



Shavu'ot & vegetarianism

I am convinced that vegetarianism is ethically superior to meat-eating, which involves killing and consuming fellow creatures.

It cannot be stated too often that God's original design at the time of creation was that man should be vegetarian.

It was only after the flood that meat-eating, under strictly controlled conditions, was permitted as a concession to human weakness. This is quite clear from B'reishit 1:29-30 and 9:3, and underlined by Rashi's comments on these verses and by the Talmudic comment in Sanhedrin 59b.

"The Royal Table", a book on the Jewish dietary laws by Jacob Cohen (Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem and New York), commences with the statement, "In the perfect world originally designed by God man was meant to be a vegetarian."

Cohen goes on, "Vegetative life was originally created to serve as food for animal beings... The Utopian order of endless life was too dazzling for man's weak intellect... To the new humanity God gave a new dispensation, permitting the use of animals as food... The reasons for this

permission were manifold. First, man having proved his inability to control his appetite under the old order, God found it necessary to make a concession to his weakness and permit him a wider latitude in the choice of food..."

The careful structure of the laws of shechita is based on the determination to ensure that, if this concession is to form part of Jewish life, it must be controlled for the sake of kindness and dignity.

But let me add that vegetarians who are able – for reasons of ethics or health or both – to control their appetite still further and to refrain from meat-eating are fulfilling God's original intention and HAREI ZEH M'SHUBACH, are to be considered praiseworthy.

For every Jew, meat-eater or not, the festival of Shavu'ot is the most vegetarian of all, for it has long been customary to eat dairy foods on this Yom-Tov.

The reasons vary. One theory has it that on the festival of the giving of the Torah one should recall rabbinic comparisons of Torah with milk.

Rabbi Oshaia said: "Why are the words of the Torah likened to three liquids, water, wine and milk? To teach you that just as these three

liquids can only be preserved in the most inferior of vessels, so too the words of the Torah endure only with him who is meek-minded.

“Another explanation: Just as these three liquids can become unfit for consumption through inattention, so too the words of the Torah are forgotten through inattention” (Ta’anit 7 a/b).

Some quote a verse from the Song of Songs (4:11): “Honey and milk are under your tongue” and apply it to study of the Torah, which leaves as sweet a taste as milk and honey, or to the land of Israel (“a land flowing with milk and honey”), where Shavu’ot is a summer harvest festival.

Various communities have their own Shavu’ot food specialities. Our custom of eating cheese cake is too well-known to need emphasis or explanation.

It was once usual to bake twin loaves for the festival – to represent the two loaves of bread, made from the new wheat, which were offered in the Temple on Shavu’ot, or to symbolise the sign of the zodiac associated with the month of Sivan, namely Gemini, the Twins.

Some communities make bread or cake for Shavu’ot in the shape of a ladder with seven rungs, representing the seven heavens through which

it was believed Moshe passed on his way to heaven to receive the Torah.

A North African version of this bread or cake is in the form of a pyramid of concentric circles, adorned with Biblical symbols – a ladder for Moshe to climb, Moshe's staff, a model of Mount Sinai, the tablets of the Law and the Ark; and other items depicting events during the forty years in the wilderness.

Once upon a time the little child would begin Hebrew education on Shavu’ot and thus Israel would be introduced to Torah in every age on the anniversary of the day on which the Torah was introduced to Israel.

Washed and scrubbed and wearing his best clothes, the child would be led by his father to Cheder where the teacher would show him the Alef-Bet written on a slate or small board. Then he would be allowed to lick off the letters written in honey – a most wonderful way of ensuring that the child would associate religion with sweetness from the very first lesson.

Shavu’ot is not only the most vegetarian of our festivals. It is also one of the shortest, the most pleasant and the easiest to observe. It is indubitably the most important of them all, for the giving of the Torah was the greatest event in Jewish history. **OZ**