

Why do we eat dairy on Shavuot?

Ahhh... the sumptuous delight of blintzes and cheesecake. Eating a dairy meal on Shavuot has become an enduring tradition. But what's the source for this? There are many traditional sources for this enduring custom. According to tradition, when Moses brought the Torah to the people at Mt. Sinai, it was the first time the Israelites learned the laws of *Kashrut* (kosher,) most specifically, how the Israelites should prepare meat and the separation of meat and dairy.

For many Jews who do not keep kosher, it may seem like an old-fashioned tradition that has little relevance to our modern lives. Not so! There are many other fascinating reasons we celebrate this holiday with delicious dairy treats:

2. The Land of Milk and Honey

Torah is likened to milk, as the verse says, "Like honey and milk [the Torah] lies under your tongue" (Song of Songs 4:11). Just as milk can fully sustain the body of a human being (i.e. a nursing baby), so too the Torah provides all the "spiritual nourishment" necessary for the human soul.

2. The Math of Milk

The *gematria* (numerical value) of the Hebrew word for milk, *chalav*, is 40. We eat dairy foods on Shavuot to commemorate the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai receiving instruction in the entire Torah. (Moses spent an additional 40 days on Sinai, praying for forgiveness following the Golden Calf, and then a third set of 40 days before returning with a new set of stone tablets. Spoiler Alert: When you add these days together, it equals 120, which was Moses' age when he died.

Here's another brain twister:

An alternative name for Mount Sinai is Har Gav'nunim, the mountain of majestic peaks. The Hebrew word for cheese is *gevina*, etymologically related to Har Gav'nunim.

Further, the *gematria* of *gevina* (cheese) is 70, corresponding to the "70 faces of Torah."

3. Celebrating Mothers

Moses was born on the seventh day of Adar, and stayed at home for three months with his family, before being placed in the Nile River on the sixth of Sivan.

Moses was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted Moses and took him to live in Pharaoh's palace. But right away a problem arose: what to feed the baby. In those days, there was no bottled baby formula, so when the birth mother wasn't available, the caretaker would have to hire a wet nurse. In the case of Moses, he kept refusing to nurse from Egyptian women. Finally, Pharaoh's daughter found one woman who Moses agreed to nurse from – Yocheved, Moses' biological mother!

Appreciate the irony: Pharaoh's murderous decree against the Jews was specifically intended to prevent a new generation of Jewish leadership. Holy miscalculation, Pharaoh! Here's the irony: Moses, the upcoming great Jewish leader, was raised, educated and trained – right under Pharaoh's nose, in Pharaoh's own home, at Pharaoh's expense! And on top of it all, Moses' mother was paid a salary!

The eating of dairy foods on Shavuot commemorates this phenomenon in the early life of Moses, which occurred on the sixth of Sivan, the day on which Shavuot falls.

Chag Shavuot Sameach! Happy Shavuot!