

WHY WE DO? SHAVUOT

WITH THE HALACHOT OF SHAVUOT

"Why We Do" is a new series on foundational Jewish knowledge, offering insights into the reasons behind our practices. Understanding these reasons brings purpose, meaning, and excitement to what we do.

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Why do we celebrate Shavuot?

Shavuot, also known as the Festival of Weeks, is celebrated to commemorate the giving of the Torah to Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai. This momentous event occurred on the 6th of Sivan, seven weeks after leaving Egypt. The Torah describes Shavuot as the culmination of the Omer-counting period, connecting it directly to the Exodus and the spiritual journey from physical freedom to spiritual responsibility. Shavuot is also one of the Shalosh Regalim (three pilgrimage festivals), during which Jews would bring Bikkurim (first fruits) to the Beit HaMikdash in gratitude to Hashem. [Vayikra 23:15–21, Shemot 23:16]

Why do we stay up all night learning Torah on Shavuot (Tikkun Leil Shavuot)?

The custom of staying awake all night to learn Torah on the first night of Shavuot is based on a Midrash that says Bnei Yisrael overslept on the morning of Matan Torah. To rectify this and show our eagerness, we stay up learning all night. *Kabbalists*, particularly the *Arizal*, emphasized this practice as a spiritual preparation for receiving the

Torah anew each year. It is also a sign of love and devotion to Torah. The *Shaar HaKavanot* states that one who does not sleep even for a moment during the night of Shavuot and only learns Torah is assured that he will not come to harm, or even die, that year.

The *Shlah* in *Sefer Shene Luchot Haberit* (*Masechet Shavuot, Perek Ner Mitzvah* no. 5 s.v. *velehorot*) and the *sefer Chemdat Yamim* (57d) recorded the episode of Maran HaRav Yosef Karo, who, while still living in Turkey, arranged with his colleagues and disciples to spend the night of Shavuot studying Torah together. While they were studying mishnayot, they suddenly heard the overwhelming voice of an angel speaking through the mouth of Maran. The angel praised them immensely for the rectification they had accomplished through their studies and told them of the immense pleasure it had brought to Hashem. This account, as follows, was written by eyewitness Rav Shelomo Alkabetz (author of *Lecha Dodi*). [*Magen Avraham* 494:1; *Mishnah Berurah* 494:1]

Why do some communities read Megillat Ruth on Shavuot?

There are several reasons for reading *Megillat Ruth* on Shavuot. First, the story of Ruth takes place during the harvest season, aligning with Shavuot's agricultural theme. Second, Ruth converted to Judaism and accepted the Torah fully, mirroring the Jewish people's acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. Lastly, Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David, who was born and died on Shavuot. [*Rama*, 490:9; *Talmud Yerushalmi (Beitza 2:4; Hagigah 2:4)*]

Why do we eat dairy on Shavuot?

There are many symbolic and halachic reasons for the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot. One is that upon receiving the Torah, Bnei Yisrael were bound by the laws of kashrut, and rather than prepare new meat dishes, they ate dairy. Another is the idea that Torah is likened to milk, as it says in *Shir HaShirim* (4:11): "Milk and honey are under your tongue." Additionally, the gematria (numerical value) of the word "chalav" (milk) is 40,

symbolizing the 40 days Moshe spent on Har Sinai. [*Mishnah Berurah* 494:12]

Why do we decorate the shul and home with greenery on Shavuot?

Many have the custom to place fragrant herbs and flowers in every corner of the synagogues and homes in honor of the Chag of Shavuot. This is to commemorate how Hashem gave the Torah to Klal Yisrael. Our sages taught (*Shabbat* 88b) that with every statement that Hashem spoke, the entire world became filled with pleasant fragrances. This is alluded to in the pasuk (*Shir Hashirim* 5:13), "His lips are roses dripping with fragrance myrrh." We also have the custom to set up tree branches in the synagogues and houses, alluded in the *Gemara (Rosh HaShanah* 16a), "On the festival of Shavuot we are judged concerning the fruits of the trees." Although some poskim question the validity of this custom, it is best to allow people to practice it since well-established customs have the authority of Torah law. [*Rama*, O.C. 494:3; *Mishna Berurah* 494:10]

Why do we count the Omer leading up to Shavuot?

Counting the Omer is a mitzvah that bridges the physical redemption from Egypt on Pesach with the spiritual climax of receiving the Torah on Shavuot. It instills anticipation and spiritual preparation. Each day is a step in self-refinement, especially through the lens of the Kabbalistic Sefirot, preparing us for the responsibility of Torah. [Vayikra 23:15–16]

Why don't we have a set date for Shavuot in the Torah?

Shavuot's date is not mentioned directly in the Torah to emphasize that it is not simply a calendar date but rather a culmination, exactly 50 days after the Omer count begins. This teaches us that the festival is intrinsically linked to our own efforts of counting and preparing, making the giving of the Torah a dynamic and participatory experience.

Why do we call it “Zman Matan Torateinu” and not “Zman Kabbalat HaTorah”?

There's a profound difference between *Hashem giving the Torah—matan Torah*—and *our receiving it—kabbalat haTorah*. Shavuot marks the historic moment when Hashem gave us the Torah at Sinai, a one-time, world-shifting event. But receiving the Torah isn't limited to that day—it's something we're meant to do again each year, and even each day, within our own hearts and lives.

When we call Shavuot *Zman Matan Torateinu*, we're not just remembering the past—we're recognizing that Hashem is still offering His Torah to us right now. The question is: are we ready to receive it? As Rav Moshe Feinstein beautifully taught, the Torah wasn't just given once—it's being given constantly. But only those with open hands and open hearts will truly receive it.

Why is there no specific mitzvah associated with Shavuot, like matzah on Pesach or sukkah on Sukkot?

Shavuot doesn't have a unique ritual mitzvah because its essence is spiritual receiving the Torah anew. The focus is inward: on learning, connecting to Hashem, and deepening our relationship with Torah. The customs, such as learning all night and reading Ruth, reflect this inner dimension. [Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Commentary on Vayikra]

Why is Shavuot only one day (in Israel) compared to seven or eight for other festivals?

Shavuot represents a single moment of Divine revelation—the giving of the Torah. It was a one-time event, unlike the continuous miracles of the desert (like Sukkot) or the drawn-out redemption of Pesach. Therefore, one day is enough to encapsulate the power of that spiritual peak. [Rav Soloveitchik, Festival Lectures] This teaches us that Torah isn't a thing we "do once a year" it's a lifelong relationship.

1. Preparation for Shavuot

Learning the Halachot of Shavuot

- **30-Day Rule:** Our Sages, such as the Magen Avraham (429:1), advise beginning to learn the halachot of Shavuot thirty days before the holiday. This follows the principle of *Shloshim Yom Kodem HaChag* — that we prepare for each festival by studying its laws starting a month in advance, just as we do for Pesach.
- **From Rosh Chodesh Sivan:** Others (*Mishnah Berurah 429:1*) say to start from the beginning of Sivan.
- **Purpose:** To enter the Yom Tov prepared and with a proper understanding of its Halachot.

2. Decorating the Shul or Home

- **Flowers and Greenery:** Many have the custom to decorate the shul and home with greenery, trees, or flowers to commemorate *Har Sinai*, which was lush at the time of Matan Torah (*Rama O.C. 494:3*).
 - **Controversy:** The *Vilna Gaon* and some other poskim objected to this practice due to its similarity to non-Jewish rituals (*Mishna Berurah 494:10*). However, the custom is to still decorate, and the *Birkei Yosef* §6, writes that this custom dates back to the times of Mordechai and Esther.
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3. Reading Megillat Rut

- **Ashkenazi Custom:** It is customary to read *Megillat Rut* on Shavuot morning (*Rama O.C. 490:9*). However, the **Sephardic** custom is not to read *Megillat Rut*.

4. Eating Dairy Foods

- **Widespread Custom:** Many eat dairy foods on Shavuot (*Mishna Berurah 494:12*).
- **Reasons:**
 - **Torah Compared to Milk:** “Devash ve’chalav tachat leshoneich” (*Shir HaShirim 4:11*).
 - **First Meal After Matan Torah:** Once they received the Torah, they couldn't eat meat until they prepared it according to Torah law (kashering, shechita, etc.), so they ate dairy.
 - **Gematria of “Chalav”** (milk) is 40, corresponding to the 40 days Moshe spent on Sinai.
- **How to Fulfill It:**
 - Some eat dairy in the morning, then wash out their mouth, wait, and eat meat later (*Aruch HaShulchan O.C. 494*).
 - Some make two separate meals.

- **Yom Tov Simcha:** However, since meat and wine are associated with simchat Yom Tov (*Rambam Hilchos Yom Tov 6:18*), many poskim say a meat meal is also required.
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5. Shavuot Night – Tikkun Leil Shavuot

- **Staying Up All Night:** Many stay up learning Torah the entire first night of Shavuot (*Magen Avraham 494:1*).
 - **Tikkun Leil Shavuot:** A structured program of Torah passages from Tanach, Mishnah, Zohar, etc., is often read (especially by Sefardim). If one finds it difficult to complete the full Tikkun, he may read the sections of Tanach and at least one paragraph of Zohar, then continue learning Gemara or Rambam's Sefer HaMitzvot for the rest of the night.
 - The most important thing is to learn as much as one can, without wasting time sleeping or talking. (*Yechaveh Daat 3:32*)
 - **Reason:** To "repair" the Jewish people's mistake of sleeping late on the day of Matan Torah.
 - **Halachot for Staying Up:**
 - **Sefirat HaOmer:** Recite after nightfall before learning.
 - **Shema:** One should recite Keriat Shema SheAl HaMittah before chatzot, even if one will not sleep that night (*Chazon Ovadia, Yom Tov, p. 311*)
 - **Netilat Yadayim:** After Alot HaShachar, one washes hands as usual, but does not recite a berachah unless one slept at least 30 minutes. Similarly, one only says Asher Yatzar if one used the bathroom. (*Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 4:13; Chazon Ovadia, Yom Tov, p. 313; Yalkut Yosef, Moadim, 441*)
 - **Birchos HaShachar:** After alot hashachar, **Sephardim** recite all Birchos HaTorah and Birchos HaShachar. Many **Ashkenazim** hear them from someone who slept, rather than say them themselves. (See *Ben Ish Chai, Vezot Haberachah 1:3; Yabia Omer, vol. 5, O.C. 6; Yechaveh Daat 3:33; Chazon Ovadia, Yom Tov, p. 312*)
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6. Shavuot Morning – Matan Torah

- **Aseret HaDibrot:** Read on the first day of Shavuot. Some stand during the reading as a sign of respect (*Mishna Berurah 494:12*). Ideally, this should be avoided in order not to show that the Aseret Hadibrot are more important than the rest of the Torah. (*Yabia Omer 8:15; Yechaveh Daat*, vol. 1, 29; *ibid.*, vol. 6, 8)
 - **The Morning Meal:** If one stayed up all night and plans to nap in the morning, it's best to eat the seudah before chatzot. If that's not possible, he should have bread with Kiddush after shul, and then eat the full meal after his nap. (*Ohr LeTzion*, vol. 3, 18:11)
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7. Kiddush and Shehecheyanu

- **Kiddush:** Standard Yom Tov Kiddush is recited (*Shulchan Aruch O.C. 494:1*). Kiddush on Shavuot night should ideally be said after tzet hakochavim (nightfall) to complete the Omer count, per some authorities. In areas where nightfall is late, causing family inconvenience, Kiddush may be recited during the day, preferably after shkiyah (sunset). Alternatively, eat a kezayit of bread after nightfall.
 - **Shehecheyanu:** *Shehecheyanu* is recited during Kiddush on the night of Yom Tov. Ideally, women should not say *Shehecheyanu* when lighting the Yom Tov candles. Instead, they should have in mind to fulfill their obligation by hearing it during Kiddush. Additionally, women should not respond "Amen" to the *Shehecheyanu* blessing in Kiddush, as doing so would be considered an interruption (*hefsek*) between the blessings.
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8. Learning Torah on Shavuot

- **Key Focus:** Shavuot is *Zman Matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah. There is a strong emphasis on Torah study all day.
 - **Custom:** Learn topics related to Torah Shebichtav and Torah Shebe'al Peh, or the Ten Commandments and their meanings.
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9. Isru Chag

- **Day After Shavuot:** Known as *Isru Chag*, it retains a trace of the Yom Tov's holiness.
 - **Tachanun:** The Sephardic minhag is not to recite *tachanun*, *lamnatze'ach*, or *tefilla lidavid* from Rosh chodesh sivan until the 12th. (*Kaf Hachaim* 494:50)
 - **No Fasting or Eulogies.** (*Kaf Hachaim* 494:48)
- **Extra Joy:** Some increase in food and drink slightly on Isru Chag.