

CEREMONY & CELEBRATION

FAMILY EDITION

THIS SERIES IS BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF
RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל



SHAVUOT 5781



Educational content provided by Dr. Daniel Rose together with The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

Shavuot in a Nutshell

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.



From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks

TORAH: OUR GREATEST GIFT

On the face of it, Shavuot is a brief festival with few distinctive practices and, at least as far as the Torah is concerned, no specific historical content. But Shavuot is the festival of Jewish identity. Judaism is supremely a religion of the land – the whole of Torah from Avraham to the death of Moshe is a journey toward it – and Shavuot was the supreme festival of the land. There were agricultural elements on Pesach and Succot also, but Shavuot was the time of the grain harvest and of bringing first fruits to the Temple and declaring: “My father was a wandering Aramean.... And the Lord brought us out of Egypt.... He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

However, from the outset Shavuot was also the festival of the Giving of the Law, seen as the culmination of the seven-week journey that began with Pesach. But every nation had laws, and for much of the biblical era, other issues, political, military and cultural, held centre-stage. The Prophets tirelessly argued that without faithfulness to God and justice and compassion to their fellow humans, Israel would eventually suffer a momentous defeat, but all too few were listening, and the reforms of Kings like Chezekiah and Yoshiyahu proved too little too late.

Only with the experience of the Babylonian exile did people come to see that the law of Israel was unlike that of any other nation – not just because of its content but because of who gave it, when and where. It was given not at Mount

Adapted from
“*Shavuot Today*,”
an extract from the
Introduction to the
*Koren Sacks Shavuot
Machzor*



Zion in Jerusalem but at Mount Sinai in the desert. The law came before the land. Therefore, though they had lost the land, they still had the law. Though they had lost the country, they still had the covenant. The law of Israel was not like the law of every other nation – the decree of kings or the edict of a legislative assembly. It came from God Himself, the Infinite Eternal. Therefore, it could never be lost or nullified.

This was when the full significance of Shavuot began to come clear. The real miracle was not the land but the law that preceded the land. Ezra and Nechemiah understood this after the Babylonian exile, as did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in the midst of the rebellion against Rome. Without them it is highly doubtful whether Jews or Judaism would have survived.

For the better part of two thousand years Jews lost their land, and once again – as it was for the exile in Babylon – it was Torah that sustained the people as a people, giving them the assurance that one day they would return. For in truth this always was our greatest gift: the Torah, our constitution of liberty under the sovereignty of God, our marriage contract with Heaven itself, written in letters of black fire on white fire, joining the infinity of God and the finitude of humankind in an unbreakable bond of law and love, the scroll Jews carried wherever they went, and that carried them. This is the Torah: the voice of heaven as it is heard on earth, the word that lights the world.

REFLECT: How did the Torah help the survival of the Jewish people after they were exiled from the Land?

SHAVUOT FOR OUR TIME

(From a shiur given on 24th May 2020 entitled: “A Life of Vertical & Horizontal Responsibility: Shavuot During the Coronavirus Pandemic”)

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



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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.

REFLECT: Why are laws not enough? Why do we need to also remember to be kind? How will you show *chessed* to someone today?



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Deep Diving into Megillat Rut

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 Ruth, who had married her son Machlon, insists on going with her. There, in Bet Lechem, in a field at harvest time, Ruth meets a relative of Naomi's, Boaz, who acts kindly toward her. Later at Naomi's suggestion, Ruth asks him to act the part of a kinsman-redeemer. Boaz does so, and he and Ruth 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 Ruth 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. Ruth 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



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Adapted from "Ruth: the Book of Loyalty and Love," an extract from the Introduction to the Koren Sacks Shavuot Machzor

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.

Points to Ponder

- 1 What are the thematic connections between Megillat Rut and Shavuot?
- 2 Why is Shavuot compared to the wedding day of Israel and God?
- 3 How is this connected to Megillat Rut?

Shavuot for the Young (and Young at Heart!)

It once happened on Shavuot...

THERE ARE two famous midrashic accounts of the Giving of the Torah that paint very different pictures of what led to the Israelites receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. They are retold here:

When Hashem was ready to give the Torah to the Children of Israel, He offered the Torah to all the other nations as well. First Hashem went to the Children of Eisav and asked them "Will you accept the Torah?" They replied to Him, "Master of the universe, what is written in it?" He said: "You shall not murder" They replied to Him, "Killing has always been part of our way of life. We cannot accept the Torah!"

Then He went to the Children of Ammon and Moab, and asked them if they would accept the Torah? They asked Him, "Master of the universe, what is written in it?" He told them "You shall not commit adultery." They replied to Him, "Adultery has always been part of our way of life. We cannot accept the Torah!"

Then He went to the Children of Yishmael, and asked them if they would accept the Torah. They asked Him, "Master of the universe, what is written

in it?" He told them "Do not steal." They replied to Him, "Theft has always been part of our way of life. We cannot accept the Torah!"

Finally He came to Israel. They simply said, "We will do and we will listen" (na'aseh ve-nishma) (Shemot 24:7).

Pesikta Rabbati, 21

The Israelites actually stood underneath the mountain, as Hashem held the mountain upside down above their heads like a gigantic barrel, and He said to them: "If you accept the Torah, excellent, but if not, I will drop the mountain on top of you and this will be where you are buried!"

But if this is true then the Jewish people can claim they had no choice and were forced into accepting the Torah! Does this mean we don't need to keep it if we do not want to today? Ah, but then the people re-accepted it voluntarily at the end of the Purim story.

Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a



Points to Ponder

- 1 Do you find anything troubling about these two stories?
- 2 What lessons can we learn from the ways the Rabbis told the story of the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai?
- 3 Which of these two stories best articulates how you see the relationship between the Jewish people and the Torah?

A double-chocolate cheesecake recipe you can make for your whole family!

INGREDIENTS

Biscuit base (crust)

- 4oz Rakusens “Chocolate Oatie” biscuits* (or half a box of Graham Crackers plus 2 tbsp melted dark chocolate)
- 2oz (4 tbsp) melted butter

Cheesecake top

- 12oz full-fat soft cheese (e.g., Philadelphia cream cheese)
- 100g of caster sugar (½ cup white sugar)
- ¾ of a cup of thick plain or vanilla yogurt (plain Greek yogurt)
- 300ml or ½ pint of double cream (1 ¼ cup of whipping cream)
- 6oz (1 cup) dark melted chocolate
- 6oz (1 cup) white melted chocolate
- 1 chocolate flake (Elite’s chocolate mekupelet)

METHOD

Part 1 – biscuit base (crust)

1. Line an 8-inch baking tin with baking paper (use either a spring-form tin or loose bottom tin).
2. Place the biscuits (or Graham Crackers. Another alternative is toasted oat cereal) into a sealed plastic food bag, and crush them using a rolling pin until you have a bag full of very small chunks.
3. Mix the melted butter and the crushed biscuits together in a bowl (if you are using Graham Crackers, also include 2 tbsp melted dark chocolate when you add the melted butter to the mix).
4. Pour mixture immediately into the tin and smooth it down with a spoon, so that it’s spread evenly over the bottom of the tin. This is your biscuit base (crust). You now just need to leave it to set.



Part 2 – cheesecake top

1. Mix the cheese and sugar with a wooden spoon until the mixture is smooth.
2. Pour in the yoghurt (still using your wooden spoon) and mix well.
3. Whisk the cream separately (using either a hand-whisk or electric beaters) until the cream is just holding its shape. Then fold the cream into the sugar-cheese mixture.
4. Divide the mixture into two equal bowls and get ready to add the chocolate.
5. Mix all the melted white chocolate into one of the bowls and all the melted dark chocolate into the other bowl.
6. Take the tin with the biscuit base and create a rough chessboard pattern by spooning alternate tablespoonfuls of white and dark chocolate-cheese. Then add a second layer, continuing to alternate your spoonfuls of white and dark, but this time also try to place white on top of dark and vice versa. Continue layering until all the mixture in both bowls has been used.
7. Very gently pull a fork through the mixture in the tin to create a “marbling” effect.
8. Level the top with a knife or palette knife, then have fun creating a pattern by raking a fork across the top.
9. Crush your chocolate flake (Elite chocolate mekupelet), and sprinkle this on top.
10. Refrigerate (at least 90 minutes) until you are ready to serve your cake.

**Please note, this recipe has adapted notes in round brackets for North American/Israeli bakers who may use different terms and ingredients to a British baker.*

Chidon on the Chag (A Quick Quiz)

1. What does Shavuot mean, and why is the festival called that?
2. What are the other four names of Shavuot?
3. According to the Hebrew calendar, what is the date of Shavuot?
4. Which agricultural themes are connected to Shavuot?
5. Which Megillah do we read on Shavuot?
6. With what do we decorate our shuls on Shavuot, and why?
7. What is a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, and what is behind this custom?
8. Why do we have the tradition of eating dairy foods on Shavuot?
9. What is King David's connection to Shavuot?
10. When Naomi tried to convince Ruth to return to Moav, what did Ruth say to her?



Educational Companion to the Questions

DEEP DIVING INTO MEGILLAT RUT

1. The story took place at the time of the grain harvests in early summer, which is the time in the calendar when Shavuot falls. But there are several themes that are present in the story that are appropriately linked to the themes of the festival. Ruth is a model example of a convert to Judaism, entering voluntarily into the covenant of Sinai, which is what the Israelites did when they accepted the Torah on the first Shavuot. The themes of love and *chesed* are also important themes of Shavuot and Matan Torah (see also *Shavuot for our Time* above). Finally, Megillat Rut ends with the birth of Ruth's great grandson, David HaMelech, who was born (and died) on Shavuot.
2. The wedding metaphor helps us to understand the covenantal love between God and the Jewish people. Just as marriage is a covenant based on love, with both parties having contractual obligations to each other (the contract being the *ketubah*), so the covenant of Sinai is a contract based on love and mutual obligation between God and Israel (with the Torah being the contract). There are even some that suggest that the aggadic story found in Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a (see *It Once Happened on Shavuot* above) where God suspends Har Sinai above the heads of the Israelites, represents the chupah (the wedding canopy).
3. The recurring themes of Megillat Rut are love, loyalty, and contractual obligations (the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is an example of love and loyalty, and while the relationship between Boaz and Ruth becomes one of love also, its foundation is contractual (as he redeems her as the next of kin).

IT ONCE HAPPENED ON SHAVUOT...

1. The first story seems to suggest that Israel was the only people willing to enter into a covenant with God and accept the obligations of the Torah, rather than God choosing the Jewish people to be His *Am Segulah* (treasured people). The second story suggests that the Israelites had no choice but to accept the Torah at Sinai, because God was threatening their very lives. Apart from the question of fairness and coercion, this would cause many theological and legal problems, for example, how can Jews be held responsible for not observing the mitzvot if they did not readily commit to them from a position of free choice. This is why the story ends with a national voluntary recommitment to the Torah at the end of the Purim story in Megillat Esther.
2. These midrashic retellings of the events at Sinai are not necessarily to be taken as historically factual, but rather as a pedagogic tool to teach us theological lessons. For example, if there

is discomfort caused by the chosenness of the Jewish people (why would God choose one nation above all the others?) this story suggests that it is actually the Jews who chose God. It is a complimentary text that praises the Israelites for accepting unconditionally the Torah without even fully understanding what its content or obligations are. This can also be a lesson to us, to accept all the contents of the Torah even when some of it does not make sense to us. The second story articulates the binding obligation to keep the Torah and join with the destiny of the Jewish people. It hints at the ramifications for disobedience that are explicitly described in the Torah itself.

3. For some people it is clear to them that all Jews have a binding obligation to keep the Torah in its entirety, and this was a covenantal relationship initiated between God and our ancestors. However, for some, Torah observance feels like something that each individual recommitments to themselves in the modern age of freedom and competing lifestyles.

CHIDON ON THE CHAG (A QUICK QUIZ)

1. Weeks, because Shavuot falls seven weeks after Pesach.
2. *Zeman Matan Torah, Chag Hakatzir, Yom Habikkurim, Atzeret.*
3. 6th of Sivan (and the 7th of Sivan also, in the diaspora).
4. The wheat harvest and the bringing of the first fruits.
5. Megillat Rut.
6. Greenery and flowers, because the Midrash says that Har Sinai blossomed with flowers in anticipation of the Giving of the Torah.
7. *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* translates literally to the "rectification for Shavuot night". It is the custom to stay up all night learning Torah to make amends for the Israelites, who according to the Midrash went to sleep to be well-rested for the next day but they overslept and had to be woken by Moshe.
8. Because before the receiving of the Torah it wasn't clear which meat was kosher, and so to be safe, the Israelites only ate dairy meals. Additionally, the Torah is compared to milk (Shir HaShirim 4:11), and the gematria (numerical value) of the word *chalav* (milk) is 40, signifying the number of days and nights Moshe spent on Sinai.
9. King David was born on Shavuot, (and 70 years later, he died on that same day) and his great-grandmother was Ruth, who we read about in Megillat Rut on Shavuot.
10. "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people, and your God my God."

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