

## SHAVUOT

Shavuot begins on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan. However, it was not tied to a specific calendar date in the Torah, but to the counting from Pesach. Because the length of the months used to be variable, determined by observation, and there were two new moons between Pesach and Shavuot, it could occur on the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan. However, with the advent of the mathematically determined calendar, and the months between Pesach and Shavuot do not change on the methodical calendar; Shavuot is always now celebrated on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan. Here in the US we add an extra day just as we do for Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, and Pesach.

Shavuot is known by more names than any other holiday. Each name illustrates a different aspect of the holiday. As an example:

**Z'man Matan Torateinu**, *Giving of the Torah*. It is interesting, however, that the giving of the Torah and Shavuot are not explicit in the Biblical texts. The connection with the giving of the Torah in rabbinic times is on the basis of the biblical verse "On the third new moon after the Israelites have gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai, Ex 19:1. Accordingly, the Torah reading in synagogues for this day is the Ten Commandments. It is also noteworthy that the holiday is called the time of the giving of the Torah rather than receiving it. The sages point out that we are constantly in the process of receiving the Torah, which we receive every day, but it was first given at this time. Thus it is the giving, not the receiving that makes this holiday significant.

**Hag-ha-Shavuot**-Ex. 34:22, Deut. 16:10 *Festival of Weeks*. It occurs after the seven weeks of counting the Omer which begins with the second day Pesach. It is therefore intertwined with Pesach which marks the rebirth of the land and rebirth of a people after four centuries of bondage whereas Shavuot commemorates not only the ingathering of ripened sheaves, but also the ingathering of souls wandering in the wilderness. More on the connection of the two holidays in the next name.

**Hag-ha-Katsir** Ex. 23:16 *Festival of Reaping*, and **Yom-ha-Bikkurim**, Num. 28:26 *Day of the First Fruits*. Besides its significance as the day on which the Torah was revealed including the Ten Commandments, Shavuot is connected to the season of the grain harvest in Israel. In ancient times the grain harvest lasted seven weeks and was a season of gladness. It began with the harvesting of the barley during Pesach and ended with the harvesting of wheat on Shavuot. Shavuot was the concluding festival of the grain harvest just as Sukkot was the concluding festival of the fruit harvest. In the time of the Temple an offering of two loaves of bread from the wheat was made on Shavuot and brought to the Temple. Shavuot was also the first day on which individuals would bring the Bikkurim (first fruit) to the Temple in Jerusalem. The Bikkurim were brought from the seven species which were the native foods in ancient Israel, wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates. Jewish farmers would tie a reed around the first ripening fruits. At the time of harvest, the fruits identified by the reed would be cut and placed in baskets woven of gold and silver. They were loaded on oxen whose horns were gilded and laced the garlands and flowers and led to Jerusalem. At the Temple, each farmer would present his Bikkurim to the kohen in a ceremony that followed the text of Deut. 26:1-10.

Two other names are associated with the holiday. One is **Pentecost** meaning fiftieth day which came from the Hellenistic Greeks and the other is **Atzeret**. This means completion or enclosure. We usually associate this with Shemini Atzeret which translates as Eighth Day of Assembly. This final day of solemnity marks the closure for the festival activities with the recognition that next years harvest rest with the winter's rains, whose advent rests in the hand of God.

It is unfortunate that Shavuot doesn't seem near as important as the other pilgrimage holidays such as Sukkot and Pesach. Maybe it is because it is only a two day celebration and Sukkot is associated with a Sukka and Pesach with the Seder. Perhaps because its historical linkage with the agriculture cycle came so long after the Torah was written. However, there are a lot of modern day customs associated with the holiday such as:

**Reading the book of Ruth.** What is the connection to Shavuot? Well the story takes place during the harvest, Ruth, a proselyte, accepted the Torah, just as Israel did at Sinai, she showed loyalty to her mother-in-law just as Israel does to the Torah, King David, Ruth great-grandson was purportedly born and died on Shavuot.

**Tikkun Leil Shavuot:** The custom of all-night Torah study goes back to 1533 when Rabbi [Joseph Caro](#), author of the [Shulchan Aruch](#), then living in Ottoman Salonika, invited his [Kabbalistic](#) colleagues to hold a night-long study vigil, in the course of which an angel appeared before them and commanded them to go live in [Eretz Yisrael](#). According to a story in the [Midrash](#), the night before the Torah was given, the Israelites retired early to be well-rested for the momentous day ahead, but they overslept and Moses had to wake them up because God was already waiting on the mountaintop.<sup>[7]</sup> To rectify this flaw in the national character, religious Jews stay up all night to learn Torah.

Any subject may be studied, although Talmud, Mishna and Torah typically top the list. In many communities, men and women attend classes and lectures until the early hours of the morning. In [Jerusalem](#), thousands of people finish off the nighttime study session by walking to the [Kotel](#) before dawn and joining the sunrise [minyan](#) there. The latter activity is reminiscent of Shavuot's status as one of the three Biblical pilgrimage festivals, when the Jews living in the Land of Israel journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday.

In keeping with the custom of engaging in all-night Torah study, the [Arizal](#), a leading [Kabbalist](#) of the 16th century, arranged a special service for the evening of Shavuot. The *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* ("Rectification for Shavuot Night") consists of excerpts from the beginning and end of each of the 24 books of [Tanakh](#) (including the reading in full of several key sections such as the account of the days of [creation](#), [The Exodus](#), the giving of the [Ten Commandments](#) and the [Shema](#)) and the 63 chapters of Mishnah. This is followed by the reading of [Sefer Yetzirah](#), the 613 commandments as enumerated by [Maimonides](#), and excerpts from the [Zohar](#), with opening and concluding prayers. The whole reading is divided into thirteen parts, after each of which a *Kaddish di-Rabbanan* is recited when the Tikkun is done with a minyan present.

This service is printed in a special book, and is widely used in Eastern Sephardic, some German and Hasidic communities. There are similar books for the vigils before the seventh day of [Pesach](#) and [Hosha'ana Rabbah](#).

The [Spanish and Portuguese Jews](#) do not observe this custom.

**Akdamut** ([Aramaic](#): אקדמות) is a liturgical poem extolling the greatness of God, the Torah and Israel that is read publicly in the synagogue right before the morning reading of the [Torah](#) on the first day of Shavuot. It was composed by Rabbi Meir of [Worms](#), whose son was murdered during the [Crusade](#) of 1096. Rabbi Meir was forced to defend the Torah and his Jewish faith in a debate with local priests, and successfully conveyed his certainty of God's power, His love for the Jewish people, and the excellence of Torah. Afterwards he wrote [Akdamut](#), a 90-line poem in [Aramaic](#) which stresses these themes. The poem is written in a double acrostic pattern according to the order of the [Hebrew alphabet](#). In addition, each line ends with the syllable "ta" (תא), the last and first letters of the Hebrew alphabet, alluding to the endlessness of Torah. The traditional melody which accompanies this poem also conveys a sense of grandeur and triumph.

Sephardim do not read *akdamut*, but before the evening service they sing a poem called *Azharot* which sets out the [613 Biblical commandments](#). The positive commandments are recited on the first day and the negative commandments on the second day

**Eating Dairy:** One explanation is that King Solomon's portrayal in Bible of comparing the Torah "as honey and milk as under your tongue" and because the law of the firstfruit is paired with the biblical law prohibiting the boiling of a kid in its mother's milk. Also, the Hebrew word for milk is "*chalav*," and when the numerical value of each of the letters in the word "*chalav*" are added together - 8, 30, 2 - the total is forty. Forty is the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai when receiving the Torah. Another legend is that when the Israelites received the laws of kashrut at Sinai, they realized that their pots were unkosher since they had not seen the laws until then and so ate dairy foods until they could procure new pots.

**Greenery:** Many Jewish families traditionally decorate their homes and [synagogues](#) with plants, flowers and leafy branches in honor of Shavuot, both in their natural forms as well as in the form of papercuts called "roiselakh" (little rose) or "shavuoslekh" .

According to the [Midrash](#), Mount Sinai suddenly blossomed with flowers in anticipation of the giving of the Torah on its summit. Greenery also figures in the story of the baby [Moses](#) being found among the [bulrushes](#) in a watertight cradle ([Ex. 2:3](#)) when he was three months old (Moses was born on 7 Adar and placed in the [Nile River](#) on 6 Sivan, the same day he later brought the Jewish nation to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah).

The mystics in sixteenth-century Safed liked to compare the covenant on Mt. Sinai between the People of Israel and God to a wedding. They regarded the study vigil on the first night as the tikkun as the brides "beddeken", her preparation before the wedding ceremony. Some synagogues now decorate the [bimah](#) with a canopy of flowers and plants so that it resembles a [chuppah](#), as Shavuot is mystically referred to as the day the matchmaker (Moses) brought the bride (the Jewish people) to the chuppah (Mount Sinai) to marry the bridegroom (God); the

*ketubbah* (marriage contract) was the Torah. Some Eastern Sephardi communities actually read out of a *ketubbah* between God and Israel as part of the service.

The [Vilna Gaon](#) cancelled the tradition of decorating with plants because it too closely resembles the Christian decorations for their holidays.

One last thought, it has also been a custom to inaugurate a Jewish child's education at Shavuot. In medieval communities, a child was introduced to the Hebrew alphabet on this day at the age of five and was given honey and sweets so that the Torah might be sweet on their lips. In many contemporary communities graduations and confirmations take place at this time.