

THE SWEETNESS OF CHESHVAN

Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan • 5787

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The honey has been put away

Thank you to our anonymous sponsor for bringing us together for this Rosh Chodesh breakfast.

During Tishrei, honey was part of our table. We dipped into honey and asked Hashem for a sweet year. But now Tishrei is over. We have put the honey away and returned to our regular routine.

There is something surprising about Cheshvan. The Bnei Yissaschar explains that each month corresponds to a particular arrangement of the four letters of Hashem's Name. Cheshvan's arrangement is vav-heh-heh-yud. [1]

ו — ה — ה — י

Where do those letters come from? From the beginnings of four consecutive words spanning two pesukim in Parshas Ki Savo. And the first of those words is **u'devash—“and honey.”**

**We have put the honey away.
Yet Cheshvan's hint begins with honey!**

Before we explain that, let us look at the pesukim in their setting—and ask the two questions that this hint raises.

At the end of the declaration concerning maaser, we ask Hashem to look down from His holy dwelling, bless His people Israel, and bless the land He has given us. The pasuk concludes:

כִּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעַת לַאֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ

“As You swore to our forefathers—a land flowing with milk and honey.” The next pasuk begins:

הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְצַוְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים

“This day Hashem your God commands you to carry out these statutes and laws.” It continues by calling on us to observe them with all our heart and soul. [2]

The four consecutive words are **u’devash, hayom, hazeh, Hashem**. Their opening letters give us vav-heh-heh-yud. Honey appears at the end of one pasuk; the next speaks of Hashem commanding us to observe His statutes and laws.

Two questions we have to ask

First: what does honey have to do with Cheshvan? Honey belongs at our Tishrei table. We have already stopped dipping into it. Why does the hint for Cheshvan begin with honey, just when we have put it away?

Second: where is the sweetness in a month without Yom Tovim? Tishrei gave us the shofar, Yom Kippur, the sukkah, the arba minim, and the dancing of Simchas Torah. Each brought its own sweetness. Cheshvan has none of those Yom Tovim. What sweetness are we supposed to find now?

**Why honey after we have stopped using it?
Where is sweetness without the Yom Tovim?**

The Tzvi LaTzaddik's answer

The Tzvi LaTzaddik, the earlier Bluzhever Rebbe, explains that a Jew can miss the sweetness of Tishrei's many mitzvos. Yet through engaging in Torah and learning its laws in Cheshvan, we can continue to experience that sweetness. He also reads metzavcha, "commands you," as a hint to attachment and companionship with Hashem. [3]

Now we can answer both questions. The honey on our table has been put away, but the sweetness can continue. The special mitzvos of Tishrei have passed, but learning Torah gives us a way to carry their sweetness into the ordinary days of Cheshvan.

The honey continues—in our Torah learning.

The month's name points to Torah

There is a teaching from the Shaar Yissaschar: written with two vavs, Marcheshvan has the numerical value 610. Add the kolel—one for the word as a whole—and the total is 611, the numerical value of Torah. [4]

מרחשוון + הכולל = תורה

The Shaar Yissaschar connects this hint to the beginning of winter, with its longer nights: now is the time to establish and increase our regular Torah learning. After the intensity of Tishrei, Cheshvan offers time to settle into learning.

The hint tells us what to do with this month: sit down and learn. Give Torah a regular place in the week. That is where Cheshvan's sweetness can be found.

But why is Torah sweet?

That leaves us with one more question. We understand that honey is sweet; we taste it. But what makes Torah sweet? What is a person receiving when he sits down to learn?

The Tanya, in chapter five, explains that when we understand Torah, our minds grasp Hashem's wisdom, and that wisdom is held within our minds. He describes Torah as nourishment for the soul. [5]

That helps us understand its sweetness. A difficult question becomes clear. Two ideas that seemed unrelated suddenly fit together. We begin to understand what Hashem wants of us. There is satisfaction in the understanding itself, and there is something deeper: we are connecting with Hashem through His wisdom.

Torah gives both the mind and the neshamah something to receive. Its wisdom can nourish us as we work to understand it.

The Yanov Torah: one panel at a time

There is a remarkable account behind a scroll known as the Yanov Torah. Its history was preserved and retold by Rabbi Erwin Herman. The following follows published accounts of that history. [6-7]

In the Janowska camp near Lvov, Jewish prisoners suffered hunger, exhaustion, and illness. Occasionally, small groups were permitted to visit the city. They returned with provisions, much of which the guards took.

During one visit, the prisoners described another desperate need: Torah to sustain them. The Jews of Lvov feared the consequences of bringing a scroll into the camp. One prisoner, identified in Herman's account as Moshe the Tailor, proposed recovering separate parchment panels from damaged scrolls buried in the cemetery.

The prisoners wrapped the panels around their bodies beneath their clothing and smuggled them back. Inside, they hid them under floorboards, in mattresses, and inside pipes. They brought them out one panel at a time, keeping Torah learning alive. [6]

**One panel at a time,
they kept Torah learning alive.**

“That’s my Torah”

A later published account names another participant: Ludovic Wurmfeld, a deaf Jewish prisoner. According to this account, the guards underestimated him because he was deaf and allowed him to leave the camp regularly. He returned carrying Torah panels around his legs and sewn into his jacket.

After the war, surviving fragments were assembled into a scroll. Eventually, it reached America. Decades later, Rabbi Herman brought it to Temple Beth Solomon of the Deaf in Los Angeles.

While Herman was speaking, a man rose and approached the scroll. In sign language, he repeated: **“That’s my Torah. That’s my Torah.”**

It was Ludovic Wurmfeld. He lived to see the panels he had helped carry into the camp joined together again in a synagogue. [7]

The scroll carries a story of Jews reaching for Torah when so much had been taken from them. Their determination invites us to think about what Torah can give a person: meaning, spiritual nourishment, and a connection with Hashem that reaches into the hardest circumstances.

Connoisseurs of sweetness

We have to become connoisseurs of sweetness. Sweetness is something the mind can taste, too. A person who appreciates a fine food learns to notice its flavor. We can learn to recognize the pleasure of understanding a piece of Torah.

**The palate tastes honey.
The mind tastes understanding.
The neshamah tastes closeness to Hashem.**

After a busy day, a question in the shiur catches our attention. We listen, think, ask, and begin to understand. That understanding nourishes us, and we carry it home.

Sometimes learning takes work before it becomes enjoyable. We may need a clear explanation, a suitable sefer, or a chavrusa who helps us work through the words. The satisfaction often comes as the meaning unfolds.

Give the learning time and attention. Work through a question until you understand. A regular time to learn makes room for that sweetness to grow.

Now is the time to sit down and learn

This is a practical invitation for Cheshvan. Choose a learning time that belongs in your week. Join a shiur. Arrange a chavrusa. Return to the sefer you have been meaning to finish. Give your mind and your neshamah something nourishing every day.

The Tzvi LaTzaddik teaches that the sweetness of Tishrei can continue through Torah. The Shaar Yissaschar points us toward the regular learning of the winter months. Together, they give us a direction for this new month.

We have danced with the Torah. Now it is time to open it.

Cheshvan may have no Yom Tovim, but it has Torah. We can sit down, open a sefer, and get our learning done. And there, in the learning itself, we can discover the honey.

If you want to know whether your Torah is sweet, ask yourself: **Am I enjoying this learning?** If I am enjoying this learning, then it is sweet. If I am not enjoying this learning, then it is not sweet.

Sources & further reading

1. Bnei Yissaschar

Maamarei Chodesh Marcheshvan, maamar 1, section 1: the month's arrangement of the Divine Name and the initial letters across Devarim 26:15-16.

2. Devarim 26:15-16

The declaration concerning maaser and the command to observe Hashem's statutes and laws.

3. Tzvi LaTzaddik

Moadim, Cheshvan, maamar 1, section 2; see also section 3.

4. Shaar Yissaschar

Cheshvan, section 5. Marcheshvan, spelled with two vavs, equals 610; with the kolel, it equals 611, the numerical value of Torah.

5. Tanya, Likutei Amarim, chapter 5

Torah as nourishment for the soul and the union of the intellect with Hashem's wisdom and will.

6. The Yanov Torah: Herman's account

Donald H. Harrison, "Saga of Yanov Torah recounted at Yom Hashaoh rites," San Diego Jewish Press-Heritage, May 9, 1997. Rabbi Erwin Herman's retelling of the scroll's history.

7. Ludovic Wurmfeld and the reunion

Joel Simonds, "The Yanov Torah and Our Fragile Faith," HUC-JIR, The Chronicle, issue 72 (2009), printed pages 48-49. See also "Ogden Jewish congregation sees Torah from Poland that survived WWII horrors," Jewish Deaf Community Center, April 26, 2010.

Harrison's report • 1997

The Chronicle • printed pages 48-49