

irving greenberg

guide
to
shavuot



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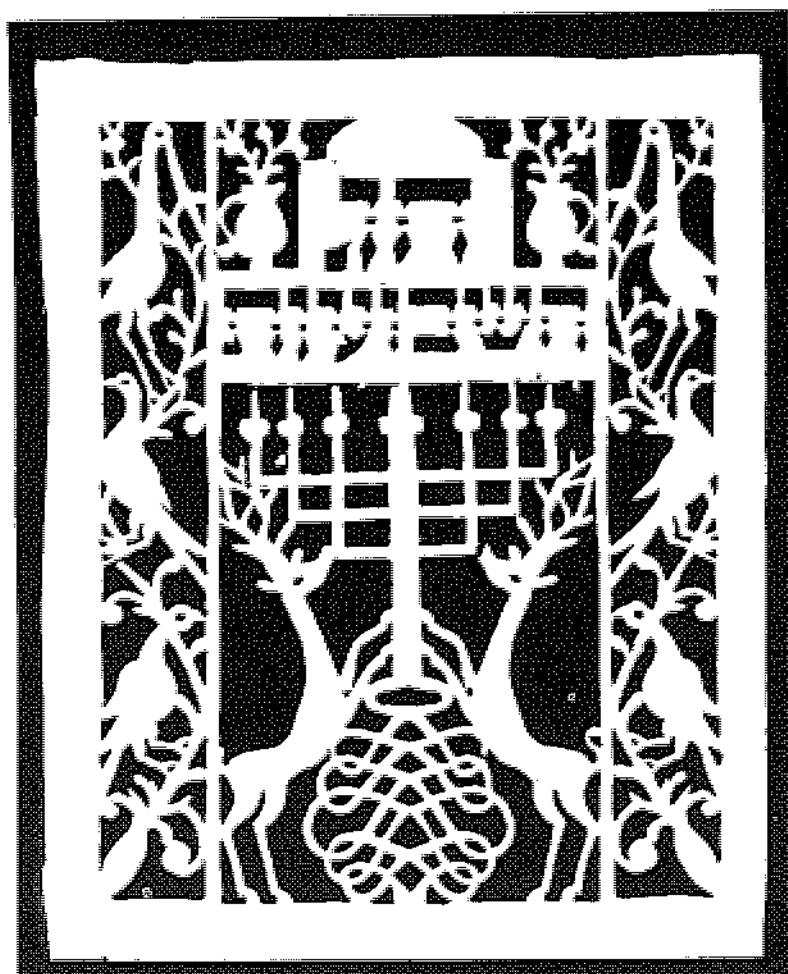


Plate 1. A seven branched menorah supported by two gazelles. Above it, the inscription: Festival of Shavuot, flanked on both sides by pitchers with flowers. On both margins, birds including two storks, amidst the leaves.

A classic paper cut of the type known as Roysalech (rosettes) or Shevuoslech (for the holiday of Shavuot). They were hung on window panes of Jewish homes during Shavuot.

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by
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TO
BLU GENAUER GREENBERG
who taught me the meaning of covenant

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There are three central pilgrimage holidays in the Jewish calendar: Pesach (Passover), Shavuot and Sukkot. These are days of special joy. On these days, Jews found it especially urgent to come together as a nation to celebrate the peak moments of national religious life and history. The Passover and Sukkot holidays - reenact the Exodus, the moment of national liberation and its continuation in the desert. The third, Shavuot, has come to represent the reenactment of the revelation of Mount Sinai.

Rabbinic tradition identifies Shavuot, the fiftieth day after the day of Exodus itself, as the anniversary of the theophany of Sinai. That event celebrated on Shavuot, marks not only the giving of the Ten Commandments, but the establishment of the Covenant - the agreement, indeed, the treaty between God and Israel. It is the Torah which becomes the basis of the ongoing relationship of God and the Jewish people. It is the teaching which guides the way of the Jews from the once and partial Exodus to the future and universal Messianic redemption.

If the Exodus is the central motif, then the covenant is the central concept and mechanism of Judaism. The Exodus asserts that human dignity, value and freedom is the right and ultimate fate of every human. Reality is not neutral and cannot remain indefinitely oppressive and valueless - because it is rooted in a loving, transcendent God who cares. The Covenant is the promise and the process whereby we are pledged that the final perfection will come.

The subjects of the Torah are the stuff of infinity and eternity; an infinite God beyond all measurement of dimension, beyond human grasp or ken; an eternal destiny that will outlast history until this flawed world is changed and made perfect. But such concepts are not commensurate with the limited, fragmented imperfect world. Thus even if the Torah's categories were true, they would be 'out of this world', beyond all connection to human reality. However, through the mechanism of the covenant, infinity and eternity are converted into finite, temporal, usable forms - without losing their ground in the absolute. Thus the covenant makes possible the actual functioning of Judaism in history.

FROM EXODUS TO COVENANT

In the Exodus tyranny was overthrown and Israel was taken out of slavery into freedom. Reality's veil parted long enough to show the fullest possibilities of sustaining ultimate human value. This became the fundamental assertion of Judaism. The state of the entire world will attest to this some day. Judaism and Jews will exist and proclaim that perfection and will demonstrate the path until the world actually changes. (see Guide to Passover; Guide to Sukkot).

But how can you live by the Exodus? In fact, the world is not yet redeemed. Shall we live by perfection? Shall we treat every human being as if she/he is of absolute value? Inevitably we would bankrupt ourselves and still not succeed - for our resources are limited and cannot cope with the misery of all human beings. Shall we disarm as if the world is at peace? We would be destroyed by the wicked who still abound. Should we rather act as if the world is still a jungle? (Enough of it still is to make this a 'justifiable' strategy). Shall we let power, not love, rule relationships? Shall we grab what we may, live for this moment, savor what this life in this generation offers - for it is all that we will ever have? To act so would be to deny the Exodus which did take place and which showed us a better possibility, a truer vision.

The answer the Torah gives is: understand the covenant. But what is the covenant? How did it come into being? The covenant establishes the relationship between God and Israel. It is the treaty which binds both. It reflects the fact that the Lord took the Jews out of Egypt - the House of Bondage - and promises to stay with them and sustain them until the final perfection. "Now if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant then you will be My treasured possession among all peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you will be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation to Me". (Exodus 19, v.5-6)

THE COVENANT IN HISTORY

Under the Covenant the responsibility of the people Israel is to be loyal to their redeemer and to start living primarily by Exodus principles. The widow, the orphan, the stranger will be treated kindly. There will be one law for the citizen and the outsider. Human life is precious and murder will be considered an ultimate crime.

But compromises will also be made. Slavery will not be totally abolished at once. Hebrew slaves will be liberated within six years and treated better in the interim. Canaanite slavery will continue but the treatment of all slaves will be better. As time goes on the treatment of slaves will continue to improve until slavery is finally abolished.

Economic inequality is not abolished. Each family will be given a source of income, but poverty and social disadvantage will be softened rather than obliterated. Women's condition will be improved, but equality will not be achieved yet. Capital punishment will be allowed, even though it contradicts ultimate human value; only gradually will it be abolished. Moral priority will be given to one's family and to the Jewish people because the resources are not yet available to treat all human beings perfectly alike.

These concessions were possible because they were in the framework of a covenant- a pledge to keep living and working until all these limitations were overcome and the world was totally redeemed. Even as they compromised to survive in the real world, the Jewish people proclaimed the once and final perfection. The Exodus was reenacted in countless rituals to remind Jews and to remind the world that these were, after all, still only compromises and to goad people on to yet another improvement, yet another step toward the final goal.

There is an exquisite dialectic in the covenant. The Jews were chosen - because they did experience the Exodus and because they did try to live up to the promise of that experience. But the chosenness does not indicate their superiority. God kept an earlier covenant, a promise made to their fathers, in taking them out of the slavery of Egypt and God expects them to live up to the covenant - to act more responsibly and ethically. (see Deuteronomy 6, v.6-11) God has a special relationship to Israel, yet ultimately remains the Lord of all the vast universe, the Lord of Lords. Israel does not 'own' God. If it exploits and takes advantage of the relationship, it will be punished (see Deuteronomy 9, v.-12 ff; Amos, ch.3; Isaiah, ch.40; Jeremiah, chs. 32,34). The final conclusion of the covenant will be with and for everybody, (see Isaiah chs. 2,11,42,45, v. 18ff, 56) since God's fundamental responsibility always remains the entire universe.

Further, it is obvious that the covenant goals cannot be achieved in one generation. Therefore, the covenant becomes a treaty with all the generations. Each generation will have to do its share of redemption and pass it on to the next generation until the redemption is complete. This is the basis and authority for Jewish tradition. "You all stand before the Lord, your God today ... to enter into the covenant ... which the Lord, your God, establishes with you today. To establish you today to be a people to Him and He will be your Lord ... not with you alone do I establish this covenant ... but with the one who is here among us standing today before the Lord our God and with the one who is not here with us today". (Deuteronomy 29, v. 9ff)

Thus the covenant is between the generations as well as between God and Israel. If one generation rejects the covenant, or refuses to live up to its role, or fails to pass it on to the next generation, then the effort of all the preceding and future generations would be lost as well. This sense of being part of the chain is what creates the commitment to Jewish survival even in people and generations who do not know the reason for this drive or indeed the reason for Judaism at all.

What appears to be blind sentiment of 'tribalism' is really an urgency communicated between generations. This tradition is too important to lose especially since lost with it would be all the efforts of countless and nameless persons - some of whom gave even their very lives for this

vision. On the other hand, each generation that does its share that, forges a link in the chain - becomes part of the covenant. This is the basis of the rabbinic tradition that all Jews who ever lived - or will live - stood at Sinai and heard the proclamation of the covenant. It is that moment - that standing before Sinai to accept the covenant - that is symbolically reenacted every year on the morning of Shavuot.



Plate 2 - circular paper cut - in the center, the traditional motif of two lions flanking the two tablets of the covenant (bearing the ten commandments). above: a gold crown, below and around: ornamentation of vegetation.

a product of the folk art of papercut originating in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. They were made by men (pupils of Cheders and Yeshivot, as well as old men) in their spare time and were considered holy work.

THE OPEN COVENANT

Since the covenant links the infinite and the finite in a continuous process of perfecting the world, the concept of the covenant has some extraordinary dynamics. The covenant is not offered once and concluded. It is offered to every generation which accepts it. Indeed the Rabbis dramatized this theme in their statement that the covenant is offered every day. (note the repeated use of the word 'today' in the covenant ceremony in Deuteronomy 24,v9,11,12,14).

Nor is the covenant restricted only to Jews. The process of redemption really began when humans entered into an imperfect world. The universal Lord relates to all humankind and looks to the day when all people will know God and live a perfect life. So the covenant was offered before there were Jews in the world. In fact the very first Biblical Covenant is with Noah and his family - the ancestors of all humankind.

Interesting enough, then, from the beginning the covenant is available to non-Jews (see below). All people can (and will be!) redeemed and one need not be Jewish to be saved. The covenant is potentially, a model for an absolute commitment and belief which yet does not deny the validity of other commitments, religions or peoples. This is a model of tremendous importance in this age when the growth of communication and power has created a pluralistic world which must reconcile absolutes or risk all-out collision and destruction. (This is not to deny that there are Jews and particularly Christians and Moslems who have interpreted the covenant idea to deny the legitimacy of other faiths).

Another dynamic: As God comes to accept human freedom more and more (humans are not wiped out or punished every time they do evil) then a special covenant is offered to Abraham. If he and his children will "observe the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice", they will testify and guide mankind toward the final redemption and thus "be a blessing to the nations". (see Genesis, Ch 15 and 12). The covenant with Abraham is inscribed in his flesh: -the rite of circumcision becomes the sign of this commitment. (Genesis, ch. 14). This means that Abraham and those born to this family are committed in their very being to teach and to testify for the Lord. They can not deny what they stand for; they can not hide from their role and fate by posing as just ordinary people. And so, the mission of the people of Israel is born and with its birth comes the exposure and risk of being Jewish. This also means that every Jew - believing consciously or not - testifies in and through his/her very being. The statement of his/her life denies every idolatry e.g. every partial or human

reality that claims to be absolute or perfect. The existence of the Jews challenges these absolutes and speaks for the need of final redemption. This recognition is what led the Nazis to try to kill every single Jew - whether they 'believed' or not. Yet here again the dialectic of the covenant makes its appearance. The purpose of Abraham's covenant and family is to help all humankind reach freedom and dignity. And because the covenant is built on values and concepts - transcendence, redemption, human dignity, justice - Abraham's is more than a biological family. Were Jewry just a family, one could not join Judaism - either one is born into a family or one is not. But such a pattern would make Jews a 'superior race' and would turn the Torah into a doctrine of tribal improvement. In fact, the covenant is meant to help all humans and this family is built around shared values and a vision of perfection. Therefore, it is possible to join Abraham's family if one shares the vision and is prepared to make the commitment (and take on the risks!). People can join Jewry by accepting the Jewish religion. Thus, the covenant makes it possible to join Abraham's family voluntarily - by adoption. "(This covenant is also) with the one who is not here today (Deuteronomy 29,14) - This refers to the strangers who will convert in the future"(TB Shavuot 39a). This is one reason why the book of Ruth - the story of a woman led by love for the living and the dead, who joined the Jewish people and religion - is read on Shavuot, the holiday of the covenant.

There is another dynamic in this. Since the covenant is open, it is open to further revelations in history. New redemptive events confirm the covenant and move the world closer to the Messianic age. The day will come, says Jeremiah, (chap.22,v.7-8) when people will no longer swear" by the God who took the children of Israel out of Egypt"but will take the oath by the God who brought the children of the house of Israel ... and settled them again on their land". New tragic events challenge the covenant. They test it, bring it into question and force it to grow in order to overcome the tragedy. (See I. Greenberg, Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity. After the Holocaust).

By the same token, if the covenant is not only open to Gentiles but also to further revelation, one can not rule out a revelation out of this covenant for the Gentiles as a group. This is, of course, what Christianity and Mohammedanism claim to be. Sadly enough, both religions and especially Christianity claimed that as a result of this process, they had superseded Judaism and that Judaism was finished as a religion. Under those circumstances, it is no surprise that Maimonides and many great Jewish philosophers and Rabbis claimed that there could not be any further revelation of this type, a pronouncement which meant that Christianity was a 'false' religion.

Still Maimonides himself did say that Christianity was a way in which God brought important parts of Judaism's message to the world. I believe that after the Holocaust and in light of the pluralism of the post modern world - Christianity (and Islam) will have to reject their own claims to supersede Judaism. Then, I believe, the way will be open to recognizing these religions as further outgrowths of the covenant through which many Gentiles are brought into the Messianic process and become partners in the covenant of God and Man - even while we affirm the validity and integrity of the Sinaitic treaty with Israel. If and when this happens, on Shavuot, Jews will celebrate not merely their own illumination but the fulfillment of words of the Mekhilta: "Why was the Torah not given in the Land of Israel" In order that the nations of the world shall not have the excuse of saying: "Because it was given in Israel's land, we do not accept it". Another reason: To avoid causing dissension among the tribes. Else one might have said: "In my territory, the Torah was given". And the other might have said: "In my territory, the Torah was given": Therefore, the Torah was given in the desert, publicly and openly, in a place belonging to no one". "To three things, the Torah was likened: to the desert, to fire, and to water. This is to tell you that just as those three things are free to all who come into the world, so also are the words of the Torah free to all who come into the world". (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 20,2).

The final dynamic of the covenant's openness is that it can develop in order to move toward the final goal, yet everything done to carry it out should be vested with the authority of the process of perfection itself. Thus, the Oral Law including the later rabbinic developments and additions must not be seen as inferior in authority to the Written Law. Since it is part of a necessary unfolding and application of the covenant in new situations and circumstances, it is authorized by the process of perfection and its authority is that of the original statement of the covenant. Indeed, one could say that the Rabbis and later authorities simply become further signatories to the covenant and their words carry the authority of the covenant.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch suggested that the holiday of Shavuot was not identified in the Bible itself but only in Rabbinic sources as the holiday of the giving of the Torah because the written Torah wanted to 'force' us to recognize our dependence on the Oral Torah even for basic understanding of the Bible. Hirsch's historical interpretation may be on shaky grounds (see below) but his point is well taken. The openness of the covenant invites and creates an ongoing Oral Law. That is its glory and the power in its process. In this way, it is at once eternal, yet contemporary in every age. This, too, Jews celebrate when on Shavuot they reenact the Biblical proclamation at Sinai. They do it in the synagogue, the premier institution of the Rabbis using many customs created by the Rabbis.

THE COVENANT THAT BINDS GOD

An infinite God or Power is the Source of this vast universe. Many people who are not formally religious would agree to such a formulation. What bothers more people is the Jewish claim that this Divine Being cares about humans and has chosen the Jews to serve as a vehicle of that concern. (As the old anti-semitic doggerel) puts it: How odd/of God/to choose/the Jews). There is however, a final Jewish assertion about the covenant which even Judaism's daughter monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, find hard to accept. It is the affirmation that God is not merely the source of the Torah but is also bound by the covenant. Such a statement is incredibility piled on top of paradox. Would an infinite, universal all powerful One care enough to intervene in 'trivial' human concerns? Would that Being then be held to the terms of that intervention? Yes, says the Bible and later Jewish tradition.

It all stems from the dignity of the humankind - according to the Bible, the human being is in the image of God. As human beings emerge from the chain of biological necessity and being, they are recognized as having the unique quality, to become like God. This means an acceptance of their freedom (in Biblical language: Adam and Eve sin but are not put to death. Then after the flood, God binds Himself in the first covenant: not to destroy the earth again with a deluge). And this also means that the process of human freedom - including the doing of evil - is accepted. Perfection may come more slowly but henceforth it will only come in a partnership - a covenant - of humans and God. In this covenant, the human will not be overwhelmed and forced to do the good.

This convenantal notion implies the Jewish vision of God as teacher and pedagogue - teaching Torah to Israel and to the world. If goodness will not be imposed by power, then the human must be unfolded and educated toward perfection. This is why, in the words of Ethics of the Fathers, (Chapter 6, m2), "The only truly free person is one who studies Torah". Teaching becomes the special role and concern of God and leads to the covenant with Abraham and the revelation at Sinai. By the same token, God is the ultimate model for teaching purposes. The imitation of God is the basis of ethics. Then God, too, must bind Himself by these principles. A teacher and/or a parent, however warm or spontaneous, cannot enable the child/student to grow unless he/she is prepared to bind him/herself - to be available in some committed way, to be a reliable and consistent model. From this stems Abraham's incredible challenge when God seeks to destroy Sodom: "You dare not? Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Genesis 15, v.25). Out of this ground comes the Jewish tradition of a din Torah mit'n Ribbono

Shel Olam, - a demand of justice even from God - a trial of God. From Moses to Jeremiah and Lamentations through Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Elie Wiesel in our time, Jewish religious life has brought forth people who arraign even God when there is injustice.

The binding of God in the covenant is the guarantor that redemption is the true fate of humankind. After all, reality itself does not seem to operate to insure the triumph of good. Ultimately, then, it is God's promise, the divine undertaking of the covenant that justifies hope - that establishes human dignity and deliverance as the ultimate reality. This is the irony and paradox of the 'guarantee' - it is built on nothing more substantial than the word of God. What could be more ephemeral than a word - especially when the promise of redemption may point to an event hundreds or even thousands of years away? Yet Jews trusted, waited and worked. Thus the Torah is no cheap iron-clad guarantee against fate or suffering. Yet it has outlasted empires. The Jew's testimony is that it will outlast even those societies and cultures which deny its existence. On the other hand, the ethics of asking people to depend on God's word implies that God will truly bind Himself to keep that promise.

Shavuot, therefore, is no coronation ceremony. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews blow the Shofar, crown the Lord as ruler of the Universe, and celebrate God's unbounded might and rule. Shavuot is a more 'democratic' holiday. It remembers those who went up to Sinai to receive the Torah. It also celebrates the God who 'came down on the mountain' and bound Himself permanently to the Jewish people and to humankind. Rulers issue decrees of life and death. A covenant rests upon 'free negotiations, mutual assumption of duties, and full recognition of the equal rights of both parties ...' (Joseph B. Soloveichik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*). God becomes a partner in this covenantal community. He joins man and shares in his covenantal existence ... The whole concept of "I (God) shall be with him in trouble" (Psalm 91:5) can only be understood within the perspective of the covenantal community which involves God in the destiny of His fellow members" (Ibid).

So Shavuot is the holiday of partnership and commitment out of love. It is unbounded love that pushes aside unbounded power and equalizes the two partners.

As astounding as this idea of partnership is, it has been one of the most fruitful aspects of the concept of covenant. It has had an immeasurably positive impact on human history - even beyond religion. It has become the source of morality and ethics, pushing Judaism (and Christianity and Islam) away from magical and ritual/mechanical models of religion toward a primary ethical concept of religion. Concern for social justice,

compassion for human suffering, and the demand that religious humans serve other humans have all flowed from this idea. Even secular Western morality, and the secular Messianic/redemptive movements of the modern world (Socialism, Communism, etc.) have been influenced by this idea.

Another outgrowth of this concept has been the notion of the rule of laws, not men. If God is bound by the law, then the earthly ruler is not above the law either. This tradition has persisted especially in the United States in the form of the supremacy of the constitution, the right of the individual and the group to legal protection and the consensus on the need for limits on the government.

Finally, one might well say with Alfred North Whitehead that the Biblical tradition is entitled to significant credit for the rise of science in the West. The Biblical notion of a lawful world operating as the creation of God, by fixed and reliable principles, was the fundamental assumption needed to conceive of learning the laws of Nature and utilizing them for human benefit. Surely an important ingredient here is the Jewish insistence that even the 'inscrutable' God can be held accountable to known commitments - so the universe itself cannot be incomprehensible or beyond law or accountability. One wonders whether a distant echo and reflection of this covenant idea is not present in Albert Einstein's famous comment made when he justified his attempt at an ultimate field theory unifying all major scientific phenomena in reality: "I do not believe that God plays dice with the universe".

FROM NATURE TO HISTORY

FROM THE HARVEST TO THE COVENANT

The dominant motif of Shavuot in the Bible was the agricultural theme. The holiday has three names in the Bible: the feast of harvest (Exodus 23,16), the feast of weeks (Shavuot = weeks) Deuteronomy 16,10) and the day of the first fruits (Numbers 28,26). All three reflect the fundamental character of the holiday as celebration and thanksgiving for nature's bounty.

Shavuot occurs during the summer harvest season in Israel. "from the time the sickle is first put to the standing crop, you shall begin to count seven weeks; and you shall keep the feast of weeks unto the Lord ... according as the Lord, your God, blesses you" (Deuteronomy 16,9).

On the day of the first fruits - after counting seven weeks from the first offering of the barley sheaf - a new meal offering was made: two breads baked from the wheat harvest. Thus the 'first fruits' of the wheat (see Exodus 34,22) were brought to the Temple and offered to God in gratitude. Thenceforth, meal made from the new wheat crop was used to bake the Temple breads and offerings. By starting the seven week count from the first day after Passover starts - the day when the first barley sheaf was waved in the Temple - the Torah makes clear that the connection of Passover with Shavuot is the connection between a joyous spring harvest festival and a joyful summer harvest holiday. The counting of the days which linked the two became known as Sefirat Ha Omer - the counting of the Omer - (Omer= the measure of grain offered everyday in the Temple).

It is likely that Shavuot was recognized in Biblical times as the anniversary of the Revelation at Sinai for the Torah refers to the Jews' arrival at the mountain in the third month (see Cassuto commentary on Exodus, ch.19, v. 1, p.154). However, the dominant motif of Shavuot was the harvest. Accordingly, it was a very joyous holiday.

One outstanding ceremony of the festival was the bringing of the first fruits. (In the Second Temple period, the bringing of the first fruits was specifically restricted to Shavuot and the season following until Sukkot). The first fruits of the seven species for which Israel is known were brought. (The species are: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil, dates, honey). The Mishna describes the ceremony as follows:

The inhabitants of the cities of each district marched to Jerusalem. An ox with horns bedecked with gold and an olive wreath crown on its head led the way. A flutist headed the procession playing before them and they sang pilgrimage psalms when they entered Jerusalem. They were greeted by dignitaries and the skilled artisans of Jerusalem. As they entered the Temple, the Levites' choir hailed them jubilantly with the

verse "I will extol you, O'Lord, for you have raised me up". (Psalm 30,2). The farmers would then transfer the basket of first fruits to the priest and together they waved it while the farmer recited the ancient summary of Judaism. "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down unto Egypt, and the Egyptians ... afflicted us ... and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand ... and has given us ... a land flowing with milk and honey ..." (Deuteronomy 26, 5ff). The rich brought their first fruits in baskets overlaid with silver or gold, while the poor used wicker baskets of peeled willow branches. They used to give both the baskets and the first fruits to the priest. (Bikkurim ch. 3,m. 1-8). Of course, there was also the usual feasting, celebrating and sharing with family, and the poor Levites. However, as the covenant theme became more dominant, the agricultural dimension of the holiday was subordinated to the historical dimension, i.e. the anniversary of Revelation.

The history of this shift is still shrouded in mystery and scholarly controversy. One of the keys is the controversy between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, two conflicting sects within Judaism at the close of the Second Temple period. The Rabbis (and almost all existing Jews) are the descendants of the Pharisees.

The Sadducees were aristocratic, connected to the Temple priesthood and the government. They insisted that only the written Torah was authoritative. The Pharisees were more rooted in the provincial Jewish culture. The Pharisaic tradition insisted that the unwritten Torah (Oral Law) was equally authoritative and it was the basis of the interpretation, development and application of the Written Torah in further generations. The Pharisees placed a tremendous stress on learning and on Torah as way of life. Out of the Pharisaic tradition came the Talmud and other developments (including Jesus' teachings and Christianity).

There were many factors - sociological and political as well as theological and legal - in the conflict of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. I believe that they ended up with two different conceptions of the covenant. To the Sadducees, it was a concluded covenant. The political - sacral form of Judaism in that Biblical period was the final form. Reinterpretation was restricted and there was little room for further development. In the Pharisees' view, the openness of the covenant built in the ability to apply and interpret (see above). Indeed the written Torah could only be understood properly by the Oral tradition. To the Pharisees, the state itself was subordinated to the Torah and the continuing covenant of Israel to serve God in any and all circumstances. These differing attitudes made the Sadducees far more dependent on the existence of the Temple and of the state. When the Destruction of the Temple and the Exile came in the first century, the Pharisees proved far more capable of responding and living the Jewish way under the new circumstances.

These differing viewpoints came to a head in the understanding of the holiday of Shavuot. The Biblical verse states "You shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath [holy day] ... seven complete Sabbaths [weeks] (Leviticus 23,15). The Sadducees interpreted Sabbath to mean literally the weekly Shabbat. Therefore, they ruled that counting the Omer starts the day after the Sabbath of Passover and runs forty-nine days until Shavuot. Thus Shavuot's chronological distance from Passover varied from year to year depending on when the Sabbath of Passover happened. The Pharisees ruled that counting starts the day after the holiday of Passover begins. The Oral Law interpreted Sabbath in the verse (Leviticus 23,15) to mean holy day e.g. Passover itself.

According to Pharisaic ruling, Shavuot invariably came forty-nine days after Passover. To further underscore the connection between the two holidays, the Rabbis even gave Shavuot a new name "Atzeret" (closing Assembly) e.g. it is the gathering day that closes Passover - just as Shmini Atzeret (eighth day assembly) is the gathering that closes Sukkot. Thus they maintained there is a fundamental and unvarying connection between Jewish liberation at the Exodus and the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. Therefore, the central overriding theme of Shavuot is the revelation of Sinai and the acceptance of the covenant of the Torah, and that covenant which made Israel a 'holy nation', validated the Oral Law and its development as well. (see above)

Stressing Shavuot as the holiday of Revelation was essential to the Rabbis: because it was the acceptance of the covenant of the Torah that had made Israel an eternal people. "When Israel stood at Sinai and received the Torah, the Holy One Blessed Be He, said, to the Angel of Death, "You have power over all ... but not over this people, for they are my portion and just as I live for ever, so will my children be eternal". (Exodus Rabbah 32,7). Thanks to the Pharisees, the historical dimension of Shavuot became dominant - and none too soon.

With the destruction of the Temple and the Exile, the Jewish people was uprooted from the land. Now the Jewish people lived in sacred time awaiting the restoration. Had the holiday been exclusively agricultural, it would have withered on the vine. (Although it is noteworthy that the ceremony of bringing first fruits has been revived in modern Israel and is practiced even in many 'secular' kibbutzim).

As it turned out, during the exile, certain agricultural associations were preserved in the synagogue: but the aspects of Revelation, covenant, and learning Torah became the dominant themes in the celebration of Shavuot. Among the agricultural connections are the practices of decorating synagogues and homes with trees and greens

and of spreading the floor of the synagogue with grasses. (Later traditions anachronistically connect the grass to the green fields where the Jews stood before Sinai). Sweet smelling herbs are distributed during services. Some weave a garland of flowers for the Torah. In the eighteenth century, Elijah, the Gaon of Vilna, objected that bedecking the synagogue with trees was a 'Gentile custom'. Some believe this objection gave rise to the custom of making decorative flower paper cutouts for synagogue and home. Overall, the holiday has a relative scarcity of religious symbols compared to Sukkot and Passover. Of course, there are two ways of looking at this shortage - A Jewish folksaying is that Shavuot is the best among the holidays because one can eat whatever one likes, wherever one likes, and whenever one likes (as opposed to Pesach when chametz is prohibited; Sukkot when meals are to be eaten in the Sukkoh; Rosh Hashanah when you can only eat after finishing lengthy prayers; and Yom Kippur when you can't eat at all). In any event, the reenactment of Sinai has come to dominate the celebration of Shavuot.

SINAI: THE REENACTMENT

The classic Jewish religious method is to recreate great redemptive (or tragic) events so that individuals can relive them and appropriate them for themselves. The reenactment of Sinai starts forty-nine days before the event. On the first night after the Exodus (the second night of Passover), the "countdown" begins. (It is, perhaps, better called a "count-up" - since the count is from one to forty-nine.) Maimonides interprets Sfirat Ha Omer (the Counting of the Omer) as the expression of the extraordinary anticipation that Jews felt for the great event. As soon as they were out of Egypt, the Jews looked forward to receiving the Torah. They counted every night much like a child who cannot wait for a birthday or a great day in his life to arrive. The count went on for seven times seven days. Seven is the number/symbol of perfection in Biblical language. (The Sabbath is the seventh day, etc.)

So the number forty-nine symbolizes the arrival of the pinnacle of perfection. Although the holiday's arrival is eagerly sought, it is customary to wait until sundown before praying the evening service, thus fulfilling the dictum: And you shall count...seven complete weeks (Leviticus 23, 15).

The three days before the holiday are special days of preparation for Shavuot. Mourning ceases in anticipation of the great day (see Exodus 19, v.15 ff), and on the night before Shavuot morning, it is customary to stay awake all night in preparation for the revelation at Sinai. ("I'm too excited to sleep"). The Kabbalists interpreted this custom as staying up all night to prepare the bride's (Israel's) trousseau for the wedding (with God) in the morning.

During the night, the Torah is studied so that a Jew 'knows' all that she/he is about to receive. Traditionally, this is done by reading the tikkun layl shavuot - (the order of Shavuot eve). This prescribed "order" of study includes the first and last verses of all the major portions of the Torah, the books of the Prophets and the Writings, and the volumes of the Mishnah (Talmud). Thus, symbolically, the 'entire' Torah, both written and oral, is reviewed.

Many congregations today carry on the tradition of all-night study but instead of hurrying through the tikkun, they schedule various classes, discussions, and study groups to make the learning more meaningful. Good all night sessions are an exciting, if tiring, off-beat learning experience. Those who stay up all night pray the morning service just at daybreak - another symbol of 'eagerness' and anticipation to receive the Revelation.

On the morning of Shavuot, the entire congregation gathers to hear the reading of the Ten Commandments. In some Sephardic congregations, the Kabbalistic image of the wedding of God and Israel is followed up by reading a mock wedding or engagement contract between God and Israel. It is considered especially meritorious that women also be present - for the Torah was given both to men and women. Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer teaches us that, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob' (Exodus 19, v. 3) refers to the women' and declare to the children of Israel (Ibid.) refers to the men". To underscore the drama, the reading is preceded by the responsive recitation of a special liturgical hymn - Akdamut (The 'Introduction'). Written in Aramaic in the eleventh century, the hymn praises God for the Creation and for choosing the people of Israel. It dramatically portrays Israel as tempted by the nations to abandon God in its suffering but it remains steadfast and is promised a rich reward in the world to come. Then the account of the theophany at Sinai is read. (Exodus, chs. 19, 20). When the Ten Commandments are read, the entire congregation rises to stand in awe as if it were hearing the Voice at Sinai again. The Commandments are chanted with a special 'trop' (notes) to make the reading even more impressive.

The prophetic reading for Shavuot is the great mystic's text: truly the most important of Kabbalistic speculations - Exekiel's vision of the chariot (Exekiel, ch. 1). Thus the peak collective Revelation experience is matched by the peak individual religious experience. However, so important is the concept of community, that in comparing the two events the Talmud says that the lowliest ignorant handmaiden saw more divinity at the Red Sea, than did Ezekiel in his solely personal experience.

SHAVUOT CUSTOMS

In traditional French and German Jewish society, it was customary for young children to begin to study the Torah on this most appropriate day. To 'sweeten' the experience, some would coat with honey the first letters that the child was taught in order to fulfill the Psalmist's words that the Commandments are "more desired than gold...and sweeter than honey"... (Psalm 19, v. II). Still another custom was to bake "Mount Sinai cakes" - special sweet honeycakes filled with almonds and raisins to fulfill the dictum: "Taste and see that God is good". In modern times, Reform congregations have scheduled confirmations for teenagers on Shavuot to signify their 'coming of age' as Jews on the day of the Revelation.

Most Jewish holidays have some special food associated with them. The tradition of feasting on this holiday is strongly asserted. (There is a tradition that every holiday should be celebrated 'half and half' - half for God, and half for Man. Rabbi Eliezer says: Since Shavuot is the day on which the Torah was given, one must increase joy to

show how delighted one is (Pesachim 68 b) and to balance the Torah's half of spirituality with 'our' half of pleasure.

In the case of Shavuot, special fare is scanty. Some eat dairy meals with blintzes and cheesecakes as the special features. Some attribute this custom to the verse which compares the Torah to milk and honey; (see Song of Songs 4.v.11). Others say it is due to the fact that once the Jews received the Torah, the meat had to be kosher (e.g. specially slaughtered, prepared, etc.) and they had not prepared it in time. Still others see this in keeping with the Torah's Messianic preference for vegetarianism over animal-eating. Another custom is to bake two extra long challahs to remind us of the special two loaves offered on the day of the first fruits. Finally, a custom grew up of preparing triangular shaped latkes or kreplach. The three sided shapes evoke the old witticism that God gave a three part Torah (Torah, Prophets, Writings) to a three part people (Cohen, Levites, Israelites) through a third born son (Moses following Miriam and Aaron) in the third month (Sivan is the month of Shavuot).

All in all, however, Shavuot has been the holiday most limited in specific rituals and, of course, it is only one day (two days in the Diaspora by Orthodox and Conservative practice.) Samson Raphael Hirsch has sought to make a virtue out of this fact. Says Hirsch: "There is no symbol for the Torah for the same reason that there is no symbol for God" the Torah is One and Unique like God its Creator". (Judaism Eternal, I. p. 88). The danger of a specific holiday or ritual in connection with the Torah, says Hirsch, is that we may think: this is the way to celebrate the Torah. In fact, the Torah should be with us at all times, every day, and should permeate all our symbols and actions.

Hirsch's own favorite symbol of the holiday is the two loaves of bread and the 'shlamim' - the peace offering - which was brought on Shavuot. They represent food and human independence and the state of complete human happiness which is expressed in the shlamim i.e. inner peace and harmony. "For those who have achieved this inner harmony...there is no longer any conflict or chasm between heaven and earth, between time and eternity, between temple and home, altar and table. For heaven and eternity, bliss and supreme happiness have entered the daily, temporal concerns of such people...in the presence of God, together with wife and children, they can enjoy eternal values which transform every moment of our fleeting existence on earth into a taste of eternity." (S. R. Hirsch, Judaism Eternal, I, p. 109).

THE COVENANT OF TOTAL BEING

When Moses completed the covenant ceremony and read the book of the covenant to the Israelites, they responded "we will do and we will listen" (Exodus 24, v.7). The expression has always been a source of wonderment and surprise to the Rabbis and a source of dismay to the opponents of the Jews. The language implies a commitment to observe the covenant even before the Jews heard its details! But how can one commit one's self to an agreement without knowing all that it involves?

The Talmud (Shabbat 88a) tells a story which is a commentary on this question. An opponent once saw Raba so engrossed in learning that Raba ignored a wound in his own hand! The Sadducee exclaimed: 'you rash people! (you Jews) you put your mouths ahead of your ears! and you still persist in your recklessness . (In other words, you seem to always make incredible, total commitments). First you should have heard out (the covenant details). If it is within your powers, then accept. If not, you should not have accepted! 'Raba answered: we walked [with God] with our whole being (Rashi's commentary - "we walked ...as those who serve [God] in love. We relied on Him not to burden us with something we could not carry"). Of us it is written: "The wholeness of the righteous shall guide them" (Proverbs 11,v.3).

This story captures one last dimension of the covenant commitment - it is open-ended. Like love, it has proven to be a limitless commitment thus far. The reason is that, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveichik has written: it is a covenant of being, not doing (Soloveichik. The Lonely Man of Faith). It is not a utilitarian contract designed for useful ends so that if the advantage is lost, the agreement is dropped. It is a commitment on the part of each to be the only one for the other - unique to the other. It is a turning of the whole person to the other. Thus, we are bound together in our wholeness - a wholeness which transcends all the particulars of interest, advantage, cooperation and mutual help.

It might be said that when the initial agreement was made neither side knew the limits of their commitment. When Israel accepted a mission to the world, it sounded agreeable. But what if the Jews

had known then what we know now about the cost of this mission? As Elie Wiesel once said: "If God wanted to send us on a mission to redeem the world, that was all right - but God failed to tell us that it was a suicide mission". As the pain and risk and suffering of Jewish history unfolded, this is the question that came to haunt the covenant. Initially, the Jews accepted the covenant in their love and gratitude for redemption. In their enthusiasm, "The Jews were as one heart"(Mekhilta on Exodus 19,2). This gave them the strength to commit themselves to what turned out to be an open ended covenant - very much like a commitment to marriage or to having a child - a commitment for which there was no way of knowing the ultimate cost or demands that might arise. One can only make such a commitment out of deepest love and primordial faith.

This commitment has been tested repeatedly. Three times, the tests were so extraordinary that they challenged the basic structure of the agreement. Each time, the partners responded by calling on the reserves of love and deepened the commitment to each other. In the destruction of the First Temple, the prophets posed the question: Israel had not lived up to the covenant. Did the destruction mean that God was angry - so angry that He repudiated the covenant itself? Was it all over? The answer is explored again and again in prophetic literature. God was angry: God would punish. But finally, God came to realize that if one loves, one must forgive all. The ultimate expression of this is found in Hosea's image: God told him to marry a woman, Gomer. He loved her and she bore his children. Then she whored and betrayed and failed him. In anger and jealousy, he sent her away. But he loved her so that he called her back. He even offered to pay her harlot's hire to stay with him.

The people of Israel, like Gomer, broke God's heart. But nonetheless, after the rage, the hurt, the jealousy, the wrestling with rejection, comes God's anguished affirmation: "how shall I give you up, Ephraim? How can I surrender you, Israel?" (Hosea, 11, 8). The crisis of the destruction passed and God was committed personally. In the future, the Shekhinah (the divine Presence) would go into exile with Israel but would never abandon the people or leave the covenant.

In the crisis of the destruction of the Second Temple, Israel experienced the silence of God. The God who intervened in the Exodus to save Israel at the Red Sea was now the God who controlled Himself and allowed human freedom even when it meant that the wicked triumphed and trampled the Temple itself and all but destroyed the Jewish people. (TB Yoma 69b) Prophecy stopped and the Jewish people had to ask itself whether God's silence and their suffering meant that the covenant was broken. They came to recognize that it was not. As Rabbi Soloveichik

put it: "in the bleak autumnal night of dreadful silence unilluminated by the vision of God or made homely [heimish] by His voice, they refused to acquiesce in this cruel historical reality and would not let the ancient dialogue between God and man come to an end." "If God has stopped calling man", they urged, "let man call God". (Lonely Man of Faith). The concept of prayer and the synagogue were developed by the Rabbis to carry on the covenantal dialogue - now with man speaking and God listening. They came to recognize God's presence in His Hiddenness. The flawed, partial human redemption of Purim was recognized as the new redemption, and the Sinai covenant was reconfirmed (see TB Shabbat 88a and Guide to Purim). In retrospect, they said: Sinai was too grandiose. The Jews were 'coerced' into the covenant by the Exodus miracles. Purim was the truly voluntary covenant-for it was accepted out of discernment and faith and not out of awesomeness and miracle. The Jews redoubled their commitment and reaffirmed the covenant.

But is there some limit that could break the covenant? And is the suffering and the pain which acceptance has brought with it worthwhile? This question forces itself into our consciousness whenever we approach the holiday of the covenant and the re-enactment of Sinai. This is why the climax of the Shavuot holiday is the reading of the Book of Ruth (on the second day in Diaspora).

THE READING OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

Many reasons have been offered for the reading of the Book of Ruth. Ruth is a convert who could join the Jewish people because the covenant, accepted on Shavuot, opens the Jewish people up to others who share its values. She is the ancestor of David, the King, and, according to tradition, David died on Shavuot. The book tells of the harvest season and Shavuot is the holiday of the summer harvest season.

However, none of these reasons touches the deepest levels of the book or its inclusion. Only after the Holocaust can we understand its true message. Despite the surface gentleness and decency of the book, the megillah of Ruth is really suffused with tragedy, with pain and suffering, even with betrayal. The land of Judah suffers famine and Ruth's husband-to-be and father-in-law abandon it to save themselves. In Moab they die suddenly, without children, unknown on a foreign soil, their lives untimely ended. In this welter of pain, the question arises: is life useless? What is the meaning of all this? The answer rises in a woman named Ruth. She loved her husband even after his death and did not want his name to die with his childless family.

The covenant of love extends beyond the grave. She loves Naomi, her living mother-in-law and will not let her go away alone and impoverished. Although there is no hope or reason and there is no visible redeemer to keep the

family name alive, Ruth insists on going with Naomi. She acts out of chessed, a loving kindness that sees not only the bleak hopeless reality, but the possibilities of redemption that may still break through the harsh surface of an unredeemed world. Ruth remains faithful. She joins Naomi's people and comes to Naomi's God. And incredibly, out of this barren, rocky soil grows hope - an act of kindness, a relative who cares. A marriage follows and a child is born who is the parent of the David from whom will come the Messiah. Out of faithfulness comes hope; out of suffering comes redemption; out of love that can bear all pain comes renewed life.

On the holiday of Shavuot the mind turns to the cruel and bloody record of Jewish history; to the harsh unyielding evil which has all but destroyed the Jewish people in our time. And the question is asked: has to be asked: Did it all matter? Was it worth it? Will any good come of it?

Perhaps an even more profound question is posed: You are released from the previous covenant - acceptance - for how can God bind you to it if He will not protect you for it. What say you now - people of Israel?

Quietly, gently - for one can make no demands from survivors - the story of Ruth is told. The pain is not in vain; the tale is not told by an idiot, it is not full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Out of the barren, blood drenched rocks there grows a flower. A flower from the stock of Jesse. One can dream that:

"A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse,
a twig shall branch off from his stock...
The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him -
a spirit of wisdom and insight...
He shall sense the truth...
He shall judge the poor with equity
and decide with justice for the lowly of the land...
The wolf shall dwell with the lamb
the leopard shall lie down with the kid...
With a little boy to herd them...
They shall not hurt nor destroy in my holy mountain
For the earth shall full of devotion to the Lord...."
(Isaiah II)

If we understand and accept the story of Ruth, we understand that we can accept the covenant - again. We understand that the suffering is not in vain. It is connected to redemption by a love more powerful than death. We understand that Messianic possibility is born in the generation where all is destroyed.

Can there be any question but that Ruth lives in our own time - a thousand times? a million times? or that this generation's response in the creation of Israel means that we stand before Sinai again: all of us, those who died, those who live, those who are yet unborn?



Plate 3. Portrayal of the Akedah (the Binding of Isaac) against the background of a latticework of flowers. Abraham is wearing a 'shtraimel' a 'Kaputa' and a 'gartel' (belt) e.g. traditional Hassidic garb.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the disappearance of the art and most of the preserved specimens were destroyed during World War II. (See page 18)

OUR NAME

The rabbinic phrase *clal Yisrael* refers to the indivisibility and sacred collectivity of the Jewish people. It is in this spirit of pluralism and respect for the many forms which Jewish practice may take, that we have chosen the word CLAL for our name. CLAL heralds our belief that only by strengthening each and every constituent part, and by encouraging dialogue between groups, can all of Judaism be strengthened. CLAL symbolizes our commitment to serve as a Center where Learning And Leadership go hand in hand.



HOW WE DO IT

Shamor *Leadership Education*

As the Programming and Educational Division of CLAL, *Shamor* provides lay and professional leaders extraordinary learning and pluralistic religious experiences. It also identifies, nurtures, and motivates talented individuals to assume the obligations and responsibilities of leadership in the Jewish community.

CLAL, in joint sponsorship with local Jewish organizations and national Jewish agencies, annually coordinates over thirty ongoing classes in five cities, sponsors dozens of weekends, seminars and institutes, for more than ten thousand leaders in over 50 Jewish communities in the United States and Canada.

Chevra *Rabbinic and Academic Dialogue*

Rabbis and scholars from the four Jewish denominations gather to learn and to explore together the sometimes divisive issues of concern to the Jewish community. Chevra currently has chapters in seven cities: Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia and San Francisco, with over one hundred and fifty participating rabbis and academics, and sponsors an annual conference for learning and deliberation on critical religious issues.

Rabbinic Interns — Select rabbinical students from the four major denominations come together in an on-going program of study and dialogue at CLAL. Through hands-on experience, CLAL trains these interns to develop programs and curricula in their respective schools and communities, imparting the spirit of *clal Yisrael*.

Zachor *Holocaust Resource Center*

The first Holocaust Resource Center in the country, Zachor, was founded by CLAL to commemorate and explore the fundamental challenge of the Holocaust. Among its accomplishments are its help in establishing the permanent United States Holocaust Memorial Council, and the development of a service for Yom Hashoah, the Day of Remembrance. Zachor also created "The Fifth Child", a commemorative prayer developed by an inter-denominational group of scholars, authors, and rabbis, designed for use in the Passover seder.

Other resources include the award winning "Witness to the Holocaust" film series and *The Holocaust: An Annotated Bibliography and Resource Guide*.

WHY CLAL

CLAL is dedicated to preparing Jewish leaders to respond to the challenges of a new era in Jewish history; challenges which include the freedom to accept or reject Judaism, the liberty to choose from an abundance of Jewish values and lifestyles, and the exercise of Jewish power after the Holocaust and the rebirth of the state of Israel.

CLAL believes that freedom and pluralism are unparalleled blessings in Jewish history which can stimulate higher standards and more individual participation, strengthen each segment of Judaism, and enrich the totality of Jewish life.

WHAT WE DO

CLAL educates Jewish leaders, teaching them the lessons of leadership through the treasures of Jewish history and texts. Our programs strengthen Jewish unity, create a deeper appreciation for Jewish culture and religion, yield insights from our tradition, and offer authentic Jewish responses which can be applied to private behavior and communal policies.

CLAL provides its learning experiences to Jewish leaders through classes, dialogues, study groups, conferences, publications and retreats. Our programs are offered to Jewish groups in their communities throughout North America.

CLAL (formerly the National Jewish Resource Center) was founded in 1974 by Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, Elie Wiesel and Rabbi Steven Shaw. In 1983, the Institute for Jewish Experience, founded by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, merged into CLAL.