

A Summarization of Shavuot Traditions

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Shavuot (שבועות)¹ is one of three pilgrimage festivals that is commanded in the Torah (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16). In Hebrew, its name means “weeks,” derived from the command in Deuteronomy 16:19, “You shall count seven weeks for yourself; you shall begin to count seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain.” Many Christians know *Shavuot* from its Greek-derived name “Pentecost,” as *Pentēkostē* (πεντηκοστή) means “fiftieth,” indicative of the fifty days that are to be counted between Passover and this time.

In Biblical times, *Shavuot* was originally celebrated as a harvest festival. The Torah calls it “the Festival of the Harvest, first fruits of your labor that you sow in the field” (Exodus 23:16, Alter). It would occur at the end of the barley crop and the beginning of the wheat crop, also known as *Chag haKatzir* or Harvest Festival. In Rabbinical literature it is commonly referred to as *Yom haBikkurim* or the Day of First Fruits to commemorate the new wheat crop. The Mishnah records that this was a time of great rejoicing:

“Those [who come] from nearby bring figs and grapes, but those [who come] from afar bring dried figs and raisins. And an ox walks before them, its horns overlaid with gold, and a wreath of olive [leaves] on its head. A flutist plays before them until they arrive near Jerusalem. [Once] they arrived near Jerusalem, they sent [a messenger] ahead of them [to announce their arrival], and they decorated their firstfruits. The high officers, chiefs, and treasurer [of the Temple] come out to meet them. According to the rank of the entrants, they would [determine which of these officials would] go out. And all the

¹ Pronounced as *Shavuos* in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition.

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craftsmen of Jerusalem stand before them and greet them, [saying], 'Brothers, men of such and such a place, you have come in peace'" (m.*Bikkurim* 3:3).²

Surely, when we come to celebrate *Shavuot* as one of the Lord's appointed times as Messianic Believers today, we are to remember how it was commemorated in ancient times. Wherever we may be from, we are to open our arms to our fellow brothers and sisters and tell them "*Shalom*, you have come in peace!" and be hospitable in the Spirit of the Lord.

Going Before the Lord

"You shall bring in from your dwelling places two *loaves* of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an *ephah*; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD. Along with the bread you shall present seven one year old male lambs without defect, and a bull of the herd and two rams; they are to be a burnt offering to the LORD, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD. You shall also offer one male goat for a sin offering and two male lambs one year old for a sacrifice of peace offerings. The priest shall then wave them with the bread of the first fruits for a wave offering with two lambs before the LORD; they are to be holy to the LORD for the priest" (Leviticus 23:17-20).

When celebrating *Shavuot*, it is clear that the Torah itself does not offer that many instructions concerning its observance. The first command is to bring "two loaves made of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour, baked with yeast, as a wave offering of firstfruits to the LORD" (NIV). Also to be offered before God are "seven yearling lambs without blemish, one bull of the herd, and two rams, with their meal offerings and libations, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the LORD" (NJPS). The third set of offerings to be delivered up are "one he-goat as a sin-offering, and two lambs in their first year as feast peace-offerings" (ATS). All of the offerings are to be, as the Hebrew states, *qodesh yih'yu l'ADONAI l'kohen* (קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לַיהוָה לְכֹהֵן), "holy to the LORD for the priest."

The challenge when considering *Shavuot* today, either as Messianic Believers, or simply as a member of the Jewish community, is that much of it is focused around being a harvest festival with animal sacrifices. Without a doubt, *Shavuot* is intended to be a time when we are **to go before God and rejoice**. Simply being alive and healthy are adequate reasons enough for us to go before the Lord. But, much of this was intended to be done in Jerusalem at the Temple. How are we to celebrate *Shavuot* today?

² Margaret Wenig Rubenstein and David Weiner, trans., in Neusner, *Mishnah*, pp 172-173.

Shavuot and the Word of God

The most significant Jewish tradition associated with *Shavuot* is the connection between the Feast of Weeks and the giving of the Torah. This belief was extant sometime during the Second Temple era, as the Talmud refers to "*Pentecost*: it is the day on which the Torah was given" (b.*Pesachim* 68b).³ Consequently, most celebrations of *Shavuot* following the destruction of the Temple are focused as an anniversary of commemorating the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. The Torah portion associated with *Shavuot* is the reading of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:1-20:26), and apparently "This section was read daily in the Temple."⁴

Much of our celebration surrounding *Shavuot* should be focused around the Word of God as a great gift that our Father has given us. Of course, the Word of God was not *exclusively given* at Mount Sinai, but the scene of Sinai covered in fire and smoke and surrounded by the very presence of the Almighty is something awesome to contemplate, and *Shavuot* is a worthy time for us to remember it. When we all enter into fellowship with one another and focus on the goodness of what He has done for us, we need to remember that the easiest way to focus on our Creator is to examine the Scriptures He has given us for our life's instruction.

It is interesting that just as during Passover we are commanded to eat unleavened bread before the Lord, that on *Shavuot* the priest was to offer two leavened loaves. Many Jewish commentators have connected the offering of leavened loaves to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Ronald L. Eisenberg summarizes this view in *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*:

"Bringing the leavened loaves on Shavuot may indicate that the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai on that date should be understood as the culmination of the process of redemption from slavery that began on Passover, when only matzah could be consumed. Just as the two loaves marked the staple of our physical existence, so the historical process that began with the Exodus from Egypt and culminated with the giving of the Torah reflected the essence of our spiritual existence."⁵

The teachings of Yeshua the Messiah mirror the fact that bread alone is not sufficient for our well-being. Yeshua refuted Satan in the wilderness, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD'" (Matthew 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4). Of course, Yeshua was quoting directly from Deuteronomy 8:3, where Moses reminded the Ancient Israelites, "He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you

³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

⁴ Eisenberg, 299.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

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with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” When we celebrate *Shavuot*, how many of us stop to consider the importance of the Word of God in our lives, and how important it is to not only know the Scriptures—but actually be able to *live them out*?

Miscellaneous Jewish Traditions

Some Jewish traditions have developed since Second Temple times that can be edifying to the Messianic community. However, it is important to note that since *Shavuot* is so innately connected to the Temple service, that not all of the traditions intended to augment the absence of the Temple are necessarily good. Obviously, the study of God’s Word *at any time*, including *Shavuot*, **is something to be encouraged.**

A major custom that is observed in many segments of the Orthodox Jewish community is *Tikkun leil Shavuot*, meaning “the Prepared [texts] of the night of Shavuot.” This is an all-night vigil that was actually developed by Jewish Kabbalists, and the tradition became “devoted to the study of passages from the Bible, Talmud, and Zohar. The popular explanation is that staying up all night on the eve of Shavuot atones for the behavior of the Israelites at Sinai, who according to tradition slept late that morning and had to be awakened by Moses. . . an opposite view is that this practice is based on the legend that thunder and lightning kept the Israelites awake and trembling all night while Moses was on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah.”⁶

Some in Messianic congregations choose to observe a kind of all-night vigil during *Shavuot*, studying the Scriptures or focusing on some kind of Biblical topic. This should not be discouraged, but it should be noted that this custom gained popularity by Kabbalists who believed the study would help atone for them. As Believers in Messiah Yeshua, He alone provides our atonement, and any kind of study should be to uplift Him and thus edify one another. It is interesting that “In some communities, the Shavuot eve study session concludes with the only sunrise service of the Jewish year, a symbol either of the light of the Torah or of the Jews as a ‘light to the nations’ (Isa. 49:6).”⁷ Certainly, if you choose to stay up all night on the eve of *Shavuot*, do so with the intention of the Lord using you as a light to others.

Common Scriptures that are examined by the Jewish community may include an all-night reading of the entire Book of Psalms during the eve of *Shavuot*. This is influenced by a belief that David, author of many of the psalms, was born and died on *Shavuot*. In certain Sephardic Jewish

⁶ Ibid., 299.

⁷ Ibid.

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communities, a *ketubah* or marriage contract is read before the ark containing the Torah scroll in the synagogue, per the opinion that God was “married” to Israel at Mount Sinai. Another common text read at *Shavuot* is the Book of Ruth, as Ruth is connected closely to David as his great-grandmother, and because the story occurs at harvest time (Ruth 2:23).⁸

During *Shavuot* as a harvest time, it is also not uncommon for Jewish synagogues to be elaborately decorated in plants and flowers. This is frequently based on Proverbs 3:18, which says that the Torah “is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who hold her fast.” Rabbinic exegesis on Exodus 34:3 connects Mount Sinai to originally being a great green mountain with trees and shrubs, and so by decorating one’s place of worship, we are connected back to that idyllic setting.

Dairy foods and honey are traditionally eaten during *Shavuot* for a number of important reasons. One reason is the Jewish view that Song of Songs 4:11, “honey and milk are under your tongue,” pertains to the Torah. Another view is that the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk is given right after the offerings for *Shavuot* are detailed: “You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the LORD your God. You are not to boil a young goat in the milk of its mother” (Exodus 23:19). Yet another opinion is “that the Israelites [were] exposed for the first time to the wondrous world of Torah. . .like newborns. . .[and] just as babies drink only milk, so Jews commemorate the moment at Sinai by drinking and eating only dairy foods.”⁹

A traditional food eaten among Ashkenazic Jews during *Shavuot* are cheese blintzes. These are thin crepes filled with various sweet cheeses, and often topped with fruits or jams. In some other communities triangular dumplings are eaten stuffed with three types of cheese, because the Bible consists of three parts (Law, Prophets, Writings), the Torah was given by God in the third month, through Moses who was the third child born to his parents, to a people divided into three groups (priest, Levite, and Israelite).¹⁰

Another important feature among non-Orthodox Jews is a ceremony of confirmation, where teenagers are acknowledged as having completed a formal course of study on the Torah and commit themselves to its teachings. Sometimes these are *bar/bat mitzvah* proceedings, but not always.¹¹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 300.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp 300-301.

¹¹ Ibid., 302.

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Shavuot for Messianics

"Pentecost" in Christian tradition has some equal theological significance as does *Shavuot* for Judaism. The Day of Pentecost is most commonly associated as being the time when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon those gathered at the Upper Room. Yeshua the Messiah had promised His Disciples, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). This was the time when the 120 Believers gathered were miraculously empowered to speak foreign languages or "tongues" (Acts 2:6), and three thousand were evangelized and saved (Acts 2:41). From this point onward the Book of Acts records a massive evangelistic campaign throughout the Mediterranean world. In fact, many of the first Messianic congregations outside of the Land of Israel were likely started by those who had traveled great distances to come observe *Shavuot* at the Temple.¹²

In Christianity, though, Pentecost is commonly viewed as "mark[ing] the shifting of God's redemptive purpose from a particular people (the descendants of Abraham via Isaac and Jacob) to all peoples. On that day the Church was formed and empowered for its worldwide mission; the event thus marks the resumption of universal history, with which the Bible begins (Gen. 1-11)" (*ISBE*).¹³ As Messianic Believers, who understand ourselves to all be a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12), how are we to understand *Shavuot*? Even though *Shavuot*, as a Biblical festival, was not the "birth of the Church,"¹⁴ the *Shavuot* when the Spirit was poured out did signal the beginning of a worldwide expansion of the good news of the God of Israel and His Messiah Yeshua. How many of us as Messianic Believers, because of the high focus on "Israel," often forget that Israel is to be a light to the whole world?

Consider the fact that there are two loaves of bread commanded to be offered by the high priest before God at *Shavuot*. Why is this the case? What do these two loaves represent? These two loaves represent Israel *and* the nations—because the high priest did not *serve Israel exclusively*. The author of Hebrews writes that "every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Hebrews 5:1). Every priest of Israel that served before

¹² This notably includes the mixed congregation(s) of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Rome, to whom Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, and who many expositors (ourselves included) believe could have possibly been the primary audience of the anonymous Epistle to the Hebrews.

¹³ A.F. Glasser, "Pentecost," in *ISBE*, 3:757.

¹⁴ Consult the article "When Did 'the Church' Begin?" by J.K. McKee.

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God serves “mortals” (NRSV) or “humans” (Grk. *anthrōpōn*, ἀνθρώπων).¹⁵ Those who came to the *Shavuot* event when the Spirit was poured out came from all over the Jewish Diaspora, and this included proselytes. They did not just come from among Jews living in Israel:

“Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (Acts 2:9-11, NIV).

Shavuot is a time when we as Messianic Believers certainly need to focus on the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But *Shavuot*, perhaps more than anything else, is a time when **we need to understand the global vision of God**. According to some Rabbinical opinions on Deuteronomy 1:5, when God delivered His commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, they were delivered in the seventy languages of humanity that existed at the time—*meaning that they were not for Israel exclusively*. Israel just happened to be the vessel God would use to convey His good news to others.

That has still not changed. As Believers in Yeshua, we are all a part of the community of Israel via our faith. The responsibility is still the same, but the means are much easier. The Torah was given by God to Israel at the first *Shavuot*, and many years later the Holy Spirit was poured out on another *Shavuot*. We now have to take God’s two most powerful evangelistic tools: His Law and His Spirit, and be empowered to change the world. *Shavuot* is one of the most significant displays of our Heavenly Father’s *salvation history* plan for the world.

When we celebrate *Shavuot*, we need to be committed to do the work of the evangelist—making sure that all know Yeshua as their Lord and Savior. We as Messianics can do this by not only knowing Yeshua for who He is in the writings of the Apostles, but also in the Scriptures that precede Him. It begins by us knowing that the Torah is to reveal the sin in our lives, and why we desperately need Him. At each *Shavuot*, let us celebrate the festival with a fullness that only those who have both the Torah *and* the Holy Spirit can experience!

¹⁵ We do note that the priesthood of Melchizedek, which supersedes the Levitical priesthood, with much further clarity serves all people. For a further discussion of this subject, consult *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.