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Re’eh:

Not Cooking a Kid in Its Mother's Milk:

Pagan Ritual, Compassion, or Covenantal Discipline?

The prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother’s milk appears three times in the Torah (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21), a repetition that already suggests its significance. Yet despite its prominence, the Torah offers no explanation for the commandment. Classical commentators and modern scholars have proposed markedly different understandings of its rationale, while exegetes have also debated whether its plain meaning coincides with the halakhic interpretation preserved by the Oral Law.

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:48), Rambam proposes that the prohibition originated as a rejection of pagan agricultural ritual. Since the command appears in Exodus immediately following the laws of *bikkurim* (bringing the first fruits to the Temple), Rambam conjectures that boiling a kid in its mother’s milk formed part of an idolatrous fertility ceremony associated with harvest celebrations. Abarbanel and Sforno adopt similar approaches.

Remarkably, Rambam anticipated what many scholars later believed had been discovered. In 1929, excavations at Ras Shamra uncovered the Ugaritic texts, including a fragment reconstructed as *tb[h g] bhlb annh bhmat*, translated by many as, “Cook a kid in milk, a lamb in butter.” This reconstruction was widely accepted and was heralded as striking confirmation of Rambam’s hypothesis.

By the 1970s, however, scholars returned to the original fragment and challenged the reconstruction. The text is badly damaged, and the restoration was shown to be speculative. K. Lawson Younger Jr., in *The Context of Scripture* III, translates the preserved portion instead as “Coriander in milk, mint in butter.”

Jacob Milgrom (*Anchor Bible*) sharply criticized the earlier interpretation: “In sum, the Ugaritic text in question is a broken one, its suggested reconstruction is palpably wrong, its clearer portion has been misconstrued, and a key word of the biblical prohibition, ‘mother,’ is not there. In recent memory, nothing matches this example of the hazards of interpreting broken texts on the basis of a purported biblical echo.”

Nevertheless, the collapse of the Ugaritic evidence does not necessarily invalidate Rambam’s theory. Even if such a ritual were explicitly attested, that would not prove that the Torah’s rationale is anti-pagan. Conversely, the absence of corroborating evidence does not disprove Rambam’s interpretation. A ritual may once have existed without leaving surviving textual evidence, or future discoveries may yet vindicate his conjecture.

Other commentators sought a more ethical explanation. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban understand the command as part of a larger pattern of laws designed to cultivate compassion toward animals. They compare it to the prohibitions against slaughtering an animal and its offspring on the same day (Leviticus 22:28), sacrificing an animal during its first week of life (Leviticus 22:27; Exodus 22:29), and taking a mother bird together with its young (Deuteronomy 22:6–7). The image of cooking a young animal in the very substance intended to sustain its life is viewed as especially cruel.

A different approach appears in Philo (*On the Virtues*, 142–144). He interprets the prohibition symbolically as a rejection of mixing life and death. Milk represents nourishment and vitality, while the slaughtered animal represents death. Combining the two is therefore spiritually inappropriate. Milgrom finds this

explanation compelling and extends it to many of the Torah's other animal-related restrictions, seeing them as expressions of a broader biblical resistance to confusing the boundaries between life and death.

Beyond questions of rationale lies another issue: what does the verse mean in its immediate context?

The prohibition appears three times, yet in Exodus it is embedded within laws concerning *bikkurim*. The Mishnah (Hullin 8:4) and Talmud (Hullin 113a) famously derive from the threefold repetition three distinct prohibitions: cooking meat and milk together, eating such a mixture, and deriving benefit from it. Most medieval commentators simply cite this halakhic tradition.

Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor, however, offers a strikingly different reading. He proposes that in its Exodus contexts the phrase does not refer to cooking at all. Drawing on Genesis 40:10, where *bishul* can denote ripening, he argues that the verse means that one should not allow a young animal to mature on its mother's milk, but rather bring it promptly to the Temple. This interpretation accords well with the surrounding injunctions not to delay sacrificial obligations and not to leave sacrificial fat until morning. The broader message is one of punctuality in divine service.

It is important to emphasize that Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor advances this interpretation exclusively at the level of *peshat*. Like other medieval exegetes who distinguished contextual meaning from halakhic meaning, he fully accepted the authority and binding force of the Oral Law.

His interpretation remains difficult, however, since the verse speaks of a *gedi* (kid) generally and not specifically of a firstborn animal.

An even more daring proposal appears in Menahem ben Saruk. He suggests that *gedi* refers not to a young goat but to berries, and that *halev immo* denotes the

juice or sap from which the fruit emerges. The command would then mean that one should not bring *bikkurim* (first fruits) to the Temple before the produce has fully ripened. While ingenious, this interpretation won little acceptance among later exegetes.

These debates highlight a broader methodological divide. Should the plain meaning of the verse always coincide with its halakhic interpretation, or may *peshat* diverge from the legal tradition and teach an additional religious dimension? This question separates figures who insisted that the Oral Law reflected the true meaning of the *peshat* in the Torah, and those who were willing to distinguish between a verse's contextual meaning and its normative halakhic application.

The centrality of dietary laws in Judaism was emphasized powerfully by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Chumash Mesoras HaRav*, 74-75). He observed that although the Torah mentions prayer explicitly only once (Deuteronomy 11:13), it devotes extensive attention to the laws of permitted and forbidden foods. Modern people may readily embrace spirituality expressed through worship, song, or sacred space, yet resist the notion that holiness extends to the discipline of the body. The Torah insists otherwise. Sanctity cannot be achieved through spiritual aspiration alone; it requires concrete habits of restraint and obedience. For nearly two millennia Jews have lived without a Temple, but *kashrut* has remained one of the principal forces preserving Jewish distinctiveness and continuity. *Kashrut* thus serves not merely as a dietary system but as a daily discipline through which covenantal identity is embodied and sustained.

Whether understood as a rejection of pagan practice, an expression of compassion, a symbolic affirmation of the distinction between life and death, or a discipline that sanctifies the body, the prohibition against cooking a kid in its mother's milk exemplifies the richness and depth of Torah interpretation.