

ONEG SHABBAS

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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

Visualizing a Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

Having previously described in *Parashat Shemot* how a land oozing of milk and honey is a special agricultural blessing that may require work and also connects with drinking, what might this blessing actually look like?

We get an opportunity to explore with another occurrence of this phrase in this week's Torah portion, as Moshe addresses the people (Ex. 13:3-5):

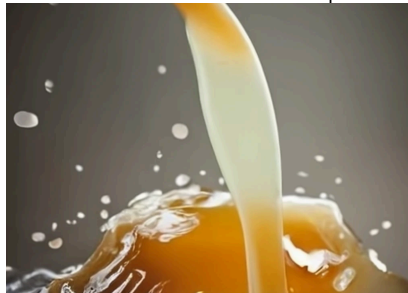
Remember this day, on which you	זָכוֹר אֶת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה
went free from Egypt, the house of	אֲשֶׁר יִצְאֶתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם
bondage, how The LORD freed you	מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים כִּי בְחֻזֶּק
from it with a mighty hand: no	יָד הוֹצִיאָה אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה
leavened bread shall be eaten. You go	וְלֹא יֵאָכַל חֶמֶץ הַיּוֹם
free on this day, in the month of Abib.	אַתֶּם יֹצְאִים בְּחֹדֶשׁ
So, when The LORD has brought you	הָאֱלֹהִים הַיְּיָאֵךְ
into the land of the Canaanites, the	ה' אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי
Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and	וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֲמֹרִי וְהִיטִי
the Jebusites, which was sworn to	וְהִיבֹסִי אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע
your fathers to be given you, a land	לְאֲבוֹתֶיךָ לְתֶת לָךְ אֶרֶץ
flowing with milk and honey....	זֹבֶת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ

Within this context, this phrase is part of a promise and sets up this future scenario helping the Israelites envision what it will be like when they arrive and, hopefully, also have an agricultural bounty. Of course, Moshe continues to describe abstaining from leavened products (Ex. 13:5-10).

What Does This Look Like?

As Moshe verbally paints the picture for the Israelites of what to expect when they arrive to this land flowing/oozing of milk and honey, how does milk and/or honey ooze?

It turns out we are not the only people to be curious about this imagery, as there are a handful of visual descriptions in the Talmud about how they think this looks.



Goats & Fig Trees

A description that appears in both Talmuds is that of people tying their goats to fig trees, one version of which is the following (yPeah 7:3):

Rabbi Huna in the name of Rabbi Idi: "It	רַבִּי חוּנָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אִידִי
happened that someone tied his goat to	מַעֲשֶׂה בְּאֶחָד שֶׁקָּשָׁר
a fig tree; when he returned, he found	עוֹ לְתַאֲנִיהָ וְכָא וּמִצָּא
honey and milk mixed."	דְּבִשׁ וְחֵלֶב מְעוּרָבִין

In this description, it is simply that the honey from the figs were seemingly oozing down onto whatever milk may have emerged from the goat. It is unclear whether this milk happened to have simply emerged from the goat without the goat necessarily trying to express the milk or if the goat was simply so full that it could not retain the milk within itself. A similar description is found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Ketubot* 111b):

Rami bar Yehezkel visited B'nei B'rak	רַמִּי בַר יֵחֶזְקֵאל אִיקְלַע
and saw goats grazing beneath a fig	לְבֵנֵי בֵּרַק חוֹנְהוּ לְהִנְהוּ
tree with honey oozing from the figs	עֵי דְקָאֲכֹלן תּוֹתֵי תַאֲנִי



and milk dripping from them (the goats), and they were mixing together with each other. He said, "This is 'flowing of milk and honey!'"

וְקִנְטִיף דּוֹבְשָׁא מִתַּאֲנִי וְחֵלֶבא טִיף מִנִּיהוּ וּמִיַּעֲרַב בְּהִידֵי אִמְרָה הֵיִינוּ זֹבֶת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ

In this story, it is not one goat tied to the fig tree, but rather goats simply grazing beneath the tree. Moreover, it is clear that the figs were oozing out their honey, while milk was dripping from the goats, yielding their mixing. It also seems from his exclamation that he had also struggled with considering what this phrase would actually look like until he saw this scene, especially since it is rare to see either of these liquids ever oozing on their own, let alone together.

Another curious aspect of both of these descriptions is that one could potentially consider either [fig] honey oozing on its own and [goat] milk oozing on its own, yet both of these scenes depict these two liquids flowing/oozing in a mixed fashion.

The Novelty of Fig Honey Oozing

In both these descriptions, Rabbi Idi's, as well as Rami bar Yehezkel's, we read of a mixture of fig honey oozing mixing with goat milk. In addition to the surprising visual of these two liquids flowing together, there is something going on with these scenes that is remarkable, as Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (1835-1909) described (ד"ה הֵיִנוּ זֹבֶת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ):

It seems to me, with God's help, that he initially thought the "honey" mentioned regarding "a land flowing with milk and honey" referred to date honey, as is written in the seven species: "A land of olive oil and honey" (Deut. 8:8). Therefore, it was difficult for him to understand how such a

וְנִרְאָה לִי בִסֵּד דְּהוּא הִיָּה חוֹשֵׁב דְּבִשׁ הָאֲמֹר גְּבִי זֹבֶת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ הוּא דְּבִשׁ תַּמְרִים כְּכַתּוּב בְּשִׁבְעַת הַמִּינִים אֶרֶץ זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדָבָשׁ (דְּבָרִים ח, ח) לְהִכִּי הוּא קָשִׁיָּא לֵיהּ הִיָּכִי מִשְׁכַּחַת לֵה זֹבֶת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ, כִּי אֵלֹנוּת

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mixture of milk and honey could exist. The reason is that date trees are tall, and goats do not graze near them. If so, even if the dates ooze their honey onto the ground, who would bring goat milk there to mix with the date honey? After all, this is not a place where goats graze!

However, now that he saw that fig trees are so significant that their sap (honey) drips to the ground, and since these trees are low, goats graze there and eat the fig leaves. Through this, he discovered a mixture of goat milk with the honey from the figs. He then understood that the "honey" mentioned in this verse is not the date honey referred to in the seven species, but, rather, the honey of figs.

Alternatively, it can be explained, with God's help, as follows: Initially, he questioned this praise that describes the land as "flowing with milk and honey." Granted, the honey is a fitting praise for the land, as it comes from the trees and fruits of the land. However, the milk comes from goats, sheep, and ewes—what connection does that have to the land? ...

But now that he saw goats eating the fig leaves, which are exceedingly rich, and because of these leaves, they produced an abundance of milk that flowed to the ground, he realized that even the abundance of milk is a praise of the land. Due to the richness of the land, even its leaves produce such an increase in milk that it flows abundantly, resembling a flowing stream. This, then, is the meaning of "flowing with milk and honey"—praising the land for both!

התמרים גבוהים ואין רועות העזים שם ואם כן אם התמרים זב דובשן לארץ, מי הביא חלב עזים שם כדי שיתערב החלב עם דבש התמרים והלא אין זה מקום לרעות בו העזים? אך עתה אשר ראה שהתאנים כל כך חשובים שזב דובשן לקרקע וגם שהם בשביל שהם אילנות נמוכים לך העזים רועים שם כדי לאכול מן עלי התאנים ועל ידי כך מצא תערובת חלב הצאן והעזים עם דבש התאנים, אז הבין כי דבש דהאי קרא אינו דבש תמרים האמור בשבעת המינים אלא הוא דבש תאנים. או יובן בס"ד דמקודם הוה קשיא ליה בשבח זה שהוא משבח את הארץ שהיא זבת חלב ודבש בשלמה הדבש שפיר הוה שבח הארץ כיון דיוצא מן האילנות שהם פירות הארץ אך החלב יוצא מן הצאן עזים ורחלים ומה לו שייכות בארץ? ... אך עתה שראה העזים אוכלים מעלי התאנים שהם שמנים ביותר דמחמת העלין האלה שאוכלים נעשה להם חלב ברבוי שזב לארץ נמצא גם זיבת החלב הוא שבח הארץ כי לרוב שומנה גם העלין היוצאין ממנה עושין רבוי חלב כזה שהוא נחל רב אמר ה'ינו זבת חלב ודבש דמשבח הארץ בתרווייהו



Rabbah bar bar Ḥanah said: "I myself saw flowing milk and honey throughout all of Israel, and it seemed to be from the city of Bei Mikhsei until the fortress of Tulbanki: Its length twenty-two parasangs and its width six parasangs."

אמר רבה בר בר חנה לדידי חזי לי זבת חלב ודבש של כל ארץ ישראל והוויא כמבי מיכסי עד אקרא תולבנקי כ"ב פרסי אורכא ופוטאי שיתא פרסי

(A mil, according to Wikipedia, "is a unit of distance on land, or linear measure, principally used by Jews during the Herodian dynasty to ascertain distances between cities and to mark the Sabbath limit, equivalent to about 1/3 of an English statute mile, or what was about four furlongs (four stadia)." According to Wikipedia, "The parasang is a historical Iranian unit of walking distance, the length of which varied according to terrain and speed of travel. The European equivalent is the league. In modern terms the distance is about 3 or 3 1/2 miles (4.8 or 5.6 km).")

I am not surprised to read of Rabbah bar bar Ḥanah, a third-century rabbi, here, since he is known for his tall tales (cf. *Bava Batra* 73a-74a), although I am somewhat surprised to read of Resh Lakish, also a third-century rabbi, here describing such a massive flowing of milk and honey by Tzipori. While these two rabbis mention both honey and milk oozing, it is interesting that Rabbi Ya'akov ben Dostai only mentions the fig honey oozing, but not the milk.

Milk = Wine???

Moving beyond the visual aspects, another connection to drinking with this expression is the clever possibility out there that this milk is actually wine (Rabbi Dr. Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "What's the Truth about...A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey?", *Jewish Action* (Winter 2005)):

Rav Reuven Margolis 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' interpretation is also consistent with the statement Moshe's spies declared 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.

Conclusion

While it may have seemed simple to consider the phrase "a land flowing of milk and honey" meant to simply convey the notion of agricultural bounty, both in terms of the fruit yield, as well as the good grazing opportunities for goats, how might it actually look? As we see from these Talmudic descriptions, whether it's a simple proximity of goats having milk expressed from them near the oozing of growing figs, or whether it is of a fantastical visual of miles of fig honey literally flowing alongside goat milk throughout the land of Israel, the rabbis were keenly interested in painting a visual for us to consider how this might look. Moreover, the novelty here of assuming that this honey is that of dates, yet these rabbis describe figs oozing honey, which is fascinating. Finally, of course, it's hard also not to consider Rabbi Margolis' idea that maybe wine could also be involved....

L'chaim 

A Few Fantastical Descriptions

Going beyond these simple descriptions, the Babylonian Talmud then shares not one, not two descriptions, but three separate images of their experiences (*Ketubot* 111b):

Rabbi Ya'akov ben Dostai said: "There are three *mil* from Lud to Ono. Once I rose early in the morning and I walked in ankle-deep honey oozing from fig trees."

א"ר יעקב בן דוסתאי מלוד לאונו שלשה מילין פעם אחת קדמתי בנשף והלכתי עד קרסולי בדבש של תאנים

Resh Lakish said: "I myself saw flowing milk and honey by Tzipori, and it was sixteen by sixteen *mil*."

אמר ר"ל לדידי חזי לי זבת חלב ודבש של צפורי והוי שיתסר מילין אשיתסר מילין

