

## Shavuot

**T**HE TORAH TEACHES that upon completing the counting of the Omer, the Festival of Shavuot is celebrated:

Seven weeks you shall number unto you; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn you should begin to number seven weeks. And you shall keep the Feast of Weeks (*Hag HaShavuot*) unto the Lord your God after the measure of the freewill-offering of your hand, which you shall give according as the Lord your God blessed you. (Deut. 16:9–10)<sup>1</sup>

Shavuot not only commemorates the conclusion of the counting of the weeks of the Omer, but it also celebrates the wheat harvest (Ex. 23:16), and is therefore known as “*Hag HaKatzir*,” the Harvest Festival. The *shetei halehem*, two leavened loaves made from the new wheat harvest, are offered with the *Musaf* offering, and the festival is therefore also referred to as “*Yom HaBikkurim*” (Num. 28:26). The offering permits the use of new grains in the *Beit HaMikdash* and ushers in the season of the *Bikkurim*, the first fruits, which are brought to the *Beit HaMikdash* (Deut. 10:1–11).

In addition to the themes reflected by the biblical names given to this festival, the Rabbis refer to this festival as “*Atzeret*” (Rosh HaShana 1:2),<sup>2</sup> seemingly referring to the fact that it marks the conclusion of the Pesah festival.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as we have seen, Ramban asserts that Pesah and Shavuot are comparable to the first and last days of Sukkot and Pesah, and the days between Pesah and Shavuot are actually similar to *Hol HaMo’ed*. It is logical then, that the description of Shavuot as “*Atzeret*” most likely refers to the religious/historical connection between Pesah and Shavuot – the Jewish people left Egypt on Pesah and received the Torah on Shavuot.

In addition to the agricultural and ritual reasons for the holiday cited above, we traditionally associate Shavuot with the giving of the

Torah. The Rabbis point to the uniqueness of Shavuot, as “it is the day upon which the Torah was given” (Pesahim 68b). In addition, the Torah reading of Shavuot (Ex. 19), as recorded by the Tosefta and cited in the Talmud (Megilla 31a), recounts the giving of the Torah. Furthermore, the Shavuot liturgy refers to the day as “*Zeman Matan Torateinu*” – the day upon which the Torah was given.

Numerous commentators have questioned why this aspect of Shavuot, *Matan Torah*, which is so central to our Shavuot celebration, is not mentioned in the Torah. In fact, the Talmud cites a debate between the *hakhamim* and R. Yose regarding whether the Torah was given on the sixth or seventh of Sivan (Shabbat 86b). According to R. Yose’s opinion that *Matan Torah* took place on the seventh of Sivan, nowadays, when we always celebrate Shavuot on the sixth of Sivan (forty-nine days after the second day of Pesah), we would actually be celebrating *Matan Torah* on the incorrect day!

These questions brought R. Yitzchak Abrabanel (1437–1508) to explain as follows in his commentary to the Torah:

The Torah did not specify that the reason for the celebration for this festival is to remember the day of the giving of the Torah, as no festival was assigned to remember the giving of our Torah; because the Divine Torah and its prophecies, which are in our hands testify to themselves, and there is no need to dedicate a day to remember it. Rather, the reason for the Festival of Shavuot is because it is the beginning of the wheat harvest.<sup>4</sup>

R. Abrabanel does acknowledge that certain mitzvot and halakhot hint to the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. For example, the offering of the *shetei halehem* on Shavuot, which are made from leavened wheat, in contrast to Pesah’s Omer offering made from barley, indicates the Jewish people’s spiritual poverty before receiving the Torah. He continues:

[Although] there is no doubt that on this day the Torah was given, no festival was designated to remember it, just as you will find regarding *Yom Terua* [Rosh HaShana], upon which we say, “this is the day of the beginning of Your creation, a remembrance for the first day” [Rosh HaShana 27a], and despite this, God did not command that one should observe Rosh HaShana

as an anniversary of the creation of the world, rather as a "Yom HaDin" [day of judgment].

The giving of the Torah is coincidental and secondary to the primary reason for the observance of Shavuot – the wheat harvest.

Others accept that the giving of the Torah plays a central role in the observance of Shavuot, but maintain that it was deliberately not mentioned by the Torah. R. Yitzchak b. Moshe Arama (c. 1420–1494) offers two reasons for this omission in his commentary to the Torah, the *Akeidat Yitzchak*. First, he suggests that like belief in the existence of God, the giving of the Torah is so basic to Judaism that there is no reason to dedicate a day to its commemoration. Second, he proposes that the very nature of the Torah precludes designating a day of commemoration. He writes:

The commemoration of the giving of the Torah cannot be limited to a particular time, like other matters connected with the festivals, but it is a precept that applies at all hours and times, as it is written, "This book of the Law shall not move from your mouth and you shall meditate in it day and night" [Josh. 1:8]. Every day, we are commanded that its contents should remain as fresh and as dear to us as on the day they were given, as it is written, "This day, the Lord your God has commanded you to do these statutes and judgments; you shall therefore keep them and do them."<sup>5</sup>

In other words, although the Torah may have been given on a specific historical date, we relate to Torah as if it is constantly given to us anew, and it is therefore not restricted or limited to a specific time. Indeed, the Midrash states:

What is meant by "this day"? Had the Holy One, Blessed be He, not ordained these precepts for Israel till now? Surely this verse was stated in the fortieth year! Why does the Scripture therefore state, "this day"? This is what Moshe meant when he addressed Israel: Every day, let the Torah be as dear to you as if you had received it this day from Mt. Sinai.<sup>6</sup>

This beautiful midrash emphasizes the timeless nature of Torah, and how marking the anniversary of the giving of the Torah might ultimately reduce or minimize our relationship to the Torah.

Finally, R. David Zvi Hoffmann, in his commentary to Leviticus, explains why there are no mitzvot associated with Shavuot:

No symbolic ritual was instituted for Shavuot to mark the Sinaitic Revelation, for the reason that it cannot be translated into the tangible language of symbol. The Children of Israel had been commanded to take heed "that you saw no likeness on the day that the Lord spoke unto you at Horev from the midst of fire," so as not to become involved in any idolatrous, anthropomorphic conception of the Divinity. They were simply bidden to commemorate the historical experience. They would celebrate on the day of the giving of the Law the conclusion of the harvest as well, to give thanks to Him on bringing the first fruits to the Sanctuary and acknowledge that He is the Lord of all, to whom it was meet to pay homage and whose commandments they were to obey. By this they would reenact the promise they made on Sinai, "*naase venishma*" ("we shall do and hearken") [Ex. 24:7].

While it is impossible to commemorate the giving of the Torah with any symbols, we bring God our first fruits, give thanks to Him, and fulfill our promise to Him at Har Sinai – "*naase venishma*."

As R. Hoffmann observed, there are no halakhot or mitzvot specifically related to Shavuot. In fact, the *Shulhan Arukh* dedicates only one chapter – at the end of the Laws of Pesah – to the "Order of the Prayers on Shavuot."<sup>7</sup> The Jewish people, however, have enriched the Festival of Shavuot with many customs, which have themselves generated much Torah inquiry. In this chapter, we will investigate a number of these customs.

#### BRINGING IN SHAVUOT "EARLY"

The *Rishonim* record that the custom in Medieval Ashkenazic communities was to recite *Tefillat Maariv* after *pelag haMinha*, and not only after *tzeit hakokhavim*, in accordance with the position of R. Yehuda (Berakhot 26a). Based upon this custom and another passage in the Talmud that explicitly records the practice of reciting Kiddush on Shabbat before dark (Berakhot 26b), it was also customary to bring in Shabbat before dark in Ashkenazic communities until the modern era.

On Shavuot, however, it has become customary to begin the festival only after dark. What is the source of this practice? *Shela* writes in his *Shenei Luhot HaBerit*:

I received [a tradition] from my teacher, the Gaon R. Shlomo of Lublin, who received [this tradition] person to person from the Gaon R. Yaakov Pollack, [that one should] not make Kiddush and eat on the first night of Shavuot until after the stars have appeared. The reason is because it says regarding the counting [of the Omer], "Seven complete weeks there should be"; if one recites Kiddush while it is still day, one slightly detracts from the forty-nine days of *Sefirat HaOmer*, and Shavuot is supposed to be [observed] after the [full] count.<sup>8</sup>

This tradition dates back to R. Yaakov Pollack (1460–1561), the forefather of the Polish rabbinic tradition. Interestingly, R. Horowitz writes that even though one may not recite Kiddush before nightfall, one may still recite the evening prayers early, as even on Shabbat, one may recite the prayers of Motza'ei Shabbat.

R. Yosef Hahn (Frankfurt am Main, 1570–1637), a contemporary of R. Horowitz, records that he had not seen this practice in Germany. Furthermore, he argues that this practice is not only an unnecessary stringency, but it also takes away from the time one could learn at night, as the night is relatively short during the summer.<sup>9</sup> This seems to have been the practice in Germany thereafter as well, as R. Netanel Weil writes in his comments to Rosh, the *Korban Netanel*, that one may recite Kiddush and eat while it is still light on all festival days, including Shavuot.<sup>10</sup> *Magen Avraham*,<sup>11</sup> however, as well as *Peri Hadash*,<sup>12</sup> cite *Shela*, ruling that one should not recite Kiddush until after dark.

Although these early authorities only mention delaying Kiddush until evening, *Taz* records that the congregation delays beginning Maariv so that the count should be "complete."<sup>13</sup> R. Yaakov Emden, however, insists that, on the contrary, one should pray before dark in order to fulfill of the mitzva of adding from the weekday onto Shabbat and Yom Tov (*tosefet Shabbat*).<sup>14</sup>

R. Shimon Sofer, in his *Hitorerut Teshuva*, suggests a different reason to delay Maariv; we should wait until night to ensure that even those who will stay up the entire night will not forget to recite *Keriat*

*Shema* after dark, its proper time.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, R. Natan Gestetner suggests that Maariv is not recited until dark simply to ensure that people do not recite Kiddush before dark.<sup>16</sup> Numerous *Aḥaronim*, such as *Peri Megadim*,<sup>17</sup> the *Shulḥan Arukh HaRav*,<sup>18</sup> the *Kitzur Shulḥan Arukh*,<sup>19</sup> and the *Mishna Berura*,<sup>20</sup> rule that one should not recite Maariv until after dark.

R. Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, Netziv, offers another suggestion in his commentary to the Torah.<sup>21</sup> The Torah says that one observes Shavuot "*be'etzem hayom hazeh*" – "this very same day" – in order to teach that there is no mitzva of *tosefet Shabbat* on Shavuot. We learn that we should observe Shavuot after dark from this verse, and not in order to ensure than our "count" is complete.

#### DAIRY FOODS

One of the most well-known customs associated with Shavuot is the practice of eating dairy foods. R. Isaac Tyrnau (fourteenth to fifteenth century, Austria) records in his *Sefer HaMinhagim*<sup>22</sup> that this custom is alluded to by the verse, "*Minḥa Ḥadasha LaShem BeShavuoteikhem*" (Num. 28:26), the first letters of which spell "*ḥalav*" – milk. This practice has generated much discussion in halakhic literature.

First, aside from the textual hint, what is the reason for this custom? Rema explains that in remembrance of the *shetei halehem*, the two loaves offered in the *Beit HaMikdash* on Shavuot, we wish to eat two loaves of bread at the meal. Since one is not permitted to use the same loaf of bread for both a dairy and meat meal,<sup>23</sup> we eat a dairy meal and then a meat meal, in order to ensure that two loaves are eaten.<sup>24</sup>

*Magen Avraham* offers another reason. He notes that the Zohar equates the seven weeks between Pesah and Shavuot to the seven "clean days" (*shivat neki'im*) that a woman counts before purification. Just as the woman is "pure" after these seven days (after immersing in the *mikveh*), so too, the Jewish people are purified from the impurity of Egypt after *Sefirat HaOmer*. Milk is viewed, symbolically, as antithetical to *tuma*, as a woman who produces milk and nurses generally does not menstruate. We therefore eat dairy foods on Shavuot.<sup>25</sup>

The *Mishna Berura's* reason is possibly the most well known. He explains that after receiving the Torah, the Jewish people were no longer able to eat their meat; they had to properly slaughter and prepare new meat in kosher vessels. This process is time-consuming, and they therefore ate dairy products, whose halakhot are less intricate and which can be prepared in less time.<sup>26</sup> The *Mishna Berura*<sup>27</sup> also cites *Kol Bo*,<sup>28</sup> who explains that since the Torah is compared to milk and honey,<sup>29</sup> it is customary to eat dairy, and even honey, on Shavuot. The *Aḥaronim* offer additional reasons for this custom as well.

Second, this practice raises numerous halakhic concerns. For example, as we learned in chapter 3, one may be obligated to eat meat on Yom Tov as a fulfillment of the mitzva of *simḥat Yom Tov*. Even if one is not obligated to do so, many agree that it is certainly a mitzva to eat meat. The ancient practice of eating dairy on Shavuot seems to contradict this halakha! Indeed, even the *Sefer HaMinhagim* cited above writes that one should still eat meat on Shavuot, as "there is no happiness without meat" (*Pesaḥim* 109a).

R. Tzvi Hirsch Shapiro (1850–1930), the second Munkatcher Rebbe, discusses this issue at length in his *Darkhei Teshuva*.<sup>30</sup> He relates that some suggest eating a dairy meal at night and a meat meal during the day. This is the custom in many communities, and was the practice of R. Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (1899–1985), the Steipler Gaon.<sup>31</sup> R. Shapiro argues, however, that whether or not *simḥat Yom Tov* is biblically mandated at night is a debate among the *Aḥaronim*,<sup>32</sup> and it is therefore improper not to eat meat at night. In addition, Rema, cited above, implies that dairy food is meant to be eaten in addition to meat at the same meal in order to obligate two loaves. For this reason, the *Sefer Yosef Ometz* records that it is customary to eat dairy on the first day of Shavuot, but that one should eat meat afterward.<sup>33</sup>

The *Aḥaronim* note, however, that eating meat after dairy poses serious halakhic concerns, and therefore one should be careful not to violate the laws of *basar behalav* in fulfilling this custom. The Gemara (*Hullin* 105a) explicitly states that after eating cheese, one may eat meat. Rema, in his *Darkhei Moshe* commentary to *Tur*,<sup>34</sup> cites a responsum

of Maharam of Rothenburg, who relates that he once found cheese between his teeth in between meals. He thereafter decreed upon himself to wait after eating cheese the same way he waits after meat, although he was lenient regarding chicken. The *Darkhei Moshe* continues to cite other sources that limit this stringency to cheese that has aged at least six months.<sup>35</sup> In his comments to the *Shulḥan Arukh*, R. Isserlis cites the custom of waiting after hard cheese, even before eating chicken. He notes, however, that others are lenient and says not to rebuke those who are lenient, as long as they do "kinuah," "hadaḥa," and "netilat yadayim." He concludes, however, that "it is good to be stringent."<sup>36</sup>

How should one conduct himself if he wishes to eat both meat and milk at the same meal? Some write that one who does not eat hard cheese can simply clean and rinse one's mouth, and then eat meat at the same meal.<sup>37</sup> R. Ovadia Yosef writes that this is his practice.<sup>38</sup> Others insist that one should eat dairy and then recite the *Birkat HaMazon*,<sup>39</sup> in deference to the Zohar, which implies that one should not eat meat and cheese in the same meal.<sup>40</sup> Still others object to this practice, on the grounds that reciting *Birkat HaMazon* in between the meals constitutes a recitation of a "berakha she'eina tzerikha" (an unnecessary blessing),<sup>41</sup> but R. Moshe Feinstein endorses this practice.<sup>42</sup>

*Darkhei Teshuva*, cited above, offers a different suggestion:

The preferred practice is the custom that I received from my teachers and my ancestors: to eat a dairy meal immediately after the morning prayers, during the Kiddush, without bread, but only as a "seudat arai." And then one should recite the blessing afterward, wait a bit more than an hour, and then eat the day meal with meat and wine. That is the preferred custom in my opinion, and with this, one fulfills one's obligation according to all.<sup>43</sup>

This custom also appears in the *Luah Eretz Yisrael* of R. Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky.

Interestingly, R. Yitzchak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, in his commentary to the Torah, suggests that the custom of eating milk and meat at the same meal affirms the commitment the Jewish people, who, unlike the angels, are able to fulfill the mitzvot with their bodies, with great zeal and alacrity.<sup>44</sup>

## TIKKUN LEIL SHAVUOT

The earliest mention of the practice of staying up the entire night of Shavuot and learning Torah appears in the Zohar:

Therefore, the pious in ancient times did not sleep that night but were studying the Torah, saying, "Let us come and receive this holy inheritance for us and our children in both worlds." That night, the Congregation of Yisrael is an adornment over them, and she comes to unite with the King. Both decorate the heads of those who merit this. R. Shimon said the following when the friends gathered with him that night: Let us come and prepare the jewels of the bride... so that tomorrow she will be bejeweled... and properly ready for the King.<sup>45</sup>

The Zohar connects the learning of Shavuot night to the "wedding" between the Jewish people and the Almighty.

Although this custom is not cited by R. Yosef Karo in the *Shulhan Arukh*, there is written evidence of R. Karo holding a night of learning in Salonica, Greece, in 1533. *Shela* cites a letter from R. Shlomo Alkabetz, a friend of R. Yosef Karo's, and author of the *Lekha Dodi* prayer recited every Friday night, describing that evening and how it eventually led to R. Yosef Karo's move to Tzefat.<sup>46</sup>

By the seventeenth century, this practice was widespread, and *Magen Avraham* records the custom of staying awake all night on Shavuot:

The Zohar says that the early pious ones would stay awake all night on Shavuot and learn Torah. Nowadays, our custom is for most learned people to do so. Perhaps the reason is based on the fact that the Israelites slept all night long and God had to wake them when He wanted to give them the Torah, as it says in the Midrash, and therefore we must repair this.<sup>47</sup>

There are different customs, however, regarding whether one should learn/recite the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, a collection of texts selected for study on Shavuot evening, or whether one should learn "whatever his heart pleases."

This practice of staying up all night has led to numerous and in-depth discussions regarding whether or not one who has not slept may

recite the morning blessings. Concerning *netilat yadayim*, R. Yosef Karo writes that there is a doubt, and Rema rules that one should wash without a *berakha*.<sup>48</sup> The *Mishna Berura*, however, maintains that the *Aharonim* agree that if one uses the bathroom before *Shaharit*, one should then wash one's hands and recite the *berakha* of "al *netilat yadayim*."<sup>49</sup>

Since we follow the opinion that the *birkot hashahar*, the morning blessings, are recited regardless of whether or not one actually received the benefit described by the specific *berakha*, it would seem to follow that one should recite these *berakhot* even if one was awake all night, as they are a daily obligation. This, indeed, is the ruling of the *Arukh HaShulhan*<sup>50</sup> and Arizal. The *Mishna Berura*, however, cites those who question whether one who did not sleep should recite "Elokai neshama" and "hamaavir sheina," and therefore suggests that one hear these *berakhot* from someone who has slept.<sup>51</sup>

The *Mishna Berura* cites a debate among the *Aharonim* regarding the *birkot haTorah*: *Hayei Adam*, *Peri Hadash*, and *Gra* rule that one should not say the *birkot haTorah* if one was awake all night, while *Magen Avraham* and *Eliya Rabba* rule that one should say the *berakhot*. Ideally, one should try to hear the *berakhot* from another person who has slept, but if this is not possible, one may have in mind that the second blessing preceding the morning *Keriat Shema* ("Ahava Rabba" in Ashkenazi congregations and "Ahavat Olam" in the Sephardic tradition) should exempt him from *birkot haTorah*. One should then study a verse or *Mishna* after one's *tefilla*.<sup>52</sup>

Interestingly, the *Mishna Berura*<sup>53</sup> cites the opinion of R. Akiva Eiger, who offers a brilliant solution to this quandary. He suggests that if one sleeps a *sheinat keva* (significant slumber) the day before, one may then recite *birkot haTorah* the next morning, even if one remained awake all night. He argues that, "mimah nafshakh," whichever opinion one follows, one would be so obligated – if the *berakha* is meant to be recited daily regardless of whether one slept, one should always recite it on Shavuot morning, and if it is considered a *birkat hamitzva*, then it should be recited after any interruption, such as a long afternoon nap! Therefore, everyone would agree that in such a case one should recite *birkot haTorah* in such a case.

Another well-known custom of Shavuot is to adorn the *beit kneset* with greenery. Over the course of centuries, this custom developed in different directions, and numerous reasons were given for this practice. Some even expressed opposition to this practice.

It seems that this custom first developed in fifteenth-century Ashkenaz. R. Yaakov Moelin, known as Maharil, records that it was customary to cover the floor of the *beit kneset* with flowers, "*lesimhat haregel*" (for the joy of the festival).<sup>54</sup> While Maharil speaks of adorning the *beit kneset*, the *Sefer Leket Yosher*<sup>55</sup> writes that his teacher, R. Yisrael Isserlin, author of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, put greenery on the floor of his home. It seems that the purpose of this early German custom was to beautify and refresh the *beit kneset*, or even one's house, in honor of the festival. Indeed, these sources emphasize that "*besamim*," pleasant-smelling greenery, was placed on the floors.

Writing over a century later in Poland, Rema offers a different reason: "It is customary to place greenery in the *beit kneset* and the homes as a remembrance of the happiness of the giving of the Torah."<sup>56</sup> In what way does greenery remind us of the giving of the Torah? R. Mordekhai Yoffe explains in his *Levush Malkhut*, that the greenery reminds us of the plants that adorned Har Sinai, as the verse warns, "neither the flocks nor herds should feed before that mount" (Ex. 34:3) – implying that the mountain was filled with plant life.<sup>57</sup>

*Magen Avraham* offers a third reason.<sup>58</sup> He records that it is customary to place trees in the *beit kneset* on Shavuot to remind us that the fruits of the trees are judged on Shavuot (Rosh HaShana 1:2) and that we should pray for them.

*Hayei Adam* records that the Vilna Gaon abolished the custom of putting trees in the *beit kneset*, as it resembles the current custom of non-Jews.<sup>59</sup> Despite the Gaon's objections, however, it is common practice to adorn the *beit kneset* with greenery for Shavuot, and the *Aharonim* offer numerous defenses of this practice.