

SHAVUOT

Shavuot is the second of the three pilgrimage festivals, commemorating the first [wheat] harvest (*Exodus 34:22*) and the conclusion of the 50-day counting of the omer. Like Pesach and Sukkot, Shavuot has an additional historical component. But unlike the other two that are described clearly in the Bible, Shavuot's historical connection was devised later by the rabbis who claimed that the ten commandments were given on Shavuot, the 6th of Sivan (*B.T. Shabbat 86b-88a*). It became known as *zeman mattan toratenu* (the season of the giving of our Torah).

Its various biblical names reflect its agricultural meaning: *Yom HaBikkurim* (day of first fruits), *Chag HaKatzir* (harvest festival), and *Chag HaShavuot*, designating the seven-week period of the omer (*shavuot* means weeks).

From the day after you bring the sheaf (omer) of wave offering [the second day of Pesach], you shall count until seven full weeks have elapsed: you shall count 50 days, until the day after the seventh week.

Leviticus 23:15-16

The customs associated with Shavuot are far less demanding than the other pilgrimage festivals. They include the *tikkun leil Shavuot* – studying Torah throughout the first night until dawn – reading the Book of Ruth, eating dairy foods, and decorating with plants and foliage.

The tradition of all-night study might derive from the midrash that Israel had to be awakened from its deep slumber to receive the revelation:

Israel slept all that night, because the sleep of Shavuot is pleasant and the night is short. R. Judah said: Not a flea worried them. God came and found them sleeping, so he began to rouse them with trumpeters, as it says: 'there was thunder and lightning,' and Moses roused Israel and brought them out to meet the supreme King of kings . . . and then God went before them until He reach Mt. Sinai.

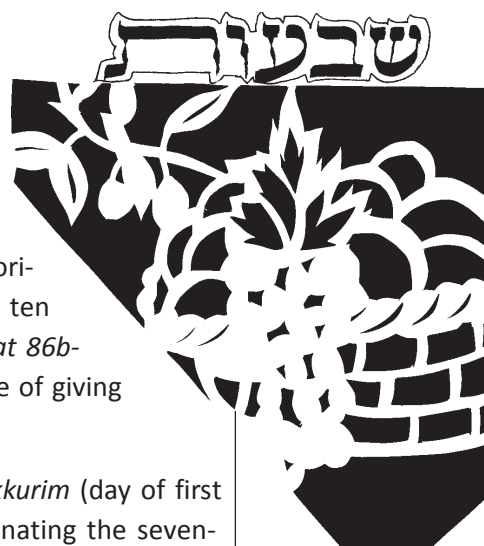
Shir HaShirim Rabbah 1.12

There are a number of explanations for why we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot. A rabbinic tradition suggests that King David, whose lineage is traced back to Ruth (*Ruth 4:21-22*), was born and died on Shavuot (*Ruth Rabbah 3:2*).

The explanation for why we eat dairy is vague, perhaps deriving from the verse "honey and milk shall be under your tongue" (*Song of Songs 4:11*) or the suggestion that words of Torah are as pleasant to our ears and hearts as milk and honey are to our tongues (*Kol Bo 58*). Eating dairy does afford opportunity for culinary derivations from our usual meat-centered meals.

An interesting and lively Shavuot question is raised by the rabbis:

Why were the women asked first whether they wish to receive the Torah? On the eve of Shavuot the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, arranged with the men



apart and the women apart. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “Go, speak to the daughters of Israel, [asking them] whether they wish to receive the Torah.” Why were the women asked [first]? Because the way of men is to follow the opinion of women, as it is said, Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob (*Exodus 19.3*): these are the women. And declare to the children of Israel (*ibid.*): these are the men. They all replied as with one mouth, and they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey (*ibid. 24.7*)

Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 41

Words of Hiddur Mitzvah

Debra Band

Hiddur mitzvah is the central focus – in the language of perspective, the vanishing point – toward which every aspect of my life tends. I’ve had more than my share of theological challenges. When my husband of 30 years passed away after an illness that challenged our faith and skills, what held me steady in the tradition, what guided me away from perpetual anger toward the Almighty, was my ability to immerse myself in hiddur mitzvah knowing that this is what I am supposed to do.

I am descended from a 250-year-old line of eminent British and Ukrainian rabbis going back to the Berditchever Rav. My earliest attitudes toward Jewish life and thought were shaped by my grandfather, Rabbi Harris Swift, whose search for intellectual integrity within Jewish tradition remains a guiding principle for me. My parents worked hard to give us a strong Jewish identity in the American south of the 1960s and ‘70s. My husband was as devoted to Jewish life and learning as to his beloved astrophysics, and my father-in-law, an eminent scholar of Hebrew literature, has mentored me since we first met. And for the past 23 years I have spent roughly twelve hours a day absorbed in the creation of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts.

Much of my life revolves around hiddur mitzvah. I love to cook. On Shabbat and holidays a delicious, aesthetic meal and table – nice china, cloth napkins, flowers on my grandparents’ dining room table – are part of my observance. Shabbat is a weekly opportunity for friends and family to enjoy each other and celebrate the gift of sacred time. Shabbat is a day of joyful dignity, and that elegant and delicious meal helps set the tone. So my hours of preparation are a conscious act of hiddur mitzvah.

However, for four and a half days, my focus is on my work. Illuminating Hebrew manuscripts unifies all the disciplines dearest to me: imagination, secular and biblical research, and playing with paints, gold, and luscious papers and parchments. Engaging in hiddur mitzvah colors my whole life. Matching text and concept with visual imagery, color and emotion can convey essential thoughts about the individual, the community, the land of Israel, and God. This immersion in that spiritual conversation quite literally saved my sanity by offering me a way of conversing with the Divine, finding a means of looking beyond the pain. Hiddur mitzvah is not frippery, not simply a pleasing aesthetic overlay, but a goal that sustains life.

Judaic Mosaic

TORAH BINDERS

By the fourth century in Palestine, Torah scrolls had become large enough to require two staves (*atzei chayyim*) to support their bulk, and a binding was necessary to hold the scroll together. Later, as diaspora communities began to create ritual objects, regional variations for Torah binders evolved.

The Ashkenazi Wimple

The first mention of Torah binders, called *mappen*, is from a 16th-century German text where they are described as beautifully embroidered wraps inscribed with a male child's name, date of birth and the date of his circumcision. Another German text uses the term *wimple*, usually made from the swaddling cloth worn by the infant at his *brit milah*. After the ceremony the cloth was pieced into a band and inscribed with the child's name, his father's name, the baby's birth date, and the phrase "May he grow to Torah (study), *huppah* (marriage) and *ma'asim tovim* (good deeds).

Wimples varied from six to 12 feet in length and were made of linen or silk. Often a wimple was presented to the synagogue at the birth of the child, and placed in a box until his bar mitzvah when it was used to wrap the sefer Torah from which he had his aliyah. This practice began in 16th-century Germany and spread to communities in Holland, England, Denmark, and the United States. Thousands of these priceless artifacts kept in synagogues throughout Europe were destroyed in the Holocaust.

Torah Binders of Sephardic Jews

Jews of Italy, Turkey and the Levant had different traditions for creating and donating Torah binders. Sephardic binders celebrated a broader variety of occasions and rites of passage than just the birth of a baby boy. They were lengths of linen and silk covered with fine silk embroidery of intricate patterns and/or Hebrew inscriptions.

Creating Torah binders provided an important and visible role for women in communities where their ritual lives were limited. The fact that Italian Jewish women were such prominent donors of textiles for the Torah was incorporated into the liturgy of Roman Jews: "*He who blessed our matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, may He bless every daughter of Israel who makes a mantle or cover in honor of the Torah.*" What a beautiful blessing!

The Torah Binders of the Czech Community

Czech Torah binders were made of humbler fabric but were lavishly embroidered to commemorate private or public events in the life of a member of the community – a wedding, a death, the establishment of a synagogue, festivals, or a birth, especially of a boy. The binders' ornamentation included Jewish symbols, geometric designs, animals, and folk art. The appearance of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and wedding scenes suggest that binders were made to commemorate marriages.

Modern Torah Binders

Today, Torah binders are often created to match the Torah mantle or cover. Unlike tied binders of the past, modern binders often feature Velcro or metal closures similar to belt buckles. Thanks to the publication of *The Second Jewish Catalog* in the 1970s there was a renewed interest in creating Torah binders, especially wimples. The catalogue provides simple directions and encourages honoring the birth of a girl, as well, with a binder. In some synagogues, parents create Torah binders in honor of a child's bar or bat mitzvah. Judaic stitching groups follow the example of the Sephardic and Czech communities and create Torah binders that celebrate life cycle events in a family or community.

Adapted from an article by Dr. Rita Altmann from the Women's League International Day of Study: Megillat Ruth.

The full article can be found at www.wlcj.org



Creative Judaic Arts Project

TORAH BINDERS

There are no hard and fast rules for the length or width of a Torah binder; however, you must keep in mind the regulations regarding *sha'atnez*, which forbids the mixing of wool and linen. Woolen floss may not be used on linen. The design elements and the media are yours to choose. Let your creative juices flow and be courageous in your expression of beauty.

Design Steps

Measure the width of the Torah for which the binder will be made. Decide how many times the binder will circle the Torah to determine its length.

Decide on the width. Four to six inches will provide a nice area in which to lay out your design.

Make a paper pattern using freezer paper that is strong enough to withstand handling as you use it to cut the fabric. Make multiple copies to lay out on the fabric as you work through the design.

Think of the Torah binder as a long, narrow painting. Consider the elements you want and research appropriate designs. Make copies of your design elements and place them on one or more of the freezer paper patterns to see how they look when the design is completed.

Determine what medium you will use. The medium will suggest the fabric:

Needlepoint: Even-weave canvas that has the design painted on it or stitched following a charted design. Perle cotton yarn is easier to use than wool and has a better life expectancy. Add metallic threads as accents.

Surface embroidery: Tightly woven linen, silk or cotton. Transfer the design to the fabric with special marking inks that can be removed after the stitching is completed.

Counted Cross Stitch or Even Count Stitchery: Even-weave linen or Aida cloth, Lugana, or similar fabrics. The design needs to be charted and the stitching done from the chart.

Applique: A base fabric such as muslin. The appliquéd designs need to be attached by hand or machine. The binder will need a backing.

Pieced/Mosaic Sections: Fine quality muslin on which individual segments can be pieced together. The band will need a backing that unifies all the pieced. Use stamped images or wood block print images on sections of fabric and then connect.

Silk Ribbon Embroidery: This medium lends itself to floral designs. Use a tightly woven fabric and silk ribbon. Transfer the design to the fabric and then decorate the surface with ribbon embroidery.

Painted Fabric: Tightly woven fabric and fabric markers

Weaving: Table-top loom and various fibers. The beauty of a woven binder comes from the woven patterns. There are distinctive ethnic patterns that lend themselves to this medium.

Decide on the closure. Velcro closures work well or use a buckle closing. If you make the binder longer than the width of the Torah, you will need a tying method.

If you are inscribing a Hebrew phrase, have the letters and words checked by someone knowledgeable in Hebrew. There are Hebrew alphabet books that can help with the calligraphy. For possible phrases, look to the Bible, siddur and mahzor.

Judaic Mosaic

BEIN GAVRA

Bein gavra le-gavra means “between man and man” (*gavra* = man in Aramaic). The term *bein gavra* refers specifically to the time between aliyot when the Torah should be closed and/or covered until the next aliyah.

Authorities agree that in the time between aliyot, a Torah scroll must be closed. But whether the closed scroll requires an additional covering is the subject of differing opinions:

Rabbi Isaac Klein holds that *bein gavra le-gavra*, the scroll is kept rolled together and covered with a mantle.

A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice, p. 29

Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried, in the *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* maintains: “Between aliyot, the Torah should be rolled closed. It is not, however, necessary to cover it with its mantle. Before the maftir, when kaddish is recited and there is a long interruption, it should be covered with its mantle. The same applies whenever else a long interruption is made, e.g. when songs are sung in honor of a bridegroom and when extensive *Mi sheberach* prayers are recited.”

Ch. 79 par. 5

Synagogues where the sefer Torah is covered, use a variety of coverings. Sometimes the reader covers it with the Torah mantle (cover) or a tallit, and some use specially designed cloths (*mappot*). These come in a variety of fabrics, with an even more extensive variety of decorations: embroidery, appliqué, silk screen, fringed.

A Sisterhood Project

A lovely and not too ambitious project is to create a mappah – or *bein gavra* as it is also called– for covering the sefer Torah when required. Present it at Shavuot when the revelation of Torah is the center of the synagogue service.

Creative Judaic Arts Project

NAPKIN RINGS: DECORATE YOUR DAIRY TABLE FOR SHAVUOT

Supplies

Empty toilet paper or paper towel tubes

Available from
Women’s League:
ALEPH BET VARIATIONS
A collection of Hebrew
alphabets for use in
needlecrafts and other
media

Wide ribbon or wallpaper to match your room, material, wrapping paper, or colorful paper napkins

Modge Podge

Glue



Instructions

Cut the tube into 2 inch rings or any size you want

Cut the paper or ribbon the circumference of the tube plus ½ inch matching patterns if necessary.

Cut the paper or ribbon to the width of the tube leaving enough on the sides to fold under, ½ inch on each side.

Glue or Mod Podge whatever material you are using to the ring, folding the excess under.

Let dry. Then paint a coat of Mod Podge over the ring and let dry. Use several coats of Mod Podge to protect the napkin rings.

Tikkun Olam Project

Because this mid-spring holiday is so closely associated with agriculture, use this time of year to beautify your synagogue or other spaces in your community:

Donate and plant flowers, bushes or trees on your synagogue property, in the ground or in decorative pots.

Create and name a new space or flower bed, perhaps in honor of a past sisterhood president who was dedicated to synagogue beautification.

Invite students from the Hebrew school and/or Kadima/USY to help.

Recipes

NOT JUST BLINTZES AND CHEESECAKE

While we all love blintzes and cheesecake, you might like to experiment with different Jewish cuisines, even those containing *vegetables*.

HUNGARIAN MUSHROOM STEW (GOMBA PAPRIKASH)

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 large chopped onion
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded, de-ribbed and chopped
- 2 cloves minced garlic
- 2½ cups plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
- ½ cup vegetable or pareve chicken stock
- 2 tablespoons sweet Hungarian paprika
- 1 pound mushrooms, cleaned and sliced (5-6 cups)
- ¼ cup sour cream
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt

white pepper
pinch sugar

Directions

In a Dutch oven or large frying pan, sauté onion, bell pepper and garlic in ¼ cup oil until softened, about 10 minutes. Add tomatoes and salt and cook, stirring occasionally until soft, about 10 more minutes.

Cool mixture slightly then process or blend. Add stock, paprika, pepper and sugar and process until smooth.

Return mixture to saucepan. Add mushrooms and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until mushrooms are tender and the sauce has thickened. Remove from heat, stir in sour cream.

Serve warm over buttered noodles.

SEPHARDIC CAULIFLOWER PATTIES

1 medium-large head cauliflower, broken into florets
3 eggs slightly beaten
1 minced onion
1/3 cup chopped fresh parsley
1 C (or more) bread crumbs or matzoh meal
1 –1½ teaspoon kosher salt
white pepper

Coating

1 egg, beaten
flour for dredging
olive oil

Directions

Cook cauliflower in large pot of salted water, uncovered, until soft but not mushy (10-12 minutes). Drain and finely chop or mash with a fork.

In bowl, combine cauliflower, eggs, onion, parsley, salt and pepper. Add bread crumbs, until mixture is thick enough to mold and hold its shape.

Shape into 3 x 5" oval patties, tapering the ends. Dip each in egg and roll in flour.

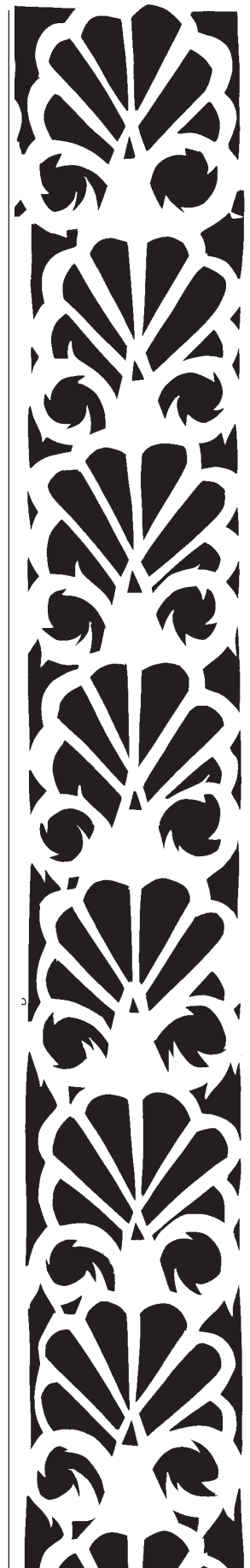
Heat a thin layer of oil in large frying pan. Fry patties in batches, turning until golden brown (about 3 minutes per side).

Serve with yogurt-dill or homemade tomato sauce.

Variations

Add ¼ cup grated Parmesan or Romano cheese to mixture and fry as directed.

Add ¾ cup sharp cheddar cheese and fry as directed.



FLORAL ARRANGEMENT FOR SHAVUOT

Stem counts

Geraniums	5
Forsythia	1
Purple Stasis	1
Tulip	1
Peony	3
Pussy Willow	1
Roses	11



**Thanks to florist
Sherry Wiesman,
Congregation
Kneseth Israel,
Elgin, IL**

This arrangement works well on a table or sideboard. If you have a specific container, choose flowers that will work in harmony with it. To use peonies and roses choose a container with big shoulders to support the flowers.

Trim 2 blocks of silk flower foam to fit the container. Secure with hot glue or chicken wire or create a grid of Davey Tape. If your arrangement is top heavy, weigh the container down with weights.

Typical arrangements are generally no higher than 1½ times the height of the container. However, if your arrangement is for a dining table, keep it below eye level.

Start with the forsythia in the middle to define the highest point, then place the focal flower (the one tulip) directly below the forsythia.

Next space 3 peonies around the perimeter bent over the neck of the container so they appear to be supported by the shoulders of the container. Place the geraniums diagonally and higher than the peonies.

Insert the roses in the remaining spaces, diagonally, as they would grow. Insert the other blossoms, but don't overuse filler flowers.

Tips

Turn the container as you work so that all sides of the arrangement are equally attractive.

If stems have multiple blooms, cut some of the blooms off and use them elsewhere in the arrangement. Silk flowers will not look natural if every stem has exactly the same number of blossoms.

Often silk flower blooms need to be opened slightly. Roll some of the petals backward over a pencil or gently steam some outward so that they appear to be opening.