



Rabbi David Silverberg  
Parashat Ki Tissa  
Lo Tevashel Gedi Be Chalev Imo

In Parashat Ki-Tisa, the Torah reiterates the prohibition of *basar be-chalav* – cooking or eating meat with milk: “*lo tevashel gedi ba-chalev imo*” (“Do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk” – 34:26). This prohibition was first introduced earlier in Sefer Shemot, in Parashat Mishpatim (23:19), and appears for a third time in Sefer Devarim (14:21).

Maimonides addresses the reason behind this prohibition in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:48), and initially ascribes this prohibition to the unhealthful effects of eating *basar be-chalav*: “Meat boiled in milk is undoubtedly gross food, and makes overfull.” This is consistent with Maimonides’ earlier remarks in that chapter, where he puts forth the controversial theory that the Torah’s dietary code relates (at least in part) to health concerns: “I maintain that the food which is forbidden by the Law is unwholesome.” The obvious flaw in this approach, however, is that the Torah forbids not only partaking of meat with milk, but the act of cooking meat with milk. If the prohibition related only to the poor quality of the food, there would be little reason for the Torah to prohibit even the act of cooking.

Thereafter, Maimonides speculates that preparing meat with milk was perhaps associated with some pagan ritual:

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 heathens... This I consider the best reason for the prohibition; but as far as I have seen in the books on Sabeian rites, nothing is mentioned of this custom.

Maimonides concedes that he has found no historical evidence to substantiate his conjecture regarding the association between *basar be-chalav* and idolatry. He does, however, draw support from the fact that both in Parashat Mishpatim and in Parashat Ki-Tisa, the prohibition appears in the context of the festival observances. This contextual association between *basar be-chalav* and the festival celebrations may reinforce the notion that cooking meat with milk was a pagan ritual, and the Torah therefore admonished *Benei Yisrael* not to imitate pagan rites on their religious holidays. In Maimonides’ words, “...as if to say, ‘When you come before Me on your festivals, do not seethe your food in the manner as the heathens used to do’.”

A number of recent writers (see, for example, Rav Menachem Kasher’s *Torah Sheleima*, vol. 19, appendix 21) noted that archaeological findings have proven Maimonides’ theory concerning *basar be-chalav*. The Ras Shamra tablets, unearthed in Northern Syria in 1928, contain a Ugaritic inscription that describes, among other things, pagan rituals, including the boiling of a goat in its mother’s milk, which was believed to

bring agricultural success. Rav Aharon Adler

([http://www.afyba.org/parsha\\_print.asp?parashald=194&archive=yes](http://www.afyba.org/parsha_print.asp?parashald=194&archive=yes)) noted that the agricultural aspect of this ritual helps explain why the Torah – both in Parashat Mishpatim and in Parashat Ki-Tisa – presents the *basar be-chalav* prohibition together with the obligation of *bikkurim* (first fruits): “You shall bring the first of the fruits that ripen in your land to the house of the Lord your God; do not cook a kid in its mother’s milk.” We are to beseech God for agricultural prosperity by bringing the first fruits to the Temple as an offering to the *kohanim*, God’s attendants, thereby demonstrating our awareness of His unlimited control over the earth and its produce. Rather than resorting to the futile, superstitious rituals practiced by the pagans, we are to fulfill God’s commands as outlined in the Torah and thereby earn His blessings of prosperity and success.