

Shavuot

The Festival of Shavuot (שבועות) occurs 50 days after the first omer is counted, i.e., 50 days after the second day of Pesach. There is an on-going Rabbinic debate exactly how to calculate the day of Shavuot (the debate hinges on what is meant by the word Sabbath in Lev. 23:15), but the prevailing halachah after the destruction of the Temple accepted the Pharisaic reckoning (see the Excursus at the end of this chapter). As noted earlier, during the time of the Temple, on each of these days an omer (a little more than 2 quarts) was presented to the priests as an offering. On day 50 (Shavuot), two loaves of bread were brought as a wave offering to the Lord. Interestingly, these two loaves are specifically commanded to contain leaven (Lev 23:17). Whereas at Pesach we were slaves hurrying to be free, now we are free citizens with plenty of time to let the bread rise. Leavened loaves presented at Shavuot emphasized the freedom of the people to regulate their time according to God's calendar, not Pharaoh's or his slave masters.

Though in the Scriptures Shavuot is not directly connected with the giving of the Law at Sinai, the Rabbis taught that the Law was, in fact, given 50 days after the exodus, and that Shavuot celebrates this event. From a rabbinic standpoint, the counting of the days is explained this way: the people were so eager to receive the Law, that they counted each day from the exodus until Sinai.

The period of counting the omer is marked by a spirit of mourning. It is forbidden to marry, have your hair cut, or attend concerts. Some people refrain from shaving. A Talmudic notice gives the reason for this. During the early 2nd century C.E., many disciples of Rabbi Akiba fell sick and many died. It is stated that the reason for the plague was that the students were not treating each other with proper respect. According to this legend, the plague ended on the 33rd day of counting the omer. Therefore, in the middle of counting the omer, a semi-holiday is observed, called Lag B'Omer (ל"ג בעומר). The name is derived from the abbreviation for 33: L = 30, G = 3, thus lag. This semi-holiday marks the end of mourning during the omer counting, and is celebrated by making large outdoor fires, and eating picnic-type foods. Some suggest that once the plague had ended during the days of R. Akiba, the clothes of the sick were burned, thus beginning the tradition of fires on Lag BeOmer.

It is also traditional, during the period of counting the omer, to study Pirkei Avot, The Sayings (or Ethics) of the Fathers. The study begins after Pesach, and one chapter is studied each week after the minchah (afternoon) service on Shabbat afternoons. The sixth chapter centers on the Torah, and is therefore well suited to bring one into Shavuot.

Since the re-establishment of the nation of Israel, Yom HaShoah (יום השואה), Holocaust Day, has been set by the government on the 27th day of Nisan, which falls during the counting of the omer. This is a special day to reflect on the terrible destruction of the Nazi terror, and to observe a memorial for all the victims of their cruelty.

When Shavuot finally arrives, its primary focus is celebrating the giving of the Torah, God's gift to the Jewish people and a guide for all peoples, giving to mankind a true representation of God's love and holy character. It also celebrates the harvest and is marked by giving thanks to God for sustaining our lives through the bounty of food the earth brings forth. Thus, it marks the point at which the first fruits of harvest were to be presented to the priests during the period of the Temples. People would bring first fruits beginning at Shavuot and throughout the harvest period until Sukkot.

To mark these particular aspects of Shavuot, the following rituals are often observed:

- (1) The synagogue is decorated with green plants, branches, and even trees, reflecting the greenery around Mt. Sinai, as well as symbolizing the food which God gives to us at the time of harvest.
- (2) Dairy products dominate the meals on Shavuot (because the biblical texts indicate that the flocks and cattle of the Israelites were there at the foot of the mountain.)
- (3) Roses are a favorite flower for Shavuot, on the basis of a play on words from Esther 8:14, "And the decree [דַּת, *dat*] was proclaimed in Shushan," in which *dat* is the Torah, and was given with a rose (*shoshan*).

- (4) It is traditional to stay up the entire night at the beginning of Shavuot and study Torah. This is explained as necessary to prepare oneself for the revelation of God, and in contrast to the Israelites who, according to tradition, slept late on the first Shavuot and had to be awakened by Moses for the giving of the Torah.
- (5) The book of Ruth is read in the synagogue, which reflects the agricultural aspects of the festival, as well as the idea of ingathering, for Ruth was a Gentile who was brought into the people of Israel. As a convert to the God of Israel, Ruth stands symbolically of all who accept the Torah willingly. Legend has it that King David was born and died on Shavuot, and the book of Ruth ends with the genealogy of David.

From a Messianic perspective, it is significant that the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit) was poured out upon the early believers in Yeshua on Shavuot (Pentecost). Thus, Yeshua, who was crucified on Pesach, appeared after His resurrection for over 40 days (Acts 1:3) and then ascended into heaven. Since the Torah requires adult males to appear in Jerusalem on Shavuot, the disciples (following Yeshua's instructions) waited in Jerusalem for the festival. It was on this Festival of Ingathering that the Spirit was given, the One Who would both bring in the harvest of the nations (marked by the speaking in many languages at the event) and teach them the Torah of God (write the Torah on the heart).