

# SHAVUOT

**A HOME CELEBRATION  
FOR HUMANISTIC JEWS**



## CANDLE LIGHTING BLESSING

*Blessed is the light in the tradition  
which gives us joy and happiness  
in the kindling of the Festival flame*

ברוך האור במסורת  
הנותן לנו ששון ושמחה  
בהדלקת נר של יום טוב

*Baruch ha'or bamasoret  
hanoten lanu sason vesimḥa  
behadlakat ner shel Yom Tov*

Shavuot began as a celebration of the end of the spring harvest season when our agricultural ancestors gathered their first fruits. It was one of the three major pilgrimage festivals in ancient Israel, when the Israelites travelled to the Temple in Jerusalem to present offerings of fruit, oxen and loaves of bread. In time the details of this “pilgrimage” changed since for a very long time Judaism adapted without access to the Temple site.

Shavuot literally means “weeks” because it occurs seven weeks after Passover (Pesah), but it is also commonly called “Festival of First Fruits.” Over the course of history the festival has taken on the symbolism of being the anniversary of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. We know that the Torah was written by different people over hundreds of years and that the High Priest Ezra finalised it in the 5th century BCE. Nevertheless, Shavuot still symbolises the beginning of a Jewish civilisation governed by a written law. It is on this day that we learn new things and think about how to live ethically.

It is a Jewish custom to stay awake at night on Shavuot and study, studying is an integral part of Jewish culture, and the Jewish way of studying is to do it with a critiquing mindset, not to take everything literally, but to look for new ways of seeing the text, to look beneath its plain meaning for deeper symbolism, and to search for better or fresher ways to understand what we read. As Humanistic Jews we question

authoritarian and ethnocentric ideas, we do not see ourselves as better than non-Jews, and we do not believe that only Jews have the right to live in the “Promised Land” which we celebrate at Shavuot by eating and drinking dairy products, to remember that the Promised Land is a land of milk and honey (unlike the dry, barren, inhospitable land of the Sinai Desert). In Egypt we were slaves, in Sinai we were free, in the Land of Israel we have moral and ethical responsibilities. Shavuot celebrates the result of that journey out of Egypt.

By studying humanistic commitments - instead of commandments- we can start to question and think about what it means to have responsibility as a people, and we can learn from our strong commitment to social justice and from the responsibility to repair the world (Tikkun Olam). Moses taught the Israelites “Do not oppress the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land” this is a powerful reminder of our obligation to respect human rights. There is a Yiddish witty saying that a Jew without moral is “er is geven shpet tsum barg Sinai” meaning “He was too late to Mount Sinai.” In other words, he missed the lesson.

Another symbolism embedded in the eating of dairy products on Shavuot is a reminder of pastoralism and to decorate homes with wheat, greenery and flowers. This reminds us of nature and our duties to protect animals and fields. The Book of Ruth is read at Shavuot and the story is set in the fields, in the story Ruth, who is a Moabite, not an Israelite, commits to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi, an Israelite, and the family line “wherever you go I will go, your people will be my people, your god will be my god” is a beautiful reminder of the joy of living in diverse families and communities, not just with our own people. Ruth’s grandson was King David, teaching us that non-Jews are an integral part of Jewish families and that both Jewish and non-Jewish friends, family and relatives are to be celebrated. Ruth also reminds us that in Jewish law the corners of fields must be left for the poor, that our land never just belongs to us but that we should share with others.

adapted by Martin Hasan Di Maggio from ‘Celebrating Jewish Holidays: An introduction for secular Jewish families and their communities. 2002

# TEN COMMITMENTS

## Blessing for Study

Blessed is the light in the tradition  
which gives us joy and happiness  
in studying words of Torah

בְּרוּךְ הָאֹר בְּמִסֹּרֶת

הַנּוֹתֵן לָנוּ שִׂשׂוֹן וְשִׂמְחָה

בְּעֵסֶק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה

Baruch ha'or bamasoret  
hanoten lanu sason vesimḥa  
ba'eseq bedivrei torah

Working in pairs (or by yourself) read the following Ten Humanist Commitments and choose two that speak to you the most. Discuss.

## Critical Thinking



As we are each bombarded with a constant stream of information, it can become challenging to decide what is accurate and true. Thinking critically allows us to make sense of all this information and reason our way to good judgments and effective solutions to the problems we face while rigorously avoiding pitfalls like rationalization, conformity, and stereotyping. This process forms the basis of the scientific method, which opens the door for new discoveries through hypothesizing and experimenting. Critical thinking is a skill that requires continued attention, practice, and reflection. Exercising our minds to build these skills enables us to challenge biases in ourselves and in others, paving the way for a fair, open-minded, and autonomous perspective that fosters a multicultural worldview.

## Ethical Development



The key to understanding ethical development is acknowledging that nobody is perfect or has all the answers. Ethical development is a never-ending process that requires constant reflection and evaluation of our personal choices and the consequences they have on others. Fairness, cooperation, and sharing are among the first moral issues we encounter in our ethical development as human beings and are often embraced intuitively, but each new day carries with it new challenges and new moral dilemmas. We should continually adapt and rebuild our moral frameworks with the goal of becoming ever better human beings.

## Peace and Social Justice



True peace involves an intense commitment to social justice and affirms the human rights and personal autonomy of all people. Any level of injustice against groups or individuals signifies existing conflict, even if the conflict isn't immediate or obvious. We attain peace only by consistently responding to injustice through thoughtful conflict resolution that aims to repair harms and ensure a fair and equitable society moving forward. This kind of conflict resolution is known as restorative justice. In order to achieve a just, peaceful society, we all must take claims of injustice seriously and ensure that those who are impacted most by rights-violations determine the best course forward.

## Service and Participation



Service and participation means putting values into action in ways that positively impact our communities and society as a whole. It fosters helping others, increasing social awareness, enhancing accountability, and many attributes of the other nine commitments. Engaging in service doesn't just make the recipients better off, but those who serve can develop new skills, experiences, and personal satisfaction that all promote personal growth. We must all recognize that we are members of a group, and engaging in service to benefit the group and the other individuals in it makes us all better off.

## Empathy



Empathy means entering imaginatively into another's situation in an attempt to understand their experience as though we are experiencing it ourselves. Empathy requires a person to step outside of their own perspective to consider someone else's thoughts, feelings, or circumstance from that person's point of view. In many ways, empathy is the first step to ethical behavior as it allows us to respond compassionately to the suffering of others and exercise good judgement when our actions may affect someone else. Understanding another's perspective is not only critical to building better relationships, but also makes us better citizens in our local and global communities. Empathy promotes tolerance, consideration, and compassion amongst us all.

## Humility



Humility means displaying modesty about accomplishments, talents, gifts, or importance of self. It acknowledges we humans are fallible and have limitations in what we know and can do. Being humble isn't about having low self-esteem or denigrating oneself. Humility at its core is robust self-awareness—awareness of our strengths and weaknesses, our faults and our merits. Humility involves setting aside personal pride and overcoming our egos to embrace gratitude for what you have and appreciate others for who they are. In **b e i n g** humble, one recognizes their own value in relation to others; inherently, you are neither better nor worse than anyone else.

## Environmentalism



Regardless of our individual identities, we all share the same home: planet Earth. Just as we depend on the planet to sustain us with its precious resources, this planet's ecosystems depend on us to be good stewards and take responsibility for the impact human activity has on our shared planet. Disregard for the large-scale impacts humans have on our environment has caused extensive harm to earth's ecosystems. Despite this, humanity is also capable of positive environmental change that values the interdependence of all life on this planet. Each of us must acknowledge our collective and individual mistakes, repair past damages, and purposefully work toward cultivating rich, diverse, and resilient ecosystems.

## Global Awareness



We live in a world that is rich in cultural, social, and individual diversity—a world with rapidly increasing interdependence. As a result, events anywhere are more likely to have consequences everywhere. Global awareness broadens our knowledge of cultures and perspectives that are outside of our own experience. A true global awareness includes attention to both current and historical events, and acknowledges how we affect—and how we are affected by—the interconnected social, political, and economic systems in which we reside. The end-goal of global awareness is global citizenship, which recognizes our personal responsibility to foster a healthy and dignified life for everyone in our global community.

## Responsibility



Every day, each of us makes choices. These choices, large and small, all have consequences—for ourselves and for the world around us. Moral responsibility involves taking conscious ownership of one's intentions and actions, and being accountable for the resulting consequences. Although we all live in a society with various cultural values, expectations, codes of conduct, and social mores, ultimately we all decide for ourselves what is right and wrong. Being a responsible person involves steadfast attention to what is right and willfully bearing the blame or praise for our own actions.

## Altruism



Altruism is the selfless concern for the welfare of other living beings without expectation of reward, recognition, or return. The collective welfare of our communities and society depends on the welfare of each individual person. We should always seek to alleviate the suffering and hardships of others with compassionate action. By caring for others around us and lifting each other up, we reinforce healthy connections and contribute to the betterment of our community, society, and the world.

# THE BOOK OF RUTH

(adapted)



## CHAPTER 1

1. In the days when the chieftains ruled, there was a famine in the land; and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons, went to reside in the country of Moab.
2. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was Naomi, and his two sons were named Mahlon and Chilion—Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. They came to the country of Moab and remained there.
3. Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons.
4. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth, and they lived there about ten years.
5. Then those two—Mahlon and Chilion—also died; so the woman was left without her two sons and without her husband.
6. She started out with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab; for in the country of Moab she had heard that they had found food.
7. Accompanied by her two daughters-in-law, she left the place where she had been living; and they set out on the road back to the land of Judah.
8. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her mother's house. May life deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me!"

9. May each of you find security in the house of a husband!" And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping.
10. and said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."
11. But Naomi replied, "Turn back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons in my body who might be husbands for you?"
12. Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to be married. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I were married tonight and I also bore sons,
13. should you wait for them to grow up? Should you on their account debar yourselves from marriage? Oh no, my daughters! My lot is far more bitter than yours, for life has not dealt me a good hand"
14. They broke into weeping again, and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth clung to her.
15. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law."
16. But Ruth replied, "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your beliefs my beliefs.
17. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may life do to me if anything but death parts me from you."
18. When [Naomi] saw how determined she was to go with her, she ceased to argue with her;
19. and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, "Can this be Naomi?"
20. "Do not call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter.
21. I went away full, and come back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when life has been so harsh for me, when so much misfortune is upon me!"
22. Thus Naomi returned from the country of Moab; she returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth the Moabite. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

## CHAPTER 2

1. Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a man of substance, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.
2. Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness." "Yes, daughter, go," she replied;
3. and off she went. She came and gleaned in a field, behind the reapers; and, as luck would have it, it was the piece of land belonging to Boaz, who was of Elimelech's family.
4. Presently Boaz arrived from Bethlehem. He greeted the reapers, "Peace be upon you!" And they responded, "And upon you Peace!"
5. Boaz said to the servant who was in charge of the reapers, "Whose girl is that?"
6. The servant in charge of the reapers replied, "She is a Moabite girl who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.
7. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' She has been on her feet ever since she came this morning. She has rested but little in the hut."
8. Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter. Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls.
9. Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn."

10. She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, “Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?”
11. Boaz said in reply, “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before.
12. May your deeds bring you reward. May you have a full recompense among the people of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!”
13. She answered, “You are most kind, sir, to comfort me and to speak gently to your maidservant—though I am not so much as one of your maidservants.”
14. At mealtime, Boaz said to her, “Come over here and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.” So she sat down beside the reapers. He handed her roasted grain, and she ate her fill and had some left over.
15. When she got up again to glean, Boaz gave orders to his workers, “You are not only to let her glean among the sheaves, without interference,
16. but you must also pull some [stalks] out of the heaps and leave them for her to glean, and not scold her.”
17. She gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned—it was about an *ephah* of barley—
18. and carried it back with her to the town. When her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned, and when she also took out and gave her what she had left over after eating her fill,
19. her mother-in-law asked her, “Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you!” So she told her mother-in-law whom she had worked with, saying, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.”
20. Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be the light in humanity that has inspired kindness toward the living and to the dead! For,” Naomi explained to her daughter-in-law, “the man is related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsmen.”
21. Ruth the Moabite said, “He even told me, ‘Stay close by my workers until all my harvest is finished.’”
22. And Naomi answered her daughter-in-law Ruth, “It is best, daughter, that you go out with his girls, and not be annoyed in some other field.”
23. So she stayed close to the maidservants of Boaz, and gleaned until the barley harvest and the wheat harvest were finished. Then she stayed at home with her mother-in-law.

### CHAPTER 3

1. Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy.
2. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you were close to. He will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor tonight.
3. So bathe, anoint yourself, dress up, and go down to the threshing floor. But do not disclose yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.
4. When he lies down, note the place where he lies down, and go over and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what you are to do.”
5. She replied, “I will do everything you tell me.”
6. She went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her.
7. Boaz ate and drank, and in a cheerful mood went to lie down beside the grainpile. Then she went over stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down.
8. In the middle of the night, the man gave a start and pulled back—there was a woman lying at his feet!

9. "Who are you?" he asked. And she replied, "I am your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid,<sup>a</sup> for you are a redeeming kinsman."
10. He exclaimed, "Be blessed, young woman! Your latest deed of loyalty is greater than the first, in that you have not turned to younger men, whether poor or rich."
11. And now, young woman, have no fear. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask, for all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are."
12. But while it is true I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another redeemer closer than I."
13. Stay for the night. Then in the morning, if he will act as a redeemer, good! let him redeem. But if he does not want to act as redeemer for you, I will do so myself, I swear! Lie down until morning."
14. So she lay at his feet until dawn. She rose before one person could distinguish another, for he thought, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."
15. And he said, "Hold out the shawl you are wearing." She held it while he measured out six measures of barley, and he put it on her back. When she got back to the town,
16. she came to her mother-in-law, who asked, "How is it with you, daughter?" She told her all that the man had done for her;
17. and she added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying to me, 'Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"
18. And Naomi said, "Stay here, daughter, till you learn how the matter turns out. For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today."

#### CHAPTER 4

1. Meanwhile, Boaz had gone to the gate and sat down there. And now the redeemer whom Boaz had mentioned passed by. He called, "Come over and sit down here, So-and-so!" And he came over and sat down.
2. Then [Boaz] took ten elders of the town and said, "Be seated here"; and they sat down.
3. He said to the redeemer, "Naomi, now returned from the country of Moab, must sell the piece of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech.
4. I thought I should disclose the matter to you and say: Acquire it in the presence of those seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you are willing to redeem it, redeem! But if you will not redeem, tell me, that I may know. For there is no one to redeem but you, and I come after you." "I am willing to redeem it," he replied.
5. Boaz continued, "When you acquire the property from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabite, you must also acquire the wife of the deceased, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate."
6. The redeemer replied, "Then I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own estate. You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it."
7. Now this was formerly done in Israel in cases of redemption or exchange: to validate any transaction, one man would take off his sandal and hand it to the other. Such was the practice in Israel.
8. So when the redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire for yourself," he drew off his sandal.
9. And Boaz said to the elders and to the rest of the people, "You are witnesses today that I am acquiring from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.
10. I am also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, as my wife, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate, that the name of the deceased may not disappear from among his kinsmen and from the gate of his home town. You are witnesses today."

11. All the people at the gate and the elders answered, “We are. May the woman who is coming into your house be like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem!
12. And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which you will have with this young woman.”
13. So Boaz married Ruth; she became his wife, and he cohabited with her. She conceived, and she bore a son.
14. And the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the light in humanity, for you have not lacked a redeemer today! May the people Israel live!
15. May your life be renewed and may you be sustained in your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.”
16. Naomi took the child and held it to her bosom. She became its foster mother,
17. and the women neighbors gave him a name, saying, “A son is born to Naomi!” They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, father of David.
18. This is the line of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron,
19. Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab,
20. Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon,
21. Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed,
22. Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

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