

OLAMI MENTORSHIP



SHAVUOT SPECIAL

RECEIVING THE TORAH TOGETHER

WHAT IS SHAVUOT?

THE SHAVUOT HOLIDAY 2026 BEGINS AT SUNDOWN ON THURSDAY 5/21-NIGHTFALL 5/23

Shavuot is one of the major Jewish holidays, yet many Jews know less about it than holidays like Passover or Hanukkah. That is surprising, because Shavuot marks what is arguably the most important moment in Jewish history: the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Shavuot commemorates the moment when the Jewish people stood together at Mount Sinai and entered into a covenant with God. The Torah gave the Jewish people not only laws and rituals, but also a mission, values, and a shared identity. Ideas such as human dignity, justice, responsibility, and belief in one God all became central to Jewish civilization and later influenced much of the Western world.

Shavuot takes place on the 6th of the Hebrew month of Sivan, seven weeks after Passover.

THE JOURNEY FROM PASSOVER TO SHAVUOT

Between Passover and Shavuot, Jews count forty-nine days in a process called “Counting the Omer.” The Hebrew word Shavuot means “weeks,” referring to these seven weeks of preparation and anticipation.

Passover celebrates physical freedom from slavery in Egypt. Shavuot represents the next step: discovering what freedom is for. Judaism teaches that freedom is not only about escaping oppression, but also about living with meaning, values, and purpose.

REFLECTION QUESTION

- Why do you think freedom alone is not enough?
- What values or principles give direction to a person’s life?



A HOLIDAY WITHOUT SYMBOLS

Many Jewish holidays have famous physical symbols:

- Rosh Hashanah has the shofar
- Sukkot has the sukkah
- Hanukkah has the menorah

Shavuot is different. It has no single defining object or ritual. Instead, the focus is on ideas, learning, and personal growth.

Some suggest that this itself is the message of Shavuot: the Torah is not meant to remain a symbol on a shelf, but something lived and studied.

THE CUSTOM OF STAYING UP ALL NIGHT

One of the best-known Shavuot traditions is staying up all night learning Torah.

People gather in synagogues, homes, or community centers to study Jewish texts, discuss ideas, ask questions, and reflect on life and spirituality.

Reflection Question

- Why do you think Judaism places such a strong emphasis on learning?
- What subjects or conversations make you feel more connected to who you are?

THE BOOK OF RUTH

On Shavuot, Jews traditionally read the Biblical Book of Ruth.

Book of Ruth tells the story of Ruth, a woman born outside the Jewish people who chose to join the Jewish nation out of love, loyalty, and spiritual conviction.

Her famous words to her mother-in-law Naomi express deep commitment:

“Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people.”

Ruth’s story highlights themes that connect strongly to Shavuot:

- Choosing meaning and commitment
- Joining a people and a mission
- Personal transformation
- Loyalty and kindness

Jewish tradition also teaches that Ruth became the ancestor of King David.

Reflection Question

- What do you think motivates someone to commit deeply to a set of values or a community?
- What can Ruth’s story teach about belonging and identity?





FLOWERS, NATURE, AND FIRST FRUITS

Many synagogues decorate with flowers and greenery on Shavuot.

According to tradition, Mount Sinai blossomed with flowers when the Torah was given. In addition, Shavuot was historically connected to the harvest season in the Land of Israel. Farmers would bring their first fruits to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem as an expression of gratitude.

These traditions connect spirituality with appreciation, growth, and renewal.

Reflection Question

- Why is gratitude such an important part of human life?
- What are the “first fruits” — the blessings or successes — that you are grateful for?

WHY DAIRY FOODS?

A popular Shavuot custom is eating dairy foods such as cheesecake, blintzes, and ice cream.

Different explanations are offered for this tradition. One poetic explanation compares Torah to “milk and honey,” symbolizing nourishment and sweetness.

Another explanation is historical: after receiving the Torah, the Israelites learned new dietary laws and were not yet prepared to cook meat according to those standards, so they ate dairy foods instead.

Regardless of the reason, the custom has become one of the most beloved parts of the holiday.



A CENTRAL IDEA OF SHAVUOT

Shavuot is not only about something that happened thousands of years ago. Jewish tradition teaches that every generation must see itself as personally standing at Sinai.

The giving of the Torah was not only a historical event, but an ongoing invitation:

- to grow,
- to ask questions,
- to pursue wisdom,
- to live with purpose,
- and to connect to something larger than oneself.

For many Jews today, Shavuot can serve as a yearly opportunity to reconnect with Jewish identity, learning, values, and community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MENTORS AND MENTEES

1. What values do you believe are essential for a meaningful life?
2. Why do you think learning has always been central to Jewish culture?
3. What does it mean to belong to the Jewish people?
4. Do you see spirituality as connected to everyday life? Why or why not?
5. What Jewish experience, tradition, or idea has impacted you personally?



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