



THE HALACHIC STATUS OF HONEY

Adapted from a shiur given by Dayan Steiner at the Manchester Rabbinical Training Programme

With the month of Tishrei rapidly approaching, honey is soon to take its place of honour on our dining tables. Honey is central to the culinary minhagim of the Yomim Noraim, used for dipping apples on Rosh Hashanah, enhancing meat and poultry dishes, and inclusion in baked goods. Consuming honey is symbolic of our heartfelt desire for a sweet new year.

However, when shopping for honey, it is important to be aware of its kashrus status. In recent years, several significant kashrus concerns have been identified concerning honey, two of which will be explored in this feature.

FOREST HONEY

This product, also known as Honeydew or Pine Honey, is usually easily identifiable by its darker appearance compared to regular honey. Sometimes, companies may also supplement regular honey with honeydew.

In 2020, the Manchester Beis Din warned that consuming Forest Honey may constitute a Torah prohibition.



To understand why Forest Honey is problematic, we shall explain the difference in how it is produced compared to regular bees' honey.

Bees' Honey is produced in a series of remarkable feats for half-inch-long insects with a brain the size of a sesame seed. The forage bee uses its tubelike tongue to lap up nectar (a sugary liquid) from flowering plants. The bee stores the nectar in its "honey stomach" and returns to its honeycomb. The honeycomb is formed from beeswax produced by worker bees.

After clearing security with the guard bees, the forage bee regurgitates the nectar into the honeycomb. Once the nectar is in the honeycomb, the hive bees process it into honey.

The production of Forest Honey follows a similar process, albeit with one crucial distinction in source. Whereas regular honey is produced from nectar gleaned from various flowering plants, forest honey is derived by the forage bees from honeydew.

What is honeydew?

For many years, it was widely assumed that honeydew was a form of sticky dew or secretion of trees, which the bees ingest and process. Hence, the somewhat misleading name ascribed to it, "Honeydew", in respect of its similarity to the dew that gives leaves on a tree a sticky substance.



In recent times, however, scientists observed that honeydew is produced by aphids and other insects¹. The bug lands on the leaf, sucks sugars from the leaf, and then excretes the waste onto the leaf surface. This excretion attracts, among other creatures, bees, which then ingest the excretion and continue to produce Forest Honey from it. Now, there is a principle, taught by a Mishnah, that "What emerges from the tamei creature is tamei"². For example, a camel is not kosher; therefore, whatever emerges from a camel is likewise not kosher. Therefore, camels' milk is forbidden to drink, as it "emerges from the tamei", unlike cows' milk.

Accordingly, the excrement of the aphid, which is a non-kosher creature, is forbidden to eat. (This excrement may not have the same Kashrus status as Shellac, which is a separate topic.)

Now, you may be wondering why bees' honey is kosher - surely this too emerges from a non-kosher insect?

Bees' honey is kosher for one of two reasons:

1) The nectar merely passes through the insect's body and is not secreted by the insect (as stated above, the bee merely stores the nectar in its second stomach until offloading it at the honeycomb).

2) The Torah permits bees' honey as per a pasuk relating to winged insects, as derived by the Sages in the Gemara.



(In fact, not only is honey permitted to be consumed, but other beneficial products of the bee are permitted, such as propolis and beeswax. Thus, one may even suck honey from a honeycomb, as did Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (d. 1995) on the night of Rosh Hashanah. However, as far as Forest Honey is concerned, since it is known to be sourced from the excrement of a non-kosher creature, this is not included in the Torah's licence for bees' honey.

Milky Honey

Several years ago, one kashrus organisation notified the community that a particular brand of honey should be treated as milky.

This notice of caution was of significant practical relevance, particularly at this time of the year, when many nashim tzidkoniyyos add honey to their chicken or meat dishes.

The information I received upon contacting the kashrus organisation was that the honey in question is processed in a factory that also produces milky products. The 2 And likewise what emerges from the tahir creature is tahir.

1 Small sap-sucking insects, in a family which includes greenfly and blackfly.

2 And likewise what emerges from the tahir creature is tahir.