



Celebrating 10 Years of Ten Minutes of Torah

Shavuot Study Guide—Parashat Mishpatim

May 2014

This year marks the 10th anniversary of **Ten Minutes of Torah**. Each weekday, over 20,000 subscribers receive an e-mail that brings the Jewish world to them. From Torah commentaries written by scholars to recipes for baking challah, *Ten Minutes of Torah* explores the great variety of Jewish life. Join the many readers of **Ten Minutes of Torah** and subscribe now.

What better time is there to celebrate *Ten Minutes of Torah* than on Shavuot! Like many Jewish holidays, Shavuot has its origins as an agricultural festival. The word *shavuot* means “weeks,” and Shavuot refers to the period of seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. The timing of the festival marked the end of the spring barley harvest and the beginning of the summer wheat harvest. Our ancestors would bring an offering from their harvest to the Temple in Jerusalem.

After the destruction of the Temple such offerings could no longer be made. Over time, this offering was replaced by reading the Ten Commandments and the Book of Ruth. By the time of the destruction of the Second Temple, Shavuot became associated with the Ten Commandments and the festival became known as *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the “Time of the Giving of the Law.”

One of the most distinctive customs of Shavuot is *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, an evening-long study session held on the night of Shavuot. *Tikkun* means a “set order” of something and refers to the order in which the texts are read. The custom originated with the mystics of Safed in the 16th century, and today, many Jews stay up all night on Shavuot reading and studying a variety of sacred texts. Traditionally, readings from the Torah and Talmud are included.

Many synagogues hold a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. Some host programs that go on all night, culminating in morning services at sunrise. Other congregations gather for a few hours of study. Whether one is planning to attend an all-night session, study for a few hours, join with others, or study on one's own, Shavuot is a wonderful time to encounter sacred text.

We asked several rabbis on the staff of the Union for Reform Judaism to share their own encounters with our text. Each video explores a different text. Some focus on a commandment. Others challenge a difficult passage, while others grapple with age-old questions.

These videos provide interesting responses to our sacred writings whether you are studying with others or watching these videos on your own. This guide offers a couple of questions to accompany the video, spark conversation, and give the reader an opportunity for further reflection.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Senior Vice President, Union for Reform Judaism

Text—*Parashat Mishpatim*, Exodus 21:1–24:18

reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/mishpatim

Summary:

- Interpersonal laws ranging from the treatment of slaves to the exhibition of kindness to strangers are listed. (21:1–23:9)
- Cultic laws follow, including the commandment to observe the Sabbatical Year, a repetition of the Sabbath injunction, the first mention of the Three Pilgrimage Festivals, rules of sacrificial offerings, and the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk. (23:10–19)
- The people assent to the covenant. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascend the mountain and see God. Moses goes on alone and spends forty days on the mountain. (24:1–18)

Questions:

Rabbi Pesner tells us that it is in taking action to repair the world or to engage in tradition that we can hear God's voice. Can you recall a time that this is true for you?

Rabbi Pesner points out that we all stood together at Sinai to accept God's covenant (Deut. 29:14). What does this mean to you? Does it make you feel more connected to God... to the people around you? Does it inspire you to perform mitzvot... to participate in performing mitzvot with others?