

Shavuot Educator Background

Passport to Peoplehood

Jews are a multicultural people who live around the world.

Big Ideas

1. Shavuot is a holiday that celebrates the Jewish people coming together as one while also highlighting our diversity.
2. The connection of the Book of Ruth with Shavuot is a reminder of the value of welcoming in Jewish life
3. Welcoming is a value that comes about through actions as we see in the exceptional welcome Jews have received in India

In the time when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, Shavuot, together with Passover and Sukkot, was one of the three great pilgrimage festivals. Jews from every tribal land gathered together in Jerusalem in celebration. In the Torah, there are four names for the holiday, each name focusing on a different aspect. The name Shavuot literally means “the festival of weeks”, as Shavuot comes seven weeks after the beginning of Passover. Another name for the holiday is Hag Hakatzir, “the holiday of reaping”, as Shavuot coincides with the wheat harvest in Israel. It is also known as Hag Habikurim, “the holiday of the first fruits”, as the first fruits began to appear in the spring, and pilgrims would bring offerings of these bikkurim, first fruits, to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The final name of the holiday is Z'man Matan Torah, “the time of the giving of the Torah”, because Moses received Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. Together, these multiple meanings of the holiday made it one of the most important on the ancient Jewish calendar, bringing together the land and covenant in one sacred celebration.

However, with the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews from Israel, the agricultural elements receded into the background. Jews could no longer come to Jerusalem and were scattered into the diaspora where the agricultural cycles were different. Torah, covenant, and Sinai became central to the holiday.

In modern times, it is customary to spend the night of Shavuot studying Torah. Sixteenth-century Jewish mystics believed that at midnight on Shavuot, the heavens open to our prayers and meditations. A custom of all-night study, called *tikun leil shavuot*, developed from this belief.

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Shavuot Through a Diversity Lens

In ancient times, each tribe had its own portion of land and lived as a separate community. Throughout their travels in the desert, the ancient Israelites traveled in tribal groups. When they camped, each tribe had their own location in camp.

On pilgrimage holidays like Shavuot, the tribes would come together and celebrate their unity as the people of Israel, sharing the same rituals and the same God. This vision of multiple communities with unique identities coming together as one is shared across all the pilgrimage holidays.

But the connection of Shavuot with the revelation at Sinai strengthens this understanding of the holiday as a moment of celebrating both our collective and individual identities. Our tradition teaches that all Jews throughout history stood at Sinai receiving the Torah, including future generations and those who have joined the Jewish people through conversion. The giving of the Torah united the people, and yet tradition speaks of the diversity of that experience. The Torah was given in the wilderness because wilderness belongs to no specific group of people, just as the Torah is not the property of any specific people; it is available to everyone. As the rabbis teach, the revelation was heard in 70 different languages and each person understood it according to their ability (Midrash Exodus Rabbah 5:9). In other words, even when we come together in our most sacred moments, in the moments that define us as one people, our tradition recognizes that we are a diverse people with distinct forms of expression and understanding. This moment of revelation is one of the most pivotal in the Torah, and reminds us of our shared identity with Jews all over the world.

The Book of Ruth

In addition to the traditional holiday liturgy, the biblical Book of Ruth is read at Shavuot. The Book of Ruth can, like all biblical works, be read in a myriad of ways. It tells the tale of Ruth, a Moabite woman, who marries a Jew living in Moab. After the death of her husband, she follows her mother-in-law Naomi back to the city of Bethlehem. In the process, Ruth declares, "wherever you go I will go, wherever you sleep I will sleep; your people are my people and your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth pledges allegiance not just to this woman who she loves, but also to her people and her God.

Upon returning to Bethlehem, the women are poor and Ruth goes out to collect the remains of the harvest in the field of Boaz. Boaz ensures the women have enough to eat and are treated in a respectful manner. This is a critical lesson when it comes to community at every level and in every era. Even those who are "strangers" or who are "lesser" by communal standards (in the

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case of Ruth and Naomi, unmarried, poor, women) are deserving of welcome and respectful. Boaz and Ruth eventually marry and from their line descends David, King of Israel, who is said to be the forefather of the Messiah.

The Book of Ruth draws a direct connection between the holiday of Shavuot and welcoming and inclusion as a Jewish value. Her story is one of profound love, loyalty, and kindness. Her acceptance of the Jewish people and traditions parallels the Israelites' acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. In dedicating herself to Naomi, Ruth gained a new communal and spiritual identity; at Sinai, we gained our identity as the Jewish people—a covenanted community. Redemption will come not from being closed and parochial but from being open and welcoming.

The strength of Ruth's story is compounded by the evolution of the canon of the Jewish Bible, as Ruth was one of the last books added. Its narrative of inclusion stands in direct contrast to the books of Ezra and Nehemia, which oppose intermarriage and inclusion. There were essentially two radically different positions about being open to "strangers." By instating Ruth as the book read on Shavuot, the rabbis made their position in support of inclusion clear. The books of Ezra and Nehemia with their xenophobic rhetoric have for the most part been relegated to books of scholarly interest.

In an era when many Jews are welcoming "strangers" into their communities and seeing them as valued members who strengthen our people, Ruth resonates with new and stronger meaning.

Shavuot and the Jews of India

Welcoming is not a value unique to the Jewish community. It is shared by many communities and groups, including many in India, which has been a benefit to the Jews of India from the start. While the exact details of the ancient origins of the Jews of India have been lost to time, welcome is a common thread throughout the stories of the Jewish experience in India. From the beginning, Jews were welcomed into the local community and allowed to form their own identities as well as connect with local culture and traditions. Like Ruth in the Bible, the Jews of India welcomed local people into their community as well. In a region where there are tensions between Hindus and Muslims, the welcome that the Jews have experienced, not only in the past but through to this day is notable. It also stands in contrast to lack of welcome and anti-semitism Jews have experienced elsewhere.

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Shavuot Foods

At Shavuot, meals are usually oriented around milk. Sweet and savory dishes that highlight milk or milk products can be found on the menus of Jewish communities around the world.

It is unclear when and where the pairing of Shavuot with milk based foods began. Among the many explanations for this tradition is the whiteness of milk as a metaphor for the purity of the Torah which was revealed at Sinai. Continuing with the theme of purity, we know that the people of Israel had to purify themselves before receiving the Torah and killing animals for meat would have broken that purity.

In the Bible, the land of Israel is described as a land of milk and honey for its bounty. Because that abundance was celebrated at Shavuot, it became traditional to eat milk based meals during the holiday.

Another reason cited is that it was at Sinai that the rules of keeping kosher were revealed. Once the people learned about these laws, they understood that the meat they had prepared was no longer permitted and they chose to only eat milk.

Regardless of the reason, to this day, Shavuot is associated with milk based meals. Not surprisingly, different families and communities have their own unique foods and recipes, yet there are some general themes. Taken together, these food customs are another reminder that we share a core vision as Jewish people but execute it differently depending on our unique historical and cultural experiences.

Among Eastern European Jews, blintzes, or pancakes filled with cheese and cheesecakes are the most common Shavuot foods. Rice pudding is on the menu in Greece, Syria and India. Greece also serves spanakopita and honey yogurt bread. In Syria, a yogurt phyllo pie and ataif pancakes in sweet syrup are popular.

In Turkey there is a frojalda a rich cheese bread with feta and hard cheese. For the Jews from the Balkans, in addition to frojalda, the holiday highlights savory flaky pastries and pies, including Banitza, Bourekas, Bouikos, and Chukor as well as and not surprisingly, rice pudding. In the same regions, it was not uncommon to shape bread into the shape of Mt. Sinai, sometimes with seven rings, sometimes with symbols of the holiday, sometimes with both.

Persian Jews make Polao mastin a dish made of rice and milk, and koltcha shiri, a dairy cake. Italian Jews made sweet tortellini and cheesy dumpling. Syrian Jews served *calsonnes w'rishta*,

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buttery noodles with cheese ravioli, *sambousak*, cheese filled pastries and *ataiyef* stuffed pancakes. While Tunsian Jews prepared cheesy sugar cookies.

Among Indian Jews there are a wide variety of dishes that are served for the holiday and they differ depending on one's Indian Jewish community of origin. There is an Indian version of the Iraqi kahi pastry which is fried (not baked Iraqi style, where it was a Shavuot food) and served with butter and date syrup as well as a fried cheese pastry called sumoosucks. There are also milk puddings sweetened with nuts and dried fruit.

Similar milk puddings could be found throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Tunsian Jews prepared cheesy sugar cookies. Ethiopian Jews have a tradition of bringing bread and other grains to bless, after which the entire community eats together. And there was a tradition among some Jews in Libya to make cookies/pretzels in shapes that are connected to the holiday and string them on necklaces for the children.

Shavuot Customs From Around the World

In addition to the special foods and liturgy of Shavuot, there have developed a variety of customs for Shavuot.

Because Shavuot occurs in the springtime in the northern hemisphere, it is a holiday of harvest. Many communities, including those in Greece and Turkey, Iran, Bukharia, Italy and Poland, decorate their homes and synagogues with flowers. In Germany tree branches were brought into the synagogue to remind the community that the Torah is the "tree of life."

Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, Shavuot was a time for water play. Water represents the life-giving properties of Torah and children in Morocco, Libya, Yemen, Iraq and other places would spray each other with water.

Iraqi and Kurdish Jews returned to the ancient roots of the holiday and would make pilgrimages to sacred sites. Iraqi Jews called the holiday "Eid al-Ziyara," Judeo-Arabic for "festival of the pilgrimage. They traditionally went to the holy shrines of the prophets to receive blessings. One of the shrines is Ezekiel's tomb which lies in at Al-Kifl near Baghdad. Kurdish Jews visited the tomb of the prophet Nahum near Mosel. The last time this was possible was 1951.

The early settlers to the kibbutzim and moshavim in pre-state Israel reconnected with the agricultural roots of the holiday. Though often not religious, they saw Shavuot as a time to

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celebrate the harvest and the first fruits. To this day, pageants celebrating the growing cycle and the bounty of the earth are part of modern Israeli life.

Historically in some places in Central Europe, the holiday of Shavuot was the traditional “first day of school” when young boys would begin their study of Torah at the same time as the Jewish people received the Torah. In contrast, in North America, especially among liberal Jewish denominations, Shavuot is often a time to celebrate those who have completed their Jewish studies with special recognition and celebration woven into the Shavuot services.