

# Cheesecake

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Shavuot is the poor relative of the three pilgrim and harvest festivals mentioned in the Torah. It has none of the range of special rituals of Pesah and Sucot. It is only one day in Israel. Two in the Diaspora. Originally it was just a harvest festival. It marked the transition from the barley harvest to the wheat harvest. Linked to Pesah by counting the 49 days of the Omer between the two. It was also when the first fruits of the season appeared. In Talmudic times it was called Atzeret which suggests it was regarded as a sort of postscript to Pesah. Just as Shmini Atzeret is to Sucot.

The Torah says nothing about its being the anniversary of the Mount Sinai revelation. That idea probably came to the fore after the exile and Israel's displacement from its land in the first and second centuries. Then study, Torah, was what kept the people together wherever they were.

Apart from decorating the synagogues with harvest plants and produce, the customs we have added since the late Middle ages are to stay awake all night studying Torah, the *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*. And the custom of eating cheesecake or milky foods. Where does it come from and why?

The earliest source for eating dairy on Shavuot is in the late 14th century. Its first appearance in authoritative legal texts is by Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572) in his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch*. He explains that eating dairy on Shavuot is to commemorate the "*Shte'i HaLechem*" offering (two loaves) in the Temple on Shavuot. Some people had the custom of a dairy meal first, then mid-way through the meal, the table was cleared to make way for a meat meal. The switch requires a blessing over a new loaf of bread and that is why they started with a milky meal before switching to meat. But this is strange because it's not necessary to bring another loaf between milk and meat. The custom was not widely accepted in Ashkenazi circles and even less so in the Sephardi world.

Jump to the nineteenth century and the custom becomes more widespread. Now it is justified by saying that on Shavuot, we celebrate the giving of the Torah. The Torah is likened to milk in the Songs of Songs "*Your lips, my love, drop like honeycomb: honey and milk are under your tongue*" (4:11). That is if we assume that the whole book is about the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and not a love poem. That might explain why we should eat dairy products, though not why we don't have to eat honey.

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, the *Chafetz Chaim*, suggests that when the Israelites received the Torah from Moses (which according to tradition happened on Shavuot), they suddenly had to keep the laws of Kashrut. Since there was no time to prepare kosher meat before the feast, the Israelites had to eat a dairy meal. And throw out all their non-kosher plates and cutlery!

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein, quotes "*Also in the day of the first fruits, when you bring a new meat offering to the Lord, after your weeks be out, you shall have a holy gathering and do no work*" (Numbers 28:26). The paragraph does not actually mention milk. But the first letters of "*a new meat offering to the Lord*" spell out the three letter acronym *HLB* which is the Hebrew for milk!

And the numerologists, who always have fun and ought not to be taken too seriously, note that the value of milk, *HLB* is 40, the same number of days Moses spent on Sinai receiving the Torah. Or as Psalms 68 referred to the mountain of God as *Gavnunim* which has the same root as *Gevina*, cheese. Rabbi Moishe Sternbuch, quotes the Talmud (Berachot 6b) that before the Torah was given, the Israelites were not allowed to eat dairy products, since these were considered "a part of a live animal". But once the Torah was handed down, the passages containing the phrase "Land of Milk and Honey" (e.g., Exodus 3:8) made their consumption permissible.

The most likely is simply that at harvest times in general it was customary to eat lighter milky meals. But that's too prosaic of course.

Then, leaving reasons aside, there are as many variations of the custom itself as there are explanations. Some eat milky the whole of Shavuot, some on both nights, others only the first night and those who eat milky first and then meat.

Most of this sounds implausible. We can probably blame Hasidim, who together with the Kabbalists were never very rational, for the massive proliferation of customs now regarded as law even if they are mainly of non-Jewish superstitious or magical origin. And in one way there's nothing wrong with fanciful customs regardless of origins so long as they do not become oppressive. What if I don't like Cheese Cake? Am I a sinner? Or if I am on a diet, must I eat it on Shavuot regardless?

And this raises another issue. Must one eat meat on Shabbat and Festivals? Once upon a time they were the essential elements of any festive meal. Like wine. But can "Beyond Meat" or other non-animal substitutes count instead?

Pious Jews I know insist that one has to eat meat and carp (smoked salmon was not a Jewish fish!) on Friday nights. Whereas I like vegetarian, Indian food, which for me is a greater treat than meat.

There are customs and there are customs. Some are serious, others less so. They vary from community to community and from sect to sect. No one can possibly keep all of them. And despite what many may tell you, you don't have to. It's custom, not a law. Yet many will tell you that a custom, any custom, is as serious as a law. But surely not cheesecake!

There is a danger of insulting people of other Jewish communities by giving them the erroneous impression that they are missing something or even wrong. So, I make a heretical plea. Relax. If you don't want to, you don't have to eat cheesecake on Shavuot. Happy Festival, Hag Sameah, Gut Yontiff or A Gitten Yomtov! Whatever your custom is.