

What's the Truth about ... "A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey"?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: In the Biblical phrase that praises the Land of Israel, "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*, a land flowing with milk and honey," the honey refers to bee's honey, and the milk to cow's milk.

Fact: In the Bible, honey usually refers to date honey, not bee's honey. And the milk is as likely to be goat's milk as cow's milk, or possibly even white wine.

Background: The Land of Israel, which was promised by God to the Jewish people, is praised in various ways in the Bible. One of the most popular phrases is "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*," which appears both in *Chumash* and *Nach*.² This phrase is first used to highlight the fertility of Israel as compared to Egypt (Exodus 3:8 and 17). Subsequently, Korach refers to it cynically to describe Egypt (Numbers 16:13). In Isaiah the phrase is used to describe the condition of the Land after it reverts to its natural state following simultaneous invasions from the north and south (7:22). *Devash*, although not *chalav*, also appears in a list of the Seven Species (Shivah Minim) by which the Land is praised: "*Eretz chitah, useorah, vegafen uteanah, verimon, eretz zayit shemen udevash*, a land of wheat, barley, grapes,

figs, pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey [dates]" (Deuteronomy 8:8).

In Leviticus 2:11, Rashi offers proof that *devash* refers to date honey or any fruit extract, not bee's honey. The *pasuk* states that no *devash* (honey) or *se'or* (leaven) may be placed on the altar.³ The following *pasuk*, however, states that there are times when these two items may be brought to the Beit Hamikdash, but not placed on the altar. When are *devash* and *se'or* brought to the Beit Hamikdash? What could the Torah be referring to? Rashi explains that the *se'or* must be alluding to the *shte'i halechem* (loaves), brought on Shavuot, and *devash* must refer to *bikkurim*, the first fruits brought to the Beit Hamikdash annually. Thus, *devash*, in this context, refers to fruits or fruit extracts, explains Rashi (based on *Torat Kohanim*).⁴

Similarly, most commentators understand that the ambiguous term *devash* in the phrase "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*" refers to date honey—a fruit extract.⁵ Why does the Torah praise the Land for its date honey and not for its dates? This is most likely because dates in Eretz Yisrael are primarily valued for their abundance of honey.

There are other places in *Tanach* where *devash* clearly refers to bee's honey. In the Book of Judges, Shimshon extracts *devash* from a beehive (14:8). The *devash* mentioned in Psalms 19:11

is obviously bee's honey as well because there is reference to a honeycomb. Similarly, the *devash* mentioned in Isaiah 7:22⁶ is bee's honey because wild bees are mentioned a few verses earlier.

Rashi (*Berachot* 41b, s.v. *devash*) notes that all Biblical *devash* is date honey. *She'eilot Uteshuvot Radvaz* (962),⁷ on the other hand, suggests that *devash* in *Tanach* can refer to either date honey or bee's honey, while in rabbinic literature, it is always bee's honey.⁸ Thus, according to Radvaz, in the phrase "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*" the image of flowing honey can be either that of honeycombs melting in the hot Mediterranean sun or, as most of the commentators understand it, dates or figs dripping nectar.

In fact, bee's honey is quite popular in Jewish ritual life. In addition to the custom of dipping challah and apples in honey on the Jewish New Year, some have the custom of dipping the head of a sheep or cow in honey (Beit Yosef and Bach, *OC* 583). There is also the custom of eating honey on Shavuot (*Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 103:7) since the Torah is compared to *devash* (see Song of Songs 4:11) and the tradition of having a young boy lick honey-covered letters before learning the *Aleph Bet*, an act expressing the hope that Torah learning be sweet to him.⁹

The permissibility of eating bee's honey seems to fly in the face of a gen-

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eral principle of *kashrut*: the product of a non-kosher animal is non-kosher (Mishnah, *Bechorot* 5b; Rambam, *Ma'achalot Asurot*, 1:5). Thus, for example, camel's milk, ostrich eggs and catfish roe are not kosher. Yet bee's honey is kosher. The Talmud (*Bechorot* 7b) offers two possible reasons for this:¹⁰ Either this is because of a Scriptural decree, based on Leviticus 11:21, which exempts honey from the general rule, or it is because the bee does not actually produce honey the way a camel produces milk. For something to be considered an animal product in halachah, it must be metabolized within the animal. The Talmud states that honey is not "produced" by the bee, it is simply nectar taken from plants and regurgitated into the hive to be stored as food for the winter.¹¹ Indeed, this Talmudic analysis coincides with contemporary science. The bee does not decompose food into base components and then "produce" honey. The ingested nectar is merely regurgitated by the bee after a minor chemical transformation takes place (enzymes in the bee's saliva act upon the nectar).

The *Shulchan Aruch* (YD 81:8) rules that bee's honey is kosher but does not provide a reason for the ruling. Rambam states that it is permissible because it is simply stored nectar, while Rosh and Ramban state that it is permissible because of a Scriptural decree.

Other bee products, such as royal jelly (also known as bee's milk), do raise *kashrut* concerns. Royal jelly, which is a glandular secretion, is produced as "royal" food for the developing queen bee. Since it is an authentic product of the bee, some authorities rule that it is not kosher.¹²

The Talmud (*Ketubot* 112a) states that "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*" teaches us not only which fruits are native to the Land but also about the quality of the fruits. According to the Talmud, the Biblical phrase means "A land with [fruit] as fatty as milk and as sweet as honey." Drawing upon this *gemara*, Targum Yonatan (Deuteronomy 27:3) interprets the phrase as "A land with

fruits as fatty as milk and [a land] that makes *devash*." So too, in the recitation of Viduy Ma'aser¹³ (Deuteronomy 26:15), we request that God grant us "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*," which the Mishnah interprets to be a request for tasty fruits (*Ma'aser Sheni* 5:13). This understanding of the phrase is consistent with yet another *gemara* that states that, indeed, the Land produced massive peaches and grapes (*Ketubot* 111b-112a).

In the Bible, milk usually either refers to that of a goat or cow. (See Deuteronomy 32:14, Proverbs 27:27 and Isaiah 7:21-22.) Rav Reuven Margolis¹⁴ offers a novel explanation of both the *devash* and the *chalav* in "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*." He was troubled by several points: the inclusion of an animal product in a list of agricultural products; the juxtaposition of milk and honey, a combination found nowhere else in Tanach; the inclusion of date honey, the last of the Seven Species, and the absence of wine in the praise. He notes that a more usual pairing in *Tanach* is wine (grapes) and figs. His creative proposal is that *devash* refers not to date honey but to fig nectar. This suggestion is not so farfetched since both honey and fig nectar are the sweet products of a fruit, and, as explained above, oftentimes *devash* in the Bible refers to any fruit extract. Indeed Rashi identifies the honey in the phrase as both date and fig honey (Exodus 13:5). And *chalav*, Rav Margolis boldly suggests, is white wine, not the product of an animal's udder. Rav Margolis cites the Targum to Song of Songs 5:1, where *chalav* is translated as white wine, and demonstrates that in other contexts such a translation makes sense as well. Hence, to Rav Margolis, when stating "*Eretz chalav udevash*," the Torah is praising the Land of Israel as a land of grape and fig (products). Grapes and figs are also the first fruits of the Seven Species. Rav Margolis's interpretation is also consistent with the statement the spies made upon their return from the Land: "We arrived at the Land to which you sent us, and indeed it flows with


milk and honey, and this is its fruit." Perhaps the reference to "milk and honey" was to the grapes and figs the Torah records the spies brought back with them.

In Exodus 13:5, Rashi, drawing on a *gemara*, explains the phrase "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*" in graphic detail. The Talmud (*Megillah* 6a) relates that Reish Lakish said:

I saw the milk and honey flowing near Tzipori and it was 16 mil by 16 mil. ... Rabbah bar bar Chanah said in the name of Rav Yochanan that he saw the milk and honey of the entire Land of Israel and it was twenty-two parsah long by six parsah wide.

Commenting on this, Rashi (s.v. *zavat chalav udevash*) paints a picture of milk-laden goats eating lush dates that drip honey. The honey mixes with milk flowing from the goats and forms into a kind of stream.¹⁵ This is based on another Talmudic passage (*Ketubot* 111b) that states that Rami ben Yechezkel traveled to Bnei Brak, where he saw goats eating under fig trees. The fig honey dripped from the trees while milk dripped from the goats, and the two ingredients mingled. Noting this, he proclaimed that this is the "*Eretz zavat chalav udevash*." So too, Rav Yaakov ben Dostai reported walking from Lod to Ono in fig honey that was ankle-deep.

Bee's honey or date honey; cow milk's, goat's milk or white wine, the Torah praises the Land for the natural fertility that exists when the Jews dwell there. "*Eretz chalav udevash*" refers to the commingling of animal products and vegetation, of herders and farmers. The images conjured by "*zavat chalav udevash*" did not only serve to "convince" the Jews of the goodness of the Land prior to their arrival, they are, in fact, reflective of the Land's productivity.¹⁶

In the Al Hamichyah prayer (Ashkenazic version), said many times daily, we beseech God to let us eat from the fruits of the Land and enjoy their goodness. May we all be privileged to do so! 

Notes

1. This is the literal translation of “*zavat*,” from the root “*zav*,” to flow. Targum Onkelos renders “*zavat*” (e.g., Exodus 3:8) “*avdah*,” a land that produces milk and honey.

2. See, e.g., Exodus 13:5, Leviticus 20:24, Numbers 13:27, Deuteronomy 26:9, Joshua 5:6 and Jeremiah 11:5; 32:22.

3. Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:46) suggests that the Torah prohibits the use of honey on the altar because idolaters seasoned their sacrifices with honey.

Note that this prohibition, though Temple-based, may have halachic implications even today.

The *halachah* states that the wine used for Kiddush must be the type that was eligible to be used on the altar (*Bava Batra* 97a; *SA OC* 272:1). Rambam (*Shabbat* 29:14) explicitly excludes wine with honey in it, and this may include wine with added sugar, since sugar is derived from a cane, a sweet “fruit” product unknown in Biblical times.

The Tishah B’Av *kinnah* “*Lecha Hashem Hatzedakah*” mentions that the Jews were ashamed of having offered fine flour with oil and honey to idols. This is based on Ezekiel 16:19: “My bread that I gave you—fine flour, oil and honey did I feed you—you placed it before them.” Rashi cites a midrash that says this refers to the manna (which was compared to honey cakes) that was placed before the Golden Calf in worship. But the midrashic explanation does not detract from the simple reading of the verse, which indicates that honey was used by the Jews as an idolatrous offering.

4. Explaining this verse, Rambam, *Issurei Hamizbayach* 5:1, simply writes *devash*, without clarification. The *Mishnah Lemelech*, ad loc., discusses whether *devash* in this context means specifically date honey or any fruit extract.

5. Rashi to Exodus 13:5 and to Deuteronomy 26:2, based on the Sifri, notes this. This is also clearly the under-

standing of the Talmud in *Berachot* 41b. Targum Yonatan to Deuteronomy 8:8 translates *devash* as “dates that make honey.”

6. Cf. Deuteronomy 32:13.

7. In some editions, 527.

8. See, for example, the *mishnah* in *Nedarim* (6:9), which states that one who vows to abstain from eating *devash* is prohibited from eating bee’s honey but is permitted to eat date honey. So too, in modern Hebrew unspecified *devash* is bee’s honey. It seems that in the Mishnaic period, dates were not used primarily for their honey (*Terumat* 11:3). That *Chazal* sometimes treated plain Biblical *devash* as bee’s honey is seen in *Torat Kohanim* to Leviticus 11:34 (135 in Malbim): Bee’s honey is one of the “seven liquids” (*Machshirim* 6:4) because it is “honey” without an added descriptor, as opposed to date honey and other fruit extracts.

9. See Y. Lewy, *Minhag Yisrael Torah* 3, (1999), 193-194 for sources.

10. Of note is that when the Talmud (*Bechorot* 6b) queries the reason milk is kosher and is not considered *eiver min hachai* (something taken from a living creature), it cites the phrase “*Eret zavat chalav udevash*” (Exodus 3:8). Yet, when discussing the permissibility of eating bee’s honey it does not cite that phrase. We can assume that if the Gemara would have understood *devash* to be bee’s honey, it would have cited the phrase. Clearly the Talmud understood *devash* to mean something else.

11. The *Torah Temimah* (Leviticus 11:21, note 66) quotes several *halachot* that result from the fact that honey is just regurgitated nectar. These include Rishonim who said that but for the fact that the original plant taste is not detectable, the *berachah* on bee’s honey would be *Ha’adamah*; Rambam’s ruling that bee’s honey, like fruit juice, does not cause *chimutz* (leavening) and *Shu”t Sha’ar Ephraim*’s ruling that one who vows not to eat products of living creatures may eat honey.

Employing this logic, it can be observed that because the sweet syrup of

any fruit is called honey (Rashi, Leviticus 2:11), bee’s honey may actually be called honey because it is merely regurgitated fruit nectar. Hence all honey is fruit nectar, and bee’s honey is simply one example.

12. This is the position of the OU (*The Daf Hakashrus* 7 [Cheshvan 5759/November 1998]: 7-8) and the Star-K. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (*Tzitz Eliezer* 11:59) permits eating royal jelly for a variety of reasons. Rabbi Moshe Sternbuch (*Teshuvot Vehanhagot* 4, *YD*:188, pp. 180-182), hesitatingly permits it, but only for an ill person, and only if it will surely benefit him.

13. On Viduy Ma’aser, see Ari Zivotofsky, “Tax Filing Season—as Required by *Halacha*,” *Jewish Observer* 38, no. 4 (Nissan 5765/April 2005): 50-54.

14. *Hamikra Vehamesorah* (Jerusalem, 5749), 62-64. First published in *Hahed* 12, (Jerusalem, 5696).

15. In one of the places in the *Chumash* where this phrase appears, Rashi paints a similar picture but mentions figs and dates as sources for the honey.

16. See also 2 Kings 18:32; Josephus, *War* 4:468-469 and Pliny, *Natural History* 13:44-45 (Rackham ed. [1945]).

The Land’s fertility in Biblical times is attested to by archeological evidence and ancient Egyptian texts (see S. D. Waterhouse, “A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 1 [Michigan, 1963]: 152-166).

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