



# Shavuot:

## *the basics*

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Unlocking Jewish

## What Does The Word Shavuot Mean?

“*Shavuot*” is the Hebrew word for “weeks.” The Torah tells us to count seven full weeks after the second day of Passover to Shavuot. In ancient times, the Israelites were an agricultural people who brought sheaves of grain as gifts to the Temple for these seven weeks. On the fiftieth day, Shavuot, they brought loaves of bread made out of the new grain.

The holiday is also called *Hag HaBikkurim* (Hebrew for Holiday of the First Fruit) as it marks the beginning of the fruit harvest when the first ripe fruits were brought to the Temple as an offering of thanksgiving.

## What Does The Holiday Of Shavuot Celebrate?

Seven weeks after the Hebrew slaves left Egypt— seven weeks after Passover— the Israelites were transformed into the Jewish people when they received the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

The tradition tells us that everyone who is a Jew today stood at the mountain with the children of Israel— and the “strangers in the camp” were there too (Deuteronomy 29:9-14). At *Pesach* (Passover), we are all encouraged to see ourselves as having been in Egypt. At Shavuot, we are encouraged to see ourselves as part of the crowd that stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. You can get a sense of the awesome power of that encounter by reading the story starting with Exodus 18: “There was thunder and lightning, a thick cloud, the sound of a *shofar* (ram’s horn) and smoke. The earth itself quaked!” The Torah tells us that the people “saw the thunder.” So powerful was Sinai, our senses became interchangeable.



## How Was The Torah Created?

The tradition tells us we received the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, at Mt. Sinai. In Exodus and Deuteronomy, there are several different versions of what happened. The sages have interpreted the different version in several ways:

- God dictated all five books of the Torah, word for word.
- God gave the Ten Commandments, in full, to Moses.
- Some say God gave Moses just the first commandment, or only the first word, or even the first letter.
- The Torah is a response, written by men, to the encounter at Sinai.
- The Torah is a collection of our mythic stories, which teach and direct our lives with their wisdom.

Whichever interpretation(s) you believe, all agree that it was a unique spiritual experience.

No matter what happened back then, we do know one thing. Somewhere, sometime, something occurred that was so awe-inspiring that a people was born, their belief system founded on the principle that they are holy, connected to one another and to the Source— whatever that may be— that conferred meaning on them and on life everywhere. And in response to that discovery, the Jews pledged themselves, individually and collectively, to join their will to God’s and to seek to increase holiness in the world.

[Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, *The Tapestry of Jewish Time: A Spiritual Guide to Holidays and Life-Cycle Events.*]



## What Makes Shavuot One Of The Three Pilgrimage Festivals?

The Torah tells us that Jews would travel on Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot by foot to the Temple in Jerusalem. In Hebrew, these three holidays are known as *regalim*, which translates to “by feet”— a fitting name for pilgrimage festivals. Shavuot instructions, according to Deuteronomy 26, were to bring a gift of the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple as an acknowledgement that the land and its produce were the fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham. Thousands of people converged to share in holiday rituals on these special days (*chagim*). Each of these holidays has both an agricultural story and a historical story.

## How Is Shavuot Celebrated?

Shavuot begins at sundown with a holiday meal which includes blessings for candles, the holiday *kiddush* (blessing over the wine) and *shehechyanu* (prayer of gratitude for reaching this day). Because the Torah mentions the offering of two loaves of bread made from new grain, it is a custom to have two loaves of bread on the table. Some people bake two loaves of challah side-by-side, leaving them connected so they look like the two tablets of the commandments.

It is customary to eat a dairy meal at least once during Shavuot. One reason is that it is a reminder of the promise that Israel would be a land flowing with “milk and honey.” Another reason might be because



the Israelites abstained from eating meat as part of their purification before receiving the Torah. No one really knows how this tradition started, but it is a good excuse to indulge in dairy delicacies.



Rice pudding and cheese-filled filo are common dishes in the Sephardic (Mediterranean) Jewish communities. Jews of Kurdistan prepare a dish with ground wheat cooked in sour milk and butter that is served with dumplings. In Triploi, women bake wafers in the shape of a ladder that helped Moses to the top of Mt. Sinai or in the shape of the tablets. Ashkenazi (European) Jews eat cheese filled crepes called blintzes and bake cheesecakes.

In the medieval period, mystics from Safed studied all night in preparation for the opening of heaven at midnight. They believed they would hear the echo of the giving of the Torah. Some synagogues emulate this tradition with all-night study sessions, taking turns reading from the Torah and teaching each other until dawn. This ritual is called *tikkun leil Shavuot* (literally “healing for Shavuot night,” it is known as a “night of learning [for Shavuot]”).

Families can replicate this custom and make Shavuot a time when children are allowed to stay up late reading bible stories or watching movies with biblical themes while enjoying dairy snacks.

What is added to the regular synagogue service? *Hallel*, a collection of verses from Psalms, is traditionally chanted on all festivals. Before the Torah portion of the week, which includes the reading of the Ten Commandments, the Book of Ruth is read.

Some synagogues decorate the sanctuary with greens. Some act out the covenant between God and the children of Israel as a wedding under a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), with God as the groom, the Jewish people as the bride and the Torah as the wedding contract.

## Why Do We Read The Book Of Ruth On Shavuot?

Each of the pilgrimage festivals has a book from Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) associated with it. The Book of Ruth is the reading for Shavuot because it both tells of the grain harvest and of Ruth's acceptance of Judaism and Torah, the two themes of Shavuot. Ruth's statement to her mother-in-law Naomi, "Your people shall be my people and your God my God," is considered a model of covenantal commitment to Judaism.

Ruth is even more relevant in our time when religious affiliation is increasingly a matter of individual self-expression and those who formally choose Judaism bring a special energy and commitment as a gift to Jewish communities.

## Why Is Shavuot A Time For Confirmation Ceremonies?

Shavuot represents the time when Israel confirmed its faith and its commitment to Judaism by accepting the Torah and a covenant with God. Confirmation is a group ceremony that takes place at the end of the 10th grade which allows students to "confirm" their faith and commitment to Judaism.



... The moment of Revelation at Sinai is not an event that only happened in the past. Rather Sinai, the giving and receiving of Torah, is an ongoing experience. God's voice calls from Sinai every day. The Torah is given every day. The difference between Passover and Shavuot is that the Exodus is over, while revelation continues.

... Our task is to hear anew and renew the Torah every day.

[Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice.*]





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