

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

Honey: Date, Bee, and Ancient Jewish Texts

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



From the Torah through the Talmud, ancient Jewish texts make numerous references to honey. One of the most famous and oft-quoted passages is from the Book of Exodus: "And, I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." (3:8)

A little later in Exodus, as our ancestors move further into the desert, we learn that the manna that God provided the Children of Israel tasted "like wafers made with honey."

For the People of the Book, words are our stock in trade, and the Book of Proverbs confirms the importance of kind ones, likening them to honey: "Pleasant words are as a honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones." (16:24). The Psalmist writes "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (119:103).

But, the most romantic reference to this sweet substance in our texts has to be from Solomon's Song of Songs. "Your lips drip flowing honey, O bride; honey and milk are under your tongue, and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon." (4:11)

Biblical scholars inform us that the honey to which the Tanach refers is generally not the clover honey that we purchase today in the jam aisle at Price Chopper. It is, in fact, a thick syrup made from the fruit of the date palm, which archaeologists believe grew in great numbers throughout the Jordan River valley.

Because it is the source of honey, the date is cited as one of the seven species of the Land of Israel: "... a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive trees and honey;" (Deuteronomy 8:8).

Honey is viewed as such a delicacy that King Jeroboam considers it the perfect house gift when he sends his wife to inquire of the prophet Ahijah what would become of their gravely ill son. He says, "Take ten loaves with you, some cakes and a jar of honey, and go to him. He will tell you what will happen to the boy." (I Kings 14:3)

While date honey is featured much more prominently, bees' honey does figure occasionally in the Tanach. Because it was harder to procure than date honey, it was considered among the finest of rare commodities. It also appears to be associated with very bad temper.

The Book of Samuel recounts the story of Jonathan eating bees' honey he finds in the forest. By doing so, he unknowingly violates an oath made by King Saul to refrain from eating until he has beaten the Philistines. "But Jonathan had not heard that his father had bound the people with the oath, so he reached out the end of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb. He raised his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened." (I Samuel 14:27)

Saul is furious and vows to kill his son for disobeying him. The troops tell the king that if not for the honey, Jonathan would not have had the strength to fight successfully against the Philistines while they were too faint from hunger to fight. Jonathan's life is spared.

In another example of honey's association with anger, the Book of Judges tells that Samson, while on his way to meet the Philistine woman he wants to marry, finds honey inside the skeleton of a lion (14). He devises a riddle to challenge the Philistines, but the young woman divulges the answer, causing Samson to wreak havoc not only on those who had solved the riddle, but on the people of Ashkelon as well.

When the rabbis of the Talmud get involved, they refer specifically to that product of bees with which we are most familiar today. As a result, they make distinction between the two types of honey. Apparently, people are still making vows involving honey at this point, so they rule that, "He who takes a vow to abstain from honey is permitted to eat date honey." (Nedarim 6:9).

Good news for those of us who love sweets: honey is kosher! Yes, despite the fact that it is made by "unclean" insects, the rabbis of the Talmud ruled that honey is

not actually a product of the bee; it is simply stored in its body (Bechorot 7b).

Both date honey and bees' honey are fruit nectar, and therefore kosher.

And, a good thing it is. Jewish tradition has incorporated bees' honey into many of our most cherished rituals. Between Rosh Hashanah and Hoshana Rabba, we dip both challah and apples into honey to symbolize our wishes for a sweet New Year.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, some Jewish communities began the practice of giving children beginning their Jewish studies the aleph-bet covered in honey.

The young ones lick the honey from the letters in order to launch a sweet career in learning Torah.

Proverbs tells us "My son, eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste." (24:13).

On the other hand, a few verses later, we are given sound nutritional, as well as ethical, counsel: "If you have found honey, eat only enough for you, lest you have your fill of it and vomit it (25:16); and "It is not good to eat much honey, nor is it glorious to seek one's own glory." (25:27)

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She recently launched the blog "Food for Thought," on her website at carol-goodmankaufman.com. She invites visits and comments.



Samuel: Jonathan finds bees' honey in the forest



Kings: King Jeroboam's wife brings honey, the perfect house gift, to the prophet Ahijah



Solomon's Song: 'Your lips drip flowing honey, O bride'

Date Honey

Makes about 1½ cups

The caution in Proverbs to avoid overindulging in honey is well taken, but it would be a very bland life indeed if we were not to make use of this wonderful syrup at least once in a while. Here is a recipe for date honey similar to what you would have found in the days of the Torah, when date palms carpeted the Jordan River valley and contemporary cooks had an abundance of the luscious fruits with which to experiment.

Ingredients

3 cups boiling water
1/2 pound pitted Medjool dates
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon (optional)

Directions

- In a bowl, pour one cup boiling water over dates and soak twenty minutes.
- Mash dates.
- Pour remaining two cups water over dates. Let stand five minutes.
- Drain through a colander set over a large bowl.
- Strain again through a fine-mesh sieve, pressing mixture with a wooden spoon to extract as much of the liquid as possible.
- Discard pulp. Pour liquid into a large, non-aluminum saucepan.
- Cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the syrup reduces to the consistency of honey, about forty to forty-five minutes
- Let cool.
- Store in a sealed glass jar in the refrigerator.

Use as a spread by itself, or for a special treat, blend with equal amounts of tehina for a truly decadent halvah spread.



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