



Torah, Children and Agriculture

A study based upon three sources.

Suitable for KS2 (8-11 years olds) KS3 (11-14 years old) and discussion groups

Shavuot is the second of the three pilgrim festivals in the Jewish Calendar. It is not given a precise calendar date but is calculated as 50 days after the start of Passover and commemorates the giving of the Torah to the Israelites after the escape from Egypt. As with many festivals it has multiple names, Matan Toratenu: the Season of the Giving of the Torah reflects this momentous period of revelation.

Shavuot is also known as an agricultural festival and time of harvest: Chag HaBikurim. This theme was particularly embraced by the early Zionist Kibbutz pioneers as they looked to reclaim the Land of Israel and root themselves physically as well as historically and spiritually to the Land.

Shown below are some thoughts, readings and guided questions that link these main themes and children.

SOURCE 1:

A guarantor for the Torah – the retelling of a story based on Midrash



When a person borrows something important, they often are asked to give a guarantor, another person who will guarantee that they will look after and return the thing they have borrowed. The Torah was the most precious thing GOD had ever given to people, so before Moses took the Torah to the Israelites, GOD asked them to provide a guarantor who would make sure that they would continue to observe the Torah and to look after it in the future. Moses didn't know who the Israelites could offer as a guarantor, after all they had been slaves to Pharaoh for many years, so he went back to the Israelites and called together 70 of the elders. He explained the problem to the elders and together they racked their brains to think of someone who could act as a guarantor.

"I know", said one of the elders, "let's offer our holy ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel as our guarantors. After all they are holy people, and they are the ones who GOD promised the land of Israel to."

So, Moses offered the foremothers and forefathers as guarantors, but GOD would not accept them. "No Moses" said GOD, "they cannot be your guarantors because they have done their work and must be allowed to rest." Moses went back to the 70 elders. They now suggested the prophets, people of passion and vision. But still the Holy One was not satisfied with their suggestion. Finally, the Israelites said that their children would be the guarantors that they would observe the Torah. And GOD accepted." *Midrash Shir HaShirim 1:4*

Questions to Consider:

Why would GOD want guarantors for giving the Torah? What does that tell us about GOD's relationship with the people?

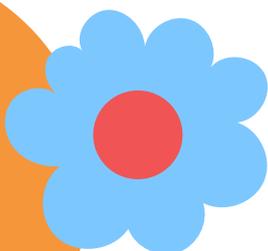
Why would children be acceptable when our ancestors (those who GOD already knew and trusted) or the prophets (wise people who would inspire people to keep the Torah) would not be?

What challenges and opportunities does this give to parents when they are teaching their children about Judaism and their heritage?

SOURCE 2:

Shavuot was adopted by the early Kibbutzim as a festival to celebrate their agricultural achievements. For many kibbutzim there was a move away from traditional religious practice, which they felt had stifled them in their countries of origin (often the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe). The Zionist dream of returning to our indigenous land was the opportunity to embrace the agricultural roots of our people.

Here is a poster produced in the early 20th Century by KKL in Israel. It depicts a parade of children displaying the harvest of the Kibbutz at Shavuot.



In the foreground a group of children are holding produce – fruit, flowers, a dove, and a kid. Most of the children are wearing white clothes with floral crowns on their heads. One of the children is wearing a tembel hat, and the girl at the head of the line is waving an Israeli flag. Two of the children are carrying a bunch of grapes, imitating the biblical image of the spies sent by Moses to scout out the Promised Land. This large bunch of grapes is a symbol of the richness of the produce of Israel. The boy on the far right is pushing a wheelbarrow filled with flowers. The background is an agricultural setting with open fields and a few scattered houses. The children appear to be walking towards an arch decorated with flowers and blue and white streamers where a crowd awaits them. Above the arch is the symbol for the JNF-KKL. It is likely that this scene is an illustration of the celebration for the first fruits of the season (bikkurim) that became common in agricultural settlements throughout Israel from the beginning of the twentieth century. At the bottom of the poster there is a quote from a children's Shavuot song written in 1933 by Yitzhak Shenhar and named "A Song of Thanks":

'Bikkurim, the fruit of our thanksgiving. We have brought a gift, a gift to the people.'

Compare to the following text from Torah; Exodus 34:22-26

'You shall observe the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot), of the first fruits of the wheat harvest; and the Festival of Ingathering (Succot) at the turn of the year... (you) shall appear before the Sovereign LORD, the GOD of Israel... The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your GOD.'

Questions to Consider:

What is the connection between the poster and the biblical text?

Why would GOD want us to give our choice fruits as an offering?

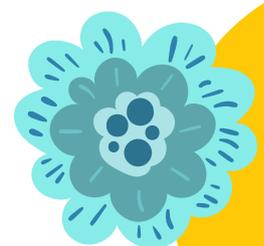
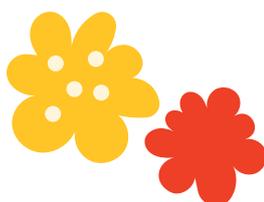
What message did KKL want to give the viewer of this poster?

What role do you think children played in the kibbutz community from the impression we get in this poster?

Why do you think they're all wearing white? What's the connection between Shavuot, harvest and white?

SOURCE 3:

Many Kibbutzim celebrated Shavuot with parades of harvested produce, their best farm machinery and prize livestock. The parades would attract crowds, often people from the cities of Israel would pay to be able to view these colourful parades of proud Zionist pioneer farmers as they exhibited their fresh produce and shiny tractors.





Standardised forms of the “Inter-kibbutz Festival Committee” included suggestions as to how to decorate the wagons, organise your parade and illustrate the visual aspect of the holiday. It is interesting to note the following quote written by representatives from Kibbutz Beit HaShita, when describing the role of children in the parades:

“The festival of Shavuot is the festival of those who sowed and planted and hoped all year long, and they are those who deserve to sincerely rejoice and exhibit that which they have produced. The children did not sow in tears, nor did they reap in mirth (except for on the children’s farm), therefore it will be a sacrilege and a lack of respect to allow the children to represent this moment of seriousness and happiness in the festival. The children shall be made part of the celebration in accordance with their participation in the work [...]. If there is no truth in the festival, it cannot in any way express or satisfy those who celebrate it.”

Questions to Consider:

What do you think the opinion is of the writer of this quote towards children?

What do you think children provide to a parade or performance that adults don’t?

The parades were to show pride and thankfulness for what the Kibbutz members had achieved. What do we do to show thankfulness?

Overall Questions to consider from the three sources:

Shavuot started out as an agricultural festival as seen in the Torah text, it changed into a historical religious one and then returned to its agricultural roots. Why do you think that is and do you think it’s significant?

Can you connect the idea of text 1 to text 3?

This year we will be celebrating Shavuot in our homes and with our immediate families only. How does this change our relationship with the festival? What can we do to make sure we still mark the giving of the Torah and thankfulness for what the world provides us with?

