

## Shavuot



Dear Families,

*Shavuot* is the only holiday in the Torah that is not tied to any specific date on the calendar.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the holiday falls after seven full weeks (50 days) from the first day of *Pesah*. From this it gets its name, שְׁבוּעוֹת (*shavuot*; weeks). *Shavuot* celebrates the gift of the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. On this day, seven weeks after the Israelites left Egypt, God gave the Jewish people the *Torah* with its stories of their past, and the laws by which they were to live. The *Torah* says,

*God spoke to you from the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but you saw no form -- only sound. God told you of God's covenant, instructing you to keep the Ten Commandments which God inscribed on two stone tablets. (Deuteronomy 4:12-13)*

In commemoration of the *midrash* (a commentary on the *Torah*) that says that the Jews overslept on the day they were to be given the *Torah*, many Jews now stay up on all night on *Shavuot*. They hold a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, an all night study session.

On *Shavuot*, Jews world-wide read the Book of Ruth, the story of a woman who chose to be Jewish. One of the many explanations for why Ruth is connected to *Shavuot* is that just as the Jews at Mt. Sinai affirmed acceptance of God's *Torah* by saying "we will do and we will listen," Ruth followed her Jewish mother-in-law and said "your people will be my people and your God, my God."

*Shavuot* has two other names: *Hag Matan Torateinu* (the festival of the giving of the *Torah*) and *Hag Habikkurim* (the festival of the first fruits). In the time of The Temple, over 2,000 years ago, *Shavuot* was celebrated by bringing the best of the first fruits to Jerusalem. As such, *Shavuot* is the middle of the three<sup>2</sup> pilgrimage holidays when Jews from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem to offer their first fruits to God to celebrate together as a people. The offering of the first fruits was seen as a token of gratitude to God for providing a bountiful harvest.

On *Shavuot*, most Jews eat a dairy meal (or at least dairy appetizers before a meat meal<sup>3</sup>). One reason for this custom is that a *midrash*<sup>4</sup> states that with the final rush to receive the *Torah*, those at Mount Sinai only had time to prepare a dairy meal. [Remember that in those days, eating meat required slaughtering an animal, skinning it, and doing other preparations before roasting it for several hours.] So, for this reason (never mind our enjoyment of *blintzes*<sup>5</sup> and cheesecake), Jews eat dairy products on *Shavuot*.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Pesah* IS tied to a date on the calendar, for it is celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of the Hebrew month of *Sivan*

<sup>2</sup> In order they are: *Pesah*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot*

<sup>3</sup> Traditional Jewish dietary law specifies not mixing milk and meat. Observant Jews wait from one to six hours between eating meat and milk. The rules about eating dairy products *before* meat are less stringent. Some Jews wait an hour between milk and meat, though others only clear the table and use new linens, dishes, and utensils.

<sup>4</sup> A *midrash* is a story created by the rabbis to explain certain "holes" in the *Torah*, i.e., stories that don't feel complete without extra words of explanation.

<sup>5</sup> A *blintz* is a thin pancake (like a crepe) stuffed with cheese or fruits. It is a food eaten by Jews of Eastern European descent.

Most notably, *Shavuot* is the day when most synagogues have Confirmation, a ceremony in which high school age students “confirm” their commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people.

### THINGS YOU CAN DO AS A FAMILY



It is a custom for Jews to stay up all night and study on *Shavuot*. Explain to your children the importance of study and spend some time enacting a shortened version of the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (an all night study session) by reading some Jewish stories (especially Biblical ones) dressed in pajamas. Don't forget to eat something dairy (cheese and crackers, cheesecake, grilled cheese, macaroni and cheese, blintzes, etc.)!



The *Torah* encompasses many laws including the Ten Commandments. With your children discuss rules and why we have them. Why do your children think God gave the Jewish people “ten good rules?” What kind of rules do you have in your home? at school? Explain to your children that this holiday commemorates God's giving us “ten good rules” that we call the Ten Commandments.



Many say that the words of the *Torah* are like milk and honey. This is one reason why, on *Shavuot*, it is a tradition to eat dairy foods like cheese and blintzes. As a family, plan and prepare a dairy meal. Recipes can be found at <http://www.jccathisnewmonth.org> (Click on Sivan and then scroll to the bottom of the page).



*Shavuot* is also known as *Hag Habikkurim* (the festival of the first fruits) because it commemorates the Jewish farmers bringing their first fruits of the harvest to the Temple. In honor of “first fruit,” as a family go to the grocery store and buy canned fruit to donate to a food bank.

For additional background information, family activities, and holiday recipes, see:  
<http://www.jccathisnewmonth.org> (click on *Sivan*)  
or <http://uahc.org/educate/parent/> (click on *Shavuot*)



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