



# SHAVUOT

IN **60** MINUTES (OR LESS)

BY RABBI ELAZAR MEISELS

## Shavuot in the Torah

וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שֶׁ בַעֲשֵׂתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה: מִמוֹשׁ בְּתִיכֶם תְּבִיאוּ לֶחֶם תְּנוּפָה שֶׁ תִּים שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִים סֵלֹת תִּהְיֶינָה חֲמֵץ תִּאֲפִינָה בַּכּוֹרִים לַיהוָה: וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עַל הַלֶּחֶם שֶׁ בָּעֵת כִּבְשִׂים תְּמִימִם בְּנֵי שָׁנָה וּפָר בֶּן בָּקָר אֶחָד וְאַיִלם שְׁנַיִם יִהְיוּ עֲלֶיהָ לַיהוָה וּמִנְחָתָם וְנִסְפִיָּהֶם אֵשׁ הָרִיחַ נִיחַח לַיהוָה: וַעֲשֵׂי יִתֶּם שְׁעִיר עִזִּים אֶחָד לַחֲטָאת וּשְׁנֵי כִבְשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה לְזָבַח שְׁלָמִים: וְהִנִּיף הַכֹּהֵן אֹתָם עַל לֶחֶם הַבִּכּוֹרִים תְּנוּפָה לִפְנֵי יְדֹד עַל שְׁנֵי כִבְשִׂים קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיוּ לַיהוָה לַכֹּהֵן: וְקִרְבַּתָּם בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם כָּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבָדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ חֲקַת עוֹלָם בְּכֹל מוֹשֵׁ בְתִיכֶם לְדוֹרֵיכֶם: וּבָקְצַרְכֶם אֶת קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פֶּאת שָׂדֶךְ בָּקְצַרְךָ וְלִקַּט קִצִּירְךָ לֹא תִלְקַט לְעֵנִי וְלִגְר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי יְדֹד אֶל־לֵהִיכֶם וַיִּקְרָא כֵּן: טו-כ"ב

*You shall count for yourselves, from the day after the day following the Passover holiday when you brought the omer wave-offering, seven complete weeks they shall be. Until the day after the seventh week, you shall count fifty days, and you shall bring a new meal-offering to Hashem. From the land upon which you dwell you shall bring two bread wave-offerings; of two tenths of wheat flour they shall be. You shall bake them leavened, as first-fruit-offering to Hashem. You shall bring, along with the bread, seven unblemished, yearling sheep, one young bullock and two rams; they shall be a burnt-offering to Hashem with their meal-offerings and wine-offerings, a fire-offering of pleasing fragrance to Hashem. You shall also prepare one he-goat as a sin-offering and two yearling sheep as peace-offerings. The kohen shall wave them along with the bread of the first-fruit-offering as a wave-offering before Hashem with the two sheep; they shall be holy for Hashem, for the kohen. This very day shall be celebrated as a sacred holiday when no service work may be done. This is an eternal law for all generations, no matter where you may live. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not cut completely the corner of your field when you reap. [Also] do not pick up individual stalks that may have fallen. You must leave these for the poor and the stranger; I am Hashem, your G-d.*

*Leviticus 23:15-22*



### From the Chassidic Masters

Why does the Torah insert the prohibition against harvesting the corners of the field among all the laws of the festivals? This teaches us that even while a person is engaged in lofty thoughts of spiritual pursuit, he must never forget the needs of the poor and hungry who lack adequate material sustenance.

### From the Chassidic Masters

The farther we travelled away from Egypt and its spiritually poisonous environment, the closer we came to Sinai and the hallowed principles of Torah.

Why wait until the Third Month to give them the Torah if it is so crucial to their existence? Why not the first or second month? The law is that a female convert, freed maidservant, or hostage, may not marry for the first three months [lest she bear a fetus whose Jewish status or lineage will later be called into question.] Following the Exodus, the Jewish people were considered converts, freed servants, and freed hostages. Fearing that they still perhaps bore some of the contamination of their experience, the Almighty decided to wait for three months until He was satisfied they were untainted and then engaged us in “marriage” through the gift of His Torah.

Yalkut Shimoni, Remez 271

וּבַיּוֹם הַבְּכוּרִים בְּהַקְרִיבְכֶם מִנְחָה חֲדָשָׁה לַיהוָה בְּשִׁבְעַתֵּיכֶם מִקֶּרֶן קִדְשׁ יְהוָה לָכֶם כֹּל מְלֶאכֶת עֲבֹדָה לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ: וְהַקְרַבְתֶּם עֹלָה לַיהוָה יַחַח לַיהוָה פָּרִים בְּנֵי בָקָר שְׁנַיִם אֵיל אֶחָד שִׁבְעָה כִּבְשִׂים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה: וּמִנְחַתְּם סֹלֶת בְּלוּלָה בְּשֶׁמֶן שְׁלֹשָׁה עֶשְׂרִינָם לְפָר הָאֶחָד שְׁנֵי עֶשְׂרִינָם לְאֵיל הָאֶחָד: עֶשְׂרוֹן עֶשְׂרוֹן לִכְבֹּשׁ הָאֶחָד לְשִׁבְעַת הַכִּבְשִׂים: שְׁעִיר עִזִּים אֶחָד לִכְפֹּר עֲלֵיכֶם: מִלֶּבֶד עֹלֶת הַתְּמִיד וּמִנְחֹתָו תַעֲשׂוּ תְּמִימִם יְהִיו לָכֶם וְנִסְפִּיהֶם:

במדבר כח: כו-לא'

*The day of first fruits is when you bring a new grain offering to G-d as part of your Shavuot festival. It shall be a sacred holiday to you on which you may not do any mundane work. You shall present a burnt-offering of a pleasing aroma to Hashem; two young bulls, one ram, and seven yearling sheep. Their meal-offering shall consist of fine flour mixed with oil, three tenths of an ephah for each bull, two tenths of an ephah for the one ram. One tenth of an ephah for each of the seven sheep. You shall also bring one he-goat to make atonement for you. In addition to bringing the daily burnt-offering and its meal-offering the sacrifices shall be unblemished, and their libations.*

Number 28:26-31

שִׁבְעָה שָׁבְעַת תִּסְפֹּר לָךְ מֵהַחֵל חֲרָמְשׁ בְּקִמָּה תִּחַל לִסְפֹּר שִׁבְעָה שָׁבְעוֹת: וְעִשִׂיתְּ חֵג שִׁבְעוֹת לַיהוָה מִסֵּת נִדְבַת יָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּתֵּן כְּאֲשֶׁר יְבָרַכְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ: וְשִׂמַּחְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתְךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְהַגֵּר וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאִלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ בְּמָקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׂכֵן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם: וְזָכַרְתָּ כִּי עַבְדְּ הָיִיתָ בְּמִצְרַיִם וְשִׂמַּחְתָּ אֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה:

דברים טז: ט-יב'

*Seven weeks count for yourself, from the time the sickle begins cutting the standing grain, begin to count seven weeks. You are to celebrate the festival of Shavuot for Hashem, your G-d, presenting a hand-delivered offering according to the extent of the blessing that, as Hashem, your G-d, has blessed you. You are to rejoice in the presence of Hashem, your G-d, in the place that Hashem, your G-d, chooses to house His presence there — you, and your son and daughter... and the proselyte, and the orphan and the widow who are among you. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt; you are to guard and celebrate these statutes.*

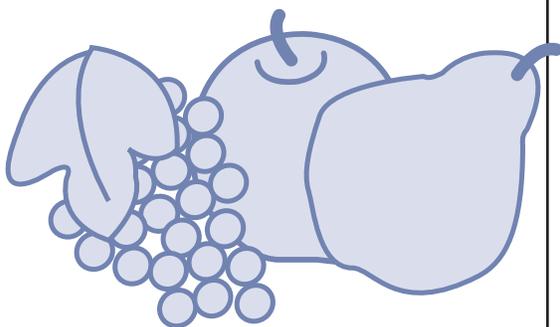
Deuteronomy 16:9-12

## The Month of Sivan

**Sivan** is the Babylonian name of this month which the Torah referred to as “the Third Month,” as it is the third month when counting from Nissan which is referred to as “the First Month.”

The Almighty waited until forty-nine days passed and then gave us the Torah in the Third Month. Forty-nine equals 7x7 and represents the spiritual cleansing process of counting seven, just a woman counts seven days before immersing in a mikvah. On the fiftieth day, the Almighty gave us the Torah which is compared to a mikvah and completed the cleansing process.

The *mazal* [“sign”] of the month of Sivan is “Twins.” This symbolizes Moses and Aharon, who — although one was older than the other — were equals in terms of spiritual greatness. Through them, the Torah was given during this month. Moses represented strict judgment whereas Aharon represented supreme kindness. Their influence in these two areas rendered the Jewish people suitable recipients of the Torah which expects us to blend and synthesize these two character traits.



Sifsei Kohen [Exodus 19:1] explains that the Torah was given under the *mazal* of “Twins” to denote the Almighty’s great love for us and the fact that He considers us His twin. The verse [Song of Songs 6:9] refers to the Jewish people as, “*Achas Hi Yonassi Tamassi*” — She is unique, My dove, My perfect one. Our sages explain that the word should also be read, “*Te’umossi*” — My twin, for we represent His interests in the universe. The Torah that He shared with us, also reflects this idea of duality. It was presented on not one, but Two Tablets, and speaks constantly about things that are:

- Permitted or Forbidden,
- Pure or Impure,
- Acceptable or Unacceptable,
- Positive Commandments or Negative Commandments
- Oral Law or Written Law

## Names of the Holiday

The holiday of Shavuot is referred to in the Torah by many names, but in the Talmud only one name is mentioned. Here is a list of those names and what they represent:

**Chag Shavuot — *The Feast of Weeks*** — It culminates the seven weeks of counting the Omer.

**Zman Mattan Torateinu — *The Time of the Giving of the Torah*** — The Torah was taught to the people at Mt. Sinai.

**Atzeret — *The Holiday of Being Restrained*** — This name is the only name used for this Holiday in the Talmud. It evokes a hint to Shemini Atzeret which concludes the Holiday of Sukkot. Similarly, Shavuot is in a certain sense not only an independent holiday, but a conclusion of the process of spiritual growth begun on Passover.

**Chag HaBikkurim — *The Holiday of the First Fruits*** — On Shavuot, a special Temple offering was brought called “The New Grain Offering.” Its offering made it permissible to bring further Grain Offerings from the New Grain. Additionally, during this time, the first fruits of all the Seven Species of Produce with which the Land of Israel is blessed (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates) were brought to the Temple in a special ceremony.

**Chag HaKotzir — *The Holiday of the cutting of the Crop*** — The crop referred to here is the wheat crop, the last of the crops to be harvested.

## Six Days In Sivan

**I**n the early morning, Moshe ascended the mountain which he had been told (in the episode of the Burning Bush) would be the place where we would serve Hashem, and a cloud was over the mountain from which Hashem’s voice emanated to him once he was ascending the mountain.

**Rosh Chodesh:** They arrived at the Sinai Desert, as the verse says,

*In the third month following the Exodus of the Jewish People from Egypt, on that very day, they came to the Desert of Sinai (Exodus 19:1)*

**Days 2&3:** G-d told Moses to share the following message with the Jewish People:

*You have seen what I did to Egypt, and how [I watched over you by carrying you] as if on the wings of eagles, to Me. If you hearken to Me, and observe My covenant, you will be for Me a cherished people among the nations, for the whole world is Mine. And you will be for Me*

Why was the Torah given during the month whose sign is “Twins?” This was done specifically to provide a refutation to those nations who would claim that if they would have been offered the Torah, they too, would have gladly accepted it. The month chosen was the month of Twins, alluding to the fact that if Esau had decided to accept the Torah, he too, could have joined his twin, Jacob, and received it. He disdained the opportunity, thus negating his claim of unequal treatment.

*Pesiktah D’rav Kahana 12:20*

### The Bikkurim Offering:

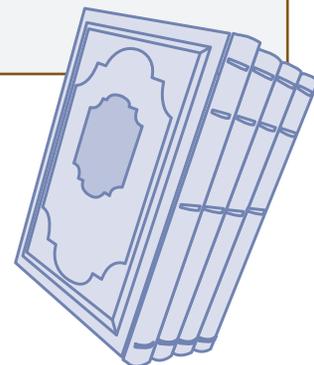
Those who came from near to Jerusalem would bring figs and grapes (which were not likely to spoil on a short journey). Those who came from a distance from Jerusalem would bring dried figs and raisins. An ox walked before them, its horns overlaid with gold...a flute was played...until they approached Jerusalem. As they neared Jerusalem, messengers were sent ahead of them, and they would decorate their First Fruits.

Important dignitaries went out to greet them...all the craftsmen of Jerusalem would stand before them and inquire concerning their welfare, “Our brothers, from wherever you come, welcome!” A flute was played before them...Once they reached Temple Mount, even King Agrippas would carry the basket on his shoulder and go in as far as the Temple Courtyard. Once they reached the Temple Courtyard, the Levites would sing, “I will praise You, O G-d, for You have raised me up, and You have not allowed my enemies to rejoice over me!”

*Tractate Bikkurim, Chapter 3;  
Mishnah 3-4*

### From our Chassidic Masters

Rav Boruch of Mezhibuz zt”l, used to say that the name Atzeret [meaning “contained”] symbolized the fire of Torah that is “contained” in the bones of every Jew.



“Mt. Sinai was encased in smoke” – Smoke rose from the mountain, but from the fire in which G-d descended no smoke rose. This is because Divine fire is so pure that it does not produce smoke. The purpose of the smoke was to obstruct the view of the nation and conceal the Divine Presence as it descended in fire.

*Ksav V’Kaballah*

“As the smoke of a furnace” This is an imperfect analogy and is only used because we, being physical creatures, are wholly incapable of envisioning spiritual manifestations with anything other than material depictions.

*Rabbeinu Bachya*

“A kingdom of ministers and a holy nation” Rabbi Yosef of Salant was once approached by an early follower of the Enlightenment who argued, “It’s true that the Torah says nice things, but that’s only from the standpoint of earlier, uncivilized, generations. Nowadays, we are enlightened; therefore we are not particularly impressed.” Rabbi Yosef responded, “You are still too drunk with excitement and flushed with success to perceive how unprogressive your ideas truly are. Wait 100 years and you’ll get smacked in the face with the true realization of how enlightened you really are.”

*Repeated by R’ M. Hershovitz who was bound and trampled to death by the Nazis for refusing to work on Shabbat.*

#### From the Chassidic Masters

“You shall set boundaries for the people around [the mountain]...” It is important for the people to recognize that their intellect is limited and that not all spiritual realms are within their intellectual grasp.

*Beis Yitzchak*

“As an apple-tree among the trees of the forest, so is My beloved among the sons...”  
[Song of Songs 2:3]

*kingdom of ministers and a holy nation — These are the things you should say to the Children of Israel.*

*(Exodus 19:4-6)*

*Upon hearing this message, the Jews responded, “All that G-d asks of us, we will do!”*

*(Exodus 19:8)*

**Day 4:** Moshe shared the nation’s enthusiastic response with G-d, Who instructed him to set boundaries around Mt. Sinai and warn them,

*Beware of ascending the mountain or touching its edge, for whoever touches the mountain shall surely perish.*

*(Exodus 19:12)*

They were also told to immerse themselves and their clothes in a mikvah and separate from their wives for the next three days.

**Day 5:** Moses arose early in the morning and built an altar of twelve stones for the Twelve Tribes of Israel. He brought sacrificial offerings and sprinkled their blood on the altar. He read to the nation the portions of the Torah that had already been written down, to ensure their agreement, and they responded,

*All that G-d wants, “Naaseh V’Nishma,” “We will do, and afterwards we will hear!”*

*(Exodus 24:7)*

**Day 6:** Moses took the People out of the encampment, and they stood at the foot of the mountain.

*And Mt. Sinai was encased in smoke because G-d descended upon it in fire, and its smoke rose as the smoke of a furnace, and the people trembled greatly. And the sound of the Shofar was steadily increasing in intensity; Moses would speak, and the L-rd would echo him in thunder!*

*(Exodus 19:18-19)*

G-d insisted that Moses warn the nation again against breaching the encirclement and approaching Mt. Sinai. Then G-d came down to the People, and He spoke to them as the verse says,

*And the L-rd spoke all these Utterances, as follows...*

*(Exodus 20:1)*

## The Revelation

### HEAR YE’ HEAR YE’

*Rabbi Elazar said: “When the People of Israel preceded the words, ‘We will hear’ with ‘We will do,’ a Heavenly Voice emerged, saying, ‘Who revealed unto My children this secret known only to the Heavenly angels?’ As it is written (Psalms 103), ‘Praise Hashem, His Angels, mighty in strength, who abide by His will, then understand His word’ — first they obey, and only afterwards, do they understand.”*

*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a*

*In what manner can the Jewish people be compared to apple trees? Just as the apple-tree produces its fruit before its leaves, so too, the Jewish nation proclaimed, “We will do” before, “We will understand.”*

*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a*

*When Adam was instructed in only one mitzvah, the Almighty equated him with the Divine Angels, saying, “Behold the man was like one of Us.” If so, the Jewish people who accepted upon themselves all 613 commandments, shouldn’t they live on for eternity?”*

*Medrash Rabbah, Shmos 32:2*



*Indeed, this would have been their fate had they not immediately sinned with the Golden Calf. As soon as they did, they descended from the level of Angels and became mortal again, just as Adam and Eve had become susceptible to death.*

*Rabbeinu Bachya, Shmos 23:20*

Why did they precede “We will hear” with “We will do?” The Hebrew word for “do” is “*Naasseh*” which can also be read, “*NeiOsseh*” and implies that we have already done as we are being asked to do now. Yalkut Shimoni [Exodus 19:276] points out that a cursory review of early human history reveals that long before they were formally presented to us, our ancestors already observed the Ten Commandments:

- 1. I am the Lord your G-d** – All three of the Patriarchs observed this meticulously
- 2. You Shall Not Have Gods of Others** – Jacob instructed his son: “*Remove the foreign deities from within your midst.*” *Genesis 35:2*
- 3. You Shall Not Take the Name of the Lord in Vain** – Abraham swore, “*I raise my hand to the Lord...*” *Genesis 14:22*
- 4. Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it Holy** – Joseph observed the Sabbath as is evidenced in the verse in *Genesis 43:16*
- 5. Honor your Father and Mother** – Isaac honored his father’s wishes by agreeing to ascend the Altar and be sacrificed
- 6. Do not murder** – Judah warned his brothers not to murder Joseph *Genesis 37:26*
- 7. Do not Commit Adultery** – Joseph observed this by refusing the entreaties of Potiphera’s wife
- 8. Do Not Steal** – The brothers fulfilled this, as evidenced by the verse, “*And how could we steal from the house of your master silver or gold?*” *Genesis 44:8*
- 9. Do Not Bear False Testimony** – Abraham observed this by bearing witness to the universe that the Almighty was its Creator
- 10. Do Not Covet** – Abraham fulfilled this when he refused to plunder the king of Sodom and proclaimed, “*I will take neither a string nor a shoe strap...*” *Genesis 14:23*

It is in the merit of these great men that we, their humble descendants, were fortunate to have been entrusted with the duty of safeguarding these commandments and their multitude of off-shoots, the other 603 commandments.

## What exactly did they hear from G-d?

Although tradition teaches that G-d taught us the Ten Commandments, there is some dispute regarding exactly what He taught, and what He left for Moses to teach us. Here are four dominant opinions:

- *All Ten Commandments were taught to us simultaneously by G-d Mechiltah*
- Only the first two commandments were uttered by G-d. The remaining eight were spoken by Moses. Proof of this is the verse that says,
- “*Moses taught the people the Torah.*” The Hebrew word “*Torah*” has a numerical value of 611. This implies that Moses taught us 611 and the other two were taught by G-d. *Talmud, Tractate Makkos 24a*

In what manner can the Jewish people be compared to apple trees? Just as the apple-tree produces its fruit before its leaves, so too, the Jewish nation proclaimed, “We will do” before, “We will understand.”

*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a*

The apple-tree hastens to give forth its fruit and forgoes the protection of its leaves. Similarly, the Jewish people committed themselves to mitzvah observance even before they truly understood what was being asked of them, and whether or not they were capable of adhering to it. Perhaps it is this unusual degree of dedication that we seek to recall when we dip an apple in honey and request a sweet new year on Rosh Hashanah; the Day of Judgment when we must muster all the merits we can.

### **From the Chassidic Masters**

Rav Aharon of Chernobol zt”l would proclaim before the Almighty, “Master of the Universe, You desire that we abide by the laws of Your Torah. Remember, however, the conditions under which You gave us the Torah. We were wealthy thanks to the Egyptian booty, we were healed from all our ills, we were united under Your banner, and we were free to do as we pleased. Sadly, today we are impoverished and lack leaders like Moses. We are sick and downtrodden, suffering under the rule of foreign nations. Please, Almighty G-d, restore us to our original state so that we may once again serve You as You and we both desire.”

### **From the Chassidic Masters**

As a child, Rav Avraham of Sochatchov studied at the feet of his father, the Rabbi of Biala. One time, Rav Avraham offered an original explanation for a segment of Talmud but his idea was rejected out of hand by his illustrious father. In his later years, his father chanced upon the very same idea written by a great scholar in earlier times. Remembering how he had dismissed it earlier when his son proffered it, he travelled to his son’s town to retract his rejection. Rav Avraham showed little emotion upon seeing his thoughts validated. When questioned about his unenthusiastic reaction, he explained, “I knew then too that I had concurred with the thoughts of this great person. Since, however, my esteemed father dismissed my words, I could not disrespect him and mention it.



Why were all Ten Commandments first taught simultaneously if they would have to be repeated later one by one? This teaches us that the although it is comprised of 613 mitzvot, the entire Torah is one unified body in which all the mitzvot are interdependent. One cannot not pick and choose from among the mitzvot and contend that some have ceased to be relevant, for to do so would destabilize the entire Torah.

Maharal, Gur Arye, Exodus 20:1

"All the people saw the sounds, the flames, the blast of the ram's horn, and the mountain smoking. The people trembled when they saw it, and kept their distance."

Exodus 20:15

This teaches that all the blind people were miraculously healed and thus "all the people saw the sounds." Additionally, all deaf, mute, lame, and insane people were healed too.

Mechiltah

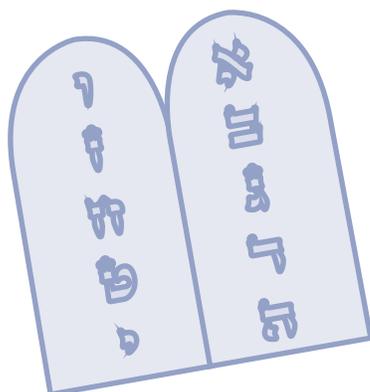
#### From the Chassidic Masters

"And kept their distance" Even when a Jew is travelling away from the Almighty, he must still hear His voice and see the sounds.

Rav Shmelke of Nikolsburg

"When [God] finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, He gave him two tablets of the Testimony..." Rabbi Avahu taught, "All forty days that Moses spent in heaven, he would study the Torah and immediately forget it. He complained to the Almighty that all he had was forty days to learn it and he still knew nothing. What did the Almighty do? At the conclusion of forty days, He gave it to him as a gift." –

Medrash Rabbah, Exodus 41:6



- First, all ten were spoken by G-d simultaneously. Next, they were repeated one by one by G-d. After the first two, the people were overwhelmed by the spiritual intensity of the experience and pleaded with Moses to teach them the remaining eight. His voice was not powerful enough, so G-d amplified his voice so the entire nation could hear him *Rashi, Exodus 20:1*
- The nation heard all ten spoken by G-d, however, although they heard the sound, they could not perceive the words. Only Moses understood the words and he taught them to Israel. Thus, the people experienced prophecy by hearing the sound, and their faith in Moses was reinforced because he alone understood what G-d had said. *Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed 2:32*

### Watch Out Below

וּיִתְצַבּוּ בְּתַחְתֵּית הַהָר אֲמַר רַב אַבְדִּימִי בַר חַמָּא בַר חַסָּא מִלְּמַד שִׁכְפָּה הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֵת הַהָר כְּגִיגִית וְאָמַר לֵהֶם אִם אַתֶּם מִקְּבָלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוּטָב וְאִם לֹא שֵׁם תֵּהָא קְבוּרַתְכֶם.

מסכת שבת דף פח/א

"And they stood beneath the mountain."

(Exodus 19:17);

Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama said, "This teaches that the Holy One suspended the mountain over their heads like an overturned flask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, good! But if not, there will be your graves!'"

Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 88b

#### IF THEY HAD ALREADY SAID, "WE WILL DO AND WE WILL HEAR," WHY DID HE HAVE TO COERCE THEM INTO ACCEPTING THE TORAH?

1. Because they accepted the mitzvot on a voluntary basis but without expectation of a penalty for failing to fulfill its precepts. The coercion was regarding accepting the penalty as well. *Ra'av, Exodus 19:17*
2. They gladly accepted the Written Law which was easy to study and follow. They were reluctant to accept the Oral Law, which requires much greater dedication and resolve. The mountain suspended above them helped them realize that just as mountain entombs its victims, if they would only follow the Written Law, their hopes for eternal survival were nil, They would be entombed in the incomplete and limiting body of law that they were prepared to accept. *Midrash Tanchuma*
3. When overturned, the top of the flask appears directly over one's head as if it were resting solely upon him. This implied to the people that this was not only a communal acceptance of the Law, but an individual acceptance of the Law as well. *Rabbi Yosef Dov Solveitchik*

### The Three of Life

דַּרְשׁ הָהוּא גְּלִילָאָה עֲלֵיהָ דַּרְבַּ חַסְדָּא בְּרִיךְ רַחֲמָנָא דִּיהַב אֹרִיאָן תְּלִיתָאֵי לְעַם תְּלִיתָאֵי עַל יְדֵי תְּלִיתָאֵי בְּיוֹם תְּלִיתָאֵי בִּירְחָא תְּלִיתָאֵי תְּלִיתָאֵי בְּבַלִּי מִסַּכְתָּ שַׁבַּת דָּף פַּח/א.

"A certain Galilean taught in the presence of Rav Chisda, 'Blessed is the Merciful One Who gave us a Torah which is divided into three parts, to a People that is divided into three parts, through one who himself was a third [child,] on the third day, in the third month.'"

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a

#### A TORAH OF THREE PARTS:

- 1) The Five Books of Moses
- 2) The Books of the Prophets
- 3) The Sacred Writings

#### TO A PEOPLE THAT IS DIVIDED INTO THREE PARTS:

- 1) Kohanim
- 2) Levites
- 3) Israelites

#### THROUGH ONE WHO WAS A THIRD:

Moses, the third child of Amram and Yocheved, born to his mother after Aharon and Miriam.

#### ON THE THIRD DAY:

After the prescribed “three days of Preparation,” before they could receive the Torah. Moshe commanded the Jewish People to “Make yourselves ready by the third day.”

#### IN THE THIRD MONTH:

Nissan is called the First Month in the Torah, followed by Iyar and then Sivan.

Maharal explains the significance of the number three in relationship to the Torah as follows:

The number three connotes a sense of balance by embracing two items and creating a middle ground between the two. Minus the middle ground, each item represents an extreme. The third item creates a middle ground that unifies and harmonizes the inner edges of the extremes.

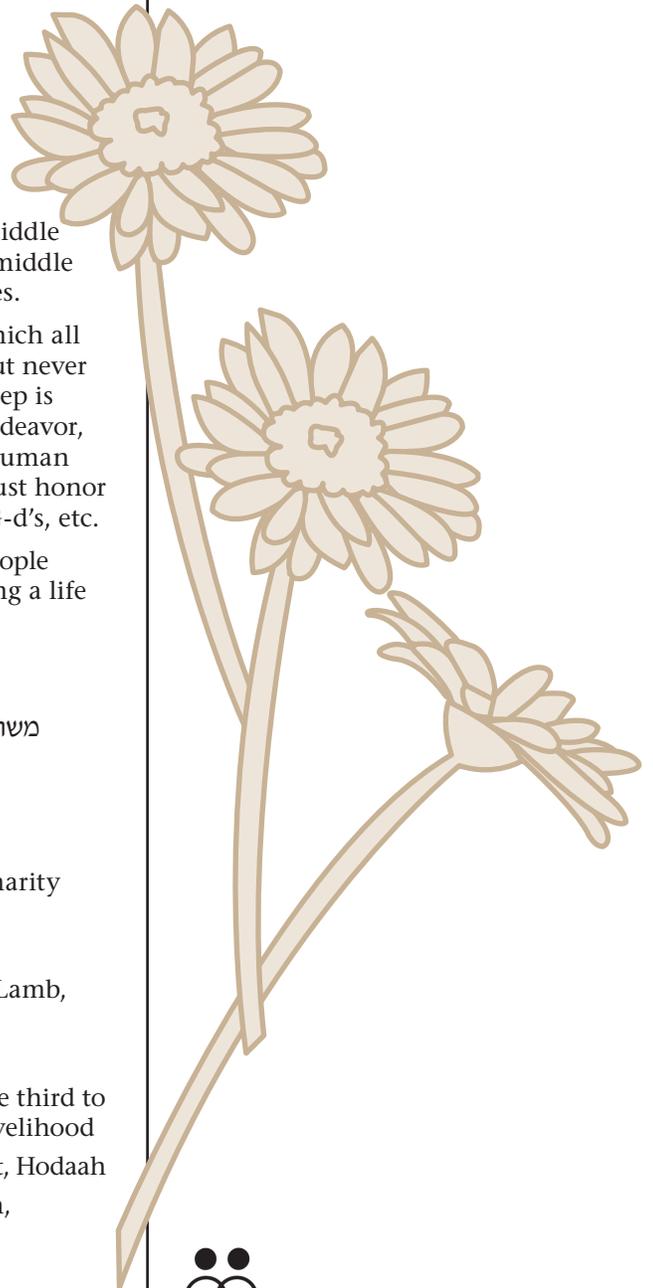
The Torah asks of us to lead a life of balance and moderation, in which all aspects of the physical universe may be utilized for our pleasure, but never taken to extremes. Eating is wonderful, but only in moderation; sleep is good, but only within reason; sexuality can be a holy or unholy endeavor, depending largely on whether it's carried to an extreme; taking a human life is forbidden unless a capital crime has been committed; one must honor his parents, but not past the point where their will conflicts with G-d's, etc.

When all aspects of the Torah and its presentation to the Jewish people echo the theme of three, it symbolizes this central idea of promoting a life of holistic balance.

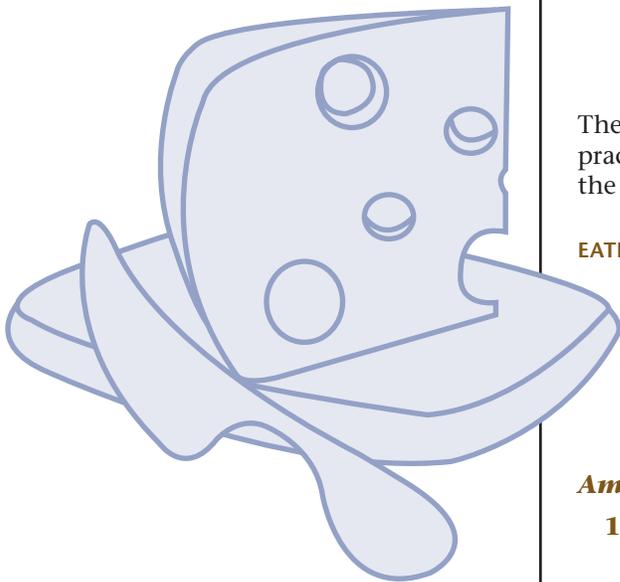
#### ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF THE NUMBER THREE IN JUDAISM ARE:

- The Hebrew spelling for Moses name contains three letters: משה
- Mt. Sinai in Hebrew contains three letters: סיני
- Three Pilgrimages Festivals: Pesach, Shavuot, Succot
- Three Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob
- The three prerequisites of atonement: Repentance, Prayer, Charity
- Three days may not pass with the Torah being read publicly. Therefore it is read every Monday, Thursday and Shabbat
- The primary commandments of the Passover Seder: Paschal Lamb, Matzah, Bitter Herbs
- Three daily prayers: Shacharit, Minchah, Maariv
- A person should divide his day into three parts and devote one third to Torah study, one third to prayer, and one third to earning a livelihood
- The daily Amidah is comprised of three sections: Avot, Emtzoit, Hodaah
- Three pillars upon which the universe stands: Torah, Avodah, Gemilut Chassadim

The world was created in six days which are described in the opening of the Book of Genesis. Each day concludes with “And G-d saw that it was good,” with two exceptions; the second day on which this statement is entirely omitted, and the third day upon which it is stated twice. This too, symbolizes the unique relationship between the number three and the Torah about which it is written, “The only true ‘good’ is the Torah” [Ethics of the Father 6:3] Torah is also referred to as “life” and life too, is created by a partnership of three entities, G-d, father, and mother.



“This very day shall be celebrated...” [Leviticus 23:21] The words, “this very day,” are used in the Torah by only two holidays, Yom Kippur and Shavuot. This is because these two holidays are unique in the sense that they are not merely commemorative celebrations of events in years past, but every year at this time, the same events occur anew. We are not merely celebrating the Receiving of the Torah that occurred back 3,300 years ago. Rather, we are receiving it once more and renewing our original commitment.



## Customs of Shavuot

Shavuot features a number of widespread customs. Following is a short list of the most prevalent, and reasons for their practice:

### STUDYING TORAH THROUGH THE NIGHT

Strangely, rather than spend the night prior to the Sinai revelation steeped in spiritual pursuits, the nation went to sleep instead and had to be awakened by the Almighty with thunder and Shofar blowing to receive the Torah. Although their intentions were pure, for they sought to ensure that they'd be rested the next morning and in a proper frame of mind to receive the Torah, it was seen as a negative that they were able to sleep so soundly and weren't too excited to fall asleep. To rectify this slight shortcoming, many people remain awake throughout the night, studying Torah in anticipation of the Receiving the Torah in the morning.

### GOING GREEN

*Mt. Sinai was not only a relatively small mountain, it was also essentially barren. Miraculously, in honor of the Revelation, the Almighty caused it to grow lush with flowers and grass. Thus, there exists a custom of decorating the synagogue on Shavuot with flowers and greens, in commemoration of that event.*

#### *Levush Mordechai*

There used to be a custom to bring trees into the synagogue, but that practice was discontinued by the Gaon of Vilna for it too closely resembled the pagan practice of the non-Jews who celebrate their holiday with trees.

### EATING DAIRY

*There is a custom to eat dairy foods on Shavuot. Some fulfill this by eating a dairy meal. Others prefer to begin a meal with dairy dishes, rinse their mouths well, clear the table of all vestiges of dairy dishes, and resume their meal with meat dishes, in fulfillment of the Talmudic dictum, Tractate Pesachim 109a, “rejoicing is incomplete without meat.”*

#### **Among the reasons offered for this custom are:**

1. Prior to the Revelation at Sinai, meat was eaten without “*Shechitah*” — ritual slaughter. Following the Revelation, meat could only be eaten if it was ritually slaughtered. The Revelation occurred on Shabbat and “*shechitah*” may not be done on Shabbat. Consequently, upon their return from the Revelation, all the Jews could eat was dairy foods. We therefore eat dairy to commemorate the way they immediately implemented all that they'd just learned.
2. Moses received the Torah after spending forty days in heaven studying it. The numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word for milk, “*chalav*,” is forty. By eating dairy we show our awareness that although it was “given” to us as a gift, it was a gift that had to be earned through dedicated study.
3. The rule is that one loaf of bread may not be used at both a dairy and meat meal. Therefore, by beginning the meal with dairy and concluding with meat, this forces us to use two, not one, loaves of bread throughout the meal. The two loaves evoke memories of special offering of “*Shtei HaLechem*” — [Two Loaves of Wheat] which were brought in the Temple on Shavuot.

## THE SCROLL OF RUTH

Most congregations have a custom to read the Scroll of Ruth following Shacharit on the first [for those who live in Israel,] or second [for those who live outside of Israel and observe two days,] morning of Shavuot. According to the Talmud, the Scroll of Ruth was authored by Samuel the Prophet to dispel slanderous allegations against King David's lineage. Its four chapters tell the story of how Ruth, a Moabite princess, bravely converts to Judaism, marries Boaz, a prominent descendant of the House of Judah, and bears him a child, Oveid, who is the grandfather of King David. As King David was born and died on Shavuot, it is a fitting time to read the story of his ancestry and the many Divine machinations involved in his emergence as our leader.

### Additional reasons for reading the Scroll of Ruth are:

1. To commemorate Ruth's arduous path to Torah and take inspiration from her dedication to truth
2. Ruth's conversion to Judaism was — on a personal scale — a recreation of the monumental acceptance of Torah at Mt. Sinai by the entire Jewish nation many years prior, which is the theme of Shavuot. Just as Ruth "*entered under the wings of the Divine*" and committed herself to a life of Torah, so did the Jewish nation.

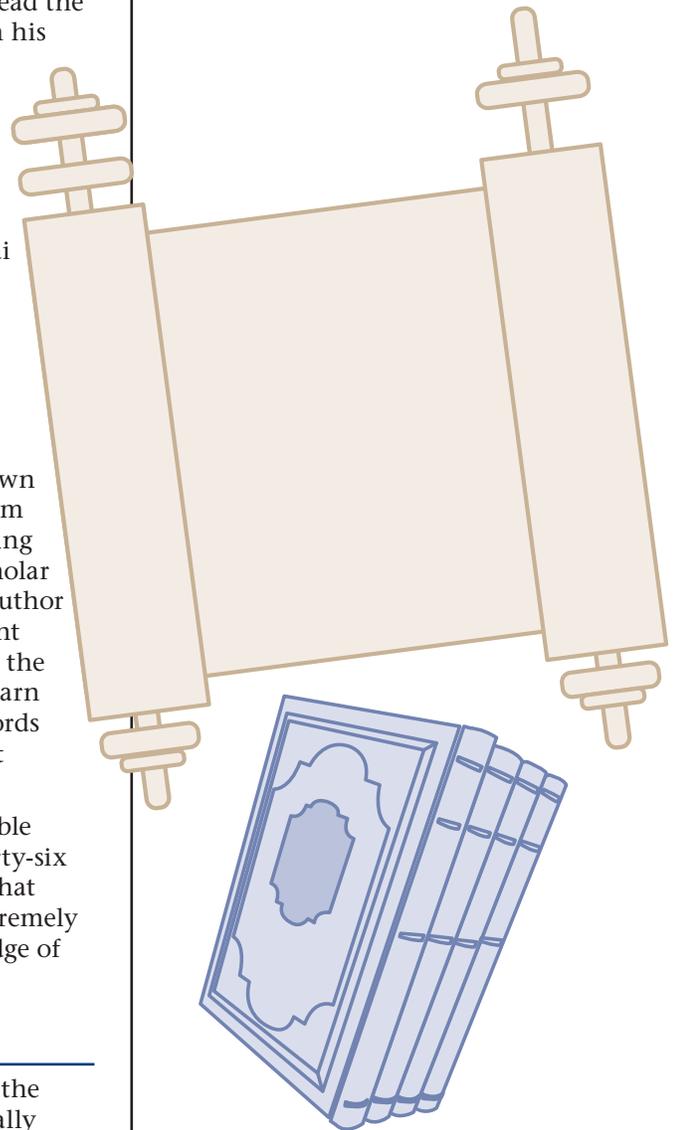
## THE POEM OF AKDAMOT

It is the custom in Ashkenazic congregations to recite the poem known as Akdamot on the first morning of Shavuot just prior to reading from the Torah, which includes the Ten Commandments. Composed during the First Crusade by Rabbi Meir, son of Rabbi Yitzchak, a leading scholar of the City of Vermaizia, in Germany, it describes the words of the author as he "debated" the truths of Judaism to a hostile audience, a frequent and tragic occurrence in those unfortunate times, and one in which the author himself, was forced to participate. Lest the Christian world learn its meaning and visit even greater catastrophes upon the Jews, its words were disguised for posterity in the Aramaic language, a language not understood by the Christian world at the time.

Akdamut contains ninety lines; the first forty-four begin with a double Aleph-Bet; Aleph, Aleph, Bet, Bet, etc. The first letters of the next forty-six lines make up an acrostic in which the author expresses the prayer that G-d will bless him with the ability and opportunity, even in the extremely hostile environment in which he found himself, to grow in knowledge of Torah and the performance of good deeds.

## Shavuot Fun Facts

- The first day of Shavuot will always occur on the same day as the second day of Passover and Chanukah the following year usually occurs on that day as well.
- The Torah was given on Shabbat, on either the sixth or seventh day of Sivan.
- No sound was made in the world at the time at the time the Torah was given.
- The sixth of Sivan is the day that Moses, who would later be so instrumental in the giving of the Torah, was rescued from the water by Batya, Pharaoh's daughter.



### From our Chassidic Masters

"All agree that on Shavuot we must also tend to our own needs" [Talmud, Tractate Pesachim, 68b] When the Rabbi Moshe Betzalel of Gur reached midlife, he declared, "The first half of my life I dedicated to tending to my own needs. From this point onward, I must attempt to dedicate myself to His needs." His adoring students stared in amazement at this person whose entire essence embodied spiritual pursuit yet who found himself lacking in dedication to the Almighty.

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Rabbi Eli Gewirtz, *Director*

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- According to our sages, on that day, Batya immersed in the water as part of her conversion ceremony to monotheism, setting the stage for the sixth of Sivan to serve as a day of mass conversion to Judaism.
- Every verse of the Scroll of Ruth begins with the letter, “vov” with the exception of eight verses.
- Boaz passed away the morning after he married Ruth.

## Make It Meaningful

If Shavuot this year is just like all the others in past years, it will not have the same meaning. Here are six suggestions for how you can make this Shavuot even more meaningful than all the others:

1. **Don't Be Ruth-less:** If Hebrew is not one of your languages, take advantage of the many translations of the Scroll of Ruth and learn her story and what it meant for the Jewish people. My personal favorites: *A Harvest of Majesty* by *Rabbi Moshe Alshich*, and *Ruth Talk* by *Rabbi Moshe Pinchas Weisblum*.
2. **Take Three:** Traditionally the three days prior to the holiday were designated for preparation for receiving the Torah. Plan ahead and you'll enjoy the holiday so much more.
3. **Pull an All-Nighter:** I know it sounds radical, but consider spending the night engaged in Torah study. There are Shavuot night programs in every city that will fascinate you and leave you energized to last a long time.
4. **Say Cheese:** Shavuot just isn't the same without the cheesecake or other dairy dishes that make up the traditional Shavuot menu.
5. **Book Ahead of Time:** Check out the tremendous selection of books on the holiday of Shavuot and reserve room in your brain for all the extra information that you want to hold on to.
6. **Re-examine Your Commitment:** Shavuot is best experienced when the focus is on our commitment to Torah and its study. Re-examine yours and ask yourself what you can do to add Torah study to your schedule.

## Points to Ponder

- Is my daily schedule really too tightly packed to accommodate more Torah study?
- Why is Torah study such an important part of Judaism?
- Would you too, have preceded “We will hear” with “We will do?” If not, why not?
- Why are so many Jews unaware of the holiday of Shavuot?
- Will your children celebrate the Holiday of Shavuot when they mature? How about their children?
- Must one celebrate Shavuot if he's allergic to milk or a vegan? Is soy an acceptable alternative?
- How can Ruth's example be incorporated into your daily life?
- Why did Elimelech's behavior result in his premature death?
- If there's one lesson to take from the Shavuot experience, what would it be?