

The Feast of Weeks

SHAVUOT in Ancient Times

Shavuot, the Feast of the Weeks, is the Jewish holiday celebrating the harvest season in Israel. Shavuot, which means "weeks", refers to the timing of the festival which is held exactly 7 weeks after Passover. Shavuot is known also as Yom Habikkurim, or "the Day of the FirstFruits", because it is the time the farmers of Israel would bring their first harvest to Jerusalem as a token of thanksgiving. Shavuot also commemorates the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

The farmers of Israel would begin their spring harvests with the barley crop at Passover. The harvest continued for seven weeks as the other crops and fruits began to ripen. As each fruit ripened, the first of each type would not be eaten but instead the farmer would tie a ribbon around the branch. This ribbon signified that these fruits were Bikkurim, or the first fruits. At Shavuot the farmers would gather the Bikkurim into baskets and bring them to the city of Jerusalem where they would be eaten in the holy city. The farmers living close to Jerusalem would bring fresh fruits, while those who had to travel a long distance carried dried raisins and figs. This joyful occasion was celebrated with the music of fifes, timbres, and drums. As the pilgrims approached the city walls the inhabitants of the city greeted them. Sometimes the King himself would join the procession to the Temple Mount. The Bikkurim ritual is no longer practiced in present day Israel.

SHAVUOT - NATURE AND NAMES OF THE FESTIVAL

The Festival of Shavuot - Hag Matan Torah - is cited in the Torah as a festival of nature and of agriculture. On Pesach we celebrate the exodus of our forefathers from Egypt - from bondage to freedom; after months of wandering in the desert the Children of Israel arrived at Mount Sinai, where they received the Torah through the intermediary of Moses.

Since the Israelites received the Torah on Shavuot, the festival is also called Hag Matan Torah (the Festival of the Giving of the Law). Our Sages emphasize that only when they received the Ten Commandments did the Israelites become a free people. Our forefathers received the Torah of their free will and with full agreement (Exodus 24:7). According to tradition the Torah was given to Israel in the year 2448 of the Creation of the world.

On Shavuot the People of Israel concluded the barley harvest and commenced the wheat harvest, since in Eretz Yisrael the month of Sivan signals the end of spring and the beginning of summer. The "3 Pilgrim festivals" are:

The Festival	The Season	The Biblical Source
Pesach [The Spring Festival]	End of Winter/start of Spring	Beginning of the Barley Harvest Deut. 16:9
Shavuot [Festival of Reaping]	End of Spring/Start of Summer	First fruits of Wheat Ex. 34:22
Sukkot [Fest of Ingathering]	End of Summer/start of Fall	After gathering your corn and wine Deut. 16:1

Thus, three times yearly, our forefathers went up to the Temple in Jerusalem to bring the fruit of their soil as a thanksgiving offering to the Lord.

There is another special significance to the timing of Shavuot, between the Omer and the harvest. The festival was fixed at the end of a season lasting seven weeks, namely the period of "Counting the Omer", which commences on the first day of Chol Hamoed Pesach in Israel [second night of the festival in the Diaspora] according to the Pharisaic tradition and the first day of the week after the weekly Shabbat of Pesach according to the Sadducean view. In this period, the fierce struggle between the easterly and the westerly winds intensifies in

Eretz Israel. The dry easterly winds on the one hand, and the westerly winds on the other, bearing clouds and the danger of sudden rains, can lead to sudden weather changes, affecting the field crops and plantations. Thus the 49 days of the Omer are counted with some degree of trepidation.

When Shavuot arrives, the weather stabilizes. The farmer already knows the fate of the grain crops, but he has no guarantee of the success of the harvest of the fruit that grow in summer. This is known only at the Harvest Festival. In addition to the name "Hag Matan Torah", the festival has four other names: mainly,

Shavuot

Literally, "weeks." In the Torah the festival is called "Hag Ha-Shavuot", the Festival of Weeks, after the seven weeks counted from Pesach to Shavuot:

"You will count for yourselves seven weeks; begin to count the seven weeks from the time that you begin to put the sickle to the corn. And you shall keep the feast of weeks unto the Lord your G-d..." (Deuteronomy, 16: 9-10)

The seven weeks of the counting of the Omer must be complete. The Torah does not indicate the date of Shavuot, since it is fixed as the fiftieth day of the Omer (Leviticus 23:16)

Hag Hakatzir

Literally, the Festival of Reaping. The barley harvest, that commences on Pesach, ends on Shavuot, when the wheat harvest begins (wheat ripens later than barley):

"And the feast of harvest, the first fruits of your labors, which you have sown in the field". (Exodus, 23:16)

"And you shall observe the feast of weeks, of the first fruits of wheat harvest". (Exodus, 34:22)

Hag Habikurim

The Festival of First fruits - Just as the Omer offering of the new barley is brought on Pesach, during the festival of "your first harvest", so on Shavuot, at the end of the barley harvest, the offering of the two shew-breads (baked with leaven) is brought.

These offerings are mitzvot [precepts] which are not binding on the individual, but rather on the public, and they were brought to the Temple. It is customary today to bring first fruits of the land (mainly fruit and vegetables) and to distribute them to the poor.

Atzeret

In the Mishnah and Talmud, Shavuot is known as "Atzeret", which means: a festive assembly of all the people. The pilgrims who came to Jerusalem used to gather in the Holy City and celebrate the festival joyously. Today, this agricultural event is celebrated in the kibbutzim and moshavim of Israel with dancing and singing. This is the final day of the Pesach period, just as Shemini Atzeret concludes Sukkot.

The festival of Shavu'ot arrived, and the believers all gathered together in one place. ² Suddenly there came a sound from the sky like the roar of a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ Then they saw what looked like tongues of fire, which separated and came to rest on each one of them. ⁴ They were all filled with the Ruach HaKodesh and began to talk in different languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak.. (Acts 2:1-4)