

SHAVUOT, THE OMER, & LAG BA`OMER

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שְׁבוּעוֹת

Shavuot



On the Calendar & About the Name

- Shavuot is one of the *Shlosha Regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals (*ḥagim*), in the Hebrew calendar
 - ◆ The other two are Sukkot and Pesah
- It starts on the 6th of Sivan and lasts for one day
- In English, Shavuot means “weeks,” because it occurs seven weeks after Pesah



Names for Shavuot

- ◆ *Hag HaShavuot* — חַג הַשְּׁבִיעוֹת
 - Festival of Weeks
- ◆ *Hag HaKatzir* — חַג הַקְּצִיר
 - Festival of Reaping/Harvesting
- ◆ *Yom HaBikkurim* — יוֹם הַבִּכּוּרִים
 - Day of First Fruits
- ◆ Hellenistic Jews called Shavuot “Pentecost,” from the Koine Greek for “fiftieth day”



Observance

- Shavuot originally was a festival celebrating the end of the harvest season
 - ◆ The season lasted from the barley harvest at Pesah to the wheat harvest at Shavuot
 - Shavuot complements Sukkot, the festival celebrating the end of the fruit harvest
 - ◆ At this time, it was appropriate to bring the *bikkurim*, the first fruits of the season (of the Seven Species, *Shiv'at HaMinim*, special for the Land of Israel), giving Shavuot its name *Yom HaBikkurim*
 - This offering of the *bikkurim* was also the purpose of the pilgrimage to the Temple

זְמַן מַתַּן תּוֹרַתֵינוּ

Zeman Mattan Torateinu

- In modern times, some call Shavuot זְמַן מַתַּן תּוֹרַתֵינוּ *Zeman Mattan Torateinu*, “the Season of the Giving of the Torah”
 - ◆ For example, see Kiddush, the Festival Amidot, and Birkat HaMazon additions for Shavuot, which reference “*Zeman Mattan Torateinu*”
 - ◆ Sources originating in the Talmud claim that Shavuot celebrates the anniversary of God’s giving the Torah to the Israelites at Mount Sinai
 - ◆ There is much dispute over this claim, given that there are conflicting opinions about the day of the week on which the Torah was given (most of the rabbis say the Torah was given on Shabbat, but also that the Exodus occurred on a Wednesday night, which contradicts the timeline laid out in the Torah)
 - ◆ Furthermore, this name is not from the Torah, and some dispute that Shavuot has any connection to the giving of the Torah according to the Torah itself, as there couldn’t possibly be a *mitzvah* in the Torah commanding a celebration of its own revelation



מִנְהָגִים *Minhagim* (Customs) for Shavuot

As Shavuot is the only *hag*, festival, commanded in the Torah without any specific *mitzvot* in place for its observance, we observe many *minhagim*, or customs, to distinguish it as its own festival.

In the Ashkenazic community, these customs can be easily remembered by the acronym אַחְרִית, which means “last” (another name for Shavuot is “ראשית”, meaning “first.”)

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Akdamut — Reading a **liturgical poem** (including, but limited to, “Akdamut,” or, in Sephardic communities, one of the Azharot) during the morning service

אקדמות

Halav — Consuming **dairy** products (such as milk, cheese, and cheesecake)

חלב

Rut — Reading the Book of **Ruth**

רות

Yerek — Decorating homes and synagogues with **greenery**

ירק

Torah — Studying **Torah** all night

תורה

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חֶלָב *Halav*

Dairy products

- ◆ Customary foods:
 - Cheesecake
 - Cheese blintzes
 - Cheese kreplach





Torah Study

Midrash Break!

- We learn in *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:12 that when we received the Torah as a people we blew it
- The Israelites, camped in front of *Har Sinai*, Mount Sinai, went to sleep early the night before they were to receive the Torah
- However, they overslept, so Moses had to wake them up, as God was waiting at the top of the mountain
- In order to make up for this, we stay up all night on Shavuot studying Torah to this very day
 - ◆ This is why we call the night of study a “*Tikkun*” *Leil Shavuot*
 - *Tikkun* means “fixing” or “rectification,” in this case of the flawed reception of the Torah by the Israelites

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History

- The custom began in the early 16th century with a group of rabbis, including Joseph Caro (author of the *Shulchan Arukh*) and Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz (composer of *Lekha Dodi*), who held all-night study vigils
 - ◆ They took three days beforehand to prepare, in imitation of the Israelites' preparation to receive the Torah at Mount Sinai
- In Jerusalem, since 1967, it is customary to conclude the night of study with a walk to the Western Wall, as it had been reopened after the Six-Day War just the week before Shavuot that year



Tiqun Leyl Shavuot

Leading 16th-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria composed a service called the *Tiqun Leyl Shavuot*, during which participants read excerpts from each of the 24 books in the Tanakh, the entirety of *Sefer Yetzirah* (Maimonides' compilation of the 613 commandments), and excerpts from the *Zohar* (the foundation of *Kabbalah*, Jewish mysticism).

Today, this has come to refer to any program of all-night study for Shavuot.

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סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

Sefirat Ha`Omer

Counting of the Omer



Origin

What's an omer?

- An *omer* was originally a unit of weight measurement, used in the Torah in reference to the weight of certain ingredients, such as barley, in sacrifices in the *Mishkan* and, later, the Temple
- The word *omer* later came to refer exclusively to the *omer* measure of barley sacrificed on Shavuot, fifty days after Pesah
- The *mitzvah*, was to count the days, starting with Pesah, until the *omer* sacrifice was to be offered on Shavuot



The Modern *Mitzvah*

→ Today, we count the *omer* in a very specific way, as follows

◆ Begin on the second night of Pesah


- Immediately preceding the *berakha* before the first counting, and, for many, preceding all countings, the following meditation is traditional:

הַנְּבִי מוֹכֵן וּמְזַמֵּן / מוֹכְנָה וּמְזַמְנֵת לְקִיּוֹם מִצְוַת עֵשָׂה שֶׁל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה: וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת, מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאְכֶם אֶת עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה, שִׁבְעַ שַׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימוֹת תִּהְיֶינָה. עַד מַמְחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת הַשְּׁבִיעִית תִּסְפְּרוּ חֲמִשִּׁים יוֹם

- *Hineni mukhan umezuman / mukhana umezumenet lekayyeim mitzvat `asei shel Sefirat Ha`Omer, kemo she-katuv baTorah: "U-sefartem lakhem mi-mokhorat haShabbat, mi-yom haviakhem et `Omer ha-tenufa, sheva Shabbatot temimot tiheyena. `Ad mi-mokhorat haShabbat ha-shevi`it tisperu hamishim yom."*
- I am ready to fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer, as it is ordained in the Torah: "You shall count from the eve of the second day of Pesah, when an Omer of grain is to be brought as an offering, seven complete weeks. The day after the seventh week of your counting will make fifty days" (Leviticus 23:15-16).

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בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר:

- 
- Count the Omer after nightfall, at least 25–30 minutes after sunset
 - ◆ If in a synagogue, counting before Aleinu during the Arvit, evening, service
 - If this happens before nightfall, count the Omer without the *berakha* and count again, with the *berakha*, after nightfall

→ Recite the following *berakha* immediately preceding the counting:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל
סְפִירַת הָעוֹמֵר

- ◆ *Barukh atta Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Ha'Olam, asher kiddeshanu bemitzvotav, vetzivvanu 'al Sefirat Ha'Omer*
- ◆ Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the counting of the Omer



- If possible, use the formula given in a siddur, which is effectively reproduced below:
 - ◆ For the first day: הַיּוֹם יוֹם אֶחָד לְעֹמֶר
 - ◆ For all other days: הַיּוֹם _____ יָמִים (שָׁהֵם שָׁבוּעַ אֶחָד \ _____ שָׁבוּעוֹת (וְ\־וְ־ _____ יָמִים)) לְעֹמֶר
- The biblical obligation to count the Omer can be fulfilled at any point during the day, even during the daytime, although without the *berakha*, as the strict rabbinic obligation is to count during the evening



- Counting all seven weeks of the Omer is considered to be one *mitzvah*, so missing one day disrupts fulfillment of the obligation
 - ◆ If you miss a day of the counting, refrain from reciting the *berakha* for all subsequent countings
 - ◆ Some people recite the Omer both at night and during the day so as to ensure that they don't miss a day
 - If you follow this practice, refrain from reciting the *berakha* during the day, as the counting itself fulfills the obligation, but the *berakha* is not proper in this setting



ל"ג בַּעוֹמֵר

LaG Ba`Omer

**33rd Day in the [Counting of the]
Omer**



On the Calendar & About the Name

- Occurs on the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer, corresponding to the 18th of Iyyar
 - ◆ In Hebrew: “The Hebrew letter ל (*lamed*) or ‘L’ has the numerical value of 30 and ג (*gimmel*) or ‘G’ has the numerical value of 3. A vowel sound is conventionally added for pronunciation purposes.”



Observance

- Marks the death of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai and, according to some, the creation of the Zohar, his text on Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism
 - ◆ It also marks the end of the period during which the 12,000 *ḥevruta* (study pairing of disciples), or 24,000 students, of Rabbi Akiva were killed by a plague
 - This period is traditionally a time of mourning, during which it is halakhic to refrain from haircuts, shaving, conducting joyous events, and various other pleasurable activities



מִנְהַגִּים

Minhagim (Customs) for LaG Ba`Omer

- Common practices
 - ◆ Bonfires
 - ◆ Pilgrimage to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai
 - ◆ Ending the period of semi-mourning during the Counting of the Omer (for most—traditions vary a little; see above regarding the period of semi-mourning)



SOURCES

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