

## Why Does Shavuot Matter?

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*Shavuot*, the "Festival of Weeks", is probably the least observed of the Biblical holidays in the Jewish calendar, the others being *Passover*, *Rosh HaShanna*, *Yom Kippur*, and *Sukkot*. We begin *Shavuot* this year at sundown, Saturday May 26, and conclude it with dark on Monday May 28. Why do we observe this oft forgotten holiday, and what does it mean to us? Further, is there significance to *Shavuot* coinciding with Memorial Day?

It turns out that there is a tremendous amount of meaning to this festival. From the second night of Passover, we count the *Omer* each night until *Shavuot*, 7 weeks, hence the English name. The *Omer* is a count of the barley harvest brought to Jerusalem before *Shavuot*. As with all agricultural rules the Torah teaches us, we are commanded to leave behind some of our harvests for others who are poor, to come and glean. Setting aside from our bounty to help those less fortunate is a vital Torah Obligation.

On the second day of *Shavuot* we read *Megillat Ruth*, the book of Ruth. In this book, Ruth, a widow, comes to glean in the field of Boaz, a rich landowner, and a relative of hers. They come to be married and Ruth and Boaz contribute the line to King David. Our tradition says that when the Messiah comes, he will be a descendant of Ruth and Boaz. This poor widow who went to glean, and this rich landowner who let her glean, will lead to our ultimate redemption according to tradition.

This shows the importance of putting aside your own needs to ensure that the needs of those less fortunate will be taken care of. On the first day of Shavuot, we read the Ten Commandments. The last of the Ten teaches us to not covet our neighbor's wife or possessions. Those who would covet others property or family members are unlikely to be generous towards the less fortunate as well. They would, then, not contribute to our ultimate redemption.

I have written before in this venue of the plight of our veterans coming back from war in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the causes for these wars is often purported to be the (covetous) desire for more oil from the Middle East. Desiring what another has brings society to war far too often.

This year *Shavuot* and Memorial Day fall on the same weekend. Memorial Day is often seen as just the "official start of summer." Of course, those who see Memorial Day this way probably aren't great at gleaning, and might even covet stuff a bit. This conflation makes observing these two holidays at the same time very significant from a religious standpoint, and as a Jewish American (or American Jew depending on your outlook).

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On the Second Day of *Shavuot*, we recite the *Yizkor* or memorial prayers. There are various *Yizkor* prayers for Israeli soldiers who have died in battle. A prayer for the welfare of our troops downrange can be found at A prayer for the welfare of our soldiers at war can be found at

[http://www.ou.org/general\\_article/prayer\\_for\\_the\\_american\\_armed\\_forces](http://www.ou.org/general_article/prayer_for_the_american_armed_forces).

I have not, however, found a *Yizkor* for those in the US military who have died serving our country. Many Jewish military personnel, for instance, died in World War II, liberating Europe and freeing Jews and others interred in the concentration camps. Jewish military personnel, have, of course died in every war the US has ever fought. Thus, I think it is important, on this combined Shavout/Memorial Day holiday weekend, that we should consider reciting a prayer honoring the memory of all those military personnel, Jewish or not, who died in defense of our country.

So, on this holiday weekend I ask you to consider the following prayer during your *Yizkor* prayers:

**May G-d remember the souls of all of the military personnel of the United States of America, Army, Navy Air Force Marines and Coast Guard, who died in the sanctification of G-d's Name, fighting for what was right and just, helping others to enjoy the freedom that we in America have enjoyed throughout all her history. From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli, and all the other myriad places our troops have gone to their ultimate reward, may their loss be for good and peace. In memory of these brave souls, may G-d help us to remember what they died for. Help us remember and live up to the ideals of Torah, "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they experience war any more" to sanctify their names. May these brave souls be sheltered in the shadow of G-d's wings forever, and bind their souls in the bond of everlasting life. G-d is their heritage, may the Garden of Eden be their resting place, may they rest in peace and may their merit stand for us, the United States and the world, and may they receive their ultimate reward. Let us say 'Amen'.**