

The Meaning of Shavuot

Introduction

There are 3 pilgrimage festivals, when the people travelled to the Temple in Jerusalem: Pessah, Shavuot and Sukkot. Pessah commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Sukkot commemorates the 40 years of wandering in the desert, when God made us dwell in flimsy booths.

But what does Shavuot commemorate? Most Jews will say: It commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai: *Zman matan toratenu!*

But that is nowhere to be found in the Torah itself. Here is all it says about the holiday:

First, we hear about it in Exodus:

[You will observe the Feast of the Harvest (חג הקציר, *Chag HaKatzir*), of the first fruits of your work, of what you sow in the field. [Exodus 23:16]

וחג שבועות תעשה לך בכורי קציר חטים וחג האסיף תקופת השנה:
You shall observe the Feast of Weeks (חג שבועות), of the first fruits of the wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering (חג האסיף) *Chag Ha-Asif* at the turn of the year. [Exodus 34:22]

Then in Leviticus:

וספרתם לכם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את-עמר התנופה שבע שבתות תמימות תהיינה:
And from the day when you bring the sheaf of elevation offering — on the morrow after Shabbat — you shall count off seven weeks (שבע שבתות). They must be complete.

You must count until the day after the seventh week — fifty days. Then you shall bring an offering of new grain to the Lord: ... two loaves of bread as an elevation

offering... You shall [also] present... seven yearling lambs without blemish, one bull of the herd, and two rams, with their meal offerings and libations... You shall also offer one he-goat as a sin offering and two yearling lambs as a sacrifice of well-being...

On that same day you shall hold a celebration. It shall be a sacred occasion for you. You shall not work at your occupations. This is a law for all time in all your settlements, throughout the ages. [Leviticus 23:15-21]

Then in Numbers:

וּבְיָנוּם הַבְּכוּרִים בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה בְּשִׁבְעַתֶּיכֶם מִקְרָא־קִדְוֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל־מִלְאכָתָ עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ:
On the day of the first fruits (*Yom HaBikkurim*), your Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot*), when you bring an offering of new grain to God, you shall observe a sacred occasion: you shall not work at your occupations. [Numbers 28:26]

Finally in Deuteronomy:

You shall count off seven weeks. Start to count the seven weeks when the sickle is first put to the standing grain. Then you shall observe the Feast of Weeks offering your freewill contribution... [to God] You shall rejoice before your God with your son and daughter, your male and female servant, the [family of the] Levite in your communities, and the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your midst, at the place where your God will choose to establish the divine name. [Deut. 16:9–11]

On Shavuot, it is customary to read the Book of Ruth. Why? Because the action is set at the time of the gathering of the grain.

So, to summarize: The name of the festival, Shavuot, means “weeks” and refers to the 7 weeks of the counting of the Omer, beginning on the 2nd day of Pessah. It is also called *Chag Habikkurim*, the Feast the First Fruits; and *Chag HaKatzir*, the Feast of the Harvest. It celebrates the season of the grain harvest in Israel, which lasted seven weeks. That season began with barley on Passover and ended with wheat 7 weeks later. It was a happy time, to be celebrated by great communal rejoicing and a feast. Work restrictions applied, like for Shabbat and other holidays.

The Mishnah says that on Shavuot, pilgrims would offer their first fruits (*Bikkurim*) to the kohanim in the Temple in Jerusalem [Bikkurim 1:3]. They were the Seven Species mentioned in the Torah: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. [Deuteronomy 8:8]

Nothing about commemorating the giving of the Torah!

Reinterpretation

Shavuot came to be interpreted as commemorating the giving of the Torah. The Talmud says clearly:

Rabbi Elazar said: [Shavuot is] the day on which the Torah was given. [Pesahim 68b]

But why doesn't the Torah itself say that? Sforno says the Torah did not want to tie Shavuot to the giving of the Torah because the gift did not accomplish its purpose at that time, given that the people started worshipping a golden calf.

Other reasons come to mind:

- The timing is about right: Torah was given about 50 days after Exodus
- In the diaspora, the agricultural reason for Shavuot became less relevant

An ingenious explanation begins with a story in the Talmud. The Torah says that Shavuot should start "the day after Shabbat". Which Shabbat? Not specified. Long discussion in Talmud:

-The Sadducees interpreted the phrase "the day after Shabbat" literally, as referring to the first Shabbat within Pessah, not the first day of Pessah... One elderly Sadducee told Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai: "Moses, our teacher, was a lover of the Jewish people and he knew that Shavuot is only one day. Therefore, he arose and established it after Shabbat, to allow the Jewish people to enjoy themselves for two days." [Menaḥot 65a] So the Sadducees believed God added a day to Shabbat to give the people a full weekend off, after their hard labor in the field!

-This did not fly with the Pharisees (the rabbis) because if you assume the Shabbat in the verse is the first Shabbat in Pessah, it will vary from year to year, and so will the timing of Shavuot, so the rabbis decided the Torah meant the first day of Pessah, interpreted as a "Shabbat" -- a day of rest, which it is also. This fixed the date of Shavuot as the 6th of Sivan. [Menaḥot 65b]

Rabbi Menaḥem Kasher, from Poland then Israel, [Torah Shelemah v21, p 213] suggests that the rabbis wanted to counter once and for all the Sadducees' claim that Shavuot is always on a Sunday, so they tied Shavuot to a fixed historical event -- the giving of the Torah. The Talmud says:

The Sages taught: On the sixth day of the month of Sivan, the Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people. [Shabbat 86b]

This story underscores the intense rivalry between the Pharisees (the rabbis) and the Sadducees (priests and aristocrats – rich and powerful people -- who refused to accept the Oral Law and the resurrection of the dead). Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai called the elderly Sadducee a “fool” who “prattles” with “frivolous speech”, adding that “And if Moses, our teacher, was a lover of the Jewish people, why did he delay them in the wilderness forty years?” The elderly man said to him: “My teacher, you dismiss me with this retort?” [Menahot 65a-b, Bava Batra 115b]

In the end,

- The counting of the Omer was reinterpreted as counting the days till Torah was given. (But how did the Israelites know when – or even whether – they were going to receive the Torah?)
- The reading of the Book of Ruth was reinterpreted as being motivated by Ruth converting and accepting the Torah just as the Jews did at Mount Sinai.

How is Shavuot observed today?

The only mitzvah of Shavuot is to abstain from work and rejoice. Rabbis added special prayers, including *kiddush*. In Israel, secular kibbutzim celebrate it as a harvest and first-fruit festival, as in days of old. Non-traditional congregations hold confirmation ceremonies for post-bar-mitzvah students on this holiday.

A mnemonic for the traditional customs is *aḥarit* (אחרית), meaning “last”:

- אקדמות – read special poems in liturgy
- חלב – *ḥalav* (milk), eat dairy products
- רות – *Rut*, read the Book of Ruth
- ירק – *Yereq* (greening), decorate with greenery
- תורה – study Torah all night on the eve.

Let us expand on each in turn.

Read special poems

-Ashkenazim read *Aqdamut* (אקדמות), a long poem (*piyyut*) in Aramaic praising God. It concludes with:

מְרוֹמָם הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ בְּקִדְמָתָא וּבִתְרִיתָא God, exalted from beginning to end,
צָבִי וְאַתְרָעִי בֵּן וְיָמֶסֶר לֵן אוֹרִיתָא Was pleased with us and gave us the Torah.

-Sephardim read *Azharot*, which lists the positive commandments on the first day and the negative commandments on the second day.

Eat dairy

What is the origin of the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot? It is not ancient. The Torah mentions the many sacrificial offerings, which were eaten by the people. The Talmud also records eating meat on Shavuot:

On Shavuot, Rabbi Yosef would say: "Prepare me a third-born calf [the best kind]", saying, "If it were not for the influence of this day, how many Yosefs would there be in the market place!" [That is, I would be just an ordinary person, not learned in Torah, which was given on this day]. [Pesahim 68b]

Another instance in the Talmud:

Rabbi Yohanan said: If a man set aside ten beasts for his festal-offering, [and] he offered five the first day of the festival, he may offer the other five on the second day of the festival. [Hagigah 8b]

In fact, the Sages even had a saying:

אֵין שִׂמְחָה אֶלָּא בִּבְשָׂר וּבַיַּיִן -- *En simchah ella be-bassar ve-yayin*

There is no rejoicing except with meat and wine. [Rambam, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18, based on Pesahim 109a]

This is a custom, not a law.

The earliest reference to eating dairy on Shavuot is *Kol Bo*, a 13th-century opus on Jewish Law, probably by Rav Aharon ben Yaakov HaKohen of Lunel:

There is an established custom to eat honey and milk on Shavuot since the Torah is compared to honey and milk as it is written [in the Song of Songs]:
Honey and milk are under your tongue. [Song of Songs 4:11]

Why eat dairy? Many reasons have been offered:

1-John Cooper, in his 1994 book *Eat and be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food* writes:

According to Kalonymos ben Kalonymos, the 14th-century Jews of Provence used to eat a specially-prepared honey cake in the shape of a ladder on Shavuot. Later in Germany the cake was made with 7 rungs, symbolizing the 7 spheres rent by the Almighty when He descended to give the Law.

So, too, the earlier 13th-century Provence philosopher Jacob ben Abba Mari Antoli asserted that it was customary for Jews to partake of milk and honey on Shavuot, as these foods were compared with the sustenance derived from the Torah...

In central and eastern Europe dairy foods replaced the honey cake of Provence on Shavuot, partly because there was an abundance of milk at this time of the year, and partly because dairy dishes were the standard festive food at [that time of year] in several parts of Germany.

2-There are also mystical reasons. The book *Chag HaShavuot* says:

Why is Torah likened to honey and milk? Honey comes from a bee, which is not kosher, and milk comes from a live animal whose meat is forbidden until the animal is slaughtered. Both honey and milk, therefore, allude to the power of Torah which can transform a sullied soul into one of holiness and purity. [Chag HaShavuot published by Yad L'Achim]

3-Also, the gematria of milk, *chalav* in Hebrew, is 40. It reminds us of the three sets of 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. There were also 40 generations from Moses, who recorded the Written Torah, to Ravina and Rav Ashi, who wrote the final version of the Oral Torah, the Talmud. Finally, the Talmud begins and ends with the letter *mem*, which has a gematria of 40.

4-Also, the Midrash notes that Mount Sinai is also known as *Har Gav'nunim*, the mountain of majestic peaks. The Hebrew word for "cheese" is *gevinah*, which has the same root. *Gevinah* has a gematria of 70, corresponding to the "70 faces of Torah." This connects Torah and Sinai with milk. [Numbers Rabbah 13:15]

5-Also, before the Torah was given to the Israelites in the desert, the laws for the ritual slaughtering of animals, or *shechitah*, were not known. So, to be on safe side, they simply ate dairy meals. Another reason is that receiving the Torah was like being born again, so we celebrate by eating baby food, namely milk.

6-Finally, the Torah says:

מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה בַּשָּׁבֳעֹתֵיכֶם -- *Minchah chadashah l'HaShem be-Shavu'otekhem*
On your holiday of Shavuot, when you offer new grain to God. [Numbers 28.26]

The initials of the four Hebrew words spell *me-chalav* (from milk), pointing to eating dairy on Shavuot.

Sephardic Jews, however, eat both dairy and meat on Shavuot. Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, who used to be Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, wrote in 1964:

Our custom is to eat some dairy and after rinsing out our mouths we eat meat. It is a mitzvah to eat meat on Yom Tov to fulfill the obligation of being happy on the holiday, because there is no happiness unless there is meat!

So the meat meal follows the milk meal. These two meals represent the two loaves of bread, formerly offered in the *bikkurim*, or “first fruits”, offering at the Temple service on Shavuot.

The Talmud [Makkot 23b] says that the Torah has 365 negative commandments, corresponding to the 365 days of the year. The Zohar adds that they are matched one for one. So which is Shavuot? The Torah gives the answer:

Bring *Bikkurim* [first fruits] to God's Holy Temple. Don't cook a kid in its mother's milk. [Exodus 34:26]

Why are these two commandments side by side? Well, the first day for bringing Bikkurim is Shavuot. So, the second half of that verse is the negative commandment corresponding to Shavuot. Thus, on Shavuot we eat two meals, one of milk and one of meat, taking care not to mix the two. Also, we do not use the same loaf of bread for a meat meal and then later at a milk meal, lest some of the meat splatters on the bread.

The Jews of Aleppo, Syria, had a custom of eating a light dairy meal on the first night to facilitate staying up all night studying.

Popular foods:

- For Ashkenazim: cheeses, cheesecake, blintzes, kreplach;
- For Sephardim: sambusek, kelsonnes (cheese ravioli), atayef (pancake with cheese), kahee (dough with butter and sugar), siete cielos (seven heavens, a seven-layer cake);
- For Yemenites: no dairy foods eaten;
- The Jews of Egypt, like me, ate geese in a local herb soup called molokheyya. There was a meat meal at night and a dairy meal during the day;
- All eat of the seven species native to Israel: Barley, wheat, dates, figs, olives, grapes and pomegranates. The latter because rabbis

said they contain 613 seeds, the number of commandments in the Torah.

Read of the Book of Ruth

It is customary to read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot because the action is set at the time of the gathering of the grain. Later, it was reinterpreted as being motivated by Ruth converting and accepting the Torah just as the Jews did at Mount Sinai. Also, King David, who descended from Ruth, was born and died on Shavuot [Hagigah Y 2:3].

Traditionally, converting to Judaism just to marry a Jew is not acceptable, yet many, perhaps most, conversions are for marriage. Indeed, listen to the impassioned speech Ruth gave to her mother-in-law Naomi:

And Ruth said: "Do not entreat me to leave you, or to keep from following you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there be buried. The Lord may do so and so to me, and more besides, if even death separates me from you." [Ruth 1:16-17]

Note that she does not talk about her love of God, of Torah, of commandments, or of Israel. She talks only about her love of Naomi!

Decorate with greenery

The Midrash says:

The whole world was created only for the sake of the Torah... God saw a single rose-colored flower, to wit, Israel. He took it and smelled it, when He gave [the Israelites] the Ten Commandments; His spirits were calmed when they said:

We will do, and we will listen. [Exodus 24:7]

[At that time], the Holy One said, "The orchard shall be saved on account of this flower. For the sake of the Torah and of Israel the world shall be saved." [Vayikra Rabbah 23:3]

From this, the tradition emerged that Mount Sinai blossomed with flowers right before the giving of the Torah. Also, Baby Moses was found among the bulrushes in the Nile River on Shavuot (6 Sivan).

Many families decorate homes and synagogues with plants, flowers tree branches. The earliest mention of this custom is by the Maharil, from 15th-century Germany.

Some also decorate the bimah as a chuppah, because on Shavuot the matchmaker (Moses) brought the bride (Israel) to the chuppah (Mount Sinai) to marry the bridegroom (God), with the Torah as the ketubah (marriage contract). Some Sephardim read a ketubah by Rabbi Israel ben Moses Najara as part of the service. Some Hasidim adopted this custom.

The Mishnah states that God judges the world four times a year to determine if it is worthy of additional sustenance:

Four times every year the world is judged: On Passover for grain; on Shavuot for fruit trees; on Rosh HaShana [for life] ... ; and on Sukkot for water. [Rosh Hashanah 1:2]

So, the Magen Avraham, from 17th-century Poland, said that greenery should be placed in the synagogue on Shavuot to remind us to pray for fruit trees. [Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494:5]

Study Torah all night on the eve

A popular custom is to stay up all night on the eve of Shavuot and study until dawn. It is called *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, or “Repair of the night of Shavuot”.

Why do we do it and why is it called that? The Midrash explains that when the Israelites were about to receive the Torah, they were sleeping, and God had to awaken them with thunder and lightning. Therefore, we stay up studying that night, to make amends for our ancestors and show how happy and appreciative we are to have received the Torah. The Midrash says:

[It says in Exodus:]

For the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people.

[Exodus 19:11]

Israel slept that entire night, because the sleep of Shavuot is pleasant and the night is short. Rabbi Yudan said: Not a flea worried them.

God came and found them sleeping, so he began to rouse them with trumpeters, as it says [in Exodus]:

And it came to pass on the third day... that there was thunder and lightning. [Exodus 19:16]

And Moses roused Israel and brought them out to meet the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says [in Exodus]:

And Moses brought forth the people... to meet God. [Exodus 19:17]

And then God went before them till He reached Mount Sinai, as it is written [in Exodus]:

Now Mount Sinai was altogether in smoke. [Exodus 19:18]

It was for this that [God] taunted them through the mouth of Isaiah, saying:

Why is it that when I came, no man was there; when I called, no one was there to answer? [Is. 50:2]
[Song of Songs Rabbah 1:57]

The custom is based on the Zohar, which states that the original pious ones would not sleep that night, and they toiled in Torah:

When Israel drew near to Mount Sinai, that dew that descends from the Supernal Point came down in its fullness and purified them so that their filth left them and they became attached to the Holy King and the Community of Israel and received the Torah... Any man who does not count those seven complete weeks [the Omer] so as to qualify himself for purity is not called "pure"... But if a man has reached this day in purity and has not lost count, then it behooves him on this night to study the Torah and to preserve the special purity to which he has attained on this night... The pious ones of old used not to sleep on this night, but they used to study the Torah. [Zohar, Vayikra 3, Parshat Emor 98a]

What should be studied is generally left up to individual groups. Some groups have the participants take turns in presenting a short dvar Torah. A canonical reading package has evolved that includes excerpts from all major Jewish sources, as follows:

First, read from the Torah: 3-7 verses from the beginning and the end of each of the 54 weekly Torah portions. Some important sections should be read in full, such as:

- The days of Creation in Genesis, [Gen. 1:1-2:3]
- The Exodus and the song at the Sea, [Ex. 14:1-15:27]
- The giving of the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, [Ex. 18:1-20:26, 24:1-18, 34:27-35; Deut. 5:1-6:9] and
- The historical review in Deuteronomy and parts of the Shema. [Deut. 10:12-11:25]

Second, read from the Prophets: 3-7 verses from beginning and end of every book. However:

- The reading from Ezekiel is the entire first chapter, the part about the *Merkavah*, or fiery chariot; and
- The readings from *Trei Asar*, or the Twelve Prophets (considered as one book), are specific verses from Hosea, Habakkuk, and Malachi: Hosea 1:1-3; Habakkuk 2:20 - 3:19; Malachi 3:22-24.

Third, read from the Writings: The Book of Ruth in full, as well as five specific psalms: 1, 19, 68, 119, and 150. [Shaarei Teshuvah to Ohr Hayyim, 494]

Fourth, read from the Mishnah, or Oral Law: The beginning and the end of each of the 63 tractates, with some important chapters in full.

Fifth, read *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation. It is the oldest kabalistic text, about 2,000 years old.

Sixth, read the list of the 613 commandments in the Torah (the *Taryag*), perhaps using Maimonides' list, which is the most authoritative.

Finally, read from the **Zohar**, the book of Jewish mysticism: Excerpts bearing on the subject, with opening and concluding prayers.

The whole reading is divided into 13 parts, after each of which "Kaddish de-Rabbanan" is recited.

Chag sameach! Study well and enjoy cheeses!