

whenever possible. In this prohibition, the Torah seeks to moderate our desires, refine our behavior, and sensitize us to cruelty, so that we can avoid it in all areas of our lives.

We are all made of the same stuff, as Menocchio noted, and we inevitably rot and decay, like all living creatures. Yet, according to Menocchio—and according to the Book of Job—that “stuff” can be compared to milk. As Job 10:10-11 has it: “Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?” We are made, then, out of mother’s milk: a sign that all life is a blessing.

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משפטים תש”ף



## Mother’s Milk

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In 1976 the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg published a book called *The Cheese and the Worms*, an account and analysis of a 16th-century Inquisition trial. The defendant in this trial was a miller from the Friuli region of Italy named Menocchio. Among the heresies that he stood accused of was his apparent claim that the world came into existence through a process of putrefaction. Here are his words at the trial as Ginzburg reports them:

Menocchio said:

I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed—just as cheese is made out of milk—and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels there was also God, he too having been created out of that mass at the same time . . .

Aside from the Gnostic influence (positing the existence of an inferior divine being as well as a more remote superior God), the truly creative bit of cosmology here is the idea that the world curdled itself into existence. He describes the primordial chaos—the *tohu vavohu* of Genesis 1—as akin to milk before the cheese-making process. Despite the strangeness of the description, and its fantastical imaginings, I do think there is an inspiring insight contained within his description of his personal cosmology.

It is undoubtedly true that we associate milk with motherhood and new life. It is no great leap to imagine that the world originates in something like milk. Indeed, this concept may stand behind Exod. 23:19, a verse we read in this week's Torah reading, Parashat Mishpatim:

The choice first fruits of your soil you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

The identical verse appears as Exod. 34:26. These verses seem to associate the prohibition on cooking a young animal in milk with the first fruits, leading us to ask what sort of connection exists between the harvest offering of thanksgiving, on the one hand, and the Torah's warning against cooking a kid in milk, on the other. (The third time that the provision regarding meat and milk appears in the Torah, Deut. 14:21, it is not associated with the harvest offering, but with holiness generally.)

The Torah presents these two verses in Exodus in the context of sacrificial laws relating to the three pilgrimage festivals. Perhaps the prohibition on cooking flesh in milk is designed to prevent the pious Israelite from offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving in this manner. The Torah may be asserting that such an offering not only fails as a pious act, but actually stands in conflict with the Torah's values. Indeed, in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains the prohibition on cooking milk and meat as probably deriving from the existence of a Canaanite sacrifice that was brought as a thanksgiving offering at a festival:

Meat boiled in milk is undoubtedly gross food, and makes overfull; but I think that most probably it is also prohibited because it is somehow connected with idolatry, forming perhaps part of the service, or being used on some festival of the heathen. I find a support for this view in the circumstance that the Law mentions the prohibition twice after the commandment given concerning the festivals: "Three times in the year all thy males shall appear before the Lord God" (Exod. 23:77), as if to say, "When you come before me on your

festivals, do not seethe your food in the manner as the heathen used to do." (III:48; transl. M. Friedlander)

But is the objection only to idolatry? Or is there something that the Torah finds more repellent in an offering of the young cooked in mother's milk? The association of mother's milk with new life and creation at the moment of harvest is powerful symbolism. But using that symbol of life as the instrument that ensures the young animal's consumption strikes me as cruel. Milk gives us life; to use it this way is hard-hearted.

As Samuel ben Meir (Troyes, c. 1085–c. 1158) writes in his commentary on Exod. 23:19:

It is something distasteful, revolting, a rapacious thing, to consume the mother's milk together with the young animal that this milk was intended to nourish. We find a parallel in the legislation not to slaughter mother animal and her young on the same day, as well as the prohibition not to take the young chicks while the mother bird is present. (Lev. 22:25 and Deut. 22:6-7) The Torah teaches you these matters as a matter of elementary culture, i.e. respecting life. (transl. based on E. Munk, *HaChut Hameshulash*)

To be perfectly clear, this prohibition seems to have both a sacrificial and an ethical element. In the Canaanites' sacrificial culture, which Deuteronomy repeatedly worries will be attractive to the Israelites, offering a kid with mother's milk was perhaps not only unremarkable, but seen as pious and encouraged. The Torah views sacrifice presented in this manner as abhorrent. However, in clinging to the rabbinic dictum that our tables are supposed to be like altars, (BT Hagigah 27a) it is clear that the uncaring cruelty our Sages saw in combining milk with meat would be inappropriate at any Jewish table.

Ultimately, I prefer to view this as another one of the Torah's concessions to our desire. The act of killing animals for food is undoubtedly morally tainted. But the Torah seems to think that our desires for meat will be so strong that it cannot prohibit such food. However, it is a basic tenet of the Torah's values that we are to be kind, and caring, and avoid cruelty