

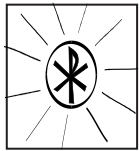
5 Ways to Celebrate Pentecost

Jewish traditions and Christian life

How can Jewish Shavuot practices influence Christians in their celebration of Pentecost? Certainly we can count the days till Pentecost with holy anticipation as we prepare our hearts for the dramatic liturgical conclusion of the Easter season. Five more suggestions follow.



Bible. The night before (all night if you wish!) pray and reflect on Scripture: the Pentecost story in Acts 2:1-11 as well as from the Old Testament texts that are part of Jewish Shavuot (see p.3).



Eucharist. Come morning, celebrate the Sunday Eucharist with joy. Remember your Confirmation. Renew your faith commitment, praying that the gifts of the Holy Spirit be activated afresh in your life.



Fire. Christians are familiar with the Pentecost symbol of fire, but perhaps don't connect it with the lightning flashes and smoking mountain at Sinai! Read the drama of Ex. 19:16-18; 20:15 as well as Acts 2:2-3.



Tongues. In Jewish midrash, it is said that at Sinai God's voice was heard in 70 languages; that Torah is destined for all peoples. In what language (and culture) has the Lord's voice reached your ears?



Decor. At Shavuot Jews decorate with flowers/greenery and include dairy foods (the 'sweetness' of Torah) in festive meals. What décor and festive foods might you include in Pentecost celebrations at home? e.g., red table cloth, candles, an ice-cream dessert.



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Each week in this series *Light of Torah* we 'unpack' a portion of the Torah (the first five books of the bible) drawing on Jewish sources and insights. We undertake this process as Christians in an effort to deepen our appreciation of the Judaic roots of Christianity.

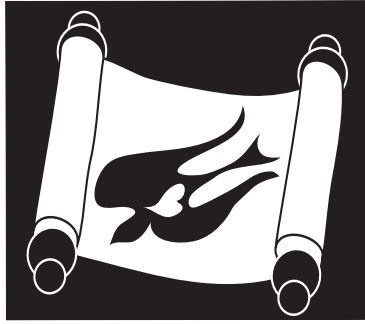
This week's issue falls on 30 May, coinciding with the Jewish festival Shavuot and the day prior to the Christian feast of Pentecost; an opportunity to consider the links between the two feasts. For this reason we will depart from our usual pattern of Torah reflection.

At its core, Shavuot celebrates the 'Giving of the Torah,' that dramatic event on Mt Sinai (Ex.19-20) from which Moses emerges clutching the two stone tablets engraved with the Ten Commandments. In the process of translation, the Mt Sinai revelation became known in English as the giving of the 'Law.' Unfortunately 'Law' is often heard in the popular Christian mindset as 'legalistic,' i.e., restrictive and oppressive, in contrast to a spirit of love promoted by Christianity. But this is an unfortunate misunderstanding. For the Jewish people, the giving of the Torah at Sinai — the gift of a 'teaching,' a spiritual and moral 'road map' from God's very self — expresses a relationship with a loving God to be joyfully embraced with gratitude and wonder. It is a sign of being chosen, called, gifted, entrusted with a divine undertaking.

Join us here as we explore the Jewish festival of Shavuot, and enliven our appreciation of the Church's celebration of Pentecost.

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.





Shavuot / Pentecost

The Jewish Festival of Shavuot (*shavuot* is Hebrew for 'weeks') occurs 50 days after Passover. 'Fiftieth day' in Greek is *pentekoste*, hence the name 'Pentecost.' Here we explore its themes under four headings: Reaping the Harvest, Giving the Torah, Counting the Days, Pondering the Text. Before reading further, open your bible to Deut. 16:9-11 and read about this ancient, joyous harvest festival in the Torah.

Works consulted: Murray Watson (St Peter's Seminary, London, Ontario), 'The Pentecost Before Pentecost', article for private circulation, 2008. Websites: www.jewfaq.org; www.jewishencyclopedia.com; www.ou.org/torah. The assistance of Jack Driscoll, cfc, is gratefully acknowledged.

Reaping

Originating as an agricultural feast, Shavuot was celebrated in ancient Israel as the culmination of the harvest period. The harvest began around Passover with the barley crop, and concluded seven *weeks (shavuot)* later with the wheat harvest. Shavuot involved a pilgrimage to the Temple to offer to God the 'first fruits' of the harvest in thanksgiving for the earth's produce. Can we see the links with the Christian Pentecost? The Church celebrates the 'first fruits' of the Spirit's transformation of the earth as the reality of Christ's resurrection takes hold in the world.

Giving

In Judaism today, the focus of Shavuot has shifted to thanksgiving for God's gift of Torah. Rabbinic teachings hold that 50 days after the Israelites left Egypt, God gave the Torah to Moses at Sinai. If the exodus was a physical deliverance, the gift of the Torah at Mt Sinai is considered a spiritual liberation changing the course of Judaism forever. On that day, a community of Hebrew refugees was galvanized as a nation, entering a radically new phase in their covenantal relationship with God. Jewish tradition speaks of this event as God's 'betrothal' to Israel, and Shavuot is compared to a wedding day.

Thus Shavuot is the anniversary of the 'Giving of the Torah' and 'the birth of Israel.' For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the radical newness of God's action: the fulfillment of the Torah in Jesus, and the birth of the Church.

Counting

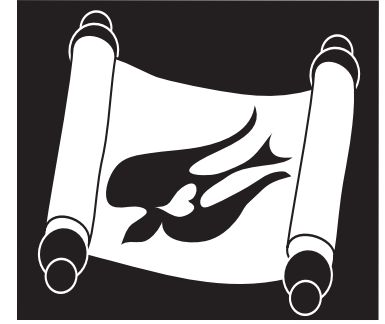
In Jewish practice, the 50 days leading up to Shavuot are 'counted.' This is known as 'The counting of the Omer.' 'Omer' refers to a cultic offering of barley. Although this died out with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the practice of counting the days continued, the focus now being to anticipate the Giving of the Law. This 'counting' of days between Passover and Shavuot highlights the fact that Shavuot is the extension and conclusion of Passover. Similarly in the Christian Church, Pentecost marks the conclusion of the Easter season.

The 'counting' of 50 days in Jewish custom enhances the sense of excited anticipation. Like a bride and groom looking forward to their special day, Jews look forward to Shavuot. Even after having celebrated the events of the exodus, there is a longing for the 'something more to come.' Similarly, even after reveling in the wonder of the Resurrection at Easter, Christians look forward to the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

Pondering

In greeting Shavuot, it is a Jewish practice to stay up all night reading Torah. Study halls are filled on this night. Come dawn, in Jerusalem, Jews stream to the Wailing Wall for special prayers.

What are some key Torah texts relating to this festival? Exodus 34:18-26, Leviticus 23:9-21, and Deuteronomy 16:9-11 all refer to Shavuot. Exodus 19:1-20:23 is familiar to Christians as the story of Moses and the 'Ten Commandments.'



'Your people will be my people, and your God my God.'

The Book of Ruth is also read on Shavuot, telling of the faith of a gentile woman who converts to Judaism. Although born an 'outsider,' Ruth's choice for the people and land of the Torah is celebrated as a witness to the cleaving to the God of Israel to which every Jew is called. Conversion of the gentiles is also a powerful Pentecost theme for the Church.

Texts like this are part of our Christian Bible, although escaping the notice of many Christians. An awareness of Shavuot can stimulate our love for Torah and reconnect us with the ancient depths of our own sacred story.