

Lux Center News



May 31, 2017

Jewish and Christian Pentecost: Two Holy Days with the Same Name?

It is interesting to note that two holy days that commemorate pivotal events in Judaism and Christianity are little known by the general public and not so widely observed within each faith community. Today, May 31st, Jewish people around the world are celebrating the holiday known in the Hebrew as **Shavuot** (pronounced *shah-vu-ote*). In accordance with Jewish tradition, the holiday began at sundown on Tuesday, May 30th. **Shavuot** literally means “weeks” and in English is known as the **Feast of Weeks**. In Ancient Greek, it is also known as **Pentecost**. This Sunday, June 4th, is known on the Christian calendar as **Pentecost**. Are we celebrating the same holiday or is it just a coincidence that we celebrate a holiday with the same name at the same time of year?

What is Shavuot—the Jewish Pentecost?

Like several other Jewish holidays, **Shavuot** began as an ancient agricultural festival that marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. In ancient times, **Shavuot** was one of the three pilgrimage festivals during which Israelites brought crop offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem (Exodus 34:22).

Today, it commemorates the anniversary of the day God gave the Torah to the entire nation of Israel assembled at Mount Sinai, thereby entering into a covenant between Israel and God. On Passover, the people of Israel were freed from slavery in Egypt. On Shavuot they were given the Torah and became a nation committed to serving God. Torah mandates that the days and weeks be counted between Passover and Shavuot, known as the Counting of the Omer. This counting is understood to express anticipation and desire for the giving of the Torah. **Shavuot** is celebrated seven weeks after the second Passover seder (and therefore known as the *Feast of Weeks*) or 50 days after the first seder.

Shavuot is a joyous celebration of Torah, education, and actively choosing to participate in Jewish life. There is a tradition of staying up all night studying Jewish texts. The Book of Ruth is read. Traditionally, dairy foods are eaten. If you have not heard of this Jewish holiday, it is because it is one that is generally less familiar to both secular Jews and those who do not observe Judaism.

Pentecost Sunday in the Christian Church

This year the Christian holy festival of Pentecost will be celebrated on Sunday, June 4th. Pentecost literally means **fiftieth**, as it was the fiftieth day after the resurrection of Jesus (Easter) that the Holy Spirit descended

upon the Apostles (Book of Acts 2:1-13). The New Testament tells how after Jesus' ascension to heaven, the disciples of Jesus returned to Jerusalem and joined together in prayer in an upper room. On the Day of Pentecost, the sound of a violent wind filled the house and they received the "gift of tongues" causing them to speak in different languages. From here, Jesus' followers went out to tell the world what they experienced.

This event, the Christian Pentecost, was the birth of the Christian Church. It is not certain when Pentecost began to be observed but it may have been as early as the first century. Today, Pentecost Sunday is celebrated to recognize the gift of the Holy Spirit, realizing that God's life and powers live within each believer.

The symbols of Pentecost are those of the Holy Spirit and include flames, wind and a dove. The color red is often used in churches to symbolize this special day.

Pentecosts—Same or Different?

Shavuot, the Jewish Pentecost, and the Christian *Pentecost Sunday* obviously do not celebrate the same event, have the same religious meaning, or are commemorated in the same manner. However, because Jesus was crucified during the Jewish holiday of Passover, it was no coincidence that the followers of Jesus, who were Jews, had gathered together during the Jewish celebration of Shavuot (Pentecost) seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection (Easter). This was when, as written in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon these first followers of Jesus.

Each Pentecost is pivotal for each faith. Shavuot, the Jewish Pentecost, commemorates the birth of the Jewish people as they received the Torah, the Holy Scripture that would define their relationship with God, serve as a guide for how to live, and identify their mission in the world. Similarly, the Christian Pentecost empowered the followers of Jesus for their mission in the world and commemorates the birth of the Christian Church. Pentecost is not as well-known as Christmas or Easter or Passover or Yom Kippur or Chanukah, but both commemorate watershed events in both Christian and Jewish history.



The Lux Center wishes all 13 travelers from Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology a safe and enriching journey to Israel

The nine seminarians, one master's degree student, one parent and two faculty members (Dr. Patrick Russell and Msgr. Ross Shecterle) left for their three week adventure on Monday, May 29th and will return on June 19th. We look forward to hearing about their experiences which will include the archaeological dig at Magdala in the Galilee, their visits to Christian and Jewish holy sites throughout Israel, their home hospitality meeting with Israeli families and their guided visit to Yad Vashem (Israel's Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Congratulations to the Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology graduates who are now or will be soon ordained as priests in the Catholic Church!



Photo is from the ordination of Fr. Dan Dorau on May 27th in Clinton, Iowa for the Diocese of Davenport. Shown with Fr. Dorau is Most Rev. Martin J. Amos, Bishop of Davenport; Dcn. Leo Blasi, Dcn. Steven Kramer, and Fr. Alfred Pillarelli.



Ms. Bonnie Shafrin

Director of the Lux Center for Catholic-Jewish Studies
at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology

414-529-6966

bshafrin@shsst.edu