

Shavuos Roadmap

Table of Contents

1. The Facts
 - The When and Why of Shavuos
 - Calendar Date
 - Mention in the Torah
2. The Story of the Giving of the Torah
3. The First Fruits
4. Customs in Synagogue
 - Akdamus
 - Reading the Ten Commandments
 - All-Night Learning
 - The Megillah of Ruth
 - Greenery
5. Holiday Concepts
 - First, Derech Eretz
 - Do First, Ask Later
 - Tailor-Made
 - One Man, One Heart
 - Dairy Delights
6. A Shavuos Tale



I. The Facts

The When and Why of Shavuos

The holiday of Shavuos occurs on the 6th of the Hebrew month of Sivan. It is celebrated as a two-day holiday outside of Israel. As with all Jewish holidays, it begins on sunset the night before the first day. On this year's secular calendar (2010), the dates are May 19 and 20.

You may recall from our Pesach Roadmap that the period between Passover and Shavuos is called the Omer. It marks the seven weeks between the Jewish people's Exodus from Egypt (celebrated during Passover) and their receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai (which is the event that Shavuos commemorates). The 49 days of the Omer are verbally counted, and the 50th day of the Omer is Shavuos. The word Shavuos means "weeks," which refers to the counting of the seven weeks.

Shavuos is also called:

- "Atzeres," which means the cessation or conclusion. This is the name by which Shavuos is called in the Talmud. Some commentators explain that Shavuos is actually the end of a festive period that begins with Pesach. Another explanation is that all productive work (besides certain food preparation) is prohibited. Thus "Atzeres" refers to the cessation of work.
- Yom HaBikurim: The Day of the First Fruits. Shavuos was the time when the first fruits of the Seven Species were brought to the Holy Temple to be given to the Kohen (priest).
- Chag HaKatzir: The harvest festival
- In addition, the prayers on Shavuos refer to the holiday as Z'man Mattan Toraseinu: the time of the giving of our Torah.

Shavuos is mentioned in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) as one of the three pilgrimage festivals, when the Jews gathered at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. These include Sukkos and Pesach as well. The Torah (Numbers 28:26-31) instructs the Jewish people, "Also in the day of the first-fruits, when you bring a new meal-offering to the G-d in your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy assembly. You shall not do any type of productive work."

Unlike the other festivals, Shavuot is not designated by date in the Torah. Instead, the Torah instructs us to count 49 days from “the day after Shabbos.” The Talmud explains this to mean the second day of Passover, which follows the first day of Passover, referred to as a Shabbos. These 49 days are designated as the Counting of the Omer, which we discuss in our Pesach booklet. The Torah commands us to verbally count these days one by one, according to a special formulation that keeps track of the days and weeks.

This seven-week period is a time that is specially primed for spiritual growth and striving, since it is during this period that the Jews lifted themselves out of their slave mentality and prepared to become G-d’s “nation of priests.” This is a reason why Shavuot, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, was designated to follow the period of the Omer, rather than be fixed by calendar date.

II. The Story of the Giving of the Torah

The Torah relates in minute detail the astounding events of G-d’s revelation of the Torah. This momentous occasion, singular in all of the history of the world, was witnessed by at least 3 million men, women and children. It seared a permanent imprint into their souls, which became the Jewish people’s “spiritual DNA” for all generations. Parent to child, teacher to student, this knowledge has come down through the ages in a traceable chain. Only approximately 100 intergenerational transmissions need be counted to get from Mount Sinai to your own family.

But the Jew’s magnetic attraction to the truth found in the Torah is not just a product of teaching; in reality, every Jew was present at its giving. Our Sages teach us that every Jewish soul that ever existed or will exist in the future was present at Mount Sinai. The Torah we learn in our lifetimes resounds so strongly within us because we are not really learning new, foreign concepts. Rather, we are merely reawakening something already embedded in our essence. To a Jew, Torah has the sweet taste of home. Below are some of the details of this world-altering event that brought moral structure to the entire world.

- The Jews had been traveling from Egypt for almost two months. They encamped in the wilderness, opposite Mount Sinai.
- G-d proposed a covenant to Moses: “You have seen what I did to Egypt, and that I have borne you on the wings of eagles and brought you to Me. And now, if you listen well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all people. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

- Moses relayed G-d's message to the elders, and without asking for any further clarification of what the covenant would demand of them, they agreed to accept it.
- G-d explained that he would appear in a thick cloud and speak so that all could hear His voice, thus reaffirming the people's faith in Moses and his power of prophecy. He described a three-day purification process that the people would have to undergo in order to be prepared to stand in such close proximity to G-d's presence. He also established the boundaries where they would be permitted to stand.
- "On the third day when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning and a heavy cloud on the mountain, and the sound of the shofar was very powerful and the entire people that were in the camp shuddered. Moses brought the people forth from the camp toward G-d, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. All of Mount Sinai was smoking because G-d had descended upon it in the fire; its smoke ascended like the smoke of the furnace and the entire mountain shuddered exceedingly. The sound of the shofar grew continually much stronger; Moses would speak and G-d would respond to him with a voice." (Exodus 19:16-19)
- Moses went up to the mountain, but G-d told him to descend again and warn the priests and the people not to trespass over the boundaries that had been set, "lest Hashem burst forth against them." (Exodus 19:22)
- G-d issued the Ten Commandments in the hearing of all those assembled. The experience was so intense that the people begged Moses to act as an intermediary for them. "You speak to us and we shall hear; let G-d not speak to us lest we die." (Exodus 20:16) G-d then taught the Torah to Moses, a process which took 40 days. This included the laws transmitted orally and expounded upon in the Talmud.

The Family Legacy

The Torah is called "Morasha Kehillas Yaakov – the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob," which in simple English means the inheritance of the Jewish people. Given in public to the entire nation, it has never been the exclusive property of the learned or the elite of our people. It belongs to every Jew, and the Torah itself ensures that it will remain so with this commandment transmitted from Moses to the people of Israel:

"Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld. Do not remove this memory from your heart all the days of your life. Teach your children and your children's children about the day that you stood before the Lord your G-d at Chorev (Sinai)..." (Deuteronomy 4:9-13)

The Torah can be learned at any level. The smallest children and the most phenomenal geniuses have all found themselves at home in Torah study.

III. The First Fruits

The First Bite

Little is as tantalizing as the first bite of a tasty delicacy. For a farmer, the ripest and choicest of his fruits are enticing indeed. He has labored hard for an entire year, plowing, planting, pruning, tending and harvesting, and his natural tendency would be to literally enjoy the fruits of his labors.

The Torah teaches, however, that in the midst of one's experiencing the sense of satisfaction over a job well done, a person must shake himself awake. He must instill in his heart the immense gratitude due to G-d for giving him his success. For a farmer, especially, it should be clear that all the plowing, planting and pruning in the world cannot guarantee a crop. Weather, insects and dozens of other variables can easily render his efforts useless.

The same is true for every person trying to make a livelihood in this world. The best business deal can go sour, the most talented professional can lose a job. Effort comes from people, but success comes from Above.

This is the lesson of the First Fruits, an awe-inspiring and festive ritual that coincides with Shavuot. It was a colorful, magnificent outpouring of thankfulness to G-d which took place at the Holy Temple. Below is a description of how the First Fruits, known as Bikurim, were brought to Jerusalem each year.

Our "Thanksgiving Parade"

The process began when the farmer entered his fields and saw that his produce was beginning to ripen. Bikurim were taken from the seven species that are designated specifically as blessings of the Land of Israel: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. When the farmer noticed the first fruit from these species ripening, he tied a string or ribbon around it and declared, "This is for Bikurim." Once they were ripe, they were picked and placed in a basket. Most farmers brought their offerings in simple, but often beautifully decorated baskets made of reeds, but the wealthy landowners brought theirs in baskets of silver or gold.

When the time to travel to Jerusalem arrived, those leaving from each location would gather together and set out in the morning in a festive procession accompanied by music. The group was preceded by a bull whose horns were decorated with gold and whose head was adorned with a wreath.

When they approached Jerusalem, they sent messengers into the city to announce their arrival. The city's dignitaries would come to greet them, and even hired workers were permitted to interrupt their tasks to welcome them. Everyone paid homage to those involved in this joyous mitzvah.

As they proceeded to the Temple Mount, they were accompanied by the music of a flute. Upon arrival at the Temple Mount, each person would hoist his own basket onto his shoulder. Even those wealthy men whose offerings had been carried by servants up to that point would now bear their own basket to the Temple court. Each person would bring his basket to the Kohen (priest) in the Temple, and recite a declaration of gratitude to G-d for redeeming the Jewish people from slavery and giving us the Land of Israel. The statement concludes: "He brought us to this place. He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold I have brought the first fruits of the land that Thou O L-rd hast given me."

The person would then leave his basket and bow before G-d.

IV. Customs in Synagogue

Akdamus

If all the heavens were parchment,
If all the trees of the forest were pens,
If all the waters of the sea were ink,
And if every creature was a scribe,
They would not be enough
To express the greatness of
The Creator,
And the reflection of His Majesty
in Heaven and on Earth...

This is part of a poem that is read on the first day of Shavuot in the synagogue during the Torah reading. It was written by Rabbi Meir bar Yitzchak of Worms, Germany, who lived in the 11th century. The form of the poem is an acrostic, and it consists of 45 verses of two lines each. Each line of the poem ends with the sound "ta," spelled with the Hebrew letters "tav" which is the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and "alef," which is the first letter. The message conveyed by this formula is that as soon as one comes to the end ("tav") of learning Torah, he begins again ("alef"). Learning Torah is a lifelong pursuit.

The Ten Commandments

Imagine you were there - standing beneath the towering peak of Mount Sinai, the sky thick with clouds and pierced by bolts of lightning. A shofar blast grows louder and louder, and the very ground beneath your feet trembles with awe. A voice resounds, striking so deeply within you that you feel your soul depart. "I am the L-rd your G-d," it pronounces, and you know in your very bones that this is the ultimate truth.

It may be a far cry from standing in your neighborhood synagogue listening to your cantor chant the holy words that were spoken to the Jewish people on the first Shavuot. However, with a little mental focus, a little vision and an open heart, you, too, can commemorate and reaccept the Torah and the commitment to its teachings.

The custom in most congregations is for the Ten Commandments to be chanted in a special cantillation which brings greater emphasis to the words.

Here is a brief summary of the concepts included in the Ten Commandments:

1. "I am the L-rd your G-d..." (recognizing G-d)
2. Prohibition against idol worship
3. Prohibition against using G-d's name in vain - especially in an oath
4. Remembering Shabbos and keeping it holy
5. Honoring parents
6. Prohibition against murder
7. Prohibition against adultery
8. Prohibition against stealing or kidnapping

9. Prohibition against testifying falsely
10. Prohibition against coveting other people's family or property

It is worthwhile to note that while most congregations stand while the Ten Commandments are being chanted, the great sage, Maimonides, objected to this custom. That is because the Torah actually contains 613 commandments, and the Jewish people are required to keep them all with equal vigilance. He feared that by standing for the reading of these ten particular commandments, people would conclude that they are the most important ones and all others are secondary. In truth, however, there are no "minor" commandments.

All-Night Learning

The giving of the Torah is the central theme of Shavuot, and the Jewish people enjoy their precious gift to the maximum on this holiday. Many synagogues feature an all-night learning program with a variety of classes, lecturers, topics and texts. In some synagogues, people form their own learning partnerships or groups.

Torah commentators trace the custom of all-night learning to the fact that, at the time the Torah was given, Hashem had to wake up the Jewish people from their slumber in order to enable them to receive it. This is a somewhat mysterious idea, since one cannot easily imagine a situation less conducive to sleep than the dramatic scene leading up to G-d's revelation. However, the idea indicates that the people were at something less than the state of high anticipation they should have reached. Staying up all night to learn Torah makes amends for this national breach, demonstrating to Hashem how much we treasure His gift to us.

Some people have a custom to recite a special compilation of sections from the written Torah and the Mishnah which people customarily learn on Shavuot night. It is called Tikkun Leil Shavuot, and it includes the beginning and the end of each book of the written Torah as well as each book of the Mishnah (the basis of the Oral Torah). However, any learning of Torah-based material is a worthy pursuit on Shavuot night. Unless one has a particular custom, one should learn the sections of Torah which he finds most absorbing.

If one is able to make it through the entire night to the sunrise Shacharis (morning service) that follows, the feeling is truly incomparable. The special purity that pervades the early morning hours, when the world feels clean and new, enhances one's learning and one's prayers immeasurably. However, one should not feel that this is an all-or-nothing venture. Even a taste of this late-night learning, for an hour or two, is well worthwhile.

The Megillah of Ruth

The Megillah of Ruth is read in the synagogue on Shavuot. In this famous story, a wealthy couple named Elimelech and Naomi leave

Israel during a time of famine to stay in Moab for the duration of the crisis. Elimelech dies in Moab and the couple's two sons marry the daughters of the Moabite royal family. The sons also die, leaving the two daughters-in-law and Naomi alone.

Naomi decides to return to her homeland, and her daughters-in-law insist on coming with her. Naomi knows that her lot will be difficult; she is an impoverished widow with no one to help her. Naomi insists that her daughters-in-law return to their family and live in wealth and security, but one of the young women – Ruth – refuses, stating, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your nation is my nation. And your G-d is my G-d. Only death will separate us."

[The classical Biblical commentaries are divided on the exact sequence of events in the life of Ruth. For one, it is unclear at what precise point Ruth converted to Judaism. Regardless of these questions of detail, Jewish tradition emphatically portrays Ruth as a role model of the true Jewish convert who comes to the service of Hashem wholeheartedly, without any ulterior motive. It is this genuine commitment that we wish to remember and emulate on Shavuot, the anniversary of the conversion of the entire Jewish nation to our faith.]

The two travel back to Israel and do indeed face great difficulty. However, it is harvest time and Jewish law permits the poor to harvest from the corners of each field and to collect the wheat that drops from the harvesters' bundles. Ruth goes to gather wheat in the field of Boaz, a wealthy landowner who is also a relative of Elimelech. He recognizes her qualities of kindness and modesty and instructs his workers to make her task as easy as possible. When Naomi hears of Ruth's contact with Boaz, she gives her instructions intended to encourage Boaz to marry her. The plan succeeds, and from this marriage, the ancestor of King David is born.

There are several reasons this Megillah is read on Shavuot. One is that it occurs during the harvest season, which is one of the occasions Shavuot marks. Another is that the story provides the lineage of King David, who was born and died on Shavuot. Perhaps the strongest link to the spirit of this Yom Tov is Ruth's unconditional acceptance of the Jewish faith, for Shavuot marks the Jewish people's unconditional acceptance of the Torah - whatever it would ask of them.

A Little Green

If you attend synagogue on Shavuot, you might notice that it has been decorated with greenery and flowers. The custom of decorating the shul – and the home as well – with greens and fragrant flowers arises from the teaching that when the Torah was given, Mount Sinai was miraculously cloaked in grass and flowers. The Sages arrive at this conclusion based on the Torah's warning that "also your sheep and cattle should not graze by this mountain" (Shemos 34:3).

Today, we recall the scene by bringing greenery indoors to enhance our celebration. Fragrant flowers are also a reminder of the glorious fragrance our Sages tell us permeated the air when G-d spoke to us on that day.

V. Holiday Concepts

First, Derech Eretz

There were seven weeks between the Jews' departure from Egypt and their arrival at Mount Sinai. Our Sages teach us that giving the Jews the Torah was the real object of taking them out of slavery. G-d did not want to simply set us free to become a nation like all others; He wanted us to be His agents on earth, helping to nudge the world toward its ultimate state of G-dly perfection. You might wonder then, if receiving the Torah was the goal, why the delay? Why did G-d not give it to us as soon as we reached safety?

One answer comes from the words "Derech erez before Torah," from Pirkei Avos (3:17), a compilation of our Sages' ethical teachings. Derech erez is a term that literally means "the way of the land." It is usually understood to mean good character – consideration, responsibility, honesty and so forth. The Sages tell us that a person has to develop these traits in order to properly learn, absorb and live by the Torah. Torah is not merely a philosophy a person can study on an intellectual plane; it is meant to be a way of life. The forty-nine days from the Exodus until the giving of the Torah were a period when the Jewish people instilled in themselves Derech Eretz.

Do First, Ask Questions Later

When G-d created the physical world we see all around us, He also created a spiritual world filled with mysterious forces and powers that execute G-d's will. The English word "angels" is used to identify some of these forces, but these are not the type of "angels" popular culture depicts as cherubs with wings and harps. In Hebrew, angels are called malachim, which means "messengers." They are messengers of G-d's will, and therefore, they have no will of their own.

This sharply distinguishes them from man, who was given his own will and spends most of his lifetime trying to rein it in and direct it properly. Though his level of devotion to G-d's will is usually much lower than that of an angel, his distinction is that he himself achieves this level. There was, however, one time in Jewish history when our people rose to the level of the malachim, and that was at the giving of the Torah.

When G-d offered the Torah to the Jewish people, Moses transmitted His offer to the elders of Israel and they responded with the words

“na’aseh v’nishma,” which means “we will do and we will hear.” In other words, they made the commitment to accept the Torah, to learn and abide by G-d’s will, before they even heard what the Torah actually contained. They had become, at least for this time, like the angels, desiring only to be an instrument of G-d’s plan.

This flash of spiritual loftiness has remained the paradigm for Jews ever since. Although we are obligated to inquire into, learn, study and understand our religious laws and ethics, we are also always aware that a complete understanding of G-d’s ways is beyond human intelligence. Our first commitment is to do and then to seek understanding of what we do. The Sages teach us that each word – “na’aseh” and “nishma” – is a crown upon the head of every Jew – two crowns of honor, which the Jewish people wear with pride as they bear the Torah’s message throughout the ages.

Tailor Made

There was a boy named Naftali who sat through his classes in yeshiva drawing little pictures while his rebbe taught. In fifth grade, Naftali was constantly getting in trouble: “Pay attention and stop doodling,” his rebbe would scold. But in sixth grade, Naftali’s new rebbe stood close to his doodling student’s desk and watched him draw. Amazingly, he was depicting in his drawings the exact concept the rebbe was teaching. This was the way Naftali’s mind worked. This was how he was best able to absorb the lesson. Not only did the rebbe not scold his artistic student; he asked if he could borrow the notebook so that he could photocopy it for other students who might find the illustrations helpful.

King Solomon taught in Proverbs, “Teach each child according to his way...” A good teacher knows that different children learn differently. This is, in fact, G-d’s own teaching technique which has been passed down through the ages. The Sages teach that when the Jewish people heard the Ten Commandments, each heard G-d’s words according to his own level of understanding. The message that imprinted itself upon each person was the same message, but it was transmitted in a way that exactly suited each person’s learning style and level of understanding. To this day, G-d’s method sets the paradigm for how Torah should be taught. If the student hasn’t learned, then the teacher hasn’t taught: “Each child according to his way.”

One Man, One Heart

The Torah relates that when the Jews arrived at Mount Sinai, they set up camp. The word used for encamping, however, is in the singular form, rather than the plural form that would normally be used for a group of people. Rashi explains that the singular form conveys a message – that the Jewish people were in a state of complete unity. They were “as one man with one heart,” united in their desire to receive G-d’s Torah.

The unity of the Jewish people is a force of immense power. The times in our history when we were united have always brought us Divine favor and protection. Times of fragmentation and strife have always brought disaster. Most notably, the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile in which we remain are traced to the lack of unity that prevailed in that period and which, unfortunately, continues until today.

Obviously, however, people are all very different from each other and the tendency to see “different” as “wrong” is a very strong human inclination. But as the Jews at Sinai proved, when everyone’s eyes are lifted toward Heaven, their hearts are in the right place as well.

Dairy Delights

For those who prefer a sweet, creamy cheese blintz to a slice of roast, Shavuos offers a delectable change of pace. Dairy food traditionally comprises all or at least part of one meal on this Yom Tov. The most frequently cited reason for this custom is that it helps us to connect to the experience of our ancestors immediately after they received the Torah. Now that they had to abide by the kosher dietary laws, preparing a meat meal was a complicated affair involving ritual slaughter and koshering the meat. Therefore, the most readily available option was to eat dairy.

The dietary laws themselves are a perfect example of the Jewish people’s willingness to act in accordance with the words *na’aseh v’nishma*” (see page 10, *Do First, Ask Questions Later*). Attempts to explain the laws as health measures (i.e., Jews have been spared certain diseases carried by pork and shellfish) may illustrate some benefits of keeping kosher, but they are far from conclusive reasons.

On a deeper level, kosher laws cause a person to think before he eats. Kosher slaughtering provides the most painless death possible to the animal. Keeping dairy separate from meat forces us to recognize the distinction between life and death, even of a lower creature. By avoiding eating predatory animals, we distance ourselves from cruelty. Culturally, the dietary laws ensure that the Jewish people cannot completely meld into the society around them, thereby losing their identity and abandoning their G-d-given role in the world.

Yet none of these benefits fully explains the dietary laws. They are simply G-d’s prescription for the health and well-being of the Jewish soul.

A Shavuos Tale

Alice had never heard of Shavuos, or at least she didn’t recall it ever being mentioned in the Hebrew school classes she had attended as a

child. But now she was 27, single, living in Manhattan and sitting, for reasons only G-d could really know, in an Orthodox synagogue on the Shabbat prior to Shavuos. The rabbi announced that the holiday would commence Sunday night, and that services would begin on Monday morning at 8:45.

Alice wanted to go to the services. But what about her job? She had just started to dabble in religious observance. She was attending synagogue on Shabbat morning and hanging on each word of the rabbi's inspiring speeches. No one in her office knew anything about it. They just knew what she had to do in the office on Monday. On Monday, she had deadlines to meet and an important interview to conduct. Maybe she could tell a white lie and call in sick, she thought. On the other hand, maybe lying wasn't the right way to observe the holiday. After mulling over her dilemma, she decided that she would attend the morning services and then go to work late.

Monday came. Alice sat among the other women in the synagogue, eyeing their festive spring suits and soaking up the sense of anticipation in the air. When it was all over, she wandered off alone, despondent. They were all headed toward family meals and she was headed off on a self-imposed exile to her stuffy cubicle.

Arriving in her mid-town office, she settled into her desk and noted that nobody even mentioned her late appearance. Maybe she could have stayed home after all. No matter, though, she had come, and there was plenty for her to do.

At lunch time, she walked to the nearest post office to mail her bills. There was a long line, but she didn't mind. She relished having a little time to think. At last, a brawny, middle-aged clerk called "Next," and Alice approached the counter. She asked for a book of stamps.

"Isn't that a Jewish thing you have around your neck?" the clerk asked, looking at her gold pendant shaped in the Hebrew word "chai."

"Yeah," Alice replied. "It means life."

"Well, isn't today a Jewish holiday?" he persisted. "Aren't you people supposed to stay home from work?"

Alice stared at the clerk in disbelief. Why did he care? Why was he standing there voicing the exact thought churning around in her head?

"Oh, you know," she answered, "it's like every religion. Some people are more traditional and other people are less. This isn't a holiday a lot of people celebrate."

“Oh,” he nodded. “It’s not an important holiday...”

“No, it’s pretty important,” Alice replied, eager to share the knowledge she had gained only that morning in synagogue. “It marks the day the Jewish people received the Torah.”

The clerk began shuffling papers, looking busy. It was as if he himself could not explain his barrage of questions. But for Alice, the whole episode was self-explanatory. G-d sends His messengers in many guises. She went back to the office, postponed her interview and headed home. She wanted to be where the other Jewish people were, doing what they were doing. She wanted to be part of it, all of it, no matter what it entailed.

“Shavuot was the day I accepted the Torah,” she would later tell her children. “Just like the Jews at Mount Sinai.”



Exploring Judaism Together

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