



# Chagim Center

Home for the holidays

## The Shavuot Holiday and Meanings of Tradition

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The word 'tradition' means different things to different people. Perhaps more than any other holiday, Shavuot illustrates the different approaches, since this holiday has different traditions:

**Biblical tradition**--- as an agricultural holiday during the harvest period, with the Omer sacrifice, the counting of the Omer harvest days, praise and thanks to G-d, and the beginning of the season of bringing the first fruits (*bikkurim*) of the seven species;

**Wise men's tradition**--- a the holiday of the giving of the Torah with emphasis on the Ten Commandments, noting the purpose of the exodus from Egypt; Tikkun Leil Shavuot (lit. service of the night of Shavuot).

**Zionist-pioneering tradition**--- revival of the agricultural emphases of the holiday with the return of the people to its Biblical homeland, while ignoring, to a certain extent, the religious aspects;

How do we define 'tradition'?

Are there correct or incorrect traditions?

How many generations of transmission are required to establish a 'tradition'?

The following story from the Babylonian Talmud is recommended for study (together or in pairs).

Before studying, read together the following guidance questions:

1. Who in your opinion is the main character in the story? Explain your answer.
2. What does the story teach us about the value of tradition?

### Babylonian Talmud Minhag Tractate 29b

Rav Yehuda says that Rav says: When Moses ascended on High, he found the Holy One, Blessed be He, sitting and tying crowns on the letters of the Torah. Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, who is preventing you from giving the Torah without these additions? G-d said to him: There is a man who is destined to be born after several generations, and Akiva ben Yosef is his name; he is destined to derive from each and every thorn of these crowns mounds upon mounds of *halakhot*. Moses said before God: Master of the Universe, show him to me. God said to him: Return behind you. Moses went and sat at the end of the eighth row in Rabbi Akiva's study hall and did not understand what they were saying. Moses' strength waned... When Rabbi Akiva arrived at the





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discussion of one matter, his students said to him: My teacher, from where do you derive this? Rabbi Akiva said to them: It is a *halakha* transmitted to Moses from Sinai. Moses returned and came before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and said before Him: Master of the Universe, You have a man as great as this and yet You still choose to give the Torah through me. Why? He asked him: Be silent; this intention arose before Me.

## Questions for review and discussion:

1. Is it conceivable that Moses, who received the Torah from G-d, sat in Rabbi Akiva's study hall and could not understand what they were saying? Try and suggest explanations for this. Perhaps this is just hyperbole?
2. What in the end puts Moses' mind to rest, and why?
3. What are the sages trying to teach us of the complexity and moral and ethical standards of tradition?

In 1923, the pioneers of the [Jezreel] Valley, Ein Harod, Geva, and Kfar Tivon began to celebrate the holiday in an agricultural procession. Some elements of the procession were inspired by the *bikkurim* ceremony of the Temple. To these were added new components, in order to give expression to Zionist and pioneering values.

The following is an excerpt from the memoirs of Michaeli, one of the participants. Compare his words to the above section from the Talmud.

Michaeli (in wake of the first agricultural procession at Ein Harod, Shavuot 1923) continues in the pathos of pioneering pride: "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.

For Michaeli, what is the 'groundwater' to which he seeks to penetrate? What is it needed for?

What do you think 'tradition' meant to him then and to us today?

