

Shavuot Activities for Families

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Experiential Learning – The Original Source

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Introduction:

Adults and children alike, when asked to recall memories from school often remember the most interesting and obscure things. It is impossible to predict what will leave a lasting impression on a person. However, when anyone is asked to recall memories from school, one thing usually is consistent – people remember events more than information. The first thing to pop into a person's mind is rarely an interesting fact from school, rather an inspiring (or funny) story.

Experiences are often more transformative and impactful in a person's life than knowledge. Judaism, from its founding moments, was well aware of this reality. In fact, the Gemara in *Berachos* (7b) states that it is greater to physically assist one's rabbi than to learn from one's rabbi, because we will learn more from our teacher's actions than their words.

The giving of the Torah, which we are celebrating on the holiday of Shavuot, was far from a boring lecture. It was the most exciting and riveting experience one could ever imagine, with the most spectacular light show (of thunder and lightning) the world has ever seen. The giving of the Torah did not just have amazing content, it had an unbelievable context. The giving of the Torah was not merely the acceptance of a book, it was an unforgettable experience. In fact, when remembering the giving of the Torah it is incumbent upon every Jew to not simply recall the information given over on Har Sinai, but the experience itself.

Activity:

Discuss with your child your own memories from school. What do you remember? What has had a lasting impact on you?

Sources:

Right before the Torah repeats the Ten Commandments, the Torah says

Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest they be removed from your heart all the days of your life, and make them be known to your children and your children's children.

Devarim 4:9 (Artscroll Translation)

רק השמר לה ושמר נפשך מאד,
פן-תשכח את-הדברים אשר-ראו
עיניך ופן-יסורו מלבבך, כל, ומי
חייך; והודעתם לבניך, ולבני בניך.
דברים ד:ט

The Ramban (ibid) comments that this verse is a Torah commandment never to forget the experience of Har Sinai:

This verse, in my opinion, is a negative commandment, concerning which [Moses] exhorted [the people] greatly. For having said that we must be careful concerning all the commandments and that we should observe the decrees and the judgments, to do them in the land, [Moses] said further, "Only, I am exhorting you greatly to 'beware of yourselves' and to 'greatly beware for your soul very, very much' to remember from where these commandments came to you. That you should not forget the assembly at Mount Sinai, 'any of the things that your eye beheld there' – the thunder and the flames, 'His glory and His greatness' – and 'His words that you heard there from the midst of the fire', and 'you shall make known to your children and your children's children forever, all the things that your eyes saw at that august assembly.'" (Artscroll Translation)

הכתוב הזה לדעתי מצות לא
תעשה, הזהיר בה מאד. כי כאשר
אמר שנוזהר בכל המצות ונשמור
החקים והמשפטים לעשותם בארץ,
חזר ואמר רק אני מזהירך מאד
להשמר ולשמור נפשך מאד מאד
לזכור מאין באו אליך המצות, שלא
תשכח מעמד הר סיני מכל הדברים
אשר ראו שם עיניך, הקולות
והלפידים, את כבודו ואת גדלו,
ודבריו אשר שמעת שם מתוך
האש, ותודיע כל הדברים אשר ראו
עיניך במעמד הנכבד ההוא לבניך
ולבני בניך עד עולם.

Discussion Questions:

What do you think is the importance of not only remembering the commandments taught on Har Sinai but also the experience itself?

Do you think this idea is one that is relevant to our day-to-day life?

How can each of us do a better job of incorporating the experience, and not merely the details of the Torah, into our daily lives?

The Cheesecake Lesson Plan

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The Chagim are a time of bonding between family members. It is critical to take advantage of every “teachable moment” you have with your child. But who has the time to sit with your children at the table before Shavuot to discuss what they learnt in school? When do we ever get the chance to discuss the deep philosophical implications of a nation accepting a new religion? When do we have time to make the discussion about the meaning of Shavuot relevant to today’s youth (how do we accept the Torah today?) With the myriad of things to cross off our to-do list, it is possible to miss out on a precious moment with your child. That’s why it’s great to find ways to take care of your to-do’s while spending time with your child. One way to do this is to use the process of making a cheesecake as a springboard for discussion on the Chag.

Here's a simple recipe:

INGREDIENTS:

15 graham crackers, crushed	1 1/2 cups white sugar	1/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons butter, melted	3/4 cup milk	The zest of one lemon or lime
4 (8 ounce) packages cream cheese	4 eggs	
	1 cup sour cream	
	1 tablespoon vanilla extract	

DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F (175 degrees C). Grease a 9 inch springform pan.
2. In a medium bowl, mix graham cracker crumbs with melted butter. Press onto bottom of springform pan.
3. In a large bowl, mix cream cheese with sugar until smooth. Blend in milk, and then mix in the eggs one at a time, mixing just enough to incorporate. Mix in sour cream, vanilla and flour until smooth. Mix in the lemon (or lime) zest. Pour filling into prepared crust.
4. Bake in preheated oven for 1 hour. Turn the oven off, and let cake cool in oven with the door closed for 5 to 6 hours; this prevents cracking. Chill in refrigerator until serving.

The concept is simple: Each ingredient can launch a discussion on a different aspect of Shavuot. As you progress through each step you can also progress through the major themes of the Chag.

Step 1: As you open all your ingredients you can start by asking "Why do we eat cheesecake on Shavuot?" Make sure to discuss the mitzvot the Jews were keeping before Matan Torah (which did not include the mitzvah of Kashrut).

Step 2: As you prepare the graham cracker crust you can pose the question: "It seems like there are many details in the Torah. Why is it important to focus on the details in life? Does it ever seem like there are too many details?"

Step 3: As you mix in the sugar you can ask "What are the sweet parts of living a Jewish life?"

Step 4: As you mix in the lemon zest you can ask "Some parts of the Torah are not so easy to do and seem to have some harshness to them. Why do strong tasting ingredients belong in a cake and how can we relate this to the difficult parts of our Avodat Hashem (service of God)?"

Hopefully you and your family will find this activity fun and inspiring. Your children will feel a sense of pride both in their culinary and academic accomplishments. More importantly you will have succeeded in weaving a new memory into the fabric of their childhood that they will cherish and will inspire them to enjoy Shavuot in a whole new way! B'Teavon!

Lessons from Megilat Ruth

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Many of the books of Tanach are named after people. Please count how many are names of women:

תורה - בראשית, שמות, ויקרא, במדבר, דברים
 נביאים - יהושע, שופטים, שמואל, מלכים, ישעיהו, ירמיהו, יחזקאל, הושע, יואל, עמוס, עובדיה, יונה,
 מיכה, נחום, חבקוק, צפניה, חגי, זכריה, מלאכי
 כתובים - דברי הימים, תהילים, איוב, משלי, רות, שיר השירים, קהלת, איכה, אסתר, דניאל, עזרא, נחמיה

Only 2 books are named after women: Esther and Ruth. There must be a reason why these women are so special to have a book named after them. Let us look into Megilat Ruth to find out what makes her so special.

Below are two sources that show two of Ruth's many outstanding qualities that make her a Jewish female role model.

Source #1

Ask students if they know what being loyal means. Discuss different situations of loyalty. The dictionary writes that loyalty is being faithful to one's government, oath, commitments, or to any person.

Would these scenarios show people being loyal?

- 2 friends walking together to shul.
- 2 friends helping each other with homework.
- 2 friends fighting over a toy.

We will now see how Ruth showed loyalty inside the Megilah.

16 And Ruth said: 'Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your G-d my G-d; **17** Where thou die, will I die, and there will I be buried; Hashem should do so to me, and more also, and only death should part you and me.' **18** And when she (Naomi) saw that she was persistent to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

Ruth 1:16-18

טז ותאמר רות אל-תפגעני-בי,
 לעזבך לשוב מאחריי: כי אל-אשר
 תלכי אלה, ובאשר תליני אליו עמך
 עמי, ואלקוני אלקי. יז באשר
 תמותי אמות, ושם אקבר; כה יעשה
 ה' לי, וכה יוסיף כי הננות, ופריד
 ביני ובינך. יח ותרא, כי-מתאמצת
 היא ללכת אתה; ותחדל, לדבר
 אליה.
 רות א:טז-יח

Naomi had lost everything; her wealth, her husband and two sons passed away. Now she would be returning to her family in Israel and tells her daughter-in-laws to go back to the place where they came from. Ruth tells Naomi, "wherever you go I will go, your nation is my nation." Ruth makes it clear to Naomi that after she has lost everything she will not lose Ruth. These *pesukim* show Ruth's loyalty and devotion and appreciation/gratitude for all Naomi has done for Ruth.

Source #2

Ask students if they know what being modest means. Discuss different situations of modesty or *tzniut*. The dictionary writes that modesty is to have or show a moderate or humble estimate of one's merits, importance, and being free from vanity etc.

Would these scenarios show people being modest?

- A boy showing off how smart he is.

- A girl wearing a tight skirt.
- Thanking your parents for their help with your homework..

We will now see how Ruth was modest inside the Megilah.

5 Then said Boaz to his servant that was set over the reapers: 'Whose young lady is this?' 6 And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said: 'It is a young lady from Moav that came back with Naomi out of the field of Moav; **Ruth 2:5-6**

הַיְאֹמֵר בְּעֵז לְנַעֲרוֹ, הַנִּצָּב עַל-
הַקֹּצְרִים: לְמִי, הַנַּעֲרָה הַזֹּאת. ו
וַיַּעַן, הַנַּעֲרָה הַנִּצָּב עַל-הַקֹּצְרִים
וַיֹּאמֶר: נַעֲרָה מוֹאָבִיָּה הִיא, הַשֹּׁבָה
עִם-נְעֻמִי מִשְׂדֵי מוֹאָב.
רוּת ב:ה-ו

The Rabbis (*Shabbat* 113b) explain that Boaz was a very righteous man and did not ask about random women. He was looking at Ruth because he noticed something extra special about her. When Ruth was collecting food in the field, she was sitting in a way that was especially modest. When the other girls would collect crops they would bend down in an immodest way to pick the crops closer to the ground. Ruth was in touch with her modesty and took the necessary precautions to make sure she was modest at all times.

It is also explained (*Shabbat* 113b and Maharsha) that Ruth's modesty went beyond her manner of dress and how she conducted herself. There is a Jewish law called *leket* that when a farmer drops two bundles of wheat, a poor person can take it, but three bundles dropped are only for those who are widows, poor *and* converts. Although Ruth was a widow, poor and a convert, she took the lesser amount to allow food for other poor people; she was modest in her behavior as well.

Conclusion

From these two sources, we learn a few special qualities from Ruth. Because of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, the Jewish people and Hashem, Ruth merited to be a famous Jewish convert who was the ancestor of David Hamelech.

Ruth's life could have been "easier" without being loyal or modest. But because of her passions and dedication to Hashem, she was able to face her challenges head on which made her the strong woman she was.

Challenge

Using art supplies and household items, children can recreate a scene from Megilat Ruth. Children should caption their artwork with a lesson learned from Megilat Ruth.

Hide and Seek

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Our relationship with Hashem, like our relationships with each other, is sometimes expressed with concrete objects, and is sometimes abstract or invisible. A parent shows love for a child

physically—by giving food and shelter (and hugs and kisses). A parent also shows love for a child in invisible ways—by listening, advising, and just being there.

Discussion Questions:

- What are some of the concrete ways parents show love for their children? Children for their parents? What are some of the more abstract ways?
- What are the concrete objects that help us connect to God? Try to think of some we may use every day and some we may only use once a year.
- Do you find it harder to connect to G-d with or without the help of a concrete object?
- Do you feel your relationship with others is stronger when you have something concrete to base it on?
- Are mitzvot that require use of an object easier to perform than mitzvot that don't have an object? (For example, is it easier to fulfill the mitzvah of shaking the lulav on Sukkot or the mitzvah of enjoying Shabbat?) Which do you think are greater mitzvot? Are they the same?

Activity:

Before or after Tom Tov buy your child a present. Then go up to your child (without the present) and inform them that you love them. After doing so, wait some time (a couple of hours or a day,) and give the present to your child and say "I love you." Note the reaction of the child in both scenarios. Were they different? If so, how? Also note your reaction to their reactions. How did you feel in both scenarios?

The text study below will help you explore some of the concrete and abstract components of the chagim. As you learn them, think about how Shavuot differs from the other chagim, and how that difference relates to the discussion questions above.

Challenge! Go to your closest *Shulchan Aruch* or your closest *Mishna Berura* and find *Hilchot Shavuot*, the laws of Shavuot. You have 30 seconds. Alright fine – let's save you a whole lot of time. If you found a *Hilchot Shavuot* then it's pertaining to the laws of making a *sh'vua* – an oath, but otherwise, you won't find it because it doesn't exist! The only mention of the holiday of Shavuot is in the last *siman* in the *halachot* that describe *Hilchot Pesach*!

Let's take a closer look:

On the fiftieth day of the counting of the Omer it is the holiday of Shavuot, and the order of the prayers (on this day) are just like on the holiday of Pesach – except that we say "The day of this holiday of Shavuot; the time of our acceptance of our Torah"
Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 494:1

ביום המישים לספירת העומר
הוא חג שבועות, וסדר התפלה כמו
ביום טוב של פסח, אלא
שאומרים: את יום חג השבועות
הזה זמן מתן תורתנו
שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תצד:א

Not only does this special day – the day we accepted the Torah, not have its own section in the annals of Jewish law, but even when it is described, it is within the context of a different holiday, namely Pesach, and even still, it is described as the fiftieth day of the counting of the Omer (which is counted starting the second day of Pesach). Additionally, the defining feature of this

special day is its special prayer which is introduced as being “just like on the holiday of Pesach”. It appears as though Shavuot is a continuation of the holiday of Pesach!

Further investigation shows that Shavuot, being a mere shadow of Pesach, permeates the “extensive” laws and guidelines for this holiday:

*It is customary in all places to eat dairy foods on the first day of Shavuot; and it appears to me the reason for this is that **it is similar** to the two dishes that we take **on the night of Pesach**, in remembrance of the Pesach (sacrifice) and the chagiga (sacrifice), so too here, we eat a dairy dish and then afterwards we eat a meat dish.*

Rama (R. Moshe Isserlis) Orach Chaim 694:3

ונוהגין בכל מקום לאכול מאכלי
חלב ביום ראשון של שבועות;
ונ"ל הטעם שהוא כמו השני
תבשילין שלוקחים בליל פסח, זכר
לפסח וזכר לחגיגה, כן אוכלים
מאכל חלב ואח"כ מאכל בשר.
רמ"א אורח חיים תצד:ג

Once again, the law has to take one of the only customs that we do have for the holiday of Shavuot and compare it to Pesach stating “what we do on Shavuot is exactly like what we do on Pesach”?! Why is this so?

This last point leads us to another strange and interesting phenomenon pertaining to this holiday. All Jewish holidays are known for their specific symbols: Pesach is known for the Seder, the matza, and the maror, Sukkot is known for the taking of the four species, Chanuka has the menorah and the drierel, Purim has the Megillah, but what does the holiday of Shavuot have? The answer is seemingly nothing but cheesecake! On the day that we received the Torah, seemingly a very special event, why is there a lack of special symbols and special mitzvot for us to perform on this day?

One idea that perhaps can emerge from these two questions is the following: Rabbi Moshe Wasserman once explained that one can easily appear pious by getting a really nice etrog, by ensuring that their matza is the best around, or by searching for the nicest Megillah possible. While these things are very nice, one can just focus on these external mitzvot and fulfill his obligation even though the essence of these mitzvot and why we do these mitzvot are lost upon such an individual. Torah learning can't be faked. There are no external symbols that one can focus on, rather it's just you, Hashem, and the text you are learning.

This could also explain why we don't take out the Torahs and dance with them as we do on Simchat Torah – if this is the day we accepted the Torah should we not celebrate it with song and dance? Rather, Shavuot is a time to sincerely learn – no flashiness, no external objects attached.

This could perhaps be the idea behind the hidden nature of the laws of Shavuot. Shavuot is only found by the one who searches for it. Shavuot does not have a big introduction to it nor its own section devoted to it. Pesach is the holiday with many objects and articles connected to it, but hidden at the end of the holiday with all of the external mitzvot is the holiday where only the sincere go; the holiday that one cannot fake. Let us continue to learn and grow, focus on the externals, but at the same time not lose sight of the true meaning behind them.