



## The *Minhag* of Eating Dairy Products on Shavuot

There is longstanding *minhag* to eat dairy products on Shavuot in lieu of the traditional meat meals that are eaten on other festivals. This article will explore the various reasons for this tradition and the halachic underpinnings of each reason. It will also cover the practical differences between each reason.

### **The Availability of Meat After *Matan Torah***

Perhaps the most famous reason for eating dairy products is the reason given by *Mishna Berurah* 494:12. *Mishna Berurah* suggests that at the time of *Matan Torah*, the receiving of the Torah, the Jewish people became obligated in all of the *mitzvot* of the Torah. As such, in order to eat meat, they would have had to follow the complex procedure involved in producing kosher meat. Because this procedure required time in order to properly prepare the meat, the only food items available immediately after *Matan Torah* were dairy products. The tradition of eating dairy products on Shavuot serves to commemorate the *Matan Torah* experience when the Jewish people were only able to eat dairy products.

R. Shalom B. Felman, *Shalmei Todah*, no. 2, notes that there is dispute recorded in the Gemara, *Shabbat* 87a, as to whether *Matan Torah* occurred on Shabbat. The reason given by *Mishna Berurah* follows the opinion that *Matan Torah* did not occur on Shabbat. The commandment to keep Shabbat preceded *Matan Torah* (see *Shabbat* 87b). Regardless of whether or not it was difficult to prepare kosher meat after *Matan Torah*, the Jewish people would not have been able to prepare meat on Shabbat. Therefore, according to the opinion that *Matan Torah* occurred on Shabbat, and the commandment to keep Shabbat was already in effect, the lack of ability to eat meat would be attributed to Shabbat and not to *Matan Torah*. One must then find a different reason for eating dairy products on Shavuot.

### **A Remembrance of the *Shtei HaLechem***

Rama, *Orach Chaim* 494:2 suggests that the *minhag* of eating dairy products on Shavuot serves as a remembrance of the *shtei halechem* (two bread) offering that was brought on Shavuot during the times of the *Beit HaMikdash*. Rama suggests that the *minhag* of eating dairy products does not replace the traditional meat meal eaten on Yom Tov. Rather, one starts the meal eating dairy products, and mid-way through the meal, one removes the dairy products, and replaces them with meat products. Upon replacing the dairy products with the meat products, one is required to remove the bread eaten during the dairy portion of the meal, and replace it with bread that was not used with a dairy meal (See *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah* 89:4). By using two separate sets of bread, one commemorates the *shtei halechem* offering.

This reason presumes that there is an actual requirement to remove the bread that

was eaten with the dairy products and replace it with bread suitable to eat with meat. However, R. Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* 1:38, notes that the prohibition to eat a meat meal with bread that was eaten with dairy products only applies to the smaller pieces of bread that might have come into contact with dairy products. The loaf of bread on the table may be used during the meat meal. If so, there is no need for two separate sets of bread. Nevertheless, R. Feinstein admits that although there is no obligation to remove the bread eaten with the dairy meal, it is certainly praiseworthy. Perhaps R. Feinstein understands that if one removes the bread eaten with the dairy meal as a matter of added stringency, this also constitutes a commemoration of the *shtei halechem* offering.

### **The First Opportunity to Eat Dairy Products**

R. Moshe Shternbuch, *Moadim U'Zemanim* 8:319, presents a novel approach toward the *minhag* to eat dairy products on Shavuot. The Gemara, *Bechorot* 6b, questions why consuming milk products does not constitute a violation of *ever min hachai*, eating from a live animal. The Gemara states that the permissibility of milk is derived from the verse (Shemot 3:8) that refers to the land of Israel as *eretz zavat chalav udevash*, a land flowing with milk and honey. If milk was actually prohibited, the Torah would not have praised Israel with such an accolade.

R. Shternbuch suggests that the permissibility derived from this verse did not go into effect until *Matan Torah*. Prior to *Matan Torah*, consuming milk products constituted a violation of *ever min hachai*, which is prohibited even for non-Jews. Therefore, after *Matan Torah* the Jewish people had their first opportunity to consume milk products. Since milk products were novel to the Jewish people, they likely ate mostly milk products in the ensuing days. To commemorate this unique event, the *minhag* developed that dairy products are eaten on Shavuot.

R. Shternbuch admits that there is a problem with this interpretation. *Shita Mekubetzet*, ad loc., questions the Gemara's choice of the source that milk is permitted. He suggests that one can derive that milk is permitted from Avraham Avinu. The verse (Bereishit 18:8) states that Avraham offered milk to his three visitors. If milk was actually prohibited, Avraham would not have offered it to them. *Shita Mekubetzet* explains that one cannot derive from Avraham that milk is permitted. When Avraham offered milk to his guests he did not know that they were angels. He thought they were non-Jews, and therefore offered them milk. Therefore, there is no proof from this event that milk is permitted to Jewish people. The Gemara must then prove the permissibility of milk from a different source; from *eretz zavat chalav udevash*.

It is clear from *Shita Mekubetzet's* interpretation that there was never a question if milk is permitted for non-Jews. The only question is whether it is permitted to Jews. Therefore, it is illogical to assume that the Jewish people would have refrained from partaking of milk products prior to *Matan Torah*.

### **We Are Not Like the Angels**

The event involving Avraham and the angels serves as an alternative source for the *minhag* of eating dairy products on Shavuot. The verse states that Avraham not only gave milk to the angels, he gave them meat as well. The Midrash, *Midrash Tehillim* ch.8, relates that when the Jewish people were receiving the Torah, the angels complained that

the Torah should not be given to mortal human beings who cannot possibly keep the Torah. The Almighty responded "was it not you who descended upon Avraham and ate milk and meat together?"

R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik of Brisk, *Beit HaLevi, Parshat Yitro*, explains that the angels didn't eat actual *basar b'chalav* (meat and milk cooked together). Rather, they weren't meticulous in the various laws of eating meat subsequent to eating dairy products. Therefore, on Shavuot, the *minhag* developed to eat dairy products followed by meat. By doing so with the proper meticulousness, we show that we are not like the angels, and we are indeed worthy of receiving the Torah.

### **Conclusion**

Four approaches were presented to explain the basis for eating dairy products on Shavuot. Rama's approach, as well as *Beit HaLevi's* approach assume that the *minhag* entails eating dairy products followed by meat products. *Mishna Berurah's* approach as well as R. Shternbuch's approach do not necessarily assume that one should eat meat subsequent to the dairy products.

The discrepancy is reflected in various family traditions. Some family traditions call for eating dairy products exclusively. Other family traditions insist on eating meat after eating dairy products. The different traditions are due to both varied interpretations of the *minhag* as well as the various positions on *simchat Yom Tov* (as discussed in [last week's issue](#)).

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