

Shavuot: The Festival of Weeks

Shavuot begins at sundown on **Thursday, May 21** and ends at sundown on **Saturday, May 23** — the 6th and 7th of *Sivan*, 50 days after Passover. In Israel, it is observed for one day; the diaspora celebrates two.



Originally a Harvest Festival

During the First and Second Temple periods, Shavuot was called the "*Festival of Harvest*" (Exodus 23:16). For 50 days from Passover, sheaves of barley were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem — a joyous celebration of the firstfruits of the land.



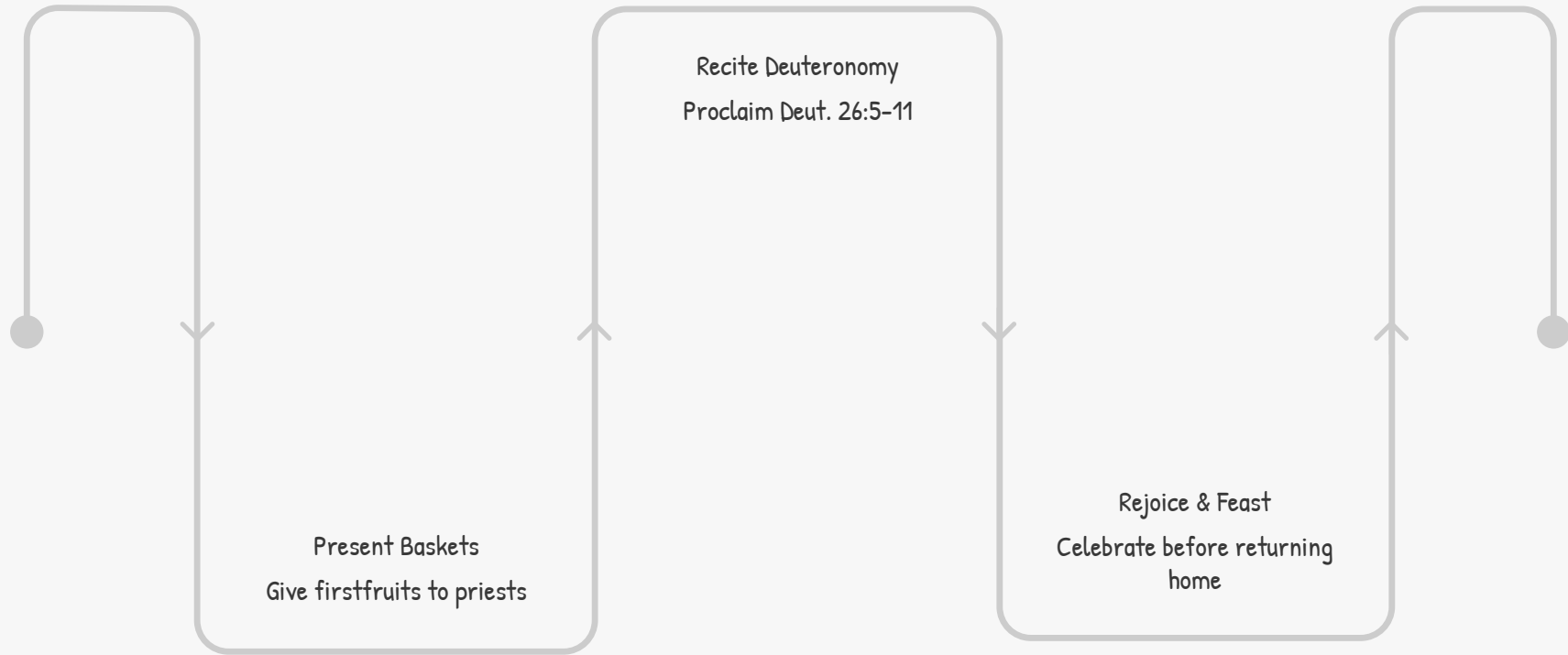
Bringing the *Bikkurim*



When an Israelite spotted the first of the **seven species** – wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranate, olives, or dates – he tied a string around it, marking it as firstfruits.

At Shavuot, pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem in grand procession: an ox with gilded horns led the way, accompanied by music and song. Craftsmen and officers greeted them: *"Enter in peace!"*

The Temple Ceremony



Upon reaching the Temple, firstfruits were given to the priests. Passages from Deuteronomy 26 were recited, giving thanks for *"a land flowing with milk and honey."* The ceremony concluded with rejoicing and feasting.



A Spiritual Shift: The Gift of the Torah

After the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E., Shavuot's focus shifted to commemorating the giving of the *Torah* to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The Exodus gave physical freedom; Shavuot reminds us that **physical liberation was incomplete without spiritual redemption through God's Law.**

Spiritual Meaning & Recommitment

Covenant Renewed

On Shavuot morning, the Ten Commandments are read aloud and Jews reaffirm their commitment to God's Law.

Given vs. Received

Hasidic rabbis note the holiday is "the season of the *giving*" – because while the Torah was given once at Sinai, we are to *receive* it everywhere, on all occasions.

Torah Offered to All

A Midrash teaches that God offered the Torah to all 70 nations first – each declined after hearing the commandments. Israel alone accepted.

The Book of Ruth



Ruth is read on Shavuot for its harvest setting and Ruth's acceptance of the Jewish faith. Her pledge to Naomi is among Scripture's most stirring words:

"Where you go I will go... Your people will be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ruth was also the great-grandmother of King David, who — by tradition — was born and died on Shavuot.

The Three Pilgrimage Festivals



Passover

Beginning of the barley harvest



Shavuot

End of wheat harvest; beginning of
fruit harvest



Sukkot

End of the fruit harvest

All three festivals mark key moments in the annual harvest calendar, weaving together the agricultural and spiritual life of the Jewish people.

Why Dairy on Shavuot?

Two Meals

A dairy meal followed by a traditional holiday meal – recalling the two-loaf bread offering brought to the Temple.

Milk & Honey

A reference to Israel as “*a land flowing with milk and honey*” (Exodus 3:8).

Kosher Laws

The Torah was given on Shabbat – no cattle could be slaughtered or utensils prepared as kosher, so dairy was eaten instead.



How Shavuot Is Celebrated



Special Services

Attending synagogue, reading the Ten Commandments, and reaffirming commitment to Torah.



Flowers & Foliage

Homes and synagogues are adorned with greenery, recalling Shavuot's agricultural roots and gratitude for material blessings.



Holiday Meals

Cheesecake, blintzes, and festive meals – traditions varying across Israeli, Eastern European, and Sephardic communities.