

Dairy on Shavu'ot: A Mysterious Custom and its Meaning Today

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One of the better known Jewish holiday customs is eating dairy on Shavu'ot, though, strangely, many people struggle to produce a reason for this custom. Once the custom appears in medieval Ashkenazi works, it is cited frequently, with a wide array of explanations. Let's explore the main ones and see what they bring up today.

1. Mirroring Holiday Sacrifices in the Time of the Temple

Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 494:3, Gloss of the Rema

Rav Moshe Isserles (Krakow, Poland, 1520-1572)

We have the custom to spread out plants on Shavu'ot in the synagogue and in houses, as a memory for the happiness of the receiving of the Torah.

We have a custom everywhere to eat dairy food on the first day of Shavu'ot. And it seems to me that the reason is similar to the two cooked dishes that we take on Pesach night, commemorating the Pesach offering and commemorating the Festival offering. **So, too, we eat a dairy food followed by a meat food, so that we must bring with them two loaves of bread** on the table, which stands for the altar, and through this there is **a reminder of the two loaves of bread that they used to offer on The Day of First-Fruits.**

ונוהגין לשטוח עשבים בשבועות
בבית הכנסת והבתים זכר לשמחת
מתן תורה.
ונוהגין בכל מקום לאכול מאכלי
חלב ביום ראשון של שבועות ונראה
לי הטעם שהוא כמו השני תבשילין
שלוקחין בליל פסח זכר לפסח וזכר
לחגיגה. כן אוכלים מאכל חלב
ואח"כ מאכל בשר וצריכין להביא
עמהם ב' לחם על השלחן שהוא
במקום המזבח ויש בזה זכרון לשני
הלחם שהיו מקריבין ביום הבכורים:

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

According to the Rema, the custom has nothing to do with dairy itself, but is really about bread and the special, unusual, fluffy, two loaves from new grain offered on Shavu'ot in the Temple (VaYikra/Leviticus 23:16-17). Since dairy and meat may not be eaten in the same meal, having them in succession requires separate loaves. The Rema's explanation opens up a more direct question: **How about baking two separate, fancy breads to eat on Shavu'ot, to recall the only Biblical commandment unique to Shavu'ot?**



2. Torah is Like Milk and Shavu'ot is the Holiday of Receiving Torah

P'ri Chadash on the Shulhan Arukh, 494

Rav Chizkiah da Silva, 1659–1698, Livorno, Tuscany and Jerusalem)

And with regard to what [the Rema] wrote:...

What a weak reason this is! It seems more reasonable to say that **we eat dairy food because it is the day on which Torah was given and Torah is compared to it**, as we say in the first chapter of Ta'anit, "Why were words of Torah compared to these three liquids, to water, to wine, and to milk...."

ומ"ש "ונ"ל הטעם וכו'":
כמה טעם חלוש הוא זה! ויותר נרא'
לומר שאוכלים מאכל חלב משום
שהוא יום שנתנה בו תורה והתורה
נמשלה בו כדאמרינן בפרק קמא
דתענית למה נמשלו דברי תורה לג'
משקין הללו במים וביין ובחלב כו'

The Talmudic Text above just referred to: Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 7a

And Rabbi Osh'aya said: Why were words of Torah compared to these three liquids, to water, to wine, and to milk? As it is written with regard to water: "Hey, all that are thirsty, go for water" (Isaiah 55:1), and it is written [in the same verse]: "Go, stock up on food, and eat. Go, stock up on food without money and on wine and milk without cost" It tells you: Just as these three liquids can be retained only in the cheapest of vessels, so too, words of Torah are retained only by one whose mind is lowly (i.e., humble).

ואמר רבי אושעיא למה נמשלו
דברי תורה לשלשה משקין הללו
במים וביין ובחלב? דכתיב, "הוי
כל צמא לכו למים" (ישעיהו נה:א)
וכתיב, "לכו שברו ואכלו ולכו
שברו בלוא כסף ובלוא מחיר יין
וחלב" (שם). לומר לך מה שלשה
משקין הללו אין מתקיימין אלא
בפחות שבכלים אף דברי תורה אין
מתקיימין אלא במי שדעתו שפלה.

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

According to the P'ri Chadash, we eat dairy on the day we receive Torah, because Torah is compared to milk...in just the way it is compared to water and wine. In Isaiah's prophecy, the exiled Jews are promised a fully accessible return to access to God's covenant through the metaphor of available drinking water and bountiful wine and milk at no cost. **Does eating dairy on Shavu'ot fulfill this ideal in an age of industrial agriculture, in which [dairy farming is one of the leading causes of water becoming toxic and undrinkable](#)?**

3. Milk Symbolizes Purity and Mercy, Transformation from Blood and Judgment

Magen Avraham, comment to Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 494, #6
Rav Avraham Abele Gombiner, c. 1635-1682, Gombin & Kalisz, Poland

"Dairy": There are many reasons; I found a reason written in the Zohar: the previous seven weeks were for the Jewish people the seven clean days as modeled by a woman becoming ritually pure after menstruation, and it is known that "blood decomposes and is turned into milk" (Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 9a), ie, from the trait of judgment to the trait of mercy, and the custom of our ancestors is itself Torah. However, it is important to be careful not to violate any prohibitions...

"חלב": יש הרבה טעמים ומ"כ הטעם דאיתא בזוהר שאותן ז' שבועות היו לישראל שבעה נקיים דוגמת אשה המיטהרת מנדתה וידוע ש"דם נעבר ונעשה חלב" (בבלי נידה ט.), והיינו מדין לרחמים, ומנהג אבותינו תורה היא. אך יש לזוהר שלא יבא לידי איסור...

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

This Kabbalistic explanation builds on the Rabbinic science theory that pregnant and nursing people do not menstruate because menstrual blood transforms into breast milk. The Zohar derives symbolism from this theory: that this transformation is a bodily manifestation of judgment transformed into mercy. Since the Jewish people experience a parallel transformation in the seven weeks leading from Pesach to Shavu'ot, consuming dairy on Shavu'ot highlights the mercy and compassion through which we should receive and live Torah. **Can consuming dairy cultivate compassion when it reaches us through industrial means that [cause high rates of workplace injury](#)? When dairy cows are subjected to conditions that cause [numerous painful injuries](#)?**

4. Milk Symbolizes Torah, Delicious to the Taste

Hok Ya'akov, comment on Shulhan Arukh 494, #8

Rav Ya'akov Reischer, 1661–1733, Prague; Reische, Poland; Germany; Metz, France

It is written in the Kol Bo* (#52): “They were also accustomed to eat honey and milk on Shavu’ot because of the Torah which is compared to honey and milk, as it is said, “honey and milk under your tongue” (Song of Songs 4:11). And it is the custom of all of the Jewish people to put saffron in cake and the reason is that it gladdens the heart.

Also, women have been accustomed to making on Shavu’ot long bread with four heads. It seems that we can find in this custom a recollection of the Two Loaves offered on Shavu’ot or because of the astrological sign of Gemini, which serves in the month of Sivan.”

**Kol Bo is a compendium of Jewish law, published around 1490, of uncertain editorship, probably in Provence.*

כת' הכל בו סימן נ"ב וז"ל: "גם נהגו
לאכול דבש וחלב בחג השבועות
מפני התורה שנמשלה לדבש וחלב
כמו שנאמר, "דבש וחלב תחת
לשונך" (שיר השירים ד:יא).
ונהגו בכל ישראל לשום בעוגה
זפר"ן והטעם לפי שמשמח הלב.
גם נהגו הנשים לעשות בשבועות
לחם ארוך ולו ארבע ראשים ונראה
לומר כי נמצא המנהג זכר לשת
לחם הקרב בעצרת או מפני מזל
תאומים המשמש בסיון יעב"ל:

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

The Kol Bo, one of the earliest sources to record the Shavu’ot dairy custom, focuses on sweetness and bounty: our physical and spiritual nourishment should mirror each other. The verse in Song of Songs echoes the Bible’s oft-repeated, idyllic description of the Land of Israel as “flowing with milk and honey” (e.g., [Devarim/Deuteronomy 31:20](#)), owing to its abundance of goats and dates. However, personal experience of plenty must be regulated by communal sustainability: the Mishna even prohibits raising goats in populated centers in the Land of Israel (Bava Kamma 7:7), in order to prevent goats’ destruction of farmland (according to Rashi). As [Rav Yuval Cherlow explains](#), “They ruled against inappropriate development that yields a quick profit for some but damages others, and causes extensive long-term ecological damage.” **When [dairy production is one of the world’s leading contributors to global warming](#) and an unsustainable planet, should we seek other sources for the bounty that represents the eternity of Torah?** Note the other food customs in the Kol Bo: saffron cake and multi-head bread loaves.



5. Dairy is Faster than Meat

Mishna Berura, comment on Shulhan Arukh 494, #12

Rav Israel Meir Kagan, 1839-1933, Radin, Belarus

“Dairy foods” - ...I also heard in the name of a great one who said a correct reason for this: that when they stood at Mt. Sinai and accepted the Torah...and they went down from the mountain to their homes they found nothing to eat immediately except for dairy foods because for meat they would need much preparation -- slaughtering with a checked knife as God commanded, pulling out the strings of suet and blood, rinsing and salting it, cooking in new vessels, since the vessels they already had previously, which they used in the last 24 hrs, had become forbidden to them. Therefore, they chose dairy foods for the moment, and we do this as a commemoration of this.

מאכלי חלב - ...ואני שמעתי עוד
בשם גדול אחד שאמר טעם נכון
לזה כי בעת שעמדו על הר סיני
וקבלו התורה...וירדו מן ההר לביתם
לא מצאו מה לאכול תיכף כ”א
מאכלי חלב כי לבשר צריך הכנה
רבה לשחוט בסכין בדוק כאשר צוה
ה' ולנקר חוטי החלב והדם ולהדיח
ולמלוח ולבשל בכלים חדשים כי
הכלים שהיו להם מקודם שבישלו
בהם באותו מעל”ע נאסרו להם ע”כ
בחרו להם לפי שעה מאכלי חלב
ואנו עושיין זכר לזה:

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

According to the Mishna Berura, we eat dairy to commemorate returning from Revelation, informed and energized by the new laws according to which previous tools for meat preparation were now prohibited; dairy could be eaten immediately, though. **However, when the dairy available to us is only available through abuse of workers, animals, and the planet, is this the accessible food that best represents our Revelation-inspired enthusiasm for a life guided by Torah?** Our Sages teach us (Pirkei Avot 6:7): “Great is Torah for it gives life to those who practice it in this world and in the world to come, as it is said...’It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it and all who support it are happy’ (Proverbs 3:18). When we symbolically digest Torah in order to embody it, let’s seek foods that reflect Torah’s life-giving character.



6. Milk is Abundant at Shavu'ot because it is Calving Season

Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Elton, “The Spiritual Genius of Eating Cheesecake”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 5/9/13 The reason we have milky foods on Shavuot is probably because the festival falls in the calving season when there is a large amount of surplus milk.

Lesli Koppelman Ross, “Why Dairy on Shavuot?”, *MyJewishLearning.com*

Scholars who trace all Jewish customs and rituals to practices common among various ethnic groups claim that spring harvest festivals characteristically featured dairy dishes, perhaps because cheese was produced during that season.

EXPLANATION AND REFLECTION:

Historically, it is pretty clear that the reason it was common to eat dairy on Shavu'ot is that milk was abundant at that time because goats and sheep give birth and lactate at that time of year. Scholars linked the agriculturally-driven diet to various spiritual meanings, much as the Talmudic Sages linked the Bible's Festival of First Fruit to the date God gave Torah to Israel. Today, pretty much all industrially produced dairy on the market in the West comes from cows, who only give birth and lactate year-round due to artificial insemination. **Might we find more continuity with historical Jewish creativity and seasonality if we build Shavu'ot food culture around local produce that is newly in abundance at this time of year, and creatively ascribe spiritual meanings to them?** For example, if strawberries are just coming into season, maybe build a Shavu'ot feast around them because their fiery red evokes Torah, which is compared to fire, and God, who first spoke to Moses out of fire.

Chag sameach -- a joyous, life-affirming Shavu'ot holiday from the Jewish Initiative for Animals!