



## **Laws & Customs of Shavuot 5783-2023**

The sixth of Sivan marks the Biblical holiday of Shavuot. Outside of Israel, Shavuot is celebrated for two days, in keeping with the holidays of Pesach and Sukkot where each *chag* day is doubled. This year we celebrate Shavuot from **Thursday evening, May 24 - Shabbat, May 26**.

### **I. Cooking**

As with the other Biblical holidays, creative work (*melachah*) is not allowed. However, there is a special mitzvah of enjoyment and pleasure associated with preparing food according to the verse: (Ex 12:16) “No work shall be done, but what is eaten by any person, that alone may be done for you.” This is the source for being allowed to cook and bake, although it is not permissible to **light** a fire; rather we must **transfer** fire from an existing flame. Hence the custom to light a *yahrtzeit* candle that will last for 48 or 72 hours as needed to light candles and to light a fire on the stove.

Similarly, there are many other leniencies regarding food preparation on Yom Tov compared to Shabbat. Also, on Yom Tov which is not Shabbat, one can carry outside even in a place without an *Eruv*.

**Cooking for same day consumption:** *Melachot* permitted for food preparation or other Yom Tov necessities are only if the intent is to derive benefit on Yom Tov itself. One may not cook food on Yom Tov for use after Yom Tov. One may also not cook food on the first day of Yom Tov for consumption on the second day of Yom Tov<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, one must be sure not to engage in any *melachah* for the second day until the first day has passed and the next night has begun. However, if one is preparing food for eating on the first day of Yom Tov, one may make enough to eat on the second day as well. This year, when the second day is Shabbat, one is allowed to prepare on Friday for Shabbat through the mechanism of an [\*Eruv Tavshilin\*](#).

**Gas Cooktop:** One may **light** a gas flame by transferring a flame from one that is already lit. One may turn up the fire or turn it down as needed for cooking/warming food. Many are of the opinion that one may even turn **off** a gas flame as this is turning off the **source** of the gas rather than extinguishing the flame.

**Note:** When turning the gas knob on or off, do it **quickly** to bypass the electric sparking.

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<sup>1</sup> We don't “step down” in holiness from the first day of Yom Tov which is **Biblical** by preparing for the second day of Yom Tov which is **Rabbinically** ordained. Note that if the 2nd day is Shabbat, one is allowed to prepare from Friday for Shabbat through the mechanism of *Eruv Tavshilin*.

## II. Customs Associated with Shavuot

***Shlosbet Yemei Hagbalah***: “the Three Days of Limitation”, the name given to the three days immediately preceding the festival of Shavuot. These were days when the Israelites prepared themselves to receive the Torah on Mount Sinai. For those who keep the mourning practices of *Sefirat Ha’omer* starting from Rosh Chodesh Iyyar, these days are permitted to have haircuts and festivities such as weddings.

***Greenery***: Synagogues and homes are traditionally adorned with fresh greens and leaves, branches and flowers in honor of the Shavuot holiday that occurs in the spring. In addition, the greenery is a reminder of the flowering on Mount Sinai where we received the Torah from God.

***Tikkun Leil Shavuot***: The custom of staying up all night or part of the night of the first night of Shavuot and learning Torah! Although we use the word “Torah”, it refers to any and all of our sacred texts. Those who stay up all night learning attend a *Vatikin* Tefillah which is the earliest time that the morning Tefillah may be recited. This practice became popular in the 1500’s with the kabbalists<sup>2</sup>.

***Dairy***: There are many reasons given as to why there is a prevailing custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot<sup>3</sup>. Here are some:

- The land of Israel is a land “flowing with **milk** and honey”
- At Sinai, the Israelites were considered to be as innocent as newborns, whose food is **milk**.
- The *gematria* (numerical equivalent) of *chalav* חָלָב (milk) is **40** which is the number of days Moshe spent on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah.
- When the Israelites received the Torah, they learned the laws of kashering meat but were too tired to prepare it properly. Instead, they took food that was readily available, which was **dairy**.
- The Rema<sup>4</sup>, clarified by the Mishnah Berurah<sup>5</sup> in OC 494:3 quotes the custom to eat a meal on the **first** day of Shavuot gives the following explanation of a custom to eat a meal starting with dairy and concluding with meat. Since we are not permitted to eat meat with the same loaf that we serve with dairy, those eating bread for both dairy and meat will eat from **two** different loaves. This serves as a reminder of the unique offering of *Shtei Halechem*, the Two Loaves, that was brought in the Temple on Shavuot.

***Akdamut***: This custom is practiced in Ashkenazic communities. *Akdamut* is an Aramaic word meaning “introduction,” and this word begins a liturgical poem that we read responsively

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot Horowitz proposes a compelling argument that this custom became widespread once coffee became widely available, in his paper entitled **Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry**.

<sup>3</sup> Note that this is a **custom** only and not mandatory to eat dairy foods.

<sup>4</sup> Rav Moshe Isserles (Poland, 1520-1572) renowned Ashkenazik Halachic decisor and Talmudist.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (Poland, 1838–1933), also known as the Chafetz Chaim.

before the first Aliyah of Torah reading. It commemorates an ancient custom of translating the Torah reading into the common language so that people would understand what was being read. *Akdamut* is written as an acrostic and is both a request to the congregation to allow the Aramaic translation as well as an introduction to the Torah portion recounting the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

**Megillat Rut:** There is a *Megillah* (Scroll) that is associated with each of the Pilgrimage Festivals. We read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot; outside of Israel it is read on the second day<sup>6</sup>. Here are some reasons given that we read this *Megillah*:

- ❖ Ruth's coming to Israel took place around the time of Shavuot
- ❖ Her acceptance into the Jewish faith is analogous to the Jewish people accepting God's Torah.
- ❖ The *Megillah* is associated with many acts of kindness and that is a primary value in Judaism.

**Tachanun:** We do not recite *Tachanun* from Rosh Chodesh Sivan through the *Sheloshet Yemei Hagbalah*, *Erev Shavuot*, and all the way through the 12th of Sivan, since the supplementary sacrifices for Shavuot were offered until that time.

### III. Halachot After *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*

These Halachot pertain to those who remained awake all night, or had a short nap but not a deep sleep, in accordance with the custom of learning all night on the first night of Shavuot.

**Eating and Drinking**<sup>7</sup>: During the night, one may eat and drink without limitation. However, as on any morning, from half an hour before *Amud Hashachar*, at **3:16am**, it is forbidden to eat a full meal, so as not to get over-involved in eating before prayer. This includes the prohibition of eating bread or cakes whose size is equal to, or larger, than an egg (56 grams). However, one may eat without establishing a meal: fruits, vegetables, and cooked *mezonot* foods without limitations. From *Amud Hashachar* (**3:46am**), it is generally forbidden to eat or drink anything other than water. However, according to many poskim, coffee or tea is permissible where needed to settle the mind for tefillah<sup>8</sup>.

**Modeh/Modah Ani:** One need not recite.

**Al Netilat Yadayim:** This blessing is customarily recited upon awakening after a ritual washing of the hands. There is a debate about whether to recite it after remaining awake all night. The Mishnah Berurah in OC (4:28) writes that one should use the bathroom prior to tefillah and one may then recite this blessing after washing hands.

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<sup>6</sup> In the Bayit we have a mixed reading after Musaf.

<sup>7</sup> [Halacha Blog](#) | [R. Eliezer Melamed](#)

<sup>8</sup> See [Peninei Halachah](#)

**Birkot Hashachar:** The morning blessings must be recited (exceptions below). The earliest time for reciting them is after midnight, at **12:52am**.

**Elokai Neshama, Hamaavir Sheina, Birkot HaTorah:** There is a debate about whether to recite these blessings. Therefore, it is preferable to have one who has slept at night recite these blessings and those who are listening should answer Amen and have intention to fulfill their obligation. If there is no one to recite these blessings who slept at night, the majority opinion is that they can be recited. The earliest time that *Birkot HaTorah* may be recited is *Alot Hashachar* (dawn), at **3:46am**.

**Tallit:** The *tallit* may be donned and the blessing recited at **4:29am**.

**Tzitzit:** If worn all night, a bracha is not recited.

#### IV. Names of the Holiday

##### ❖ ***Chag HaShavuot: Festival of Weeks***

The word Shavuot means **weeks** and it denotes the counting of seven weeks from the holiday of Pesach. This period of time is called *Sefirat Ha'omer* and Shavuot marks the 50th day starting from the second day of Pesach.

##### ❖ ***Chag HaKatzir: Harvest Festival***

The festival of Shavuot is also the time of the beginning of the wheat harvest in the Land of Israel.

##### ❖ ***Zeman Matan Torateinu: Time of the Giving of Our Torah***

God gave the Torah to the fledgling Jewish people on Mount Sinai.

##### ❖ ***Yom HaBikkurim: Day of the First Fruits***

Starting on Shavuot, the choicest of the first-fruits are brought to the priests in the Temple in a ceremony called *Bikkurim*. These first fruits come from the seven species for which Eretz Yisrael is known: wheat, barley, figs, grapes, pomegranates, olives and dates.

##### ❖ ***Atzeret: A Stopping Point***

This holiday reminds us to stop and refrain from creative work on this holiday which has no specific *mitzvah* associated with it (but lots of customs!). Another way of understanding *Atzeret* is a “holdover” when finishing the counting of the seven weeks from Pesach and celebrating the completion of this *mitzvah*.

