

# The Minhagim of Shavuot

From Members of the Graduate Program of Advanced Talmudic Studies at Stern College for Women



## Where Are All the Mitzvot on Shavuot?

Rachel Weber Leshaw

If you open up a *Shulchan Aruch* to find the halachot of Shavuot, you'll probably spend a few minutes flipping pages with a perplexed look on your face. Where is the section called *Hilchot Shavuot*? Shouldn't it be immediately after *Hilchot Pesach*? Or before *Hilchot Tisha B'av*? But in fact, *Hilchot Shavuot* does not appear in any of those places, because *Hilchot Shavuot* does not have its own section in the *Shulchan Aruch*. Instead, the last *siman* (chapter) of *Hilchot Pesach* is called *Seder Tefillat Chag Hashavuot*, and it contains just three short *seifim*, or sentences. The *Shulchan Aruch* simply lists what the order of davening is for Shavuot, and which Torah portions are read, followed by the prohibition of fasting on the holiday.

What is also immediately obvious is the lack of any specific halachot for Shavuot — there's no matzah, no

sitting in a sukkah, no blowing of the shofar — absolutely nothing marks Shavuot as a unique holiday from the halachic perspective of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The Rema, in 494:3, adds some Shavuot-specific details in the form of customs — but not halachot — which were common in his day. These include spreading out grass in shuls and houses, and eating dairy foods. Many of the other common hallmarks of Shavuot are also customs, including staying up all night to learn, reading *Megillat Rut*, and reciting *Akdamot*. To wit, the majority of our contemporary celebration of Shavuot is really made up of *minhagim*, customs, as opposed to halachot.

What is responsible for this oddity? Where are the missing mitzvot of Shavuot? Why are there so many *minhagim*? What makes this holiday different from all others?

The first thing that separates Shavuot from Pesach in the Torah is that it is exclusively an agricultural holiday, and is not linked to any historical event. As opposed to Pesach, which marks the Exodus, and, secondarily,

the beginning of the barley harvest, Shavuot only celebrates the wheat harvest, reflected in the korban of the *Shtei HaLechem*, which was brought on Shavuot (*Shmot* 23:16). Here we start to understand our feeling a lack of mitzvot on Shavuot; the mitzvot that we perform on other holidays are predicated upon the commemoration of significant historical events, and not solely upon agricultural timekeeping. The commandments to sit in a sukkah or to eat matzah are mitzvot whose function is to recall the historical experience they echo; Shavuot, which is not as directly tied to a historical event, lacks a comparable thematic mitzvah.

And yet the agricultural celebration of the wheat harvest is ultimately less associated with Shavuot than a particular historical event — the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. Even though the Torah never gives a specific date for *matan Torah*, it is understood by all later sources to be on the same day as Shavuot (*Pesachim* 68b, *Shabbat* 86b and others). Shavuot is described as *zman*



*Matan Torateinu* in the davening, and the Torah reading on Shavuot is the story of the receiving of the Torah in Parshat Yitro. So if we follow our previous train of thought, shouldn't there be a mitzvah associated with this historical event that we perform on Shavuot?

R' David Tzvi Hoffman answers this question by suggesting that Shavuot's connection to *matan Torah* is in fact the very reason why there are no mitzvot associated with it. In his commentary to Vayikra 23, he explains that our responsibility to remember the giving of the Torah is so all-encompassing that it cannot be reduced to symbolic actions. The revelation of God to the Jewish people at Har Sinai cannot be reproduced in any physical way, and therefore the day of Shavuot must remain untethered by specific mitzvah obligations.

R' David Tzvi Hoffman believed that Shavuot was always known as *Zman Matan Torateinu*, and was celebrated as such since the time the Jews wandered in the desert. However, there remains no text in the Torah connecting *matan Torah* to Shavuot. This has led some scholars to suggest that after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, the rabbis placed a greater emphasis on the historic significance of Shavuot as *zman Matan Torateinu*. Shavuot was originally an agriculture-focused holiday, which was celebrated with a special korban in the Beit Hamikdash. No other rituals were necessary because it was a holiday centered around the Beit Hamikdash. However, after the destructions of the First Beit Hamikdash and the Second Beit Hamikdash, the day was suddenly empty, celebrated as a generic holiday with nothing marking it as unique.

The rabbis then placed a greater emphasis on the historic aspect of the holiday, and developed Shavuot into a holiday focused around the giving of the Torah.

There are various explanations for the most prevalent *minhagim* of Shavuot, many of which relate back to Shavuot as *zman matan Torateinu*. But it does not seem far-fetched to say that a holiday which may have been empty of unique practices was bolstered by *minhagim* developed over the course of centuries, so as to make the day more special.

One final source suggests this idea in a slightly different way. The Gemara in *Pesachim* 68b, discusses the optimal way to celebrate Yom Tov, and quotes a dispute between R' Eliezer and R' Yehoshua. R' Eliezer says that Yom Tov should be spent either "*kulo laShem*" entirely in the service of God and learning of Torah, or "*kulo lachem*," entirely as a day of eating, drinking, and physical enjoyment. R' Yehoshua believed that the holidays should be split half and half — "*chetzyo laShem v'chetzyo lachem*." But even R' Eliezer agreed that Shavuot must also include time for physical enjoyment, because it is the day on which the Torah was given. Rashi explains that we need to show that we are still happy that we accepted the Torah, and therefore we need to celebrate in a physical way.

To take this idea one step further, we can suggest that Shavuot cannot be a day of purely ritual structure; in order for us to show our happiness around accepting the Torah, the day must include time for human initiative. The "*chetzyo lachem*," the part of the holiday meant for human enjoyment, is described in the Gemara as being for eating and drinking. But it seems that on Shavuot this concept

has expanded, as generations of Jews have added *minhagim* to the celebration of Shavuot. To show our acceptance of the Torah anew every year, we imbue the "*chetzyo lachem*" with communally-created meaning, whether by eating cheesecake, decorating the shul with flowers, or any of the other *minhagim* that we choose to perform, all as a show of our love for the holiday empty of mitzvot but full of *minhagim*, and full of meaning.



## **Tikkun Leil Shavuot: A Priority?**

**Gabrielle Hiller**

One of the most famed *minhagim* of Shavuot is the practice of staying up all night learning Torah, formally referred to as *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Synagogues around the world have programming and shiurim designed to encourage as many community members as possible to forgo a night of sleep in order to engage in this practice. Strangely, however, in the *Shulhan Arukh*'s discussion of Shavuot<sup>1</sup> there is no mention of this minhag. Even the Rama, who delineates other *minhagim* of Shavuot such as eating dairy and decorating the synagogue with flowers,<sup>2</sup> omits any mention of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Where then does this practice come from and should it actually be encouraged for everyone?

The first discussion of this idea appears in the *Zohar* I:8. R. David Brofsky explains that, "This passage describes the 'wedding' of the Shekhina with Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu (the distinct aspects of God as understood by the Zohar), accompanied by the bridesmaids, the

Jewish people, who learn Torah all night, as an adornment of the bride.”<sup>3</sup> The *Zohar* discusses this idea once more in *Parshat Emor* 88a:

*Therefore, the pious in ancient times did not sleep that night but were studying the Torah, saying, “Let us come and receive this holy inheritance for us and our children in both worlds.” That night, the Congregation of Yisrael is an adornment over them, and she comes to unite with the King. Both decorate the heads of those who merit this. R. Shimon said the following when the friends gathered with him that night: Let us come and prepare the jewels of the bride ... so that tomorrow she will be bejeweled... and properly ready for the King.<sup>4</sup>*

In the seventeenth century, the *Magen Avraham* again mentions this practice:

איתא בזוהר שחסידים הראשונים היו נוערים כל הלילה וועוסקים בתורה וכבר נהגו רוב הלומדים לישותן ואפשר להת טעם עפ' פשוטו לפ' ישישראל היו ישנים כל הלילה והוצרך הקב"ה להעיר אותם כדאיתא במדרש לבן אנו צריכים לתיקון זה.

*It is written in the Zohar that the pious in ancient times would stay awake the whole night and study Torah. And most learned people already practice this, and it is possible to say that the straightforward explanation is because Israel slept the whole night and Ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu needed to wake them up, as it is recorded in the Midrash. Therefore, we need to fix this.<sup>5</sup>*

The *Magen Avraham* states that, by his time, the practice of learning throughout the night had spread to most learned people. Furthermore, he brings a different explanation than the *Zohar* for the minhag: to counteract the lack of anticipation and excitement of Bnei Yisrael who overslept the morning of receiving the Torah.

Today, the practice of staying awake learning Torah has spread to the general population, not just the pious or the learned, as mentioned by the *Zohar* and *Magen Avraham* respectively. While it is certainly praiseworthy for someone to take this practice upon him or herself, the lack of a solid foundation in halakhic sources for the widespread practice means that a person should also consider the consequences of staying up all night to ensure that it does not interfere with other religious obligations. Indeed, R. Shlomo Aviner asserts that if staying awake will lead someone to be too exhausted to *daven* Shaharit in the morning with proper *kavanah*, intent, then one should not stay up all night because *davening*, a clear obligation, takes precedence over a minhag. Additionally, R. Aviner cites the Brisker Rav’s bewilderment that so many people take upon themselves the performance of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* when many are not as careful to observe the obligation of discussing the Exodus from Egypt until one is overcome by sleep.<sup>6</sup>

While R. Aviner’s message appears discouraging, it is important to remember that the message of the minhag remains the same. Shavuot has been established as *zman matan Torateinu*, the time of the giving of the Torah, and the minhag of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* teaches that it is vital to seriously learn and study the Torah that we received. That message is not limited to the night of Shavuot. Rather, it should imbue our perspective of the entire holiday, encouraging us to learn during the day if we are unable to do so during the night.

### Notes

1. See *Orah Haim* 494.

2. See Rama to *Orah Haim* 494:3.

3. Rabbi David Brofsky, “The Customs of Shavuot,” The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, available at: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/shavuot/shv72db.htm>.

4. Translation is from Rabbi David Brofsky’s article cited above.

5. *Magen Avraham* 494. Author’s translation.

6. Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, “Laws of Staying Awake All Night on Shavuot,” *Torat HaRav Aviner*, available at: <http://www.ravaviner.com/2013/05/laws-of-staying-aware-all-night-on.html>.



## The Minhag of Reciting Yetziv Pitgam

Davida Kollmar

One common Ashkenazi minhag on Shavuot is to recite the *piyut* (poem) of *Yetziv Pitgam* on the second day of Shavuot. The first letter of each line forms an acrostic, spelling out the name of the author, Yaakov BeRabbi Meir Levi, who is commonly identified as Rabbeinu Tam.<sup>1</sup> The text of the *piyut*, which originated in France,<sup>2</sup> is brought in the *Machzor Vitri*, and the minhag to read it is also mentioned in the *Sefer HaMinhagim* of both R. Isaac Tyrnau and R. Avraham Klausner, in the *Sefer Maharil*, in the *Levush*, and others.

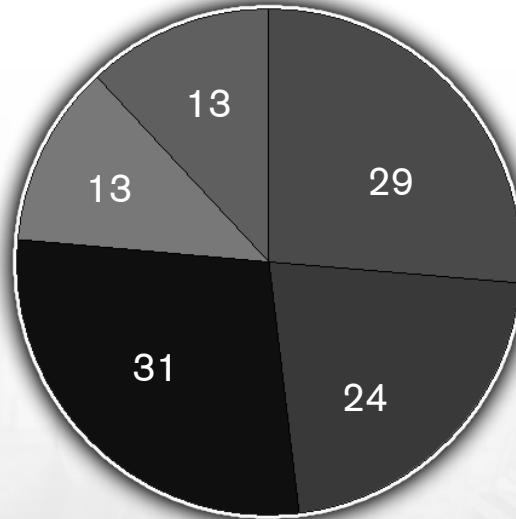
*Yetziv Pitgam* is read after the first verse of the haftarah. The timing of the reading is the context in which *Yetziv Pitgam* appears most often in halachic discussions. This is because there is a halachic problem with reading the *piyut* between the brachah on the haftarah and the haftarah, because it would constitute an interruption. This problem is resolved for the *piyut* of *Akdamot*, which is recited at the Torah reading on the first day, by reading it before *Birkot HaTorah*. Since *Yetziv Pitgam* is read during the haftarah,

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one may be more lenient, and it can therefore be read in the middle.<sup>3</sup>

The placement of *Yetziv Pitgam* makes sense when considering the purpose of the *piyut*. The *piyut* is written in Aramaic, and was once said by the *meturgaman*. In ancient times, the Torah was read a few verses at a time, in Hebrew, and then it was the job of the *meturgaman* to translate those verses into Aramaic, the common vernacular. In this *piyut*, the *meturgaman* asks Hashem and community members for permission to conduct this translation. This purpose of *Yetziv Pitgam* is stated explicitly in the last line of the *piyut*, “*Keka’imna vetargimna, bemilui debahir safrin*,” (As I stand and translate with the words the *sofrim* chose).<sup>4</sup> Once the Torah and haftarah were no longer translated, this last line was deleted from the *piyut*, which is why it is not said today.<sup>5</sup> The connection between *Yetziv Pitgam* and the Targum helps explain what is now the last line of the *Piyut*, “*Yehonatan gevar invetan bechain namtei lei apirin*,” (Jonathan the humble, let us give to him praise). This line is likely a reference to Yonatan Ben Uzziel, who wrote the Targum Yehonatan, one of the earliest Aramaic translations of the Neviim.

*Yetziv Pitgam* is not the only Aramaic *piyut* that was ever written for the *meturgaman*. *Akdamot*, which is also still extant, likely served the same purpose, but it is also probable that there were other such *piyutim* as well. So why have *Yetziv Pitgam* and *Akdamot* survived, while the others have not? I would like to give a few suggestions.

First, a *piyut* focused on the *meturgaman* makes sense for the holiday of Shavuot. On Shavuot, we celebrate the giving of the Torah to

the Jewish people. However, in order for the common man to learn Torah, it was important that it would be in a language he could understand. The celebration of the role of the *meturgaman* makes sense for Shavuot, then, because it was through him that the common man could appreciate the Torah that he was given on that day. Furthermore, in addition to simply translating the text, the *meturgaman* would also add in his own thoughts and explanations about what was being read.<sup>6</sup> On Shavuot, there is a focus on Talmud Torah, so we applaud the learning that the *meturgaman* would do throughout the year.

Another important aspect of the *meturgaman* which relates to Shavuot is his job as the middleman. The *meturgaman* would act as the intermediary between the one reading the Torah and the people. In Mishnaic times as well, the *meturgaman* was in charge of taking the Hebrew outline of the shiur given quietly by the Tanna, and explaining it loudly, in more detail, and in Aramaic for those present to hear. The Torah, too, was given to the Jewish people through a middleman, Moshe. Following the narration of the *Aseret HaDibrot*, The Torah, Devarim 5:20-28, describes the request that the Jewish people had of Moshe, that they would hear the Torah from him instead of from Hashem directly, because they were afraid. Hashem’s response to this request was “*Heitivu bechol asher dibeiru*,” (they did good with all that they said), that He was pleased with their fear of Him and was therefore supportive of their request for a middleman. On Shavuot, then, when we commemorate *matan Torah*, we retain the *piyut* that was given by the *meturgaman*, a later-era middleman who is replicating what happened at *matan Torah*. The connection between

the *meturgaman* and Moshe acting as a middleman on Har Sinai is supported by the Yerushalmi, *Megillah* 4:1, which states explicitly that the Targum of the Torah during Torah reading corresponds to giving of the Torah through a middleman.

A final suggestion for why the practice of reading *Yetziv Pitgam* on Shavuot has been maintained is based on an alternate reading of the last line. Instead of reading the word “*Yehonatan*” as the name Jonathan, it can alternatively be translated as “God gave,” and then the phrase “*Yehonatan gevar invetan*” would be translated as, “God presented [the Torah] to [Moses] the epitome of humility.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, the *piyut* as a whole praises Hashem who gave the Torah, and the people who learn it.<sup>8</sup> This idea relates to the theme of Shavuot as a day of *matan Torah* and *talmud Torah*. Therefore, although there were once many *piyutim* recited by the *meturgaman*, it is the one about Shavuot, which is closely connected to the spirit of the day, which is the one that has remained.

## Notes

1. Schiffman, Lawrence. “*Yatziv Pitgam*, One of Our Last Aramaic Piyyutim.” *Shavuot To Go*, 5771.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Nulman, Macy. “*Yetziv Pitgam*.” *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*. Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD, 1993.
5. Ibid.
6. “Meturgaman (‘Interpreter’).” *Jewish Encyclopedia*. 1906. Retrieved on April 1, 2015, from <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10742-meturgeman>.
7. Gold, Avie. *The Complete Artscroll Machzor Shavuos*. Zlotowitz, Meir, and Nosson Scherman, ed. Mesorah Publications: New York, 1991.
8. Ibid.



## Adorning the Synagogue with Flowers: A Fulfillment of a Biblical Commandment

Ashley Mandelstam

**T**here is a common custom among Ashkenazi Jews to decorate their synagogues and homes with trees and flowers for the holiday of Shavuot. In this essay, we will explore some prominent reasons for this minhag and try to fully understand the importance of this minhag.

The earliest known source of this minhag is recorded by the MaHaril, Rav Yaakov Moelin (1365-1427), who records that on Shavuot, German Jews in his community had the custom to place fragrant spices on the floors of their synagogues for “*simchat haregel*,” for the pleasure of the holiday. He does not mention, however, the connection between fragrant smells and the chag of Shavuot. The Rema codifies this minhag in *Orach Chayim* 494:3, where he states the custom of decorating our shuls and homes with green plants and trees as a remembrance of *matan Torah*.

Many achronim try to explain why the minhag of decorating with trees helps us to remember *matan Torah*.

The *Levush* explains that the connection between *matan Torah* and trees is apparent in the pasuk in *Shmot* 34:3:

גַּם־הַצָּאן וְהַבָּקָר אֲלֵי־יְרִעָה, אֲלֵי־מֹלֵךְ הַהֶּר הַהוּא.

*The sheep and cattle should not graze opposite that mountain.*

At *ma'amad Har Sinai* we were commanded not to let our animals graze around Har Sinai, and from that we infer that there were many trees surrounding Har Sinai.

Rabbeinu Sheim Tov Gagin in his *Keter Sheim Tov*, offers another approach, based on the verse in *Shir Hashirim*.

לְחַיּוּ כְּעֻרְוגָת הַבְּשָׂם, מְגַדְּלוּת מְרַקְּחִים; שְׁפָתוֹתִין, שׁוֹשָׁנִים—נְטָפוֹת, מֹר עֲבָה.  
שיר השירים ה:יג

*His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as banks of sweet herbs; his lips are as lilies, dropping with flowing myrrh.*

He explains the words “*sifrotav shoshanim*,” (his lips are as lilies) to mean that every word of HaShem fills the world with wonderfully fragrant smells. As such, there is a very clear connection between this interpretation of the verse in *Shir HaShirim* and the minhag as initially recorded by the MaHaril.

There is a common thread in the various reasons for the minhag. It seems that this minhag is an attempt to recreate the setting of *ma'amad Har Sinai* on Shavuot. Yet the minhag demonstrates something deeper as well. Another message can be found in the



verse in *Parashat Va'etchanan* in recalling *ma'amad Har Sinai*. The verses state,

וְקַח הַשְׁמָר לְךָ וְשִׁמְרֵנִי שְׁמָר מֵאֶיךָ פֶּן תִּשְׁכַּח  
אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רֹאָה עִינֵיכֶם וְפֶן־יִסְׂרָאוּ  
מִלְבָבְךָ, כֹּל, יָמִין חַיָּה; וְהַזְּעַפְתָּם לְכָנִין, וְלִבְנִי  
בָּנִיךְ. יוֹם, אֲשֶׁר עַמְקָת לִפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים בְּחַרְבָּה,  
בְּאָמֵר הָאָלֵי הַקָּהָל־לִי אֶת־הָעֵם, וְאַשְׁמַעַם  
אֶת־דְּבָרַי:  
דְּבָרִים ד:ט-

*But beware and watch yourself very well, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest these things depart from your heart, all the days of your life, and you shall make them known to your children and to your children's children, the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble the people for Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.*

Devarim 4:9-10

The Ramban asserts that these verses impose two very important obligations. First, that we must take extra heed to remember the Torah and its mitzvot. Second, that we must remember the experience of *ma'amad*

*Har Sinai* and pass it down to our children and grandchildren. In light of the Ramban, it seems we have an obligation not only to remember the experience cognitively, but also experientially by recreating *ma'amad Har Sinai* through sounds, smells and visions. Ramban here emphasizes the importance of the "*ma'amad Har Sinai Experience*," including all the sounds and visions, because he felt that the atmosphere of *ma'amad Har Sinai*, was essential to our internalization of our deep rooted faith in God and His Torah after our close encounter with Hashem Himself.

Considering this obligation, it is no coincidence that the minhag of decorating our shuls with fragrant flowers and trees is one that is linked to the well-known psychological phenomenon that smells trigger memory. This phenomenon of sensory input causing significant memory recall is called the Proustian phenomenon, wherein by creating a similar atmosphere to one that had been previously experienced, the individual is transported back to that original setting. We use this minhag as an avenue not only for our

own fulfillment of re-experiencing *ma'amad Har Sinai* but also to fulfill our obligation to teach our descendants about the entire *matan Torah* encounter through experiential education. Experiential education is a tool that is often utilized in Jewish education, such as at the Pesach Seder. However, I believe this minhag of decorating our shuls with greenery is yet another example. By creating the atmosphere of *Matan Torah*, we can instill into future generations not only the message of the importance of the Torah we received on *Har Sinai*, but also the experience itself.



## Eating Dairy Foods

Elana Raskas

The minhag of eating dairy on Shavuot is a very popular one. It's hard to imagine this holiday without variations of appetizing cheesecake. Usually we eat meat on the festivals as a manifestation of our joy for the holiday, but Shavuot seems to be an exception. Is this truly the case? Why do we eat dairy specifically on Shavuot? In the following essay, we will explore a few reasons behind this minhag as well as its different permutations.

Perhaps the most well-known reason for eating dairy on Shavuot is cited by the *Mishnah Brurah* in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 494:3:12). The *Mishnah Brurah* explains that when the Jewish people received the Torah at *Har Sinai* (the event we commemorate on Shavuot), they received all the laws of kashrut, including those of *basar b'chalav*, meat and milk. Since the laws of slaughtering and kashering meat are



very complex, when the Jews went back to their homes after *ma'amad Har Sinai*, they were not sufficiently prepared to prepare and eat kosher meat, and they therefore opted to eat only dairy at that time. We therefore have the custom to act as Bnei Yisrael did when they received the Torah and eat dairy in commemoration of that moment in our history.

The *Mishnah Brurah* also mentions the practice of eating milk and honey on Shavuot (*ibid.* 13). Originally cited by the *Kol Bo*, this minhag centers on the pasuk in Shir HaShirim

נְתַת תְּפִנָּה שְׁפֹתָתִיךְ, כְּלָה; דְבָשׂ וְחֶלֶב תְּחַת  
לְשׁוֹנֶה, וַיְרֵחַ שְׁלֹמֹתִיךְ כְּרִיחַ לְבָנוֹן.  
שיר השירים ד:יא

*Thy lips, O my bride, drop honey —  
honey and milk are under thy tongue;  
and the smell of thy garments is like the  
smell of Lebanon.*

Shir HaShirim 4:11

This verse is traditionally understood to be likening the Torah to milk and honey. Many people thus eat both milk and honey on this holiday of celebrating our receiving the Torah.

While these two explanations account for why we eat dairy (and honey) on Shavuot, they also pose a problem: According to many poskim,<sup>1</sup> we are obligated to eat meat on the festivals in order to fulfill the commandment of “*v’samachta b’chagecha*,” rejoicing on holidays. How, then, could we ignore this command and instead eat dairy on this holiday?

A look into the *Shulchan Aruch* reveals that it may not be the case that we avoid meat in favor of dairy. While R. Yosef Karo does not mention the minhag of eating dairy on Shavuot, the Rama, R. Moshe Isserlis, does in his glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 494:3).

He explains that the minhag allows us to commemorate the korban of the *Shtei Halechem*, the bread offering given on Shavuot. How so? There is a halacha that when eating a dairy meal with bread, the bread used at that meal cannot subsequently be eaten with meat, and vice versa.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Rama notes the practice of beginning a meal with dairy foods, eaten with one loaf of bread, followed by meat foods, which requires a second loaf of bread. In this way we ensure that there are two loaves of bread eaten at the Shavuot meal, reminiscent of the *Shtei Halechem* brought to the Beit Hamikdash.

The *Beit HaLevi*, Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, writes of another reason for eating dairy on Shavuot in his commentary on *Parashat Yitro* (Shemot 19). This reason, like the Rama’s, involves eating both dairy and meat, rather than dairy alone. He cites a well-known Midrash in which the angels ask God why they were not the recipients of the holy Torah, and why it was given to Bnei Yisrael over them. God gives many responses; among them He praises Bnei Yisrael for their conduct in keeping the laws of meat and milk. God says, “You, angels, ate meat and milk together when you visited Avraham in his tent after his Brit Milah. But even the small children of Bnei Yisrael know not to eat meat and milk together. They separate milk and meat by eating bread in between and washing out their mouths.” God uses this as an example to prove to the angels why Bnei Yisrael are deserving of the Torah. In this vein we eat milk followed by meat on Shavuot to indicate our meticulousness in our observance of mitzvot via our eagerness to keep the laws of kashrut, an act unique to the Jewish people and not to the angels.

Based on these various motives for eating dairy on Shavuot, our practice will differ. In line with the *Mishnah Brurah*, eating dairy alone would be appropriate on this holiday, while according to the Rama and *Beit HaLevi* the minhag requires of us that we eat dairy followed by meat. The *Darkei Teshuva*, R. Tzvi Hirsch Shapira, maintains that the ideal practice is to eat a dairy kiddush or a small meal, followed by a large meat meal an hour or so later (*Yoreh Deah* 89:19). Whatever one’s practice in one’s own home, the underlying inspiration is apparent: On this seminal holiday of recalling *matan Torah*, we demonstrate through this minhag, as well as through others, our readiness to accept the Torah and our meticulousness in keeping all of its mitzvot.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. Rambam, among others. See <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/711105> for a lengthier discussion on the topic of *simchat Yom Tov*.

2. *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah* 89:4. The reason for this is lest remnants of dairy/meat remain on the bread and be eaten with the other.

3. Thanks to Halachapedia for direction to many sources.



## Akdamut

Aviva Sterman

If you were to write an introductory poem to the Ten Commandments, what would you say? *Akdamut*, a poem written by Meir ben Yitzchak Nehorai in the 11th century, has been incorporated into our liturgy as such an introduction. *Akdamut* can be divided into four sections: praise of G-d, a description

of the angels' praise of G-d, a description of the people of Israel's praise of G-d (even in the midst of hatred from the nations), and a description of the end of days. Though praise of G-d is always appropriate and is certainly stressed on holidays, the content of *Akdamut* does not seem to be directly related to the Ten Commandments or Shavuot. It is possible that there is a hint to Shavuot in the transition from the second section to the third, when the author contrasts the angelic praises of G-d with those of the Jews.

After detailing the tributes of the angels described in our *Kedusha* service (referencing Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6, and *Chullin* 91), the author turns to the people of Israel. He notes that unlike the angels, some of whom only praise G-d once every seven years, the Jews make G-d their *chativa*, object of love, *bikivata*, at fixed times, and recite the Shema twice a day (referencing *Chagiga* 3a). The Jews also study the Torah constantly, and since by doing so they follow the Divine will, G-d accepts their prayer.

The contrast set up between the angels and the Jews is a theme found throughout Jewish literature. The Talmud in *Chullin* 91b, which the author of *Akdamut* references numerous times, states that the

Jews are *chaviv*, dearer, to G-d than the angels because they praise G-d regularly, whereas the angels sing before G-d more rarely. Additionally, the angels only say G-d's name after three words ("*kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Hashem ...*") whereas the Jews say it after only two ("*Shema Yisrael Hashem ...*"). Lastly, the angels are only able to sing before G-d after the Jews have already done so.

Shema is often used in Jewish texts to symbolize the Torah study and prayer of the Jewish people, and therefore is used elsewhere as a contrast to the praise of the angels. During a period of persecution in which Shema could not be recited in its normal place in the prayer service, Shema was added to the *Kedusha* service, a natural place for it to be added given *Kedusha*'s description of the angelic chorus.

Rabbi N. Daniel Korobkin<sup>1</sup> points out that this theme is likely also the reason the description of the *Kedusha* appears in the first of our two blessings before Shema during Shacharit.

Why did Meir ben Yitzchak Nehorai choose to elaborate on this theme in his introduction to the Ten Commandments? Perhaps he mentions it as a way of alluding to a dichotomy present on Shavuot.

On Pesach, we celebrate how G-d

miraculously and openly saved us from slavery. The people of Israel were swept off their feet and taken by G-d through an ocean to their freedom. The Jews themselves had little to do with their redemption; the events that took place were entirely orchestrated by G-d.

From Pesach we begin *sefirat ha'omer*, in which we count our way towards the receiving of the Torah. In this 49-day process, we are meant to prepare and perfect ourselves. As we build a relationship with G-d, it is now our turn to initiate holiness. On Shavuot itself we celebrate our reception and continued study of the Torah. *Talmud Torah* is a mitzvah that involves constant human effort: to learn, think, and understand as much and as often as we can. I have heard from my teachers that this is the reason the Torah does not mention that Shavuot commemorates *matan Torah* and only mentions its agricultural significance. We are supposed to celebrate the fact that we were given the Torah every day, not just on the holiday. This also may be the reason Shavuot is so short. Torah study should not be celebrated on one major holiday and then abandoned the rest of the year; it should be commemorated modestly in a one-day (or in the Diaspora, two-day) holiday and continuously celebrated year-round.



Yet when we get to Shavuot, we are met with a different set of messages. *matan Torah* itself was very much a Divinely-initiated experience. Revelation and its overwhelming spiritual nature become apparent as we read of the events that unfolded at Har Sinai. Chabbakuk's description in the haftarah of the second day of Shavuot of the earth shaking and mountains exploding as G-d gave the Torah adds even more reverence to this sacred scene. The fact that revelation was spiritually overpowering is not a side note: on the first day we read of Ezekiel's description of the angels' *Kedusha*, further attesting to the importance of revelation on Shavuot. Perhaps Shavuot is only one day because the intensity of revelation that it commemorates is too sublime for an extended celebration. Though it at first seems that we are celebrating the reception of the Torah and its year-round, daily study, we seem to be in fact celebrating the giving of the Torah — a transcendent, once-in-a-lifetime experience.

What, then, are we meant to celebrate? Is Shavuot about human-initiated Talmud Torah or about the centrality of revelation in the Israel-G-d relationship?

As a book of Divine law and ethics, the Torah had to be given in a context that would give appropriate grandeur to its lofty content, and given in a way that made it absolutely clear that the Torah was from G-d. The sacred task of being a "kingdom of priests" needed to be assigned in a way that conveyed its gravity and Divine nature. The glory of G-d revealed at Har Sinai did just that. We remind ourselves of the intensity of revelation by reading accounts of other revelations, such as that of Ezekiel's.

Once this Divine essence of the Torah was made clear, however, and the Torah was given, subsequent generations have the duty to study and keep the Torah, while remembering the loftiness that it contains. Therefore, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah on Shavuot, we remind ourselves of when it was first given and the revelation that awed our people, while simultaneously reminding ourselves of the daily task we have to cherish, study, and observe the Divine will. While writing an introduction to the scene of *matan Torah*, the author of *Akdamut* may have wanted to hint to us that what we are about to read contains both

a powerful moment of revelation, like that of witnessing the Heavenly chorus of angels, and the giving of our daily-learned Torah.

He reminds us as well that G-d favors the learning and prayer of the Jews more than the praise of the angels, and that instead of dreaming for a prophetic experience, we should use the tools we have been given to access G-d. A Divine encounter initiated by G-d is not something we can choose to experience whenever we would like. But we can encounter G-d in our own way, by building ourselves toward Him through learning and observing the Torah. On Shavuot, therefore, we do not just celebrate both the intensity of revelation and the importance of daily learning and observing, but the intensity of an encounter with G-d that is achieved through daily learning and observing. On this Shavuot, let us recommit ourselves to toil in the Torah day and night, and in doing so build a life of closeness with G-d.

#### Notes

1. Korobkin, N. Daniel. 2013. "Kedusha, Shema, and the Difference between Israel and Angels." *Hakira, the Flatbush Journal for Jewish Law and Thought*. Vol. 16 (19-46).

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