

# Shavuot



Shavuot is the Hebrew word for “weeks.” This Jewish festival marks the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, which occurs seven weeks after Passover. The Bible recounts how, after the Exodus from Egypt, the Children of Israel proceeded to Mount Sinai in the desert. According to tradition, Moses ascended the mountain to meet God, who gave him the Ten Commandments, which were written on two tablets to be delivered to the Children of Israel. Symbolically, we count this as the transmission of Torah.

This seven week period links the Exodus from Egypt with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Jewish mystics expanded upon this historical bond, seeing the period as joining the Jewish people's physical (Pesach) and spiritual (Shavuot) redemption.

Shavuot, like many other Jewish holidays, began as an ancient agricultural festival



that marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. Along with Sukkot and Passover, it is one of the *Shalosh Regalim* (Three Pilgrimage Festivals), during which the Israelites brought crop offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. The custom of *S'firat*

*HaOmer*, Counting the Omer, (an ancient Hebrew measure of grain) spans a seven week period (49days) between the second day of Passover and the beginning of Shavuot. Biblical law forbade any use of the new barley crop until an omer was brought as an offering to the Temple in Jerusalem.



It was commanded: "And from the day on which you bring the offering . . . you shall count off seven weeks. They must be complete." This commandment led to the traditional practice of "Counting the Omer." After the Temple in Jerusalem was

Week 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 3	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 4	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 5	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 6	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Week 7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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destroyed in 70 C.E., the Omer offering could no longer be observed. The practice of counting the Omer has continued and is still observed by many Jews. There is a prescribed ritual for counting the Omer. Each evening of the 49 day period Jews say a special blessing and recite a prescribed formula for counting each day.

Today, Shavuot is a celebration of Torah, education, and actively choosing to participate in Jewish life. Jews no longer bring the first fruits of their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem; therefore there are no specific *mitzvot*, or commandments, associated with Shavuot. There are, however, several rituals that are traditional components of celebrating the holiday.

Many people stay up all night studying Torah. This custom evolved from the story that says that when the Israelites were at Sinai, they overslept and had to be awakened by Moses. As a result, many modern Jews stay up all night to study and celebrate receiving the Torah. These events, known as *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, which literally means "Rectification for Shavuot Night," are understood as the custom of studying with a community in order to re-experience standing at Mount Sinai, where the Jewish people received the Torah. The *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* was developed by 16th century mystics in Safed, who believed that by studying on Shavuot, they were symbolically preparing Israel to enter into a sacred relationship with God. Modern interpretations and versions of this practice include study on a wide range of topics.



Traditionally, the Book of Ruth, part of the section of the Bible known as Writings, is read during services on Shavuot. Ruth was a young Moabite woman who married an Israelite man. When her husband died, she followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel and adopted the Jewish faith and people as her own. Ruth met a rich man, Boaz and eventually they married. Among their descendants is the famed King David who built the first Temple. Ruth is often considered to be the archetype of all who "choose" or convert to Judaism—accepting the Torah, just as Israel accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai—and this passage traditionally has been understood as her conversion statement.



The ceremony of Confirmation is effectively our graduation from Religious school studies. At age 16, our young adults begin to see the world through an adult lens (career, relationships, responsibilities, etc), and we mark this transition by re-introducing them to Torah. Just as we accepted the Torah on Shavuot, so do Confirmands reaffirm their commitment to the covenant and adult Jewish life.

## At Home

The Torah teaches that the Israelites had three days to prepare to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai. To ready themselves for the momentous occasion, they were instructed to wash their clothes and to stay ritually pure. Jews today recall the three days before Shavuot by preparing personally, as a family, and as a community to re-experience this life-changing event. It is customary to decorate ones home with greens and fresh flowers as a reminder of the



spring harvest and the ancient ritual of bringing the first fruits to the Temple. Many Jews prepare and eat dairy foods, such as cheesecake or blintzes as Jewish tradition compares the words of Torah to the sweetness of milk and honey. Often families gather together on the holiday to enjoy a meal that features such dishes.