

Mishnah Berurah Digest

Based on the Sunday morning shiur
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NUMBER 2

ש"ע סימן ר"ב, סעיף ט"ו ומשנה ברורה שם

In Issue 1 we made reference to the discussion over the correct בִּרְכָה to be said on sugar. In this issue we shall examine the debate in more detail. Before doing so, however, let us make some general observations.

Seasoned students of הלכה are unlikely to question the necessity of probing the properties and characteristics of a sugar-lump in order to determine its correct בִּרְכָה. Antagonists of Judaism, on the other hand, may take this as an example of what they see as Judaism's inordinate preoccupation with legalistic minutiae. We can give an unfaltering response to such a challenge.

The minutiae of הלכה are to more grand aspects of תורה what microscopic components in the human body are to whole organs. No one would suggest that once the whole heart has grown we can dispense with the tiny cells and channels of which it is comprised and which remain essential and integral to its healthy functioning.

Similarly, if הלכה is at the heart of Judaism, it must operate smoothly and healthily at every level, such that unstinting attention to detail becomes the very lifeblood in the fine workings of the whole great and complex system that is the halakhic process. (I recall Dayan Abraham pointing out that, "the Divine is in the detail, not the devil!") Moreover, in the course and discourse of detailed halakhic dialogue we see in microcosm the whole halakhic engine and formulate an understanding of its broader aspects.

Let us now return to our discussion of sugar and observe the different arguments as they crystallize.

The הלכות ערוך השלחן rules that one should say שֶהֶכֶל on sugar and should also say שֶהֶכֶל when sucking on sugar cane.

(סימן ר"ב, סעיף י"ב)

This is in line with רמב"ם, who first mentions that many gaonim ruled that הַאֲדָמָה is said on sugar, and a minority (notably the הלכות גדולות) ruled that the בִּרְכָה is הֶעֱץ, then continues:

"...but I say that this is not a fruit and one should only say שֶהֶכֶל on it. For the 'honey' (i.e. sugar) from these canes, that needs to be processed with heat (i.e. cooked), is no better than the 'honey' from dates that is not processed with heat and which takes the בִּרְכָה of שֶהֶכֶל." (הלכות ברכות ח,ה)

in the above הלכה, רמב"ם compares the sugar that is extracted from sugar cane with the 'honey' that exudes from dates. He is of the opinion that since date honey, a secondary product of the main fruit, takes a שֶהֶכֶל in its natural, untreated state, then sugar, which must also be processed after being extracted from its cane, can be no 'better' than date honey and must also take שֶהֶכֶל.

The הלכות ערוך השלחן cites this רמב"ם in full then writes that the two (date honey and sugar) can not be compared in this way. The הלכות ערוך notes that, from planting to eating, dates are considered the primary fruit and the juice that exudes from them is secondary, whereas sugar canes are not לֵאכִילָה (edible) and are planted for their sugar which should therefore take בִּרְכָה. In short, date honey is the secondary product and should take שֶהֶכֶל, but sugar is the primary product and should take הֶעֱץ.

Commenting on these words of the הלכות ערוך, the הלכות ערוך (also by R' Yosef Caro, the author of the הלכות ערוך, and first published in 1542) writes (with a teaspoon of sweet humour): "דְּבָרֵי טַעַם הֵם" - "they are flavoursome words," but concludes that it is nevertheless preferable to say שֶהֶכֶל in order to satisfy all opinions.

However, in his commentary on Rambam's Mishneh Torah called the הלכות ערוך (publ. 1574-76) R. Yosef Caro provides a different view and suggests that Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher (author of the Tur) could never have seen the way sugar canes are often sold in their thousands for the primary pastime of being sucked on. Where sucking the canes is prevalent, reasons the הלכות ערוך, then the extraction and processing of the sugar will not be primary and the sugar will be no better than fruit juices that are considered of secondary status.

The הלכות ערוך suggests that Rambam's view was that the sugar canes can not be considered fruit in any sense, rather, nothing more than sticks with a sweet flavour. Interestingly, in discussing the dates, the הלכות ערוך notes that the הלכות ערוך itself refers to dates with the term "דְּבָשׁ" but confirms that the rabbis definitely understand the הלכות ערוך to be referring to the actual fruit - the dates - when it uses the term "דְּבָשׁ" - and not to be implying that the honey is the primary food.

The הלכות ערוך also writes that the cane is "עֵץ בְּעֵלְמָא" - just wood - and is not actually eaten but only enjoyed by dint of its sweet flavour.

The הלכות ערוך concludes that one should לכתחילה say שֶהֶכֶל on sugar, but, if he said פה"א or פה"ע it would be acceptable.

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