



Chag haShavuot

Interesting and Unusual Shavuot Facts

- Shavuot has several different names in the Bible. In Exodus 34:22 and Deuteronomy 16:10 it is referred to as *Chag ha-Shavuot*, "Feast of Weeks," one of the harvest festivals on which pilgrims brought offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. In Numbers 28:26 it is called *Yom ha-Bikkurim* or "Day of the First Fruits"; Shavuot was a celebration of the harvest of the first fruits of late spring, and dates, figs, grapes, pomegranates, and olives, in addition to wheat and barley, were brought to the Temple by worshipers. In Exodus 23:16 Shavuot is called *Chag ha-Katzir*, meaning the "Harvest Feast"; Shavuot occurred at the conclusion to the barley harvest, which had begun at Passover, and began the early spring wheat harvest, since in biblical Israel the month of Sivan signaled the end of spring and the beginning of summer. The wheat-harvest aspect of Shavuot was observed by bringing to the Temple an offering of bread loaves baked from the new grain harvest. The pilgrims who came to Jerusalem would gather and celebrate the festival joyously. In modern times this agricultural event is celebrated in Israel's *kibbutzim* with dancing and singing. The commandment to celebrate this holiday is found in Leviticus 23:15-21.



- In the Talmud Shavuot is known as "*Atzeret*," "a festive assembly" of all the people. We know this word from another holiday, *Shemini Atzeret* (see Num. 29:35), where its meaning seems to be "remain with Me [God] for another day." This implies that "*atzeret*" represents a completion or a final part of a festival; thus Shavuot could be seen as the conclusion of the festival of Pesach just as *Shemini Atzeret* is the conclusion of the festival of Sukkot.
- Unlike other holidays, Shavuot does not begin at sundown. Since the *mitzvah* to count the *Omer* is to count a *full* 49 days, Shavuot does not officially begin until three stars are visible in the night sky—well after sundown. The Shavuot kiddush is not recited till certain nightfall.
- Also unlike the other holidays mentioned in the Bible, Shavuot is not given a specific date for its celebration. Before the calendar became mathematically determined, the beginning of each month was established by observation, making the length of the months somewhat variable. Since there are two new moons between Passover and Shavuot, this variability could result in Shavuot falling on either the 5th or 6th of Sivan.



- The Torah states the following about Shavuot's observance: *Shiv'ah shavu'ot tisporlach mehachel chermesh bakamah tachel lispor shiv'ah shavu'ot*, "Then count seven weeks for yourself—from the time that you first put the sickle to the standing grain, you must count seven weeks" (Deut. 16:9). But this statement is not terribly useful in setting the date; it's ambiguous at best. When exactly do you start to

count? Leviticus 23:15 attempts to define the start of counting by stating, *Usfartem lachem mimochorat hashabbat miyom havi'achem et-omer hatnufah sheva shabbatot tmimot tiheyenah*, "You shall count for yourself from the full day following the holiday when you brought the *omer* as a wave offering [this is Pesach], seven complete weeks they shall be." Here "*shabbat*" is translated into its root meaning, "complete" or "perfect," but it could also mean "Shabbat" itself, so the observance of Shavuot could have actually been based upon counting Shabbatot and not weeks!

The Sadducees understood the term "*shabbat*" in these verses as a proper noun, i.e., that "*shabbat*" only referred to Saturday, the seventh day, so for them, the day of the first fruits of the barley harvest always fell on the day following a Shabbat, meaning Shavuot would also only fall on a Sunday. The Pharisees, however, properly interpreted "*shabbat*" as meaning a "time of rest" (c.f. Lev. 25:4 where the entire sabbatical year, *shemittah*, is called a *shabbat*), and for them the "time of rest" referred to the previously mentioned festival of Pesach (b. *Menachot* 95b). Under their view, Shavuot always fell on the 6th of Sivan, the 50th day after the first day of Pesach. During rabbinic times, the Pharisees' view became the accepted practice.

- In biblical times, Shavuot was a major holiday: one of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrimage, or "walking," holidays (along with Sukkot and Pesach). This holiday has completely changed in character from its biblical purpose and description, more so than any other holiday: the Bible describes Shavuot as being an agricultural holiday whose purpose was for the people to visit the Temple bringing the first of the season's crops. Agriculture was the basis of the economy, so tithes of agricultural produce were central to the religious observance. No description exists of how Shavuot was observed before the Babylonian exile, but a description does exist in the *Mishnah* of how Jews celebrated it in the days of the Second Temple.

"Those who lived near [Jerusalem] brought fresh figs and grapes, but those from a distance brought dried figs and raisins [fresh fruit would rot during a long trip]. An ox with horns bedecked with gold and with an olive-branch crown on its head led the way. The flute was played before them until they were nigh to Jerusalem; and when they arrived close to Jerusalem they sent messengers in advance, and ornamentally arrayed their *bikkurim* [first fruits]. The governors and chiefs and treasurers [of the Temple] went out to meet them. According to the rank of the entrants used they to go forth. All the skilled artisans of Jerusalem would stand up before them and greet them, 'Brethren, men of such and such a place, we are delighted to welcome you....'" —b. *Bikkurim* 3

After the destruction of the Temple, the observance of Shavuot—marked by bringing the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple—was no longer possible, so the Rabbis sought to give the holiday a new purpose. Shavuot was the only holiday that the Bible did not associate with any historical or profound religious experience. The Rabbis, in seeking a historical basis for the holiday, noted how the Torah linked Pesach, the Omer counting, and Mount Sinai. Based on Exodus 19:1, which reads, "In the third month after the children of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on the same day they came into the wilderness of Sinai," and using some creative calculations, the sages linked Shavuot to Pesach, and thus Shavuot became the anniversary of the Giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. For the authors of the Babylonian Talmud (*Pesachim* 68b), Shavuot became *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, "The Season of the



Giving of Our Law."

- Unlike all of the other holidays, there are no special *mitzvot* associated with Shavuot other than the bringing of the two bread loaves, symbolizing the first fruits of the wheat harvest.
- The Rabbis did not write a Talmud tractate for Shavuot as they did for all the other holidays, such as *Pesachim* for Pesach, *Succah* for Sukkot, *Yoma* for Yom Kippur, and others.
- At Shavuot it is customary to decorate the synagogue with greenery. Tradition maintains that Mount Sinai, despite being in the wilderness of the Sinai desert, was verdant, which is implied by the verse in Exodus 34:3, "...neither let the flocks nor herds graze." Then the mountain miraculously flowered and bloomed in honor of the giving of the Law. Another tradition specifically links roses with the giving of the Law; Esther 8:14 states "And the decree [or law] was proclaimed in Shushan." This verse was reinterpreted to infer that the Law was given with a rose, or *shoshan* in Hebrew. The custom of decorating synagogues with greenery, including flowers, on Shavuot is mentioned in many halakhic works and possibly dates at least to the time of the second Temple. According to the *Mishnah (Bikkurim 3:3)*, oxen leading the processions bringing the first fruits to the Temple wore wreaths of olive branches entwined on their horns. Because of this tradition, Shavuot is known to Persian Jews as the "Feast of the Flowers," and to Italian Jews as the "Feast of the Roses."
- All Jewish holidays are intimately associated with food, and Shavuot is no exception. Eating dairy foods is customary on this holiday—cheese blintzes, cheese kreplach, and cheesecake are popular. Where did this food association come from? It's a long shot, but one possibility can be found in the term *har gavnunim*, "many-peaked mountain," found in Psalm 68:16. The Hebrew word *gevinah* means "cheese," so some commentators immediately linked Mount Sinai to cheese (*Shemot Rabbah 2:4*), and the association stuck. Another possible source is the idea that the Israelites who received the Torah at Sinai were like little babies, being introduced to the Torah's wonders for the first time. Just as the first food of newborns is milk, legend has it that Jews, in commemorating the Law-giving at Sinai, should eat only dairy foods. Yet another explanation for Shavuot's dairy custom arose from allusion to the verse in the Song of Songs (4:11) that "knowledge of the Torah is like milk and honey under the tongue." This verse also gave rise to the custom of serving at each meal two *challot* that are sweet and baked with honey. There are yet other explanations, but one truly interesting one may be characterized as a "*kashrut* malfunction." Before the giving of the Torah, the Children of Israel did not follow the laws of *kashrut*—those laws were unknown. Then on the day of the Law-giving, the first Shavuot, they learned that their utensils were not *kosher* and thus unfit for use. Since they found themselves without *kosher* meats or utensils to prepare *kosher* meats, the Israelites were forced to eat only uncooked dairy foods, since it's much simpler to *kosher* utensils that have only been used with foods that haven't been cooked. Yemenite Jews, however, believe otherwise. In their tradition, Abraham knew and followed all 613 *mitzvot*, and transmitted this knowledge to his children. The Yemenites believe that the Jews of the exodus did have *kosher* meats and utensils, so the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot never became adopted.

Apart from these fanciful reasons for the custom of eating dairy foods, there is one compelling one that might account for this custom. Spring festivals of many ancient societies were based upon dairy products, since the spring was the time for the birth of many agricultural animals

such as cattle and goats which were the principal sources of milk products like cheese, curds, and yogurt. These spring festivals were common elements of the societies of the ancient middle east, including those of Canaan. According to Theodor Gaster, the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother's milk found in the Torah is twice linked with the commandment of the Shavuot first-fruits sacrifice (Theodor Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, Anchor Books, 1961). It's possible that such a ritual was practiced by the Canaanites, and its rejection by the Israelites led to their eating only dairy foods at the first-fruits festival.

- Jewish tradition maintains that God chose to give the Torah to Israel in the wilderness rather than in the Land of Israel. Why? According to a *midrash* in *Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael*



The Torah was given in public, openly in a free place. For had the Torah been given in the land of Israel, the Israelites could have said to the nations of the world: "You have no share in it." But now that it was given in the wilderness publicly and openly in a place that is free to all, everyone wishing to accept it could come and accept it (*Midrash* on Ex. 19:2). Why was the Torah not given in the Land of Israel? In order that the nations of the world should not have the excuse for saying, "Because it was given in Israel's land, therefore we have not accepted it." Another reason: to avoid dissension among the tribes. Else one might have said, "In my territory the Torah was given." And the other might have said, "In my territory the Torah was given." Therefore, the Torah was given in the desert, publicly and openly, in a place belonging to no one. was to demonstrate that the Torah was intended for the whole world, not just the Jews, since the wilderness was not owned by any one nation (*Midrash* on Ex. 20:2).

- Tradition maintains that King David was born and died on Shavuot. In the Book of Ruth, which is read on this holiday, we learn that Ruth was an ancestor of David. Also, Ruth, as a convert to Judaism, accepted the Law of the Torah voluntarily, just as the Children of Israel did at Mount Sinai. Thus there is a link between the spring harvest, which is the major theme of the Book of Ruth, the Giving of the Law, and Shavuot.
- Exodus states that when Moses came down from the mountain after receiving the Torah the second time, his face shone. The word used in the Torah to describe this is *koran*, from the Hebrew root *keren*, meaning "to shine." Another meaning for *keren* is "horn," which is how early Christian translations of the Bible rendered the term. This is why, when Michaelangelo made his sculpture of Moses, he showed Moses with horns on his forehead.
- In a charming custom of pre-modern European Jewish communities, teaching Torah to children began on Shavuot. The children were taken to the synagogue at daybreak, where they were taught to recognize the letters of a Hebrew verse written on a slate, a verse they had been taught to say as soon as they could speak. One such verse was, "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe,*" "Moses commanded us the Torah." The teacher would name each letter and the child would repeat the letter. As the child mastered each letter, it was marked with a drop of honey, which the child then licked off.
- The Sephardim practice an unusual ritual for Shavuot. After the ark is first opened on Shavuot morning, congregants read a *ketubah* (marriage contract) between God, the groom, and Israel, the bride. In the text of the *ketubah* God invites the bride to His palace and promises to bind Himself to her forever. The bride replies, "*Na'aseh v'nishmah,*" "We will do and we will listen."

These are the identical words that were said at Mount Sinai by the Children of Israel. And the groom's gift to the bride is given—the Torah and the oral law.



- According to a Jewish legend, at exactly midnight on Shavuot, the heavens open for an instant and God will respond favorably to any prayer that is spoken then. According to one commentator, it's likely that this story was told to keep children—not to mention sleepy adults—awake and alert during the night's study session. The origin of the midnight time for prayer and study lies in Psalm 119:62: "At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee." This psalm is attributed to David, who, according to the Talmud (b. *Sukkah* 29b), was a notorious insomniac, being satisfied with only "sixty breaths of sleep."
- In the Zohar, Judaism's major mystical work, there is a passage that praises those who stay awake all night in anticipation of receiving the Torah. Why did this custom arise in the first place? A *midrash* relates that God revealed the Law at Mount Sinai at noon, but the Children of Israel had overslept and Moses had to rouse them. This gave rise to the custom of staying awake all night as a way of atoning for their failure to be awake and alert when God appeared. The Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria of Safed), a major figure in Jewish mysticism, emphasized the importance of prayer and meditation late at night. The custom of saying the *tikkun chatzot*, "midnight service" had existed for many centuries; the custom had grown out of talmudic practice. By the time of the Ari, the prayer sessions had become divided into two parts: *tikkun Rachel*, said at night and *tikkun Leah*, said early in the morning (both prayers were named after Jacob's wives). Prayer at these times was said to connect the individual with the daily creations of light and darkness.

Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulchan Arukh*, is credited being one of the creators, in Salonica in 1533, of the all-night study session on the eve of Shavuot, called *tikkun leil Shavuot* ("service for Shavuot night"). Karo moved to Safed in 1536 and introduced the *tikkun leil Shavuot* to the kabbalists of the town. Fortunately, coffee had been introduced in Safed several years earlier, in 1528. It appears that the availability of coffee greatly facilitated all-night study; people who had participated in *tikkun Rachel* and *tikkun Leah* could now spend the entire night in study. Elliott Horowitz (Department of Jewish History, Bar-Ilan University) provides us with a fascinating reconstruction about the development of late-night and all-night rituals as opposed to early morning rituals in 17th-18th century Jewish mystical circles. Coffee arrived in Venice in 1615. The first public coffee house opened in 1640. In 1655, for the first time, Italian Jews accepted the *tikkun leil Shavuot* ritual. Horowitz notes that during the next thirty years no less than five editions of *tikkun leil Shavuot* texts were published in Venice. Similar events occurred in other areas of Europe coinciding with the rise of coffeehouses. In Worms, the Jewish community was charged with supplying coffee specifically for Shavuot night. It seems that coffee thus facilitated greater participation in a ritual that demanded wakefulness through the night. [Horowitz, Elliott, "Coffee, Coffeehouses and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 14:1 (Spring 1989) 17-46]

- Shavuot never begins on Shabbat, but the second day of the holiday can fall on Shabbat (in the diaspora). This leads to two interesting facts: first, the haftarah for the second day, taken from the third chapter of Habakkuk, is never read in Israel, and it is the least frequent

haftarah read on Shabbat, since Shavuot II seldom falls on Shabbat. Also, the Torah reading on Shavuot II Shabbat is taken from Deuteronomy 14-16, but in Israel the normal *parashah* is read, since Shavuot is only one day there. (Reform congregations also only celebrate one day of Shavuot.) This means that the Torah readings in Israel and the diaspora will be out of step until the next double portion is reached, which happens with Chukkat-Balak. (Shavuot II is not the only diaspora holiday that can cause the readings to get out of sync—it also happens in years when the eighth day of Pesach falls on Shabbat, and the same solution is employed, but using a different double portion.)

Reform Jews of North America handle the problem of getting their Torah readings out of step with other denominations in the diaspora by splitting Naso into two parts. Since it's a long *parashah*, it's easily divided into two. Doing this puts the North American Reform community back into step with the rest of the diaspora by the week following Shavuot, while European liberal communities continue to follow the same Torah-reading schedule as Israel.

- According to the *midrash* (*Shemot Rabbah* 2, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1, and *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 8), Mount Sinai has eight names, as follows:



1. *Har Sinai*: from the word *sineh*, "bush," referring to the burning bush. Also, Sinai is related to the word *sinah*, "hatred" or "rejection." God rejected the angels by giving the Torah to human beings instead of to the angels.
2. *Har ha-Elohim*: "God's Mountain," because the Torah was revealed there to the Jewish people.
3. *Beit Imi*: "My Mother's House." By accepting the Torah, the Jews were born as a nation.
4. *Har Choreb*: from the word *cherev*, "sword." The Torah empowers special Torah courts, called *sanhedrin*, with authority to try capital cases.
5. *Har Chemed*: "Desirable Mountain." God chose Mount Sinai as the place from which to give the most desirable of His treasures, the Torah.
6. *Har Bashan*: from the word *shen*, "tooth." Sustenance and blessing come to the world in the merit of Torah study and observance. Just as teeth prepare the food for digestion, so too the Torah brings nourishment to the world.

7. *Har Gavnonim*: from the word *gevina*, "cheese." Cheese is a metaphor for purity, probably because it's made from pure white milk.
8. *Har Moriah*: "Mountain of Teaching," where God taught Moses the Torah.