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Shavuot With Chabad.ORG Series

Study material for you to print before the holiday

Shavuot Customs!

The customs of Shavuot are as beloved as they are well known. Decorate with flowers and greenery, stay up all night studying, and enjoy dairy delights. But where did these practices come from, and what do they mean for us?



The Shavuot With Chabad.org Series is a curated collection of essays and learning materials—in a wide array of interests and styles—for you to study and enjoy over Shavuot.

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Shavuot With **Chabad.ORG**

Shavuot Customs

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Why Eat Dairy on Shavuot?

It is customary to eat dairy foods on the first day of Shavuot.

Menus range from traditional cheese blintzes and cakes to quiches, casseroles and more.

Reasons Why We Eat Dairy on Shavuot

There are a number of reasons for this custom. Here are a few:

- On the holiday of Shavuot, a two-loaf bread offering was brought in the Temple. To commemorate this, we eat two meals on Shavuot—first a dairy meal, and then, after a short break, we eat the traditional holiday meat meal
- With the giving of the Torah, the Jews became obligated to observe the kosher laws. As the Torah was given on Shabbat, no cattle could be slaughtered nor could utensils be koshered, and thus on that day they ate dairy.
- The Torah is likened to nourishing milk. Also, the Hebrew word for milk is *chalav*, and when the numerical values of each of the letters in the word *chalav* are added together—8 + 30 + 2—the total is forty. Forty is the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai when receiving the Torah.

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- When Moses ascended Mount Sinai, the angels urged Gd to reconsider His decision to give His most precious Torah to earthly beings. “Bestow Your majesty upon the heavens . . . What is man that You should remember him, and the son of man that You should be mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:5-7). One of the reasons why the angels’ request went unheeded is because of the Jews’ meticulous adherence to the laws of the Torah—including the kosher laws. Not so the angels, who when visiting Abraham consumed butter and milk together with meat (Genesis 18:8). On Shavuot we therefore eat dairy products and then take a break before eating meat—in order to demonstrate our commitment to this mitzvah.

What to Cook and When to Serve It

There are numerous customs regarding when to serve dairy. The practice in Chabad is to serve a dairy meal immediately after morning services. Then, after reciting Grace After Meals and waiting an hour, a meat meal is served.

Important note when planning your menu: If you will be having meat within six hours of your dairy meal, make sure that you serve only milk and soft cheeses—not authentic aged (“hard”) cheese, which would warrant a six-hour wait before meat can be consumed.

During the holiday meal, it is also appropriate to drink wine, which contributes to the festive nature of the repast.

7 Classic Reasons for Shavuot Flowers and Greenery

By Yehuda Shurpin

Many have the custom to decorate the synagogue and home with greenery and flowers in honor of the holiday of Shavuot.

The earliest mention of this custom is by Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Halevi Moelin, known as the Maharil (Germany, 1365–1427), who writes that it was the custom to spread grass and fragrant flowers on the floor of the synagogue in honor of the “joy of the holiday of Shavuot.”¹ However, the custom may go as far back as the Babylonian exile: Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, known as the Chida (Jerusalem, 1724–1806), cites an ancient Midrash that alludes to this custom being practiced at the time of the Purim story.²

Although Rabbi Moelin mentions only the synagogue, others add that it was the custom to decorate the house as well.³

Since these earlier sources don’t elaborate on the connection between greenery and the holiday of Shavuot, subsequent commentators have offered many explanations, although different explanations apply to grass, trees, flowers, and plants in general.

[Before discussing the reasons, it should be noted that some, most notably Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilnius, known as the Gaon of Vilna (1720–1797), advocated abolishing the custom of placing greenery as a decoration in honor of the holiday of Shavuot, due to it having become the practice of non-Jews to honor their own holidays by decorating with greenery and trees.⁴ Thus, there are many communities that, despite the explanations cited below, refrain from decorating the synagogues with greenery on Shavuot.]

1. Green Pastures in the Desert

Perhaps the most famous reason given is that Gd warned the Jews at Sinai that “the sheep and the cattle shall not graze facing that mountain [Sinai].”⁵ Now, the Torah was given in a desert. This indicates that a miracle occurred, temporarily turning that area into fertile land with an abundance of greenery. In commemoration of this miracle, it became the custom to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot with greenery.⁶

2. Fragrant Speech

Expounding on the verse “His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as banks of sweet herbs; his lips are lilies dripping with flowing myrrh,”⁷ the Talmud explains that “from each and every utterance [of the Ten Commandments] that emerged from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed be He, the entire world was filled with fragrant spices.”⁸ Accordingly, on Shavuot we decorate with fragrant flowers and greenery.⁹

3. Judgment of Trees

The Mishnah states that on the holiday of Shavuot, Gd judges the earth and determines the abundance of the fruits of the trees for the coming year.¹⁰ Therefore, trees are placed in the synagogue to remind us to pray for the trees and their fruits.¹¹

4. Baby Moses’ Basket

Moses was born on the 7th day of the month of Adar. Three months later, when his mother was no longer able to hide him from the Egyptians, she put him into a basket and placed the basket among the reeds of the river, whereupon he was found by Batyah (Bithiah), daughter of Pharaoh, and miraculously saved. Three months from the 7th of Adar is the 7th of Sivan, the second day of Shavuot. In commemoration of this miracle, we decorate the holiday with grass and reeds.¹²

5. “A Rose Among the Thorns”

Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Spira of Dynów, known as the Bnei Yissaschar (1783–1841), explains the custom of beautifying the holiday with flowers, as well as a custom to adorn the Torah scroll with flowers, as follows:¹³

Elaborating on the verse “As a rose among the thorns, so is my beloved among the daughters,”¹⁴ the Midrash tells the story of a king who had an orchard planted with beautiful trees. He entrusted it to a tenant and went away. After a time, the king returned and found it full of thorns, so he brought woodcutters to cut it all down. However, looking closely at the thorns, he noticed among them a single rose. He smelled it, and his spirits calmed down. The king said: “The whole orchard shall be saved because of this flower.”

In a similar manner, the whole world was created only for the sake of the Torah. After 26 generations, the Holy One, Blessed be He, looked closely at His world to ascertain what it had yielded, and found it lacking. Looking closely, He saw a single rose—the Jewish nation. And when He gave them the Ten Commandments, and the Jewish people proclaimed “We will do, and we will hear,”¹⁵ His spirits were calmed. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: “The orchard shall be saved on account of this flower. For the sake of the Torah and of Israel, the world shall be saved.”¹⁶

6. Harvest and the First Fruits

Some explain that this custom is based on the fact that Shavuot is called the “harvesting festival.”¹⁷ Additionally, Shavuot marked the start of the season for bringing *bikkurim*, first fruits, to the Holy Temple. We decorate with greenery and flowers in remembrance of the custom to adorn the baskets of *bikkurim* (as well as the oxen leading the procession) with flowers and greenery.¹⁸

7. Yissachar is Conceived

The Torah describes how Reuben went in “the days of the wheat harvest” and brought *dudaim* (flowers) to his mother Leah. Desiring the flowers, Rachel said to her sister Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s *dudaim*.”

Resentful of Rachel’s position as favorite wife, Leah replied, “Is it a small matter that you have taken my husband, that [you wish] also to take my son’s *dudaim*?” So Rachel said, “Therefore, he shall sleep with you tonight as payment for your son’s *dudaim*.” The Torah continues that from the union that night between Jacob and Leah, Jacob’s fifth son, Yissachar, was conceived.¹⁹

Rabbi Moshe Alshich (1508–1593) explains that this incident occurred on the eve of Shavuot. Thus, Yissachar, who was conceived on Shavuot, was especially blessed that his descendants would be Torah scholars and sit on the Sanhedrin.**20**

Midrash Talpiot explains that based on the opinion that the dudaim that Reuben brought were a type of flower, the custom is to beautify the holiday with flowers.**21**

Footnotes

1. *Minhagei Maharil, Shavuot.*
2. *See Birkei Yosef 494:6.*
3. *See glosses of Rama to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494:3.*
4. *Quoted in Chayei Adam 131:13 and Chochmat Adam 89:1.*
5. *Exodus 34:3.*
6. *Levush (HaChur) 494:1.*
7. *Song of Songs 5:13.*
8. *Talmud, Shabbat 88b.*
9. *Midrash Talpiot, s.v. Dudaim; Rabbi Shem Tov Gaguine, Keter Shem Tov, vol. 4, p. 13.*
10. *Rosh Hashanah 1:2.*
11. *Magen Avraham, Orach Chaim 494:5.*
12. *Pardes Yosef, Exodus 2:3; Sefer Ziv HaMinhagim, Chodesh Sivan 7.*
13. *Bnei Yissaschar, Chodesh Sivan 4:7.*
14. *Song of Songs 2:2.*
15. *Exodus 24:7.*
16. *Vayikra Rabbah 23:3.*
17. *See Exodus 23:16 and 34:22.*
18. *Sefer Ziv Haminhagim, Sivan 7.*
19. *Genesis 30:14–18.*
20. *Rabbi Moshe Alshich, Torat Moshe, Genesis ad loc.*
21. *Midrash Talpiot, s.v. Dudaim.*

Learning on Shavuot Night Tikkun Leil Shavuot

An Insomniac's Preparation for the Torah

By Eli Landes

A Peculiar Custom

Let's take a walk for a moment. It's Shavuot night; the festive meal has finished. Like so many other festival nights, you'd expect the events to play out in a familiar pattern. The guests head home, the older family members help clean up, but slowly, one by one, the family drifts off to sleep. But this night, something different happens. Rather than going to sleep, the members of the household stay up all night—and learn Torah.

The obvious question is, why? What is so special about this night that so many people forego a night's sleep to stay up learning instead?

To understand this practice, we're going to take a step back in time to the very first Shavuot—the day Gd gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai.

A Lazy Reception

The giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai is one of the most fundamental and famous moments in our history. But any great event is only as momentous as the preparation that leads up to it. This story is about the preparation the Jewish people took the night before the giving of the Torah.

The Midrash records a fascinating story. **1** The night before the giving of the Torah, the Jewish people did what anybody does before an important event—they turned in early for a good night’s sleep. This seemingly innocent decision, however, led to embarrassing consequences. The next morning, when it came time for the Torah to be given, the place was empty. The entire Jewish people had slept in. The Midrash even recounts that Moses had to wake them—causing Gd to later lament, “Why have I come and no one is here to receive me?” **2**

This story remains a shameful part of our history—and it is at the heart of the custom of staying up late. In order to rectify our forefathers’ mistake, we stay up late every Shavuot night to show that our enthusiasm isn’t lacking at all.

But there’s still much that remains to be explained. Who started this custom of staying up late? How widespread is it? Perhaps most importantly, why is it still necessary to rectify an event that took place thousands of years ago? To explain this, let’s start by taking a look at the sources for this custom.

Kabbalah, Halachah, Customs, Oh My

The custom of staying up late has developed in stages over the years. Tracing its sources leads us on a fascinating journey through our history and the many facets of the Torah.

Let’s start at the Zohar, the earliest source for the custom. This ancient Kabbalistic work, written in the years after the destruction of the Second Temple, recounts that Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai—the author of the Zohar—as well as “the early pious ones” **3** would stay up learning Torah on Shavuot night. **4** The Zohar does not mention anything about the Jews sleeping in, instead writing that this practice was a preparation for and in honor of the “bride’s” (the Jews) upcoming marriage to the “groom” (Gd, or the Torah). However, the Zohar does mention that their learning was to help “fix” the bride.

Our journey now skips over a thousand years, leading us to a fascinating occurrence that took place sometime in the early to mid-1500s in Turkey.**5** Rabbi Joseph Caro, the author of the Code of Jewish Law, invited Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz, the composer of the Friday night prayer *Lecha Dodi*, to his house to learn that Shavuot night. R. Alkabetz relates that, as they started to learn Mishnayot, R. Caro began to speak, his voice turned powerful and loud, his words sharp and enunciated. Those present instantly grasped that this was not R. Caro speaking. The voice praised them, telling them that their learning

had pierced the Heavens and reached Gd Himself. As their words ascended, the voice continued, the angels became silent, some standing still while others wept, all stopping to listen to the sound of their learning. This story quickly spread like wildfire throughout the Jewish world.

We continue to the town of Safed, Israel, to the famous Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria, commonly known as the Arizal, or Ari for short. The Ari famously never wrote any of his teachings down; most of them were instead recorded by his most prominent student, Rabbi Chaim Vital. Rabbi Vital records that the custom of staying up late is a truly important one, and writes that it had already become widespread throughout Jewry. He then makes a promise: those who stay up Shavuot night—refraining from even a second of sleep—and spend the night learning will be protected from any harm that year. **6**

Our final step takes us to the Magen Avraham, a prominent halachic authority who lived from 1635 to 1682. He quotes the Zohar about staying up late and then, for the first time in history, suggests the above-mentioned reason for this practice—that it's to rectify our forefathers' mistake of sleeping in the first Shavuot. **7**

Though there are many Kabbalistic reasons for this custom, the reason of the Magen Avraham is the most widely known and cited. Nowadays, this practice of staying up is kept in virtually all communities. **8**

Let's Talk Details

So perhaps you're sold. This Shavuot, you're going to stay up and learn Torah. There's one problem—the Torah is a pretty large collection of works. Where do you start? Can you learn whatever you want, or do you have to learn a specific volume?

This question is discussed in detail among the rabbis. **9** Nowadays, there's a widely accepted booklet known as the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* that includes the entire text you need to learn. The halachic authorities strongly encourage reading this text,**10** which includes the beginning and end of every section of the Tanach and the Mishnah, choice selections of key Kabbalistic texts, and a list of the 613 mitzvahs of the Torah **11**. Through learning the beginning and end of the basic sections of the Torah, it is as if we learned the entire thing. **12**

Of course, learning other Torah topics is perfectly acceptable, since the main objective is simply to stay up and learn Torah, and indeed many synagogues offer a variety of Torah classes on Shavuot night. **13**

Here's some parameters for saying the *Tikkun*:

- ***You can start before the meal and continue afterwards from where you left off. 14***
- ***You should stay up until daybreak (alot hashachar), after which you can head off for some much-deserved sleep.***
- ***If you feel that you can't stay up that late, you should at least try to stay up until chatzot, the halachic midnight. 15***
- ***Finally, if you didn't manage to finish the text by night, you should try to finish it off the next day. 16***

If you have sons, and they're able to stay up late, you should encourage them to stay up with you. **17** Though women are not obligated to stay up and learn,**18** many women choose to do so, and there are often Torah classes for women on Shavuot night.

Like every festival, Jews in the Diaspora have an extra day on Shavuot than the Jews in Israel. There is some debate whether or not you should stay up the second night as well, but the opinion of most rabbis **19**—and the custom of Chabad **20**—is that we do not (phew).

Many have the custom to go to the *mikvah* a few minutes before daybreak to immerse themselves.**21** This is the Chabad custom as well.

An Unusual Preparation

Let's take a moment to talk about the story we quoted earlier in the Midrash about the Jews sleeping in on the first Shavuot.

Imagine for a moment that you were there. Some 3,000 years ago, you're there in the desert the night before Gd Himself gives us the Torah. You're probably a little uncertain what to do the night before such an event. So you ask around, and your friends tell you that they're going to get a good night's sleep. Seems reasonable, right? The thing is, how much sleep do you actually think you'll get? When we go to sleep early before a big event, we usually don't get that good night's sleep we're craving. We toss, we turn, we get up, we go back to sleep. Maybe we cram in an hour or two of shut-eye. We're too pent up—too excited, too nervous—to really get any sleep in.

But the Jewish People did. They slept like babies—so well, in fact, that they slept in the next day. The fact that the night before Gd was going to give them His infinite Torah, they were able to sleep so well, seems to imply that they were genuinely not excited or even overly enthusiastic about the event.

There's a problem with that, however.

It just isn't true.

The Jewish people *were* excited for the giving of the Torah. They were so excited that 49 days beforehand—almost two months—they began counting the days to the giving of the Torah. And they weren't just counting the days. Kabbalah explains that, during each one of those days, the Jews worked on a different personal characteristic, refining it, elevating it, painstakingly working on it until they'd managed to make it pure. They did this for 49 days, with the goal in mind that in 49 days they would have completely refined their entire personality. They were so enthusiastic about accepting the Torah that they were willing to completely reinvent themselves in preparation for it.

And they did.

And yet, on the night before the giving of the Torah, 49 days later, the night before the event they'd been waiting for for so long, they went to sleep. And slept perfectly, without a sound. And slept in.

Something isn't adding up.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe explains that we're misunderstanding this story. The Jews didn't go to sleep out of apathy; they went to sleep out of enthusiasm. To explain this, let's take a moment to talk about sleep.

Since the dawn of time, countless philosophies have dealt with a question: what happens when we sleep? Kabbalah has its own explanation. When we are awake, our soul stays inside our body, animating our thoughts, actions and emotions. When we sleep, however, the soul leaves the body, leaving behind a mere remnant—just enough to keep us alive. The rest ascends to Heaven and learns Torah with the angels and other souls there. Then, right before we wake up, it returns. Now, though this happens to everybody, how much the soul learns in Heaven—and how much is remembered—is dependent on how much we studied during the day.

Now let's come back to the Jewish people in the desert. For 49 days, the Jewish people had worked upon themselves, refined themselves, elevated themselves. At that moment, the night before the Torah was to be given, they were holier than they'd ever been. And they were unsatisfied. They were unsatisfied because they felt it wasn't enough. No matter how much they worked on themselves, they were limited people, trapped by the physical confines of the body. How could they, as coarse, corporeal beings, ever be ready to accept the Torah—the height of spirituality? They needed one more preparation—something that would really express their readiness to accept the Torah.

For one night, just one, they wanted to experience something truly spiritual.

And so they went to sleep. They lay down, left their bodies behind, and let their souls ascend to Heaven to learn Torah. They experienced a truly spiritual revelation—the experience of sleep, as witnessed by the genuinely righteous. This preparation, the complete divergence of the physical and the cleaving to the spiritual—*this* was their final preparation for the Torah.

Yet now we must understand a different issue. If this was what was going on in their mind, what was the problem? Why was it considered a sin? Why, over 3,000 years later, are we still trying to rectify what they did?

Their mistake, the Rebbe continues, was that, by going to sleep, the Jews demonstrated that they had completely misunderstood the point of the Torah. The Torah wasn't given to us so that we can become spiritual beings, devoid of all vestiges of physicality. If that was the goal, Gd would have been better off giving it to the lofty angels. Instead, the purpose of the Torah is for us to use it to elevate and refine this physical world. Judaism isn't found in the songs of angels or in the piety of ascetics. Judaism is in the struggles of our desires—in getting up early to pray, in giving charity at work, in staying up late to learn a verse or two. Judaism is working with our physical nature and, little by little, civilizing it, refining it, and, ultimately, elevating it.

By going to sleep—by opting to choose the spiritual over the physical—the Jews demonstrated that they had missed the entire point.

We therefore stay up. We stay up to fix their mistake. Most importantly, we stay up to show Gd that we haven't missed the point. We get it. We could opt to go to sleep, to cleave to the spiritual and ignore our physical body. But instead, we spend the night learning, working with our body, inspiring it, purifying it. We stay up so that every part of us, both the physical and the spiritual, is prepared for the Torah. **22**

Footnotes

- 1.** *Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, ch. 1, pg. 12b.
- 2.** *Isaiah* 50:2.
- 3.** In *Zohar*, *Parshat Vayikra*, pg. 23a., Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Yosi are mentioned by name.
- 4.** *Hakdamut*, pg. 8b. *Parshat Vayikra*, pg. 23a. *Parshat Emor*, pg. 98a.
- 5.** Recorded in the *Shnei Luchot Habrit (Shelah)*, beginning of Tractate *Shavuot*.
- 6.** *Shaar Hakevanot*, *Drushei Shavuot*, drush 1.
- 7.** Chapter 494, s.v. *Isah*.
- 8.** *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, ch. 494, halachah 3. In the *Shelah* (see footnote 5), it states that everyone does it.
- 9.** *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, *ibid.*, states that you should focus on Oral Torah. *Shaar Hakevanot*, *ibid.*, says to learn specific verses from *Tanach*, parts of *Mishnayot*, and then spend the night learning *Kabbalah*.
- 10.** *Netei Gavriel*, ch. 14, halachah 5.
- 11.** The Chabad custom is to say the *Tikkun*, but without the blessings found in the text, *Otzar Minhagei Chabad*, page 295.
- 12.** *Netei Gavriel*, *ibid.*, footnote 6.
- 13.** *Ibid.*, halachot 5 and 7.
- 14.** *Ibid.*, halachah 10. This was the practice the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Otzar Minhagei Chabad*, *ibid.*)
- 15.** *Ibid.*, chapter 16, halachah 3.
- 16.** *Ibid.*, halachah 8.
- 17.** *Ibid.*, halachah 7.
- 18.** *Ibid.*, halachah 1.
- 19.** *Ibid.*, halachah 5. See footnotes 5 and 6 *ad loc.* for an overview of the debate.
- 20.** *Otzar Minhagei Chabad*, pg. 297.
- 21.** *Netei Gavriel*, ch. 16, halachah 15.
- 22.** Based on *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 4, pg. 1024-1027.