

## The Shavuot Festival – From Harvest Festival to Holiday of the Giving of the Torah

### Harvest and Bikkurim (First Fruits)

**And thou shalt observe the feast of weeks of the first fruits of wheat harvest.**

(Exodus 34:22)

15 You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath: **from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering.** 16 You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord. 17 You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, **as first fruits to the Lord.** And you shall present with the bread seven lambs a year old without blemish, and one bull from the herd and two rams. They shall be a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs a year old as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs.

**And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.** When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

(Leviticus 23)

You shall count seven weeks: **Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you.** And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant



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and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.

(Deuteronomy 16)

## Giving of the Torah

**On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain. And Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel. You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.**

(Exodus 19:1-6)

**On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.**

(Exodus 19)

**Our Rabbis taught: The Sages taught: On the sixth day of the month of Sivan, the Ten Commandments were given to the Jewish people. Rabbi Yosei says: On the seventh day of the month.**





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(Babylonian Talmud)

**You have chosen us from all the Nations. You loved us and desired us. You have exalted us from above all tongues and sanctified us by your commandments. You brought us closer to your service to serve your great and holy Name you called us. And you have given us in love, O Lord our God, appointed times for gladness, festivals and seasons for joy, this day of the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), the season of the Giving of our Law;**

(From the Shmoneh Esrai prayer for Shavuot)

## Renewal of the agricultural holiday

This is a true revolution; we have thus made a real breakthrough, and shall celebrate the holiday in a different way than our ancestors in exile; we have now returned to the land. In exile this was a holiday of the home, full of spiritual content, with songs, prayer and holiday symbols to remind us of the physical splendor of the past. Just as we work the land, and drill wells and excavate in rock until we reach the pure groundwater, so we are obligated to strive and penetrate to reach the sources of our holidays, and redeem the purest 'groundwater' of our ancient culture from the depths of Jewish life in the past, and once again make it flow through the pipes of influence, clogged after so many years of exile.

(Yitzhak Michaeli, Shavuot 1926)

## First Fruits Festival and Day of Giving the Torah

But please do not forget one important thing! And that is, that the national continuity of our people begins on the holiday we celebrate today: The festival of Shavuot – this holiday was not just a holiday of nature, festival of the first crops from the fruits of the earth and man's labor: This was the day of *Matan Torah* – the giving of the Torah, on which we became a people. The two cannot be separated. On a single day we were created as a people, and became a people working its land with the sweat of its brow. Such a separation could put obstacles in our path like those that stood in it over the last generation. We must avoid them.





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(Menachem Ussishkin on the Shavuot festival in Haifa 1932)

My friends, have you felt this privilege, the privilege of reviving an ancient custom, sanctifying an ancient custom; such that our generation has been given; a custom with such meaning and so much culture inherent in it. It tells us that we are a people, and that we were not born yesterday. We now sanctify customs dating back three thousand years, and this holiday still maintains its meaning and its freshness. We were not born yesterday. We have experienced and seen much. The chain of generations is complete. We now continue with it. All of the good from our past, from ancient times, we shall renew and sanctify; and that which is foreign to us – we shall remove. We have a glorious yet innovative past. A fresh, vibrant holiday we celebrate in continuity with the past. Have we learned to appreciate the existing foundation (Keren Hakayemet)? Without it we are dust in the wind. And this is the day on which we shall appreciate the great value of this foundation, which has given us this valley around us, and that is destined to give us and redeem us many more lands in the future...

Today is not just the Holiday of *Bikkurim* (first fruits), itself worthy of celebrating with all our enthusiasm; rather, today is also the holiday of the giving of the Torah, given to us by one G-d, seeing without being seen. This Torah has given us the human conscience, it too seeing without being seen. This is the Torah that has given us the Sabbath, a day of cessation from work and rest for workers after six days of work. A Torah that has liberated slaves wherever they may be...

In those ancient times, two wonders of the world came into being: The pyramids in Egypt and the Torah of the Jewish people. The pyramids erected by the toil of Israel still exist and lie still and cold as stone, as opposed to the pyramid of the Torah of Israel, whose spirit fills the world. This is a Torah that demands one law for foreigners and residents, and commands you to remember that you too were once a slave and calls for the freeing of all slaves. It is a living moral pyramid given as law by a merciful G-d.

Today is a double holiday: the Holiday of *Bikkurim* and also the holiday of the giving of the Torah. Our culture is thousands of years old, and we continue in our cultural path.

**(Shlomo Lavie, Ein Harod, Bikkurim Ceremony 1937)**





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## First Fruits (*Bikkurim*), the Giving of the Torah and Us

Just as everything returns to the ground it came from, so our national creation grows from the earth. No national growth is possible without the primary source of revival and cultivation. This is the point of departure, not just for education but rather all aspects of national life and creation. ... I wish the idea of the redemption of the land to ascend to such heights, that its content is interpreted in a thousand interpretations, just as there are 49 faces of Torah. .... Our children need to know that whoever does not create all his values from within the soil is but half a man, and as our sages said: "First man was not called man until he tilled the earth." All of our literature is actually "redemption of the land" in its highest meaning. Our students should know that just as there is physical land from which all material creation emanates, so there is a spiritual ground from which all spiritual creation is derived from. They must realize that without contact with the soil, without plowing and planting, there can be no real spiritual growth. The one redemption is not possible without the other.

From: Bialik, words spoken to the Teachers' Council for the Keren HaKayemet at Ben Shemen Youth Village Kislev 5687 (1927))





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**Festival / Rachel**

Idioms speaking to me:

We planted in the furrow of the heart;

And a day will come and we will

become golden stalks.

And a tender child will come to you

to choose from flowers of wheat

And a poor wanderer in your nights

will break his hunger.

Plowing and planting,

in the furrow of the heart,

Come, do come, stranger and friend,

to the nearing harvest festival!



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