



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 3, 2015
Shabbat Chol HaMoed

**Pastrami, Cream Cheese,
Paganism & Messiah:
A Sukkot Extravaganza**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5776 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What’s the common denominator between pastrami, cream cheese, paganism, and the Messiah?

One word: Sukkot.

The conclusion of today’s Sukkot Torah reading speaks about the prohibition of mixing milk and meat. What connection does this have with Sukkot?

The answer provides us with a formula to deal with one of the most fundamental challenges in life. All healthy structures are built on a balance between boundaries and confluence. This is especially true for Judaism. The big question is how do we find the proper balance between the two?

For example: We are not allowed to mix milk and meat. Yet, we are commanded to mix the Four Kinds (the palm frond, the willow and myrtle branches, and the citron), and unite them under one sukkah. Why?

Furthermore, the mystics teach that mixing milk and meat (though forbidden now) will be permitted when the Messiah comes. What’s this all about?

To begin with, the pagans would mix milk and meat during the ingathering of crops, which coincides with Sukkot, the harvest festival of booths.

What is the difference between the pagan version and the Jewish version of mixing, mingling and uniting?

The answer is what this sermon is all about.

It also includes a witty Chassidic story about how mixing milk and meat saved a woman's life, wrapping this sermon up in a beautiful and unified bundle.

Mix well before drinking.

PASTRAMI, CREAM CHEESE, PAGANISM & MESSIAH: A SUKKOT EXTRAVAGANZA

1. Jewish Mainstays

Good Yom Tov! Chag samayach!

Eastern European Jews brought two mainstays (at least) to the United States: pastrami and bagels.

Why do I mention this on Sukkot?

Because there is a connection, of course. Let's find out.

2. Pastrami

New York pastrami is generally made from the navel end of the brisket. It is cured in brine, coated with a mix of spices such as garlic, coriander, black pepper, paprika, cloves, allspice and mustard seed, and then smoked. Finally, the meat is steamed until the connective tissues break down into gelatin.

The name pastrami comes from Romanian *pastrama*, which in turn comes from Greek, itself borrowed from Turkish. *Pastrima* in Turkish means "pressed meat."

Romanian Jews immigrated to New York as early as 1872. Among Jewish Romanians, goose breasts were commonly made into pastrami because they were inexpensive. Beef navels were cheaper than goose meat in America, so the Romanian Jews in America adapted their recipe and began to make the cheaper alternative: beef pastrami.

New York's Sussman Volk is generally credited with producing the first pastrami sandwich in the US in 1887. Volk, a kosher butcher and New York immigrant from Lithuania, claimed he got the recipe from a Romanian friend in exchange for storing the friend's luggage. According to his descendant, Patricia Volk, Volk prepared pastrami according to the recipe and served it on sandwiches out of his butcher shop. The sandwich was so popular that Volk converted the butcher shop into a restaurant and went on to sell many a pastrami sandwich.

3. Bagels

Bagels were brought to the United States by immigrant Polish-Jews, with a thriving business developing in New York City that was controlled for decades by the Bagel Bakers Local 338, which had contracts with nearly all bagel bakeries in and around the city for its workers. Back then the bagels were prepared by hand, and they became so popular they swept the entirety of North America. The latter had a great deal to do with the efforts of bagel baker Harry Lender, his son, Murray Lender. Murray also invented the pre-sliced bagel.

In modern times, Canadian-American and NASA astronaut Gregory Chamitoff is the first person known to have taken a batch of bagels into space on his 2008 Space Shuttle mission. His shipment consisted of 18 sesame seed Montreal-style bagels, produced at the famous Fairmount Bagel bakery in Montreal; Chamitoff was born in Montreal to members of the city's Russian Jewish community and is related to the Shlafman family that owns the bakery.

The most common smear on bagels is cream cheese.

So now: What in heaven's name does cream cheese and pastrami have to do with Shabbat Chol Hamoed Sukkot?

Okay, okay ... we are getting there.

4. Milk & Meat

The Torah portion we just read describes the three pilgrimage festivals in agricultural terms: the festival of spring (Passover), the festival at first harvest (Shavuot), and the festival at the time of ingathering (Sukkot).

Then the Torah reading concludes with something seemingly out of place and totally disconnected from the theme:

*You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk.*¹

This prohibition actually appears three times in the Torah² and from it we deduce that we cannot mix milk and meat.³

In other words, you can have pastrami on a bagel, you can have cream cheese on a bagel, but you cannot have pastrami and cream cheese on a bagel together.

As a matter of fact, because this prohibition is repeated three times, the rabbis rule that you cannot eat milk and meat, you cannot cook milk and meat, and you cannot even derive pleasure/profit from a mixture of milk and meat (like say sell a cheese burger).

Everything in the Torah is exact and precise. So why is the prohibition of mixing milk and meat mentioned in today's Torah reading, in relation to the festivals in general and the festival of Sukkot in particular?

What's the connection? There appears to be no obvious one.

The issue becomes even more confusing when we realize that Sukkot is a holiday that celebrates the fusion of opposites. This is the holiday when the Four Kinds (the palm frond, the willow and myrtle branches, and the citron) are mixed, as well as the four distinct personalities of Jews they represent. We are all combined and united under one sukkah.

Yet, the prohibition against mixing milk and meat is the opposite of combining and uniting. So what then is the connection with Sukkot, which is all about mixing different kinds in one bundle and under one sukkah? Why is this prohibition mentioned at this very time?

¹ Exodus 34:23-24, 26.

² Exodus *ibid*; Exodus 23:19; Deuteronomy 14:21.

³ See Chulin 115b; Rashi on the verse in Exodus, *ibid*.

5. The Commentators Explain

Maimonides⁴ asserts that an ancient pagan ritual – which involved the cooking and consumption of meat and milk – is the source of the prohibition of milk and meat.

Sforno⁵ suggests that the purpose of this pagan practice was to elicit a blessing for plentiful crops or flocks. The mitzvah of not cooking milk and meat together, then, intends to distance the Jewish people from this idolatrous behavior.

The Abarbanel⁶ elaborates on this idea: The pagan and idolatrous farmers, shepherds and field-workers would gather during the harvest and celebrate that year's crops by worshipping their pagan gods. One of their rituals was to cook kid goats in goat milk for this they believed is what their deities enjoyed. Abarbanel, who was from Spain, writes that even in his times the Spanish shepherds would gather twice a year and they would cook milk and meat together, and that a goat cooked in milk was a particular delicacy.

Thus, Sukkot, the time of ingathering of the crops, when pagans and idol worshippers would mix milk and meat and perform unkosher acts, is the most opportune time to read and study the laws of not mixing milk and meat together.

But why indeed is this act prohibited? How does the Jewish experience of milk and meat differ from the pagan, and how does the Jewish celebration of agricultural ingathering differ from that of the idol-worshipper?

And, again: Why on Sukkot are some mixtures celebrated (the Four Kinds in one bundle; different Jews in a sukkah) while others are prohibited?

⁴Moreh Nevuchim, part III, ch. 48.

⁵Exodus 23:19.

⁶Exodus ibid.

This question is not a trivial one. It addresses one of the most fundamental challenges in life. All healthy structures are built on a balance between boundaries and confluence. This is especially true for Judaism. The big question is how do we find the proper balance between the two?

The Sukkot connection to not mixing milk and meat provides the answer.

6. The Mystics Reveal the Secret

The mystics reveal the inner secret of milk and meat, as two forces in nature that require strict boundaries to maintain the balance of existence⁷

Milk and meat come from the same source -- an animal (indeed, the Torah states *You shall not cook a kid in its mother's milk*, prohibiting taking the kid and the milk from the same mother). However, milk and meat have diametrically opposing energies.

If you think about it, pastrami and cream cheese can be easily traced back to the same source in the animal, but then when they develop into their own entities – pastrami is one sort of unique energy and cream cheese is its polar opposite.

Meat, red and rich, is representative of the aggressive energy of *gevurah*, strictness and discipline. Milk on the other hand, soft and delicate (and white), represents the gentle energy of *chessed*, nurturing and love.

Indeed, we nurture newborn children on milk not meat. Meat is tough, while milk is subtle; meat is complex while milk is simple. Cream cheese is smooth, easy to smear, while pastrami is firm and dense, difficult to digest.

⁷ See Zohar II 125a. Rekanti to Exodus *ibid*, cited by the Shaloh (Torah She'biktav 321a). Rabbeinu Bechaye to Exodus *ibid*. For more sources see Likkutei Sichot vol. 29, p. 122 note 13.

Because milk and meat are two diametrically opposing energies – milk is *chessed* and meat is *gevurah* – the Torah prohibits their mingling, in order to maintain the proper balance between these two forces in nature.

But this seems counterintuitive to the foundational principle of unity and integration, which is the central tenet of Judaism, as elucidated by the mystics.⁸

Shalom, peace, is the harmony of opposites. Indeed, *tiferet*, meaning beauty/harmony, is all about integrating and uniting *chessed* and *gevurah* together. Why then is it prohibited to mix milk and meat? Wouldn't the mixing of the two – the bridging of opposites – be an act of ultimate unity, not unlike the mingling and binding of the four species on Sukkot?

7. Milk and Meat and Messiah

Rabbeinu Bechaye⁹ states that, at their source in the upper realms, milk and meat are one. Only when they evolve and descend into this world, and are separated into their own distinct entities, are they divided and prohibited from being mixed.

Continues Rabbeinu Bechaye:

In the time of the Messiah, of the Redemption, when the higher source of all things will be revealed, the mixing of milk and meat will no longer be prohibited, and it will be one hundred percent kosher.¹⁰

Today, however, when the source is not revealed, it is one hundred percent *treif* to mix milk and meat.

This piece of information – that at the time of Redemption, when the source of everything will be revealed, mixing milk and meat will be kosher – could perhaps answer all of our questions, namely:

⁹ To Exodus 23:19.

¹⁰ As an aside, this is one of the reasons given that Abraham served the angels who visited him both milk and meat: in the source in heaven, where angels reside, milk and meat are one.

- What's the connection between Sukkot and not mixing milk and meat?
- Why is mixing the Four Kinds a mitzvah but mixing milk and meat a sin?
- How does paganism factor into this prohibition?

8. Pagan vs. Jewish Unity

There is one way and only one way to mix opposites, to bind together different types of people and different types of energy – through *bittul*, humility and “self-nullification.”¹¹ When both *chessed* and *gevurah* suspend themselves for a higher purpose then and only then can they become one. But if they remain bound to their egotistical selves, they can never unite as one entity.

This is the function of all healthy boundaries and borders: to create a humble margin between opposites and different entities, with each entity humbly recognizing its own limits and perimeters, and respecting the value of the other entity. Each entity recognizes that it does not control and dominate, each remains in its own domain and does not cross the line into another's domain.

Only once different and opposing entities achieve total *bittul*, only then can they fuse into a seamless whole: harmony within diversity.

Taking the Four Kinds and binding them together and making a blessing on them under one common roof sublimates each of the Four Kinds by suspending their egos and making them greater than themselves.

When Jews gather in a sukkah, their selfish bodies become secondary and their selfless souls become primary. For this reason and this reason alone they can mix, mingle, unite and bond as one.

¹¹ See Likkutei Sichot *ibid*.

In times of exile and spiritual displacement, when their higher source is concealed, milk and meat (*chessed* and *gevurah*) remain coarse and self-absorbed – strong individual identities. Milk is driven by *chessed*, meat is governed by *gevurah* and that's just how their respective natures remain.

In such a dissonant reality, firm boundaries must be maintained between the two. Mixing them together is destructive, because as they remain intense independent entities, they counteract each other and cancel each other out. Mixing them is toxic. For this reason we are prohibited from mixing milk and meat – *chessed* and *gevurah* – together until a time when they become so refined that God reveals their one source and they are humbled, sublimated into joining as one.

Paganism/idolatry is not merely the absence of God. Idolatry is thinking that you can act like God and defy the natural divine-mandated boundaries of existence, by mixing opposite things when, in fact, it is poisonous to do so. The idolaters, instead of humbling themselves, believed that they could mix opposing energies even when God Himself said it was not possible.

Idolatry is believing there are no boundaries. It destroys the timeless boundaries between energies in order to do what one wants to do. Instead of humbly respecting the borders God placed into existence, the idolater, driven by self-interest, arrogantly argues that everything comes from God so surely everything is divine and everything may be mixed. In truth, however, also the parameters of existence – the boundaries between day and night, between land and sea, between the windpipe and the food-pipe – were set in place by God to maintain a healthy equilibrium, and crossing these lines is destructive. This pagan type of “unity” – ignoring the natural diversity of existence – only leads to chaos and hurt.

Sukkot – when we unite under one common sukkah, and when we combine all the different kinds of vegetation and all the different kinds of Jews in one bond – is precisely the time when we must learn that true unity is not the absence of boundaries but the embracing of them. True unity does not mean there is no right and no left, no wrong and no right, no *milchig* and no *fleishing*; rather, true unity is humbly knowing exactly what to mix and knowing exactly what not to mix, as mandated by God.

Only this type of unity will lead to the Redemption wherein the one source of everything will be revealed, and we will be able to experience the ultimate healthy unity.

There is a beautiful story that conveys this idea.

9. Sukkot And Jewish Oneness (Story)

Rabbi Baruch Neustadter, a well-known Talmudic scholar, was a follower of Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. He often traveled to Lizhensk in order to spend Shabbat with the revered Rebbe.

One Saturday night, as Rabbi Baruch was bidding the Rebbe farewell, the Rebbe said to him as follows: "Know that every mitzvah in the Torah makes us holy. For instance, we are forbidden to eat meat that was cooked together with milk. A Jew who keeps this mitzvah becomes pure to such an extent that his organs cannot digest this combination. If milk and meat were to enter his throat together, he would not be able to swallow, but would instantly cough them up."

After these words and the Rebbe's final blessing, Rabbi Baruch took his leave. But he was puzzled. Why, of all topics, did the Rebbe choose to speak about milk and meat just as he was departing? He pondered this for a while, but could not come up with an answer, so he let his mind turn to other matters as he journeyed home.

A few weeks passed. One night, Rabbi Baruch was in the study hall, learning Torah. Suddenly one of his children burst in. "Tatte, come quickly!" the child exclaimed breathlessly, grabbing his father's hand. "Mama was eating supper and a piece of meat got stuck in her throat! She can't breathe! Hurry!"

The two ran home. Rabbi Baruch found his house full of neighbors trying all sorts of methods, remedies and tricks to save his wife. The poor woman was lying on a bed, her face blue and her eyes popping, struggling to breathe as she attempted to dislodge the meat that was obstructing her airway. But nothing seemed to help. A doctor had been summoned as well, and he arrived on the heels of Rabbi Baruch, but he was no more successful than the rest in helping the choking woman.

“If only I could ask the Rebbe in Lizhensk to pray for her!” Rabbi Baruch thought desperately. And then it struck him like lightning! The Rebbe’s cryptic message during his last visit lit up his mind, and he knew just what to do.

Rabbi Baruch quickly prepared a glass of hot milk. Prying his wife’s mouth open wide, he poured some of the beverage inside. And just as he hoped would happen, the moment the hot milk touched the meat that was stuck in her throat, his wife began to cough and retch. It only took a moment for the meat to be dislodged.

The Rebbe was right: the body of a kosher-observant Jew could not digest that which is forbidden. Within a very short time his wife was breathing freely and was completely recovered.

Rabbi Baruch hastened to Lizhensk to thank the Rebbe for his advice. But the Rebbe Elimelech only smiled...¹²

10. Mix Humbly (Conclusion)

There is a profound life lesson in this story, one that will enhance our own lives, our relationships, our connection with our families, with each other, as well as our connection with God.

Unity, mixing, mingling and bonding – all themes of Sukkot every year, but especially this year, which is *Shnat Hakhel* (a year of assembly and gathering) – happens in two forms: sometimes things are united and completed when they are mixed (like the Four Kinds) and sometimes things are united and completed when they are not mixed (like milk and meat today).

Sometimes in our relationships we are closest when we come together (Four Kinds) and sometimes we are closest when we give each other space (milk and meat, *chessed* and *gevurah*). Sometimes you tell your children you love them, and sometimes you give them space to grow without mixing in and micro-managing their lives.

¹² <https://ascentofsafed.com/cgi-bin/ascent.cgi?Name=746-25>.

As we sit in the sukkah, united as one, may we remember that, in the world in which we live, it is healthy and holy to separate between right and left, between light and dark, and between the nurturing aspects of life (milk) and those that are more complex (meat).

May our celebration of binding of the Four Kinds (while not mixing milk and meat) lead us to a reality when indeed the source of all things will be revealed for all to see with their eyes of flesh and blood. And then surely the disciplined *gevurah* of pastrami and loving *chesed* of cream cheese will be more delicious than ever before – all under the cosmic sukkah with the coming of *Moshiach*. Amen!

Happy Sukkot!