

# A Brief History of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*

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One of the popular customs on Shavuot is to stay awake all night learning Torah. This custom is not mentioned in the Mishnah, the Gemara, by the Gaonim, the Rambam, the Tur, in the Shulchan Arukh (though see below) and by the Rama. What is the basis for this custom and how did it develop?

The oldest source for this custom is from Philo who mentions that the Essenes (1<sup>st</sup> century) used to stay awake the night of Shavuot praying.<sup>57</sup> However, it is unlikely that their practice had any influence on our present custom since the Essenes were not part of mainstream Judaism, and this source is never referred to again.

The next mention of this custom is in the Zohar (on Vayikra 23), which records that a select group of people, Hasidim, used to stay awake the night of Shavuot learning Torah in order that the bride (the *Shekhinah*? the Jewish people?) would be adorned appropriately to meet the King (G-d) in the morning.

In Spain, in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries it is possible that there were some individuals who stayed awake all night on Shavuot, but it was definitely not a common practice.<sup>58</sup> R. David Abudraham (Spain, late 13<sup>th</sup>, early 14<sup>th</sup> century) in his book on prayers and customs, makes no mention of the custom even though he records in detail the prayers and customs of Shavuot.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was a new stage in the development of the custom. In the beginning of the 1530s, R. Yosef Caro (1488-1575), a refugee from Spain and the future author of the Shulchan Arukh, was living in Turkey. R. Caro was also a mystic, and he had trances where a "maggid" would speak through his mouth.<sup>59</sup> On one Shavuot night (in 1530 or 1534),<sup>60</sup> R. Caro studied with Shlomo Alkabetz (the composer of *Lekhhah Dodi*.) Alkabetz's experience that night with R. Caro was very interesting, and he recorded his recollection of the events of the night, which was later incorporated into the book the Shelah. Alkabetz relates that when he was learning with R. Caro on Shavuot night, he heard this unique speech from R. Caro's mouth, and one of the things said was

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<sup>57</sup> See sources in Moshe Hallamish, *Kabbalah in Liturgy, Halakah and Customs*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2000, p.595.

<sup>58</sup> Hallamish, pp. 596, 597.

<sup>59</sup> R. J. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962, p.22 refers to this speaking as automatic speech. The collection of these speeches is recorded in the book *Maggid Mesharim*.

<sup>60</sup> Werblowsky, p.111.

that R. Caro should move to Israel. Apparently, R. Caro was one of the individuals who knew of this custom to stay awake on Shavuot night, but he did not want to impose this custom on everybody and hence he left it out of the Bet Yosef and the Shulchan Arukh.

After R. Yosef Caro moved to Sefat (1537), the custom of learning all night on Shavuot became widespread in the town. R. Avraham Galanti (d. 1589) recorded that all the congregations in Sefat would gather on the night of Shavuot to stay awake and learn Torah until the morning when everybody would go to the mikveh and pray.<sup>61</sup> From Sefat, the custom spread to the Mediterranean basin, and from there northwards throughout Europe. Towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Magen Avraham (R. Avraham Gombiner, 1637-1683, Poland, Orah Chayyim 494) wrote that most scholars stayed up all night to study Torah. And, a little bit afterwards, R. Yaakov Reischer (1661, Prague -1733, Metz) in his commentary on the Shulchan Arukh (Chok Yaakov, Orah Chayyim 494) noted that the custom had also spread to the general population.

There are several reasons why the custom spread. First, R. Caro was a great rabbi, and coupled with Alkabetz's testimony concerning his learning with R. Caro, knowledge of the custom became well-known. Secondly, in Sefat in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it became popular to regularly arise at midnight to recite *tikkun hazot*, prayers to mourn the destruction of the Bet ha-Mikdash and to pray for its redemption. This custom was independent of staying awake on Shavuot night, but still, if one regularly practiced the *tikkun hazot*, then one would naturally be more inclined to stay awake on Shavuot night as well. Thirdly, there developed the claim, which was attributed to the Ari (for example, see Mishnah Bruruah 494:1), that if a person stays awake the entire night and learns Torah throughout the night, then no harm will come upon the person in the following year. (The Ari was born in Jerusalem in 1534, came to Sefat to live in 1569 or early 1570, and died on July 15, 1572.)

In a fascinating article, Elliot Horowitz also credits the introduction of coffee for the spread of the custom of staying awake at night.<sup>62</sup> In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the drinking of coffee originated in Yemenite Sufi circles in order that they could stay awake for their nocturnal rituals, and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century coffee had spread throughout the Muslim world. Horowitz points out that both coffee and the custom of *tikkun hazot* spread westward from Sefat to Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

There were two new developments with the spread of the custom to Europe. One, while the Magen Avraham's quotes the Zohar as the source for the custom, he suggested a new rationale for the custom. The Magen Avraham writes that the simple reason for the custom is to rectify a mistake of the generation who left Egypt who slept the night before G-d declared the Decalogue at Mount Sinai. This idea is based on the Midrash of Shir Hashirim (Chapter 1, 12:2), which records, "Israel slept all night, because the sleep of Shavuot is pleasant and the night is short. R. Judan said: Not a flea worried them. G-d came and found them sleeping, so He began to rouse them with trumpeters, as it says in Shemot 19:16, 'there were thunders and lightings' ... It was for this that He taunted them through the mouth of Yeshayahu, in Isaiah 50:2."<sup>63</sup> Meir Bar Ilan notes that this Midrash was known for generations, but prior to the Magen Avraham nobody had felt that there was a need to

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<sup>61</sup> Hallamish, p.598.

<sup>62</sup> Coffee, coffeehouses, and the nocturnal rituals of early modern Jewry, *AJS Review*, 1989, pp.17-46.

<sup>63</sup> Translated by Maurice Simon, London: The Soncino Press, 1961, p.79.

rectify this error by staying up all night.<sup>64</sup> It seems that the Magen Avraham was looking for a new non-mystical reason for the custom in order to replace or complement the mystical reason of the Zohar.

This new reason also adds a new sin to the generation who were at Mount Sinai, which prompted Eliyahu Kitov to defend the Jews who left Egypt.<sup>65</sup> He writes, "This is not a condemnation of the Jews of that generation- all of whom eagerly awaited hearing the Divine Word. They were however, physically weak, and they feared that they might lack sufficient strength for hearing the Divine teaching without sufficient rest the previous night ... It is for this reason that also today not all stay awake during the night."

A second development concerns what is to be studied during the night. R. Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570, Sefat, Shlomo Alkabetz's brother-in-law) recorded a specific order of study, first sections of the Torah, then Nevi'im (Yechezkel), Ketuvim (Shir Hashirim, Ruth and Tehillim chapter 68), Mishnah (usually Pirkei Avot), the poem Azharot, and in the end, and mostly, Kabbalah.<sup>66</sup> This order was considered the appropriate study to adorn the bride based on the rationale of the custom in the Zohar. R. Isaiah Horowitz (1565, Prague -1630, Sefat, in the Shelah) slightly changed this order to briefly include all the books of Tanakh and the Talmud and other small variations. This basic order has remained until today as the official *tikkun leil shavuot*. However, already by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, R. Yaakov Reischer (Chok Yaakov 494) asserted that the official order was only for the "simple" people who did not know how to learn. This contention implies that people can learn what they choose. This explanation is incorrect historically since in Sefat everybody followed the official order, but it seems that for those of the non-kabbalistic bent, the official order was not sufficiently appreciated and they wanted to study other subjects.

Accordingly, the custom of staying awake on Shavuot night and studying Torah began as a kabbalistic practice, and started to become popular in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The custom was quickly accepted even amongst the non-kabbalistic population, but for them a new non-mystical reason for the custom was proposed and the learning was changed from being a set order to being at each person's discretion.

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<sup>64</sup> Tikkun Leil Shavuot, *Mehqere Hag*, 1997, vol. 8, p.29.

<sup>65</sup> *The Book of Our Heritage*, Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1978, Vol. 3, p.76.

<sup>66</sup> Hallamish, pp. 605, 606.