

# *Shavuos*

TEACHERS GUIDE

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These two Torah sources show two different descriptions of Shavuos, as the harvest festival and as a religious festival. The Torah calls it the festival of weeks, and also the festival of 50 days (which leads to it's Greek/ English name of Pentecost literally fifty days).

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Shavuos is described as Atzeres, a time of stopping and gathering together. This connects it to Pesach (just as Shmini Atzeres is connected to Succos), and shows that it is the end of this period of time.

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The Omer barley offering was brought on the second day of Pesach and marked the beginning of the 'counting of the Omer'. Shavuos was the culmination of this period of time, and the sacrifice brought on Shavuos, the Two Loaves of Bread, was made of wheat. The chasidic masters see in these two sacrifices the transition from animal food (barley) to human food (wheat), showing the gradual growth from Pesach to Shavuos, from the freedom from slavery to the freedom of Torah.

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Shavuos is also a time of judgement on this day the world is judged for the productivity of fruits (which includes wheat and grains as well)

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This is a description of the bringing of the bikurim to the Temple. This mitzvah was particularly loved by all the people and was performed with great festivity and beauty.

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We have records from Josephus and other sources that Shavuos was at time when everyone came to Yerusahalayim for the pilgrimage festival.

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Shavuos is traditionally the date that the Israelites received the Torah at Mount Sinai. However there is an argument in the Talmud as to which date this event actually occurred. It turns out that the real date of receiving the Torah was the 'second day' yomtov which is only celebrated outside of Israel.

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There is a custom (based on the Zohar) to stay awake all night on Shavuos learning Torah. There are specific texts prepared for this learning, but any Torah learning is good. Many communities host a 'tikkun leil Shavuos' with shiurim and learning all night long.

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The custom of reciting Akdamos on Shavuot goes back to medieval times. Originally this Aramaic prayer was recited after the first verse of the Torah reading. The accepted custom nowadays in most communities is to say it before beginning the Torah reading.

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There is a long established custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot. Various reasons are given for this custom. Some also have a custom to eat kreplach, cheese-filled, three-cornered Jewish ravioli, which represent the three parts of the Jewish Bible: Torah, Prophets and Writings.

Some other reasons given for this custom are:

Receiving the Torah was a form of rebirth. We celebrate this newness by consuming baby food i.e. milk.

Shavuot coincided with the time when the lambs and calves born in the spring would be suckling, therefore an abundance of dairy products were available.

Legend has it that the Jewish people were at Sinai for so long that all their milk soured and turned into cheese.

In the Torah the Jewish people are promised a "Land flowing with milk and honey." Dairy meals recall this lyrical description of Israel.

The Hebrew word for milk, chalav, has the numerical value of 40, symbolizing the number of days Moses was on Mt. Sinai. Chalav is spelled chet (numerical value, 8), lamed (30), and vet (2)

## 20 21 22 23

Another widespread custom is to decorate Synagogues and homes with plants and flowers, despite the strong opposition from the Vilna Gaon who felt this custom was too similar to non-Jewish customs on their festivals.

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We read the Book of Ruth on Shavuos for many reasons, including the fact that Dovid HaMelech was born and died on this day. The Talmud seems to make the claim that the main purpose in writing this book (which was written by Shmuel HaNavi) was to justify Dovid's eligibility as king, and to provide his dynasty with legitimacy.