

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WHAT WOULD WE GAIN FROM THAT MILK AND HONEY THAT GOES TO WASTE ON THE GROUND?

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The Torah regularly praises Eretz Yisroel as *eretx zavav chalay udvash* = “a land (over)flowing with milk and honey”. To the modern ear, this is surely a standard poetic exaggeration, like describing America as “a land whose streets are paved with gold.” Except that in a gold-paved land, gold has no value (and the roadways aren’t so durable), whereas yummy food is delicious even if one has access to infinite quantities, so long as the consumer exercises some restraint.

No one better expresses the modern ear than SHADAL. He assures us (Commentary to Shemot 13:5) that comparable hyperbolic metaphors can be found in Ovid, Euripides et al. So we need not worry that the Torah is being crude or fanciful.

My ear is not wholly modern, however. For one thing, I’ve been exposed to too much Chazal. So I wonder: Why milk, and why honey? Milk-and-honey, or milk and honey, separately? In what sense (over)flowing? Produced by what species?

On the other hand, my ear is too modern to be satisfied with a purely literal interpretation such as appears on Ketubot 111b.

רמי בר יהזקאל איקלע לבני ברק,
חזנה להנהו עיזי דקאכלן תותי תאיני, וקנטיף דובשא מתאיני וחלבא ומיערב בהדי
הדדי, אמר: היינו זבת חלב ודבש.

Rami bar Yechezkel came to Bnei Brak.

He saw those goats eating underneath a fig tree,
and honey was dripping from the figs, and milk was exuding from
the goats,

and they mixed with each other.

He said: That is “*zavat chalav udvash*!”

I am glad to learn that Rami bar Yechezkel translated “milk-and-honey” rather than “milk and honey”, but I don’t think he is teaching me the “pshat” of the verse. In fact, I suspect that his report as well should not be taken literally, and perhaps was just an elaborate way of conveying that his (possibly esoteric) understanding of the metaphor requires that translation. In other words: I don’t think that many or most members of Chazal were that kind of “modern”. With the possible exception of Rabbi Yishmael, they saw no reason to assume that the Torah was written so as to be understood by readers who lacked deep and specific cultural context, however broad their knowledge of great world literature.

Another problem with the literal reading is: How are human beings to collect this milk and honey? This problem drove the 18th century *Hon Ashir* (Commentary to Mishneh Maaser Sheni 5:13) to conclude that ground fertilized by milk and honey must produce better-tasting fruit,

דאי לאו הכי,
מה אנו מרויחין באותו חלב ודבש ההולך לאבוד על הארץ

Because otherwise,

what would we gain from that milk and honey that goes to waste on
the ground?

Seforno to Shemot 3:8 offers a sort of literalist metaphorical reading.

רבת המקנה ורבת המזון,
ערב ומועיל

abundant of flocks and of provender,
sweet/*arev* and healthy/*mo'il*

Milk stands for “flocks”, and honey for “provender”. The first seems reasonable, as abundant lactation indicates not just present dairy but future meat supplies. But I wonder whether “honey” is ever used as a symbol of regular provisions.

I must note that Seforno describes the sin in Eden as a choice of the sweet over the healthy. So perhaps his intent here is to describe the Land of Israel as a super Eden that finally enables us to eat our cake and get our fiber, too.

Rabbeinu Bachya goes full esoteric metaphor.

מה צריך להאריך הכתוב כל כך בשבח העצים והאבנים?

ועוד, ספור השבח במקום הזה למה,

כי העם אשר ברזל באה נפשו,

הוא מיוסר ביטורין ביד אדונים קשה,

הלא די לו שמחה וששון שיבשרו אותו בגאולה, ואפילו על מנת לצאת אל ארץ
תלאובות!

אבל הענין

כי כל השבחים הללו על שם התורה נאמרו:

ארץ טובה ורחבה = ארץ של טובה ושל רחבה:

טובה, שנאמר (משלי ד:ב) כי לקח טוב וגו';

רחבה, שנאמר (תהלים קיט:צו) רחבה מצותך מאד, וכתוב (איוב יא:ט) ורחבה מני
ים;

ארץ זבת חלב ודבש, שנאמר (שיר השירים ד:יא) דבש וחלב וגו',

Why must the Torah be so extensive in praise of the trees and rocks
(of the Land of Israel)?

Also, why is there need to praise the place?!

For a nation whose soul has been put in irons,
and punished by cruel masters,
it would be sufficient joy to be told of coming redemption,
even if only on condition that they exit to an unsatisfying land!

Rather, the meaning is
that all these praises were said with regard to the Torah:
“A land good and expansive” –
“good” as in “for a good takeaway I have given you” (Mishlei 4:2);
“expansive”, as in “Your mitzvot are very expansive” (Tehillim
119:96) . . .
“A land (over)flowing with milk and honey” as it says “milk and
honey under your tongue” (Shir Hashirim 4:11)

His contemporary Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi took exactly the
opposite approach:

אמר יוסף:
חכמי הנוצרים טוענים עליו בהיות עיקר היעודים לנו בתורתנו
אל ארץ זבת חלב ודבש.
והתשובה
חלילה זה אבל הוא הטפל,
ואמנם לא עתה לדבר על לבם מנתינת התורה וידיעת השם עד שיגיעו לחיי
העולם הבא,
כי לבם צר לאין תכלית מקושי העבודה,
גם כולם מלוכלכים בטיט ובצואה
טח מראות עיניהם מהשכיל לבותם.
ויהיה משה כמנגן בין המתים, או כצועק אל הצלמים,
והחלילה לחכמת השם,
לכן תחלת הדברים להציע להם מילי דבדיחותא ודברים מרהיבים לבם,
כל שכן
שהיציאה מהעבודות והשגת התנאי בחיי העולם הזה
הוא בהכרח קודם בזמן להשגת החכמות והשלמות
Said Yosef:

The Christian Sages object against us that the key promise./destiny
of our Torah is

to a land (over)flowing with milk and honey.

The answer is:

G-d forbid, that is a minor matter,
but it was not yet the time to speak persuasively to them of how the
giving of the Torah and knowledge of G-d would lead them to the
life of the World to Come,

because their hearts were infinitely narrowed by the hard labor,
and they were all filthy with clay and excrement,
their eyes too sore to see and their hearts from comprehending,
so that Mosheh would have been as one singing amongst the dead,
or praying to statues,

G-d forbid that the wisdom of Hashem should lead to such.
Therefore his first words to them were such as to cheer them and
expand their hearts.

All the more so this was justified
because leaving enslavement and achieving the necessary
conditions of this world
must always precede achievement of wisdom and perfections.

A fundamental problem with Ibn Caspi's approach is that
Mosheh repeats this description of the Land throughout Torah,

long after the giving of the Torah, for example Devarim 11:9 in
this week's parshah. I am tempted to suggest that Ibn Caspi
thinks that the goal over time was for them to come to
understand the verse as metaphorical.

I don't find any of these approaches fully satisfying. Let me
conclude by asking three questions.

1. We also read in this week's parshah (Devarim 8:8) that Israel
is

אַרְצוֹת חִטָּה וּשְׂעוּרָה וְגִפְתָּה וְתַאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן
אַרְצוֹת שֶׁמֶן וְדִבְשׁ

a land of wheat and barley, and grape and fig and pomegranate;
a land of oil-olives and honey

Why is milk/*chalah* missing from this list? Possibly the honey
mentioned here refers to fruit-honey, and so the entire verse is
vegetarian, whereas “*zavat chalah udvash*” refers specifically to bee-
honey, and therefore exclusively to animal products (although
only implicitly to meat).

2. The verb *zav* in Chumash is used only in this metaphor, and to
describe people involuntarily emitting unappetizing (and
presumably unproductive) bodily fluids. Are these processes of
extrusion so alike that G-d could not find a less-evocative verb
for his praise of the Land?

(In Tehillim *zav* is also used twice to describe what happens when
Mosheh produces water from rocks, and there are a few other
uses in Tanakh.)

3. In the course of a sugya on Talmud Bekhorot 6b-7a, the
Talmud wonders why milk is kosher even from kosher animals –
do we not ban things removed from the living (*eiver min hachai*)?
– and why bee-honey is kosher – do we not say that “what
emerges from the unclean, is unclean” (*hayotzei min hatamei-tamei*)?

In each case the Talmud offers a rational explanation for the
kashrut of the product, and also a position that it can be justified
only by a verse, by Divine decree.

Please email me if you can explain the metaphor as grounded
specifically in the halakhic oddity of milk and bee-honey! Bonus
points for an approach that integrates the verb *zav* as well. I look
forward to hearing from you.

Shabbat shalom!