

Say Cheese... Smile
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Kehillat Beth Israel, Ottawa
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Four Europeans are lost while hiking. They run out of food, then they run out of water.

"I'm so thirsty," says the Englishman. "I must have tea."

"I'm so thirsty," says the Frenchman. "I must have wine."

"I'm so thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer."

"I'm so thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes."

We all eat, whether for fuel or fine dining, whether our daily meals or on special occasions. But food can also have particular religious, ethnic and cultural qualities.

Josette and I enjoy wine at a meal, but kiddush has a different significance. You might like a baguette, but making motzee, particularly for hallah, has a deeper meaning.

You all know the 10 word description of Jewish holidays:
They tried to kill us. They failed. Now, let's eat!

What do we eat on holidays?

- Rosh Hashanah: symbolic foods: apples/honey (sweet), pomegranates (multiply mitzvot), carrots (divine judgement)
- Sukkot- *kreplakh* (hidden future)
- Hanukkah- latkes (oil)
- Tu b'Shvat (fruits from Israel)
- Purim (hamantaschen)
- Pesah (matzah, maror, haroset)
- Shavu'ot - dairy

The first record of Ashkenazim eating dairy foods on Shavuot is from the 12th century. R. Elazar of Worms, (ca. 1176–1238) describes a kashrut practice of his father's uncle, which incidentally relates to Shavu'ot:

My father, my master, said of his uncle, R. Menachem, that on the festival of Shavuot, he would eat cheese before meat, and he would clean his mouth by eating bread dipped in wine, and he did not wait any time in between.

While our practice is not to eat hard cheese immediately before meat, we do continue the custom of eating cheese on Shavu'ot.

In a Passover Sermon, while discussing laws of cooking on the festivals, R. Elazar also mentions baking cheese filled *muliyyata* on Shavuot:

It appears to me...that someone who wishes to bake [on a festival day], such as matzot on the night of Pesach or cheese pie (*muliyyata*) on Shavuot, may scrape the coals out and also the ashes...

There are over 100 different explanations for the custom of eating dairy on Shavu'ot. I'll only mention some of them. If you have a Jewish stomach that is lactose intolerant, please get your Lactaid pills ready.

Until the Torah was given, meat couldn't be consumed. Sinai revelation took place on Shabbat and the people were not prepared for kosher slaughter.

The Hebrew word *halav*, milk, has a numerical value of 40, the number of days Moshe was on Mt Sinai.

Israel is describes as a "land of milk and honey" (goat milk and date honey). Shavuot is linked to Eretz Yisrael as *Hag HaBikkurim*: Festival of First Harvest, as R. Jacob Anatoli (ca. 1194–1286)observed, "Know that the Torah is compared to honey and to milk, as it says (Song of Songs 4:11): "Your lips drip nectar, honey and milk are under your tongue."

Qalonymus b. Qalonymus of Provence (d after 1328), notes that the Torah commandments are sweet like milk and honey, but that some Jews prefer to consume foods prepared from these ingredients more than studying Torah. "They eat the foods of the festival more than they follow the commandments which come through the mouth [of their teachers]."

R. Israel Isserlein (ca. 1390–ca. 1460) permitted dairy pies to be baked fresh for Shavuot.

"On the first day of Shavuot, he would eat *Floden* (pie) and fish fried in butter. Afterwards, he would wash his hands and mouth, and place his finger in his mouth to ensure he cleaned it well, and then eat a dessert. Afterwards, he would eat roasted meat."

To this day, there are Jews who eat a dairy meal and later have a meat meal on Shavuot. Perhaps they use a toothbrush rather than their fingers to clean their mouths.

Lebanese and Syrian Jews prepare dairy calzones for Shavu'ot. Ralph Anzarouth even made the pasta.

We know that Sefardi Jews prepared a Shavuot bread named *El Pan de los Siete Cielos*. After the Exile from Spain, the Bread of Seven Heavens was reborn in Salonica where, until the Nazi extermination program, Jews made up a majority of the population. The milk bread dough might be prepared with oregano, feta, nuts, honey and even some anise arak.

Cecil Roth (1899–1970), describes the Jews of Vaucluse in southeastern France as baking bread decorated with ladders (to heaven). Jews of Ashkenaz also baked a Mount Sinai cake for Shavuot, comparable to the Seven Heavens. A Mount Sinai cake might have a ladder with seven rungs, a staircase with seven steps, seven folds, or possibly a seven-layers.

German Jews would make קאָסקען (Käsekuchen) “cheesecake” as a prize for children who successfully completed counting the omer.

So, whether a Mt Sinai cake or kreplakh, blintzes or bourekas, lasagna or ice cream, quiche or calzone, if it has cheese... smile.

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<https://www.thetorah.com/article/beyond-cheesecake-foods-of-shavuot> Susan Weingarten

[https://bitesizedhistory.substack.com/p/the-bread-of-seven-heavens-and-two?utm\\_source=post-email-title&publication\\_id=2670363&post\\_id=145492335&utm\\_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=n67cx&triedRedirect=true&utm\\_medium=email](https://bitesizedhistory.substack.com/p/the-bread-of-seven-heavens-and-two?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=2670363&post_id=145492335&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&r=n67cx&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email)  
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