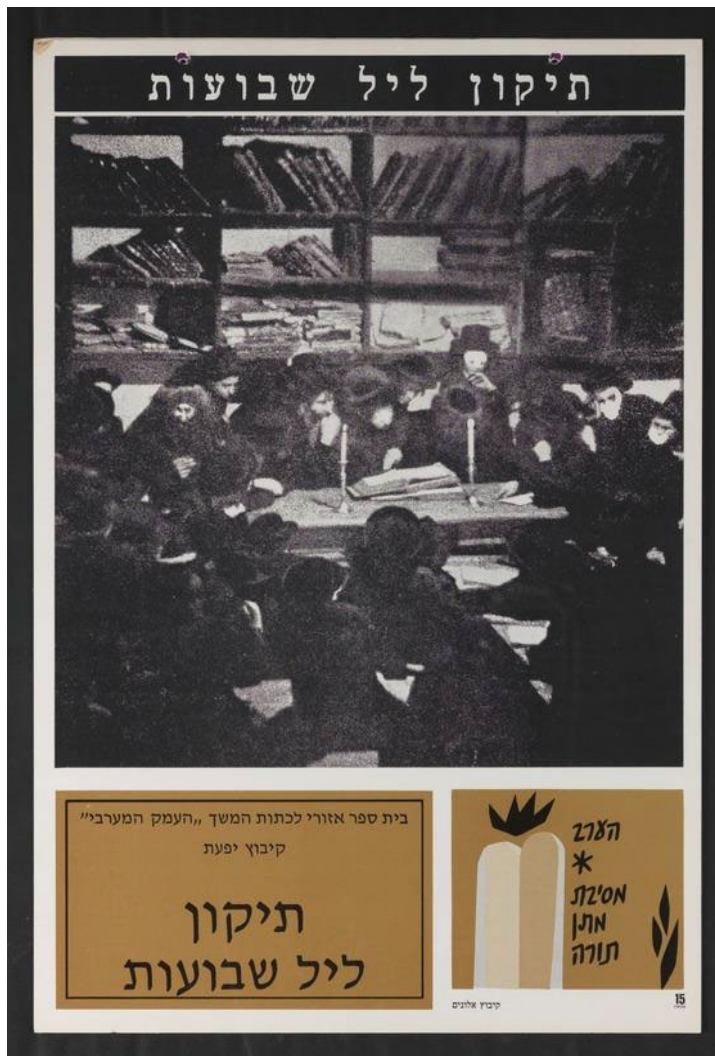


Shavuot Customs in Words and Pictures

Source Sheet by Rachel Buckman



Tikkun Leil Shavuot

There is a custom to stay awake all night studying Torah on the eve of Shavuot.

Look at a poster printed in 1972 by Kibbutz Yifat advertising a Tikkun Leil Shavuot. The text below the illustration announces a party celebrating the giving of the Torah.

Study the poster (to see a detailed version scan the code or look at a printed version), read the texts, and answer the questions below.

שמות י"ט:א

יִאָּהִיו נְכֻנִים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי | בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרֵד ה' לְעֵינֵינוּ כָּל־הָעָם עַל־הַר סִינַי:

Source 1

Exodus 19:11

(11) Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the LORD will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai.

אבן עזרא על שמות י"ט:א:א'

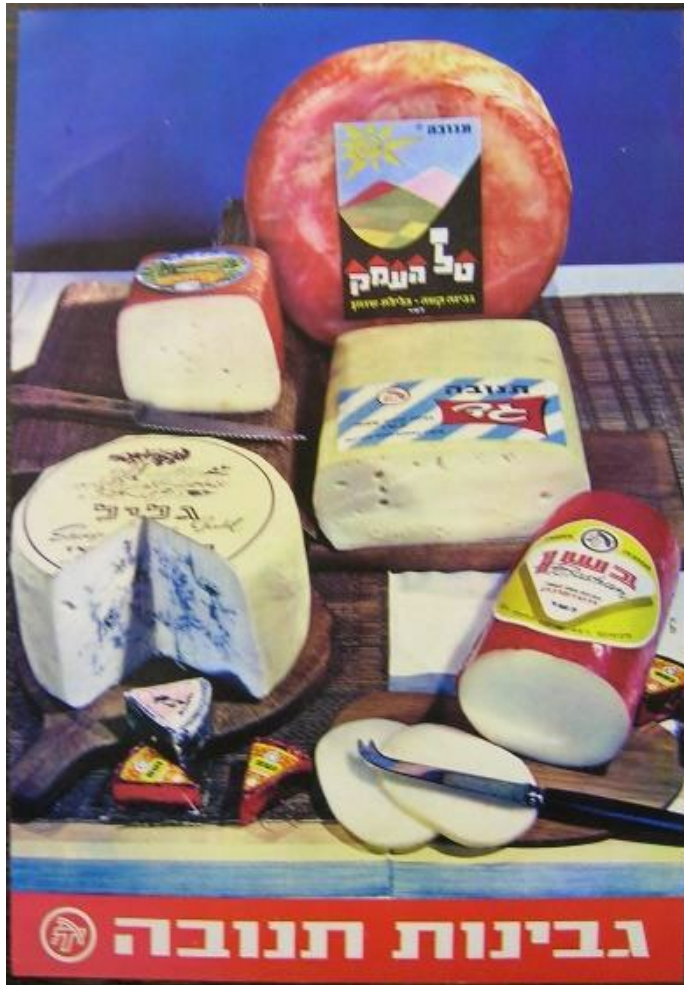
והיו נכנים. אולי לא יישן אדם בהם בלילה. שישמעו קול ה' בבקר. כדרך כהן גדול ביום הכפורים

Source 2

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 19:11:1

Be ready: Perhaps a person shouldn't sleep on them at night, because they will hear the voice of God in the morning, like the way of the Kohen Gadol [High Priest] on Yom Kippur.

1. What event is being described in the verse from Exodus?
2. According to Ibn Ezra, the medieval Spanish Bible commentator, why should people stay awake the night of Shavuot?
3. Another explanation for this custom is that on the morning that God was going to give the Ten Commandments, the people overslept! What, therefore, could be the reason for the custom of staying awake all night to study the Torah?
4. Describe the illustration on the poster.
5. Despite the depiction of religious men in the illustration, Kibbutz Yifat is not a religious kibbutz. What does this tell you about the prevalence of the custom of learning Torah on Shavuot?
6. In many communities, religious and non-religious Jews study Torah throughout the night of Shavuot. Have you ever attended a Tikkun Leil Shavuot?
7. What would you like to study if you were attending a Tikkun?



Dairy Foods

It is customary to eat dairy foods, such as cheese, cheesecake, and blintzes, on Shavuot.

Study the advertisement from the Israeli company Tnuva, read the text, and answer the questions below.

שמות י"ט:י"א

משנה ברורה תצ"ד:י"ב

{יב} מאכלי חלב - ...טעם נכון לזה כי בעת שעמדו על הר סיני וקבלו התורה וירדו מן ההר לביתם לא מצאו מה לאכול תיכף כ"א מאכלי חלב כי לבשר צריך הכנה רבה לשחוט בסכין בדוק כאשר צוה ה'....ע"כ בחרו להם לפי שעה מאכלי חלב ואנו עושין זכר לזה.

Mishnah Berurah 494:12

Dairy foods...a correct reason for this: that when Bnei Yisrael stood at Har Sinai and accepted the Torah and they went down from the mountain to their homes they found nothing to eat immediately except for dairy foods because for meat they would need much preparation to slaughter with a checked knife like Hashem commanded...therefore they choose on account of the time to eat dairy

1. There are many explanations for the custom of eating dairy foods on Shavuot. What is the reason given in the Mishnah Berurah? (Mishnah Berurah is a book of Jewish law that was written in Poland and published in 1904.)
2. What new laws were given at Sinai that made it difficult for the people to prepare meat?
3. What is Tnuva advertising in the poster?
4. Which other companies might want to advertise on Shavuot?
5. Do you eat dairy foods on Shavuot? If so, what foods?
6. Do you prefer to eat meat or dairy?



Decorate with Greenery

There is a Shavuot custom to decorate synagogues and homes with tree branches and flowers. Some communities used to decorate with paper cuts instead of real greenery.

This painting by the nineteenth-century German Jewish painter Moritz Daniel Oppenheim was used as a page in a calendar printed by the Sana company, a manufacturer of kosher margarine.

Study the illustration, read the texts and the article, and answer the questions below.

אורח חיים תצ"ד:ג'

ונוהגין לשטוח עשבים בשבועות בבית הכנסת והבתים זכר לשמחת מתן תורה.

Source 1

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 494:3

There is a custom to spread out plants on Shavuot in the synagogue and in houses, commemorating the joy of the receiving of the Torah.

משנה ברורה תצ"ד:י'

{ }זכר לשמחת מתן תורה - שהיו שם עשבים סביב הר סיני כדכתיב הצאן והבקר אל ירעו וגו'.

Source 2

Mishnah Berurah 494:10

In remembrance of the joy of receiving the Torah: for there were grasses around Mount Sinai, as it says "The flocks and cattle shall not graze."

Source 3

Canadian Jewish News, May 23, 2017

One way that Ashkenazi Jews beautified their homes for Shavuot was by creating and displaying paper cuttings. Called in Yiddish, *shevuoslakh* (or *shavuosl*) and *royzalakh* (or *raizelach*) – literally meaning little Shavuots and little roses – the paper cuttings were mounted on windows, so they would be visible both indoors and out.

[F]or Ashkenazi Jews, there was a particular link between paper cutting and Shavuot, which stems from an old practice of decorating homes and synagogues with flowers, branches, boughs and trees. In shtetl culture, cut flowers were a luxury – pricey and perishable. And Jewish culture was deeply literate, so paper – especially used paper – was always around and available for artistic repurposing.

1. According to the Shulchan Aruch, (a legal code written in Safed, Israel in the 1500s), why is it customary to decorate with plants?
2. According to the Mishnah Berurah, what is the source of the custom?
3. How did the German community, as depicted in the illustration, fulfill the custom?
4. How is the art of paper cutting connected to Shavuot?
5. Is your synagogue decorated with greenery on Shavuot?
What is the atmosphere in the synagogue when it is decorated in this way?



Book of Ruth

The book of Ruth is read on Shavuot. In this book, Ruth the Moabite accepts the laws of Naomi, her Jewish mother-in-law. This is reminiscent of the Jewish people accepting the Torah at Mount Sinai, which is commemorated on Shavuot.

This is a picture by Hector Le Roux, printed on a postcard published by the Lebanon company of Warsaw, Poland in 1870.

Study the illustration, read the text, and answer the questions below.

רות א':ט"ז

וַתֹּאמֶר רֹוּת אֶל-תַּפְּגַעִי-בִי לְעֶזְבֶּךָ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרֶיךָ כִּי אֶל-אִשְׁרֵי תֵלְכִי וּבְאִשְׁרֵי תִלְיִנִי אֶלִּין עִמָּךְ עַמִּי וְאֶלְקִי:

Ruth 1:16

But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

1. Who are the women in the illustration?
(For a review of the story, click on "Ruth 1:16" above to open the book of Ruth.)
2. Which words in the verse show that Ruth is converting to Judaism?
3. The Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai and Ruth are two examples of people who chose their Judaism.
Research by American Jewish sociologist Arnold Eisen shows that many Jews view their connection to Judaism as a choice.
Do you agree?

Eating Honey

Some communities have a custom of eating honey on Shavuot.

Read the text from the Mishnah Berurah and answer the questions below.

משנה ברורה תצ"ד:י"ג

{יג} ביום ראשון וכו' - גם נוהגין בקצת מקומות לאכול דבש וחלב מפני התורה שנמשלה לדבש וחלב כמש"כ דבש וחלב תחת לשונך וגו'.

Mishnah Berurah 494:13

On the first day...In some places there is also a custom to eat honey and milk because the Torah is likened to them, as it says, "honey and milk under your tongue."

1. In what way do you think the Torah is like milk and honey?
2. Milk and honey are used to describe something else in Jewish tradition. What is it?
3. There is a custom that on the first day of school, teachers write the words of the Torah on a piece of paper and put honey on the letters. The students put their fingers in the honey and lick their fingers. What message are the teachers trying to convey to the students by doing this?