

# Lactose and Learning



For thousands of years Jews have been studying in pairs or in groups, respectfully debating each other, learning the stories and legal texts of Judaism, and investigating their past as a means for enriching their present. This afternoon, we continue to engage in the millennia-old practice of exploring the written word as a means to connect with our tradition, open ourselves up to our inner selves, make sense of the world around us, and inspire us to action. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

*This afternoon's event is part of The Well's **CSI: Coffee. Study. Interpret.** series in partnership with JYP of Ann Arbor, and is made possible in part by funds granted by The Covenant Foundation. The statements made and the views expressed, however, are solely the responsibility of The Well.*

# Ode to Cheese

by Arkady Yanishevsky

O, you delectable concoction!

I love you Swiss,  
I love you Finnish,  
If you are blue,  
I still will finish,  
I love you white,  
I love you yellow,  
I love you when you mozzarella.  
(I love to use you as a verb,  
I'm smitten by you,  
I have no words).



With wine and pasta it is fun  
To shred a little parmesan.  
But it is even, much more funster  
To bite in to a fresh made muenster.  
I coulda, woulda and I shoulda  
Make a cheap rhyme while using gouda.  
Ah yes... and there is provolone  
So good to eat when home alone.  
I love the French for they make brie  
Ménage à trois- or cheese for three.  
When I discuss mano-to-mano  
I give him some of my romano.  
My large-hipped aunt, whose name is Greta  
Can't keep her fingers off the feta.  
Lorraine- what eyes, what lips, what knees!  
But why compare her to the cheese!  
Well, I am off to make fondue,  
So I will bid you all, "Adieu!"

# A Quick Shavuot Primer:

What is Shavuot?

Shavuot is one of the three “pilgrimage” festivals (the others are Passover and Sukkot), when ancient Jews would bring offerings to the Temple in Jerusalem. The three pilgrimage festivals each have an agricultural, as well as historical, purpose. On Shavuot, we agriculturally celebrate the wheat harvest, and historically we celebrate receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Traditionally, we consume dairy foods on the holiday (while on our other holidays we’re instructed to consume meat!).

Why doesn’t Shavuot get the same fanfare as Passover and Sukkot?

- First, the holiday only lasts for one/two days (depending on denominational custom), as opposed to seven/eight. The duration for which our lives change as a result of the holiday are thus lesser (compared, for example with eating matzah for a week or building a hut in your backyard and eating in it for a week).
- Second, the holiday generally takes place in late May / June, after Hebrew School has already let out!
- Third, perhaps since so many Jews are lactose intolerant, the idea of a holiday where the prevalent custom is to eat dairy foods is comparatively off-putting!

## Discussion Questions:

\*Why do you think the major Jewish holidays have both agricultural and historical/biblical rationales?

\*Do you think you can list all of the Jewish holidays? Challenge extended!



## Why Dairy Foods on Shavuot?

### Potential Reason #1:

יא נִפְתַּת תִּטְפָּנָה שְׁפִתוֹתֶיךָ, כָּלָה; דָּבַשׁ וְחָלָב תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנְךָ, וְרֵיחַ שְׁלִמְתֶּיךָ כְּרֵיחַ לְבָנוֹן.

**11** Your lips, my bride, drip honey – like honey and milk [the Torah] lies under your tongue; and the smell of your garments is like the smell of Lebanon.

*-Song of Songs, 4:11*

The ancient rabbis often compared the Torah to milk. For them, there was a clear connection between the two, as they believed that just as milk has the ability to fully sustain the body of a human being, so too the Torah provides all the “spiritual nourishment” necessary for the human soul. Thus, on Shavuot, the holiday when we celebrate receiving the Torah, consuming milk would logically seem appropriate.



### Potential Reason #2:

“I also heard in the name of a noted scholar: that when the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai and accepted the Torah and went to their homes they found nothing to eat except for dairy foods because for meat they would need much preparation to slaughter with a checked knife like Hashem had just commanded...! Therefore they had to eat dairy foods and we do this as a commemoration.”

*-Mishnah Berura 494:12 (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, published 1904)*

Rabbi Kagan seems to argue that by virtue of having just received the Torah at Mount Sinai (including the kosher laws), there simply wouldn't have been the time to prepare meat in kosher fashion, so the people ate dairy foods, and we do so until this day as a result.

### Discussion Questions:

- \*Do either of these potential reasons speak to you? Why or why not?
- \*What is (are) the thing(s) in your life that you would compare to milk and why?

# Gematria!

**Gematria** is a system of alphanumeric code/cipher that assigns numerical value to a word/name/phrase in the belief that words or phrases with identical numerical values bear some relation to each other or bear some relation to the number itself as it may apply to nature, a person's age, the calendar year, etc.

## THE HEBREW ALPHABET

consists of 22 ( $2 \times 11$ ) letters, so the 5 finals were added to make up three series of 9, or 27 in all:

Aleph	א = 1	Yod	י = 10	Koph	ק = 100
Beth	ב = 2	Kaph	כ = 20	Resh	ר = 200
Gimel	ג = 3	Lamed	ל = 30	Shin	ש = 300
Daleth	ד = 4	Mem	מ = 40	Tau	ת = 400
He	ה = 5	Nun	נ = 50	Koph	ך = 500
Vau	ו = 6	Samech	ס = 60	Mem	ם = 600
Zayin	ז = 7	Ayin	ע = 70	Nun	ן = 700
Cheth	ח = 8	Pe	פ = 80	Pe	ף = 800
Teth	ט = 9	Tsaddi	צ = 90	Tsaddi	ץ = 900

Finals.

Why is the number 18 (and multiples thereof) something often used by Jews when making donations or gifts? Because 18 is the numerical equivalent of the word "Chai"!

chai = 18 = life



Try it out!

What's the numerical value of your name?

## Why Eat Dairy On Shavuot?

### Potential Reason #3:

Exodus 34:28

כַּח וַיְהִי-שָׁם עִם-יְהוָה, אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה--לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַל, וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתָה; וַיִּכְתֹּב עַל-הַלָּחָת, אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַבְּרִית--עֲשֹׂת, הַדְּבָרִים.

**28** And he [Moses] was there with Adonai forty days and forty nights; he didn't eat bread or drink water. And he wrote upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

Moses was on the mountain for 40 days.

The Hebrew word for dairy is Chalav:

חָלָב

What's the numerical equivalent of the word Chalav using Gematria?

### Potential reason #4:

The ancient rabbis describe the Torah (which we're celebrating receiving on Shavuot) as having "70 faces" – aka there are myriad ways to interpret every verse.

What's the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew word for cheese, G'vina?

גְּבִינָה

### Discussion Questions:

- Does numerology speak to you as a concept, why or why not?
- Are you surprised that the ancient rabbis thought in this way? Does it make you wonder what the rationale for other still-practiced customs might be?

## Another Possible Explanation

*Maybe the simplest explanation is the most likely?*

"The reason we have milky foods on Shavuot is probably because the festival falls in the calving season when there is a large amount of surplus milk."

— Dr. Ben Eaton

"The spiritual genius of eating cheesecake" *The Jewish Chronicle*, 5/9/13

"There was an abundance of milk at this time of year," and in Russia "on Shavuot... there was glut of milk."

— John Cooper

*Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food* (1993)

"Milk was available principally in the spring and summer, once the calves were weaned and when fodder was plentiful. Since it did not keep well, especially in an age before refrigeration, most milk was made into butter and cheese."

— Jeffrey Singman

*Daily Life in Medieval Europe* (1999)

So, perhaps the custom of eating dairy on Shavuot arose from the simple fact that there was an abundance of milk, butter and cheese in Europe/Russia in May-June!

### Discussion Questions:

- \*How does this potential explanation sit with you?
- \*Is it possible that the custom arose, and then our ancestors invented other meaningful explanations to explain our actions?
- \*If so, would it change the way you view the rationale for other Jewish customs? Why or why not? How or how not?
- \*Would it shock you to learn that there are at least 5 other explanations not shared in this text packet as to why we eat dairy foods on Shavuot?





# A Closing Primer on Lactose Intolerance

## ***What is lactose intolerance?***

Affecting an estimated fifty million people in the U.S , lactose intolerance is a common form of gastrointestinal malabsorption. As a result of inadequate amounts of the enzyme lactase, which breaks lactose down into simpler sugars that the body can absorb more easily, those afflicted with lactose intolerance are unable to digest significant amounts of lactose, a sugar that is found in milk and milk products. While the total amount of lactase in the body is high at birth for the majority of infants, regardless of ethnicity, this amount drops dramatically around ages five to seven in non-Caucasians and others groups who do not have a traditionally dairy-heavy diet.

## ***Do Jews Really have a higher rate of lactose intolerance and other gastrointestinal disorders than the general population?***

Studies have borne out what stomachaches have long suggested: Jews are among the many ethnic groups that display increased sensitivity to dairy products. The National Institutes of Health estimate that some 65 percent of all adults have a form of lactose intolerance; the highest rate is among East Asian populations, where nearly 90 percent of adults are sensitive to lactose, though West Africans, Arabs, Greeks and Italians are all particularly prone to the condition. A 1985 study of 110 Jewish Israeli children strengthened the connection between Jews and dairy woes: Nearly 62 percent were lactose malabsorbers. Gastrointestinal troubles like Celiac disease, which makes gluten difficult to digest, are also common among Jews, according to gastroenterologist Joseph A. Murray of the Mayo Clinic. So are irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), writes Ernest Abel, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Wayne State University and author of *Jewish Genetic Diseases: A Layman's Guide*. Some geneticists theorize that there might have been historic perks to a sensitive stomach: The affliction may be a defensive response to substances that come in contact with the lining of the digestive system, a selective advantage in unhygienic conditions. This might explain why gastrointestinal troubles are prevalent among Jews, suggests Abel. It may have been a genetic advantage for Jews forced to live in tightly packed, often unsanitary ghettos.

-<http://www.momentmag.com/the-biggest-jewish-genetic-myths-of-all-time/>

WHY MUST LACTOSE  
INTOLERANCE HAPPEN  
TO GOOD PEOPLE?



gagamothe!