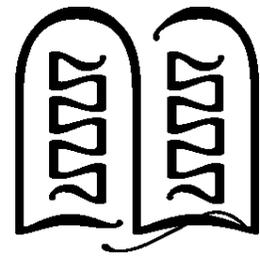


SHAVUOT



EVOLUTION OF SHAVUOT

Shavuot is the Hebrew word meaning “weeks” and refers to the festival marking the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The name “weeks” derives from the forty-nine days, the *omer*, that it took our ancestors to travel from Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai. The name Shavuot symbolizes the completion of this seven-week journey that led from a life of oppression to the giving of the Torah.

Shavuot is celebrated on the sixth of Sivan. In Biblical times, it marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. Along with Pesach and Sukkot, Shavuot was a pilgrimage festival, a time for Jews to bring crop offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Temple was destroyed and offerings were no longer possible, Jews began to decorate their homes with greenery and flowers. After Shavuot was tied with the giving of the Torah, this custom was explained by the story of the Israelites arriving to find Mount Sinai blooming with lush greenery and flowers.

CHEESE BLINTZES

Batter:

4 eggs
2 cups water (or 1 cup milk and 1 cup water)
1-2 tsp. salt
2 cups flour

Combine eggs, milk, salt and flour in that order. Heat a small amount of oil in a 6- or 7- inch frying pan. Pour in enough batter to make a thin crepe. Quickly tilt the pan from side to side to spread batter evenly across the pan. When crepe pulls away from the side of the pan, flip and fry it for a few seconds on the second side. Remove the crepe from the pan and stack it on a plate. Continue to make crepes.

Filling:

1 pound cottage cheese, strained
1 egg yolk
1/3 cup sugar
Touch of vanilla

Blend cheese, egg yolk, sugar and vanilla. Put a spoonful of filling toward one end of the crepe and roll the crepe. Bake in the oven at 350° for 20 minutes.

The Book of Ruth

By the time of the Mishnah, it was customary to read the Ten Commandments and the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. Ruth journeyed with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and her sister-in-law, Orpah, all widows, to Naomi’s homeland in Judah. Because she thought they would have difficulty adjusting to life in Judah, Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to remain in their birthplace of Maob. Orpah heeded Naomi’s advice, but Ruth declared, “Entreat me not to leave thee and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.” (1:16-17). Ruth stayed with Naomi and later married Boaz, Naomi’s distant relative; their son, Obed, was the grandfather of David. Thus, Ruth, whose speech served not only as an expression of loyalty to Naomi but as an act of conversion to Judaism, was the great-grandmother of the King of Israel.

That the story of Ruth takes place during the summer harvest is only one explanation of why we read it during Shavuot. Ruth’s story is most significant in that it reminds us of our responsibility to Judaism. Ruth, a convert, serves as an example in her commitment to her faith.

Another explanation of why we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot is that it reminds us of the great King David. King David’s birth and death were said to have occurred on this day. We read Psalms, traditionally ascribed to David, on Shavuot. Many Jews make pilgrimages to King David’s tomb on Mount Zion during Shavuot. Some traditional synagogues light 150 candles in memory of David, one for each of the 150 psalms.

Shavuot Foods

Traditional Jewish families have two *challot* on Shavuot, one for each tablet of Jewish law. It is also customary to eat dairy dishes on the holiday, especially cheesecake and blintzes. Doing so symbolizes the sweetness of the Torah and the “land of milk and honey” which the Jews were about to enter. Also, meat symbolizes the incident of the golden calf. By refusing meat, we remember the necessity of avoiding idolatrous incidents. Another explanation of why we eat dairy foods on Shavuot is that, after receiving the Torah at Sinai, Jews discovered they had not been observing dietary laws. Finding themselves without kosher meat or utensils, they ate only dairy foods.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Continuing a practice begun by mystics in the sixteenth century, many Jews stay up all night on Shavuot. They read from a special volume containing sections from the beginning and the end of every book in the Bible and the Mishnah. This custom, *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, symbolizes commitment to Torah and sets us apart from our ancestors. According to legend, the night before the Torah was given at Sinai, the Jews in the desert fell asleep and Moses had to wake them up to receive their precious inheritance. By observing *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, we show that we are always ready to receive Torah.

CONFIRMATION

In modern times, Shavuot has become closely associated with the ceremony of Confirmation. Confirmation is a ceremony affirming an individual's and group's commitment to the Jewish people. It is one of the newest Jewish life-cycle ceremonies, originating in early 19th century Germany.

Israel Jacobson, nominal father of Reform Judaism, built a new synagogue in Seesen, Germany, introducing a number of radical reforms, including the use of an organ and mixed male-female seating. Feeling that Bar Mitzvah was an outdated ceremony, Jacobson introduced Confirmation as a graduation to mark the end of a boy's education.

What began as a graduation ceremony developed into a substitute for Bar Mitzvah. At first, only boys were confirmed, usually on the Shabbat of their Bar Mitzvah. The earliest Confirmation ceremonies were held at homes or in schools. In 1817, the first Confirmation program for girls began in Berlin; by 1822, girls and boys were confirmed together, a practice that has become almost universal.

Slowly, Confirmation moved into the synagogue, occurring on the Shabbat of Pesach or Chanukah. In 1831, Rabbi Samuel Egers of Brunswick, Germany decided to hold Confirmation on Shavuot. He saw a powerful spiritual potential in associating the affirmation of faith by young Jews with the most significant faith affirmation of the Jewish people. By linking Confirmation with Shavuot, Egers effected a synthesis between antiquity and modernity and invested both events with a new spiritual dimension.

Confirmation came to North America in 1846, when New York's Anshe Chesed Congregation held its first Confirmation ceremony. Congregation Emanu-El of New York adopted the ceremony two years later, and its popularity spread. In 1927, the Central Conference of

American Rabbis, the governing body of Reform rabbis, recommended Confirmation for all Reform congregations.

Many traditionalists opposed Confirmation on the grounds that it represented a step away from tradition and towards assimilation. Even as Bar/Bat Mitzvah was re-established as widespread Reform practice, Confirmation was embraced as a major Reform life cycle event.

The Ceremony

At first, Confirmation reflected a graduation motif. After completing required studies, students took a public examination. The following day, they uttered personal confessions of faith before the rabbi, who then addressed the class, recited a prayer and blessed them. There was no fixed ritual for the ceremony.

In the early 1900s, Confirmation took on the air of great pageantry, as students wore robes, brought flowers to the *bima* and participated in dramatic readings and cantatas, illustrating the themes of dedication and commitment to Judaism. Public tests and confessions of faith gave way to more normative exams, papers and speeches, reflecting a deeper understanding of Jewish teachings and values.

Recently, Confirmation has become a simpler ceremony, although wide variations exist in congregational practice. Some have elaborate temple services; others hold private individual ones. Most Confirmation ceremonies are held in tenth grade, but some congregations mark the event at ninth, eleventh or even twelfth grade, and many congregations offer adult Confirmation programs. Confirmation captures an important message from Shavuot. The Jews who came out of Egypt were not truly free until they accepted the responsibility of Torah, the necessity of self-discipline and lives filled with Jewish values. Likewise, we must also accept the responsibility of Torah, living its values through our personal actions.

OUR THANKS TO . . .

The information above was adapted from Syme, Daniel B., *The Jewish Home: A Guide for Jewish Living*, New York, New York: UAHC Press, 1988.

The recipe for cheese blintzes is credited to Chana Shimoni and may be found at <http://judaism.about.com/religion/judaism/library/food/blshavuotblintzes.htm>.