

**In the Absence of Ritual**  
**Customs of the Holiday of Shavuot**

Simcha Fishbane

Touro College

**Shavuot and Rosh Hodesh**

Along with Passover and Sukkot, the holiday of Shavuot (“Weeks”) is one of the three pilgrimage festivals, the times when Jews would travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. In Scripture, Shavuot is identified by different names in various contexts.

In Exodus 23:16, the holiday is referred to as the Holiday or Feast of the Harvest (*Hag Ha-Katzir*): “And the Feast of the Harvest, the first fruits of your labors which you have sown in the field, and the Feast of Ingathering, which is at the end of the year.”<sup>1</sup> The holiday falls in May–June, when the wheat begins to ripen in the land of Israel. It is from this wheat that the Bible commands that the “two loaves” (*shetei ha-lehem*) be baked and brought to the Temple as an offering. This ritual then permitted the eating of the new season’s crops.

The holiday is referred to as the Festival of Weeks (*Shavuot*) in Exodus 34:22: “Seven weeks shall you count unto you, unto the Lord your God, with a tribute of a freewill offering of your hand, which you shall give, according as the Lord your God has blessed you.”<sup>2</sup> Seven weeks – forty nine days – are counted beginning with the sacrifice of the *omer* offering on Passover; this “*Sefirat Ha-Omer*” culminated with the offering of the new fruits in the Temple on Shavuot.

In Numbers 28:26 the holiday is termed the Festival of the First Fruits (*Hag ha-Bikkurim*) “Also on the day of the first fruits, when you bring a new meal offering to the Lord, on your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy gathering, you shall do no servile

---

<sup>1</sup> See also Jeremiah 5:24.

<sup>2</sup> See also Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:19; Jeremiah 5:24; and Chronicles II 8:13.

work.”<sup>3</sup> Beginning on the holiday, the first fruits of the new crop were offered to the priests in the Temple.

The name *Hamishim* (fifty) is used in Leviticus 23:16: “To the morrow after the seventh Sabbath shall you number fifty days and you shall offer a new meal offering to the Lord,” and this word appears in Josephus’s writings.<sup>4</sup>

From Scripture, it is clear that Shavuot was designated as an agricultural festival, a holiday associated with the crops of the land of Israel and the Temple in Jerusalem, with its sacrifices and rituals. With the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., however, all Temple-related rituals ceased; the Rabbis forbade the practice of such rituals as sacrifices, bread offerings, and water ceremonies, and the Temple service was replaced by prayer. Some of the Sages went as far as to forbid music and the eating of meat, since meat was associated with the Temple sacrifices, and music with the singing of the Levites.

Although Shavuot is similar to Passover and Sukkot in that work is forbidden, special holiday prayers are recited, and festive meals are eaten, it differs from the other pilgrimage festivals in that it lacks any biblically mandated practices, customs, or rituals. While *matzah* is eaten on Passover and Jews sit in a special booth on *Sukkot*, there is no unique Shavuot practice other than those associated with the Temple. As a result, following the destruction of the Temple, the holiday of Shavuot became an “orphan holiday,” without any specific associated practices, customs, or rituals.

In this sense, Shavuot can be compared to the festival of Rosh Hodesh, the first day of each new month. Rosh Hodesh is identified as a festival throughout the Bible, and in Temple times, the celebration of Rosh Hodesh included a number of rituals practiced both in the Temple and in the home. Special sacrifices were offered,<sup>5</sup> and the trumpets

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Exodus 23:14-16; Numbers 28 :26-31.

<sup>4</sup> See *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:6; *Wars of the Jews*, Book 1, 13:3 and Book 6, 5:3.

<sup>5</sup> See Numbers 28 :11-14: “And in the beginning of your months, you shall offer a burnt offering to the Lord: two young bullocks, and one ram, seven lambs of the first year without blemish; and three tenth measures of flour for a meal offering, mingled with oil, for one bullock; and two tenth measures of flour for a meal offering, mingled with oil, for one ram; and a tenth measure of flour mingled with oil for a meal offering for every lamb; for a burnt offering of a sweet savor, a sacrifice made by fire to the Lord. And their drink offerings shall be half a *hin* of wine for a bullock, and the third part of a *hin* for a ram, and a

were blown, as on the three pilgrimage festivals.<sup>6</sup> Scripture also indicates that individuals would offer personal sacrifices on Rosh Hodesh and partake in festive meals,<sup>7</sup> a practice that apparently persisted even after the destruction of the Temple.<sup>8</sup> Rosh Hodesh was also apparently considered a day for visiting prophets;<sup>9</sup> in later times, it became customary to visit scholars and teachers on that day.<sup>10</sup> Biblical sources indicate that people abstained from work on Rosh Hodesh;<sup>11</sup> although both the Mishnah and Talmud offer proof-texts that work is not prohibited, the day is compared to other festivals, and in particular to the intermediate days of Passover and Sukkot (*hol ha-moed*).<sup>12</sup> There was even a special *Kiddush* prayer recited over wine on Rosh Hodesh, just as on the Sabbath and festivals.<sup>13</sup> Like the other Rosh Hodesh practices, however, this custom was no longer observed after the destruction of the Temple.

---

fourth part of a *hin* for a lamb: this is the burnt offering of every month throughout the months of the year.”

<sup>6</sup> See Numbers 10:10: “Also in the day of your gladness, and at your appointed feasts, and in the beginnings of your months, you shall blow with the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; that they may be as to you for a memorial before your God: I am the Lord.”

<sup>7</sup> See Samuel I 1:20; see also Amos Hakham, “*Rosh Hodesh ba-Mikra*” (Hebrew), *Mahanayim – Journal of the Israel Defense Force Chaplaincy* 90 (1964): 78-79.

<sup>8</sup> B. Nachmani, “*Seudat Rosh Hodesh*” (Hebrew), *Mahanayim – Journal of the Israel Defense Force Chaplaincy* 90, (1964): 68-73, argues that even after the destruction of the Temple and the dissolution of the Sanhedrin, witnesses to the appearance of the new moon were invited to visit, eat, and offer their testimony, and festive meals continued to be practiced within the family. See also Joseph Tabory, *Jewish Festivals in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud* (Hebrew) (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 2000), 39-40, who suggests that the festive meals referred to in the Bible are not conclusive evidence, and that these meals were meant to honor – and not to sanctify – the day. Some argue that the ritual of the Rosh Hodesh festive meal was practiced only in Israel, and not in Babylonia.

<sup>9</sup> See Samuel I 20:18-26; Kings II 4:23.

<sup>10</sup> See TB *Rosh Hashana* 16b.

<sup>11</sup> See Isaiah 1:13-14 and Amos 8:5.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Mishnah *Megillah* 4:2; TB *Hagigah* 18a; *Shabbat* 24a; *Arakhin* 10b. Other sources in the early rabbinic literature argue that people did, in fact, abstain from work on Rosh Hodesh. For an overview of the sources, see Mordekhai Piron, “*Rosh Hodesh Be-Mikrot Ha-Talmud ve-ha-Midrash*” (Hebrew), *Mahanayim – Journal of the Israel Defense Force Chaplaincy* 90 (1964), 38-41; Tabory, *Jewish Festivals* 36.

<sup>13</sup> Tractate *Soferim* 19b: “On the New Moon, the association of elders, leaders, and students were assembled in session from the time of the afternoon service onwards, until the sun had set and the moon appeared in the night [sky]. It is necessary to say [after the ceremonial meal] in the benediction over the wine: ‘Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who created the fruit of the vine. Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has revealed the secret of the renewal of the moon, Who did instruct and teach us the [courses of] the seasons, New Moons, and Festivals, and Who appointed men of understanding, who determine the times [of the New Moons and Festivals]. You, our Rock, have weighed and calculated the minutest divisions of time whereby those New Moons and

According to witness testimony, the declaration of the new moon continued in the early rabbinic period, after the destruction of the Temple.<sup>14</sup> An elaborate method of informing the scattered Jewish communities of the new month through bonfires was developed, but this ritual was abolished due to difficulties posed by the Cuthites; thereafter, the bonfires were replaced with messengers.<sup>15</sup> The consecration of the new month through witness testimony was completely discontinued during the Amoraic period (approximately 220-550 C.E.), perhaps as a result of a Christian decree prohibiting the practice.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the institution of a set and accurate calendar made the entire ritual of witnesses unnecessary. Furthermore, I would suggest that the social reality of the Jews in the Diaspora simply did not allow for the observance of a vacation on every Rosh Hodesh. The Talmud suggests that a *haftara* is not read on Rosh Hodesh because congregants must rush off to work,<sup>17</sup> and it is therefore unlikely that they had time for festive meals or could afford to abstain from labor.

At that point, almost all of the rituals and practices associated with Rosh Hodesh were no longer observed, and the Rabbis made no attempt to institute or substitute other rituals to give the day a purpose and importance in the absence of the Temple and Jewish sovereignty. Rosh Hodesh became a hollow holiday, commemorated every

---

Festivals are determined, as it is written, 'Who appointed the moon for seasons; the sun knows his going down,' and it also states, 'For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make.' And one concludes with, 'Blessed are You, O Lord, Who sanctifies Israel and the New Moons.' [Then one says,] 'O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good; on this day, we all in Jerusalem rejoice and are happy in the All-present. May Elijah the prophet soon come to us; may the king Messiah cause to spring forth in our days the [happy] time, like the years when the Temple will be rebuilt, and may joyous occasions multiply in Israel.' And the people answer and say 'Amen.' The prayer is then continued, 'May good tidings multiply in Israel, may happy days multiply in Israel, may disciples of the Torah multiply in Israel. Consecrated is the New Moon, consecrated at the beginning of the month, consecrated in its proper time, consecrated in its intercalation, consecrated according to the Torah, consecrated according to the Halakhah, consecrated in the celestial regions, consecrated in the terrestrial regions, consecrated in the land of Israel, consecrated in Zion, consecrated in Jerusalem, consecrated in all the habitations of Israel, consecrated by the order of our Rabbis, consecrated in the House of Assembly. O, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good.' The [reader] says, 'You are all blessed.' After every benediction, moreover, [the reader] says, 'O, give thanks unto the Lord for He is good,' except after the benedictions of the Levites."

<sup>14</sup> The Mishnah in *Rosh Hashana* chapter 2 describes this process in great detail. For example, *mishnah* 2:8 describes the shapes of the moon that R. Gamliel prepared so that witnesses could identify which shape they saw.

<sup>15</sup> *Rosh Hashana* 2:3.

<sup>16</sup> This is the suggestion of Tabory, *Jewish Festivals*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> TB *Megillah* 21a.

month only by a limited number of additional prayers and by a special Torah reading in the synagogue.<sup>18</sup>

Shavuot, it seems, should have followed the same trajectory as Rosh Hodesh. As a festival essentially bound to the Temple and the agriculture of the land of Israel, it should have faded into obsolescence following the destruction and the subsequent exile. Nevertheless, Shavuot continued to maintain its importance, while *Rosh Hodesh* descended into obscurity. This difference, I contend, is due to the fact that the Rabbis invested Shavuot with new meaning and rituals, imbuing it with life, while Rosh Hodesh was not assigned any new customs or practices.

### Custom and Ritual

While the term “*minhag*” (pl. *minhagim*) is often used to refer to both custom and ritual, Charles Leibman argues that it is necessary to distinguish between the two:

Religious ritual connects the participant to some transcendent presence. It provides a bridge to God by engaging the participant in an act that God has commanded. At the very least, it is efficacious in the sense that it is pleasing to God or avoids God’s displeasure. But it only produces the desired results when performed correctly... [Ceremony] affirms the individual’s membership in the order. But since the ceremony is not deemed to be commanded by God, it need not be performed in as precise or stylized a manner as ritual. Because it is a consciously social act and a representation of a social order, it is more amenable to change than ritual. Since it is not perceived as preordained, those in charge are responsible for its suitability and appropriateness. Ceremony is a symbol.<sup>19</sup>

Despite this distinction, in rabbinic Judaism, the enactments of the Rabbis are considered the will of God Himself. Accordingly, if a *minhag* appears in the codes of Jewish law, even if it is only practiced by individual ethnic groups, it can be categorized

---

<sup>18</sup> While the codes of Jewish law write of some sort of festive meal on Rosh Hodesh, this practice was not observed.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Leibman, “Ritual, Ceremony, and Reconstruction of Judaism in the United States,” in Roberta Rosenberg and Chaim Waxman (eds.), *Jews in America* (Brandeis University Press: Hanover and London, 1999), 307-310.

as ritual. In contrast, self-introduced *minhagim* can be identified in Leibman's second category.

Social anthropologists have discussed the importance of ritual extensively. Fredrick Bird writes:

[Ritual implies] symbolic acts that are intrinsically valued and usually repeated, ritual actors trying to behave in keeping with expected characters and roles by using stylized gestures and words. Whenever we act ritually, we use prepared oral or written scripts that in varying detail, spell out how we should speak, gesture and place ourselves.<sup>20</sup>

These scripts are, as a rule, prepared by others and adopted by the ritual actor. Bird explains that when a person acts out his role, he simultaneously communicates a message both to himself and others:

Ritual is a primary vehicle for communicating the highly valued beliefs and moral codes that, together, regulate communal life... Rituals are models for how men and women, parents and children, and members of the community should interact. Life cycle rituals help define and order life through stages from birth through adolescence, marriage, middle age, old age, and death. Seasonal rituals establish a pattern for the year, setting aside certain periods as especially important. Weekly rituals organize everyday life in terms of weeks and weekends. In all these ways, rituals establish patterns and regulate social interactions.<sup>21</sup>

Mary Douglas further develops this concept in her discussion of the Bog Irish:

For communication about religion to take place, the structure of the symbols must be able to express something relevant to the social order. If a people takes a symbol that originally meant one thing and twists it to mean something else, and energetically holds on to that subverted symbol, its meanings for their personal life must be profound.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, when rituals are preformed, there is a basis for social solidarity; when rituals are dissolved, the collective message and its actors' unity is threatened.

---

<sup>20</sup> Fredrick Bird, "Ritual as a Communicative Action," in Jack Lightstone, Fredrick Bird, et.al. (eds.), *Ritual and Ethnic Identity* (Wilfred University Press: Waterloo, Ontario, 1995), 23-52. Bird does not differentiate between ritual and custom.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (Pantheon: New York, 1982), 38.

Clifford Geertz discusses how the absence or failure of ritual can devastate a culture; the disintegration of ritual leads to social disintegration or cultural demoralization. He writes:

[Ritual] reinforces the traditional social ties between individuals; it stresses the way in which the social structure of a group is strengthened and perpetuated through the ritualistic or mythic symbolization of the underlying social values upon which it rests.<sup>23</sup>

In the Javanese village that Geertz studied, economic stability demanded technical cooperation among the residents, a sense of community or communal harmony among the self-contained families, maintained through certain burial rituals. But “cultural decay has led to social fragmentation; loss of a vigorous folk tradition has weakened the moral ties between individuals.”<sup>24</sup> Geertz argues that despite the loss of these rituals, the group’s social life was not on the verge of total collapse – “Everyday social interaction does not limp along with suppressed bitterness and deep uncertainty such as we have seen focused around burial.”<sup>25</sup> This particular ritual was not one of social and cultural disintegration, but rather a source of social and cultural conflict over the proper way to perform the burial rituals.

Geertz further writes about changes in ritual – and the attendant tensions – that result from changed circumstances, such as when urbanites maintain the cultural practices of their rural ancestors: “Amid a radically more complex social environment, he clings noticeably to the symbols which guided him or his parents through life in rural society.”<sup>26</sup> Geertz concludes:

But a ritual is not just a pattern of meaning; it is also a form of social interaction. Thus, in addition to creating cultural ambiguity, the attempt to bring a religious pattern from a relatively less differentiated rural background into an urban context also gives rise to social conflict, simply because the kind of social integration demonstrated by the pattern is not congruent with the major patterns of integration in the society generally. The way the Kampong people go about maintaining solidarity in everyday

---

<sup>23</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books: New York, 1973), 142.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

life is quite different from the way the *Salamtan* [a religious ritual] insists that they should go about maintaining it... Thus, when an occasion arises which demands sacralization, a life-cycle transition, a holiday, or serious illness, the religious form which must be employed acts not with but against the grain of social equilibrium.<sup>27</sup>

Greetz's theory, I believe, explains the development of Rosh Hodesh. The secular urban society in which the Jew now found himself in the Diaspora demanded new and different approaches and consideration by the Rabbis. To attribute new meaning, purpose, and rituals to Rosh Hodesh would have entailed social-cultural stress and religious tension, as described by Greetz. The one-day-a-month vacation that was possible in the agricultural culture and Temple society of the Land of Israel would be nearly impossible to reproduce in the rapidly changing lifestyle of the Jews in the Diaspora.

Ritual, however, does not serve the purely functional purpose of maintaining social stability as the above-mentioned scholars have argued. Indeed, many scholars maintain that there is little real proof for the functionalist approach, and that the theory does not explain the extensive differences between cultures. Nissan Rubin emphasizes the significance or meaning of ritual (*mashmauyot*), rather than its function; the meaning of implicit and explicit symbols can be clarified even though they differ from culture to culture.<sup>28</sup>

Because Shavuot was instituted on the same level as the other festivals, prohibiting work<sup>29</sup> and entailing joy,<sup>30</sup> the Rabbis preferred not to allow it to become a hollow festival. Instead, they attributed new meaning and purpose to the day to make it relevant even after the destruction and exile. With this new identity, rituals and practices were incorporated, thereby maintaining the observance of the festival and ensuring solidarity in the community. The new meaning assigned to Shavuot was its identity as the Time of the Giving of the Torah.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>28</sup> Nissan Rubin, *The End of Life* (Hebrew) (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad: Israel, 1997), 50.

<sup>29</sup> Numbers 28:26.

<sup>30</sup> Deuteronomy 16:10-12.



## The Time of the Giving of the Torah (*Zeman Matan Toratenu*)

In his discussion of the pilgrimage festivals during the Temple period, Shmuel Safrai writes that there is no historical evidence prior to the Talmudic period that Shavuot is associated with the giving/receiving of the Torah.<sup>31</sup> Despite this lack of evidence, R. David Zevi Hoffman attempts to demonstrate through deductive reasoning that Shavuot was celebrated as the festival of the giving of the Torah not only during the Biblical and Temple period, but even by the Israelites in the desert.<sup>32</sup> Hoffman cites a *mishnah* stating that the Israelites celebrated Shavuot in the desert, and that later, during the Temple period, the holiday was celebrated by the Diaspora Jews in the same manner as in the Land of Israel.<sup>33</sup> This, Hoffman argues, can only be justified if the festival is coupled with an historical event, since Temple rituals and practices were limited exclusively to the Temple. Hoffman writes that although Philo and Josephus, who are known for their accounts of early Jewish history, do not refer to Shavuot as the festival of *Matan Torah*, this is because they only reflected on what Scripture presented explicitly. Therefore, although they were aware that Shavuot was also the holiday of the Receiving of the Torah, they chose to ignore this aspect in their writings. Hoffman cites additional sources in Philo and Josephus that take a similar approach to other holidays.

Hoffman further notes that the Rabbis of the Great Assembly, who lived in the two centuries prior to the destruction, identified Shavuot as the Time of the Receiving of the Torah rather than as the Festival of the Harvest<sup>34</sup> in the text of the *amidah* prayer that they had produced. Moreover, the Hebrew word “*Atzeret*” – “Assembly” – which was used from the time of the Mishnah to refer to Shavuot, is similar to the term that the Torah uses to refer to the giving of the Torah, “*Yom Ha-Kahal*.”<sup>35</sup> Hoffman concludes

---

<sup>31</sup> Shmuel Safrai, *Pilgrimage at the Time of the Second Temple* (Hebrew) (Akadamon: Jerusalem, 1985), 189.

<sup>32</sup> David Zevi Hoffman, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (Hebrew) (Mosad Harav Kook: Jerusalem, 1954), vol. 2, 158-68.

<sup>33</sup> Mishnah *Menahot* 4:3.

<sup>34</sup> The designation for Shavuot in the *amidah* parallels that of Passover – the Holiday of Matzot – and Sukkot – the Holiday of Our Joy.

<sup>35</sup> Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:4, and 18:16.

that, lacking the harvest holiday, the Jews who returned to Israel from the Babylonian exile (c. 538 BCE), referred to Shavuot as *Atzeret* to recall this association with the giving of the Torah.<sup>36</sup>

Hoffman cites a biblical passage concerning the reign of King Asa that describes how the Jews gathered in Jerusalem in the third month (Sivan) to sacrifice and “enter into a covenant to the Lord.”<sup>37</sup> Like the assembly at Sinai, the celebration was accompanied by the blowing of trumpets and horns. Hoffman argues that that this gathering occurred during the festival of Shavuot; all the activities described seem to parallel those at Mount Sinai, suggesting that even during the period of the First Temple, Shavuot was celebrated as the time of *matan Torah*.

Despite his citations indicating that Shavuot was always associated with the giving of the Torah, Hoffman admits that there is no empirical evidence to substantiate such claims. Furthermore, his conclusions are dependent upon the acceptance of the Oral Law, the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible.

Indeed, it appears that, to a certain extent, the Rabbis were responsible for reinventing the holiday of Shavuot, injecting it with new meaning and purpose. In the Bible, the term “*Atzeret*” refers to the last day of Passover and Sukkot,<sup>38</sup> but the Tannaim (Rabbis of the Mishnaic period) adapted it as an alternate name for Shavuot. Nachman Tselnik notes that the Mishnah uses this term 23 times, and it appears 39 times in the Tosephta.<sup>39</sup> For example; “Until when do they plow an orchard during the year preceding the Sabbatical year? ... The House of Hillel says until *Atzeret*;<sup>40</sup> “On *Atzeret*, they read [the Torah selection of] Seven Weeks [Deuteronomy 16:9].”<sup>41</sup> The Amoraim (Rabbis of the Talmudic period) continued to use this term as a reference for

---

<sup>36</sup> A number of biblical commentaries draw this association as well. See, for example, *Ha-Ketav ve-ha-Kabalah*, Deuteronomy 9:10. For further discussion and additional commentaries, see Nachman Tselnik, *Atzeret* (Hebrew) (The Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Jewish Law: Jerusalem, 1973); Hayyim Hamiel, “*Hag ha-Shavuot ba-Mikra*” (Hebrew), in *Ma’ayanot: Shavuot* (Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization: Israel, 1957), 21-22.

<sup>37</sup> Chronicles II 15:8-15.

<sup>38</sup> Deuteronomy 16:8 and Leviticus 23:36.

<sup>39</sup> Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Mishnah *Shevi’it* 1:1.

<sup>41</sup> Mishnah *Megillah* 3:5.

Shavuot. For example, Onkelos translates the word “Shavuot” as “Atzeret” in his translation of the Bible.<sup>42</sup> In a late *midrash*, we find:

R. Tuvia the son of R. Eliezar of blessed memory stated: I have reviewed the themes of festivals [in Scripture] and I have not found that the festival of Shavuot is called *Azeret*. Everywhere, [however,] our Sages of blessed memory called Shavuot *Atzeret*, and this is the language of the translation that Onkelos the convert wrote on the word “*be-shavuotekhem*” (“in your weeks”) – “*be-atzeretekhem*.”<sup>43</sup>

The Babylonian Talmud cites a dispute regarding the exact date of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, citing proof-texts to conclude that it was on the sixth or seventh day of the month of Sivan. The holiday of Shavuot, which falls fifty days after the first day of Passover, coincides with these days.<sup>44</sup> Elsewhere, the Talmud creates a direct relationship between the festival and the giving of the Torah:

R. Elazar says: All authorities concede in the case of *Atzeret* that we require also an assembly for you (*lakhem*). What is the reason? It is the day on which the Torah was given... Mar the son of Ravina would fast the entire year except for *Atzeret*, Purim, and Yom Kippur eve. On *Atzeret* He refrained from fasting because that is the day on which the Torah was given.”<sup>45</sup>

Letting blood on the eve of any holiday causes weakness, but on the eve of *Atzeret*, it is actually dangerous. Therefore, the rabbis decreed that one should not let blood on the eve of any holiday because of the concern that one might come to do so on the eve of the festival of *Atzeret*, when there is actual danger. For on this day a wind blows whose name is Slaughtering, for had Israel not accepted the Torah, this wind would have slaughtered them, their flesh and their blood.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Onkelos, Number 28:26. This is in accordance with the scholarly view that Targum Onkolos was an Amoraic and not Tanaic document.

<sup>43</sup> *Pesikta Zutra, Pinhas*.

<sup>44</sup> *Shabbat* 86b.

<sup>45</sup> *Pesahim* 68b. Three views are presented in this passage regarding how the pilgrimage festivals should be properly celebrated. 1) One should devote himself entirely to the service of God. 2) One should devote the entire day to enjoyment, such as eating and drinking. 3) Half the day should be in the service of God and half for personal enjoyment. This discussion is based on two passages in Scripture: “There should be an assembly (*Atzeret*) for you” (Numbers 29:35) and “There shall be an assembly to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 16:8).

<sup>46</sup> *Shabbat* 129b.

On *Atzeret* we read [the Torah selection of] “Seven weeks,” as stated in the *mishnah*, and conclude with the *haftara* from the prophet Habakkuk (2:20-3:19). Others say: On *Atzeret* we read the passage “In the third month” (Exodus 19:1-20:23) and conclude with the *haftara* from the passage of the Heavenly chariot (Ezekiel 1:1-28, 3:12). Nowadays, when there are two days of the festival [in the Diaspora], we follow both views but in the reverse order.<sup>47</sup>

These are the earliest sources pointing to the association between the celebration of Shavuot and the day of the Giving of the Torah. While the Rabbis of the Talmud did not institute any rituals or practices to commemorate this relationship, the Torah reading chosen for Shavuot reflects the new theological mission of the Shavuot holiday as the holiday of the Giving of the Torah.

In formulating the text of the prayers on Shavuot, R. Amram Gaon clearly writes that the purpose of the celebration of Shavuot is to honor the day that the Torah was given to the Jewish people:

And one stands during the prayer [*amidah*] and chants [the blessings of] “Patriarchs,” “God’s Might,” and “Holiness of God’s Name,” just as one does on Passover, except that one recites, “This day of the festival of Shavuot, the time of the Giving of our Torah.”<sup>48</sup>

## Shavuot Rituals and Customs

As noted above, the Rabbis instilled the festival of Shavuot with new theological meaning so that it would not become obsolete in the wake of the destruction of the Temple. New meaning, however, is insufficient; while theory and theology can stimulate the desire for a living experience, it is ritual that blows the breath of life into the festival. As Liebman indicated, ritual practices help to identify with the theological purpose of the holiday. Bird notes:

---

<sup>47</sup> *Megillah* 31a. Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 71, suggests that the selection from Habakkuk alludes to the giving of the Torah, making it relevant for Shavuot, but I do not find this argument convincing. The second alternative reading of “In the third month,” however, is a direct association with the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

<sup>48</sup> R. Saadia Gaon in his *siddur* does not explicitly identify the festival of Shavuot with the holiday of the Giving of the Torah, but other factors indicate that there is a connection between the two. Immediately after the few words he writes on Shavuot, we find two liturgical poems (*piyutim*), both of which refer to the 613 *mitzvot* and the fulfillment of the Torah laws.

To express identification with these characters, ritual actors use various techniques: wearing special clothes, putting on make-up or masks, covering or uncovering their heads, wearing broad or narrow shawls, and assuming whatever tones or voice or mentalities are considered appropriate.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, for example, *matza* is eaten on Passover to remind us of the food eaten by the Israelites when they left Egypt, and the participant can thereby identify with the Exodus through this food ritual. On Sukkot, the Jew builds a *sukkah*, just as the Israelites did during their journey through the desert. The observance of Shavuot similarly became associated with rituals, and different interpretations were given to these customs in order to identify both the ritual performer and the ritual with the purpose and significance of the holiday.

As we shall see below, an important consideration in the study of ritual and custom is cross-cultural influence, as the geographical location and availability of specific items play a significant role in the choice of the ritual items and activities. For example, water, blood, and fire are ubiquitous, and therefore prevalent in the practices of most cultures. As Mary Douglas notes, food is a common and required element for human existence, a basic prop in ritual plays,<sup>50</sup> but the choice of which food to use depends on geographical location and seasonal availability. In an agricultural society, the seasons of the year and the agricultural cycle play an important role in identifying the ritual props. Thus, different religious groups in the same geographical location may share similar props to act out their religious rituals and customs, and it is often difficult to determine which group has influenced the other.

The festival of Shavuot encompasses numerous rituals. Some are performed in the synagogue, such as the reading of the book of Ruth, the chanting of the *Akdamut* liturgical poem, the recitation of the *Azharot* prayers, decorating with greenery, and water rituals. Other Shavuot customs are performed by the family or individual, such as the consumption of dairy products, decoration of the home with greenery, the

---

<sup>49</sup> Bird, "Ritual as a Communicative Action," 24.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities* (Russell Sage Foundation: New York, 1984).

nocturnal Torah study vigil, and the beginning of Torah studies for children. We now turn to the evolution of these customs and the kinds of meaning attributed to them.

## Dairy Products

As Douglas notes, many religious rituals – Jewish and otherwise – include some form of feasting, for eating food is a communicative activity, and not simply a means of consuming nourishment.<sup>51</sup> In the context of ritual eating, food or a specific category of foods assume symbolic significance. These are not necessarily the foods that one would usually choose to eat; they might even be more expensive or considered treats. The ritual consumption of these foods, argues Bird, establishes a sense of intimacy:

Those who eat together regularly are either families or like families. By eating together, people reconstitute themselves as identifiable groups, represent themselves to each other as such and express their sense of connectedness.<sup>52</sup>

This social result is accomplished through the traditional family festival meal on Shavuot, which is further associated with the practices of the pilgrimage festivals. In addition, it is customary to include a meal featuring a special type of food on the holiday – dairy products.

## The *Rishonim* – Early Rabbinic Authorities

The earliest reference to the ritual of eating dairy products and honey on Shavuot is found in the writings of R. Avigdor Tzarfati (France, c. 1200-1270) who writes:

Everyone asks why we eat *pladen* [a dairy fruit cake] on Shavuot. This is suggested in the Torah (Numbers 28:26): “On the day of the first fruits when you offer a cereal offering of new grain to the Lord at your feast of weeks.” The first Hebrew letter of the words “new grain to the Lord at your feast of weeks” (*hadashah la-hashem be-shevuatekhem*) spell the word *halav* [milk] on Shavuot.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bird, “Ritual as a Communicative Action,” 39.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu* p. 623 ff. 1.

This suggests that this was a custom popularly practiced in France.<sup>54</sup>

R. Isaac Tirna (Czechoslovakia, late 14<sup>th</sup>-early 15<sup>th</sup> century) offers the same explanation as R. Tzarfati in his book of *minhagim*,<sup>55</sup> but he refers to eating all dairy products and not only “*pladim*.” Later, the *Kol Bo* (Southern France) explained that the reason for this ritual is that the Torah is compared to milk and honey in the Song of Songs.<sup>56</sup> Thus, the *Kol Bo* directly links the ritual with the holiday of Shavuot’s significance as the Time of the Giving of the Torah.<sup>57</sup> R. Aharon Ha-Kohen of Lunel (c.1325), the author of *Orhot Hayyim*,<sup>58</sup> offers a similar explanation, as does R. Moshe ben Yehudah Bakir. R. Yitzhak Tessler cites an unpublished manuscript by R. Elazar Rokeah of Worms (c.1160-c.1238), who writes: “My Father, my teacher, saw that his uncle R. Menahem, ate cheese before meat on the holiday of *Atzeret*.”<sup>59</sup>

It seems that by the time of the *Maharil* (Germany, c. 1385–1427),<sup>60</sup> the consumption of dairy products of some sort on the festival of the Giving of the Torah was an established and accepted custom in the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition. In his Laws of Shavuot, the *Maharil* discusses the halakhic problem with using milk obtained from a cow during the festiva to consume it on Shavuot, ruling that it may be drunk on the second day of the holiday if the cow was milked by a non-Jew on the first day. He does not, however explicitly discuss the relationship of the custom of eating dairy products to the laws of Shavuot. In the laws of *Hallah*, however, he makes direct reference to the practice, discussing what should be done if it has been forgotten to have a separate

---

<sup>54</sup> Dr. Ephraim Kanafogel (Yeshiva University) pointed out to me that although R. Tzarfati was born in France, he studied in Germany, spent time in Italy, and finally served as Rabbi in Vienna.

<sup>55</sup> Published in Venice in 1616.

<sup>56</sup> Song of Songs 4:11.

<sup>57</sup> *Kol Bo*, section 52. The *Kol Bo* was first published in Naples in 1492. The *Kol Bo* cites additional Shavuot practices as well, such as placing saffron in *matza* because it makes people happy, and baking elongated bread with four heads in remembrance of the two loaves offered on Shavuot in the Temple. He further suggests that the latter practice is intended to recall the zodiac sign of the twins, the zodiac of the month of Sivan.

<sup>58</sup> Published in Florence in 1750. Some argue that the *Kol Bo* is an abridged form and the forerunner of the *Orhot Hayyim* and that both works were composed by the same author.

<sup>59</sup> Yitzhak Tessler, *Peninei Minhag* (Hebrew) (Monsey, New York, 2008), 282.

<sup>60</sup> First published in Sabbioneta, Italy in 1556.

*hallah* on the holiday of Shavuot, “when it is everywhere traditional to bake a large ‘*pladin*’ that is called Sinai...”<sup>61</sup>

Other early rabbinic authorities do not discuss this *minhag*. Although the practice was well known, it was not considered as an established ritual until the publication of the above monographs, presumably during the period of the later rabbinical authorities (approximately 1400-1650).

While R. Joseph Caro, representing the Sephardic community, does not include this custom in his code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*, the Rama, representing the Ashkenazic community, writes that it is customary to eat dairy products on Shavuot:

It is the custom in several localities to eat dairy products on the first day of Shavuot. It appears to me that the reason is that it is similar to the two cooked foods which are taken on the eve of Passover in remembrance of the Passover offering and remembrance of the festive offering. Similarly, one eats a milk food and subsequently a meat food on Shavuot night, and it is necessary to accompany the meal with two loaves of bread onto the table, which is instead of the altar. This provides a remembrance of the two loaves of bread that were offered on *Yom ha-Bikkurim* (the Holiday of the First Fruits).<sup>62</sup>

### **The *Aharonim* – Later Rabbinical Authorities**

A pamphlet entitled *Matame Moshe*<sup>63</sup> cites eighty-one rabbinical elucidations, primarily suggested by later rabbinic authorities, to explain the custom of eating dairy products on Shavuot. A full discussion of these sources is obviously beyond the scope of this article, but I will present a number of the most popular rationalizations noted therein.

The *Magen Avraham* writes that “There are many reasons [for eating dairy on Shavuot].”<sup>64</sup> He explains that he found in the *Zohar*<sup>65</sup> that it took seven weeks for the

---

<sup>61</sup> The early rabbinical authorities listed are cited in Gedalia Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu Be-Yadenu* (Hebrew) (Mercoz Halacha: Monsey, NY, 2005), 623-6. Oberlander notes that an examination of the *Rishonim* who discuss this *minhag* shows that in Provence the Rabbis refer to specific dairy foods, while in other parts of France and in Germany, the reference is to dairy products in general.

<sup>62</sup> Rama, *Orah Hayyim* 494:3.

<sup>63</sup> Author unknown, 1993.

<sup>64</sup> *Magen Avraham* 494:3. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner born in Poland 1634 and died there in 1682.

<sup>65</sup> *Zohar*, Leviticus 97:2.



children of Israel to purify themselves between Passover and Shavuot, just as a woman waits for seven clean days during her *niddah* (menstrual impurity) period. Quoting the Talmud *Bekhorot* 6b, the *Magen Avraham* claims that it is known that in some women blood can turn to milk, symbolizing the transformation of judgment into mercy. Thus, although there is no direct connection between milk and Shavuot, the fact that it is the Time of the Receiving of the Torah as well as the connection between milk and mercy explains the custom of eating dairy products on Shavuot. The *Magen Avraham* concludes that “The custom of our forefathers [has the validity of the] Torah.”

The *Peri Hadash* challenges the *Magen Avraham’s* reasoning, claiming that his argument is weak. The *Peri Hadash* suggests that since Shavuot is the day on which the Torah was given to the children of Israel, we consume the three liquids to which the Torah is compared (as per Talmud *Ta’anit* 7a) – wine, water, and milk (products).

R. Yisrael Meir Ha-Kohen Kagan offers a different explanation in his *Mishnah Berurah*:

I have heard, in addition, on the authority of a great Torah scholar, a correct reason for this practice. He points out that at the time when the children of Israel stood on Mount Sinai and received the Torah, when they descended from the mountain and returned to their homes, they did not have anything but milk food available that could be eaten immediately. This is because meat requires much preparation: slaughtering with an inspected knife, as the Lord commanded, purging the threads of forbidden fat and the veins, rinsing, and salting. It would also have been necessary for them to cook with new utensils, as the utensils that they had previously cooked in within the previous twenty-four hours became forbidden for their use. Consequently, they chose to eat milk food at that time. We eat milk food on Shavuot in remembrance of that.<sup>66</sup>

The *Mishnah Berurah’s* explanation is the most widely known and agreed on, most probably due to the widespread acceptance of the authority of its author.

The *Imrei Pinchas* offers an additional explanation. He writes that it is a *mitzvah* to have a festive meal (*se’udat mitzvah*) when one finishes performing a *mitzvah*. Since

---

<sup>66</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 494:9. Translation based on the Feldheim translation of the *Mishnah Berurah*.

Shavuot falls at the completion of the *mitzvah* of counting 50 days from the beginning of Passover (*sefirat ha-omer*), the celebration should involve a festive meal. If meat were to be consumed, however, there would be no way to distinguish this special meal from the meat meal required on a festival. A dairy meal was therefore introduced to distinguish this *se'udat mitzvah* from an ordinary holiday meal.

Gedalia Oberlander suggests that Shavuot may have become associated with dairy products as a result of another custom mentioned by the *Rishonim*. The *Rokeah*, *Kol Bo*, *Orhot Hayyim*, *Sefer Ha-Asufot Ashkenazi*, and *Maharam Mi-Rottenberg* all note the ritual introduction of youngsters to the study of Torah, at which time foods made of milk and honey were prepared, and the children licked the honey that had been spread upon the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Oberlander suggests that at a later period, the practice was split; honey was used for the educational experience, and the consumption of dairy products was moved to Shavuot.<sup>67</sup>

An additional source of the custom is also possible. The celebration of cheese and milk as part of an agricultural festival was originally associated with the Roman pagan holiday of Parilia, when milk was consumed and used in the worship of the pastoral god Pales. This festival was observed during the harvest time (April 21), a period of rejuvenation marking the end of winter and the beginning of spring or summer, and dairy products were perceived as directly related to this regeneration.<sup>68</sup> The pagan rituals and practices celebrated in the Middle East had great cross-cultural influence, as every religion needed to represent the same agricultural phenomena;

---

<sup>67</sup> Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu*, 627.

<sup>68</sup> Wikipedia Encyclopedia describes the ceremony as follows: "The rural structure of the festival is carried out by the shepherd himself. After the sheep pen had been decorated with green branches and a wreath draped on the gate, the remainder of the ceremony took place in a sequential fashion. At the first sign of daylight, the shepherd would purify the sheep by sweeping the pen and then constructing a bonfire of straw, olive branches, laurel, and sulfur. The noises produced by this burning combination were interpreted as a beneficial omen. The shepherd would jump through this flame, dragging his sheep along with him. Offerings of millet, cakes, and milk were then presented before Pales, marking the second segment of the ceremony. After these offerings, the shepherd would wet his hands with dew, face the east, and repeat a prayer four times. Such prayers requested Pales' assistance in freeing the shepherd and the flock from evils brought about by accidental wrongdoings (e.g. trespassing on sacred grounds and removing water from a sacred water source). The final portion of the rural festival made use of the beverage burranica, a combination of milk and sapa (boiled wine). After consumption of this beverage, the shepherd would leap through the fire three times, bringing an end to the ceremony."

while the gods referred to differed, the props were similar. Furthermore, once a ritual has been accepted by a group or religion, it is difficult to force its members to abandon it, and the group or religious leaders therefore retain the same symbols while giving them new meaning or purpose.<sup>69</sup> Thus, during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, an agricultural festival called Witsunday or White Sunday was commonly observed in Central Europe. The festival was usually directly related to the Christian Pentecost, considered the birthday of the Church, which was celebrated 50 days after Easter. Another name for Whitsunday was the “Holiday of Cheese and Milk,” as the earlier traditions of the time period were still maintained.<sup>70</sup>

Theodor Gaster writes:

In reality, cheese and dairy dishes are eaten at this time because the festival has a pastoral as well as an agricultural significance. Thus, at the analogous Scottish celebrations of Beltane on May 1, dairy dishes are commonly consumed, and churning and cheese-making are a common feature of spring harvest festivals in many parts of the world. In Macedonia, for instance, the Sunday before Lent is known as “Cheese Sunday;” in several districts of Germany, cheese and dairy dishes are (or were) standard fare at Whitsun.<sup>71</sup>

Accordingly, on Shavuot, the Jews of Europe were certainly not celebrating an agricultural festival, but rather the festival of the giving of the Torah. Nevertheless, there was no need to entirely eliminate the custom of eating dairy products that was prevalent during that time of year; instead, it was incorporated into the central concept of Shavuot, *matan Torah*.

## Decorating the Home with Trees, Greens, and Flowers

---

<sup>69</sup> See Simcha Fishbane, *The Shtiebelization of Modern Jewry* (Academic Studies Press: Boston, 2011), chapter 2.

<sup>70</sup> In England (Cooper’s Hill, near Brockworth, Gloucestershire), the tradition of cheese rolling was celebrated; a large round wheel of cheese was rolled down a steep hill and people chased after it. In St. Braivels, Gloucestershire, basketfuls of bread and cheese are still thrown from a wall near the old castle; the local population has been practicing this custom since the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Similar activities involving cheese are practiced in other districts of Britain as well.

<sup>71</sup> Theodor Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (William Morrow and Co: New York, 1953), 77.

**You need one sentence here stating that vegetation, greens and flowers also play a role in the celebration of Shavuot before you go into the generalization of the use of these in Judaism/Jewish customs; otherwise it is an excessively long digression on the subject before linking it to Shavuot.**

The use of vegetation, greens, and flowers in religious ritual is a natural phenomenon, as these items are easily accessible and inexpensive, as well as being symbolic of life, renewal, and birth. This symbolism of vegetation was primarily relevant to an agricultural society, especially at the onset of the summer and the fruit harvest.

The use of flowers in ritual played an important role in many cultures. In his research on the use of flowers, Jack Goody develops the concept of “flower culture,” according to which the symbolism of flowers differs according to the society, culture, religion, and historical time period. Goody argues that “The evidence for particular changes and differences of attitude has to be assessed in a wide historical and geographical context.”<sup>72</sup> In Western Europe, for example, flowers are primarily cultivated for decoration or ornamentation, while in parts of Africa and in non-Western societies, flowers are cultivated for functional purposes, such as creating fragrant water, fulfilling culinary and medical needs, and as gifts to the gods. In most places in the world, flowers – being merely decorative – are reserved for the wealthy; the poor save their money for necessities, rather than luxuries. Similarly, in rural societies, attention was traditionally directed towards raising crops and food supply, not towards cultivating or growing domesticated flowers (unless they were for commercial purposes).

Examination of pagan and Christian rituals reveals the consistent use of flowers and greens. For example, flowers play a common role at funerals, where they are placed on the body, on the coffin, or on the gravesite.

Based on the biblical verse, “And you shall not walk in the practices of the nation which I cast out before you,”<sup>73</sup> a major consideration of the Rabbis throughout the history of rabbinic literature is to build, sustain, and strengthen the walls that separate

---

<sup>72</sup> Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge University Press: Great Britain, 1994), 2-21.

<sup>73</sup> Leviticus 20:23.

the Jew and the gentile, thus preventing dangerous religious and social influences while strengthening allegiance to rabbinic authority.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Judaism either forbids or dissuades behavior or practices that duplicate non-Jewish conduct when performing religious rituals.<sup>75</sup> Accordingly, although fragrant flowers, myrtle leaves, and spices were often used in ancient times at funerals to conceal the odor of the decaying body, the use of flowers at funerals nowadays is discouraged, labeled “*darkhei ha-Emori*” or “*hukkat ha-goyim*,” behavior of the gentiles, which must not be emulated.<sup>76</sup>

Goody argues that the Talmud rejects the use of garlands and crowns of roses and thorns because of the association between flowers and pagan idolatry, and not out of a lack of knowledge of the flower culture in Egypt and Mesopotamia:

Israel took up specific attitudes towards the use of flowers, partly to discourage the worship of false gods, partly for more general diacritical reasons, and partly for wider theological ones that concerned the approach to divinity.<sup>77</sup>

Although Goody’s argument appears to be plausible, examination of the works of contemporary rabbinical adjudicators reveals that they are not of one opinion regarding whether to prohibit the use of flowers or simply discourage it. R. Ovadia Yosef, the former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel (1973-1983), writes a lengthy responsa to prove that use of flowers is not prohibited as *hukkat ha-goyim*, but recommends that the use of flowers at funerals not be allowed to become part of Israeli culture.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, R. Bezalel Zolty, the former Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of Jerusalem (1977-1982),

---

<sup>74</sup> Mary Douglas’s theory of grid group (*Cultural Bias* [Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland: London, 1979]) offers a theoretical framework for this argument.

<sup>75</sup> The gentile and his ways were often portrayed as evil and dangerous, to be avoided at all costs. For a discussion on this topic see Simcha Fishbane, *Deviancy in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Brill: Leiden, Boston, 2007), 141-63.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, TB *Betza* 6a; “*Darkhei ha-Emori*,” in *Talmudic Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem, 1956), vol. 7, 706-12, and “*Hukkat ha-Goyim*,” in *Talmudic Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem, 1983), vol. 17, 305-25. Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, discusses the use of flowers in religious rituals in different cultures and religions throughout history. See also Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (Jonathan David Publishers: New York, 1979), 18 and Nissan Rubin, *The End of Life*, 124-5.

<sup>77</sup> Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 44-49.

<sup>78</sup> *Responsa Yabia Omer*, volume 3, 190-5.

explicitly forbids the use of flowers at soldiers' funerals.<sup>79</sup> R. Yosef and R. Zolty cite different rabbinical authorities to support their approaches. While some forbid any practice with even a semblance of gentile behavior, others argue that if the ritual has a rational basis or has been the Jewish practice for many years, it is considered "Judaized" and permitted;<sup>80</sup> still others only prohibit those practices that are used in the gentiles' place of prayer.

It may be suggested that R. Yosef's less stringent view is based on the fact that the "flower culture" in Islamic countries was not used in mosques. Goody emphasizes that in contrast to Europe, a secular flower culture always flourished in the Islamic world. Flowers were featured in gardens and in Islamic literature and art; the fragrance of roses had many practical uses and provided substantial revenue for merchants. Flowers played no part in worship, however, for this would violate the Islamic prohibition against images. Accordingly, the use of flowers is more common in Sephardic communities. For example, on the Sabbath, the synagogue is often decorated with flowers, primarily around the Holy Ark. R. Zolty, in contrast, was influenced by his European roots, for in Europe, vegetation was commonly found in the church. Indeed, in Ashkenazic Jewish practices, the ritualistic use of flowers and greens is very limited.

The disagreement regarding whether the use of flowers in religious ritual constitutes *hukkat ha-goyim* is also relevant to the use of greens as decoration in the home and synagogue on Shavuot, a practice that is apparently quite ancient but for which the source is unclear.<sup>81</sup> The *Hidah*<sup>82</sup> cites the *Targum Sheni*, an Aramaic commentary on the Scroll of Esther, which presents Haman's view of Shavuot:

In the month of Sivan, two days of holiday are celebrated. They come to their synagogues, read *shema*, pray and read from their Torah scrolls, translate the prophets, and curse the king and ministers. They call this day Atzeret or Shavuot. They ascend to the rooftop of their synagogue

---

<sup>79</sup> See his article in *Noam* (1959), vol. 2, 161-70.

<sup>80</sup> Flowers and myrtle were also used in other Jewish rituals, such as weddings, but this custom is no longer practiced. See Nissan Rubin, *The Joy of Life* (Hebrew) (Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad: Israel, 2004), 208-9, who discusses the crowns made for the bride and groom from these materials.

<sup>81</sup> Many of the sources cited below were presented by Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu*, 573-604 and Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Mossad Ha-Rav Kook: Jerusalem, 1998), vol. 7, 140-54.

<sup>82</sup> *Birkei Yosef*, section 6.

and disseminate [roses] and apples. The congregants [children] collect them and the congregants say, “Just as we collect these roses and apples, so should gather their children from our children.” This is the day the Torah was given to our forefathers at Sinai.<sup>83</sup>

The first explicit mention of the practice of decorating the synagogue with greens on Shavuot is found in the writings of the *Maharil*, an early rabbinic authority in Germany in the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century:

It is the custom to spread on the floor of the synagogue the perfume from grasses and roses in honor of the joyfulness of the festival (*simhat ha-regel*). If Shavuot fell on Sunday, it was the custom of the Mahari Segel to spread the grass on Friday, before Shabbat.<sup>84</sup>

Because joy is particularly stressed on Shavuot, greens were spread on the floor to ensure cleanliness and good fragrance, contributing to a festive ambiance.<sup>85</sup>

A similar approach to that of the *Maharil* is demonstrated by other rabbinic authorities, such as R. Isaac Turna.<sup>86</sup> In his *Leket Yosher*, R. Yosef bar R. Moshe Hoshtat cites the practice of his teacher, R. Moshe Isserlin (author of *Terumat Ha-Deshen*), who would place scented grass not only in the synagogue, but also in his home. Accordingly, the ritual is not only a public practice designed to strengthen the social group, its loyalty, and the authority of its leaders,<sup>87</sup> but it is also a private or family custom. It is noteworthy that Simhat Torah, a festival that also celebrates the Torah, is solely a

---

<sup>83</sup> Targum Sheni, Esther 3:8. This translation is adapted from the translation found in *Patshegen Ha-Ketav*. It is not clear when the Targum Sheni was redacted, but scholars are of the opinion that it was probably completed in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century or early 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. For a detailed discussion of this source, see Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (1991), vol. 2, 245.

<sup>84</sup> Maharil, *Laws of Shavuot*. The Maharil also cites the practice of spreading grasses on the floor of the synagogue on Yom Kippur (*Laws of Yom Kippur*, 1), but for a different reason – so that those praying would not bow directly on the floor during the services.

Interestingly, scented spices or flowers were often distributed to congregants in the synagogue during the prayer service, a practice that was questioned by rabbinic authorities. It is first mentioned in the writings of R. Shimshon of Shantz, one of the Tosafists, in his commentary to Mishnah *Uktzin* 1:2. See also Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 249, who discusses the halakhic difficulties with this custom.

<sup>85</sup> R. Ephraim Margolit (19<sup>th</sup> century Europe) offers an elaborate description of this practice in his *Mateh Ephraim* 427: 14.

<sup>86</sup> *Laws of the Month of Sivan*.

<sup>87</sup> See Yair Eldan, *Excommunication, Death, and Mourning* (Hebrew) (Israel, 2011), 79.

community or synagogue holiday, while Shavuot is family-orientated as well, involving practices relating to food and decoration.

R. Joseph Caro does not codify this practice in his *Shulhan Arukh*. Oberlander argues that the custom of decorating the synagogue and home was practiced primarily in Germany; therefore Caro, who represents the Sephardic community, does not include it in his work.<sup>88</sup> The *Rama*, representing the Ashkenazic community, rules in his gloss that one should decorate the home and the synagogue by spreading greens as a means of symbolically celebrating and remembering the giving of the Torah (*zekher le-simhat matan Torah*) because Mount Sinai was allegedly surrounded by greens and flowers.<sup>89</sup> The *Rama* disregards the view of Shavuot as an agricultural holiday, focusing rather on its importance as the festival of the Receiving of the Torah.

R. Avraham Gombiner (c.1634-1682, Poland) introduces a further element of the custom. In his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh*, the *Magen Avraham*, he introduces the concept of using trees for decoration on Shavuot.<sup>90</sup> It is not clear whether he is referring to small trees or to branches. The *Magen Avraham* offers an additional rationalization for the custom of adorning the synagogue and home with trees, basing his reasoning upon a *mishnah* stating that the world is judged in accordance with the productivity of fruit trees on *Atzeret*:<sup>91</sup>

It is the custom [on Shavuot] to place trees in the synagogue and home. It seems to me that the reason is to remember that [the world] is judged on the [yield] of the fruit trees and one will pray for them.

Other rabbinical authorities offer a similar explanation, including R. Yeshaya Horowitz (Prague, 1560-Israel, 1630, preceding the *Magen Avraham*),<sup>92</sup> R. Yaakov Emden in his *Siddur Beit Yaakov*, the *Be'er Hetev* commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*,<sup>93</sup> the *Mishnah*

---

<sup>88</sup> Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu*, 574.

<sup>89</sup> Although this would seem to be factually inaccurate, the myth has become part of Jewish collective memory.

<sup>90</sup> *Magen Avraham, Orah Hayyim* 494:3.

<sup>91</sup> *Rosh Hashana* 1:2.

<sup>92</sup> *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* (The Shelah) Rabbi Yeshayah Horowitz born Prague 1560 and died Israel 1630.

<sup>93</sup> *Be'er Hetev* 494:7



*Berurah*,<sup>94</sup> and R. Sholom Mordechai Schwadron (Zloczow, Poland, 1835- Berzhan, Ukraine, 1911).<sup>95</sup>

The practice of spreading greens on the floor of both the home and places of worship was common during the Middle Ages in Central Europe. The rituals of the Christian holiday Whitsunday which, as noted above, is celebrated at the same time of year as Shavuot, include the practice of decorating the church with flowers and greens.<sup>96</sup> On the English church holiday called Rushbearing, rushes were collected and spread on the floor of the parish church. This ritual dates back to a period when most structures had earthen floors; the greens were used as a system of renewing the floor coverings, thus ensuring cleanliness and insulation. The greens chosen for this purpose were usually those that provided a sweet smell.<sup>97</sup>

The practice of spreading perfumed greens was thus not at all alien to the Jew of the Middle Ages. Unless there is a specific theological reason for using a specific item in a religious ritual, the ritual object is generally selected based on availability in a particular geographical location and the group's common practice. These items are termed "hybrid," both familiar to the community members and found in the rituals of other religions found in the same location. As David Landes writes:

Where all cultures are involved in one another, none is simple and pure; all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.<sup>98</sup>

The Jews adopted cultural practices common in their society that they viewed as contributing towards a of strengthening Jewish custom, practice as well as the society and the communities.

---

<sup>94</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 494:10.

<sup>95</sup> Maharsham 494:3.

<sup>96</sup> See Gaster, *Festivals*, 75-76.

<sup>97</sup> See David George, "Rushbearing: A Forgotten British Custom," in Wim Husken Rodopi (ed.), *Ludus: Medieval and Early Renaissance Theatre and Drama* (Amsterdam, Atlanta, 1966), 17-30, for a detailed description of this ritual.

<sup>98</sup> David Landes, *Traditional Struggles: Studying, Deciding, and Performing the Law at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 2010), 138-40.

As a result of this influence, we find a discussion regarding Shavuot decorations similar to that regarding the use of flowers at funerals. R. Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman Kramer of Vilna (known as the Vilna Gaon or Gra, 1720-1779) strongly objected to decorating with trees because of their use in churches; using them would thus fall under the prohibition against *hukkat ha-goyim*. This view is shared by other rabbinical authorities as well, such as R. Avraham Danzig,<sup>99</sup> R. Yechiel Michel Ha-Levi Epstein,<sup>100</sup> the *Maharsham*,<sup>101</sup> R. Moshe Feinstein,<sup>102</sup> and the *Shulkhan Ha-Tahor*.<sup>103</sup>

R. Israel Meir Ha-Kohen cites both opinions in his *Mishnah Berurah*:

It is the practice to place trees in the synagogue and in the homes on Shavuot in remembrance of the fact that on *Atezret*, one is judged with respect to the fruit of the trees [quoting the Magen Avraham]. The Gra stopped this practice, because nowadays it is an established Gentile practice to set up trees on the festival.<sup>104</sup>

Interestingly enough, even though the leading rabbinical authorities of the modern era did not support this custom, the majority of halakhic Jewish communities continue to adorn their synagogues and homes with various types of vegetation on Shavuot, retaining the rationalization for an accepted custom. (Once a custom or ritual has been rooted in the collective mind of the group, it is very difficult to uproot it or change the rationalization for it. Decorating the synagogue and home for Shavuot has been practiced for hundreds of years, generation after generation; it is not only a public practice, but also a family or home ritual. These customs are not discarded or rejected even after instructions from leading rabbinical authorities.<sup>105</sup>

Various suggestions were offered to justify such actions of the collective memory that were in opposition to rabbinic disapproval. R. Shaul Nateason (Berezhany 1810–

<sup>99</sup> *Hayyei Adam*, section 131, paragraph 13 and *Hokhmat Adam*, section 89, paragraph 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Arukh Ha-Shulhan* OH 494:6.

<sup>101</sup> Maharsham Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Schwadron born 1835 Poland and died 1911 Israel. in his *Daat Torah* OH 494:3.

<sup>102</sup> *Responsa Iggerot Moshe*, vol. 8, *Yoreh De'ah* 11:5.

<sup>103</sup> *Shulhan Ha-Tor* Aharon Roth born 1894 Uzhhorod and died 1947 Jerusalem.

<sup>104</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 494: 3.

<sup>105</sup> I have argued similarly regarding the mourning rites during the *sefirat ha-omer* period; see Simcha Fishbane, *The Shtiebelization of Modern Jewry*, chapter 2.

Ukraine 1875) argues with the Gra and shows that the custom of decorating with trees does not fall under the category of *hukkat ha-goyim*, since there is a rational reason for it. He writes that the Gentiles he asked why they place trees in their homes, responded that the purpose was honor, beauty, and adornment. As a parallel example, he notes that it is permitted to visit the cemetery during the first seven days after a death – even though the Gentiles have the same practice – because this is done out of respect for the dead.<sup>106</sup>

The *Maharsham* also adds a defense for the custom that would negate the ruling of the Gra. He explains that the Gentiles place trees outside of their churches, while the Jews place them inside houses of worship. Thus, since the Jews are not actually copying the custom of the non-Jews, the practice should be permitted. The *Maharsham* concludes, “The custom of Israel has the status of Torah law,” and should therefore be maintained.<sup>107</sup>

Other rabbinic authorities attempt to differentiate between the use of trees and other vegetation, such as grasses and flowers. R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, for example, wrote that the Gra intended to prohibit only the former, not the latter.<sup>108</sup> These authorities thus avoid rejecting the opinion of a scholar of the Gra's stature while allowing the custom to continue.<sup>109</sup>

### **Sephardic Customs**

Although the practice is not mentioned in R. Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*, many Sephardic communities decorate their synagogues and/or homes on Shavuot.<sup>110</sup> In fact, Persian Jews call Shavuot “Moda Gol,” the Holiday of Flowers, and the Jews of Bukhara

---

<sup>106</sup> *Yosef Da'at, Yoreh De'ah* 348.

<sup>107</sup> *Maharsham* 494:3.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Oberlander, *Minhag Avoteu*, 598. R. Epstein and R. Feinstein, in contrast, interpreted the Gra as including both grasses and trees in the prohibition.

<sup>109</sup> For different rabbinic opinions, see Oberlander, *Minhag Avotenu*, 573-601; Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel* (Hebrew) (Israel, 1999), 80.

<sup>110</sup> See Shemtov Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tov* (Hebrew) (Makhon Jack: Israel, 1954), vol. 4, 12-13, who cites Sephardic rabbinic support for the custom. R. Yosef Schwarz (quoted in Tessler, *Peninei Minhag*, 62) writes that the Sepharadim in Israel do not decorate their synagogues with trees and flowers on Shavuot, but based on personal observation and inquiry, the practice today is to decorate.

called the festival “Guke Suchre,” the Red Rose; it is their custom to decorate tables with scented flowers during the holiday.<sup>111</sup> R. Shem Tov Gaguine writes that the custom in the Land of Israel, Syria, and Egypt was to adorn the ornaments of the Torah scrolls with flowers and roses. Trees and flowers were placed to the side of the Holy Ark as well as on the walls and entrance to the synagogue, and roses were flung onto the *Sefer Torah* when the Torah was removed and returned to the Holy Ark.<sup>112</sup>

Rabbi Palagei writes of his custom of distributing roses in the synagogue on Shavuot.<sup>113</sup> The *Kaf Ha-Hayyim* relates that on Shavuot, roses were placed in a vase in the synagogue, and on the second day of the holiday, these flowers were distributed to the children after the reading of the story of Ruth.

Among the Jews of Libya, it is the custom to prepare small leaves with thorns before the holiday to symbolically represent the burning bush in which God appeared to Moses. On Shavuot morning, each child receives seven leaves, which he places in water and then swallows as a merit for the study of Torah.

R. Ovadia Yosef supports the custom of decorating the synagogue and homes with perfumed grass, flowers, and tree branches by a rationalization similar to that of the *Maharsham*. He argues that although there is some question regarding the acceptability of this custom, the practice is allowed, for “their [Israel’s] custom bears the status of Torah.” Furthermore, he writes, it is an ancient custom referred to by the early Rabbis, which should thus overrule any doubts.<sup>114</sup>

As we noted above, flowers served a central role in secular culture – as opposed to religious worship – in the Islamic world. If we accept the hybrid theory of appreciating and sharing similar items and behaviors in a society, we can understand the importance of the Sephardic practice of adorning and beautifying with flowers in synagogues and homes on Shavuot.

---

<sup>111</sup> Tessler, *Peninei Minhag*, 68.

<sup>112</sup> Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tov*, 12.

<sup>113</sup> *Ruach Hayim* 494: 4.

<sup>114</sup> *Yalkut Yosef*, 317-18. In footnote 28, R. Yosef cites numerous rabbinic authorities who support his view, some of who I have noted above.

## Hasidic Customs

The concept of hybrid practices can also explain the customs that developed in Hasidic communities. By the eighteenth century, flowers and greens were back in favor in Europe,<sup>115</sup> and the Hasidic communities, which were less influenced by the Gra's ruling, did not hesitate to use vegetation as decoration on Shavuot. Three branches were traditionally placed on each of the four sides of the synagogue *bima* (Torah reading platform) to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. Some Hasidic groups would enhance this practice by weaving together the top branches to form a canopy. It is reported that leaves and flowers were also used to adorn the place where the Satmar Rebbe prayed.<sup>116</sup>

Yitzchak Tessler records that in the German Jewish communities, children would make colorful chains from scented flowers, which were then used to decorate the Holy Ark and the *bima*. Flower crowns were also made for the *Sefer Torah*.

The rose was given a special place of importance in both Sephardic and Hasidic rituals on Shavuot, due to numerous references to it in Song of Songs.

## The *Megillah* (Scroll) of Ruth

The Rabbis ordained that one of the five *megillot* – “scrolls” from the Writings – should be read on each of the pilgrimage festivals; Song of Songs is read on Passover, Ecclesiastes on Succot, and Ruth on Shavuot.

Y.S. Zevin notes that there are four prevalent customs regarding the reading of *Megillat Ruth* on Shavuot:<sup>117</sup>

1. Sephardic communities do not read *Megillat Ruth* in the synagogue on Shavuot; they similarly do not read the *megillot* associated with the other holidays. Some Hasidic groups, such as Habad, follow this tradition as well.<sup>118</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> See Goody, *The Culture of Flowers*, 284.

<sup>116</sup> Tessler, *Peninei Minhag*, 61-77.

<sup>117</sup> Zevin, *Mo'adim ba-Halakhah*, 327-8.

2. Some Hasidic groups recite the *Megillah* quietly and individually from a printed Bible prior to the holiday Torah reading in the synagogue.

3. Ashkenazic communities read *Megillat Ruth* publically, either from parchment or from a printed Bible, but no blessing is recited (as is the case with *Megillat Esther* on Purim).<sup>119</sup>

4. In Israel, those who follow the practices of the Gra read the *megillah* from a valid parchment and recite a blessing.

The first reference to the relationship between the book of Ruth and the festival of Shavuot is found in Tractate *Soferim*, redacted approximately in the middle of the eighth century, during the Geonic era. After discussing the reading of Songs of Songs on Passover, the redactor informs his readers:

Ruth [is read] on the termination of the first day of *Atzeret* to [the end of] its [first] half, and concluded on the termination of the last day of the Festival. Others hold that with all the Festivals, we begin to read [the respective scrolls] on the Saturday night preceding them.<sup>120</sup>

In the early part of the thirteenth century, the *Yalkut Shimoni* also associated *Megillat Ruth* with the holiday of the Receiving of the Torah.<sup>121</sup>

Numerous explanations for this custom have been suggested.<sup>122</sup> As we have noted, although the Torah's rationale for Shavuot as an agricultural Temple pilgrimage festival has lapsed, many customs and rituals were instituted to provide the holiday with

---

<sup>118</sup> The Shulkhan Arukh of Rabbi Yosef Karo does not include this law. Even though Rabbi Karo, representative of the Sephardic rulings, is silent on this matter, Rabbi Obadya Yosef (Chazon Obadya on Yom Tov p. 320:3) writes that it is proper practice to read Ruth on Shavuot without reciting a blessing.

<sup>119</sup> The Rama quoting the Avudram (OH 490:9) simply states that on Shavuot Migilat Ruth is read. No reason is offered. The Mishnah Berurah commenting on the Rama writes "The Migilah Ruth is said on Shavuot because of what is stated in Yalkut Shimoni on Ruth: 'what is the relevance of the migilah to Atzeret? That it should be read at the time of the giving of the Torah, to teach us that the Torah is only attainable through willingness to endure suffering and poverty etc.' It is the practice to read the megilah of Ruth on the second day."

<sup>120</sup> Tractate *Soferim* 14:18.

<sup>121</sup> *Yalkut Shimoni* 596. It is not clear who the author of this work is and when he lived; some date it to the eleventh century.

<sup>122</sup> For a detailed list of the multitude of reasons offered for this fusion see Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 238-45; Y.L. Maimon, *Haggim u-Mo'adim* (Hebrew) (Mossad Harav Kook: Israel, 1952), 269-71; and Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Mo'adim ba-Halakhah* (Hebrew) (Bet Hillel: Jerusalem, 1955) 327-9. For explanations offered by modern commentators (especially Hasidic), see Tessler, *Peninei Minhag*, 405-14.

relevant meaning as the Time of the Receiving of the Torah. Most explanations therefore associate the custom of reading *Megillat Ruth* on the holiday with this later meaning.

The *Yalkut Shimoni* notes that just as Ruth suffered and underwent great material sacrifice and deprivation in order to live as a Jewess in the Land of Israel, those who wish to become faithfully and sincerely attached to the Torah – which was received by the Jewish People on Shavuot – must do likewise.

The *Midrash Zuta* commentary,<sup>123</sup> followed by others, such as R. Tovyah ben Eliezer in his work *Midrash Lekah Tov*, suggests that the theme of poverty that pervades the story of Ruth points to a connection with Shavuot, for only through poverty, and not through wealth, can one properly devote himself to the study of Torah.<sup>124</sup>

Numerous *Rishonim*, including R. Simcha of Vitri (d. 1105, Vitri, France),<sup>125</sup> R. Avraham Ha-Yarchi (Avignon, Provence, c.1155-Toledo, Spain, 1215),<sup>126</sup> R. David Abudraham (late 13<sup>th</sup> century),<sup>127</sup> and R. Mordekhai Yaffe (Prague c. 1535- Posen, Poland 1612),<sup>128</sup> suggest that the story of Ruth is read on Shavuot, the Biblical holiday of the harvest and first-fruits, because the story takes place during the harvest season.

R. Elazar Rokeah of Worms (Mainz, Germany c. 1160-Worms, Germany 1238) notes that the Bible links the commandment to assist the poor during the harvest season specifically with the holiday of Shavuot: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not altogether remove the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning of your harvest; you shall leave them to the poor and to the stranger.”<sup>129</sup> It is therefore appropriate to read the story of Ruth during the holiday.<sup>130</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> On Ruth 1:1.

<sup>124</sup> *Midrash Lekah Tov*, end of treatise on Ruth. R. Tovia ben Eliezer lived in Kastoria, Greece in the late eleventh century and early twelfth century. *Magen Avraham, Orach Hayyim* 590, also cites this reason for reading the book of Ruth on Shavuot.

<sup>125</sup> *Mahzor Vitri* Volume 2 section 108.

<sup>126</sup> *Ha-Manhig, Laws of Sukkot*, section 58.

<sup>127</sup> Abudraham, section on Passover, *Sefirat Ha-Omer*, and Shavuot.

<sup>128</sup> *Levush ha-Hur* 494:2.

<sup>129</sup> Leviticus 23:22.

<sup>130</sup> *Sefer Ha-Rokeah*, Laws of Shavuot 296. R. Mordekhai Yaffe (*Levush ha-Hur* 494:2) offers a similar rationalization as well.

The Mahzor Vitri suggests an additional explanation, suggesting that Ruth, by converting to Judaism, entered into a covenant with God, just as the people of Israel entered into a covenant with God by accepting the Torah at Sinai on Shavuot.

A different approach is offered by the author of the *Tevu'at Shor*, R. Alexander Sender Shore. He notes that King David was born and died on Shavuot, and that therefore the book of Ruth – which presents King David's lineage as the great grandson of Ruth – is appropriate for the day.<sup>131</sup>

Y.L. Maimon suggests an alternative reason for the original Geonic - association between Ruth and Shavuot. Ruth was a Moabite woman who left her people to join the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel, eventually marrying Boaz and becoming the ancestor of King David. A literal understanding of Biblical law would seem to prohibit such a marriage: "An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever."<sup>132</sup> The Rabbis explain, "An Ammonite [is forbidden to marry a Jewess], but not an Ammonitess; a Moabite [is forbidden to marry a Jewess], but not a Moabitess."<sup>133</sup> The Karaites, who rejected the Oral Torah, and thus the Talmud, did not accept this interpretation. Their fiercest opponents – the Geonim – thus declared that *Megillat Ruth* should be read on Shavuot, the holiday of the Receiving of the Torah, because it epitomizes the traditional reliance on the Oral Law.<sup>134</sup>

## A Night of Torah Study

<sup>131</sup> This explanation is found in his Talmudic commentary, *Bekhor Shor*, on BT *Bava Batra* 13b. Maimon, *Haggim u-Mo'adim*, 270 ff., cites others who suggested similar reasons for reading Ruth on Shavuot. See also Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 241.

<sup>132</sup> Deuteronomy 23:4.

<sup>133</sup> TB *Yevamot* 76b.

<sup>134</sup> Maimon, *Haggim u-Mo'adim*, 271-2. I have offered a similar argument in my discussion of mourning customs during *Sefirat ha-Omer*; see Fishbane, *The Shtiebelization of Modern Jewry*, 30-31. Haim Leshen, *Sabbath and Festivals of Israel* (Tiv: Israel, 1965), vol. 2, 529-33, suggests that Jewish practices regarding the Ten Commandments were similarly influenced by the struggle against Christianity, which claimed that only the laws found in the Ten Commandments were still binding. As a result, the Sages of the Talmud abolished the ancient tradition of reciting the Ten Commandments on a daily basis, so as not to give the impression that these laws are more important than the others. R. Saadia Gaon included "Azharot" in the Shavuot prayer service for this reason as well, as they note the 613 *mitzvot* and thereby implicitly rebuke the Karaites and Christians.



Although the early rabbinical codes, such as those of Maimonides, *Tur*, *Shulhan Arukh*, and *Rama*, do not record the custom of learning all night on Shavuot, this is widely accepted. There is a similar custom of remaining awake to study on the night of Hoshana Rabba, the seventh day of Sukkot.<sup>135</sup>

The first explicit reference to the custom of remaining awake on Shavuot night is found in the *Zohar's* discussion of Shavuot:

Therefore, the pious ones of old used not to sleep on this night, but they used to study the Torah and say: "Let us acquire a holy inheritance for ourselves and our sons in two worlds." On that night, the community of Israel is crowned above them and comes to join the Holy King, and both are crowned above the heads of those who are worthy of this. R. Simeon used to say: "Let us go and prepare the ornaments of the Bride, that tomorrow she may appear before the King fitly adorned and bedecked..."<sup>136</sup>

In the *Zohar's* allegory, the Torah is compared to a bride and the people of Israel is her groom. On the eve of their marriage – the night before the Receiving of the Torah – jewelry and ornaments must be prepared for the wedding. These ornaments take the form of Torah study as preparation for receiving the bride, the Torah.

It was the Kabbalists, especially R. Isaac Luria (the Arizal), who popularized this practice, emphasizing that if one does not sleep on the night of Shavuot and instead studies Torah, he will be protected in the upcoming year from all evil.

A second popular justification for this nocturnal ritual is offered by the *Magen Avraham*, in an attempt to suggest a non-mystical rationalization for this practice.<sup>137</sup> He writes that the Israelites slept the entire night prior to receiving the Torah at Sinai; Moses needed to wake them to be prepared for the great event. In order to make

---

<sup>135</sup>This day is considered the culmination of the Days of Judgment, and the Kabbalists wrote that the study of Torah during that night would succor the person's final judgment.

<sup>136</sup>*Zohar*, Leviticus 23:15. I have used the Soncino translation of the *Zohar*, 123.

<sup>137</sup> Andrew Schein, "A Brief History of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*" in *Shavuot To-Go 5771* (Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future: New York, 2011), 42.

amends for their forefather's actions, Jews do not sleep on this night, studying Torah instead.<sup>138</sup>

It was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the custom of maintaining this all-night vigil began to spread amongst the Jewish populace. Although R. Caro did not mention the practice in his *Shulhan Arukh*, he was apparently aware of it, and may have been responsible for its further acceptance. The *Shelah* records a story that, in approximately 1534, when R. Caro still lived in Ottoman Solinka, R. Caro studied all night on Shavuot with R. Shlomo Alkabetz. R. Alkabetz related that during that night, a voice emanated from R. Caro's mouth (presumably that of an angel), instructing R. Caro to move to Israel.<sup>139</sup> It seems that while R. Caro personally observed this Kabbalistic custom, he refrained from imposing it, and therefore did not include it in his code of Jewish law.

Andrew Schein argues that the custom became popular after R. Caro moved to Sefad, and that it spread throughout the Mediterranean basin and northwards throughout Europe. Schein suggests three reasons for this. First, the custom was accepted because of the reputation of R. Caro, who personally adhered to this ritual. Second, it was the custom in 16<sup>th</sup> century Sefad to rise at midnight to recite prayers mourning the destruction of the Temple and begging for redemption ("*tikkun hatzot*"), and those who observed these nightly vigils would also be inclined not sleep on the night of Shavuot. Finally, the Arizal's support for the practice was influential.<sup>140</sup>

Elliot Horowitz offers a unique insight into the nocturnal ritual on the night of Shavuot. He notes that the ritual of *tikkun hatzot* became popular in 16<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalistic circles in the Sefad, just as coffee was become popular throughout the Muslim world. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Yemenite Sufi circles, coffee was used to provide

---

<sup>138</sup> *Magen Avraham, Orach Hayyim* 494. These views are summarized in the *Mishnah Berurah* 494:1: "It is stated in the *Zohar* that on Shavuot the pious of former times would stay awake all night and engage in Torah study. The majority of Torah students have already adopted this practice. It is stated in the *Shulhan Arukh* of the Arizal: 'Note that whoever did not sleep any amount at all on the night of Shavuot but engaged in Torah study is assured of completing the year and no harm will befall him.' The *Magen Avraham* writes a reason for this which is based upon the plain facts. This is that the children of Israel slept all night before the Torah was given and the Holy One, Blessed be He, needed to wake them to receive the Torah [as stated in the *midrash*]; consequently, we are required to make amends for this."

<sup>139</sup> *Shelah*.

<sup>140</sup> Schein, *A Brief History*, 41.

the necessary wakefulness for nightly prayers, and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century coffee was available to the general public for both religious and non-religious purposes, which undoubtedly influenced the Kabbalistic late-night prayers. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, both *tikkun hatzot* and coffee made their way to Europe, and the acceptance of the custom of remaining awake on the night of Shavuot may be directly related to these developments. Horowitz writes:

It may be presumed that significant numbers of those who observed them [the nighttime vigils] fortified themselves with the stimulant which the hidden hand of God had recently brought to their region... The vigils of Shavuot and Hoshana Raba, previously limited in their appeal and relatively brief in duration, came to be widely observed as all night affairs. This was due more to the availability of coffee than to the habit of frequenting coffeehouses, but the vogue achieved by the midnight rite of *tikkun hazot* would seem to have been equally linked to the latter.<sup>141</sup>

Horowitz further notes that, in contrast to Shabbat, the days on which these vigils were observed were always days on which coffee could be prepared.<sup>142</sup>

Meir Bar Ilan notes that the other pilgrimage festivals, Passover and Sukkot, both have nocturnal vigils included in their ritual practices. The Rabbis did not want Shavuot to be any different, and therefore incorporated and popularized the all-night study practice, linking it to the nature of the day as the holiday of the Receiving of the Torah and thereby strengthening its purpose.<sup>143</sup>

When a ritual or custom develops, a uniform script plays an important role in its formalization; the precise words that the actor must recite are prepared and even canonized.<sup>144</sup> Thus, the Arizal prepared a special compilation of sources, divided into 13

---

<sup>141</sup> Elliot Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses, and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry," *AJS Review* 1 (Spring 1989), 44.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.* 36. The popularization of coffee was clearly not the only motivation for the practice of remaining awake for prayer and study, but the new stimulant assisted the popularization of *tikkun hatzot* and *tikkun lel Shavuot*, which subsequently became embedded in the culture of coffee.

<sup>143</sup> Meir Bar Ilan, "Tiqun Lel Shavuot: Emergence and Precedents" (Hebrew) in *Mehkerei Hag* (1997), 28-48. (Hebrew).

<sup>144</sup> For a further discussion of this topic, see Fredrick Bird, "The Nature and Function of Ritual Forms: A Sociological Discussion," in *Studies in Religion* (University of Toronto Press for the Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1979), vol. 9, 387-402 and *idem.*, "Ritual as a Communicative Action," 24.

parts, known as “*Tikkun Lel Shavuot*,” to be recited on this night.<sup>145</sup> This compilation consists of excerpts from the beginning and conclusion of each of the 24 books of the Bible and the 63 books of Mishnah, as well as selections from *Sefer ha-Yetzirah*, Maimonides’ *Book of the Commandments*, and the *Zohar*. The Arizal recommended that ten Jewish adult men study this compilation throughout the vigil on Shavuot.

Not all rabbinic authorities, however, accepted the recitation of *Tikkun Lel Shavuot*. R. Yaakov Reischer argues in his commentary to the *Shulhan Arukh, Hok Ya’akov*, that this organized compilation is intended for the uneducated (“*amei ha-aretz*”), who lack the background required for true Torah study.<sup>146</sup> In many Ashkenazic *yeshivot*, each individual studies according to his personal preferences on the night of Shavuot.

### ***Akdamut Milin and Azharot***

An additional congregational or communal ritual on Shavuot involves poetry and prose chanted during the prayer services in the synagogue. During Ashkenazic services, the liturgical poem (*piyut*) “*Akdamut Milin*,” attributed to R. Meir bar Yitzchak (Germany, died c. 1095), is recited on the first day of the festival, prior to the reading of the Torah portion. It includes praise of God, the Torah, and the Jewish people. The prayer leader and congregation recite the 90 lines of the Aramaic poem responsively in an ancient melody.

The custom of reciting *Akdamut* was originally associated with the practice of translating the Torah reading into Aramaic during the synagogue service. Although that practice ceased in the Middle Ages, *Akdamut* was not discarded.<sup>147</sup> The custom of

---

<sup>145</sup> The first mention of *tikkun lel Shavuot* was made in R. Isaiah Horowitz (Prague, c.1560-Israel, c.1630) in his work, the *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit*, Tractate *Shavuot*. He writes that the custom of *tikkun lel Shavuot* spread throughout the land of Israel and the Ottoman Empire and was adopted by young and old alike. R. Yosef Yospa (Germany, 1570-1637) notes this ritual in his work, *Yosef Ometz, Seder Hag ha-Shavuot*, section 852.

<sup>146</sup> *Hok Ya’akov, Orach Hayyim* 494.

<sup>147</sup> The instruction to read *Akdamut* does not appear in the classical codes, and there is a dispute amongst the rabbinic authorities regarding the point in the service where it should be inserted; see Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 222-6 and Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel*, 150-4. The *Mishnah Berurah (Orach Hayyim 494:2)* summarizes: “It is the practice to say the liturgical poem *Akadamut*. Several *Aharonim* agree that it should be said before the

reciting the poem as part of the Shavuot liturgy was first noted by the *Maharil* in the mid-sixteenth century,<sup>148</sup> but the *piyut* quickly spread and was adopted into the liturgy in the majority of Ashkenazic communities. Although not directly connected to the theme of the Shavuot festival, it has become the major prayer representative of the holiday.<sup>149</sup>

Hoffman argues that *Akdamut* became widely accepted during the period of the Crusades, when the European Jewish communities suffered terribly at the hands of the Christians. According to a legend circulating at the time, R. Meir bar Yitzchak, the author of *Akdamut*, saved the Jewish community through his great piety and devotion to God. Hoffman writes:

The cumulative effect of all the ways in which the *piyut* was read in light of the tale is to enhance the figure of R. Meir into one of a victorious champion of his people, and to boost the significance of *Akdamut* from a prayer offering open-ended encouragement and hope for future redemption to a celebratory hymn of a spectacular deliverance and liberation that already took place.

*Akdamut* served as means for providing encouragement and succor to a community that had suffered greatly, and it continued to offer comfort and inspiration throughout Jewish history.<sup>150</sup>

Ashkenazic communities in the Diaspora read another *piyut* on the second day of Shavuot, "*Yatziv Pitgam*," by R. Jacob ben Meir ha-Levi (France c.1100-c.1171). This poem describes the grandeur of receiving the Torah at Sinai and includes a prayer to protect those who observe the Torah.<sup>151</sup>

---

Kohen begins to make the blessing over the reading of the Torah. This is in fact the practice today in several communities."

<sup>148</sup> *Maharil, Laws of Shavuot* 3.

<sup>149</sup> See Lawrence Schiffman, "*Yatziv Pitgam: One of Our Last Aramaic Piyutim*," in *Shavuot To-Go* 5771, 43-46, who discusses the popularity of *Akdamut*.

<sup>150</sup> Jeffrey Hoffman, "*Akdamut: History, Folklore, and Meaning*" *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99: 2 (Spring 2009), 161-84. Hoffman presents the entire legend regarding R. Meir bar Yitzhak.

<sup>151</sup> There are various opinions amongst the rabbinic authorities regarding when during the prayer service *Yatziv Pitgam* should be recited, as in the case of *Akdamut*; see Tselnik, *Atzeret*, 227.

The Sephardic communities, which did not incorporate *Akdamut* into their services, recite *Azharot*, poetic prayers based upon the 613 *mitzvot*.<sup>152</sup> Sources as early as R. Natronai Gaon refer to the reading of *Azharot* in the synagogue,<sup>153</sup> and many versions of the *Azharot* developed beginning in the period of the Geonim. One version of these prayers is found in the *siddur* of R. Saadia Gaon (Egypt, 882-Baghdad, 942). Contemporary practice is to chant the *Azharot* compiled by R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol (Spain, 1021- 1058).

### Discussion – Communal Rituals

I suggest that the structural approach advanced by Emile Durkheim and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown is applicable to the social ramifications of the communal rituals of Shavuot. Durkheim argues that religion, as a set of ideas and practices, attempts to sanctify and unify the community's social structure, primarily through the observance of communal rites and rituals. Catherine Bell explains:

As periodic opportunities for the social group to assemble itself and project sacred images that actually represent the community, rituals are designed to arouse a passionate intensity, a feeling of “effervescence” in which individuals experience something larger than themselves.<sup>154</sup>

Durkheim suggests that ritual provides the opportunity to bring people together as a collective group; it “strengthens the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member”<sup>155</sup> by means of a conscious act of affiliation. Observance of the ritual is an experience of the collective representation as a simultaneously transcendent and immanent communality. Thus, religion and ritual are extremely important for the group's social solidarity. Radcliffe-Brown, who emphasizes the a-historical approach to the study of society, similarly analyzes the social function of religions and their contribution to the formation and the maintenance of the social order, arguing that the priority of ritual and the importance of its social role is securing and maintaining the

<sup>152</sup> See Leshen, *The Sabbath and Festivals of Israel*, 526.

<sup>153</sup> *Halakhot Pesukot* 104. R. Natronai Gaon lived in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Sura, Babylonia.

<sup>154</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford, 1977), 24.

<sup>155</sup> Cited in Bell, *ibid.*, 25.

unity of the group. Without entering into the differences between these two scholars, they both clearly emphasize the importance of communal ritual for the bonding, strengthening, and maintenance of the social structure. As Bell summarizes:

For social functionalists, therefore, ritual is a means to regulate and stabilize the life of this system, adjust its internal interactions, maintain its group ethos, and restore a state of harmony after any disturbance. As such, religion and ritual are social mechanisms with a particularly vital role to play in maintaining the system.<sup>156</sup>

Thus, the communal rituals of Shavuot, in addition to reinforcing its meaning, sustain and reinforce the group's solidarity. The observance of the nocturnal vigil dedicated to the study of Torah and the recitation of special prayers bring all segments of the community together, reinforcing communal strength.<sup>157</sup>

### **Additional Shavuot Rituals**

Additional Shavuot rituals are either practiced by specific communities or restricted to individuals. For example, some, primarily Sephardic communities, include in the liturgy the recitation of a "marriage contract" between the Jewish People and the Torah. Less frequently, some choose to donate a Torah scroll on Shavuot, an important celebration for the local community. In other communities, primarily among the non-Orthodox, children begin to study Bible on Shavuot. Some individuals seek to underline the relationship between Shavuot and Passover by eating *matzah* on Shavuot; some even set aside *matzah* from Passover to be eaten on this festival.

Some North African communities observe the interesting ritual of spilling or shooting water on other Jews in the synagogue or in a public area on either of the two days of Shavuot. One possible reason for this practice relates to the Rabbis' comparison of the Torah to water.<sup>158</sup> Water also symbolizes the rainfall of the upcoming year; it was believed that the more water spilled on Shavuot, the greater the forthcoming rainfall.

---

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>157</sup> In the ultra-Orthodox community, women do not participate in the nighttime study. Increased participation in the practice reflects the evolving status of women in this part of the Jewish community.

<sup>158</sup> See TB *Bava Kama* 82a.

The water throwing may also be associated with the story of how Moses was saved from the waters of the Nile, which, according to the Rabbis' calculation, occurred on Shavuot.<sup>159</sup>

Daniel Sperber suggests that this is a hybrid custom.<sup>160</sup> E. Westermarck identifies the source for this custom in a Berber summer purification ceremony:

In Rabat, Mequenez, and Fez, people then pour or... squirt water over each other in the streets or from the housetops. This has often the appearance of a real fight, although nobody is allowed to take offence; so large a quantity of water is thrown about that the streets of Fez become almost as muddy as after a fall of rain... Among the Ait Yusi, Ait Saddem, and Ait Warain, the people on Midsummer morning pour water over each other, and sometimes even on persons who are sleeping or sitting in their tents...<sup>161</sup>

(Incidentally, Thailand has spring festival with exactly the same kind of water throwing – LV)

Sperber concludes that the name of the Berber ritual, Ansarah, is similar to the Hebrew or Aramaic name for Shavuot, *Atzeret*. He argues that if this early festival is a purification ritual, as Westermarck suggests, it is analogous with Shavuot, for the Bible required the Jew to purify himself in preparation for receiving the Torah. Although the “purification ritual” was practiced on the day of the festival itself, not prior to it, Sperber maintains that there is sufficient argument for a cross-cultural influence.<sup>162</sup>

Although the parallels between the different rituals are indeed telling, I would argue that they indicate a hybrid occurrence rather than cross-cultural influence, but

---

<sup>159</sup> See TB *Yevamot* 12b.

<sup>160</sup> Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (2007), vol. 8, 84-95.

<sup>161</sup> E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (London, 1926), vol. 2, 262-4, cited in Sperber, *ibid.*, 93-94. Westermarck writes: “The purification ceremonies which are practiced in Morocco at Midsummer are old Berber customs, in some way connected with similar rites encountered on the other side of the Mediterranean. To this day, the Arabic form El-Ansarah is used by the Copts for Witsunday. Considering that the real meaning of the word is feast in general, it is not surprising that the Arabs and Berbers adopted it as a name for the Midsummer festival. Every student of the language of the Berbers know how ready they have been to make use of foreign words; the importation of Arabic expressions in the various Berber dialects is truly immense. Hence, the midsummer festival may very well be a genuine Berber custom, although its name is derived from the Arabic form of the Hebrew word.”

<sup>162</sup> Sperber, *ibid.*, 94-95.



rather.<sup>163</sup> The practice of water throwing, shooting, or spilling existed in many cultures and was adopted by various religions, including Judaism, with different rationalizations. This is not an uncommon social phenomenon in a diverse multi-religious society.

### **Concluding Remarks**

A religious festival without purpose and ritual will swiftly become non-operational. The performance of rituals serves as a means for communicating and transmitting highly valued beliefs and moral codes regulating communal life. Holidays are opportunities to act out a script, without which the holiday risks becoming irrelevant.<sup>164</sup> As Fredrick Bird suggests in his discussion of tribal societies:

The most immediate context for learning these is a cycle of rituals in which legendary or mythic lore is propagated through recitation, music, and dance. To participate regularly in these rites is to hear of, recognize and reaffirm these stories and the beliefs they embody. Different beliefs might be cited at weddings and births, at spring festivals and new year ceremonies, at weekly services and daily prayers. But the cumulative impact is to assemble a larger collection of myths and beliefs as they are popularly recognized and understood. These are regularly cited, in turn, to justify communal mores. In this way, ritual plays a pedagogical and socializing role.<sup>165</sup>

Shavuot, essentially a Temple–agricultural holiday, lost its *raison d’être* with the destruction of the Temple. In emphasizing Shavuot’s importance as the Time of the Receiving of the Torah, the Sages chose either to stress an already existing understanding of the day, or to introduce an entirely new meaning. The rituals of Shavuot thus communicate the importance of study of and adherence to the Torah. They cement relationships, induce desirable states of mind, and foster sentiments designed to enhance Torah.<sup>166</sup> Furthermore, public ceremonies, such as special prayers,

---

<sup>163</sup> It is interesting to note that such practices are also found in religions and cultures in other geographical locations, such as Hinduism in India, where during the spring festival of Holi, the Festival of Colors, people throw colored powder or water on each other.

<sup>164</sup> For a comprehensive study of ritual as a medium of communication and ritual through plays, stage, scripts, and actors, see Bird, “Ritual as a Communicative Action,” 23-52. See also Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books: New York, 1973), chapter 7.

<sup>165</sup> Bird, *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>166</sup> See *ibid.*, 45.

the reading of *Megillat Ruth*, *Tikkun LeI Shavuot*, and water throwing are used to legitimize and reinforce public authority and strengthen social solidarity.<sup>167</sup>

I further suggest that in introducing new customs for Shavuot, the repertoire of customs on Passover and Sukkot served as a “bank.” Since a *megillah* is read on the other two pilgrimage festivals, one was instituted for Shavuot as well.<sup>168</sup> The other holidays are associated with special foods, and Shavuot was therefore identified with dairy products. The customs of Passover and Sukkot include decorations and ornaments, and Shavuot was therefore assigned flowers, trees, and greens. The other holidays involve a special event – such as the *seder* or sitting in the *sukkah* – and Shavuot was similarly ritualized through the *tikkun leI Shavuot* and water-throwing ceremonies. Finally, just as special prayers are recited on the other festivals, the *Azharot* and *Akdamut* were instituted on Shavuot.

It is significant that the rituals assigned to Shavuot, when they were introduced, were all current in the surrounding societies and cultures – i.e., what we have termed the “hybrid” phenomenon. Yet, since the meaning behind this behavior did not influence Jewish practice, it does not indicate cross-cultural influence. Rather, it was the practice's existence in the culture and the accessibility of the props that made it viable and adaptable to varied conditions. Even when these customs dated back to pagan times, they had already become imbedded in and integrated into secular culture, leading to their acceptance in Jewish ritual life.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> Bird, *ibid.*, 49, demonstrates this argument based on the writings of Marx and Durkheim.

<sup>168</sup> The order or timing of the institution of the *megillah* readings is not relevant to this point; the important issue is that Shavuot, like the other holidays, was assigned a *megillah*.

<sup>169</sup> Dr. Alan Kadish (Touro College) brought to my attention that this hybrid approach was first suggested in the rabbinic discussion of the Bible's institution of animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifice was a prevalent means of worship in the surrounding society, and the Israelites demanded it as well. Thus, the Torah instructs how to perform the sacrifices, which then became “Judaized.”