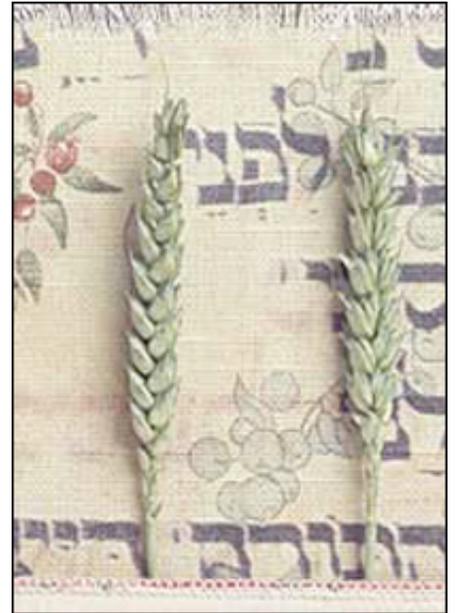


About Shavuot

by Deb Edery

Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and commemorates when the first fruits were harvested and brought to the Temple. Plan a discussion about Shavuot that will be interesting to all people, Jewish or not. Share the following information and discuss.



What Does It Mean?

Shavuot has several names: The Festival of Weeks, The Festival of the Harvest, The Day of First Fruits, and The Holiday of the Giving of the Torah. The word *Shavuot* means "weeks" because it is seven weeks (50 days) after Passover.

The festival commemorates the time the Israelites received the Torah at Mount Sinai. (Although free from the bondage of slavery, they were not totally free until they agreed to accept laws by which to live, and that was the Torah.) By accepting the laws of the Torah and the Ten Commandments, the Jews accepted responsibility for their actions.

Shavuot, the most overlooked of the Jewish festivals, is a celebration of rebirth. It is also a time to review our values and relationships. It is a time to reap and a time to plant.

First Fruits



Originally, Shavuot was an agricultural festival celebrated by pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, where Jews offered the first fruits of their harvest. In ancient times, Jewish farmers, following the laws of the Torah, checked their fields and orchards prior to Shavuot for the very first growing fruit. (There are seven foods listed in the Torah as being special to the Land of Israel—wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.) When the farmers found the first fruit of a species beginning to grow, they tied a string around it to mark it. After it ripened, the farmers put this first

fruit, along with other first fruits that grew on their properties, into a special basket and took them to the Holy Temple on Shavuot.

People from all over the land of Israel would bring their first fruits in baskets to the Temple in Jerusalem, walking or even dancing to the accompaniment of musical instruments. Thus, Shavuot became known as a "foot festival." Like many holidays, Shavuot celebrates nature and God's gifts to us through the first harvest. It is a time of joy and a time to celebrate our dependence on nature.

Customs

There are several customs associated with the celebration of Shavuot.

Study group: One is the custom of an all-night study group of the sacred texts. There are a few reasons for this, among them the legend that the Israelites unintentionally fell asleep on the night before receiving the Ten Commandments. Many congregations hold student confirmation ceremonies on Shavuot.

Dairy foods: Many people eat dairy foods, such as blintzes or cheesecake. Although the origin of the custom is unknown, some connect it to the description of Israel as "a land flowing with milk and honey." Others believe that with the giving of the Torah, the Jews became obligated to observe the laws of kosher. Since no cattle could be slaughtered, nor could utensils be koshered on the day the Torah was given, people ate dairy on that day.

Plant flowers: Recent customs are to plant flowers around the synagogue on the day before Shavuot. Sometimes grass is spread on the floor of the synagogue, a custom related to the agricultural aspects of this festival or to remind the people of the grass upon which the Israelites stood while receiving the Torah. In Israeli agricultural communities, some people dress in white and ride on carts filled with the produce of the late spring harvest.

No wedding bells: Traditional Jews do not perform wedding ceremonies, cut their hair, or attend live-music events on Shavuot.

Book of Ruth



Special readings during Shavuot include the Book of Ruth. The Book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi, who, after the death of her husband and two sons, decides to return to Bethlehem. She tells her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to return to their own mothers and remarry. Orpah reluctantly leaves. Ruth, however, chooses to follow Naomi.

The two women return to Bethlehem. It is the time of the barley harvest, and in order to support her mother-in-law

and herself, Ruth goes to work in the fields. The field belongs to a man named Boaz, who is kind to her because he has heard of her loyalty to her mother-in-law. Ruth eventually marries Boaz, and they have a son, Obed (who by custom is also considered Naomi's grandson). It is another beautiful biblical story that demonstrates the strength and courage of women in ancient times.

Decorating for Shavuot

On Shavuot, modern Israeli florists enjoy a brisk business, and supermarkets and malls host special promotions on houseplants. Schoolchildren wear wreaths and help decorate the house with the flowers and leaves they bring from school. One of the reasons for decorating with greenery on Shavuot is that it was said that when the Torah was given on Mount Sinai, the barren desert exploded with blooming flowers, as if the earth itself rejoiced.

Discussion Starters

- Why do you think the Ten Commandments are so important?
 - What do you think of the custom of not getting married on Shavuot?
 - What else do you know about the story of Ruth? How do you think the roles of women have changed over the years?
 - What would you eat if you could eat only dairy foods during Shavuot?
 - Of the seven foods listed in the Torah (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates), which is your favorite?
 - Did you ever grow your own fruit? What was it?
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