Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Shavuot
May 27, 2023 ** 7 Sivan, 5783

Shavuot in a Nutshell by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shavuot/

Shavuot is the second of the three biblical foot festivals (the Shalosh Regalim), falling on the 6th of Sivan (and continuing on 7th of Sivan in the diaspora). Shavuot celebrates the moment when, fifty days after the Exodus from Egypt, the Jewish People stood at Har Sinai for the Giving of the Torah. It also celebrates the wheat harvest in Eretz Yisrael.

Shavuot means "weeks", as it falls seven weeks (a "week of weeks") after Pesach, the culmination of the 49-day Omer period which began on the second night of Pesach. Because of this, Shavuot is also known as "Pentecost" which means fifty in Greek (it is the fiftieth day after the completion of the counting of 49 days). Other names for Shavuot found in the Torah are Chag HaKatzir (the Festival of Reaping), and Yom HaBikkurim (Day of the First Fruits) and in the Talmud it is also known as Atzeret (refraining or holding back). This connects Shavuot to Pesach in a similar way that Shemini Atzeret is connected to Succot). We also refer to Shavuot in our prayers as Zeman Matan Torah (the Time of the Giving of the Torah).

While there are no rituals associated with Shavuot in the Torah, there are several beautiful and meaningful customs that have developed to help us celebrate Shavuot. These include Tikkun Leil Shavuot (staying up all night to learn Torah), eating dairy foods, decorating the shul with flowers and greenery, and the reading of Megillat Rut.

Shavuot For Our Time by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shavuot/

At Mount Sinai, the Israelites made a covenant with God. He would be their God and they would be His people. But at key moments in Tanach we find another phrase altogether:

Moshe says in the Book of Devarim (7:9) "You shall know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God, who keeps *habrit ve'hachessed*, (the covenant and the loving-kindness)"; When Shlomo Hamelech dedicates the Bet HaMikdash (I Kings 8:23), he utters the following prayer: "There is no one like You, God, in the heavens above or the earth below *shomer habrit ve'hachessed*, (keeping the covenant and the loving-kindness)"; And likewise, Nechemiah, when he renews the covenant as the people come back from Babylon (Nechemiah 9:32), says, "The great, mighty,

and awesome God, *shomer habrit ve'hachessed*, (He who keeps the covenant and the loving-kindness)."

That's a really puzzling phrase, *shomer habrit ve'hachessed*, the covenant and the loving-kindness. Look, for instance, at the Jewish Publication Society translation, who just translate 'covenant'. Because the *chessed* is included in the covenant. If you look at the New International version (which is a very good non-Jewish translation), *habrit ve'hachessed* is translated as, "the covenant of love." But of course it doesn't mean that, it means "covenant and love." Everyone had a problem in understanding what God does for the Jewish people other than making a covenant with them on Shavuot, at Har Sinai. But if you think about it, the answer's really quite simple. A covenant is what sociologists and anthropologists call reciprocal altruism. You do this for me, I will do this for you. "You serve Me," says God, "and I will protect you." Covenant is always reciprocal and neutral. But that is terribly vulnerable, because what happens if we don't keep the covenant? The covenant is then rendered null and void.

The covenant is not enough. And that is what Moshe was saying, that is what Shlomo Hamelech was saying, that is what Nechemiah was saying. God does not just make a covenant with us. He has a relationship of *chessed* with us. An unconditional love, which is translated into deeds of kindness to us. The covenant is conditional, but *chessed* is unconditional.

Maybe ultimately this is why we read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. The Book of Ruth is the book of *chessed*. We received a covenant at Mount Sinai, but we also received something much more long-lasting and profound, which is God's unconditional love. And that's what the book is telling us, that God has love for us, the way Ruth had love for Naomi and Boaz had love for Ruth. Acts of loving-kindness all define our relationship with God. And as the Book of Ruth shows, they should be what define our relationship with one another.

This message resonates for us this year. Just as in Megillat Rut, tragedy and loneliness and isolation are healed by acts of loving-kindness, so have the isolation of so many of us been healed by acts of loving-kindness, acts of neighbourliness, people being in touch, helping us, getting things for us, phoning us up, connecting us by Zoom, showing that they care about us. Those acts of kindness have humanised and lightened our world. *Chessed* has a redemptive quality. It transforms tragedy into some form of celebration and despair into some powerful form of hope. Let what Ruth did for Naomi and Boaz did for Ruth be with us, as we try to reconnect with family and friends, and those who have been so terribly isolated during recent times. And may we remember that, as well as giving us a covenant at Har Sinai, God gave us a bond of love that is unbreakable. He will never abandon us, let us never abandon Him

Deep Dive into Megillat Rut by Jonathan Sacks z"l

https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/shavuot/

BACKGROUND

The story of Ruth is one of the most beautiful in the Bible. It begins in dislocation and grief. Famine leads Elimelech, together with his wife Naomi and their two sons, to leave their home in Bet Lechem, to go to Moav to find food. There, the sons marry Moavite women, but all three men die, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law childless widows. Naomi decides to return home, and Rut, who had married her son Machlon, insists on going with her. There, in Bet Lechem, in a field at harvest time, Rut meets a relative of Naomi's, Boaz, who acts kindly toward her. Later at Naomi's suggestion, Rut asks him to act the part of a kinsman-redeemer. Boaz does so, and he and Rut marry and have a child. The book that begins with death ends in new life. It is a story about the power of human kindness to redeem life from tragedy, and its message is that out of suffering, if transformed by love, can come new life and hope.

The commentators make two primary connections between Rut and Shavuot. The first is seasonal. The key events in the book are set during the barley and wheat harvests, the time of the counting of the Omer and Shavuot itself. The second is substantive. Rut became the paradigm case of a convert to Judaism, and to become a convert you have to enter the covenant of Sinai with its life of the commands: what the Israelites did when they accepted the Torah on the first Shavuot.

THE BOOK OF LOYALTY AND LOVE

All three *megillot* read on the pilgrimage festivals are about love: the stages of love as we experience it in our growth from youth to maturity to old age. The Song of Songs, read on Pesach, the festival of spring, is about love in the spring: the passion between two lovers that has nothing in it of yesterday or tomorrow but lives in the overwhelming intensity of today. The book is structured as a series of duets between beloved and lover, their voices loaded with desire. There is nothing in it about courtship, marriage, home-building and having children: the world of adult responsibilities. The lovers long simply to be together, to elope.

Kohelet, read on Succot, the festival of autumn, is about love in the autumn of life, as the heat cools, light fades, the leaves fall, and clouds begin to hide the sun. "Live well, with the woman you love," says Kohelet (9:9). This is love as companionship, and it is rich in irony.

Kohelet is written as the autobiography of Shlomo Hamelech, the King who married seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (I Kings 11:3), and in the end concluded, "And this is what I found: woman is more bitter than death, for she is all traps, with nets laid in her heart; her arms are a prison" (Kohelet 7:26).

A thousand wives will not bring you happiness. Faithfulness to one will.
Ruth is about the love at the heart of Judaism, the love of summer, when the passion of youth has been tamed and the clouds of age do not yet cover the sky.
Ruth is about love as loyalty, faithfulness, committing yourself to another in a bond of responsibility and grace. It is about caring for the other more than you care about yourself. It is about Ruth setting her own aspirations aside to care for her mother-in-law Naomi, bereaved as she is of her husband and two sons. It is what Boaz does for Ruth. The root *a-h-v*, "love," which appears eighteen times in the Song of Songs, appears in Ruth only once. By contrast, the words *chessed*, loving-kindness, and the verb *g-a-l*, "to redeem," do not appear at all in the Song of Songs, but figure in Ruth respectively three and twenty-four times.
The *megillot* are framing devices that force us into seeing the festivals themselves in a new light. When we read the Song of Songs on Pesach it transforms our understanding of the Exodus from a political event, the liberation of slaves. Kohelet turns Succot into a philosophical reflection on the succah as a symbol of mortality, the body as a temporary dwelling.
It is the sobering story of how Shlomo, wisest of men, sought to deny death by taking refuge in possessions, wives, servants and worldly wisdom, yet at every step he found himself face to face with the brevity and vulnerability of life.
Only at the end did he discover that joy is to be found in simple things: life itself, dignified by work and beautified by love.
Ruth likewise invites us to reframe Shavuot, seeing the making of the covenant at Sinai not simply as a religious or political act, but as an act of love – a mutual pledge between two parties, committing themselves to one another in a bond of responsibility, dedication and loyalty.
The covenant at Sinai was a marriage between God and the Children of Israel. The covenant at Sinai was a bond of love whose closest analogue in Tanach is the relationship between Boaz and Ruth.
One of the most sustained libels in religious history was Christianity's claim that Judaism was a religion not of love but of law; not of compassion but of justice; not of forgiveness but of retribution. The book of Ruth, read on Shavuot, is the refutation. Judaism is a religion of love, three loves: loving God with all our heart, our soul, and our might (Devarim 6:5); loving our neighbour as ourselves (Vayikra 19:18); and loving the stranger because we know what it feels like to be a stranger (Devarim 10:19).
Judaism is, from beginning to end, the story of a love: God's love for a small, powerless and much afflicted people, and a people's love – tempestuous at times to be sure – for God. That is the story of Ruth: love as faithfulness, loyalty and responsibility, and as a marriage that brings new life into the world. That is the

love that was consecrated at Sinai on the first Shavuot of all.

How Should We Know God?: Shavuot By Benjamin D. Sommer
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-should-we-know-god/

It's well known that Jewish tradition assigns specific readings from the Torah and the Prophets for all the holidays. Less well known are several traditions that assign holiday readings from the Book of Psalms.[1] An Ashkenazic tradition associated with Rabbi Elijah, the Vilna Gaon (1720–1797), assigns Psalm 19 for recitation at the end of the Musaf service on the first day of Shavuot. This psalm deals with an appropriate question for the holiday of revelation: How do we come to know about God and God's will? More specifically, the psalm compares two ways that we can acquire valid knowledge of the divine: through looking at God's creations, and through receiving God's commandments.
The first part of the poem describes the cosmos God created, focusing on the sky and the sun. The second concentrates on God's law or teaching. We might say, then, that the psalm contains a nature stanza and a Torah stanza. Surprisingly, the Torah stanza is full of words that ancient Near Eastern literature uses to describe the sun: "bringing light to one's eyes," "golden," "renewing life" (for in the ancient world, the rising sun rather than an alarm clock brought people back to life each morning), "judgements" that "make the simple wise" (since sun-gods in the ancient Near East were also deities of justice and learning), as well as "sweet" and "honey" (probably because light-colored honey, like gold, recalls the color of the sun). Further, the scholar Michael Carasik has pointed out that the first, or nature, stanza, is full of words relating to texts and scribes, which remind us of the Torah and learning: "recount," "proclaim," "utters," "word," "conveys knowledge," and "speech." The nature stanza alludes to the world of Torah, even as the Torah stanza hints at nature. This mirror-imaging shows that the two parts of the poem are in dialogue with each other. *What comment does the nature stanza make about Torah, and the Torah stanza about nature?*
One can come to know God through observing the world God created, and one can come to know God by observing God's laws, but these two different senses of "observing"—watching and obeying—lead to different kinds of connection. The psalm distinguishes between two types of disclosure of the divine: one that takes place constantly and impersonally in nature, and another that takes place when God provides guidance to a human being or a human community. The psalm forces us to ask: *Must our connection to God involve covenant and law? To what extent and in what ways can a divine-human relationship exist without the institutions listed in the second stanza?*

The different terms used for God in each stanza help answer these questions. The first stanza refers to God with the Hebrew term el, a word that simply means "deity." It is a noun, not a name; more specifically, it is a job title. The second stanza uses God's personal name, spelled in Hebrew with the four letters yod, heh, waw, and heh, which, in Jewish tradition, we never pronounce out loud. (I render this name above as "Hashem.") To refer to a being by the being's job title suggests respect but distance. To refer to someone by name evinces a personal relationship. From observing the cosmos, one knows about God. From observing the terms of God's covenant, one begins directly to know God. In addition, many ancient Semitic nations used the word el; that term or some close cognate means "god" in the languages of the Israelites' near and far neighbors in Phoenicia, Edom, Moab, the Aramean kingdoms, Babylonia, and Assyria. But the four-letter name was peculiar to the Israelites. Consequently, we may speak of the knowledge of God in the first stanza as universal; it is available to all humanity. The relationship with God in the second is particular; God made it specifically available to the Jewish people.

Knowledge about God in the first stanza requires action on humanity's part: we must turn to creation, observe it, think about what we perceive, and come to conclusions. The relationship with God in the second stanza, on the other hand, requires God to turn to humanity, and thus this relationship is based on divine grace. In the first stanza God is object, while in the second God is subject. This contrast becomes more pointed in the very last verse of the poem, which opens us up to dialogue and redemption, for here for the first time the speaker addresses Hashem directly, referring to the deity as redeemer. God's turning to us in Torah at the beginning of the second stanza is what allows us to begin speaking to God towards the end of that stanza. Creation does not quite do this on its own.

Revelation through nature, this psalm suggests, is valid, but limited in comparison with revelation through Torah. This is why the second stanza, alluding to the sun, tells us that Hashem's Torah, covenant, and judgments are "More desirable than gold, than quantities of platinum, Sweeter than honey, than drippings from the comb." When we recall that gold and honey symbolized the sun in ancient Near Eastern religions, we can recognize that these lines acknowledge the value and sweetness of what we learn from nature, even as they assert the superiority of the relationship we develop with God through carrying out the Torah's covenantal law.

Our Shavuot psalm, then, is concerned with a journey that we make on Shavuot—and every day of the Jewish year—when we receive the Torah anew. It moves us from knowledge of God to relationship with God, from propositions about God to

covenant with God, from speculation to law, from reasoning to action, from detachment to grace.
But both parts of the poem are relevant for modern Jews. The first part reminds us that God is not only found in books, in the beit midrash, and in Jewish law. There can be religious value in interrupting one's study of the law to observe the beauty of a tree or the loveliness of a meadow; and it behooves us to recall that all religions, and also people not connected to a specific religion, can acquire authentic and true knowledge of the one God by studying God's creations. But the second part teaches that for Jews, that type of knowledge, while necessary, is not sufficient. The relationship to which God called us at Sinai, and to which God calls again in every generation, requires covenant and law, relationship and observance. *(Benjamin D. Sommer is professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at JTS)*

What are the Shavuot Torah Readings About/ by Rabbi Mitchell H. Berkowitz

https://www.exploringjudaism.org/holidays/shavuot/shavuot-in-synagogue/what-are-the-shavuot-torah-readings-about/

Shavuot is perhaps one of the most underappreciated Jewish holidays of the year. Always falling seven weeks after the onset of Passover, it finds itself at the end of the school year, when very little attention is given to its explanation and celebration. Truthfully, Shavuot does not come with the same sort of pomp and circumstance as the other major festivals of the Jewish calendar. There is no structure to build, no leafy green item to wave, no seder table to prepare. Rather, it is a festival focused upon something that is regularly part of who we are and what we do as Jews—the Torah!
Each of the pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot) has an agricultural component rooted in its ancient celebration. Additionally, each one has taken on a historical significance as well.
Sukkot commemorates the time spent in the desert protected by God's abiding Presence, Passover marks the exodus from Egypt, and Shavuot celebrates the moment when we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received the Torah from God. Passover is about redemption, whereas Shavuot is about revelation.

The First Day of Shavuot

It is therefore fitting that on the first day of the Shavuot Torah reading we read about the revelation at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1-20:23).
Before the moment of revelation itself, there was a required period of preparation. For seven weeks the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to Sinai. During that time they were to shed the mindset of slavery and learn to commit themselves to God and to one another, rather than to Pharaoh and Egypt. But this was not sufficient. Once they arrive at Sinai, they must wait for three more days,

preparing themselves to become “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). Only then might they be ready for what comes next.
Revelation would be intense. The thunder clapped, lightning struck around the mountain, a thick cloud of fog enveloped the space, and blasts from horns emanated from the mountain.
In the midst of this atmosphere would God speak to Israel, sharing with them what we often refer to as the Ten Commandments, but perhaps better understood as the Ten Utterances, Aseret HaDibbrot—ten proclamations that God would make for all of Israel to follow.

In the millennia since that day, Judaism has affirmed that revelation may have started at Sinai, but it has never truly ceased.

After the text of the Torah came the remainder of the Hebrew Bible with the Prophets and Writings. After that came the Oral Law as recorded in the Mishnah, the Talmud, and countless collections of Midrashim. To this very day, Jews study Torah to uncover new meanings, find innovative understandings, and keep the words of this ancient text alive in all that we say and all that we do.

The Second Day of Shavuot

In most Jewish communities of the diaspora, a second day of each holiday is observed. On the second day of Shavuot Torah reading on a weekday, we read a selection from Deuteronomy 15:19-16:17. When the second day falls on Shabbat, we read from Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17 and a maftir from Numbers 28:26-31.
This is one of a few places in the Torah which describes the Israelite festival calendar. Here we see the agricultural context for the celebrations. Shavuot is the conclusion of the first part of the harvest, and is meant to be a celebration for all of Israel.
No mention is made of the Torah or revelation. Rather, here we see (and moderns mostly fair to appreciate) the dependence of the nation on the land.
Most of us are fortunate to have a house full of food and a grocery store nearby stocked with whatever it is that we may need. Occasionally we feel a pinch when a certain product is unavailable, but generally speaking we are blessed with bounty.
Our ancestors in ancient Israel were subject to the fluctuation of natural forces in the region, and thus were much more reliant upon (and attuned to) the land.
Reading this selection on Shavuot is a helpful reminder to us all that despite our relative comfort, food insecurity is still a real problem that faces millions of people on a daily basis, and one that we should work towards addressing.

Taken together, the messages of the Shavuot Torah readings remind us that we are a nation with an unending responsibility to learn from our tradition and to apply its timeless teachings to our lives.

Torah is not only the words in the scroll, but the teachings of every generation that has lived since that moment.
It is our responsibility as a Jewish community to carry those teachings forward, to uncover new ones, and to live by these words as we seek to build a world that reflects our sacred responsibilities as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

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Shavuot: Rebelation in Montgomery by Rabbi Stephen Nadav-Booth
https://truah.org/resources/stephen-booth-nadav-shavuot-moraltorah2023/

After everything it took to get out of Egypt and walk the first three months through the desert to Sinai, with three days of special preparation we stood at the base of the mountain, listening. We waited for Revelation (or whatever was coming next). We did not know what was coming! We did not know for sure if we were on the right path, or in the right place. “Could this desolate spot be the place? Why here?”
I felt similarly almost five years ago about joining Rabbi Jill Jacobs and the T’ruah crew on a rabbinic mission to visit the Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration, and the Memorial for Peace and Justice (which memorializes over 4,000 victims of racial terror lynchings), both projects of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, AL.
I thought, “Shouldn’t something this important be in DC where more people will see it?!” And especially as a northern white Jewish person, I wondered if Alabama wasn’t too far into the dangerous wilderness.
With that attitude alone, I probably would not have gone. But somehow I felt the calling (“T’ruah”) to rabbis. So just like many of those former Hebrew slaves, somewhat reluctantly, I left my comfortable place in Denver and journeyed to the “mount” of Montgomery. And perhaps like those ancient Hebrews, with my fellow Jews I wondered, “Why here? What next?”
From then until this day, when I attempt to describe to people what these EJI projects are about, they cringe. I can see it in their disturbed faces as I talk about slavery, lynchings, and mass incarceration. But I believe it is exactly this uncomfortable journey we must take if we wish to make progress towards the Promised Land.
And I think again about our ancestors at the base of Sinai. There are so many midrashim about what they heard and saw there. Revelation in their own language in a way they could understand. The silence of the opening aleph. Maybe they saw the “Or HaGanuz,” the primordial light of creation that God hid away for a future time, in which one could see the connections of all life everywhere across

time and space.
Perhaps in that primordial light, looking both backward and forward in time, they also saw the painful, difficult truths of life and history: what we know but keep at arm's length lest it overwhelm and demoralize us, the places we have missed the mark and will again. I would suggest that, though they didn't really want that part of the revelation, it was essential to their liberation.
Perhaps only by receiving at Sinai both the Holy and the Profane, the joyful and the painful, would they merit reaching the Promised Land.
And I hear Rebbe Nachman saying: "Anyone who wants to experience a taste of the Or HaGanuz — i.e., the mysteries of the Torah that will be revealed in the Future — must elevate the aspect of fear to its source." (Likutei Moharan 15:1:2) We are called to elevate the difficult truths, and sometimes our complicity in them, in order to "lift them up" for tikkun — for fixing.
The work of the Equal Justice Initiative and the museum and memorial site in Montgomery gives us exactly that opportunity. For me, it is both a horrible and a beautiful revelation as an American — a revelation that is upsetting and fills me with a sense of purpose. Perhaps, like our ancestors as they left Sinai, I left Montgomery with more energy and passion and compassion for my mission on the journey towards the great promise of democracy in America.
Now I can not be an American, a Jew, a rabbi, without working to acknowledge and repair and eventually erase the scourge of racism in this country.
Rabbi Jacobs said she brought us because, as leaders, we would hopefully be bringing people to EJI in Montgomery in the future. Wisely, she understood that it is difficult to lead and simultaneously to learn and feel these powerful teachings at the same time. I returned to Denver with a passion to return with members of The Multifaith Leadership Forum of Metro Denver, which I lead. And exactly a year ago I did just that, co-leading a multifaith and multiracial trip of 21 leaders to Montgomery.
Since then, the Colorado Lynching Memorial has been launched, and we helped designate a site recognition in Denver and Limon, CO. One of my ministers just returned from bringing her church group to Montgomery. And my co-leader, an African American who directs the Colorado Council of Churches, brought a taste of his ancestral food to my Passover seder. And the work continues.
For me, the EJI sites in Montgomery are a major and incredibly important pilgrimage site in America. I expect I will be returning at least every three to five years. If the museum were in DC, where people could drop in as one among many museums, it would lose something. Part of the power comes from the pilgrimage, the dedicated journey to this site.
As my teacher Rabbi Art Green comments on the Chasidic text Sefat Emet about

Shavuot, "The real revelation of Torah is the uncovering of the great secret of existence: that everything is animated by the single life-force that derives from the word of God." (Language of Truth, p. 400) Good and evil are both part of that life force. And it is up to us to unify, to lift up, to return it all to the Source. Just as the rabbis did when they edited Isaiah (Isaiah 45:7) in our morning "yotzer" prayer, changing "evil" to "all," so may we, as we hopefully re-experience the revelation of Shavuot, unify both the good and evil in our history as Americans, and take strong next steps to a redeemed country. *(Rabbi Steve Booth-Nadav runs the Multifaith Leadership Forum of Metro Denver and is the Chaplain at Kavod Senior Life. He is a 1992 graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and a founding member of Ohalah, The Alliance of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal.)*

Yahrtzeits

Gail Yazersky remembers her father Martin Yazersky on Sunday May 28th.
Lisa Small remembers her mother Ruby Small on Sunday May 28th.
Mel Zwillenberg remembers Susan's father Gerald Altman on Monday May 29th.
Debra Rubin remembers her mother Beatrice Kaplan on Thursday June 1st.