

1. The name of this holiday, SHEVUOS, which celebrates the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai, is usually explained as deriving from the word SHEVUA meaning "weeks", because it ~~is~~ comes at the end of seven weeks counted from the ~~be~~ second day of Passover. There is another explanation, however, offered by the Gerer Rebbe in his "S'FAS EMESS" which sheds a new light on the entire festival and the nature of the relation of each and every one of us to Torah itself. He maintains that the word SHEVUOS comes from the word SHEVUAH meaning an oath or a vow. This he derives from the Talmudic statement that every Jew is MUSHBA V'OMEID MEI'HAR SINAI, that each of us is in a state of oath consummated at Mt. Sinai to observe the Torah and all its commandments. Shevuos, therefore, is the time that each of us reaffirms the essence of our relationship with Torah - not an easy-going friendship, not just pride in it, not the use of it for private ends - but SHEVUAH, an oath, a sacred and inviolable vow.
2. Those of us who keep abreast of current religious writings will recognize that idea in one word used very frequently - "commitment". To be religious means to be committed to Torah, to submit to it without reservation or qualification. The Bible calls it "BRIS" or covenant, the Talmud calls it SHEVUAH or vow, Hassidism calls it DEVEIKUS or attachment, modern thinkers call it "commitment" or "the leap of faith". But call it what you will, it means the same thing: the knowledge that the whole essence of your life is intertwined with Torah, that you live only by the Law of G-d, that otherwise life has no meaning for you. It means you are bound to Torah, and stray from it though you may, it is all you have, all your life, and that you recognize this and only this as truth.
3. In a modified way all of you will recognize what we mean by this SHEVUAH, this idea of vow or commitment. When, as children, some of us may have belonged to the Boy Scouts, we committed ourselves to the principles of good citizenship, kindness and so on. Marriage is a kind of commitment - a pledge to live up to certain standards of monogamous behavior, to considerate treatment of one's spouse, to domestic happiness and peacefulness. When as business men you sign a ~~check~~ contract - that is a commitment; you commit yourself to buy or sell or otherwise deal in a certain specific manner. Once you signed you simply cannot withdraw, for you have made a commitment. Those of us who were born abroad and were naturalized as citizens, submitted to a commitment - to protect our country and remain ever loyal to it. Unless commitment has value, all of life becomes an unmapped and treacherous jungle. Commitment is, in reality, the essence of civilization.
4. But what we reaffirm on this holiday of SHEVUOS, the vow or commitment to Torah, is even more drastic than all that. The concept of SHEVUAH, of commitment to Torah, is more than risking membership in a club or business reputation or citizenship or married life. It means that you stake your very life on your commitment. It involves the totality of all your existence - it is either all or nothing insofar as the meaning of life and the validity of any principles you may have.
5. Perhaps that is one of the reasons we read the Book of Ruth today. Its most moving passage, the decision of Ruth to remain with her destitute mother-in-law Naomi, is the best description ever given of real, total commitment. Recall those stirring words, spoken by this young widow to her old and also widowed mother-in-law: "...whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy G-d my G-d; where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." There are no ifs and buts in this proposition. It is commitment pure and simple. It is SHEVUAH, even as the language indicates: "the Lord do so to me". Ruth, the stranger, the lonely young widow, swore and knew what she was swearing to. It was a commitment not only to Naomi, but to her people and her G-d; it was the sacred vow that our people gave at Sinai, that makes each of us a MUSHBA VOMEID MEI'HAR SINAI, but which she, being a non-Jew, now undertook on her own for the first time. VE'RUS DAVKAH BAH - there was DVEIKUS, attachment, vow, covenant, commitment, leap of faith. No wonder we read this Book on Shevuos! It tells us in no uncertain terms how we are to relate ourselves to our inheritance - a reaffirmation of total, uncompromising vow.

6. So that saying AMEN to the SHEVUAH taken by our people at the foot of Sinai, reaffirming that sacred vow and total commitment, means that you have committed your whole life; your ~~dreams~~ needs and desires, your dreams and ambitions, your acts and your thoughts, all these must now find expression in and through Torah.
7. When you realize the consequences of that SHEVUAH, you begin to understand that it took a lot of courage and that to do so today takes just as much courage. Committing ourselves to Torah means that we are going to restrain ourselves and deny ourselves certain things because of it. ~~No immorality, no theft, no envy, no impudence to elders, no work on certain days...~~ that is all part of the commitment, part of the vow. For the adolescents here this morning that commitment meant giving up precious school work for these two days. For the adults - two important business days. For all of us it means curbing our appetites and desires. Indeed, we stake our lives on that vow.
8. At this point, someone here may be inclined to think: well, if it's that inclusive, can't I just go along without a real commitment? If a SHEVUAH to Torah involves a whole new way of practical life and a positive belief in G-d and Torah and Prophecy and the Redemption of Israel - can't I have the privilege of suspending my judgement? Can't I remain neutral and not sign my life on the dotted line? Must I say "yes" or "no"? After all, I haven't doubts concerning many of these things, must I make my mind up once and for all?
9. The name for that attitude of neutrality is called agnosticism - suspended judgement, neither belief nor disbelief. It is perhaps the most fashionable of all attitudes. It gives the agnostic the comfortable feeling of being a detached, scientific observer, above allegiance and commitment. And our answer to that is: it's impossible. You may be able to avoid forming an opinion. But you can't avoid doing something with your life. At Sinai, the Talmud tells us, G-d raised the mountain over the assembled Israelites and told them, IM TKABLU MUTAV, V'IM LAV SHAM THEI KVURAS'CHEM - if you accept the Torah - good; if not, I will drop this mountain on you, and here shall be your grave!! Even our Rabbis were shocked by this statement, and one even said MODAAH RABBAH L'ORAIISA - in that case we're not responsible, we were forced to accept. I suggest, however, a different interpretation of that great and crucial event. G-d did not force us to accept. He did force us to choose. It is not that we had no choice; it is that we had no choice but to choose. You see, G-d told Israel, and us, life has its forced decisions. There are certain things about which you have got to decide whether you like it or not. And if you don't choose of your own free will, SHAM THEI KVURAS'CHEM - then that is death itself, for life chooses for you. There is no such thing as no neutrality in the great issues. It is one way or the other. It is a fact of momentous significance: you can escape making up your mind, but you cannot escape living your life as if you had made it up one way or the other. ***high school grad: go to college or business - you're at the fork in the road, college or no college, no neutrality....***M.D. to amputate above or below knee - must decide, it's a forced decision: otherwise SHAM THEI KVURAS'CHEM, gangrene decides issue for you. Can't avoid a commitment. ***Can avoid deciding if Moon has livable atmosphere or vegetation. But can't avoid making up your life on the question of Torah. Either this world is aimless and life is without purpose - in which case you will live it as freely and wildly as you can with only one interest - your selfish indulgence - or it has a goal and a purpose, there is a G-d, He gave a Torah, we were created in His image - in which case we will live our lives according to His Torah, fulfill the purpose for which we came into being and enhance that Divine image. Intellectually you may quibble about it. But insofar as life - real life, actual living - is concerned, there you live as if there were a G-d or as if there were no G-d. "Neutrality" is only a figment of an unhealthy imagination. In this case it really is a choice - that there is no G-d, a commitment to the proposition that life is an accident, purposeless, meaningless, a blind alley in an uncertain evolution. What we are here for on this SHEVUOS day is to affirm that there is either commitment for or against, one way or the other, and that we cast our lot with Torah - that is the KABALLAS TORAH, the SHEVUAH that we are here to make.

10. The Halakha indicated that idea when it said, in the words of Maimonides (Hil. Shvuot 2,12): V'CHEIN SHAAR MINEI SHVUOS EINO CHAYAV AD SHE'YIHU PIV V'LIBO SHAVIN, that SHEVUAH or commitment means something, only when the heart intends all that the mouth says. To talk about "Jewish consciousness" or "Jewish survival", to urge others to be "proud" of their "heritage", without living a thoroughly Jewish existence yourself, that shows a discrepancy between heart and mouth, it proves that there is a feeling of so-called neutrality on the basic question, it points to no commitment at all. Real commitment to Torah, real SHEVUAH, demands the totality of one's life. It is more than a word of honor. It is a life of honor.
11. One more extremely important fact should be mentioned about the nature of this commitment to Torah. And that is, that it is not only a pledge that requires the courage to give, to yield, to relinquish and sacrifice. There is another facet to it: the courage to receive, to benefit, to hope. In the Torah, SHEVUAS BITUY is both LHETIV ULEHAREYA, literally, to vow whether to do good or bad. The Halakha interprets that as: to do or not to do, positive or negative oaths, to give or to receive. That is true as well of the commitment to Torah, the SHEVUAH at Mt. Sinai which we relive today.
- **Commitment to Torah means not only the self-control not to smoke on Shabbos, but the strength, as well, to put all disturbing thoughts out of my mind and allow it to be exposed to the sacred and pleasant serenity of Shabbos.
- **SHEVUAH means BITACHON - to dare to hope, to know that even when AVI V'IMI AZAVUNI, when parents and friends have forsaken me, HASHEM YAASFEINI, that G-d befriends me.
- **Commitment means to stake my life on the confidence that even in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, KI ATA IMADI, for Thou art with me.
- **SHEVUAH challenges me to the faith that even when Israel is surrounded by fierce enemies and betrayed by her friends, she will not go under, for -in the words of the AKADAMUS - CHADU SHLEIMA BMEISSI UMANI DACHVASSA, KIRYASSA DI'YRUSHLEIM KAD YECHANEISH GALVASSA, "perfect joy and pure delight will come to Jerusalem when He will gather therein her exiles.
- **Commitment means that when doctors have despaired and relatives have given up, I will not abandon hope - for ANI HASHEM ROFECHA, G-d is He who heals.
- **SHEVUAH to Torah means the courage to know with all my heart and soul, despite the hard cynicism and pitiable confusion which surrounds me from all sides, that I must dare to believe that even death is not final, for HASHEM MEIMISS UMECHAYE, MORID SHEOL VAYAAL, G-d Who kills and brings down to the grave, brings up again and resurrects.
12. This festival of SHEVUOS, then, is the time that we are called upon to reaffirm our SHEVUAH to G-d and His Torah, to declare that we ~~are~~ committed, that we cannot be neutral, that our hearts join our lips in expressing this loyalty and pledging this fealty, that our commitment is not only an obligation, but a privilege, not only to sacrifice but to serenity, not only to duty but to hope. We are MUSHBA VOMETD MEIHAR SINAI, we are in a state of oath from Sinai. The vows then made and the affirmations now pronounced bridge the gap of centuries, and announce to all the world and for all eternity that KUDSHA BRICH HU, YISROEL V'ORAISSA CHAD HU, that G-d, Torah and Israel are solemnly pledged to each other in a ~~ee~~ sacred commitment that will not cease as long as day follows night and as long as the heavens are stretched above this earth.