

Torah Weekly

7"טב

HONEY IN JEWISH LAW, LORE, TRADITION, AND MORE

You may be familiar with the custom of dipping an apple into honey on Rosh Hashanah, but where else does honey feature in Jewish tradition? Let's explore the Torah sources that discuss this sweet treat.

Honey in the Scriptures

Land of Milk and Honey. The Torah describes the Land of Israel as "flowing with milk and [date] honey," and a verse in our Grace after Meals praises Israel's "Seven Species" of fruit and grain, including, last but not least, honey.

Indeed, the Rebbe notes that honey is truly the culmination of all the species preceding it. Date trees take a long time to grow, symbolizing the effort we must make during exile, while the sweet honey symbolizes the spiritual fruits that we will enjoy in the messianic era as a result of that effort.

Heavenly taste. The heavenly manna that sustained the Jews for 40 years in the desert was like "a pastry fried in honey" (although the miraculous manna could also taste like whatever one imagined).

Samson's riddle. Several centuries later, the mighty Samson bare-handedly killed a lion that was about to attack him. When he later returned to that spot, he found "a swarm of bees in its belly, complete with their honey." Samson then posed this riddle to a group of his friends: "From the devourer came forth food; and from the strong came out sweetness."

This inspiring idea—that even the negative can produce positive—may help explain the Rabbinic preference for bees' honey over the Biblical date honey, as we will discuss further.

Honey in Jewish Life

Good vs. sweet. Our age-old High Holiday custom to dip an apple in honey conveys our Rosh Hashanah wish that "G-d grant us a good and sweet new year." Why both "good" and "sweet"? Isn't that redundant?

"Good" per se can remain on a lofty spiritual level, so we add the adjective "sweet"—we should actually merit to enjoy tangible good, as real as the physical honey we eat with the apple. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson explains this on a Kabbalistic level: "Tova" (good) refers to the esoteric divine attribute of kindness, while "mesukah" (sweet) also transforms and sweetens the sublime "severities."

Honey's unique qualities. Why do we use honey rather than sugar for the apple-dipping custom? Rabbi Schneur Zalman of

Liadi explains: Honey both absorbs and preserves its contents. Kabbalistically, the supernal "severities" help channel the infinite spiritual energies, so they will be "preserved" and can descend to the lower spheres (as opposed to dissipating on a lofty plane). This concept is known as "severities within kindness." We thus pray that the severities, too, be transformed to good.

Raw = life. Some traditions prefer using raw honeycomb, as the Hebrew word for "raw" is "chai," which is also translated as "life," and our Rosh Hashanah wish is to be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Beyond the apple. In addition to the apple, we also dip the Rosh Hashanah challah in honey. Some continue this tradition throughout all the Tishrei festivals until Hoshanah Rabbah, which concludes the "Days of Judgment."

To bee or not to bee? Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe explains why bees' honey (versus date honey) is used for this custom: Bees have a sting within them, yet their product is sweet. We are hoping that G-d's attribute of judgment will be tempered by His attribute of mercy, producing a sweeter result.

Honey in Jewish Law

Why is honey kosher? According to halachah, a derivative of an impure animal is considered impure, so the obvious question arises: How can kosher honey be produced by the non-kosher bee?

Well, honey is actually not produced by a bee's body. The busy bees transfer the floral nectar through their mouths only as temporary "storage" until the sugar levels reach 80 percent, and then they store it in the honeycomb. Bees' honey indeed represents a unique kashrut phenomenon!

Pastry vs. bread. The Mishnah rules that pastry fried in honey (or dough kneaded with honey) does not qualify as halachic "bread," and is thus exempt from the obligation to separate "challah."

The blessing. As a food that doesn't grow from the earth or from a tree, the generic "Shehakol" blessing is recited before eating honey. Mead whiskey made from fermented honey has the same blessing.

Maimonides' health tip. Maimonides seems to be the first in the medical field to caution young children against eating honey, a common health tip for contemporary mothers.

Helpful honey. Our sages say that "honey and sweets help restore one's vision." The Talmud lists various "aids" for memory, and later commentaries add: "Honey, too, makes one wise."

Messages in the Honey

We can derive many life lessons from honey. Here is a sweet sampling:

The sweet-and-sour balance. The Torah restricts what can be offered on the altar: "Do not offer any leavening or sweet fruits as a fire-offering to G-d." Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch explains this homiletically: Always being sour—or, conversely, being too sweet—is not an acceptable form of service in Judaism.

Too much of a good thing. In Psalms, King David praises G-d's Torah: "Sweet to my palate is Your word,

ROSH HASHANAH

First Day - Tishrei 1, 5787
September 12, 2026

First Torah: Rosh Hashanah 1: Genesis
21:1-34

Second Torah: Rosh Hashanah 1:
Numbers 29:1-6

Haftarah: Samuel I 1:1 - 2:10

Second Day - Tishrei 2, 5787
September 13, 2026

First Torah: Rosh Hashanah 2: Genesis
22:1-24

Second Torah: Rosh Hashanah 2:
Numbers 29:1-6

Haftarah: Jeremiah 31:1-19

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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more than honey!" The Eretz HaChaim explains: Proverbs cautions us against indulging in too much honey, while "Torah is always satisfying.

Selfless bees. The Midrash states, "Just as the bee stores everything it produces for its owner, so do we, the people of Israel, save our mitzvahs for our Father in Heaven." The commentaries elaborate: Bees cannot consume all the honey that they gather, but they produce it for the owner of the hive. Similarly, Jewish people keep mitzvahs for the sake of heaven, without personal ulterior motives.

Sweetness and stingers. The Lubavitcher Rebbe comments: The bee both stings and produces honey. A person's character, too, is comprised of two extremes, the attribute of kindness (in Kabbalah, the "right side") and the attribute of severity (the "left side"). The Torah teaches us to "use the right side to attract and draw near, and the left to push away." A bee's primary function is to produce honey, yet its stinger is a defense to protect its treasure. So, too, our main focus is to "do good," i.e. the positive commandments; secondarily, "abstaining from bad," i.e. the negative commandments, helps protect and safeguard the former. Ideally, we try to combine and incorporate the "left" with the "right."

The sweetness of Torah. In King Solomon's allegorical "Song of Songs," the verse "Honey and milk under your tongue" is interpreted to mean that words of Torah—specifically the inner secrets of Kabbalah—are sweeter than honey. We thus eat milk and honey products on the Shavuot holiday, when we celebrate the Giving of the Torah.

Two ways to learn. Rabbi Tzvi Farber makes an interesting observation: Bees produce honey by flying many miles to collect nectar from flowers, while milk comes straight from the cow. Similarly, one learns Torah in two ways:

One should gather insights from others, learning from diverse teachers;

One can also be creative and original, developing his own Torah insights.

Additional Customs

Begging for honey cake. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the sexton or rabbi distributes honey cake to the congregation for a sweet year. It is customary to "beg" for a piece, as we hope that this will be the last time we'll have to beg, and that we'll be self-sufficient and independent in the upcoming year.

More apple in honey. Later in the festive Tishrei month, on the day of Hoshanah Rabbah (the last day of Sukkot), many recite Psalms all night, fervently praying for a sweet year. In 1984, the Rebbe revived the custom of concluding the recital of Psalms with an apple dipped in honey.

A sweet tooth. When a three-year-old child starts learning Torah in cheder (school) for the first time, it is customary to place a little honey on the letters of the alef-bet, which the child then licks happily, so the child learns to associate Torah with delight and good taste. The chassidic master Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk would expound the verse "Do not offer any leavening or sweet fruits as a fire-offering to G-d": The Hebrew word for "do not" is "lo," which, with a slightly different spelling, can mean "for him." He used this as a Biblical source for the various sweet treats brought for "him"—the child—during his cheder introduction.

This year, when you're dipping your apple into honey, you'll have a taste of its significance. May you have a good, sweet new year!

By Efraim Rubin

Monday, 25 Elul, 5786 – 7 September, 2026

Creation (3760 BCE)

The 1st day of creation, on which G-d created existence, time, matter, darkness and light, was the 25th of Elul. (Rosh Hashanah, on which we mark "the beginning of Your works", is actually the 6th day of creation, on which the world attained the potential for the realization of its purpose, with the creation of the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Rosh Hashanah is therefore the day from which the Jewish calendar begins to count the years of history; the 1st day of creation thus occurred on the 25th of Elul of what is termed -1 from creation.

Tuesday, 26 Elul, 5786 – 8 September, 2026

Creation of Skies (3760 BCE)

Today is the second day of Creation, when G-d created the skies: G-d said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water." G-d made the expanse, and it separated between the water below the expanse and the water above the expanse, and it was so. G-d called the expanse Heaven, and it was evening, and it was morning, a second day. (Genesis 1:6–8)

Wednesday, 27 Elul, 5786 – 9 September, 2026

Creation of Dry Land and Vegetation (3760 BCE)

Today is the third day of Creation, when G-d exposed the dry land and created vegetation:

G-d said, "Let the water that is beneath the heavens gather into one place, and let the dry land appear," and it was so.... G-d saw that it was good. G-d said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, seed-yielding herbs and fruit trees producing fruit according to its kind in which its seed is found, on the earth," and it was so.... G-d saw that it was good. It was evening, and it was morning, a third day. (Genesis 1:9–13)

Thursday, 28 Elul, 5786 – 10 September, 2026

Creation of Celestial Bodies (3760 BCE)

Today is the fourth day of Creation, when G-d created the sun, moon, and stars:

G-d said, "Let there be luminaries in the expanse of the heavens, to separate between the day and night...." and it was so. G-d made the two large luminaries: the large luminary to rule by day and the small luminary to rule at night, and the stars.... G-d saw that it was good. It was evening, and it was morning, a fourth day. (Genesis 1:14–19)

Friday, 29 Elul, 5786 – 11 September, 2026

Creation of Creatures and Birds (3760 BCE)

Today is the fifth day of Creation, when G-d created the animals of the sea and the birds:

G-d said, "Let the waters swarm a swarming of living creatures, and let birds fly over the earth, across the expanse of the heavens." ...G-d saw that it was good. G-d blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters of the seas, and let the birds multiply upon the earth." It was evening, and it was morning, a fifth day. (Genesis 1:20–23)

Saturday, 1 Tishrei, 5787 – 12 September, 2026

Binding of Isaac; Sarah's Passing (1677 BCE)

Abraham's supreme test of faith -- his binding of Isaac in preparation to sacrifice him as per G-d's command -- occurred on the 1st of Tishrei of the year 2084 from creation (1677 BCE), and is recalled each Rosh Hashanah with the sounding of the shofar (ram's horn -- a ram was sacrificed in Isaac's stead when an angel revealed that the command to sacrifice Isaac was but a divine test); the Torah's account of the event is publicly read in the synagogue on the 2nd day of Rosh Hashanah. On the day of Isaac's binding, his mother, Sarah, passed away at age 127, and was subsequently buried in the Machpelah Cave in Hebron.