



This shiur was given by Dayan Steiner and can be listened to on the shiurim page of this website

THE HALACHIC STATUS OF FOREST HONEY

With the Rosh Hashanah season rapidly approaching, honey will be close to the top of the shopping list for many. Honey is central to the culinary customs of the Yomim Noraim, such as dipping an apple on Rosh Hashanah, enhancing meat and poultry dishes, and including it 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, which will be explored in this and further articles.

FOREST HONEY

One kashrus concern relates to Forest Honey, which is the topic of discussion in this segment. The product, also known as Honeydew or Pine Honey, is easily identifiable by its darker appearance compared to regular honey.

In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic¹, 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.

THE PRODUCTION OF 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. It stores the nectar in its "honey stomach" and returns to its honeycomb (built by the bees, within the beehive). After clearing security with the guard bees, it regurgitates the nectar into the honeycomb. Once the substance is in the honeycomb, the hive bees process the nectar 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 bees from honeydew.

¹Forest Honey was reputed to provide, among other health benefits, antioxidant support, which boosts the immune system.



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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, "Forest Honey" or "Honeydew", the latter name in respect of its similarity to the dew which gives leaves on a tree a sticky substance.

In recent times, however, scientists observed that honeydew is produced by aphids and other insects². 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, forest bees, which then ingest the excretion and continue to produce Forest Honey from it.

EMERGING FROM A TAMEI CREATURE OR MERELY PASSING THROUGH ONE AND THE REASON REGULAR HONEY IS PERMITTED.

Now, there is a principle, taught by a Mishnah, that "What emerges from the tamei creature is tamei"³. For example, a camel is not kosher; therefore, whatever emerges from a camel is likewise not kosher⁴.

The Gemara⁵ considers whether "emerging" from the animal means that a substance is produced/excreted by the creature or it merely passes through the creature.

The Gemara cites a Beraisa (a tradition from the period of the Tanna'im not included in the Mishnah). The Beraisa raises the question as to why bees' honey is permitted, as surely it emerges from a non-kosher insect. The Beraisa provides two possible solutions:

One Tanna explains that the nectar merely passes through the bee; therefore, the honey is not considered to "emerge" from a non-kosher creature.

² Small sap-sucking insects, in a family which includes greenfly and blackfly.

³ And likewise what emerges from the tahor creature is tahor.

⁴ We are not currently addressing the halachic status of the excrement itself

⁵ Bechoros 7a-7b



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The Tanna Rebbi Yaakov maintains that bees' honey is permitted only due to a "Gezeiras Hakasuv" (a Divine Decree, communicated via a pasuk in the Torah). The mere fact of the nectar passing through the bee would not be sufficient reason to permit it.

The halacha arising from the Gemara, in the opinion of the Rosh (Rabbeinu Asher, d. 1327), is that any liquid that even passes through any tamei animal is tamei and is therefore prohibited.

Concerning Forest Honey, one could reason as follows:

If the Halacha follows the view of Rebbi Yaakov, that the Torah provided a blanket leniency for bees' honey, then perhaps it is not incumbent upon the consumer to trail after the bee to discover where it sources its honey.

However, this would only be the case if the Rosh fully concurs with Rebbi Yaakov's view.

However, the Beis Yosef (Rabbi Yoseph Karo, d. 1575) clarifies that, in ruling in accordance with the opinion of Rebbi Yaakov, the Rosh follows the principle of "In a doubt concerning a Torah law one follows the stringent view" (in this case, regarding liquids that pass through a non-kosher creature).

In which case, it would arise that the Rosh rules in accordance with Rebbi Yaakov only for the purpose of taking a stringent stance in a Torah doubt.

CONCLUSION

In respect of Forest Honey, therefore, the Rosh would follow the stringent opinion of the first Tanna, who only permits regular bees' honey given its nature of merely passing through the creature.

The Torah did not provide a blanket license for honey in the view of the first Tanna, and specifically only permitted pure bees' honey.

If so, Forest Honey would have the status of safeik d'oraysa lechumra, and would be forbidden to consume.