

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Shavuot

A wedding contract between God and Israel, a night of study, honey on a child's first letters, and buckets of water in the streets of the mellah.

WHEN

The 6th of the Hebrew month of Sivan, seven weeks after Passover, in May or June. Outside Israel it lasts two days.

WHAT IT IS

"Weeks." A harvest festival of first fruits that also celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

CUSTOMS

All night study, reading the Book of Ruth, decorating with greenery and flowers, and festive meals.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

Najara's Shavuot *ketubah*, the *Azharot*, Moroccan water play, and the foods of Baghdad, Tehran, Aleppo, and Salonica.

Shavuot is a festival of the wheat harvest and of revelation. Tradition holds that on the sixth of Sivan, the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and received the Torah. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews gave the day a special character: they read a poetic marriage contract binding God and Israel, chanted rhymed poems listing the commandments, stayed awake studying through the night, and in North Africa turned the afternoon into a joyful celebration of water. Each community also brought its own breads, pastries, and dairy dishes to the holiday table.

How Shavuot is observed

- **Tikkun Leil Shavuot.** Many Jews stay awake on the first night, studying until dawn. The fixed order of readings, the *Tikkun*, was arranged by the mystics of Safed in the sixteenth century. It includes passages from all parts of the Bible, the opening and closing of each section of the Mishnah, and the Zohar. Once mostly a practice of adult men, it has spread to nearly every community.
- **The Ten Commandments.** The Torah reading on the first morning includes the Ten Commandments. In some Moroccan synagogues, this reading was reserved for the chief rabbi.
- **The Azharot.** Where Ashkenazi Jews read the poem *Akdamut*, Sephardic Jews chant the *Azharot*, rhymed poems listing the 613 commandments. Several medieval Spanish poets wrote *Azharot*, including Solomon ibn Gabirol. In Morocco, the version by Rabbi Isaac ben Reuben of Barcelona was read at the afternoon service, with worshippers taking turns.
- **The Book of Ruth.** Ruth's story is set during the barley and wheat harvests, and it ends with the family line of King David.

A marriage contract for Shavuot

In many Sephardic congregations, before the Torah is read on the first day, the congregation hears a *ketubah*, a marriage contract between God and the people of Israel. It is dated the sixth of Sivan, the day of the giving of the Torah. God is the groom, Israel is the bride, the Torah and its commandments are her dowry, and heaven and earth serve as witnesses.

The best known version was written by Rabbi Israel Najara, a poet born in Safed around 1555 who later lived in Damascus and served as a rabbi in Gaza, where he died. His Sabbath hymn *Yah Ribon Olam* is sung by Jews around the world. In some communities the Shavuot *ketubah* was also read in Ladino.

Torah like water, Torah like honey

A festival of water. In Morocco, Shavuot afternoon became a day of water. A man honored with a certain verse might be doused with buckets as he left the synagogue, and after lunch people held water battles in the streets of the *mellah*, the Jewish quarter. Some used a homemade pump called a *batito* to spray passersby. A 1943 photograph from Morocco shows children on rooftops pouring water on people below. Libyan Jews kept a similar custom.

Why water? The explanation most often given is that the Torah is to the Jewish people what water is to the world, a source of life. Some also connect the custom to Moses, who was drawn from the water as a baby. Today, splashing water is a popular Shavuot custom across Israel.

Greenery and flowers. Many communities decorate synagogues and homes for Shavuot. Greek Sephardic Jews hung green branches and flowers in the synagogue, and Bukharian Jews decorated with red roses.

A child's first letters

In medieval Germany, Shavuot was the day a young child began Torah study: the teacher put honey on the letters so that learning would taste sweet. Rabbi David Golinkin notes that Jews of Arabic speaking lands kept a similar custom into modern times, as in the Todra valley of Morocco, where a child of five was brought to the synagogue and the Hebrew alphabet was written in honey on a wooden slate.

In a related custom from the Tafilalt region of southern Morocco, not tied to Shavuot in the source, a boy's entry into school, called *Liktahb*, was celebrated as a symbolic "wedding" to the Torah, with a parade, a feast, and a young "bride." In Yemen, children ate cakes shaped like Mount Sinai or the Torah.

Community by community

Morocco

Besides the water battles, Moroccan Jews chanted the Azharot in turns, read Najara's ketubah in some synagogues, and stayed up for the night of study. A worshipper chosen by lot to read the Azharot received a special title.

Sources: Moreshet Morocco (Moche Gabbay); jweekly; Jerusalem Post

Iraq

On Shavuot morning, Baghdadi families ate *kahi*, a flaky, layered pastry of buttery dough, served with date syrup or sugar and with *qeimar*, a thick clotted cream. Some made a pilgrimage to the tomb of the prophet Ezekiel. Baghdadi Jews who settled in India brought kahi with them.

Sources: Mother Tongue (University of Haifa); Kahal Joseph Congregation; Tablet; Jewish Food Society

Iran

Persian Jewish families serve dairy dishes for the holiday, such as *polao mastin* and *koltcha shiri*.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Syria

Syrian Jews enjoy *atayef*, small stuffed pancakes served with sweet syrup. Atayef is popular across the region among Jews and non Jews alike.

Source: Unpacked

Kurdistan

Kurdish Jews serve *kadeh*, a filled bread, together with *zizik*.

Source: Unpacked

Libya

Families made necklaces of cookies or pretzels for children to wear, and like their Moroccan neighbors, sprayed water on passersby.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Ottoman Sephardic (Greece, Turkey)

Mothers baked *pan de siete cielos*, "bread of the seven heavens," a round loaf with a central mound for Mount Sinai ringed by seven circles. In Salonica it was baked until the Second World War. Families also ate *sutlag*, a cinnamon rice pudding.

Sources: TheTorah.com (Susan Weingarten); Unpacked; My Jewish Learning

Yemen

Children ate cakes shaped like Mount Sinai or a Torah scroll. Yemenite Jews also ate *zalabiyya*, a fried pastry, on Shavuot.

Sources: Jerusalem Post (Ben Sales); TheTorah.com

Common misconceptions

- **"Shavuot means cheesecake."** Cheesecake and blintzes are Ashkenazi traditions. Many Mizrahi families did not even own separate dairy dishes, and some Sephardic families serve meat at the festive meal.
- **"The water fights are just a modern Israeli game."** They are rooted in Moroccan and Libyan Jewish custom, with a religious meaning: Torah as living water.
- **"Every community reads the same holiday poem."** Ashkenazim read *Akdamut*; many Sephardic communities read the *Azharot* and Najara's *ketubah*.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Iraqi, Iranian, Kurdish, and Yemenite Jews are usually called Mizrahi, while many Syrian and Moroccan Jews identify as Sephardic. "Sephardic" refers to communities descended from the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

Words to know

Shavuot *Hebrew*

"Weeks." The festival seven weeks after Passover.

Matan Torah *Hebrew*

"The giving of the Torah" at Mount Sinai.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot *Hebrew*

The order of study for the all night learning on Shavuot.

Ketubah *Hebrew*

A marriage contract. On Shavuot, a poem uniting God and Israel.

Azharot *Hebrew*

"Warnings." Rhymed poems listing the 613 commandments.

Megillat Rut *Hebrew*

The Book of Ruth, read on Shavuot.

Batito *Moroccan Jewish usage*

A homemade pump for spraying water on Shavuot.

Liktahb *Judeo Arabic, Tafilalt*

A boy's festive entry into school.

Kahi *Iraqi Judeo Arabic*

A flaky, layered pastry eaten on Shavuot morning.

Pan de siete cielos *Ladino*

"Bread of the seven heavens," a Shavuot loaf.

Bringing Shavuot to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare Shavuot with harvest and first fruits festivals in other cultures.
- Read the Book of Ruth as literature: a story of loyalty, immigration, and belonging.
- Study Najara's ketubah as a poem: why might a community describe its relationship with God as a marriage?
- Discuss the water customs as culture and history, but do not stage water splashing or other activities that imitate the ritual, and do not have students recite blessings or prayers.
- Explore Shavuot foods, following school allergy rules (many recipes use dairy, nuts, and sesame).

In Jewish schools and communities

- Read Najara's ketubah aloud in English, Hebrew, or Ladino, and have students design their own illustrated version.
- Hold a Tikkun night with readings from the Azharot and the Book of Ruth.
- Write the alef bet in honey for the youngest learners, as in the Todra valley.
- Bake kahi, atayef, or pan de siete cielos for a Shavuot table.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: What did your family eat on Shavuot? Did anyone throw water?
- Read the Book of Ruth together and talk about what it means to choose a people.
- Watch JIMENA's *Mizrahi Shavuot* video together and try one recipe.
- Record an elder's Shavuot memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think communities chose images of a wedding, water, and honey to describe receiving the Torah?
- The water custom traveled from Morocco to become a game many Israelis enjoy. What happens to a tradition when it spreads beyond the community that created it?
- Ruth chose to join a new people. How does her story speak to families who have moved from one country to another?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Mizrahi Shavuot with JIMENA and OneTable (JIMENA, 2020)
youtube.com/watch?v=fdF69a8WnYU

Tomb pilgrimage on Shavuot: memories of Baghdad (Mother Tongue, with Prof. Yehudit Henshke, University of Haifa)
lashon.org/en/node/6275

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

Indian-Jewish Food: Recipes and Stories from the Backstreets of Bondi, by Elana Benjamin (Sydney Jewish Museum, 2024). Includes kahi.
tabletmag.com/recipes/kahi-iraqi-shavuot

The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York, by Claudia Roden (Knopf, 1996).
discover.hsp.org/Record/marc-ocm34984360/Description

A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, by Herbert C. Dobrinsky (Yeshiva University Press, 2011). For teachers.
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-treasury-of-sephardic-laws-and-customs-the-ritual-practices-of-syrian-moroccan-judeo-spanish

Explore online

The Shavuot Marriage Contract, by Philip Goodman (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/the-shavuot-marriage-contract

Shabuot and a Ketuba Written in Gaza, by Rabbi Yosef Bitton (an English translation of Najara's ketubah)
halakhaoftheday.org/2024/06/01/shabuot-and-a-ketuba-written-in-gaza

Israel Najara (Posen Library)
posenlibrary.com/node/4374

Chavouot: Racines and Roots, by Moche Gabbay (Moreshet Morocco)
moreshet-morocco.com/2019/05/31/moche-gabbay-chavouot-racines-roots

Shavuot: Torah as Sweet as Honey, by Rabbi David Golinkin (Schechter Institute)
schechter.edu/shavuot-torah-as-sweet-as-honey

The Wedding Between Children and the Torah (National Library of Israel)
blog.nli.org.il/en/mock_wedding_torah

Beyond Cheesecake: Foods of Shavuot, by Susan Weingarten (TheTorah.com)
thetorah.com/article/beyond-cheesecake-foods-of-shavuot

The 70 Faces of Shavuot (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/2014/05/27/the-70-faces-of-shavuot

Five traditional Shavuot foods that aren't cheesecake (Unpacked)
unpacked.media/5-traditional-shavuot-foods-from-around-the-world-that-arent-cheesecake

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include My Jewish Learning; the Posen Library; Rabbi Yosef Bitton (Halakha of the Day); Moreshet Morocco; the Schechter Institute; the National Library of Israel; TheTorah.com; Unpacked; the Jerusalem Post; jweekly; Mother Tongue (University of Haifa); Kahal Joseph Congregation; Tablet; and the Jewish Food Society. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.