

Shavuot 101

Shavuot could be seen as the loser in the Jewish calendar, as it is not as famous as festivals like Chanukah, a relatively minor festival. This despite it being one of the most important festivals of the year as one of the Biblically mandated Pilgrim festivals when all of Israel would flock to the Temple to offer their first fruits (*bikkurim*).

Perhaps the problem began when the Temple was destroyed in 70CE, and people could no longer take their offerings to the Temple. There was a need to discover new meaning in the ancient festivals and customs. Shavuot came to be the festival celebrating the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai, and is in this way connected to the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, celebrated 7 weeks earlier at Pesach. Pesach symbolises our freedom, and Shavuot the responsibility that comes with that, with the receiving of law and revelation.

The festival is celebrated with services for one day in Israel and the Progressive communities, and for 2 days in Orthodox communities outside of Israel. The first night of the festival is often marked with a full night of study, keeping participants up until morning prayers can be said at dawn. No Jewish festival is complete without special foods being associated with it, and Shavuot is often a time people enjoy dairy foods such as cheesecake. For some explanations why see here: http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Shavuot/At_Home/Foods.shtml. Tradition also suggests that when Torah was given at Mount Sinai the whole mountain was covered in flowers, and so it has become customary to fill synagogues with flowers and to give flowers as gifts.

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