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## SHAVUOT— ACCEPTANCE OF TORAH

**S**EVEN weeks after Passover the early summer holiday of Shavuot arrives. Its name literally means “weeks” and is a reminder of the link between these two pilgrimage harvest festivals.

The focus of Shavuot is the biblical story in which the Israelites wandered from Egypt through the desert to Mount Sinai, where they received the *Torah*, the Hebrew Bible. Each year Jews reexperience the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai and each year they reaccept that sacred tradition. Those born as Jews and those choosing to join the Jewish people through conversion affirm yearly their commitment to Judaism.

Shavuot is known as *Zman Matan Torataynu*—the season of the giving of the Torah (*Talmud B. Shabbat 86b*). It is also known as *Hag Hakatzir*, the harvest festival, which emphasizes the agricultural roots of this holiday as the harvest of the first spring crops.

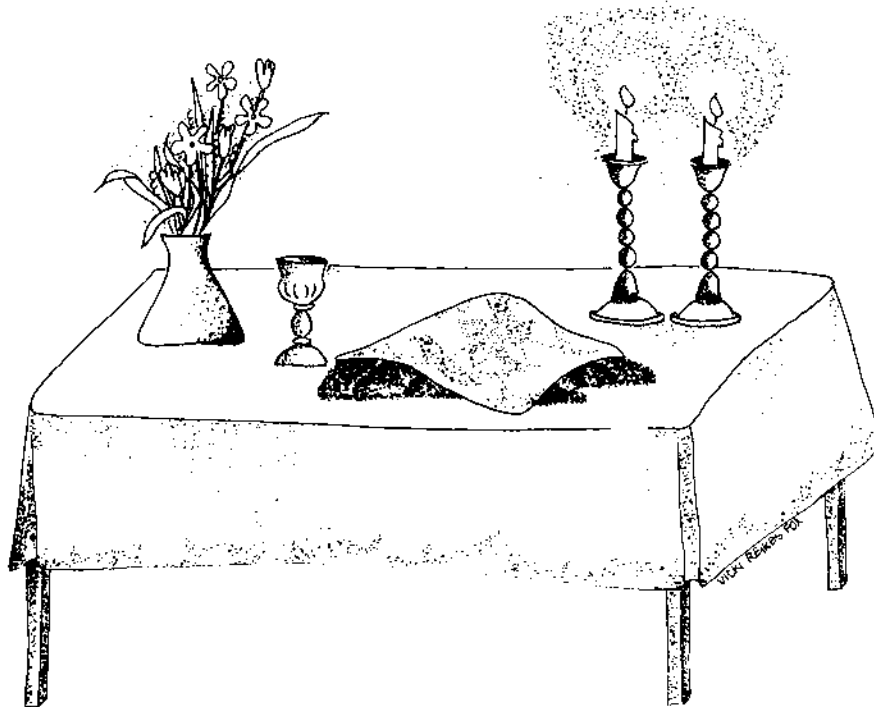
Shavuot is celebrated for one day in Israel and by Reform synagogues; others in the Jewish community celebrate two days. All who are able should not work or attend school on these days.





## GREETINGS

On Shavuot, friends and family greet each other with “*Hag Sameach*—Happy Holiday.”



## HOME TRADITIONS

### Evening

Shavuot is welcomed at home by decorating with fresh flowers and spring plants. The table is set with a fine tablecloth, wine, and *challah*.

As with Shabbat, the holiday begins at night with the reciting of the blessings and the lighting of two candles. This occurs with the setting of the sun, or the gathering for dinner, depending on one's customs. Following the candle lighting, it is traditional for parents to bless their children.

On Shavuot, Jews recall their ancestors, and one *Yizkor* candle is lit in memory of each close relative who has died. (There is no blessing that accompanies the lighting of this special candle.)

At the table, *Kiddush*, the prayer over the wine, is chanted, followed by the

blessing of the *challah*. Jews recite the *Shehechyanu* prayer, acknowledging gratitude for reaching this season in life. *Birkat Hamazon*, the thanksgiving prayer, is recited at the conclusion of the meal.

Although Shavuot may feel like Shabbat, it is unique in its themes and its flavors. Most folks eat only dairy products for this holiday. This symbolizes that as Jews entered the promised land, they entered the land of “milk and honey.”

## Daytime

After morning services a festive dairy lunch is served. The ritual order is the same as the previous evening, starting with Kiddush. As on Shabbat, people socialize, relax, play games, or simply enjoy each other’s company throughout the afternoons.

## SYNAGOGUE TRADITIONS

### Evening Service and Study

Many temples today have revived the ancient tradition of *Tikun Lel Shavuot*, a midnight-to-early-morning study session on the first night of Shavuot, concluding with an outdoor sunrise service. The topics discussed can range from the story of Ruth that focuses on intermarriage and conversion to contemporary Israeli politics to ancient and modern Jewish poets. The evening is accompanied by sweets and coffee to fuel the participants through the wee hours.

### Morning Services

Those who have studied and prayed throughout the night fall into bed before others have even thought of entering the synagogue for the holiday. However, the synagogue repeats the early-morning service for those who have opted for a night of sleep at home.

The synagogue customs for Shavuot are similar to the other two pilgrimage festivals, Pesach and Sukkot. Specific *Torah* portions linked to the holiday themes are read in the morning services. The congregation sings *Hallel*, which literally means praise, and is recited on joyous holidays. The Hallel prayer is composed of selections of poetry from Psalms 113 through 118.

The Torah portions for Shavuot highlight the experience of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. On the first day the dramatic scene in which the Torah is given



is read from Exodus 19–20, which includes the Ten Commandments. On the second day of the festival the laws regarding Temple practices are read from Deuteronomy 15:19–16:17. The additional text for Shavuot is the Book of Ruth.

Many Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform congregations celebrate the ceremony of Confirmation on Shavuot. At the conclusion of their formal religious education, teenagers publicly “confirm” their ongoing commitment to Judaism.

*Yizkor*, memorial prayers, are recited on Shavuot on either the first or second day. This is one of four times a year in which *Yizkor* is recited.

## INSIGHTS

### Torah: What Are Its Origins?

The Torah, which literally means a teaching, is the word used to indicate the whole of the Hebrew Bible. According to tradition, the Torah was given by God to the Jewish people. Due to this tradition, the Torah was believed to be the word of God.

Orthodox Judaism continues to view the Bible as the word of God given to Moses at Mount Sinai. This belief asserts that God created the text and therefore it is truth.

During the last two hundred years, as scholars have retrieved ancient documents and discovered clues to ancient languages, new views have developed regarding the origins of the Torah.

Scholars noted the influences of Egyptian, Babylonian, and other Near Eastern cultures on the biblical narrative. They noticed repetitions and variations of stories within the Bible that indicated possible human scribal errors or variations in authors. They noticed that other cultures and language groups had narratives paralleling the biblical stories, which indicated that portions of the text may have come from other peoples' traditions.

Many scholars began to acknowledge that the Torah may have developed from the daily experiences of the Jewish people. As such, it was a compiled text that captured the evolving experiences of the Jewish people with each other and other nations. Thus, the Torah defined Jewish values and beliefs and revealed the Jewish relationship with the Divine as seen from the human perspective.

This theory that acknowledges the various influences on the Bible is called the Documentary Hypothesis, developed primarily by Karl Graf and Julius Wellhausen in nineteenth-century Germany. It suggests that four major schools of thought developed different strands of sacred traditions which, when woven together by about the year 400 B.C.E., evolved into the single text known as the Torah.





God my God, where you go I will go, where you will be buried, I will be buried” (Ruth 1:16–17).

Although through the centuries intermarriage has been perceived as a threat to the survival of the Jewish people, intermarriage is very much a reality today. Current statistics indicate that “one out of every three marriages of Jewish people will involve an intermarriage . . .” (Winer, M., “Sociological Research on Jewish Intermarriage,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* (32) 1985, pp. 38–57).

The Jewish nation is small and every member of the community counts in terms of continuing and passing on an ancient and valued tradition. When Jews marry non-Jews and leave the Jewish community, the individual and the Jewish community both lose. The community grieves for the important link in the “family” of Judaism and the individual forfeits his/her historic and cultural bond to the Jewish people.

When intermarried couples decide to celebrate both religions, it can be quite stressful. Does religion become a power issue in the couple’s relationship? What beliefs do they share and transmit to their children? The children of an intermarried couple will be fortunate if the parents can give the children a sense of belonging to one religion.

Conversion has been a formalized way into the Jewish faith for generations. Couples and individuals, like Ruth, choose to become members of the Jewish people through a step-by-step learning process that leads to a formal conversion ceremony.

## Reasons for Conversion

Couples may want a common religious and cultural tradition within their homes. One partner may be willing to change his/her previous faith or explore a belief for the first time or may want to feel a connection to an ancient history and religious experience.

In other cases, one partner may be willing to convert to calm the fears the new in-laws express. At times, conversion can be seen as a step to premarital and marital conflict resolution. But conversion without personal commitment to Judaism may have limited effect in resolving marital conflict.

Conversion is a process that is slow and demands introspection. It can be meaningful if the conversion to Judaism is claimed by the newcomers as their own choice and not only an act that pleases others.

## How to Convert

Individuals considering conversion should make an appointment with a rabbi to discuss the avenues open to them. Historically some rabbis would discourage poten-

tial converts by turning them away to ensure that the potential converts were convinced that Judaism was what they truly wanted.

Most rabbis do not do this today. However, they may encourage a series of discussions exploring motivation to convert, previous experience with Jews and Judaism, family life, and visions of what Judaism can bring to their lives.

“Introduction to Judaism” courses are offered for interested students and their partners. Most formal instruction includes study in Jewish customs and history, rituals, and home life. Many courses are supplemented by support groups that encourage a personal sharing of these experiences: What is it like to become Jewish? What do I lose in relation to my family of origin? What can I gain as I establish myself in a new family situation?

In addition, the student (or couple) meets with a sponsoring rabbi during the time of study. Here the student can explore theological, spiritual, and personal questions on a one-to-one basis.

## Ceremony

Conversion is concluded with a ceremony that includes several steps. When completing the coursework, students may be asked to meet with a “court” of three rabbis. The rabbis will explore the students’ learning and discuss their commitments to Jewish life.

After this, the students may go to a *mikveh*, a ritual bath, for the ritual immersion. At this time they are given a Hebrew name and are welcomed as Jews. Males may then proceed to a ritual circumcision.

And finally, a private or public ceremony will be held in the synagogue at which the convert is formally welcomed into the Jewish community.

The conversion process usually continues over a period of six to twelve months. However, feeling that one is Jewish may come in waves. Some converts feel they have experienced their lives as Jews since birth. Some feel that only after lighting Shabbat candles over a period of years does the religion and culture become “theirs.” Some feel comfortable until faced with a trauma such as the death of a parent. Like other changes, this one is slow and gradual.

Each branch of Judaism places its stamp of welcome onto the convert in a slightly different manner. Reform, Reconstructionist, and Conservative rabbis usually accept each others’ conversions. Usually, Orthodox rabbis accept only Orthodox conversions. The Conservative and Reform movements have formal programs to encourage ongoing discussion and support for these new members in their congregations. Don’t hesitate to ask for some help. Contact the branches of Judaism or local temples to clarify the procedures in your community.



The stages of entering the Jewish people have changed some since the time of Ruth. But the process is there, and acceptance of new members into the Jewish world continues. Welcome aboard!

## ACTIVITIES

1. Keep a diary as if you were Moses preparing to receive the Torah. What did you think as you climbed that mountain by yourself? What did you feel as the Torah was given? What did you experience as you walked down the mountain, carrying the Torah for all the Jewish people, for all time?

2. What was it like to be a Jew at the foot of Mount Sinai? Look at the biblical story and fill in between the lines. Produce a play that can let others experience that powerful event.

3. Make pictorial Torahs from cloth or parchment paper. Select plain material (muslin is a good choice) cut into several pieces that each measures 11" × 17".

Choose several stories that appeal to you and illustrate each story with crayon or cloth shapes onto a separate piece of cloth. Sew each section together with colored thread. Attach each end of the scroll to a 2' stick. Roll the entire scroll the same as a Torah. Tie with a cloth ribbon.

4. You might enjoy meeting a calligrapher and learning about the ancient craft of writing and illustrating Jewish manuscripts. Or try it yourself.

5. Consider making Mount Sinai from clay or papier-mâché. Use toy figures and act out the dramatic giving of the Torah.

6. Examine the Ten Commandments. How do they apply to you? How can you make them work in the world? What other laws would you have included in these most central concerns?

7. Read the Book of Ruth. Notice the family interaction: Who cares for whom? Who leads the action? How is it accepted? Can you accept a new member into your family as easily as Naomi did? Can we learn from Naomi and from Ruth? How do you feel about someone choosing to enter the Jewish religion?

8. Spend Shavuot in the country. Go with a group of friends and make your own retreat. Study, cook, hike, and enjoy the leisure of Shavuot in the out-of-doors.

9. Create a Tikun Lel Shavuot at home with friends. Select a few sources of Jewish thought that you would like to read and discuss. Set the time, provide tea and desserts, and go into the night.

10. For the chefs, Shavuot provides the opportunity for the ultimate cheesecake bakeoff. When else can you mix calories and belief?

## RECIPES

In the relaxing days of Shavuot, one can enjoy making blintzes and cheesecake. These caloric delights add to the holiday celebration.

Cheesecake recipes abound, so follow your own choice. Blintzes can be made or bought frozen.

### BASIC BLINTZES

*BATTER:*

*4 eggs, well beaten*  
*1 tsp. salt*  
*2 cups water*  
*1½ cups flour*

*FILLING:*

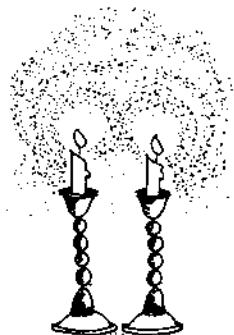
*½ lb. cream cheese*  
*2 lbs. farmer cheese*  
*½ cup brown sugar*  
*2 eggs*  
*raisins, if desired*

Beat eggs well; add salt and water. Gradually beat with rotary beater until smooth. Grease skillet with margarine. Pour out thin pancake; cook until pancake curls away from the edge of skillet. Cook on one side only. Remove from heat.

Add filling; fold like envelope. Return blintz to skillet and fry in margarine, fold side down, till slightly browned. Then turn and brown on other side. Blintzes can be wrapped with paper and frozen until ready to fry. Serve with sour cream, yogurt, jam, or fruit.



## SHAVUOT BLESSINGS



*Introductory meditation to be recited together prior to candle lighting:*

In ancient times Jews celebrated this harvest festival by going up to Jerusalem. There they gathered at the Temple and offered fruit and grains in thanksgiving for the bounty of the natural world.

Today we gather to thank God for all the goodness in our lives, for the beauty of nature, for the love we feel for one another, for the Shavuot tradition which we share. May our celebration increase our awareness of your ongoing gifts, O God.

*Candle lighting:*

(Recite this blessing, then light the candles on all nights but Shabbat evening. If it is Shabbat, light the candles first, then recite the blessing.)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, asher keedshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadleek ner shel (Shabbat v') Yom Tov.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who enables us to welcome (Shabbat and) Shavuot by kindling these candles.

*Shehehayanu:*

(On the first night of Shavuot add:)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, shehehayanu, v'keeyomanu v'higeeyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and encouraged us to celebrate this joyful festival.

*Parents' blessing for their children:*

(Place hands on children and recite.)

## FOR BOYS:

May God touch you as you strive to live in the image of Ephraim and Menashe, leaders who carried on our traditions with pride.

## FOR GIRLS:

May God touch you as you strive to live in the image of Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, leaders who carried on our traditions with pride.

## CONTINUE SAYING FOR BOTH:

May the Eternal bless you and keep you.

May the Eternal bring you warmth and protect you.

May the Eternal embrace you and grant you peace. Amen.

*Evening Kiddush:*

(Raise wine cups and recite. Then drink the wine.)

We praise God with this symbol of fullness, and give thanks for the opportunities we have to share life's blessings.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, boray p'ree hagafen.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates fruit from the vine.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, asher bachar banu meekol ahm, v'romemanu meekol lashon, v'keedshanu b'meeztvotav. V'teetayn lanu, Adonai Elohaynu, b'ahavah (Shabbatot lemnucha oo) moadeem l'seemcha, chageem u'zmaneem l'sasson et (haShabbat hazeh v'et) yom hag hashavuot zman matan Torah-taynu, mikrah kodesh zaycher l'tzeeat meetzrayim. Kee banu bacharta v'otanu keedashta meekol ha-ahmeem, (v'Shabbat) oo'moday kodshecha (b'ahavah oo'vratzon) b'seemcha oo'vsasson heenhaltanu). Baruch Ata Adonai M'kadesh (ha-Shabbat v') Yisrael, v'hazmaneem.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has chosen us from among all people, sanctified us with holy acts, and given us special times and seasons for rejoicing. (Shabbat and) Shavuot remind us of the times for celebration, recalling the gift of Torah from Mount Sinai. You have distinguished us from all people, and have given



us (the Shabbat and) holy festivals full of joy and gladness. Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who sanctifies (the Shabbat,) the people Israel, and our sacred seasons.

*Daytime Kiddush:*

(Raise wine cups and recite. Then drink the wine.)

El Moaday Adonai Meekrah-ay kodesh, asher teekrehoo otam b'moadam. VayDaber Moshe et moaday Adonai el b'nay Yisrael.

These are the sacred times appointed by God; and you shall announce them in their season.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, boray p'ree hagafen.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates fruit from the vine.

*Blessing over the challah:*

(Remove challah cover and recite. Then give each person a piece of bread.)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, hamotzi lechem meen ha-aretz.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates bread from the earth.