

**Hag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom
from Rabbi Michael Gold**

Candle Lighting Time

Thurs. Erev Shavuot 7:46 pm

Fri. Erev Shabbat 7:46 pm (from pre-existing flame)

Shavuot Services (The festival begins Thursday night May 21)

Fri. May 22 9:30 am First Day Shavuot (reading of Ten Commandments)

6 pm Evening Service followed by Dairy dinner for those with reservations

Sat. May 23 9:30 am Second Day Shavuot (reading of Book of Ruth), Yizkor

Here is my message for this week.

SHAVUOT

RECEIVING THE TORAH

“On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.” (Exodus 19:16)

This Friday and Saturday we celebrate the festival of Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks. According to tradition, it is the day the Israelites gathered at Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Rabbis call it *z'man matan torateinu* “the day of the giving of the Torah.” Why is it not called “the day of the receiving of the Torah?” The Torah may have been given on a particular day, but receiving the Torah is an ongoing process.

What does it mean to me to receive the Torah? I have found that, like many of my fellow rabbis, I have been deeply influenced by one of the great Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929). Before explaining how Rosenzweig understood the receiving of the Torah, it would be worthwhile to summarize a bit of his amazing life.

Born in Germany into an assimilated Jewish family, Rosenzweig almost converted to Christianity, not uncommon at that time. At the last minute, he decided to give Judaism one more chance. He went to a *shtiebel* (a small Orthodox synagogue) in Berlin on Yom Kippur. (What would have happened if he were turned away at the door for not having a ticket?) Something touched him and he decided to explore Judaism. He wrote his great work of Jewish philosophy, *The Star of Redemption*, from the trenches at the front during World War I.

After the war, he and his friend Martin Buber opened the Jewish *Lehrhaus* (house of learning) in Frankfurt for adult Jews to study their religion. They translated the Hebrew Bible into German. Nonetheless, Rosenzweig

sharply disagreed with Buber on numerous issues. First, Buber was a Zionist who eventually moved to the Holy Land, calling for a bi-national state of Jews and Arabs. Rosenzweig believed that Judaism should be practiced in the diaspora, where its message can be shared with the world.

More important for our purpose, Buber was opposed to Jewish religious observance. He felt that worrying about putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries) which Jews wear each morning during prayer would distract someone from the encounter with God which was at the heart of Buber's philosophy. Rosenzweig on the other hand became increasingly observant throughout his life, believing that one must slowly accept the commandments of Judaism. Sadly, he died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (A.L.S. or Lou Gehrig's disease) at too young an age. He continued writing to the very end of his life.

What was Rosenzweig's great insight that has been so influential among many rabbis? He taught that we must differentiate between law and commandment. He developed this idea in his 1923 essay "The Builders", a response to Martin Buber. A law is something written in a book. A commandment is something one feels with one's soul. Judaism is a religion of laws, but each Jew must approach that corpus of laws and try to turn them into commandments. To quote Rosenzweig, Whatever can and must be done is not yet deed, whatever can and must be commanded is not yet commandment. Law [*Gesetz*] again must become commandment [*Gebot*], which seeks to be transformed into deed at the very moment it is heard.

A story, oft quoted by American rabbis, is how Rosenzweig was asked if he put on *tefillin* each morning. Rosenzweig answered, "Not yet." *Tefillin* was a law but not yet a commandment.

On Shavuot God gave the Torah. But the Torah is simply a book of laws and teachings. When do we receive the Torah? We receive the Torah each time we take one of those laws and turn it into a commandment, something that speaks to our soul. Rosenzweig has been dead almost a century. But his response to Martin Buber reverberates with us to this very day. Happy Shavuot.