

Shavuot

Written by: Bnei Akiva of UK and Ireland

Age Group: Aleph and Zach (depending on your sniff you may want to rearrange the order of this peula)

Suitable for Shabbat before Shavuot, Shavuot itself

Goals:

1. To learn about Shavuot through its many names
2. To consider the different minhagim (customs) of Shavuot and understand their relevance
3. To know the 'story' of Megillat Ruth

Materials: a pile of names of Shavuot in English, Hebrew, and their explanation
Cards of various chagim and minhagim

Introduction

Shavuot is one of the Shalosh Regalim (3 Foot Festivals) - one of the big three. However, whilst we know tons about Pesach and Sukkot, do we really know what is behind this chag?

In this week's pe'ulah we examine what Shavuot is all about and what makes it special through focusing in on it's many names and the minhagim (customs) that we keep. We wrap up with taking a peep at Ruth to fir in with the overall theme of 'personalities'. Enjoy!

Names

Hurrah! Shavuot is almost here! We have been counting up towards it for close to 7 weeks, and our wait is almost over. But, so what? What's the big deal about Shavuot? We know it's one of the big 3 (Shalosh Regalim (3 Foot Festivals) along with Pesach and Sukkot), but what is it all about?

Let us start grappling with Shavuot by understanding the different names for this chag...

Shavuot has several names, each one providing a different angle on this chag...

The most well known name is **Chag Shavuot** – The Festival of Weeks. This name is the direct link with Sefirat Ha'Omer (the counting of the omer). Sefirat Ha'Omer connects Pesach, the time of our physical redemption to Shavuot, the time of our spiritual redemption 7 weeks later. We see how leaving Egypt and becoming free people was great, but lacked purpose...

Z'man Matan Torateinu – The Time of the Giving of our Torah. On Rosh Chodesh Sivan 2448, Bnei Yisrael arrived at Midbar Sinai (the Wilderness of Sinai). After 3 days, they were told to prepare themselves for 3 days after which they would receive the Torah. A Midrash tells of how the Torah was offered to all the other nations, but none of them were willing to take it on, until Bnei Yisrael were offered and said 'Na'aseh V'nishmah' (We will do and we will hear – we'll agree to it, and then learn what it's all about). Now, we had and have a purpose to our lives. 7 weeks had to pass until we had shaken off the feeling of being subservient to the Egyptian taskmasters and were ready to accept upon ourselves the ultimate and only legitimate master – Hashem.

Chag HaBikkurim – The Festival of the First Fruits. From this day until Sukkot the first fruits of the field (wheat, barley, grapes, pomegranates, figs, olives, dates), were brought by the farmer to the Beit Hamikdash as tokens of gratitude to Hashem. The agricultural nature of the chag is represented today by decorating the shul with beautiful flowers and plants.

Atzeret – Conclusion. This is similar to Shemini Atzeret at the end of Sukkot, and this Atzeret shows the conclusion of a process that began on Pesach.

Chag HaKatzir – The Festival of the Cutting of the Crop. In Biblical times, Shavuot was mainly a harvest festival. On the 50th day after bringing the omer, the start of the wheat harvest was celebrated by bringing a thanksgiving offering of 2 loaves of bread made from the new crop. What about the mitzvot or minhagim (customs) of Shavuot?

Shavuot is the only chag that has no specific mitzvot particular to it. On Sukkot there is the mitzvah of dwelling in the sukkah and of taking the arba minim (4 species), on Pesach there is the mitzvah of retelling the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim (the leaving of Egypt) and eating matzah, but on Shavuot.... Well, here are a couple of minhagim to make up for it!

Customs

We have already mentioned that it is traditional to decorate shul and homes with flowers due to the fact that Shavuot is a harvest festival, however, it is also connected to an ancient legend. It is said that when the Torah was given on Har Sinai, the barren mountain became covered with lush plants and fragrant flowers. The essence of the legend is that Torah brings the fragrance of spirituality into Jewish life.

There is also the custom of eating dairy foods because at the time of Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael did not yet know the many Kashrut laws concerning the preparation of meat, and keeping meat and milk separate, so they kept to the safer option and only ate dairy foods.

There is a custom of Tikkun Leil Shavuot, staying up and learning throughout the night of Shavuot, which originated from kabbalists (mystics) in Tsafat in the 16th century. A reason given for this is that Bnei Yisrael should have been preparing themselves for the great event the night before they received the Torah, but instead, they had a bit of a kip. Hashem had to wake them up to receive the Torah. Yes, that's right, the biggest thing to ever happen to Am Yisrael... and we overslept!!! We therefore stay up all night, shteiging hard, so that we are awake and ready to accept the Torah again for ourselves.

Megillat Ruth is read on the 6th Sivan (the first day of Shavuot), as it was on the Shavuot that Ruth accepted the Torah and its teachings, and it is on Shavuot, that we too accept the Torah as a guide for our lives. In addition to this, Shavuot was the day that David HaMelech (King David) was born and died and he was the great grandson of Ruth.

The Story of Megillat Ruth:

Our story takes place in the time of the Judges, when a famine hits the Land of Israel. Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their 2 sons, Machlon and Kilion moved to Moav where there was food. Elimelech died and his sons 'married out'. Both wed young Moavite ladies; Ruth and Orpah. However, soon Machlon and Kilion also passed away. The famine soon ended and Naomi decided to return to Israel. Her 2 daughters accompanied her, and despite her asking them to turn back they still continued with her. Naomi again begged them to go home, remarry and start again. Orpah decided to go home, but Ruth was determined and uttered those immortal words:

“Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people, and your G-d is my G-d; where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may Hashem do to me – and more! – if anything but death separates from you.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

They returned to Beit Lechem where Naomi and her family were originally quite wealthy, but now Naomi had nothing, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Ruth went off to the fields of Boaz (a close relative of Naomi and Elimelech) to glean the sheaves of corn and pick up the crops that the harvesters had dropped. Boaz was overseeing the harvesters and saw Ruth. He tried to work out who she was and was told that she was the Moabite girl that had come back with Naomi and had asked to come and glean in these fields and has been doing so since the morning. Boaz went up to Ruth and welcomed her to his fields and told her that he had sorted everything and she wanted a drink or to chill for a bit she should just ask and someone would help her out. Ruth was overcome and when she asked Boaz why he was being so amazing to her he replied that he had heard of all that she had done for her mother in law and hoped that Hashem would reward her actions.

When everyone got a bit peckish, Boaz invited Ruth to come and have a bite to eat with everyone. When she had finished, he told his harvesters to leave her alone and even drop a few extra sheaves for Ruth to collect. When Ruth returned to home that night, loaded with barley, Naomi couldn't understand what had happened. Ruth slowly explained the day's events and recounted all that Boaz had said and done for her. Naomi was overcome with emotion, and told Ruth that Boaz was a 'redeeming' relative and that she should do as he instructed. So, Ruth stayed close to the others gleaning in Boaz's field throughout the barley harvest and the wheat harvest that followed and when that was finished, she stayed at home with Naomi.

After a while Naomi decided that it was time to sort out Ruth's future, so she told her to get all dressed up and 'uncover Boaz's feet'. ("A brother who refuses to enter into levirate marriage, undergoes a ceremony of chalitzah which involves the removal of his shoe. Although Boaz was not Machlon's brother, as his redeemer Boaz had a moral obligation to marry Ruth. Therefore Naomi suggested that Ruth 'uncover his feet' a gesture reminiscent of chalitzah, in the hope that it would make Boaz aware of his moral obligation" Malbim.) Ruth did as she was told, and as you can imagine, Boaz got a bit of a shock to find a young lady lying at his feet...

They had a bit of a chat in which Ruth explained who she was and what she was doing and Boaz told her not to worry. He gave her a nice amount of barley so that she should not return empty handed to her mother and Naomi told her to wait patiently. Boaz explained to the elders of the town that he was ready to redeem the fields of Naomi and Ruth and to also marry Ruth. So, our 'story' ends with Ruth becoming the wife of Boaz, them settling down and having a son whom Naomi named Oved. He was the father of Yishai (Jesse) who in turn was the father of David Hamelech, from whom Moshiach will come.

Games

1. To learn about Shavuot through its many names

· Call my bluff – which is the true meaning of the name?

· Piles (?) – Split the kvutseh into 5 groups and make 3 piles (a pile of names in Hebrew, a pile of names in English, and a pile of explanations of the names) in different corners of the room. The groups have limited time in which they need to grab one from each pile and try to get a full

(correct!) set. Each group has to read out their set, and if no one has a full set, then they all get put back in the piles and they have another minute to run around and try to get the right ones for their set.

· Fruit basket, and the alternative of fruit basket using different names of Shavuot

2. To consider the different minhagim (customs) of Shavuot and understand their relevance

· Invent the custom – give chanichim an aspect of the chag (perhaps once they have learnt about the different names) and ask them to invent a custom that people can do every year to commemorate that specific angle of the chag.

· Matching Pairs – memory game in which chanichim have to uncover a chag and a related minhag.

3. To know the ‘story’ of Megillat Ruth

· Sequence the story

· Treasure hunt with a part of the story written on the back of each clue. (Please ensure that this does not mean your chanichim are interrupting other kvutsot and that if more than one kvutsah is using this idea, that they are not doing so at the same time.)