



Around the Holiday Table

**Shavuot 5765
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Born exactly forty years ago, Erev Shavuot, Marc H. Landas, is a secular and religious educator. He currently teaches students in grades 3 through 6 at the Religious School of Temple Beth El of Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn, NY.

Shalom!

Chag HaKatzir Sameach! Chag HaBikkurim Sameach!



Introduction

During the coming week, we celebrate Shavuot. The holiday of Shavuot is the second of the three *shalosh regalim*, pilgrimage festivals of the annual Jewish calendar, the others being Pesach and Sukkot. Three times a year Jews would journey to the *Beit HaMikdash* in *Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem) to offer a portion of their crops and/or livestock for sacrifices to God and for the benefit of the *Kohanim* (priests) and *Levi'im* (Levites) who served at the Temple. Shavuot marked the barley harvest and the collection of the first fruits that were ripe for picking. For this reason, two of the names of Shavuot are *Chag HaKatzir* (the Harvest Festival) and *Chag HaBikkurim* (Festival of the First Fruits).

The holiday begins on the 6th of Sivan and is observed for one day in *Eretz Yisrael* and for one or two days in other places in the world depending upon the denomination (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, etc.). The length of the *chag*, holiday, contrasts with Pesach and Sukkot. These are observed either for seven or for eight days.

Shavuot occurs exactly fifty days after the beginning of Pesach. For seven weeks, forty-nine days, beginning on the second night of Pesach, each night we count the Omer, recalling a measure of barley brought to the *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple) as part of the barley harvest. It is traditional during these seven weeks, except for Lag BaOmer, the 33rd day of counting the Omer, not to have celebrations such as weddings or even to cut one's hair.

That is, until Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the month) of Sivan. At this point we begin to anticipate the joy of Shavuot. On the 3rd through 5th of Sivan, called the Three Days of Delimitation, one lightens the restrictions of the counting of the Omer. This culminates with a *tikkun leil Shavuot*, an all-night study session held on *Erev Shavuot*, the evening of the 6th of Sivan, lasting until dawn. The *tikkun* is held in commemoration of receiving the *Luchot HaBrit* (the Ten Commandments) and Torah at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai).

In addition to the portions of the Torah and Talmud dealing with the story of Moshe on *Har Sinai* and the *halachot* (Jewish laws) and *minhagim* (customs) of Shavuot, it is customary to study *Megillat Rut* (the Scroll of Ruth). Several reasons are given for this including: (a) the story occurs during the time of the harvest; (b) Ruth was a convert to Judaism, who decided to live according to the *mitzvot* of the Torah; (c) King David, great-grandson of Ruth, was born and died on Shavuot.



Questions for your Family's Discussion

As your family shares a holiday meal or joins for *tikkun leil Shavuot* you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. In much the same way we anticipate a birthday, vacation, or special event, we count up 7×7 days between Pesach and Shavuot. Likewise, we count down the hours during the *tikkun leil Shavuot* until the dawn. How may the anticipation of an event influence one's experience of it? Why might the way we usher in Shavuot be designed in this manner?
2. When the Israelites were presented with the *Luchot HaBrit*, it is said that each person heard *kol HaShem* (the voice of God) according to her or his understanding. Yet, all of the people responded in the same manner, *na'aseh v'nishmah* (we will do and we will listen). (a) How is it possible that when God

revealed the message of Torah that each person heard a unique voice? (b) Why is the word order of the response of *b'nei Yisrael* (the children of Israel) important?

Texts to Wrestle With

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk (1787-1859) wrote the following about the third name for Shavuot:

“Why do we call Shavuot, *z'man matan Torahteinu* (the time of the giving of our Torah) and not *z'man kabalat Torahteinu* (the time of the receiving of our Torah)?” This is because whereas the giving was a singular event at *Har Sinai* the receiving of the Torah is ongoing. Every moment one engages in Torah she or he receives its gift.”

-adapted from “The Outstretched Arm” Vol. 6 Issue 1,
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1. In what ways is the Torah “a gift that keeps on giving?”
2. How can we, as individuals, and collectively, as Jews, ensure that the Torah is a gift received by anyone who desires it?

The Ten Commandments are considered a basic outline of the guidelines for living provided in the Torah. They are:

1. I am *Adonai* your God. I took you out of slavery in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt).
2. Do not worship any other gods, only Me.
3. Do not use God’s name with disrespect.
4. Remember Shabbat and keep it holy.
5. Honor your parents.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not break your marriage vows.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not tell lies.
10. Do not be jealous.

You may recall the seven Noahide laws that the Talmud says are meant for all people to keep:

1. Do not murder.
2. Do not steal or kidnap.

3. Do not blaspheme.
4. Do not worship false gods.
5. Do not engage in sexual immorality.
6. Do not eat the limb of an animal that is still alive.
7. Establish courts and bring offenders to justice.

- (a) Which of the Noahide laws are included among the Ten Commandments? Which are not?
- (b) How do you account for the similarities? How do you account for the differences?



Towards an Action Agenda

- 1) According to *minhag* (tradition), we eat only *milchigs* (dairy meals) during Shavuot. There are at three explanations for this according to Sora Landes, Principal, Perelman Jewish Day School, Forman Center, who writes on the following website, <http://www.chsweb.org/mc/shavuot02.html#Beyond%20Blintzes>
 - a) There is a quote in *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) "Honey and milk shall be under your tongue" which refers, according to tradition, to the study of Torah. The book of Exodus calls Israel "a land of milk and honey."
 - b) One tradition teaches that after standing for hours in the hot sun at Mount Sinai, the Israelites ate dairy foods, which could be prepared more quickly than meat.
 - c) The numerical value of the letters of *chalav* (milk) equals forty—the days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai. Eating dairy foods reminds us of this Biblical event.
- 2) While you may want to partake of pizza and ice cream sundaes, here is a website with other recipes for fun dairy foods you might have on Shavuot. http://www.jewishfood-list.com/recipes/shavuot/&shavout_index.html
- 3) It is also customary to decorate your home and *beit k'nesset* (synagogue) with fruits and flowers in honor of the harvest. Roses are a special favorite.
- 4) A fun activity is: *Tene Bikurim* - a basket containing the first crop of the season. Shavuot is a harvest holiday that the ancient Israelites celebrated by bringing crops from their first harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem (fruit, vegetables, wheat, first-born of cattle, etc.). Today, in Israel's schools, students celebrate the ancient harvest

of Shavuot by bringing their own baskets of fruit and vegetables of the season to share with their class. As an activity:

Prepare a basket of fruit and vegetable offerings. Pick a fruit or a vegetable and explain how it is grown, what part of the plant is the edible part, etc. Make up a story about this fruit / vegetable to share with family or explain how you made the basket at home.

-- adapted from <http://www.jrf.org/israel/shavuot-action.html>

Chag Sameach

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site.

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