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.

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**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.

**Source #2**

Ibn Ezra on Exodus 19:11:1

Be ready: Perhaps a person shouldn't

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How did it go? Let us know! [learning@nli.org.il](mailto:learning@nli.org.il)
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 to stay 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 from the poster?
6. In many communities, religious and non-religious Jews study Torah
throughout the night of Shavuot.
7. Have you ever attended a Tikkun Leil Shavuot?
8. 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.

Source #1
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

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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
foods and we do this as a commemoration
of this.

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. What 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.
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.

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
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.

For 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.

From the Canadian Jewish News https://www.cjnews.com/perspectives/shavuot-paper-cutting
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, fulfil the custom?
4. How is the art of paper cutting connected to Shavuot?
5. Is your synagogue decorate with greenery on Shavuot?
6. 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 her Jewish mother-in-law. This is reminiscent of the Jewish people accepting the Torah at Mt. 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.
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 from Ruth show that she is converting to Judaism?

3. The Israelites who stood at Mt 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.

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 is the teacher thus trying to send to the students?