

**Family Matters:  
Old-New Holiday****By Joanne Kenen**

*It is a celebration of our heritage, a commemoration of the receiving of the Torah—yet Shavuot is basically unknown to many Jews. But times are changing.*

Traditionally, Shavuot is one of the three major pilgrimage holidays, marking the day Jews were given the Torah at Mount Sinai. In practice, for many American Jews, it is a forgotten holiday, a P.S. on the ritual calendar.



Courtesy of Na'aleh Denver

That's changing. Shavuot may be the next big thing in Jewish observance, with singles and families alike rediscovering the holiday much the same way Sukkot has enjoyed a surge in observance over the last decade. A growing trend, still small but spreading, is the Shavuot retreat.

The holiday is a perfect fit. It falls in late spring (this year on June 9 and 10), sort of a Jewish equivalent of Memorial Day, when the weather is nice and people are eager to be outside. It is a happy holiday: Nobody tried to kill us, and we still get to eat. And apart from blintzes or cheesecake, Shavuot has relatively few deeply held family traditions. No one expects you to bring the kids to the grandparents for Shavuot. That vacuum means it's easy for new community-oriented celebrations and spiritual practices to take root.

**F**or the past two years, my family of four joined about 20 other families—including about 45 young children and one teen—in celebrating Shavuot at a state park in the mountains of West Virginia. We will return this year, part of a slightly larger contingent. We will daven as a community; we will read the Book of Ruth (customarily read on the holiday because Ruth's conversion to the Jewish faith parallels the Jews' acceptance of the Torah) and share the story with our children; we will hold a *tikkun leil Shavuot*, the late-night (sometimes all night) study session that is part of holiday celebrations, with explorations of classic religious texts and modern responses. Softball will be part of the program and hanging out in the playground. If the weather is as perfect as the last two years, we will take a kid-friendly hike and sing holiday songs (think Moses ascending Mount Sinai with a phalanx of kindergarteners) and end up at a small lakeside beach. We'll also eat too much. And our minds and souls will already be racing ahead to next year. We have put down our deposit for 2009 and will soon start planning for 2010.

Although a smattering of synagogues have had retreats for years, the trend has grown recently thanks in part to Kehilat Hadar ([www.kehilathadar.org](http://www.kehilathadar.org)), a traditional, egalitarian minyan attracting young adults on New York's Upper West Side. In late 2001, Elie Kaunfer—then a corporate fraud investigator, now an innovative young rabbi—and some friends decided that their new minyan should find a creative way to celebrate Shavuot with the right balance of serious learning and sense of community. They had the bright idea of loading up a couple of

buses with 240 of their closest friends and spending Shavuot at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires in Massachusetts. They developed a curriculum so elaborate it needed a spreadsheet. That first retreat, in 2002, was a success, a blend of thoughtful study and spontaneous outbursts of dance that attracted the young and young at heart from New York, Boston and Washington. It has become an annual event.

When a torah was commissioned for Kehilat Hadar in memory of a member who died, Shavuot seemed the right time to formally “welcome it into our community,” recalled Farell Diamond, a member of the minyan. “We passed it from person to person” while singing niggunim.

“Some people had never held a *Sefer Torah* in their hand,” added Kaunfer. “It was an extremely powerful moment.”

Josh Fine took part in that first Berkshires retreat, and when he moved to Denver in 2004, he took the idea with him to Na’aleh Denver ([www.naalehdenver.org](http://www.naalehdenver.org)), a minyan he helped establish. Colorado may not have the *Yiddishkeit* of the Upper West Side or a mass of seminary-trained scholars, but the Denver group can pray in a Rocky Mountains lodge with floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

“Singing *Hallel* looking at the mountains is a pretty inspirational experience,” said Lena Fishman, who has attended the retreat since it started.

Some who took part in the original Berkshires retreat later helped form the DC Minyan ([www.dcminyan.org](http://www.dcminyan.org)) in Washington, which also began its own retreat. That minyan overlaps socially and religiously with my family’s community, a group of Conservative and modern Orthodox families who know each other from *shuls* and day schools around the Washington area.

A few years ago, Marissa Fuller, a health care consultant with three children, a strong sense of community and admirable organization skills, decided to start a retreat at Cacapon State Park in West Virginia, two hours outside of Washington.

My family wasn’t part of the planning; our invitation came later in the process though still in time for the inaugural retreat. We were a bit hesitant, largely because the other couples all had young kids. We had a young child, Ilan, then 5, but we also had the only teenager in the crowd, Zach, 15, and were not sure how the dynamics would work. But Zach was enthusiastic, so we signed up.

The retreat was a success as a spiritual event, as a family event and as an incredible community-building event. The first year our group stayed in about a dozen cabins, each housing one or two families. While Kehilat Hadar had Ramah prepare its food and Na’aleh used a kosher caterer, we prepared our own dairy meals in our home kitchens and shlepped them to West Virginia. (There are numerous explanations for why Shavuot has become a dairy holiday; one tradition says it’s to recall the promise of a land of milk and honey.)

That first year we grossly overestimated the amount of food we would need. We were so stuffed that a running joke about making the second day of Shavuot a fast day made the rounds. The second year we reduced the quantities from obscene to absurd; this year we will aim for the merely ridiculous. The taco bar and make-your-own sundaes may be reprised, but the

cheesecake contest was scrapped as most of us are still digesting last year's Orange/Oreo/Old Fashioned/Chocolate Hazelnut/Ricotta concoctions. Fuller suggests that we instead invent "Shavuotinis" for Happy Hour on the beach.

Our davening that first year took place in a meeting room in the main lodge at the park—unfortunately next to a decidedly unspiritual video arcade. In a strange way, I liked passing by those pinging sounds and flashing lights to get to our makeshift *shul*, because once we walked in, there was an unmistakable spirit to it. Aura is perhaps too strong a word, but somehow our presence made it a sacred space. As Ketura Persellin, who attended the retreat with her husband and two young children, put it, prayer at the retreat had a special intensity "with a complete sense of time-out from secular concerns...."

Like Kehilat Hadar, we, too, had a Torah with a story. One member of our group, Mark Katkov, is a journalist who had worked in the Former Soviet Union. In 1993, he, his father and brother visited Krivozer, the Ukrainian village their family had fled in 1921. Katkov's host, one of a handful of surviving Jews, quietly told him about a Torah his father had hidden in 1937 when Stalin shut the synagogues. The family had kept it, at no small personal risk, for decades.

By 1993, the Torah no longer had to be a secret but they kept it in a closet, unused but cherished. They could not bring themselves to sell it, although they certainly could have used the money. Katkov unrolled it and read it for them, a deeply moving experience. They stayed in touch and years later, the family—some of whom had made *aliya* and taken the Torah with them—sold it to Katkov, who had it restored in Jerusalem. He loaned it to his Washington synagogue, but on Shavuot, he brings it to Cacapon, where we read it and the children gather round to see the Ten Commandments in the text.

"It began as a practical matter—we needed a Torah for the retreat and I had one," Katkov said. "But it took on all kinds of wonderful symbolism."

**T**he second year, half of us were in cabins and half in a smaller, older lodge. The great room doubled as a learning, davening and meal space; an adjacent smaller room became the kids "sticker central," where they could make *hag*-appropriate crafts—traditional flower garlands marking the spring holiday (Shavuot is also associated with greenery, grains and the harvest). We ran children's services both years, a tot version and one for slightly older kids. One mom came prepared with a terrific version of Shavuot *Jeopardy*.

For the New York community, the *tikkun* goes all night and culminates in a sunrise *Shaharit* service. Kehilat Hadar's offerings have run the gamut of Jewish study, with five or six choices per hour. Courses have ranged from "The Very Ugly Man, The Arab Woman and the House Servant: Who Were the Torah Teachers of *Hazal*? The Role of the Outsider in Teaching the Sages" to "Who/What is Amalek? An Aggadic, Philosophical and Hasidic Exploration of the Figure of Amalek and Our Obligation to Obliterate Him."

Our retreat in Cacapon wasn't so ambitious. With so many young children, some parents had to stay in the cabins while they were sleeping, and it's hard to stay up all night if you have to actively parent all day. Still, our *tikkun* did run several hours.

That first year, Zach was hesitant about teaching in front of adults, a combination of age-appropriate humility and apprehension. With a bit of encouragement—these adults are not

judges but friends who have watched him grow up—he decided to take part. As his first high school final exams were just a few weeks off, we suggested that he go easy on himself by discussing a topic he was studying at the time. It happened to be the laws of divorce, and though he explained at the outset why he chose the topic, at least one person who wandered in late wondered why a 15-year-old boy was opining on marital disintegration.

Other Shavuot retreats offer study and workshops in the afternoon. Kehilat Hadar, for instance, has offered both yoga and “Eco-Judaism and the Art of Bicycle Maintenance.” Maybe as our group matures we will do something similar. But so far, we have spent our afternoons hanging out.

But it wasn’t all games and cheesecake. As David Fuller, Marissa’s husband, recalled: “The entire nature of the weekend reinforces the lessons learned at home and school. A weekend of eating, praying, eating, sleeping—and oh, did I mention eating?—demonstrates to the children, and to us, that being part of community is a central part of who we are. [During] weekends like these we can slow down, take time to talk to one another...and appreciate why the communal aspect of Judaism is at the core of what makes it special.”

Even the littlest children grasped those lessons, and watching them was one of the most rewarding parts of the retreat. They traveled in astonishingly well-behaved packs. There was no fighting, and normal social fault lines evaporated; bigger kids played with littler ones, boys played with girls. They thrived in this rare delight of unstructured play, outdoors, in this Jewish slice of West Virginia countryside we had created.

There were always some parents around (I did find myself adjusting many helmets on children who did not belong to me on a 6 A.M. scooter patrol), but I loved the way the kids ran in and out of each other’s cabins. I remember lighting candles and eating dinner with friends in their cabin one evening; then we heard a knock on the door, it was an adorable 6-year-old arriving for a sleepover. He had padded up the trail from his own family’s cabin in his pajamas, toothbrush in one hand, teddy bear in the other. It was definitely an “it takes a village” experience.

Or, maybe in this case, it took a *shtetl*.

