הַקָּפֶה בְּבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ

How Coffee Entered the Halachic Literature

A sixteenth-century novelty from the Ottoman world lands on the desks of the poskim. How the halachic literature first identified, named, and ruled on the strange black drink.

3 QUESTIONS · **5** SOURCES · POSKIM **1138–1188**

9.1 Is the חִלְתִּית (chiltit) mentioned by the Rambam in Hilchot Deot 4:8 identifiable as coffee?

THE BOTTOM LINE לְמַעֲשֶׂה

The Kovetz al Yad haChazak identifies the Rambam's חִלְתִּית as coffee (קאוו"י), based on Sefer Lashon Chachamim which describes it as a warming seed (מין זרע המחמם הגוף) consumed in Arab cities — consistent with coffee's historical origin and use.

The Rambam (Hilchot Deot 4:8) recommends eating חִלְתִּית in cold/rainy seasons as a warming food alongside mustard. The commentary in Kovetz al Yad haChazak notes that the Sefer Lashon Chachamim identifies this word as identical to the Arabic/Turkish קאוו"י (qahwe — coffee): a seed that warms the body, consumed in Arab lands. Supporting sources cited: Mishnah Uktsin 3:5, Niddah 51 (with Ra'avad commentary noting the unpleasant smell yet its use as a food additive), and Tosafot Yom Tov (Tevul Yom ch.1) citing Rashi in Shabbat that this substance is sometimes eaten in cold countries. The Kovetz also notes that Rambam did not include the medicinal remedies mentioned in the Talmud in these chapters, since Rav Shimshon (R"Sh) wrote that one should not follow them lest one have doubts about Chazal.

A notable early halachic-lexicographic identification of coffee in Rishonim-era terminology. The connection: = חִלְתִּית קאוו"י = qahwe (Arabic for coffee). Supports the view that coffee was known to medieval Arab culture and that the Rambam's dietary advice may have included it. Cross-references: Mishnah Uktsin 3:5, Niddah 51, Tosafot Yom Tov Tevul Yom 1, Rashi Shabbat.

א

Rambam Hilchot Deot 4:8 ↗

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides), 1138–1204 · Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot, chapter 4, halacha 8

בְּימוֹת הַחַמָּה אוֹכֵל מַאֲכָלִים הַקָּרִים וְלֹא יַרְבֶּה בִּתְבָלִים וְאוֹכֵל אֶת הַחֹמֶץ. וּבִימוֹת הַגְּשָׁמִים אוֹכֵל מַאֲכָלִים הַחַמִּים וּמַרְבֶּה בִּתְבָלִים וְאוֹכֵל מְעַט מִן הַחַרְדָּל וּמִן הַחִלְתִּית. וְעַל דֶּרֶךְ זֶה הוֹלֵךְ וְעוֹשֶׂה בַּמְּקוֹמוֹת הַקָּרִים וּבַמְּקוֹמוֹת הַחַמִּים בְּכָל מָקוֹם וּמָקוֹם הָרָאוּי לוֹ

In the summer, one should eat cold, unseasoned foods and eat vinegar. In the rainy season, one should eat warming foods, use many spices, and eat a little mustard and chiltit. One should follow these principles regarding cold climates and hot climates — in each and every place, whatever is appropriate to it.

ב

Kovetz al Yad haChazak - Hilchot Deot 4:8 (chiltit=coffee) ↗

כתב הרב ד"ע מין זרע אדם. ובס' לשון חכמים כתב הוא מ"ש קאוו"י והוא מין זרע המחמם הגוף שאוכלין אותו בערי הישמעאלים. ועיין פ"ג דעוקצין מ"ה ובנדה נ"א והרע"ב פי' שם אע"פ שריחן רע מ"מ מערבין אותו עם מאכל ועיין בתוי"ט פ"א דטבול יום שהביא בשם רש"י בשבת דלפעמים אוכלין אותו במדינות הקרים, ורבינו לא הביא בפרקים אלו רפואות האמורות בש"ס וכבר כתב הרב ד"ע שכתב הר"ש שאין לנהוג בהן כדי שלא יהרהר אחר חז"ל

The author [of Kovetz al Yad haChazak] writes: a type of human seed. And in the book Lashon Chachamim it is written that this is what is called קאוו"י [coffee], and it is a type of seed that warms the body, which is eaten in the cities of the Ishmaelites [Arab lands]. See Mishnah Uktsin ch.3 m.5, and Niddah 51, where the Ra'avad explains that even though their smell is unpleasant, they are nonetheless mixed into food. And see Tosafot Yom Tov on ch.1 of Tevul Yom, who cites in the name of Rashi in Shabbat that they are sometimes eaten in cold countries. And our master [the Rambam] did not include in these chapters the medical remedies mentioned in the Talmud, as the author already wrote that R. Shimshon wrote that one should not follow them, lest one have doubts about the Sages.

9.2 What is the historical connection between coffee and the custom of staying up all night on Shavuot?

> THE BOTTOM LINE לְמַעֲשֶׂה
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> There is a compelling theory that the widespread custom of Tikkun Leil Shavuot (staying up all night learning Torah on Shavuot) only became universal after the discovery and proliferation of coffee, which made all-night learning significantly more feasible.

Elliot Horowitz, "Coffee, Coffeehouses and the Nocturnal Rituals of Early Modern Jewry" (AJS Review, 1989, pp.17–46) argues that the timing of the spread of the Shavuot all-night custom correlates with the introduction and proliferation of

coffee in Jewish communities in early modern times.

OU Torah Dalet Amot of Halacha (R. Enkin, 2025). Cited as a "compelling theory" — academic source, not a halachic ruling.

א **OU Torah Dalet Amot of Halacha — Coffee (Enkin, 2025) ↗**

ב **Horowitz - Coffee Coffeehouses and Nocturnal Rituals (AJS Review 1989)**

9.3 Is חלתית (mentioned in Talmudic and halachic literature) identifiable as coffee?

> THE BOTTOM LINE לְמַעֲשֶׂה
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> R' Yaakov Tzahlon in Otzar HaChaim identifies חלתית with coffee. R' Landsofer (Knafei Yonah) cites this but notes that coffee is not sharp (אינו חריף) and questions the identification.

Tzahlon writes in Otzar HaChaim that חלתית is a seed (זרע א') that warms the body, and those who eat it hear a ringing in their ears called קאוי — a phonetic identification with קאווע (coffee). Eliezer Brodt surveys this identification. The question has potential halachic ramifications wherever חלתית appears in rabbinic texts (bracha, Pesach, medical rules).

א **Brodt — קפה (כנפי יונה / חלתית) ↗**

Primary survey: Brodt discusses Knafei Yonah citing Otzar HaChaim identification of חלתית as coffee (קאוי); Landsofer qualifiedly accepts despite noting coffee is not sharp

Rabbi Yonah Landsofer in his work Kanfei Yonah cites the Sefer Otzar HaChaim (by Rabbi Yaakov Tzahalon) that chiltit-balador is none other than coffee. He acknowledges that coffee is not pungent, but writes: "Even so, one should be concerned about what is written in Sefer Otzar HaChaim, for [its author] was a great sage of his generation, and particularly in this [medical/botanical] discipline." And so wrote Rabbi Yaakov Tzahalon in his work Otzar HaChaim: "Chiltit is a type of seed that warms the body; those who eat it in the cities of the Ishmaelites call it qawi [coffee]."

ר' יונה לאנדסופר בספרו כנפי יונה מביא מספר אוצר החיים שהחלתית-בלאדור אינה אלא קפה. הוא מודה שהקפה אינו חריף, "ועם כל זה יש לחוש למה שכתב בס' אוצר החיים, כי היה חכם גדול בדורו ובפרט בחכמה הזאת". וכך כתב ר' יעקב צהלון בחיבורו אוצר החיים: "חלתית הוא מין זרע א' המחמם הגוף האוכלים אותו בערי ישמעאלים קורין לו קאוי".

FROM THE COFFEE-FACTS FILE

- The first coffee-house in England — and possibly the first in the world — was opened in Oxford in 1650 or 1651 by a Jew named Jacobs. London did not get its first coffee-house until 1652. source ↗
- Coffee reached Europe's Jewish communities in the 16th century via the Ottoman Empire, and poskim immediately confronted novel questions: what beracha to say on it, whether it could be drunk before davening, on Pesach, or when brewed by non-Jews. Ari Greenspan's Hakirah study traces how coffee, tea, sugar and chocolate reshaped Jewish practice and liturgy. source ↗
- Coffee was so embedded in early chassidic court life that it appears in chassidic storytelling itself: the Degel Machaneh Ephraim (grandson of the Baal Shem Tov) tells of a visitor who saw a famed rebbe drinking coffee and mistook the mundane act for a spiritual practice. source ↗
- Halachic literature spells coffee a half-dozen ways — קאוו, קאווי, קאווא, קאפע, קאפ"ה — reflecting how the Turkish kahve / Arabic qahwa arrived in Yiddish- and Ladino-speaking communities through different routes. source ↗