

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

FROM XMAS TO SHAVUOT: FROM GIFTS TO "THE GIFT"

Andrew Dimond

I am Jewish, as are both of my parents, but I grew up with no Jewish observance whatsoever. Growing up in Greenwich, Connecticut, I went to synagogue only twice--once for a cousin's Bat Mitzvah and once with a friend, just out of curiosity.

I didn't know what Yom Kippur was, we didn't observe Chanukah, and, during my formative years, I only once attended a seder. I certainly did not know what Shavuot was.

My family celebrated Xmas, which, I must admit, I loved. We had no religious association with the holiday, but we received lots of presents.

Early in my business career in Manhattan, I was told by a religious associate that Yom Kippur was a day of atonement, and the idea "spoke" to me. I began to observe this holiday every year thereafter fasting, and attending synagogue. I didn't understand any of the Hebrew, but the musical chanting was moving to me. I "enjoyed" this holiday, despite the self-imposed "affliction" of not eating for 25 hours.

(cont. on p. 2)



EDIBLE EXPRESSIONS

Rabbi Yosi Eisen

"You can't have these together on the table," blurted out my 5 year old niece. We were visiting my brother's family for a Shabbat after Pesach this year, and my little niece was concerned that matzah and challah were being served simultaneously at *Seudah Shlishit* (the third Shabbat meal). She remembered that when she ate matzah on Passover, challah was forbidden, and so perhaps she assumed that matzah and challah are like meat and milk--edible on their own, but not meant to be mixed! For my niece, matzah represented a special time associated with specific activities and foods.

This is true for all of us: food often plays a central role in our core associations and memories of the holidays, when it is a mitzvah to eat festive meals and specific foods. From pomegranates on Rosh Hashana to hamantaschen on Purim, the foods that we enjoy on the festivals shape our experiences of these special occasions. The same is true of Shavuot. So let's explore some of the traditional foods associated with Shavuot and examine how they help us understand, appreciate, and enhance our observance.

Ashkenazi Jews often eat dairy foods (rather ironic, given the prevalence of lactose intolerance among Ashkenazi Jews) on Shavuot.* Many reasons are given for this tradition of dairy--among them is that we first received the

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DEEP IN MY HEART (OF TEXAS!)

Evan Rosenhouse

Despite having grown up in Dallas, Texas, I like to think I had a well-rounded religious education. Some Texans will tell you that they live in the "Buckle of the Bible Belt," with churches on almost every corner. A fact that surprises many who have never visited Dallas, however, is that we also have a large and thriving Jewish community. A community which I, as a fourth generation Dallasite, can proudly say my family has been a part of for over a century.

I would describe my family as pretty traditional. We belonged to a Conservative synagogue, attended religious school (not once, not twice, but three times a week!), and there was great importance placed upon our Shabbat dinners. If we had somewhere we wanted to go on Friday night--the movies, a high school football game, whatever it was--we first had to join the family for dinner. Every Friday night, three generations came together to celebrate Shabbat, usually at my grandmother's house.

My father's mother was one of those women who cooked for an army, no matter what size the crowd. She made brisket, chicken, soup, three kugels and, of course, the best homemade challah in the world. She was one of those women who would fuss if you didn't clear your plate and ask, "What? Was there something wrong with the food?!" I'd reply,

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FROM XMAS TO SHAVUOT (cont. from p. 1)...

Twelve years later, I attended a “Beginners” Yom Kippur service. The rabbi spoke about “*Lashon Hara*” (literally, evil tongue), which refers to idle gossip, and introduced many other Jewish concepts regarding how to treat others in a caring manner. This also “spoke” to me, and I began to attend classes and enjoy Shabbat meals with these rabbis and their families on the Upper West Side.

My journey continued with a visit to Israel. The trip, which took place at the end of December 1998, was led by a local rabbi and his family. There were 12 other “students” on the trip. I had always heard that a visit to Israel was life-changing, and mind-blowing, so I decided to see for myself.

We traveled around Israel. We went horseback riding along the Sea of Galilee, visited the holy city of Safed, rode camels in the Negev and climbed Masada, where a small number of Jews fended off the Great Roman Army for 3 years.

The highlight of the trip were the days we spent in Jerusalem. It was there, in the Old City, that I observed my first Shabbat. That Friday night happened to fall on my old favorite holiday of Xmas. Instead of receiving presents as in previous years, I was given the gifts of Torah and Shabbat.

As we walked through the winding streets of the Old City, I took a guilty pleasure in seeing Xmas lights and hearing a little music from an Armenian restaurant. But, the pride I felt in my Jewishness was far greater than the draw of that familiarity.

On Saturday afternoon some of us walked through the Southern Excavation Tour, where we saw the site of the Holy Temple: the ruins of mikvahs (ritual baths), the area where souvenirs were sold during the three pilgrimage festivals, and the majestic gate through which thousands of Jews entered the site of the Temple three times a year, on Passover, Sukkot, and Shavuot.

While we waited for the sun to set over the Kotel, before saying *Havdalah* (the prayer that concludes Shabbat), we had a “rap” session. I was one of the students who spoke. Tears came to my eyes as I expressed my newfound pride in being a Jew...to stand on the shoulders of millions who sacrificed their lives so that we could be Jewish today. Jews are only approximately one-fifth of one percent of the world’s population and, therefore, each of us is a vital link in the family of Judaism. We owe it to those who lost everything because they were Jewish to stand tall and honor their memories. As I spoke of the feelings I had, I realized that, in fact, thousands and thousands had lost their lives during the destruction of the two Holy Temples, very near to the spot at which we stood.

I had grown up being defensive about being Jewish. When asked about my background, I would say that I was German and Russian (the countries from which my families emigrated). If pressed, I would admit to being “biologically” Jewish, but not religiously. My experience of Jewish life was painted by the horrific stories of the Holocaust as well as by the anti-Semitic slurs I heard growing up. Being Jewish was a thorn in my side, not something to celebrate and be proud of. I like to use the analogy that Judaism is a rose. Growing up I saw and felt only the thorns. But, the Beginners programs that I attended lifted me higher, enabling me to see the beauty of the rose above the

thorns, the treasure that is Judaism, with its moral wisdom of the sanctity of life and of honoring one’s parents and teachers; and of speaking positively about others, and avoiding an evil tongue.

Shavuot is one of the three major festivals. Yet, the exact day is not mentioned in the Torah...only that it is celebrated 49 days after the first day of Passover. To me, this demonstrates two points. One is that Shavuot (the holiday during which we receive G-d’s Torah) cannot be limited to one single date, but is really every day. In other words, we can and should receive the Torah’s wisdom every day. Secondly, Shavuot is intrinsically linked with Passover, the holiday during which we were freed from Egypt (or *Mitzrayim*, meaning “narrowness”) and slavery. These lessons stand today. We must leave our own narrowness in order to receive the good in life. In fact, it is said that freedom is not the ability to do anything one wants, but rather, that the Jews were freed from the bondage in Egypt in order to “serve” G-d, and live by His Torah.

Although we celebrate Shavuot in Sivan, we can, and should, celebrate receiving the Torah every single day. Narrowing that experience down to one moment in my life leads me back to my first real Shabbat experience, standing where our Holy Temple stood millennia ago. It was then and there that I had the eye-and-soul-opening experience that allowed me to see and feel that Judaism is not comprised of mere stories in books, but, rather, that Torah is not only very real, but really who we are.

Like the Jews in Egypt thousands of years ago, I, too, needed to be freed from my narrow concept of what my Jewishness meant to me. I needed to “escape” the seduction of Xmas and free myself to find pride in who I really am...a Jew who is carried on the broad and powerful shoulders of the many millions of Jews who went before us...for us.

Andrew Dimond is an Ad Executive in New York City. He is also one half of the musical group, Jewbilation (see their fun Jewish music videos on YouTube).

EDIBLE EXPRESSIONS (cont. from p. 1)...laws of *shechita* (ritual slaughter) when we received the Torah (which was on a Shabbat), so the Jews were unable to immediately prepare meat. A second reason is the verse, “Honey and milk are under your tongue” (*Shir HaShirim*/Song of Songs 4:11), which is understood as a comparison of the words of Torah to both milk and honey. This verse can be understood as a source for eating both dairy as well as honey on Shavuot.

Honey and Torah study are connected on Shavuot as well, in another context: There is a recorded custom that when young children first begin to learn *Aleph Bet*, drops of honey are put on their books for them to lick. Eating honey on Shavuot helps us both internalize and demonstrate that we recognize the goodness of Torah. Similarly, when we do this for the young child, we express a desire that Torah study always be sweet.

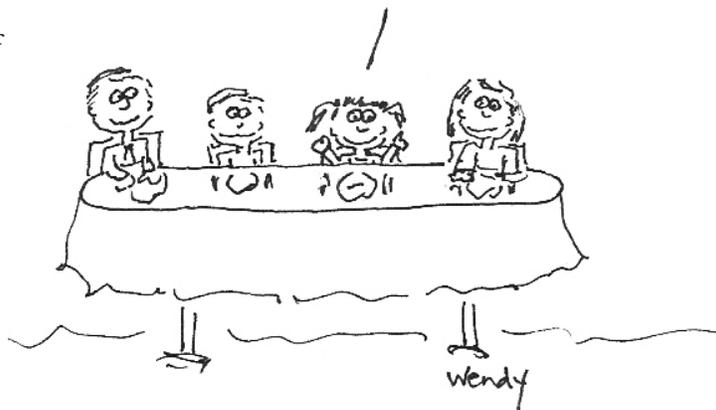
There are two other foods that can be associated with Shavuot. In the times of the Holy Temple the *korban omer* (*omer* offering) was brought on the second day of Passover. The *korban omer* was made from barley, and although (cont. on p. 3)

EDIBLE EXPRESSIONS (cont. from p. 2)...some of the ground barley was mixed with oil, the *omer* offering was not considered *chametz*. Following the offering of the *omer*, forty-nine days were then counted and, on the fiftieth day, Shavuot was celebrated. On Shavuot, two loaves of bread made of wheat (*shteí halechem*) were offered on behalf of the nation. Both the *omer* and the *shteí halechem* had to be brought from grain grown in Israel.

The progression from Passover to Shavuot is framed by the counting of days. The grains involved in this progression present a unique perspective on humanity and its potential. The barley that was brought for the *omer* offering in the Holy Temple was winnowed, parched, ground and cooked on the fire of the altar, but it was not baked or transformed (perhaps because it was Passover and could not be made into *chametz*). The *shteí halechem*, on the other hand, were definitively *chametz*. Keeping in mind that barley was often grown for animal feed, while wheat was reserved for human consumption, the following Midrash helps us understand the *omer* to *shteí halechem* progression:

The evil Turnus Rufus once asked Rabbi Akiva, 'Whose deeds are greater - God's or man's?' He replied, 'Man's deeds are greater.' Turnus Rufus asked him, 'Is man then capable of creating heaven and earth, or anything like them?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I was not referring to the sphere beyond man's ability, over which he has no control. I refer to those creations of which man is capable.' He then asked, 'Why do you circumcise yourselves?' Rabbi Akiva replied, 'I knew that was the point of your question, and therefore I answered in the first place that man's

"You can't have matzah and challah together on the table!!"



deeds are greater than God's.' Rabbi Akiva brought him grains of wheat and some bread, and said: 'These grains of wheat are God's handiwork, and the bread is the handiwork of man. Is the latter not greater than the former?'

Bread represents the ability of the natural form (grain) to be transformed into something completely new and nutritious.

While we have natural inclinations that are similar to those of the animals, to whom the barely processed barley grains

were often given, we also have free will and the ability to achieve holiness and elevated status, a uniquely human gift. The days leading from Passover to Shavuot, from *chametz* to *shteí halechem*, are our opportunity to find our greatest human potential and be more than just the created form. Through the process of self-refinement, which might be compared to the processing necessary to transform grain into wheat, we are able to actualize our potential and merit the Torah.

Will we choose to move beyond the barley of the *korban omer* to the wheat of the *shteí halechem*?

As my niece so plainly made clear, eating plays a central role in all of our holidays. The *shteí halechem*, dairy and honey all contribute to the unique character of Shavuot. The foods associated with each holiday, however, also provide us with insights into the holidays themselves.

* Rama O.C. 494:3

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DEEP IN MY HEART (cont. from p. 1)...“Grandma, I’m on my third serving!” Some of my best family memories are from the time we spent around that table as we shared the spirit of Shabbat with one another.

I attended Jewish day schools on and off throughout my childhood. For high school, I attended the Jewish day school for my freshman and sophomore years, but went to public school for my junior and senior years. While I enjoyed some aspects of being in a public school, I knew something was fundamentally missing in my education. I missed the element of Jewish learning that a Yeshiva high school provided. That is why I chose to attend Yeshiva University (YU) for college. I loved the core philosophy of the university, *Torah U’Madda*, combining Torah learning with secular knowledge. Before I made that fateful decision, I would have never guessed that I’d leave Dallas for the Yeshiva campus in New York in 2001 and remain there for 9 years, earning my Bachelors in Business, my Masters in Social Work and begin my rabbinical studies.

When I arrived at YU, I was one of the few students on campus who came from a public high school. I remember

thinking that I was at a great disadvantage with my classmates who had been learning Jewish topics in school their whole lives. That opinion changed one Friday night when I went to hear a lecture by a rabbi recruiting students for a unique Jewish learning opportunity. As an introduction, he first asked the audience how many of us had actually read the entire *Tanach*, all 24 books that make up the Jewish Bible? I quickly raised my hand. As I looked around, I was surprised to see that out of the 100 or so students, only about 10 of them raised their hands. You would think that in this group made up of Yeshiva students, alumni and rabbinical scholars, most of whom spent their formative years attending Jewish day schools, more people would have made it a point to read the entire Jewish Bible. If the Jewish people are known as “The People of the Book,” wouldn’t you have thought more of us would have read “the Book”?

People asked me why I had taken on the challenge of reading the entire Hebrew Bible on my own when it hadn’t been given as part of a school assignment. Actually, my desire to learn the *Tanach* had been inspired by a school (cont. on p. 4)

DEEP IN MY HEART (cont. from p. 3)...assignment, just not the kind they were thinking of. The syllabus in my high school English classes required us to read many of the Classics, and many of the Classics, like *The Canterbury Tales*, included biblical themes and illusions. I found these intriguing and wanted to learn more.

Going to school in Texas, I had plenty of friends through synagogue and AZA (Aleph Zadik Aleph, a part of B'nai Brith Youth Organization), but a majority of the people I hung out

with every day were devout Christians. More than once did a classmate try to proselytize me. But knowledge empowered me. Once I had read all the texts, I was able to quote and debate the Bible right back at them.

On Shavuot, the Jewish people celebrate receiving the Torah at Sinai. It is amazing to think about how the Torah informs all of life. Everything we do, from when we get up in the morning to when we go to bed at night, is influenced by Torah principles. At YU, I had the opportunity to learn new ways to understand the words of the *Tanach* that I had read while still in high school.

Many different people and experiences have made me into the type of Jew I am today. But if you ask me, none of the personal encounters or experiences compare to those Shabbat dinners I had growing up. The importance placed on that ritual always stuck with me. And I look forward to passing the love for Shabbat and of Jewish learning on to my little girl.

A jack of many trades, Evan Rosenhouse is a trained social worker, who also lends a hand at his family's accounting firm, is a kosher supervisor for Dallas Kosher and, most importantly, is a full time dad. He lives in Dallas, TX, with his wife Susanne, NJOP's Social Media Coordinator, and their 15-month-old daughter Becca, a FIFTH generation Dallasite.



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