

Got Milk?

Category: Holidays, Shavuot

Why we eat ice-cream, and how it connects to Torah.

I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that there will be no cholent today. The good news is that there will be cheesecake and ice cream instead. So, if you were looking forward to something nice and hot, let me forewarn you that the food today is ice cold. Even the blintzes are starting to get cold!

Why, in fact, do we eat ice cream on this holiday? Every other holiday is celebrated with a meat dinner, sometimes four meat dinners. It is actually a mitzvah to eat meat on Jewish holidays. Jewish Law dictates that a celebration is complete only when the celebrators partake of meat and wine. Why then, on Shavuot do we eat dairy desserts instead of a meat meal?

The truth is that the dairy desserts do not replace the meat meal. We will eat a proper meat lunch when we get home, to properly celebrate the holiday. Yet, the question still stands. What is the meaning of the custom to eat dairy on Shavuot?

There are several reasons given for this custom:

A. The Torah was given to us on Shabbat. Before receiving the Torah, the Jewish people were permitted, like every other nation, to eat the meat of any animal, as they had not been given the laws of Kosher. Therefore, when they did receive those laws, their pots, pans and all of their dishes were immediately deemed treif. Since it was Shabbat, they could not kosher their kitchens or slaughter kosher meat. Having no other choice, the Jews ate only dairy on that Shabbat, and we eat dairy on Shavuot in commemoration of that.

B. When Noah emerged from the ark, G-d gave him the right to eat meat, which until then had been forbidden. There was one condition: it is forbidden to eat a limb from a living animal. The Jewish people, being especially scrupulous, feared that milk fell into the category of "eating from a living animal". However, at Matan Torah they heard G-d praise the Promised Land as "the land flowing with milk and honey." They understood that milk is o.k. for consumption; otherwise

“flowing with milk...” would have not been much of a praise.

We eat dairy today for it was on this day that we discovered that milk is permissible.

C. Moses was born on the seventh of Adar. Three months later (Shavuot day) when his mother Yocheved felt that she could no longer hide him from the Pharaoh’s soldiers, he was placed in a basket on the Nile River. There the crying baby was found by Pharaoh’s daughter who took pity on him. Assuming that he was hungry, she hired Egyptian wet nurses, but he would not take their milk — for he was destined to speak with G-d, face to face. Since this story happened on 7th of Sivan, Shavuot day, we eat dairy in commemoration.

By the way, this should stand as a powerful lesson for each of us. Even when they are young, everything our children eat can affect their relationship with G-d when they grow older.

D. King Solomon compares the Torah to milk when he writes, “Honey and milk are beneath your tongue,” in the Song of Songs.

Now, sweet honey is a very appropriate comparison for Torah. It is the custom that at a child’s first haircut, we smear honey over the letters of the Aleph-Bet, and as the child reads them we allow him to lick the up honey, to taste the sweetness of Torah.

But what is so special about milk that it should be compared to the Torah?

The answer, of course, is that every creature, human and animal, at birth needs the milk of its mother in order to survive. A mother’s milk has all of the vitamins and nutrients that a child would need to grow strong and healthy. Try as they might, no one has been able to create a formula that is equally affective. These days, every doctor will encourage new moms to breast feed their babies for as long as possible! They say that, on average, babies raised on mama’s milk develop much better than others.

Dear friends, the Torah is the milk of the Jewish people. In it are all of the “nutrients” a Jew needs to survive in this world where evil prevails. Jews throughout the generations have tried to find a substitute for Torah, be it communism, capitalism or liberalism. But finally, today, we have come to the

realization that none of these “isms” can quite take the place of Torah – you just can’t replace mama’s natural milk!