



# Bread from the Earth and Torah from Heaven Celebrating Shavuot

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**R. Jason Rubenstein**

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The Torah is a gift, not a test.

That is the message Shavuot teaches through the fact that Torah was given during the celebration of the wheat harvest. In sacred time simultaneity is never a coincidence, but a revelation of a shared essence.

The idea that Torah is a gift, not a test—the revelation of the nature of revelation—is one of Elijah's gifts to the Jewish people, conveyed as midrashic parable. I'll retell it this way:

A king had two servants, each of whom he loved dearly. He gave each a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax—and left. One servant faithfully preserved what he had been given, careful lest he in any way alter the precious trust he had been given. The other took the wheat and ground it, removed the chaff, kneaded it, and baked it into a loaf of bread. Then he took the flax and spun it and wove it into a cloth, which he spread over the bread. When the king returned, he rejoiced in sharing the cloth and the bread with the second servant—and the first servant was distraught.

The king gives his servants precious wheat, but no instructions. And so the wheat becomes a projective test, a wide-open field where the servants live out their guesses of their master's will. Neither choice is implausible. "The wheat is precious," thinks the first, "so I must guard it jealously, lest it be tarnished." "The wheat is precious," thinks the second, "so I must do everything I can to bring its life-giving potential into reality."

On the king's return we find out that the second servant knows his master, and stands in right relation to the gift of wheat. (Implied is that, until and unless the king returns, there is no way to know which servant is right. While waiting for the king's return, as we all Jews since Sinai have, different Jewish communities will not only be united by the Torah we have inherited—we will also be divided with it, with no mechanism of bridging our divisions.) And we should ask, what gave the second servant his faith—faith in the king, in himself, and in their relationship—to take the audacious path of irrevocably altering the gift he had been given, making it into something else? It must have been years, more likely generations, of mutual care, trust, and love.

I characterized the second servant's audacity as "irrevocably altering" the wheat by baking it to bread—



but this is only part of the story. The servant irrevocably alters the flax by making it into yarn, then fabric, and finally a cloth.

The servant reworks the wheat in yet more radical ways. Elijah makes sure to mention his removing the chaff and kneading: removing the chaff means removing an element of what he was given, and in kneading water and ambient yeast are added. The bread the servant produces contains both more and less than what he was given, a process of selective exclusion and addition driven not by the wheat itself, but by his bodily needs, his tastes, and the tradition of bread-baking in which he was trained.

Knowing that the wheat is a gift doesn't make the second servant's life easier than the first—though it may make it better. Both fulfill demanding roles: preservation against any change on the one hand, creative, skilled labor on the other. The second servant stands apart from the first, however, in being nourished—and in bearing the responsibility for nourishing others.

Elijah concludes, "When the Holy Blessed One gave the Torah to Israel, God gave it to them as wheat from which to produce flour, and as flax from which to produce cloth."

In deciding to reveal the Torah during the wheat harvest, God revealed not only the Torah itself, but also how we should take up the Torah in each generation. We are not to preserve it outside of time, but to take it up again and again with the faith that we can produce something life-giving from its ever-renewed vitality.

Shavuot offers two clear, challenging guidelines for receiving Torah. First, the Torah we innovate is not judged by whether it is an "accurate representation" of the Torah we were given, anymore than the bread we eat should be evaluated by whether it is an accurate representation of the grain we harvested (what would that even mean?). Second, the Torah we learn is only Torah if we couldn't have made it without the Torah we received. Our Torah must be partly—and only partly—determined by us and our needs. If we don't experience our learning as an eruption of an outside vitality greater than ourselves that enriches our lives—but instead as an echo chamber of familiar ideas—then we aren't receiving the potential of the gift.

This Shavuot, as we harvest the great, life-giving gifts of wheat and Torah, may we renew our boundless gratitude for the Giver of these immeasurable gifts, without which our lives would not be possible. And, in the coming months, may we rededicate our energies and skills to the nurturing of these harvests for the betterment of the world, realizing their potential, and preparing for our eventual reunion in companionship, the sharing of bread and Torah, with the Source of all Life and all Wisdom.

