

Shavuot Customs and Laws

CUSTOMS AND LAWS - Decorations with Greenery

Because of the holiday's agricultural overtones, it is customary to decorate the synagogue and home with greens, grasses, branches and flowers to stir our awareness of the importance of the harvest. Decorating the synagogue with tree branches is a reminder of how dependent we are on G-d for providing the world with the fruit of the trees and that in Temple times the first fruits were brought on Shavuot. We also use flowers as decoration since the Midrash describes how Mt. Sinai suddenly flowered in anticipation of the revelation of the Torah.

Dairy Food - While Shavuot is celebrated with the joy of fine festive dining with meat and wine, there is a popular custom of serving dairy items. Some do so to recall the verse, "Honey and milk are under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11), which refers to the sweetness of Torah and to one who has attained the knowledge of Torah. Some do so to commemorate our ancestor's preparations for the giving of the Torah when it is assumed that to remain pure for the sacred moment they ate only dairy dishes. It is interesting that Mount Sinai is called Har Gavnunim (Psalms 68:16) and the word *gavnunim* is similar to *g'vina* - cheese. The numeric value of the word *chalav* - milk is 40, alluding to the forty days and nights Moshe spent on Mt. Sinai receiving the Torah. Some begin a meal with dairy and then after a small intermission continue with a meat course. Doing so recalls the "two cooked foods" of the Pesach Seder and underscores Shavuot as the culmination of Pesach.

Tikun Leil Shavuot - Since Shavuot is chiefly associated with the giving of the Torah, it is the custom to identify with our ancestors by preparing ourselves mentally and spiritually for the festival with the study of Torah. On the first night of Shavuot, one spends the entire night studying, a custom still practiced in our synagogue. The custom of remaining awake all night long on Shavuot to study Torah is called "*Tikun Leil Shavuot*". The word "*tikkun*" means enhancement or repair. What is it one repairs? Some suggest that our study all night is to compensate for the behavior of the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. In the fatigue of preparation they slept so soundly that they had to be awakened by G-d with thunder and lightning at daybreak to receive the Torah.

Megillat Ruth - The Megillah of Ruth is read on Shavuot morning before Torah reading. The story of Ruth is quite an appropriate reading for Shavuot for several reasons: The aim of the Torah is loving kindness and the story of Ruth underscores the primacy of kindness. Harvest time in Israel is the setting of Ruth's story - from the beginning of the barley harvest to the conclusion of the wheat harvest; a fitting reading for Shavuot, the harvest festival. Most significantly, the story of Ruth is the inspiring story of conversion. Ruth assumed the identity and ideology of the Jewish people and the laws of the Torah, just as Shavuot commemorates the national acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people at Sinai. All of Israel was like converts at Sinai. It is interesting that the Book of Ruth delineates the royal lineage of her grandson King David and the Davidic line. Tradition tells us that King David was born and died on Shavuot.