



A Guide to Shavuot



JWB Jewish Chaplains Council

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from the 63 treatises of the Mishnah. The aim is to personalize the participant's engagement with the gift of the Torah (Mattan Torah).

Akdamut: One feature of Shavuot liturgy is recitation of the medieval poem, *Akdamut*, just before reading the Torah. Composed by Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak Nehorai toward the end of the eleventh century, this poem extols God who gave the Torah to Israel and has prepared a wondrous future for the pure and upright in the world to come as a reward for observing the teachings of the Torah. The spirit of the poem is well expressed in the couplet:

*We are God's choice. Then let us rejoice that
God blessed us and gave us the Law.*

Confirmation: Commitment to the Jewish faith is the central theme of Shavuot. On the holiday, in Reform and many Conservative synagogues, this is enacted through a confirmation ceremony

in which teenage boys and girls, after a well-rounded course in Jewish studies, pledge their loyalty to the covenant.

Milk and Honey: The land of Israel is described as flowing with milk and honey. The Torah is compared with honey. On Shavuot, therefore, dairy and honey dishes are featured; cheesecake and blintzes are particular favorites.

Shavuot Ahead

Shavuot is observed for two days in the diaspora by Orthodox and most Conservative Jews. It is a one-day holiday in the state of Israel and for Reform Jews. In other countries, Reform and some Conservative Jews also observe one day. Because Shavuot is one of the three pilgrimage festivals (together with Passover and Sukkot), a *Yizkor* (memorial) service is held on the concluding day.



Feast of Weeks

Shavuot means weeks.

Hag Hashavuot (Feast of Weeks) commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai seven weeks after the beginning of Passover. It is celebrated on the sixth of Sivan and is highlighted by the reading of the Ten Commandments.

When Moses received the Torah on that day, the Israelites entered into a covenant with God by declaring, "All that the Eternal has spoken we shall do." (Exodus 19:8)

With that act, the Jewish people completed the process of liberation from bondage in Egypt by freely accepting the responsibility to uphold the laws of the Torah.

Each time Jews assemble on Shavuot for prayer, Torah study and the reading of the Decalogue, we are renewing that covenant and reaffirming that historic, seven-week journey from slavery and redemption celebrated at Passover to freedom and responsibility affirmed on Shavuot.

Harvest Festival

The Torah also refers to the holiday of Shavuot as **Yom Habikurim** (Day of the First Fruits) and **Hag Hakatzir** (Festival of the Harvest). In biblical times, it marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest.

During this season, in the days when the Temple stood in Jerusalem, owners of orchards brought in their fruits as an offering; the poor and landless brought what they could. Entering the Temple, they chanted: "This is the day which the Eternal has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118).

On each of the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot, Jews were instructed to bring a sheaf of barley (the *omer*) to the Temple. The tradition of *sefirah* (counting the omer) continued even after the Temple was destroyed. It is incorporated in our prayer books to this day. The kibbutz movements in Israel pioneered a contemporary re-enactment of the bringing of *bikkurim*, or first fruits, as they emphasized the agricultural roots of Shavuot. This created a link to the biblical period, helping to establish the historic validity of the Zionist movement's focus on the land of Israel as the Jewish national home.

Many Moods, Many Dimensions

The seven weeks leading to Shavuot and the holiday itself reflect a wide range of moods; sadness and joy, solemnity and celebration. A festival of many dimensions, Shavuot reaches into the heart of the Jewish people, and out to the world at large.

It was during the weeks of sefirah in the second century BCE that the disciples of Rabbi Akiva suffered from a devastating plague. Tradition states that the ancient plague was abated on the 33rd day of sefirah, celebrated as **Lag Ba'Omer**. Accordingly, some authorities permit weddings



on this date and after, while others prohibit weddings between Lag Ba'Omer and Shavuot.

Because of the association of Lag Ba'Omer with the Bar Kochba rebellion against the Romans, many of the children's songs written in Israel for the holiday were marching songs that focused on the heroism of Bar Kochba and his army. These were the first songs about soldiers in Hebrew, and again, provided ancient roots to the Zionist ideal of the new muscular and unafraid Jew. Today in Israel, Lag Ba'Omer is celebrated by huge bonfires and a pilgrimage to Mount Meron, commemorating the perseverance of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the second century struggle against Roman persecution.

The theme that the Torah belongs to all of humanity is suggested by reading the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. The story of this book, one of five scrolls or megillot read on special holidays during the Jewish year, is universally appealing.

The Moabite Ruth returns to Judah with her mother-in-law Naomi after the death of her husband Mahlon. Declaring her loyalty to Naomi's people, she gleaned at spring harvest in the field of Boaz and later, as a convert to Judaism, marries him. According to the Bible, her great-grandson is none other than King David.

Other Customs and Traditions

Tikkun L'eyl Shavuot, the practice of remaining awake all night for study and reflection, is traditionally observed by many Jews on Shavuot. Three to seven verses from the beginning and end of each portion of the Torah are studied, as well as some selections from the Prophets (the Haftarah) and excerpts