



## DOUGHNUTS ON CHANUKAH: AN ANCIENT TRADITION?

Most Jewish holidays have specific foods associated with the holiday. On Pesach, we eat matzah and maror to fulfill mitzvos that require eating those specific foods. On other holidays, there are *minhagim* (customs) to eat specific foods. For example, apples dipped in honey on Rosh HaShanah, dairy food on Shavuot and hamantaschen on Purim. There are many other examples.

On Chanukah, perhaps the two most popular foods associated with Chanukah are *latkes* and *sufganiyot*, doughnuts (or donuts for those who are less formal). In this article, we are going to present some of the sources and reasons for eating doughnuts.

### Does this Custom Date Back to the 11th Century?

R. Maimon ben Yosef (12th century),

Rambam's father, wrote an Arabic commentary on the Siddur. R. Ya'akov Moshe Toledano (*Sarid UFalit* Vol. I, pg. 8) printed one of the only paragraphs we have from that manuscript. It states the following:

אין להקל בשום מנהג ואפילו מנהג קל ויתחייב כל נכון לו עשית משתה ושמחה ומאכל לפרסם הנס (של חנוכה) שעשה השם יתברך עמנו באותם הימים ופשט המנהג לעשות סופגנין בערבי אלספלנג והם הצפחיות לדבש ובתרגום האיסקריטין והיא מנהג הקדמונים משום שהם קלויים בשמן וזכר לברכתו.

*One may not be lenient regarding any custom, even a light custom and every proper person should prepare [a feast of] drink, joy and food to publicize the miracle (of Chanukah) that God performed for us in those days. The custom is to make fried dough, in Arabic Al Spalang and they are like honey cookies, and in Aramaic translation they are called Iskritin. It is an*

*ancient tradition because they are fried in oil to remember the blessing.*

R. Maimon seems to be describing what we know as doughnuts. The reason to eat them on Chanukah is to remember the blessing.

Ostensibly, what he means is that since the miracle was with oil, we commemorate the miracle by eating food fried in oil. However, he does not address an obvious question. Usually these types of customs try to commemorate an aspect of the holiday story that is not commemorated through the mitzvos of that holiday (see the next section as an example). On Chanukah, the mitzvah of lighting already commemorates the miracle of the oil. What is added by having a custom to eat fried food? Perhaps the answer is that we are prohibited from benefitting from the oil of the

Chanukah lights and as such, a custom developed that allows us to benefit from an oil-based practice.

There is a *zemer* for Shabbos Chanukah that appears in some *bentchers* and is attributed to R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (11th century). The *zemer* opens with the phrase “*ichlu mashmanim v’soles revuchah*” — eat fattened [delicacies] and “*revuchah flour*.” The delicacies refers to the food we eat on Shabbos. [We find this in the *zemer* “*Yom Zeh Mechubad*” which states “*echol mashmanim.*”] “*Revuchah flour*” seems to refer to something specifically eaten on Chanukah. What is “*revuchah flour*”? The word *revuchah* comes from the verse (Vayikra 7:12) describing the *todah* (thanksgiving) offering which includes loaves of “*soles murbeches*” mixed with oil. What is *soles murbeches*? Rashi writes that it is bread that is boiled. He could be referring to bread that is boiled in water (like a bagel) or he could be referring to bread that is deep fried in oil (oil is clearly a main ingredient in the *todah* offerings), like a doughnut. This *zemer* would then be a source that the custom dates back to the time of Ibn Ezra, a century earlier than R. Maimon. However, there is a problem. Ibn Ezra himself in his commentary on Vayikra translates *soles murbeches* as quality flour. As such, it is difficult to suggest that the *zemer* was written by Ibn Ezra and that he was referring to something resembling a doughnut.

## Cheese Filled "Doughnuts"

*Kol Bo*, a 14th century collection of laws and customs, states the following (*Hilchos Chanukah* no. 44):

שעל ידי אשה אירע להם הנס הגדול ההוא  
ושמה יהודית כמו שמפורש באגדה בת היתת  
ליוחנן כהן גדול והיתה יפת תואר מאד ואמר  
המלך יון שתשכב עמו והאכילתו תבשיל של  
גבינה כדי שיצמא וישתה לרוב וישתכר וישכב  
וירדם ויהי לה כן וישכב וירדם ותקח חרבו  
וחתכה ראשו ותביאהו לירושלים וכראות החיל  
כי מת גבורם וינוסו, ועל כן נהגו לעשות תבשיל  
של גבינה בחנוכה

*The great miracle was facilitated by a woman whose name was Judith as the legend states, she was the daughter of Yochanan the high priest and she was extremely beautiful and the king of Greece demanded that she sleep with him. She fed him a dish containing cheese so that he will become thirsty, drink too much and become drunk and fall into a deep slumber. And so it was. When he fell into a deep slumber, she took his sword and decapitated him and brought his head to Jerusalem and when the soldiers saw that their hero was killed, they fled. For this reason, it has become customary to prepare a dish of cheese on Chanukah.*

While there are questions as to whether the story of Judith (or another woman) took place during the Maccabean Revolt or whether it took place while the Jews were living under the rule of the Persian Empire (see *Mor UKetziah* OC 670 and *Aruch HaShulchan* OC 670:8), the custom to cheese or other dairy products is mention by Rama, OC 670:2.

The custom to eat cheese or other

dairy products is not as prevalent nowadays as eating doughnuts or *latkes*. It is possible that in earlier times, it was customary to fulfill this custom by eating a doughnut type food filled with cheese (and the same could be said for *latkes*). Over time, doughnuts became a Chanukah staple even without the cheese filling.

## A Prayer for the Rededication of the Mizbeach

R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (cited in *Halichos Shlomo*, Chanukah page 319) offers an interesting suggestion for the minhag to eat doughnuts. The Gemara, *Avoda Zarah* 52b, states that the Chashmonaim were able to restore and rededicate every part of the Beis HaMikdash with the exception of the Mizbeach. They were forced to bury the stones of the Mizbeach. By eating a doughnut, we are provided with a special opportunity to pray for the rededication of the Mizbeach. How? When we eat doughnuts (or other foods from the five grains that do not constitute bread), we recite *Al HaMichya* after eating them. In the beracha of *Al HaMichya*, we specifically pray for the rededication of the Mizbeach when we say *ve'al mizbechecha*. Although *Al HaMichya* is a shortened version of *Birkas HaMazon*, this particular phrase appears in *Al HaMichya* and not in *Birkas HaMazon*. Therefore, a custom developed to eat doughnuts and have additional opportunities to pray for the rededication of the Mizbeach.



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