

Dairy Foods on Shavuot¹

An early Ashkenazic custom instructs us to eat dairy foods on *Shavuot*.² The origins of this custom are shrouded in mystery, and hence we also lack a clear understanding of its purpose and meaning. Many suggestions, some quite creative, have been advanced over the centuries in an attempt to understand the significance of this custom.³

The *Kolbo*⁴ believes that the original custom was to eat honey and milk together, in honor of the giving of the Torah, which is compared to both of these foods: “Sweetness drops from your lips, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue” (*Shir HaShirim* 4:11).⁵ If this theory is correct, it seems that over the course of time the custom of eating honey was dropped from *Shavuot* (perhaps “transferred” to *Rosh HaShana*), leaving us only with milk.

Noticing that, though, leads to an interesting question: what does milk add to the image in the first place? The idea of using the sweetness of honey as a symbol for Torah is an ancient one, already expressed in the book of *Tehillim*: “God’s Torah is perfect...sweeter than honey or the drippings of the honeycomb” (19:8-11). But if we already have this symbol, what is added by introducing milk to the image? Assumedly the idea is that milk is sweet and tasty, just like Torah. But of course, honey is even sweeter – so why does milk need to be part of the metaphor?

There is a fundamental difference between milk and honey. Honey is very sweet, but you can’t really eat it. On the other hand, milk, which is also sweet (although not as much as honey), is **nourishing** as well. And therefore, maybe this is the reason that the Torah is compared to both honey and milk – honey symbolizes the **pleasure** of studying Torah, while milk symbolizes the **benefit** of doing so. We study Torah not only because we enjoy it (like tasting honey), but even more so because it gives us strength and direction, enabling us to devote our lives to the service of God. Indeed, Torah is sweeter than honey – but it is also nourishing and essential for healthy existence, like milk.

There may also be another point to this analogy. To understand it, we must first give a brief explanation of the nature of the *Shavuot* Festival. Based on the words of our *siddur*, we usually think about *Shavuot* as *Zeman Matan Torateinu*, the commemoration of the giving of the Torah. Surprisingly, though, the Torah itself never says anything of the sort. Although it is clear from chapter 19 of the book of *Shemot* that *Matan Torah* took place on *Shavuot* or very close to it,⁶ the Festival

¹ This *devar Torah* was originally published in Hebrew, in MMY’s [Kol Mevaseret journal](#), 5770 edition. You can read the original [here](#).

² *Rama* OC 504:3

³ For example, the above-quoted *Rama* suggests that the idea is to eat dairy foods prior to the regular meat meal, which would require us to use two separate loaves of bread, thereby recalling the *Shetei HaLechem* offering brought on *Shavuot*. The *Mishna Berura* (504:12) quotes an opinion that the custom is based on the idea that on the day the Torah was given, the Israelites had to eat dairy because they had no properly-slaughtered meat in their homes and no kosher dishes, and the custom of eating dairy foods is meant to recall this dedication. There are also other suggestions

⁴ Ch. 52, s.v. *Vezehu Seder*

⁵ It is noteworthy that, like the Torah, the land of Israel is also associated with these two foods: “a land flowing with milk and honey” (*Shemot* 3:8 and many other places). However, the significance of this parallel is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁶ See BT *Shabbat* 86b, which records a debate among *Tanaim* whether the Revelation at Sinai took place on the 6th of 7th of *Sivan*.

itself is presented in the Torah as a purely agricultural holiday, *Chag HaKatzir* (the harvest Festival)⁷ or *Yom HaBikkurim* (the day of bringing first fruits)⁸.

Even *Sefirat HaOmer*, the seven-week count connecting Passover with *Shavuot*, is not presented in the Torah as connecting the Exodus from Egypt with the giving of the Torah (as we are generally accustomed to thinking of it today). Rather, it is presented as connecting the *Korban HaOmer*, the unique grain offering brought on *Pesach* with the *Korban Shetei HaLechem*, the special grain offering for *Shavuot*:

”וספרתם לחם ממחרת השבת מיום הביאכם את עמר התנופה...תספרו חמשים יום והקרבתם מנחה חדשה לה”
(ויקרא כג: טו)

The *Korban HaOmer* is brought at the time of *Aviv*, which is the beginning of the ripening of the grain. It is brought from barley, which ripens earlier than wheat and it is brought as *matza*. By contrast, the *Shetei HaLechem* is brought from fine wheat flour, and baked as *chametz*. In other words, as explained by my esteemed teacher Rav Yoel bin Nun, the *Omer* symbolizes the **beginning** of a process, when most of the harvest is still merely **potential**, whereas the *Shetei HaLechem* represents the successful conclusion of the process, the actualization of that potential. The step-by-step transition from potential to actualization is marked by *Sefirat HaOmer*.

After the destruction of the *Bet haMikdash* and our dispersion into exile and Diaspora, the emphasis of *Sefirat HaOmer* and *Shavuot* shifted from the celebration of the harvest in the land of Israel (which wasn't relevant in exile) to commemorating *Matan Torah*. Still, though, *Sefirat HaOmer* marks the transition from the **potential** contained within *Yetziat Mitzrayim* to its **actualization** at *Matan Torah*. And therefore, the tradition of spending the entire night of *Shavuot* immersed in Torah study developed.

On *Pesach*, we read *Shir HaShirim*, a passionate love song symbolizing our love for God⁹ and His for us, as it was shown at *Yetziat Mitzrayim*. And on *Shavuot*, we read *Rut*, which is also a love story. However, the type of love expressed in *Rut* is different from that represented by *Shir HaShirim*. *Shir HaShirim* depicts passionate love, filled with excitement and desire, while *Rut* speaks of love rooted in *chesed*, kindness. We read of *Rut's* kindness towards Naomi, and even of a marriage (*Rut* and *Boaz*) built on acts of kindness – the redemption of the field, the marriage of a poor widow, and the levirate redemption of the legacy of a childless deceased man.

So, we have two different types of love expressed in the two Festivals that are linked by *Sefirat HaOmer*. And indeed, the passionate love highlighted in *Shir HaShirim* exists primarily in potential, waiting to be actualized; this is quite appropriate for *Pesach*. And *Rut*, which depicts the love of kindness and generosity, is appropriate for *Shavuot* when the love has become actualized and mature.

Now, we can return to the honey and milk with new understanding.

Honey is very sweet, but cannot provide nourishment. This symbolizes the *Shir HaShirim* type of love, filled with passion, desire, and pleasure. But milk symbolizes a deeper type of love: the love of a mother for her child. When a mother nurses her baby, she is not merely **hugging** him – she is **nourishing** him, feeding him, and providing him with life. This is the love of *Megillat Rut*, and this is also the ultimate purpose of the Torah.

⁷ *Shemot* 23:16

⁸ *Bamidbar* 28:26

⁹ See Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuva* 10:3

Yes, learning Torah can be exceedingly pleasurable; it is most certainly “sweeter than honey or the drippings of the honeycomb.” But even more than honey, the Torah can be compared to milk, the essential nourishment that a loving mother provides to her beloved child.

And therefore, although the Torah is compared to “honey and milk under your tongue,” and the original custom may have been to eat both foods on *Shavuot*, it is quite appropriate that in the final analysis, we have retained specifically the milk. It’s fitting that on *Leil Shavuot*, as we sit up all night immersed in the sweetness of Torah, we eat foods made from milk, symbolizing our love and esteem for the gift of the Torah, and demonstrating that the Torah means much more to us than the pleasure of something “sweeter than honey”. We drink the words of Torah with thirst, as a baby suckles his mother’s milk.

כי הם חיינו ואורך ימינו, ובהם נהגה יומם ולילה – the Torah is the essence of our life and our key to longevity, thus we will study it day and night.

Chag Sameach!