

Halachot of Shavuot 5777

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The Holiday of Shavuot begins this coming Saturday evening May 19. Shavuot is also called *z'man matan Torateinu* – the day of the giving of our Torah – and it marks the anniversary of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. On Shavuot we celebrate our relationship to Torah and rededicate ourselves to Torah study. There are added considerations this year as Shavuot begins immediately after Shabbat. Below is an overview of the basic Halachot of Shavuot.

Decorating the Synagogue

There is a *minhag* to decorate the synagogue with plants and flowers to mark the fact that Mt. Sinai was covered in flowers and greenery.

Shabbat Erev Yom Tov

The normal strictures of Shabbat apply. Even though cooking from existing flames is permitted on Yom Tov, it is not allowed on Shabbat. No preparations for Yom Tov may be made during Shabbat.

Candle lighting

Shabbat candles should be lit in the normal fashion on Friday evening. In addition to candles for Shabbat, an additional flame should be lit that will last until Saturday night to allow lighting Yom Tov candles (on Yom Tov, one is allowed to transfer a flame but may not create a new flame). This should be done by lighting a yartzheit candle or leaving a burner on the stove set to low. **Please use exercise extreme caution when leaving flames lit for an extended period of time.**

Ovens and stovetops may be used for cooking on Yom Tov, but not on Shabbat, but only if lit from an existing flame. If you plan on cooking on Yom Tov, stoves or ovens should be left on before Shabbat. (See below “cooking on Yom Tov”)

Seudah Shlishit

While the requirement for Seuda Shlishit (a third Shabbos meal) remains in place, we also have to be careful not to ruin our appetite for the Yom Tov meal on Saturday night. While each person has different eating habits, the general recommendation is to eat Seuda Shlisht earlier in the day, as eating a formal meal late in the day will likely mess up one's appetite for a Yom Tov meal. **There will be no seuda shlishit served at shul.**

Small children

Unfortunately, the timing of things and halachic considerations are especially difficult for families with small children who are not able to stay awake until darkness. On the one hand, the parents have a halachic requirement to say kidush and have a Yom Tov meal after nightfall. At the same time if the children will not be awake it is important to create a sense of Yom Tov for them. Serving children a festive meal as one would eat on Yom Tov is certainly appropriate and the children can say kidush and ha-motzi. If the parents

wish they can make this early meal their seuda shlishit (see above) so the family is enjoying a festive meal together.

Candle Lighting

Two blessings are said over the candles AFTER NIGHTFALL. The candles should be lit from an existing flame (see above):

- 1) ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של יום טוב
baruch Atah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha-Olam Asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu lehadlik ner shel yom tov
Blessed are You Lord our God, Sovereign of the world, Who has sanctified with His commandments and has commanded us to kindle the light of the festival.
- 2) ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם שהחיינו וקיימנו והגעיענו לזמן הזה
Baruch Atah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha-olam she-hechyanu ve-kiymanu ve-higyanu la-zman ha-zeh.
Blessed are You Lord our God, sovereign of the world, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

On Sunday night we once again light candles and say the same two blessings. **Candles on Sunday night must be lit from a pre-existing flame.**

Davening and Kidush

The normative practice is to delay davening and recitation of Kidush until after *tzeit ha-kochavim* (when the stars come out). The reason for this is that the Torah instructs us that when counting the Omer we should count *sheva shabatot temimot* – seven complete weeks. We refrain from starting Yom Tov early in order to give us seven complete weeks of the Omer.

Many communities will also wait on the second night to daven only after *tzeit ha-kochavim* in order to not disrespect the second day of Yom Tov. This practice has the status of a *minhag* and is thus not binding or universal in practice. **Please note that at Netivot we do wait until *tzeit* to daven on the first night, but not on the second night.** On Saturday night, havdallah is included in the *Amidah* and *kidush* to demarcate the separation between Shabbat and Yom Tov.

Tikun Leil Shavuot

The custom has developed to stay up all night on the first night of Shavuot learning Torah. Different explanations are offered:

- It shows our enthusiasm to receive the Torah.
- It also addresses a number of midrashic accounts that say B'nei Yisrael fell asleep when camped at Mt. Sinai and did not display full enthusiasm.
- I have always thought that an additional explanation for the custom is to remind us that we are all students of the Torah – regardless of our occupation in life. Part of being a student is pulling an occasional all-nighter. Thus on Shavuot we pull an all-nighter to remind ourselves of what it means to be a student.

Reading of the Torah

On the first day of Shavuot we read the section of the Torah describing the Revelation at Mt. Sinai. Torah reading customarily includes the recitation of *akdamot* – liturgical poetry.

Yizkor

Like every Yom Tov, *yizkor* is recited on the last day of Chag, which this year is May 21. Those who say *yizkor* have the custom to light a *yartzheit* candle along with Yom Tov candles on the second night.

As with the Yom Tov candles, the *yizkor* candle must be lit from a pre-existing flame.

Megilat Rut/ The Book of Ruth

The *minhag* is to read the Book of Ruth on the second day of Shavuot. There are many explanations of the connection between Ruth and Shavuot. Some of them are:

- Ruth serves as the paradigm for converts willingly accepting the Torah. At Mt. Sinai the Jewish people were akin to converts.
- The Book of Ruth takes place during the wheat harvest, which coincides with Shavuot as *chag ha-bikurim*.
- The Book of Ruth describes many act of kindness (*chessed*) which go beyond the strict *halachic* requirements. It therefore sets the model of the Torah personality we strive to develop and become.

Eating Dairy

Another custom is to eat dairy on Shavuot. Tradition explains that the Jewish people were nervous at Mt. Sinai that they would not be able to observe the intricate laws of *kashrut* outlined in the Torah. They therefore ate dairy to mitigate the complications. There is a lot of interesting discussion in the Halachic literature over whether it is appropriate to eat dairy, or if we should eat meat as is our custom to celebrate every other Yom Tov. Each family has its own practice.

Cooking on Yom Tov

On Yom Tov we are allowed to perform certain activities that we can't do on Shabbat if they fall under the category of *ochel nefesh* (things that are beneficial to the soul). The most common application of this is that all activities associated with food preparation are permitted, provided the following criteria are met:

- One may only cook using a pre-existing flame or heat source that was lit before Yom Tov. One may leave on the oven as well as burners.
- One may adjust the temperature, but only if there is no electrical/digital indicator that will be changed.
- One may not intentionally cook on one day of Yom Tov for the following day of Tom Tov. If there are leftovers, they may be eaten on the following day. Similarly, one may not intentionally cook on Yom Tov for after the holiday. Leftovers may be eaten after Chag.
- One may not use a microwave, toaster oven or other electrical appliances. An electric stove or oven can be used. One may adjust the temperature only if there is no digital temperature indicator or lights that go on when the temperature is adjusted.

Carrying

There is no prohibition against carrying on Yom Tov, and thus no need to rely upon an eruv. The capacity to carry is considered to fall under the category of *ochel nefesh*, primarily so community members can share Yom Tov meals together. Because carrying is permitted in this context, it is permitted in all contexts. It is therefore permissible to carry keys and books, push strollers, etc.

Bathing

Bathing also falls under the category of *ochel nefesh*. However, there is a debate among *posekim* whether this applies to bathing one's entire body (including showering) or only to one's face and limb. I hold that bathing one's entire body is certainly allowed if one is accustomed to bathing every day and feels gross if they don't bathe. However, one may bathe only under the following conditions:

- Do not take an excessively long shower.
- One must be careful against violating the *melacha* of *sechita* (squeezing), which is not allowed on Yom Tov. In particular one must be careful not to use a washcloth which would be squeezed out. Similarly, one must take great care not to squeeze water or shampoo out of their hair (especially if they have long hair). Finally, great care must be taken not to wring the water out of one's towel.
- One may not use bar soap as this poses a problem of *memareach* (smoothing out). One must use liquid soap or body wash. Similarly, one may not use bar soap to wash one's hands or face.

The leniencies for cooking, carrying and bathing apply only on Yom Tov and NOT on Shabbat.

Havdallah

At the conclusion of Yom Tov, on Monday night, havdallah is recited over wine. We do not use a candle or spices.