



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM
חג השבועות – א' / 1 - SHAVUOS
NEVER PUSH OFF A SURPRISE VACATION

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SERMON TITLE:

NEVER PUSH OFF A SURPRISE VACATION

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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SHAVUOS - 1

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"When is Pesach this year? Wow, so early!" These are standard remarks that I hear nearly every year. Or perhaps the opposite- "Wow, Pesach is so late this year!" And the same goes for all the major holidays, always comments about how early or late Rosh Hashana is in a given year.

It seems as though the holidays are never at the right time. People always sound surprised. They plan a vacation or cruise and I comment, "Do you realize that for Rosh Hashana you are scheduled to be on a ship instead of in the synagogue?" The shocked answer almost always is "Rosh Hashana is so early this year? I never even thought about it; it slipped my mind!"

Firstly, let me remind you that the holidays always come, so check your calendars before you plan your next vacation!

In actuality, it's not very difficult to check the dates. Nearly every calendar in the world will have Passover and Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur marked on it. It just requires an appropriate amount of attention.

However, in the days of the Tanach and Talmud, there was no way of knowing in advance when the holidays would be.



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Let's take Pesach, for example. The Torah says that Pesach is on the 15th day of Nissan. But when would the 15th be? They didn't know, as the months were determined by the cycle of the moon and every month the High Court in Jerusalem needed to hear testimony from at least two witnesses who saw the rebirth of the moon before they could proclaim the beginning of a new month. Only then could the calculations be made of when the holiday would begin. The Jews then had a mere two weeks notice when, exactly, the Seder night would be.

The Mishna tells how this information was publicized to population. "At first torches were lit....cedar poles were brought....someone took them to the top of the mountain and lit and kept them burning until he saw someone lighting a fire on the next mountain top and then a third and they did not move from there....until they could see the whole area ablaze with fires."

This is a simple and genius idea. They light a fire to let the neighboring village know that today was proclaimed Rosh Chodesh and they go to the tallest mountain in their area and do the same thing. This looked like Lag B'Omer does these days, the whole country full of bonfires. But as usual, there are those who make problems. The Mishna says "The Kutim in the Shomron spoiled ..." One month, the Kutim lit fires a day early and threw off the dates for everybody. From then on, this practice was discontinued and messengers were sent instead.

Immediately after the Beis Din declared the day to be Rosh Chodesh, messengers were sent to all the Jewish communities to let them know so they could then



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calculate the dates for Pesach. There were places that the messengers reached in a few days and farther places that took them 10 or even 14 days to reach. This would mean they could make it to Egypt, Syria and even Babylonia,

But there were communities that were too far for the messengers to get to before Pesach. These communities would therefore celebrate two days of Yom Tov and this is what is known as “the second holiday of the exiled.” In the communities that were exiled, and too far to know what was decided in Jerusalem, they celebrated two days.

Therefore, nowadays those communities outside of Israel still celebrate two days for every holiday. This year, for example, in Israel they will celebrate one day of Shavuot, while the rest of the world will celebrate two, all because the messengers in those days couldn't reach the far off communities in time to give them the exact dates for Pesach.

Why couldn't G-d simply establish a calendar by which every person, no matter where he lived, could know when was Rosh Chodesh, thereby knowing when to celebrate the holidays?

Why did He design this system that specifically the Beis Din in Jerusalem decided and notified people on the actual day of Rosh Chodesh, and then messengers needed to start running in all directions to notify everyone when the holiday would be?



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Why was it necessary to complicate things so? Like nowadays, we have an organized calendar and we know exactly when Pesach will be fifty years from now, G-d could have done the same thing when He commanded Moshe, "This month shall be for you the head of the months." Moshe could have put together a calendar and that's it! The calculations that were used to set up our calendar were all known back then. Why was it necessary to make life harder for everyone and cause all this headache?

Shavuot symbolizes the marriage between G-d and the Jewish people. Everyone knows that one of the characteristics of marriage is the "surprise factor." As any marriage counselor will say from the start, the worst thing for a marriage is dull routine and habit.

We see this phenomenon even before the marriage. When a boy wants to propose, he takes the girl to some special place, exotic and breathtaking. Maybe even the top of a mountain. Suddenly, firework start to explode and he pops the question of all questions. All this to surprise her, to excite her and prompt her to agree to his proposal.

(In Chassidic circles, things work a bit differently; there isn't much surprise involved. When a boy and girl date four or five times, it's not idly. They know that these meetings are solely for the purpose of marriage, too se if they are right for each other. So when they do decide they are, a proposal is almost not needed.)



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G-d wanted that in His marriage with the Jewish people, there should be this element of surprise. What are the holidays? They are the 'vacation' or 'cruise' that G-d is taking us on. On Pesach, He takes us on a seven day vacation, on Shavuot, it's two. We know there's a vacation coming up, but we don't know exactly when. Even G-d doesn't know, so to speak, as He, too, waits for the Beis Din in Jerusalem to declare Rosh Chodesh and then He will know when He gets to take His Jewish people on vacation.

To our luck, we live outside of Israel. The Israelis have but one day of vacation, while we get two.....

When a husband comes home and announces to his wife "Pack everything, we're going to the Caribbean for a week!" his wife will never protest that they have a dentist appointment they need to keep or she has exercise classes. She will happily drop everything, pack and they'll be off.

When G-d presents us with a two day vacation, we cannot complain "Oy, this is smack in the middle of the week, I'm so busy, I have an important meeting, I can't manage this right now..." We need to leave everything and jump at this opportunity that was given to us and make everything of it that we can!

"I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me."