

Dairy Delights

I apologize in advance if today's topic will make you feel hungry and impatient to move on past davening to the meal. Today is the first day of Shavuos, and one of the customs associated with today is to eat dairy foods. There are many reasons given for this custom, at least fifteen, and we shall talk about one of the better known ones today. This reason, as we shall see, gives rise to one of the most confounding questions about Shavuos, and also gives the answer.

Here is the reason for eating dairy on Shavuos morning according to the Mishnah Berurah (with only trivial embellishments):

The Jewish people had rushed out to Mount Sinai (remember that they overslept that morning and that is why we stay up all night every year for the first night of Shavuos) without even grabbing a bite to eat. The experience of receiving the Torah was exhilarating but it also was exhausting. Upon hearing the first of the Ten Commandments they recoiled backwards 12 kilometers in terror. They then gathered up close to the mountain again, only to again recoil backwards upon hearing the second Commandment. This repeated itself 10 times. Do the math; that is 240 kilometers covered right there. Meanwhile, the souls flew out of their bodies each time, to be revived by Hashem with the Dew of Resurrection. That happened 10 times, too. Consider as well that they saw the sounds and heard the visuals. In short, it was an uplifting but very draining experience.

As they returned to their tents hungry and tired they looked for something to eat. Eating meat was out of the question because it would take a long time to *shecht* an animal, to *kasher* it, and to cook it in new utensils because the dishes they had used until then were not kosher. It was easier to prepare and eat dairy, and so they did. And for that reason, for thousands of years, to commemorate the original fast food, we Jews eat dairy for our first food on Shavuos morning.



Let us not get sidetracked with questions like why didn't they just eat the Manna which had fallen yesterday (It was Shabbos so no Manna fell that day, but they had the double portion from the day before)? Or, how could they have cooked anything, meat or dairy, if it was Shabbos? There is a question here which goes to the very heart of this explanation. If their dishes were not kosher and they would have needed new ones, why did that not apply to the dairy foods as well? If their dishes were not usable because they hadn't been keeping kosher, then how did they have pots and pans to prepare the dairy foods that they ate? It can't be that they did not cook or bake dairy foods either, because then the custom should be likewise to drink a glass of milk Shavuos morning, not to eat cheesecake or lasagna which they could not have made then?

The Rebbe raises this question, and explains:

The Jewish people certainly kept kosher before the Torah was given. We see in the story of the angels coming to visit Avraham in the beginning of Va'aira that Avraham kept the meat and the milk separate. We see that when Yitzchak instructs Eisav to prepare delicacies before giving him the Brachos, he tells him to be sure to do a proper *shechita*. When the brothers come down to Egypt the second time and are told that they will be eating together with Yosef, the instruction is given that the meat be *shechted* properly. There are many more instances where we see that Mitzvos were kept before the Torah was given and even Mitzvos of Rabbinic origin.

The problem that they encountered that Shavuos morning was: Standing at Sinai was a transformative experience also in terms of their Halachic status. Until that time, although they observed the Abrahamic traditions, their status was of Bnai No'ach just like all the other non-Jews in the world. At Sinai that morning they "entered the Covenant" and became Jews. So, their dishes had been segregated for meat and dairy all along, but the meat dishes had been used for meat which had been *shechted* by a Ben No'ach, not by a Jew. And a Jew can't eat of No'achide *shechita*, and even the utensils used with No'achide *shechita* can't be used by a Jew without koshering.

When we eat cooked and baked dairy foods Shavuos morning, we do not celebrate foods which can be prepared quickly, but celebrate that we achieved new status and yesterday's *shechita* was no longer good for us. So, no, sipping a cup of coffee with a



spot of milk in it does not fulfill the custom. Bring in the cheesecake and cheese pie and cheese blintzes and cheese omelets. Just make sure to leave room for a regular Seudas Yom Tov, at least an hour later, which includes meat as every Yom Tov meal should.

That explains the Mishnah Berurah (other than those other questions which we agreed not to get into), but leaves us with new questions:

- 1) What does it mean that we achieved new status and can't eat from yesterday's meat? What are the rationale and the dynamic which cause that?
- 2) With the best of explanations of why to eat dairy on Shavuos the question arises, why celebrate the Torah by eating at all? Torah is Divine Will and Wisdom which was given to us, making us a Wise and Understanding nation in the eyes of all the other nations. Shouldn't our celebration be a learned seminar focusing on the deepest insights of Torah? Why food?

There is an interesting discussion in Gemara about how to celebrate Yom Tov in general. One opinion says, "Either celebrate by eating and drinking, or celebrate by learning Torah." The second opinion says "Spend half the time learning (and davening) and half the time eating and drinking." Then the Gemara declares that Shavuos is different, and on Shavous even the first opinion agrees that one must also eat and drink, because we must celebrate the Torah. Why is eating and drinking the way to celebrate specifically Shavuos more than any other Yom Tov?

There is one answer to both these questions. (If you heard my talk for the cRc pre-Shavous Torah Study program, you may remember that I mentioned that I had a Rosh Yeshiva, who, when challenged for the source of an idea which sounded too original, would say, "Where can you look in the entire Talmud and not find this idea?!" Well, what do you know! The answer which I gave then to explain Avraham's hospitality, is the answer to explain the dairy foods on Shavuos as well! (You can still watch it on the cRc Youtube channel, if you missed it))

But first, the "confounding question" which we mentioned in the first paragraph. Here it is: What are we celebrating on Shavuos, if they had all of the Mitzvos and were observing all of them before the Torah was given? What does Giving of the Torah mean?



Until the Torah was given, the Mitzvos performed were a matter of personal service on the part of the person doing the Mitzvah, making the person a better human being; kinder, more spiritual, etc. But, the Mitzvos didn't, and couldn't change, the world or the objects used to perform the Mitzvah. They were props for the person's spiritual growth, but they remained unaffected.

On Shavuos the world was changed and we were changed. Giving the Torah made the world ready to receive and retain holiness and G-dliness and made us, the Jewish people, the agents empowered to invest that holiness in the world through using the material objects in the world to do Mitzvos. This starts with our bodies and continues with everything in the world with which we come in contact, or have the potential to come in contact with (see the speech for Parshas Behar-Bechukosai).

So, on Shavuos, we become the people for whom whether a pot absorbed taste of non-kosher meat becomes a matter of critical importance. And kosher meat is meat which has been prepared by an empowered Jew doing proper *shechita* which enables that meat to be consumed as part of the mitzvah of celebrating Yom Tov thereby elevating the meat to a higher level of holiness. Ben No'ach slaughtered meat does not qualify and can't be eaten. If it is not fit for us to imbue it with holiness by using it we have no use for it. We move on to dairy instead.

And, that is why we celebrate Shavuos by eating. Because, until the Torah was given, eating was primarily an activity necessary for life. It could also be a symbolic act, bringing ideas and values to the fore for the person who is eating. An example would be Lot baking Matzos for the angels on Pesach night. But the eating didn't do anything for the food. The world is unchanged. The Giving of Torah changed that. When we eat something and use the energy to serve Hashem, or eat is as part of a Mitzvah, that food and the entire food production chain which made that food possible is transformed and elevated. So, would you propose celebrating that by anything other than eating?

It's been 3332 years since the Torah was given. During that time, Jews have been everywhere and engaged in everything, and by now all of the world has been used in the fulfilment of our mission of bringing G-dliness into the world, making the world ready for the coming of Moshiach NOW!

