Book Review: The Habura Shavuot Reader

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Book Review

Shabuot: Insights from the Past, Present, and Future (The Habura, 2023)

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

The Habura (www.TheHabura.com) has become a veritable force for high-quality Torah learning since their inception in 2020. Rabbis, scholars, and students learn and teach, primarily over Zoom. The Habura now has published its third holiday companion, in time for Shavuot.

The Habura promotes the inclusion of Sephardic voices and ideas in Jewish discourse, coupled with an openness to the broad wisdom of the Jewish people and the world. In this regard, their work and values strongly dovetail ours at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Their Shavuot volume contains an array of eighteen essays. The first two are by Sephardic visionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, Rabbis Abraham Pereira Mendes (1825-1893, Jamaica, England, and the United States) and Ben Zion Uziel (1880-1953, first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel). The rest of the book is divided between contemporary rabbis and scholars, and younger scholars who participate in the learning of The Habura.

The essays span a variety of topics pertaining to Shavuot in the areas of Jewish thought, faith, halakha, and custom. As in my reviews of their companion

volumes for Sukkot and Pesah (see https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-sukkot-companion-habura; https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-haburas-passover-volume), I will summarize a few of the essays I personally found most enlightening.

Rabbanit Dr. Devorah Halevy explores the fundamental differences in curriculum between the classical Ashkenazic and Sephardic models. Although the true obligation for a religious education lies with a child's parents, most contemporary parents outsource that religious education to institutions. These institutions must be . equipped with the wisdom from the Sephardic world to enhance their impact on students.

Rabbanit Halevy characterizes the classical Ashkenazic curriculum as being fairly insular, focused primarily on Talmud and theoretical halakha, and far less on Tanakh, Jewish Thought, or general wisdom. In contrast, she characterizes the classical Sephardic curriculum as being broader, encompassing a fuller knowledge of all Jewish areas, and also general wisdom. There also is a greater emphasis on arriving at practical halakhic conclusions. Rabbanit Halevy therefore calls for the integration of the broader, Sephardic model into yeshiva education, insisting that contemporary Jewish students would find this mode of education far more compelling and inspiring.

Although I fully agree with this vision of a broader curricular approach within Jewish education, it appears misleading to make a sweeping Sephardic vs. Ashkenazic generalization. Rabbi Benzion Uziel, who indeed championed a grand religious worldview, was alone within his own Sephardic Yeshivat Porat Yosef in Jerusalem. Most of his colleagues focused more narrowly on Talmud and halakha. When the Sephardic Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh (1823-1900, Leghorn) published his Bible commentary *Em LaMikra*, which incorporated archaeology and other contemporary disciplines into his analysis, other Sephardic rabbis in Jerusalem and Aleppo, Syria called for the commentary to be burned as heretical.

Our conversation is more effective when we highlight those rabbis of all backgrounds who espoused grand religious worldviews, such as Rabbis Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Avraham Yitzhak Kook, Joseph Soloveitchik, Benzion Uziel, and Haim David Halevi, to name a few. The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals hails and promotes such figures as representing the very best of what Judaism offers.

Freddie Grunsfeld returns to classical rabbinic sources to define the principle of following the majority rule in halakha. Basing himself on Rambam's writings, it appears that the majority rule principle applies only when rabbis sit physically together and actually deliberate. Therefore, rulings of the Great Sanhedrin in Temple times, or local rabbinic courts, indeed follow the majority.

However, after the abolition of the Sanhedrin, there is no concept of majority rule for individual halakhic decisions. Each local rabbi or court must make decisions for local communities, rather than determining a greater consensus from various books of rabbis who lived centuries apart. If one is unsure, one should tilt more strictly for Torah law and more leniently for rabbinic law. The process has nothing to do with counting later published rulings and taking a virtual poll.

In light of this analysis of the primary sources, it is surprising that Grunsfeld's search of the halakhic literature on the Bar-Ilan Responsa Project turned up over 2000 references to *rov posekim* (the majority of decisors), demonstrating the ongoing popularity of the "majority" approach even after the Sanhedrin. Grunsfeld explains that this approach is inconsistent with the primary sources.

Aside from the lack of basis for counting decisors in the classical sources, Grunsfeld observes the additional difficulties in such an approach: Who is to be included in this virtual poll? What about opinions of scholars whose rulings were never published? Without face-to-face interaction, one cannot apply the majority rule principle. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef rules this way, as well (*Yabia Omer* 2:17). In short, local rabbis and courts must make decisions based on their halakhic understanding, and their decisions form the halakhic policy over their local communities.

There are many other informative and thought-provoking essays in this volume. Rabbi Yoni Wieder explores the Second Temple controversy between the rabbis and sectarians on the proper date of Shavuot and the religious significance of the rabbinic position we adopt. Building off of the Hasidic master Rabbi Zadok HaKohen of Lublin, Rabbi Wieder highlights the central role of the Oral Law and the development of halakha on Shavuot. Rabbi Yitzhak Berdugo surveys rabbinic and Karaite responses to the biblical passages that suggest widespread ignorance of the Torah in the times of Josiah and Ezra and how that relates to our understanding of the continuity of our tradition. Sina Kahen focuses on the great revolution of the Torah against its ancient Near Eastern backdrop. These and so many other essays will give us food for thought for Shavuot, and for our ongoing religious growth and development beyond.

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I have had the privilege to give five Zoom classes at The Habura, co-sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. You may see them on our YouTube channel:

Understanding the Akedah:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cxbQ9daWqY&t=11s

Understanding Biblical Miracles:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUKbGmKJsB0&t=2s

Torah and Archaeology:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN1XAtia_x0&t=57s

Torah and Literalism:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K__jp8V9sXY&t=25s

Torah and Superstition:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PD68xZ4J4M8&t=17s

We look forward to many other opportunities to partner in promoting our shared ideas and ideals.