

“Shavu’ot”

In the Bible, this festival is known by three different names:

1. **Chag Ha'shavuot**—“The Festival of Weeks,” because it occurs on the 50th day (seven weeks, or a week of weeks) after the beginning of Passover. The word Shavuot itself means “weeks.”
2. **Yom Ha'bikkurim**—“The Day of First Fruits,” because on this day entire families would journey to Jerusalem to bring their first fruits to the Temple.
3. **Chag Ha'katzir**—“The Festival of the Harvest,” because it came at the end of the season of wheat harvesting in Eretz Yisrael.

Themes

1. Adherence to law
2. Love of study
3. Gratitude for nature's bounty
4. Specialness of first fruits
5. Sensing relationships

On Shavu'ot, we go back to Judaism's traditional basis for civilizing man by teaching him the Ten Commandments. This festival is called “*Zeman Matan Toratenu*”—the Time of Giving of our Torah.” Our tradition tells us that on Shavu'ot, God gave Israel the Ten Commandments.

At home, as in the synagogue, flowers and green branches are traditional decorations, commemorating the agricultural aspects of this harvest festival. The green branches symbolize the Torah, which is a “Tree of Life.” Dairy dishes, such as blintzes and sour cream, noodle pudding and cheesecake, are served to commemorate the fact that the Torah and the Ten Commandments are as sweet to us as milk and honey.

As we see, there are many important ideas to be found in this holiday. A traditional focus is on study. Of great significance to us in working with all the children is the concept of “The Giving of the Torah,” “*z'man matan Toratenu*.”

Young children may still have rather nebulous ideas about what it means to study. In fact, one of the things we hope a child derives from a good preschool experience is a joy and desire for learning. It goes without saying that a love for study underpins all of our work for the entire year. We highlight it especially on Simchat Torah and on Lag Ba'omer. We will reinforce it on Shavu'ot but another consideration comes into play.

At this stage of development, young children may struggle with mastering impulses and putting them in their proper place. The children have a need to make some sense out of this world. They find security in the sameness of an orderly process governed by rules they can understand.

Our rabbis describe Shavu'ot as the wedding day of God and Israel, the Torah being the marriage contract. Since we want our children to abide by this contract—the Torah (law), which is the foundation of Judaism—we can help meet the children's needs for having a helpful set of rules and fulfill our need to transmit Torah.

By this time, our children know that there are many rules that they are to respect. They have lived by many home and school rules. They may resent some of these rules, fight some of them or accept them. But whatever the reaction, here is an opportunity to help reinforce a foundation for understanding of how "rules" help us live together in a better way. We have to control ourselves. Rules help us understand what to do. Sometimes we may want to do things which are NOT the right things to do, e.g. taking candy from the store when we don't have money to pay for it; not listening to Mother or Father when we feel angry at them; throwing stones at small animals or birds because we are afraid; wanting (coveting) our friend's new toy so much that we are tempted to take it.

In many different ways, Judaism teaches that the individual is part of the community. Each one of us must act as though the constructive good of the community depends on our individual action. We can begin to lay this foundation now, when young children are internalizing a value system.

Before discussing Shavu'ot (or any other concept), teachers should make sure they see where they are going. They should know how they want to present ideas in a comprehensible way. Children attach their own experiences to concepts they cannot grasp. We cannot foist abstract, complicated concepts on children. Just because we say something, does not mean the child understands it, even if he/she parrots it back correctly.

Suggested Activities

1. What kind of rules do we need in school to make sure everyone has a happy time? Our Torah has rules in it to help all the Jewish people live a good life. These rules can also help other people live a good life if they want to follow them. What do you think some of these rules are?
2. What kind of rules does your family have to make sure that everyone is comfortable and healthy so the family life goes well? Can we show this through art? Dance? Creative poems? Drama?
3. Talk about how a Torah is made. Show pictures of a "Sofer" (scribe) writing a Torah. Examine a real Torah. Talk about parchment and paper. What are their ingredients? Have many kinds of materials available so that each child can choose how he wants to make a Torah. A child who makes a creative Torah has a meaningful involvement. The more mature children can make lovely Torah covers from velvet, velour paper, crepe paper, foil, and so on.
4. Since eating dairy food is traditional (because the words of Torah are like milk and honey) many schools have the children make butter. Have children shake heavy, sweet cream vigorously in small jars or use an eggbeater. It takes a long time by hand so different children can take turns during free play. School administrative assistants, principals and rabbis are always pleased to taste this kind of Shavu'ot offering (on crackers or bread) from the children. Needless to say, the children enjoy it immensely too, since they made it themselves.
5. What other kinds of "bikkurim" can children give? Transplant and care for flowers started at Tu B'Shvat to beautify playground or synagogue grounds. Help keep school and yard neat by picking up papers. You may want to open a Bible again to Genesis and remind them of the *mitzvah*, the commandment, to guard and to work the earth. You may want to bring in large pictures of spring and summer flowers. Here is another opportunity to help children classify and categorize spring flowers, which grow from bulbs planted in the fall, and summer flowers, which grow from seeds planted in spring. There are many games one can devise. For example, children can find pictures of tulips, hyacinths and narcissi in magazines. These can be cut out and pasted onto cardboards to make "Spring Flower Lotto."