, with their grain and drink offerings, an offering made by fire as a fragrant aroma for ADONAI. Offer one male goat as a sin offering and two male lambs one year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. The cohen will wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before ADONAI, with the two lambs; these will be holy for ADONAI for the cohen. On the same day, you are to call a holy convocation; do not do any kind of ordinary work; this is a permanent regulation through all your generations, no matter where you live.*

The difference between the Christian and Messianic Jewish response to both questions is revealing. While both the Christian and Messianic believer share a common belief in Yeshua, Messianic Judaism (as a Jewish faith expression) is *Torah*-conscious and seeks to be *Torah*-obedient, whereas Christianity (as a faith expression) is typically neither. That is not a criticism of Christianity, since the Jewish people have a very special responsibility to the *Torah* and, even in the New Covenant, an obligation for its preservation. This is expressed by the *Shaliach* Paul in Romans 3:1-2:

*Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of being circumcised? Much in every way! In the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.*

Now it's easy to talk about *Torah*-obedience, but let's look at the particulars of Leviticus 23, the Scripture that we have said we are seeking to obey. First, it instructs us to wave two loaves of bread; that much is easy. But then we must sacrifice seven lambs and a bull; two rams; a goat; and we must also have a *cohen* to assist us. Well, that works if one has a Tabernacle or a Temple with a functioning Levitical priesthood, but all we have is a synagogue and Art Cohen. In what way then can we be *Torah*-obedient, and how can God expect it of us? The obvious answer is that we cannot be, and God does not expect it of us because we, unlike the Israelites of old, are in the New Covenant and not under all the obligations of the Mosaic Covenant. The *Torah* is still alive to us, but we have to approach it differently than we would if we were still at Mt. Sinai, following Moses. The Israelites of old could keep all the commandments of the *Torah* in every particular, but we cannot, and we should not attempt to because God gave us a new and better covenant (referred to in Hebrews 8:6) that includes the Holy Spirit; for as Jeremiah prophesied:

Jeremiah 31:30-33(English verses 31-34)

*"Here, the days are coming," says ADONAI, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took them by their hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt; because they, for their part, violated my covenant, even though I, for my part, was a husband to them," says ADONAI. "For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says ADONAI: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will any of them teach his fellow community member or his brother, [saying] 'Know ADONAI'; for all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest; because I will forgive their wickednesses and remember their sins no more."*

No, under the New Covenant we cannot obey every commandment of the *Torah* literally as the ancient Israelites could, so we obey those we can and, for those we cannot, we provide commemorative substitutions. Over the many centuries since the Second Temple was destroyed, Judaism developed many such commemorative substitutions; therefore, in addition to our being led by the Holy Spirit individually, it is profitable for us to learn about and consider the wider Jewish community's time-honored way of *Torah*-observance, hopefully to draw us closer as a family. In the case of *Shavuot*, the Jewish practice is to observe it as a Sabbath, which means, at minimum, that we do no ordinary work and, as a substitute for the requisite sacrifices, we attend synagogue services for prayer. Beyond that, it is customary to wave and bless over two loaves of bread, read the *Megillah* of Ruth, eat dairy meals with leavened bread, and read and study the *Torah* – sometimes all night long. This latter practice is motivated by the belief of some, that the *Torah* was given on *Shavuot*, and there is a *Midrashic* legend that a goodly number of the Israelites fell asleep the night before the *Torah* was given, and that God had to awaken them; ergo we do the opposite – stay awake all night reading the *Torah*. There are also several legends that purport to explain the eating of dairy. One of them is that, after receiving the commandments of *kashrut*, the Israelites still did not know the *kosher* way to slaughter animals,

so they ate only dairy until they had it figured out. These legends are not found in Scripture; that's why they are legends.

Now looking back at Leviticus 23 (and still speaking about *Shavuot*), we see that the waving of two loaves of bread is offered as *bikkurim* (or firstfruits) of the new grain harvest for the Lord. This is at the conclusion of seven weeks and fifty days from when there was another firstfruits offering, on a day we also call *Yom HaBikurim*, and on which we commemorated Yeshua's resurrection. Yes, *Shavuot* is also "*Yom Habikurim*" and, although the *Torah* commandment concerning it is exclusively connected to Israel's agricultural harvest, we read in the New Covenant Scriptures, in Acts Chapter 2, that God chose this very day to send mankind the Holy Spirit. Coincidence? Not likely, so let's look at Chapter 2 of the Book of Acts; please listen carefully as I begin reading at verse 1:

*The festival of Shavu'ot arrived, and the believers all gathered together in one place. Suddenly there came a sound from the sky like the roar of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire, which separated and came to rest on each one of them. They were all filled with the Ruach HaKodesh and began to talk in different languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak. Now there were staying in Yerushalayim religious Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered; they were confused, because each one heard the believers speaking in his own language. Totally amazed, they asked, "How is this possible? Aren't all these people who are speaking from the Galil? How is it that we hear them speaking in our native languages? We are Parthians, Medes, Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Y'hudah, ... [and so on ...] How is it that we hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things God has done?" Amazed and confused, they all went on asking each other, "What can this mean?" But others made fun of them and said, "They've just had too much wine!" Then Kefa stood up with the Eleven and raised his voice to address them:*

*"You Judeans, and all of you staying here in Yerushalayim! Let me tell you what this means! Listen carefully to me! "These people aren't drunk, as you suppose- it's only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken about through the prophet Yo'el: 'ADONAI says: "In the Last Days, I will pour out from my Spirit upon everyone. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my slaves, both men and women, will I pour out from my Spirit in those days; and they will prophesy. I will perform miracles in the sky above and signs on the earth below- blood, fire and thick smoke. The sun will become dark and the moon blood before the great and fearful Day of ADONAI comes. And then, whoever calls on the name of ADONAI will be saved.'"*

We see how Peter is working the salvation message into his explanation of Jeremiah's prophecy; so let's continue as Peter explains about Yeshua's resurrection:

*"Men of Isra'el! Listen to this! Yeshua from Natzeret was a man demonstrated to you to have been from God by the powerful works, miracles and signs that God performed through him in your presence. You yourselves know this. This man was arrested in accordance with God's predetermined plan and foreknowledge; and, through the agency of persons not bound by the*

*Torah, you nailed him up on a stake and killed him! "But God has raised him up and freed him from the suffering of death; it was impossible that death could keep its hold on him. For David says this about him: 'I saw ADONAI always before me, for he is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken. For this reason, my heart was glad; and my tongue rejoiced; and now my body too will live on in the certain hope that you will not abandon me to Sh'ol or let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the ways of life; you will fill me with joy by your presence.' "Brothers, I know I can say to you frankly that the patriarch David died and was buried- his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, since he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn an oath to him that one of his descendants would sit on his throne, he was speaking in advance about the resurrection of the Messiah, that it was he who was not abandoned in Sh'ol and whose flesh did not see decay. God raised up this Yeshua! And we are all witnesses of it! "Moreover, he has been exalted to the right hand of God; has received from the Father what he promised, namely, the Ruach HaKodesh; and has poured out this gift, which you are both seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into heaven. But he says, 'ADONAI said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'"*

So far, Peter has explained to the gathered crowd what they have just experienced – that Yeshua was resurrected, went to be with His Father in heaven, and sent back the Holy Spirit as one of the firstfruits. What we read next though, is what we at Ohev Yisrael most need to take away from this reading of Acts, Chapter 2. It is the example of Peter reaching out to his fellow Jews, telling them that salvation and the Holy Spirit are acquired through faith in Yeshua. Let's listen to Peter and learn as we continue with verse 36:

*Therefore, let the whole house of Isra'el know beyond doubt that God has made him both Lord and Messiah- this Yeshua, whom you executed on a stake!" On hearing this, they were stung in their hearts; and they said to Kefa and the other emissaries, "Brothers, what should we do?" Kefa answered them, "Turn from sin, return to God, and each of you be immersed on the authority of Yeshua the Messiah into forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Ruach HaKodesh! For the promise is for you, for your children, and for those far away- as many as ADONAI our God may call!" He pressed his case with many other arguments and kept pleading with them, "Save yourselves from this perverse generation!"*

Notice that Peter did not pull out a "Jews for Jesus" tract or lead the crowd in reading the "Four Spiritual Laws." He merely told them how to receive salvation, and relied upon the Holy Spirit to move the people to repent and receive Yeshua. And notice, by the way, that the water of immersion was not what did it; it was the giving of themselves to Yeshua in the course of the immersion that saved them. And even with that amount and display of power, not everyone who heard Peter accepted Yeshua, for we read in verse 41:

*So those who accepted what he said were immersed, and there were added to the group that day about three thousand people.*

The inference, of course, is that some did not accept but, for those who did, life changed dramatically, and the New Covenant body of believers was born that very day. We conclude now with Acts 2:42-47:

*They continued faithfully in the teaching of the emissaries, in fellowship, in breaking bread and in the prayers. Everyone was filled with awe, and many miracles and signs took place through the emissaries. All those trusting in Yeshua stayed together and had everything in common; in fact, they sold their property and possessions and distributed the proceeds to all who were in need. Continuing faithfully and with singleness of purpose to meet in the Temple courts daily, and breaking bread in their several homes, they shared their food in joy and simplicity of heart, praising God and having the respect of all the people. And day after day the Lord kept adding to them those who were being saved.*

So we have now come to the end of this message that (I believe) is not my message, but rather one that God gave me to deliver to you on this *Shavuot*. He wants us to go beyond believing in His Son, to being true disciples – reaching out to the world with the Good News that Yeshua brought. He wants more of us than the current handful of two-by-two teams to commit to a lifestyle of outreach. Remember, the concept of ministering "two-by-two" is not something that I made up. It is how Yeshua sent his disciples out to bring the Good News to the fallen world of His day, for we read in Mark 6:7:

*Yeshua summoned the Twelve and started sending them out in pairs, giving them authority over the unclean spirits.*

Ohev will be hearing other such messages in the weeks and months to come, urging us to become a congregation dedicated to outreach. God will not take "no" for an answer to our complying with this very basic requirement of all believers.

Tonight, we have heard about *Shavuot* from two perspectives. As Jewish and *K'rov Yisrael* custodians of the *Torah*, we are called to keep *Shavuot* as a Sabbath throughout our generations. As disciples of Yeshua, we are entreated to look forward to each *Shavuot* as a day of inspiration and empowerment in the Holy Spirit, to share Yeshua with our Jewish brethren and others who do not know Him.

I now count this message as having been obediently delivered in the name of Yeshua.

Amen.