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סיוון תשפ"ב | June 2022

חגים ומועדים – Holidays and Occasions

חג השבועות *Hag HaShavu'ot*, the Feast of Weeks

The peculiar name “Feast of Weeks” refers to the way we time the festival – by counting seven weeks from the onset of the [barley] harvest: **שבעה שבועות תספור־לך; מהחל חרמש בקמה, תחל לספור שבעה שבועות. ועשית חג שבועות** (Deut. 16:9–10). On day 50 the count culminates with the festival, a celebration of **בכורי קציר חטים** ‘the first fruit of the wheat harvest’ (Exod. 34:22).

As for the sabbatical year and its cycle, the Mishna terms them, respectively, **שביעית** (“the seventh [year]”) and **שבוע**, while also using **שבוע** for ‘seven-day period’; and Nedarim 8:1 attests **שבוע** for ‘seven-year period’ in spoken Hebrew.



The word **שבוע**, from the same root as ‘seven’ (**שבע**), today denotes a calendar week (starting on Sunday, in Judaism) or any seven-day span; however, it acquired the sense ‘calendar week’ far later. In the Bible **שבוע** designates a period of seven days or years.

The abundance of units of seven in the Bible testifies to the number’s symbolic value. Observances lasting seven days include Passover and Sukkot, the wedding feast (Gen. 29:27–28), and the week of mourning (Gen. 50:10); seven days serve also as a period of ritual impurity (Lev. 12:2), quarantine (Lev. 13:4), or atonement and preparation (Exod. 29:36–37). Gen. 41 tells of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. The Bible refers to these periods usually as **שבועת ימים** (‘seven days’) and **שבע שנים** (‘seven years’), respectively, and only occasionally as **שבוע**.

Although many ancient cultures attributed special significance to the number seven and to seven-day periods, the organization of time into a continuous cycle of weeks based on a focal day observed at seven-day intervals seems to have originated from the Jewish Sabbath; Christianity and Islam greatly contributed to the diffusion of this convention. Along the way, the Sabbath-based week converged with the seven-day astrological week that names the days after celestial bodies (e.g., Sunday, Monday, Saturday); exposure to the latter inspired the name **שבתאי** for the planet Saturn. The modern calendar week, now fundamental to our day-to-day orientation in time, became widespread so late in the history of human civilization understandably: whereas the day, the lunar month, and the solar year all correspond to salient cycles of nature, no manifest natural cycle lasts seven days (or a similar whole number of days).

The Bible uses the word **שבת** (‘sabbath’) for both the Sabbath day and the sabbatical year, each a time of rest that forms the seventh and final segment in a cycle of work followed by rest (6+1 days or years). The earliest Hebrew references to the calendar week and the

Does the word **שבת** ever mean ‘calendar week’ in the Bible? The two sole candidates occur in Lev. 23:15b, 16, in the command to count to Shavu’ot. Their interpretation depends on that of the phrase **ממחרת השבת** (‘from the day after the sabbath’) in 15a. During the Second Temple period, conflicting interpretations of that phrase sparked a fierce dispute about when to start the count and, accordingly, when to observe Shavu’ot; to this day Rabbinic Jews differ from other groups on this point.

(ט) וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת, מיום הביאכם את-עמר התנופה; **שבע שבתות תמימת תהינה**.
(יז) עד ממחרת השבת השביעת תספרו חמשים יום....

(15) You shall count **from the day after the sabbath**, from the day you bring the sheaf of waving; they shall be **seven complete sabbaths**.

(16) Until the day after **the seventh sabbath** you shall count 50 days....

If **השבת** uses the word **השבת**, ‘the sabbath,’ in its ordinary sense (Saturday), then the seven-week count must begin on a Sunday and align with calendar weeks, putting Shavu’ot on a Sunday. Many groups, including the Boethusian sect of the Second Temple period, the Samaritans, and the Karaites, have understood it thus, counting from the day after the Saturday of Passover (or a nearby Saturday, depending on the group). This reading suits construing the “sabbaths” in **שבע שבתות תמימת** as *calendar weeks* (i.e., cycles ending with the Sabbath), analogous to the calendar cycles of seven years called “sabbaths” in **שבע שבתות שנים** two chapters hence (and thus Shavu’ot would cap a count of seven *calendar* cycles just as the Jubilee, year 50, does). In the phrase **השבת השביעת**, “sabbath” *could* mean ‘calendar week’; but it could also refer to Saturday, since day 50 falls on “the day after the seventh sabbath” either way.

The Rabbis interpreted **השבת** differently, attributing to the word **השבת** a sense unique in the Bible: ‘holiday’ – specifically, the first day of Passover 15

references to the calendar week and the sabbatical cycle call *them* שבת as well, extending the meaning of the word שבת to denote the *cycles* that the sabbath ends. Thus Lev. 25:8 directs us to count **שבע שבתות שנים**, 'seven "sabbaths" of years' – i.e., seven sabbatical cycles.

Similarly, the Mishna calls the calendar week שבת. (Aramaic does, too, as in **שבעה ימי שבתא**, 'seven are the days of the week,' in the Haggada song.) One mishna (Nedarim 8:1) attests colloquial use of the word שבת also for a week-long period, a further extension of meaning.

specifically, the first day of Passover, 15 Nisan. Per the Rabbis the count thus always begins on 16 Nisan – not necessarily a Sunday – so the weeks of the count do *not* always align with calendar weeks. Therefore, to reconcile the rest of the passage with the Rabbinic interpretation, we must explain the "sabbaths" in **שבע שבתות תמימות** and **השבת השביעת** not as calendar weeks but as week-long periods, a sense not found elsewhere in the Bible.

As they say, it's all in the timing....

שמות ומשמעויות – What's in a Name?

מתן – Mattan

מטבעות לשון – Idioms and Expressions

מה ענין שמטה אצל הר סיני?



The noun **מתן**, from the root **נת"ן**, means both 'giving' and 'gift.' In contemporary Hebrew the first sense crops up in new contexts and phrases in addition to fixed ones such as **מתן תורה** ('the giving of the Tora') and **מתן בסתר** ('giving [charity] secretly,' i.e., anonymously). Jewish tradition identifies Shavu'ot as **זמן מתן תורתנו**, 'the time of the giving of our Tora.'

To express 'gift,' speakers today ordinarily use the word **מתנה**, reserving **מתן** for literary or formal settings; in the Bible, too, **מתנה** outnumbers **מתן**. In both words, the first *n* of the root **נת"ן** has assimilated to the *t* (**mantan*→*mattan*, **mantana*→*mattana*) – hence the absence of the first **נ** and the addition of the *dagesh* (diacritical dot) in the **ת**, indicating the doubling of the *t*. The asterisk (*) indicates a reconstructed form.

The Bible mentions two men called **מתן**. The name is attested in other ancient Semitic languages as well. In recent decades the name **מתן** has enjoyed considerable popularity and now serves as a name for girls, too, albeit infrequently. Babies born around Shavu'ot (also called **חג מתן תורה**) are sometimes named **מתן** in honor of the festival.

This rhetorical question ('What does the subject of *shmitta* have to do with Mount Sinai?') now serves as an expression meaning 'What does one have to do with the other?' or 'What does that have to do with the matter at hand?' It comes from **ספרא** (*Sifra*), a collection of halakhic midrash (legal exegesis) on Leviticus redacted around the third century CE. In some versions the wording is **מה ענין הר סיני שמטה לענין הר סיני**.

In its original context, the question refers to Lev. 25, which opens with the words "The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying—" (25:1) and then sets forth in detail the laws of the sabbatical year (also called **שמטה**, *shmitta*, 'release'). The Tora prefaces many passages of law with the words "the Lord spoke to Moses, saying—" but the specification **בהר סיני** ('on Mount Sinai') stands out here, begging an explanation. *Sifra* on Lev. 25:1 responds: "What does the subject of *shmitta* have to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all the *mitsvot* (commandments) conveyed from Sinai? Rather, just as *shmitta*'s general rules and fine points were conveyed from Sinai, so too all the *mitsvot* – both their general rules and their fine points were conveyed from Sinai."

From the root **נת"ן** also come several boys' names of enduring popularity – the Biblical **יהונתן/יונתן** (Jonathan) and **נתנאל** (Nathaniel), both meaning 'G-d gave,' and their shortened form, **נתן** (Nathan) – as well as the less common **אלנתן** ('G-d gave') and names meaning 'gift of G-d' such as **מתתיהו** (from **מתת**, 'gift'), **מתניהו**, and **מתנאל**. Among girls, the names **מתנה** and **מתת** are rare, as is **נתנאל**; the feminized form **נתנאלה** is more frequent but still uncommon.

Other popular Hebrew names meaning 'gift' include **דורון** (from Greek *δῶρον*) and **שי**. Their use as names for baby girls has surged in recent years, often surpassing that for baby boys. In European languages, too, we find names meaning 'gift' or 'gift of G-d,' such as Theodore, Theodora, and

Timely Terms – מנחים לענין

Talk of the Town – שיחת העיר



Narrative (n.) – ספר

Both in the field of sociology and in general use, the masculine noun ספר – from the same root as ספור ('story') – provides a Hebrew substitute for נרטיב, 'narrative.' (In the study of literature, the term ספר serves instead for 'narration.')

The word is in the same pattern as the noun דבר, best known from the phrases חלק דבר ('part of speech') and עשרת הדברות ('the decalogue,' commonly referred to as "the 10 commandments").

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[לעיון במילון למונחי סוציולוגיה](#)

Fake news – ידיעת כזב; ידיעת כזב

The noun כזב, from the same root as the verb כזב ('to lie, to deceive, to fabricate') and the noun אכזבה ('disappointment'), serves in contemporary Hebrew as a formal word for a falsehood or fabrication – as in the fixed phrase שקר וכזב ('a total lie, a complete fabrication').

In 2018 the Academy introduced the terms חדשות כזב for 'fake news' (from חדשות, 'news') and ידיעת כזב for an item of fake news (from ידיעה, 'news item'; the word ידיעה, from the verb ידע, 'to know,' also means 'knowledge, awareness').

[Browse mass-communication terms](#)

[לעיון במילון למונחי תקשורת המונים](#)

Propaganda – תעמולה

The modern word תעמולה (as in תעמולת בחירות, 'election propaganda') is derived from the root עמל underlying Biblical עמל ('to toil') and עמל ('hard work, labor, great effort'), Rabbinic התעמל ('to train, practice'), and the more recent התעמלות ('exercise, gymnastics').

Dictionary definitions of תעמולה from the early 20th century include 'effort, travail' and 'effort to disseminate an idea or matter.' The latter sense appears also in Russia's Hebrew press of that period, at times with the gloss אגיטציה or אגיטציון, a cognate of "agitation"; one meaning of Russian агитация (*agitacija*) is 'propaganda.'

Now well-established, the word תעמולה, like "propaganda," today may refer to either the activity or the message. In the Academy's dictionaries it appears most recently in the 1999 [dictionary of diplomacy terms](#).

להרחבה באתר האקדמיה



נפתחה יחידה לשפת הסימנים הישראלית AHL Opens a Department for Israeli Sign Language

At the initiative of the Israeli government, the Academy has opened a unit devoted to preserving, documenting, and developing Israeli Sign Language (ISL), the predominant sign language in Israel. This unit will be staffed by members of the deaf community. The Academy warmly welcomes its new hires and looks forward to providing a supportive environment, sharing its accumulated knowledge and experience, and working with the deaf community on this important mission.

* Text in the illustration: Irit Meir and Wendy Sandler, **שפה במרחב** (*Language in Space*).



הרצאה מקוונת: תאור מעמד הר סיני כחתונה בפיוט Online Lecture: Poetic Portrayals of a Wedding at Sinai

Academy member Prof. Shulamit Elizur, a scholar of Hebrew poetry, will give a talk in honor of Shavu'ot, delving into ancient and medieval Hebrew poems composed for the holiday. She will examine depictions of the encounter at Mount Sinai as a wedding and the different versions of the wedding event that emerge. The lecture, in Hebrew, will take place on Wednesday, June 1, at 19:00 IDT. Use the link below to register.

[לעמוד ההרשמה](#)



חדש: "תיקים עבריים"
New: Hebrew Swag!

The Academy now offers "Hebrew bags," made of 100% cotton, in two designs. One design presents the Hebrew names of herbs beside the foreign names typically used for them; the other one features animals (pictured and named) and the special verbs for their vocalizations (corresponding to "donkeys *bray*," "elephants *trumpet*," etc.). The herb design adorns a sturdy tote bag; the animal design is available on the tote and, in addition, on a lightweight drawstring bag.

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[לאתר חנות האקדמיה](#)

מבוא לסמנטיקה – השתלמות מקוונת
Online Course:
Introduction to Semantics

AHL's new seven-week introductory course in semantics – appropriate for Hebrew speakers who love words and meanings – starts on June 14; it will meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays, 20:00–21:30 IDT. Advance registration and payment are required. Participants may sign up for the entire course or for individual topics (by week).

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