

Shavuot Festival – Teacher’s Annex Shavuot ID card

Name of the holiday: Shavuot

Additional names: Harvest Festival, First Fruits (*bikkurim*) Festival, Holiday of the Giving of the Torah, Festival of Fifty (Jubilee).

Date: Sixth of Sivan.

Reason for the holiday, event: Beginning of the wheat harvest; commandment of pilgrimage and bringing first fruits of wheat to the Temple.

The giving of the law at Mt. Sinai: according to tradition, this was the day on which the Torah was given to the people of Israel.

Figures: Ruth the Moabitess – Naomi’s daughter-in-law returns from Moab with her, although she is not obligated. She assists in redeeming the land of Naomi’s family, King David’s great grandmother **Naomi** – widow of Elimelech of Bethlehem; mother-in-law of Ruth who is returning to Judea. With the help of Ruth and Boaz, she redeems her family’s land, and produces an heir to the family. **Boaz** – takes Ruth as a wife, takes Naomi under his patronage and redeems the family’s land; King David’s great grandfather.

Holiday precepts (*mitzvot*):

- Day of rest;
- In the Temple period: Pilgrimage, sacrifice and two breads, beginning of bringing the *bikkurim* (first fruits).

Holiday customs

- Warnings (*Azharot*): Special hymms for the holiday, dealing mainly with the 613 commandments (*mitzvot*).
- Akdamut: A hymn in Aramaic recited before reading the Torah on Shavuot. (Ashkenazi)
- Bringing of the Bikkurim (First Fruits) In the cooperative-rural settlement in Israel, the custom of bringing the *bikkurim* (first fruits) of agriculture (and subsequently industry too) has been





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renewed in an impressive ceremony. In the schools of the Zionist settlement as well, it was customary for each child to bring a basket of fruits and vegetables, its value donated to the Keren Kayemet LeYisrael (Jewish National Fund).

- Special loaves of challah for Shavuot: 'Mt. Sinai Cakes' – special *challot* with seven folds or seven layers, corresponding to the seven heavens through which G-d came down to give the Torah to Israel. In certain ethnic groups, it was customary to bake *challot* in the shape of a ladder, the two tablets, etc.
- Greenery for Shavuot: It is customary to decorate the floor of synagogues and homes with greenery, branches and flowers. This custom has several possible reasons: Remembrance of the harvest festival. Remembrance of the giving of the Torah which was on the green mountain. Remembrance of the miracle performed for Moses in the reeds. Remembrance of the *midrash* in which the Torah was compared to a rose among the briars.
- Ketubah le-Shavuot (marriage certificate for Shavuot): It is customary to read a text of poetry or prose, as a symbolic betrothal of Israel and the Torah, or G-d and His people Israel, with the day of the giving of the Torah as the wedding day. (Sephardic)
- Dairy and cheese products: On Shavuot it is customary to eat dairy and cheese products. This custom has several explanations:
 - In the Song of Songs the Torah is compared to honey and milk: "Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue." (Song of Songs 4:11).
 - Remembrance of the milk Moses was fed from the breasts of a Hebrew woman.
 - As it is said: On the day of first fruits, when you present to the Lord an offering of new grain during the Festival of Weeks (Numbers 28), verse initials constitute Hebrew acronym "of milk".
 - At the giving of the Torah, the people of Israel were commanded to eat kosher meat; however, they did not have kosher vessels so they ate dairy products.
 - In gematria (numerical value of Hebrew word) milk equals forty, as against the forty days and forty nights Moses spent on Mt. Sinai.





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- **The Book of Ruth:** It is customary to read the Book of Ruth from parchment in the synagogue, before reading the Torah. Why is the Book read on Shavuot?
 - The story of the Book of Ruth takes place during the harvest.
 - According to tradition, King David, whose genealogy the Book deals with, was born and died on this day.
 - The Book of Ruth is also considered the 'book of foreigners', since Israel were converted on the day of the giving of the Torah.
- **Salvation water:** A custom of North African Jews brought to Israel, to pour water on every passerby.
- **The Ten Commandments:** It is customary to read the Ten Commandments in public as part of the prayer, in remembrance of the practice that existed in the Temple.
- **The Seven Species:** Seven types of fruit that the Land of Israel is blessed with: "From which the people were commanded to bring first fruits of to the Temple", and one of the symbols of the holiday renewed since the beginning of Zionism.
- Doilies Made from paper cutouts customarily pasted on windows of homes, especially in honor of Shavuot. They include decorative cutouts and symbols of the holiday.
- **Two dishes:** It is customary to eat two dishes: One dairy and later on one meat, in remembrance of the Passover sacrifice and the celebration sacrifice. Each dish has its own bread, as against the two loaves of bread sacrificed on the *Bikkurim* festival.
- **Tikkun Leil Shavuot (Service of the Night of Shavuot):** Mishmara (Sephardic version): It is customary not to sleep but rather engage in study on the night of the holiday. The traditional *Tikkun* includes sections from the Torah as well as the oral law and texts from the Kabbalah. The custom appears in the Zohar as the custom of 'opening the heavens' to receive the Torah anew. It was renewed by the ARI and has since become widespread. In recent years, it is customary to observe *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (Service of the Night of Shavuot) with free content, as a night devoted to study.





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Names of the Holiday

| <u>Name</u> | <u>Explanation</u> |
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| Shavuot Festival | The holiday is celebrated seven weeks from Passover and the beginning of the Omer, and concludes the period of counting the Omer. |
| Festival of the Harvest | Beginning of the wheat harvest and bringing the first fruits of wheat to the Temple. |
| Festival of the <i>Bikkurim</i> (First Fruits) | From this time one, the Seven Species begin ripening and the bringing of the <i>Bikkurim</i> (First Fruits) begins. In the Zionist era, the ceremony of bringing the <i>bikkurim</i> is the main theme of the holiday. |
| Giving of the Torah | According to tradition, this is the time of the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, and giving of the Ten Commandments. |
| Assembly (<i>Atzeret</i>) | Gathering of the pilgrimage for bringing the <i>bikkurim</i> ; the holiday also stops (<i>otzer</i> , derived from <i>Atzeret</i>) the counting of the Omer. |
| Fiftieth Year Holiday / Jubilee | Fifty days are counted from Passover. The counting of seven weeks corresponds to seven years of <i>shmita</i> (sabbatical year), with the Jubilee year at the end. |
| Time, occasion (<i>regel</i>) | Each of the three pilgrimage festivals (Sukkot, Passover, or Shavuot) |



Bikkurim (First Fruits) – Sources

a. Sources for the *Bikkurim* precept

Genesis Chapter 4

3) In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4) And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering.

Exodus Chapter 13

1) The Lord said to Moses: 2) Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.

Exodus Chapter 22

28) Thou shalt not delay to offer of the fullness of thy harvest, and of the outflow of thy presses. The **first-born of thy sons** shalt thou give unto Me. 29) **Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep; seven days it shall be with its dam; on the eighth day thou shalt give it Me.**

Numbers Chapter 15

20) **Present a loaf from the first of your ground meal** and present it as an offering from the threshing floor. Throughout the generations to come you are to give this offering to the Lord from the first of your ground meal.

Leviticus Chapter 23

9) The Lord said to Moses: 10) Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, **bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.**

Deuteronomy Chapter 18





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3) This is the share due the priests from the people who sacrifice a bull or a sheep: the shoulder, the internal organs and the meat from the head. 4) **You are to give them the first fruits of your grain, new wine and olive oil, and the first wool from the shearing of your sheep.** 5) For the Lord your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the Lord's name always.

b. Meaning of the precept

“Bringing first fruits to the gods or spirits seems, in the eyes of man, like effective preparation towards eating the new harvest. The supreme forces have received their share, and man is now free to enjoy the rest. According to this outlook, the harvests are conceived as a gift from G-d to man. Therefore, it is incumbent upon man to express his thanks and esteem to the beneficent gods, and the way to do this is give them a generous portion.” Sir James George Frazer, The Golden Bough

Chapter 3

9) Honor the Lord with your possessions, and with the first fruits of all your increase; 10) So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine. “The commandment of bringing *Bikkurim* (First Fruits) to the Temple is one that involves great testimony: Every person in Israel should attest to himself from the place where G-d chose to house his name; for he is neither thankless nor haughty, nor has he forgotten his origins, and he remembers all the favors G-d has bestowed upon him...” The Book of Awareness (Sefer Ha-Toda'ah), Rabbi Eliyahu Kitov, 158)

c. When are *bikkurim* brought?

Mishnah Tractate Bikkurim 1

From Atseret until Sukkot, one brings and recites. From Sukkot until Chanukkah, one brings but does not recite.

There is no appointed time for bringing *bikkurim*, neither in the Bible nor in the Mishnah... If you go outside on the eve of the Bikkurim festival, and check the state of ripening of the





Seven Species, you would find that all five types of fruit are only just blossoming or, at the most, after ripening...

The month of Sivan is part of the busy harvest season. In this season, most of the crops are still in the fields, exposed to many dangers: fire, rain, wind and robbers. Is it reasonable to assume that all the farmers could just leave their fields in this month for at least a whole week?

In Tractate Bikkurim it is said that “Once they got close to Jerusalem, they would send ahead of them” (3:3); why did the bringers of first fruits need to send messengers to Jerusalem to inform of their arrival?

The necessary conclusion from all of this is that the pilgrims did not arrive at a regular appointed time, rather, during the six months between Succot and Chanukah. The passage “once they got close to Jerusalem, they would send ahead of them” may be understood as follows: The pilgrim sent emissaries to inform of their arrival, since they did not arrive on any particular holiday, rather on one of the days between Shavuot and Chanukah. Of course, the residents of Jerusalem cannot be expected to sit and wait the entire six months for the pilgrims to come.

It follows that Shavuot was the day on which it was permitted to start bringing the bikkurim, with each area organizing itself according to its times of ripening.

(Teachers Guide for Shavuot, edited by: Yoram Goren, Oranim College, 1990 pp. 26-29)

d. The Two Loaves (*Shtei Halechem*) Offering – First Fruits of Wheat

Exodus Chapter 34 Verse 22

And thou shalt observe the feast of weeks of the **first fruits of wheat harvest**, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end.

Leviticus Chapter 23

15) And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. 16) You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present **a grain offering of new grain** to





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the Lord. 17) **You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves** of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. **They are the first fruits to the Lord.** 18) And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs of the first year, without blemish, one young bull, and two rams. They shall be as a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to the Lord. 19) Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats as a sin offering, and two male lambs of the first year as a sacrifice of a peace offering. 20) The priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. 21) And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

e. Ceremony of the bringing of the *bikkurim* (first fruits) and the *bikkurim* declaration

Deuteronomy Chapter 26

1) When you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it: 2) Take some of the first fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the Lord your God is giving you and put them in a basket; then go to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name; 3) And you shall go to the one who is priest in those days, and say to him: I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come to the country which the Lord swore to our fathers to give us. 4) The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the Lord your God:

5) And you shall answer and say before the Lord your God: 'My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6) But the Egyptians mistreated us, afflicted us, and laid hard bondage on us: 7) Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression: 8) And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm with great deeds of terror, and with signs and wonders: 9) And he brought us into this place and gave us this land a land flowing with milk and honey: 10) And now, behold, I





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have brought the first fruits of the land which you, O Lord, have given me. Then you shall set it before the Lord your God, and worship before the Lord your God. 11) So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the Lord your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you.

Mishnah Tractate Bikkurim 3

Mishnah 1

How does one designate the *Bikkurim* [first-fruits that must be brought to the Temple in Jerusalem and given to the Kohen]? A person goes to one's field and sees a date that is bearing fruit, a bunch [of grapes] that is bearing fruit, or a pomegranate that is bearing fruit, and ties it with a string and says: 'Behold these are *Bikkurim*'."

Mishnah 2

How do they bring the Bikkurim up [to Jerusalem]? All the cities of a *Ma'amad* would go into the city of the *Ma'amad* and sleep in the streets of that city without going into the houses. When they arose, the supervisor would say: "Arise! Let us go up to Zion, to the house of the Lord our God!":

Mishnah 3

Those who were close would bring dates and grapes and the far ones would bring dried figs and raisins. A bull would go before them and its horns would be plated with gold and it would have a olive wreath around its head. The flute would play before them until they got close to Jerusalem. Once they got close to Jerusalem they would send ahead of them [a messenger] and adorned their *Bikkurim*. The overseers and officers and treasurers would go out to greet them according to the stature of those coming in would they go out. All the artisans of Jerusalem would stand before them and greet them: "Our brothers from so-and-so come in peace!"

Mishnah 4

The flute would continue playing before them until they arrived at the Temple Mount. Once they arrived at the Temple Mount, even Agripas the King would carry his basket on his shoulder and enter until he reached the courtyard. Once they got to the courtyard, the Levites would speak in song (Psalms 30:2): "I will extol you, O Lord, because you have raised me and not allowed my enemies to rejoice over me"(Psalms 30):



Mishnah 6

With the basket still on one's shoulder, one would recite from "I declare today to the Lord my God" (Deuteronomy 26:3-10) until finishing the entire passage. Rabbi Judah says: until "My father was a wandering Aramean." Once one gets to "My father was a wandering Aramean", one takes the basket off one's shoulder and holds it by one's lip. The priest places his hand under it and waves it. He then recites from "My father was a wandering Aramean" until finishing the entire passage and rests [the basket] beside the altar and prostrates and leaves.

On the Book of Ruth and the Figure of Ruth

Ruth is a Biblical figure, the main heroine of the Book of Ruth and, according to the Bible, great-grandmother of King David. The Book of Ruth tells the story of the privileged Elimelech family of the tribe of Judea, who due to drought and famine leaves its homeland and migrates to the Land of Moab, an enemy of Israel at that time. The father of the Elimelech family subsequently dies.

The family's sons, Mahlon and Chilion, married two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah who, according to hazal, were the daughter or granddaughters of Eglon, King of Moab. Ten years later the two sons die too, leaving the mother Naomi and her two daughters in law. After being left with nothing, and hearing that the drought in the Land of Israel had ended, Naomi decides to return to her homeland bereaved, crushed and poor, and urges her daughters in law to leave her alone since she has nothing more to give, and asks to part ways with them. Orpah listens to her mother and returns to her family, whereas Ruth insists on sticking with her mother in law, declaring: "your people is my people and your G-d is my G-d", insisting that only death shall separate them (The Book of Ruth 1:17).

After they return to Bethlehem, Ruth, at her own initiative and with Naomi's approval went to collect stalks of wheat after the harvesters, as the poor of Israel did in ancient times (gleanings to the poor). When arriving at the field, Ruth attracts the attention of their field's owner, Boaz. Boaz inquires about her with the workers in the field, and discovers the fact that she is his relative, daughter in law of his uncle Elimelech. He therefore asks her not to go to another field, rather, collect only in his field. In addition, he asks the young men working to give her special consideration and not harass her, and shows her warm regard. After a while, Naomi advises Ruth to at night to





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the threshing floor where Boaz stays during the planting of the barley, and lay at his feet and cause Boaz to take her as his wife (The Book of Ruth 3, 4). It seems that Naomi wanted her to use the 'weapon' of seduction. This is not the *Yibbum* precept in its simplest sense; however, it is connected with the custom of *Yibbum* – the marriage of a man to his late brother's childless widow. Ruth complies with her, bathes, perfumes herself and puts on her dresses, and goes at night to the threshing floor to lay at Boaz's feet. When Boaz awakens, Ruth asks him to marry her: "Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative." Boaz agrees, but raises a legal problem: There is a relative closer than he; thus, he has right of first refusal to marry Ruth if he wishes. However, he promises to marry her if the other relative is not interested. The following day, before the break of dawn, he send her back home. The day after their meeting, he goes to the city gates to meet the other relative, referred to as John Doe, and whose real name was probably erased by the Book's author out of criticism for his acts. After the other relative does not want to exercise his right—for fear of spoiling his estate and offspring with such a marriage (Book of Ruth 4:6) due to the prohibition on receiving foreigners from Moab—Boaz and Ruth marry. It is from this union that the monarchy of David is born, as told in the Book:

Now this is the genealogy of Perez: Perez begot Hezron; Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Amminadab; Amminadab begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmon; Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed; Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.

From this story, we may learn of the tolerance that existed towards foreigners in the Israelite culture in general, and the tribe of Judea in particular. Moreover, the story of Ruth the Moabitess strongly emphasizes man's freedom of choice as opposed to his genealogy, and states that even a foreigner from an enemy land such as Moab, with a culture contradictory to the Israelite culture, should be measured only by its actions. Ultimately, she was accepted by the aristocratic elements of the royal tribe and became part of the very fiber of the Israelite kingdom. The genealogy (according the Book of Ruth, the Book of Samuel and Chronicles) shows Ruth's central position, from which the leadership of the Kingdom of Judah springs.

