

Selected Customs of Shabuot

Shabuot is one of the major festivals in the Jewish calendar. Along with Pesah and Sukkot, it is one of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, when every Jewish man was commanded to come up to Jerusalem during the time when the Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, stood, and celebrate the festival there.

The Torah refers to this holiday as *Hag Shabuot*, the Feast of Weeks, as it occurs at the conclusion of the seven-week period of the *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of the Omer, which started with the beginning of the barley harvest on the second day of Pesah.

The Torah also identifies Shabuot as the *Hag HaKassir*, the Harvest Festival commemorating the beginning of the harvest season of the wheat crop, which ripened at this time of the year in the Land of Israel. A special sacrifice, referred to in the Torah as a *Minha Hadasha* (literally, a new offering) was brought to the Beit HaMikdash consisting of the *Shetey HaLehem*, two loaves of bread made from the new wheat crop. This offering accompanied the other animal sacrifices that were brought to the Beit HaMikdash on the holiday.

The holiday is also referred to in the Torah as *Yom HaBikkurim*, the holiday of the First Fruits”, as it marks the beginning of *Bikkurim*, bringing season (which lasted for several months), when the first fruits of the crops with which the Land of Israel is blessed (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates) were brought up to the Temple from all corners of the land and presented to the Kohanim in a grandeur manner.

We are most familiar with Shabuot as the *Zeman Matan Toratenu*, the Time of the Giving of the Torah. Though we have a traditional chronology recorded in the Torah itself, of when the Torah was given, the Torah does not actually link Matan Torah with the celebration of the holiday of Shabuot. Nevertheless, Shabuot coincides with the date when we mark the anniversary of G-d’s revelation to us on Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah, including both the Written and Oral Law. The Torah describes the encampment of Israel at Mount Sinai using the singular form of the verb ‘encamped’, from which we learn the Jewish people were like one person with a single heart. The only way it is possible for us to merit receiving the Torah is when all Jews are united. Such was the situation at Mount Sinai.

An additional name for the holiday is *Asseret*, a Day of Assembly, when we assembled at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. In this sense, the name relates to the holiday of Shabuot as concluding the holiday of Pesah. On Pesah we were redeemed physically via the Exodus, and on Shabuot we were redeemed spiritually via the receiving of the Torah.

Celebrating the Torah is very important, as it is central to our entire way of life as the

Jewish people. As such, we are commanded to learn Torah day and night and teach it to our children and observe the missvot.

There are a number of customs observed on the holiday which enhance our religious experience.

- Many decorate the houses and synagogues with flowers and greens, reminiscent of the flora that surrounded Mount Sinai during the giving of the Torah.
- Our sages also instituted a course of all-night study for the men, through which we demonstrate our anticipation to receive the Torah anew each year early on Shabuot morning.
- In the afternoon, it is customary to sing the *Azharot* and read the Book of Ruth. The *Azharot*, literally Admonitions, are a poetical rendition of the traditional 613 commands. There are various versions composed by different rabbis. Traditionally, we read the one written by R. Solomon ibn Gabirol. **The Book of Ruth** is read, for several reasons, among them:
 - The story of Ruth took place at this time of the year during the barley harvest described therein.
 - The book of Ruth delineates the genealogy of King David, who according to tradition, was born and died on Shabuot.
 - The story of Ruth describes the most famous convert to Judaism, reminding us that we were all converts to Judaism at Mount Sinai.
 - Most importantly, the display of Hesed, of loving-kindness performed by Ruth stands as a shining example of how we should each treat our fellow human being.
- Some also have the custom of reading the book of *Tehillim*, Psalms, to commemorate King David, the principal author of the book.
- In addition, some Sephardim chant a *Ketuba*, a marriage contract, composed by R. Israel Najara, which delineates the experience at Sinai as a marriage between the Almighty and the People of Israel.
- It is also customary to partake of dairy and sweet foods on Shabuot. One of the many reasons for this custom is that the Torah is compared to delicacies made from honey and milk. Another explanation for the consumption of dairy food on Shabuot is that after receiving the Torah, the people needed time to learn the laws of kosher slaughter and how to make their dishes kosher; therefore dairy had to be eaten in the meantime. Despite this custom, it is still appropriate to have a meat meal in honor of the holiday, as our sages have declared that one cannot have true happiness without a festive meal of meat and wine. Thus, one should have some dairy first, and then wash their hands and their mouths before going on to enjoy a festive meal of meat and wine.

Tizku LeShanim Rabbot, Mo'adim LeSimha, Hag Sameah