

June's Musings by Rabbi Rene: Shavuot

Someone asked me recently, "What's the purpose of Shavuot?"

"Cheesecake", was my immediate answer.

The truth is, Shavuot is less observed than Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, or Pesach. And yet, in the overall Jewish narrative, if our ancestors became a people during the Exodus, they received a structure, a framework, only 50 days later on Shavuot (Hebrew for "weeks", the seven weeks between both festivals). According to Torah, God revealed what was expected from us in a Hollywood-style narrative, with thunder and loud noises, with reverence and awe.

The fundamental teaching of Shavuot is that Torah wasn't given to isolated individuals, but to all of us, standing together. A beautiful Midrash teaches that all Jewish souls were present at Sinai those of the people who lived that day, those yet to be born in the future, and the proselytes who would join our community along the way.

Shavuot invites us to contemplate: what is our community, what is our purpose? We have received a law, but it's open to endless debates and interpretations. More importantly, we have received a sense of common purpose.

Recently, I've found myself drawn to the concept of the "Amen Effect," described in a book of the same name by Rabbi Sharon Brous. In essence, Rabbi Brous explains that when we affirm each other's experiences, when we see each other in truth, something powerful happens — connection. She writes, "When I hear your story and your struggles, and respond with 'amen', I am saying, 'I see you. Your experience matters.'" And somehow, we are both strengthened. This "Amen Effect" manifests throughout our community — in conversations after services, in study groups, in how we show up for each other during both celebrations and challenges.

Rabbi Brous drew her inspiration from a passage in the Mishnah (Middot 2:2), which describes an ancient ritual when the Temple was still standing. During the pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot), people would enter the courtyard from the south and walk clockwise. However, mourners would circle in the opposite direction. When the mourners were asked, "What happened to you?", they might share their pain: "My mother died," or "I found a lump." The community would then respond, "May God comfort you", or "May you be wrapped in the embrace of the community".

This was revealed at Sinai: we now have rules and values to live by, and above all, we have each other to face any challenges that life sends our way. We see in the other the face of God, and when

we meet someone in mourning, we show up and support them. Because it is the right thing to do. And because one day we will be the ones circling counterclockwise, welcoming the love and support of our community.

The question of Shavuot's relevance arose one Sunday morning during The Forum, a safe space for difficult conversations facilitated by the fantastic John Dunston. People come with different views, yet they listen to each other respectfully. We live in a time of heightened tensions, strong emotions, and significant challenges. I am proud to be the Rabbi of a community that has created within it a space where difficult conversations can happen in a menschlich way.

Kol haKavod to you all, and Chag Shavuot Sameach.