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TO BEE OR NOT TO BEE

THE ROLE OF BEES IN PRODUCING THE DELICACY MOST CLOSELY IDENTIFIED WITH THE JEWISH NEW YEAR – HONEY – IS SIMPLY FASCINATING. WHAT BETTER TIME THAN ROSH HASHANAH TO DELVE INTO THEIR WONDERFUL WORLD?

By Natalie Page

Renowned as the land of milk and honey, Israel has roughly 100,000 cultivated beehives scattered throughout the country, each of which is home to around 50,000 bees during the honey-gathering months. These beehives' combined manufacturing efforts, notes Herzl Avidor, CEO of the Honey Board of Israel, will produce an expected 2,900 tons of honey by the end of spring – representing 72% of the 4,000 tons consumed by Israelis each year, with the remainder imported from abroad.

A staggering 40% of Israel's total annual honey sales occurs around Rosh Hashanah, with smaller peaks in Passover, thanks to certain popular North African delicacies, and in the winter months, when sufferers of sore throats seek a soothing remedy.

Yet, the bee's major contribution to Israel's population, and to humanity in general, is its role as "supreme pollinator," re-

sponsible for pollinating 80% of agricultural crops worldwide. In Israel alone, according to Avidor, the honey bees' pollination activities contribute some NIS 2.5 billion to the country's agricultural GDP. Beekeepers travel with their apiaries to plantations and fields and lend the bees' services for the duration of the flowering season. Among the many products on the greengrocer's shelf aided by pollination are apples, pears, persimmons, cherries, watermelons, melons, cucumbers, onions and almonds. So the next time you see a bee, you may want to take a moment to thank her for all her hard work!

300 varieties of honey

Honey is still the primary bee product used by humans, made from flower nectar and stored in the hive's honeycombs. Honey comes in some 300 varieties, around 20 of which are produced by Israeli bees. Each variant is defined by the flora source used to make it, with a single-source product containing at least 50% of a particular flora. The most

common types in Israel are wild flower and citrus flower honey, but others are slowly gaining popularity, such as avocado, eucalyptus, za'atar, tamarisk, sage and clover honey. Christ's Thorn Jujube honey has always been popular among the Muslim population, because, as explained by Roni Rake of Honey Galil, Muhammad gave a sermon while sitting under one such tree.

Honey is commonly used as a sweetener when cooking and baking, but while most recipes simply state a need for honey, it is worthwhile considering which type to add, since each has a unique flavor and properties. You wouldn't want, for example, to use onion honey in a honey cake, unless you intend for a pronounced onion aftertaste.

Boaz Ben Zeev of Dvorat Hatavor advocates storing at least two types in the pantry – a darker, more pungent honey for heavier dishes, like meat and chicken, and a more delicate variant, such as citrus or wild flower honey, for lighter recipes, such as for salad dressings.



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THE MOST COMMON TYPES IN ISRAEL ARE **WILD FLOWER AND CITRUS FLOWER HONEY**, BUT OTHERS ARE SLOWLY GAINING POPULARITY, SUCH AS AVOCADO AND EUCALYPTUS

Health revolution

Many medical and nutritional attributes are associated with honey. According to Eduard Filipov of Beit HaDvash, the recommended daily honey consumption is 30-120 grams – one tablespoon for adults and one teaspoon for kids aged two and older. Honey contains around 500 proteins, microelements and minerals, but many of these elements are destroyed when the honey is heated incorrectly or above a certain temperature. As Avidor from the Honey Board explains, this often happens because consumers have grown accustomed to smooth-flowing honey, and pasteurizing the honey ensures it doesn't crystallize, and also makes it easier to bottle. Retail chains actually return solidified honey, arguing that their customers will not buy it.

To assure customers that the product they buy is in fact real honey and not an artificial imitation, apiarists used to sell it with a piece of honeycomb. Today's regulatory standards require that only pure honey be labeled as such, but it is still difficult to ascertain whether the honey has been processed.

The health awareness revolution, combined with the immigration of Russian Jews, who actively seek out the grainy form, has revitalized the non-heated honey market, and these products can easily be found now in health and organic stores throughout Israel, with most middle and small independent apiaries in Israel selling such products.

Beehives also contain a repository of pollen, which latches on to the bees' legs as they fly from flower to flower. Often referred to as the "perfect food," bee pollen comprises a tremendous amount of nutritional elements and is a great natural source of antioxidant, anti-fungal and antiviral elements. Other hive products of medical value, collectively referred to as apitherapy, include propolis, the protective substance that keeps hives clean, royal jelly, the highly nutritious substance on which the queen bees feed, and bee venom. And there is also beeswax, used in the production of food, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals.

Visitors are welcome

To learn more about the fascinating world of bees and honey,

it is worthwhile visiting one of the beehive visitors' centers located around the country. It is a great way to learn about the life of the bee and the hive, economic and ecological considerations and threats (including the global mass disappearance of bees known as colony collapse disorder, or CCD), the production process of the various bee products and their applications, and the notion of organic honey. They are also ideal venues for purchasing bee products.

Here are some options, from south to north. All offer guided tours in English, which should be booked in advance. A more comprehensive list of visitors' centers, as well as one of authorized honey distributors, can be found on the Honey Board of Israel's website (www.honey.org.il).

1. Yad Mordechai

Around ten kilometers south of Ashkelon, Kibbutz Yad Mordechai is home to one of the oldest apiaries in Israel and, with 5,000 hives, is the largest in the country. An emblem of female entrepreneurship, it was founded, according to Anat Pais, Head of Tourism at Yad Mordechai, in

1936 by a group of women who learned the secrets of the trade from Australian soldiers serving in the British army. Nowadays, Yad Mordechai has a partnership with Strauss for the development, manufacture, sale, marketing and distribution of its honey products.

In the Honey House, visitors get to watch the beekeeper at work, and if they're brave enough can even accompany him as he opens a beehive and tells about honey production and its benefits. Children's activities include honey tastings, making wax candles from beeswax and, during the holidays, baking a honey cake. The Honey House activities are part of the Kibbutz's 3-4 hour tour package, which also comprises a tractor trip, a visit to a cow dairy, the famous War of Independence battle site, and the exhibit of classical kibbutz items.

2. Beit HaDvash, Kadesh Barnea

When Eduard Filipov joined Moshav Kadesh Barnea after making aliyah from Ukraine some 20 years ago, he was told that it is not viable to open an apiary in the flower-poor des-

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Alon Sigron

ert region of the western Negev. One day, he was called to help with a wild bee swarm that found its way to nearby Nitzana. He transferred the swarm to Kadesh Barnea and built an apiary for it, which produced honey already that same year. He now oversees 80 apiaries and has built a business around honey, which includes honey products, a visitors' center and B&Bs. His super-tough bees produce three types of honey: retema (broom) and date, desert acacia, and eucalyptus.

The visitors' center, which is open all week, offers a 40-minute tour that includes a glass hive – so that you can see the bees at work – an educational movie, reading materials and honey tastings. “The tour’s purpose is to explain to visitors about the honey, so they can purchase the one suitable for them, and we recommend from our experience what is good for particular medical conditions,” explains Filipov.

3. Lin Farm, Kfar Bilu

Yoval Lin started beekeeping at the age of 16 as a means to obtain some extra cash, which soon transformed to a life-long passion and a family business that boasts 700 beehives, a factory that produces bee and other natural products, and a visitors' center located in Kfar Bilu, near the southern entrance to Rehovot. An independent visit to the visitors' center, which is not open on Saturday, is free, but

there is a charge for the two-hour guided tour.

Activities include watching a movie, observing both a glass and actual beehive and a beekeeper at work, role-playing honey gathering, dressing up as beekeepers and visiting a honey-extraction facility. “It is important for us to relay to the general public the fascinating world of the bee, which is an integral element of nature and the food chain,” notes Yoval Lin.

4. Dvorat HaTavor, Shadmot Dvora

Boaz Ben Zeev is a fourth-generation apiarist whose great-grandfather was a beekeeper in Hungary, a trade that his grandfather imported to Israel. Located in Moshav Shadmot Dvora, at the foothill of Mount Tavor, the family-run business consists of 100 beehives, to which was added a bee-related visitors' center 26 years ago, the oldest of its kind in the country.

Open throughout the week, Dvorat Hatavor offers two-hour guided tours in English, Hebrew, Arabic and even German, in which visitors view the honey harvesting facility and join the beekeeper for a close-up view of an actual beehive, with the added bonus of a visit to the only active silk farm in Israel. The kids get to do arts and crafts and make candles from beeswax, Indian honey chocolate, and a bee cape with wings. There is



also an animal area, where one can feed pigmy goats, and a picnic area. Boaz notes that, “Most adults start enjoying themselves the moment they arrive and realize they are in a true moshav and a real farm, like it used to be and how they imagined Israel. They quickly forget they came because of the children and start enjoying the tour for themselves and ask in-depth questions.”

5. Honey Galil, Michmanim

During his reserve duty in the army more than 30 years ago, Roky Rake met a guy who couldn't stop talking about bees. When he returned home, he told his wife, Roni, whose father was a beekeeper, of the encounter, and they decided to purchase five beehives together. This evolved into Honey Galil, a family-run business in the town of Michmanim, near Karniel, which now manages some 350 beehives. Encircled by the

breathtaking view of the Galilee, visitors are invited to peek into the world of the bees in a glass hive, learn about the honey extraction and production process, and taste various types of honey, all free of charge.

There is also the more encompassing three-hour tour, for groups only, which includes activities such as making beeswax candles and creams, and a tour of Michmanim and the “Back to Nature via the Bible” ecological biblical village, where participants hear a lecture on apitherapy. There is also a honey and perfume workshop, focused on medicinal herbs, perfumeries, spices and honey, which is just one of the workshops on offer.

“We believe it is important for people to understand what quality honey is, because the sector is highly industrialized, and people should know how proper honey should be produced and consumed, and that it is a healthy product,” concludes Roni.