

Sivan

Shavuot: The Holiday of the First Fruits

In this lesson, we will learn about the holiday of Shavuot and focus on the custom of the First Fruits (*Bikurim*) and the Seven Species of the Land of Israel.

Goals

- > The students will learn about the holiday of Shavuot and the custom of the First Fruits (*Bikurim*)
- > The students will learn about the Seven Species of the Land of Israel

Sources

- > From the Torah: Bringing the First Fruits (*Bikurim*)
- > From the Mishnah: The ceremony of bringing the First Fruits (*Bikurim*) to Jerusalem
- > From the Torah: The Seven Species

Ages



Can be adapted for Grades 1–3



Grades 4–6



Grades 7 and up

Background for the Teacher

Names of the Holiday and Their Meanings

The holiday of Shavuot, which is celebrated on the 6th of Sivan, is a multifaceted holiday that has developed over the generations.

It originated as an agricultural holiday and one of its names in the Torah is **Chag HaKatzir** (Festival of the Grain Harvest), as it comes at the time of year when wheat is harvested. In the Torah, this holiday is also referred to as **Chag HaBikurim** (Festival of the First Fruits). From this point onward, farmers would bring the first produce of the Seven Species that grew in their fields (i.e., wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranate, olives, and dates), to thank G-d for their harvest. The song “Our Baskets on Our Shoulders” from Levin Kipnis, which we will learn during the lesson, is based on how those crops were brought to the Temple. The biblical name **Shavuot** refers to the end of the counting of the seven weeks between the Exodus from Egypt and when the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. It represents the end of the process whose beginning is celebrated on Passover and, therefore, is also called “Atzeret” (a stopping point). Shavuot is also associated with and celebrated as **Chag Matan Torah** (The Festival of the giving of the Torah), an idea first introduced by the Talmudic Rabbis.”

Today, this holiday includes customs from different eras. For example, there is a custom of studying Torah through the night (*tikun leil Shavuot*) and a custom of reading the Ten Commandments and the Book of Ruth in the synagogue on Shavuot morning. The Book of Ruth is read on Shavuot because it tells a story that took place during the time of the grain harvest. Some people decorate their homes and synagogues with leaves and flowers to commemorate how according to tradition Mount Sinai, in the middle of the desert, was covered with vegetation when the Torah was given. There is a custom to eat dairy foods, in honor of the Torah, which is referred to as "honey and milk under your tongue." Jews from North Africa have a custom of pouring or spraying water on each other, in honor of the Torah, which is compared to water.

The Seven Species

These plants are mentioned in Deuteronomy, in an expression of praise for the Land of Israel: "אֶרֶץ חִטָּה וְשֵׁעֶרֶה וְגִבְוָה וְדִבְשָׁה וְתַאֲנִיחַ וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ זֵית וְדִבְשָׁה וְדָבָשׁ" [A land of wheat and barley and grapevine and fig and pomegranate, a land of olive oil and (date) honey] (Deuteronomy 8:8). These crops represent the range of the local diet and economy in ancient times. They were used to produce basic food, wine, oil, and sweeteners, and could be stored for long periods of time. Their great importance made them a symbol of abundance, fertility, and connection to the Land of Israel, which appears often in traditional sources and Jewish and Israeli culture. This holiday models the dynamics of our tradition, in which the agricultural and historical aspects of holidays have become intertwined over generations.


Activities

Opening Activity

Share with the students about the different aspects of the holiday of Shavuot (as described in the Background for the Teacher). Announce that we will learn about the holiday as the Festival of the First Fruits (Chag HaBikurim).

Explain to the students about the custom of the First Fruits on Shavuot and about the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.

Help the students to experience the ancient pilgrimage to Jerusalem through guided imagery. Ask the students to close their eyes, relax their bodies, and imagine themselves inside the story. Read the story to them (Supplement 1). Incorporate a spirit of celebration, and theatrical flourishes into your reading.

 Upon completing the reading, ask the students:

- > In the pilgrimage that you imagined, what did you find exciting or meaningful?
- > Try to focus on the experience of visiting Jerusalem and the Temple. How does that make you feel?
- > Would you want to participate in the festivity of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem?
- > What would such a pilgrimage look like if it happened today?

Explain to the students about the custom of the First Fruits on Shavuot and about the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem.



Main Activity

Part 1: The Festival of the First Fruits in the Mishnah and Today

Pass out the worksheet (Supplement 2) to the students. Invite the students to read the Mishnah's description of bringing of the First Fruits to Jerusalem and to complete the worksheet. As a class, go over the questions and answers.

Share with the students that in ancient times Shavuot was the holiday of bringing the first fruits to the Temple, as described in the Mishnah. You can screen this [AI video](#), which puts us into a time machine and models the description in the Mishnah. Since the destruction of the Temple, Shavuot has mainly been observed as **Chag Matan Torah**, the holiday of the giving of the Torah, because according to tradition, the Torah was given at Mount Sinai on this date. When they began to return to the Land of Israel, the pioneers, especially those on kibbutzim, began to celebrate this holiday as **Chag HaBikurim** (the Festival of the First Fruits), in light of its connection with working the land and the Land of Israel.

Show the students a video of the *Bikurim* (First Fruits) ceremony at [Kibbutz Beit Alfa](#). The video is long, so choose which part you want to show the students.

In ancient times, the *bikurim* were actual agricultural crops. But, today, kibbutzim have a custom of presenting all the babies born in the past year and a variety of products as '*bikurim*' - agricultural and industrial alike. Ask the students: What are the differences and similarities between the kibbutz ceremony and the traditional ceremony described in the Mishnah?

To conclude, remind the students that *bikurim* are the first fruits of the harvest, the first produce after many months of hard work.

Invite the students to draw a picture of a basket of *bikurim* that contains things in their lives that began in the past year or successes that they have enjoyed after working hard for a long time.



Screen the [presentation](#) about the song "Our Baskets on Our Shoulders". Explain its content and talk about the ceremony of bringing *bikurim* to the Temple. Ask the students:

- > What feelings are expressed in this song? When you hear the song, how does it make you feel?
- > What about the song makes you feel that way?
- > Why are the people happy?
- > Based on what we've learned about the *bikurim* ceremony, what are they carrying in their baskets?



Pass out blank sheets of paper to the students and ask them to draw themselves in the festive procession. Ask them to describe what they would have in their basket: a favorite food, their pet that would want to join the procession, a musical instrument that they like or that they play, etc. Remind them not to draw any background, just themselves and their baskets. Then, cut out the figures that they drew so that they can be hung up on the wall with all of the other students' figures, to depict a procession.

Part 2: The Seven Species

Tell the students that the produce that was brought to the Temple was the produce of the Seven Species of the Land of Israel. Write "Seven Species" on the board and ask the students to name them. Write down all of the answers, both correct and incorrect.

Then, invite the students to use the presentation about the [Seven Species](#) to check their answers. Show the presentation and speak about each of the species. You can refer to the information window (i) that appears on each slide. After you have watched the presentation, together with the students, erase the incorrect answers from the board and add any species that may have been missed.



Ask:

- > Which of the Seven Species have you eaten recently? In what form did you eat them? Were they unprocessed, just like they are harvested, or had they been processed in some way?
- > Are there any of the Seven Species that you have never eaten? Which ones?



Prepare a domino-like card game about the Seven Species. Each student will get a sheet of paper with domino-like cards on it (Supplement 3). On each card, instruct them to draw a picture of one of the Seven Species on one side of the card and the name of a **different** member of the Seven Species in Hebrew and English on the other side. Then, cut out the cards and play together as teams or as a class.

Instructions for the game: Place all of the cards face-down in a stack. When a person has a turn, they take one card from the stack. If it matches one of the cards that has already been turned over, it is placed next to that card (like dominoes). If there is no match, the card is returned to the bottom of the stack. The goal is to match as many cards as possible.



Conclusion

Remind the students that Shavuot is also called Chag HaBikurim, which refers to the custom of bringing *bikurim* (first fruits) to the Temple. Explain that the bringing of the *bikurim* was an expression of gratitude and happiness about the agricultural harvest. Today, we can also express our gratitude for our successes and for new things in our lives and, of course, be happy about them.



Computer Game

Seven Species Game



This digital game is based on identifying the Seven Species. The students will need to identify the hidden member of the Seven Species, based on clues and pieces of a larger picture.

Level 1: Move the cursor over the picture and let them guess the hidden plant. Then, click on the arrow to reveal the picture.

Level 2: The game can be played alone, in pairs, or as a class. If you have chosen to play as a class, you can do so as follows:

Divide the students into teams. Hints will appear on the screen. Think together about what the hidden species might be, based on the hints. After they have decided, ask representatives from the different teams to say their answers. To see if the answers are correct, go to the next screen, which will show several squares of the picture. If they did not correctly identify the species, uncover more pieces of the picture and let them guess again. Once everyone is sure about the answer, click on the arrow to see if they are correct.

Supplement 1

The Pilgrimage to Jerusalem: Guided Imagery

Close your eyes.

Imagine that you are living 2000 years ago. You don't hear the noise of cars or buses; there are no telephones. Around you, there is only nature: mountains, fields, desert, and a small village where you live with your family.

Suddenly, an excited cry is heard in the village. The moment for which you have been waiting for many months has finally arrived: a festival for which you will be traveling to the Temple in Jerusalem! Imagine yourselves packing food for the journey, water, blankets, sturdy shoes.

And, of course, the good crops that you've grown in your fields this year! You've got it all packed in your basket; everything's ready. Everyone gathers together, families, neighbors, friends, and sets off together for the long journey. The sun is shining, dust is rising up from the trail, and you can feel the cool, mountain breeze on your face. It is not an easy journey, but your heart is happy.

You hear people singing, children laughing, the ringing of the bells that the lambs are wearing, the footsteps of many people. Everyone is singing together songs about Jerusalem and the Temple.

As time goes by, you get closer to Jerusalem. The air changes. You can smell flowers, green trees, and the fresh baked good from the villages along the way. Suddenly, over the mountain, it appears: **Jerusalem!**

A big, beautiful city, full of white stones that sparkle in the sunlight. And, at its center, the large Temple. The Temple's walls are white and gold and it shines like there is a special light that comes from inside it and fills up the whole city.

You get closer and your heart starts beating louder. This is the holiest place for the Jewish people.

Inside the Temple, sweet singing is heard; that's the singing of the Levites. Harps, tambourines, cymbals, shofars, and trumpets are playing a festive song. Around you, there are many people. Pilgrims from all over the Land of Israel pray, sing, and thank G-d. The residents of Jerusalem give them all a warm welcome, smiling, inviting them to stay in their homes, and saying, "*Chag sameach!* Welcome to Jerusalem!"

Supplement 2

First Fruits Ceremony

The Mishnah describes the ceremony of bringing the first fruits to the Temple.

The people who live near Jerusalem bring the figs and the grapes and those who live farther away bring dried figs and raisins.

And the ox walks in front of them, with its horns covered in gold and with a crown of olive branches on its head.

The flute is played in front of them, until they get close to Jerusalem.

As they approach Jerusalem, they send messengers ahead and place crowns on their first fruits.

The important officers of the Temple and the city go out to greet them.

And all of the craftsmen of Jerusalem stand in front of them and ask them how they are doing: "Our brothers, people from such-and-such a place, come in peace!"

Mishnah, Tractate Bikurim 3:3



- Here are two baskets. In each basket, write what each group of people brought to Jerusalem:

People who live
near Jerusalem



People who live
far from Jerusalem



- Use one color to label the sentences in the text that tell us that the procession was a happy one. Use another color to label the sentences in the text that tell us that when the procession reached Jerusalem, it was met by important people.

What does this teach us about the unique nature of the ceremony?

- Individual assignment:** Write what fruit, musical instrument, or decoration you'd bring to the procession. Explain your choice. _____

Supplement 3

