

Jewish Law: Cheeses - Gevinat Akum:

Why Certain Cheeses Are a Problem and Others Are Not

By Rabbi Aaron Abadi

The topic of **Gevinat Akum** often raises questions: Why are some cheeses a concern while others are not? Here's a clearer explanation to help you understand the distinctions.

What is Gevinat Akum?

The term *Gevina* in Jewish law refers to cheese, but not all cheese is treated the same. It traditionally refers to hard, aged cheeses that require **animal rennet** for production. These cheeses were subject to a decree by the Sages (Chachamim) due to concerns about non-kosher rennet and other factors.

However, the concept of "cheese" has since expanded to include products that differ significantly from the original *Gevina* described in the Gemara. Let's break it down.

How Do We Define Gevina?

1. Traditional Definition:

Gevina refers to cheeses made with animal rennet, often aged and requiring an intensive production process. Historically, alternative rennets (e.g.,

vegetarian) were rare and unreliable. Almost all cheese makers used animal rennet, making it the standard for *Gevina* in the Gemara.

2. Modern Cheeses:

Today, many cheeses are made with **vegetarian rennet**. Cheeses for which the majority of manufacturers use vegetarian rennet are **not considered *Gevina***. These cheeses are more similar to yogurt or sour cream, which were never part of the original decree on *Gevinat Akum*, as rennet is not imperative to their production.

What About Yogurt and Sour Cream?

Some Rabbanim extend the decree of *Gevina* to yogurt or sour cream, treating them as if they were cheese. My father, however, held that these products are **not *Gevina***. They do not require rennet and are typically made using simple enzymes or acidic components to curdle milk.

Drawing the Line: My Father's Approach

The key to distinguishing *Gevina* lies in the production process:

- **Requires Animal Rennet:** Products like traditional hard cheeses fall under the category of *Gevina*.
- **Does Not Require Rennet:** Products like yogurt, sour cream, and even many soft cheeses (e.g., cream cheese) are not *Gevina*.

If the majority of manufacturers do not use animal rennet for a specific type of cheese, it is not considered *Gevina* as described in the Gemara.

Examples of Modern Cheeses

- **Not Gevina:**

Cheeses like mozzarella, Colby Jack, and American cheese, which are mostly made with vegetarian rennet, fall outside the scope of the decree.

- **Gevina:**

Many aged cheeses and blue cheeses often require animal rennet and are closer to the *Gevina* described by the Sages.

Why Does This Matter Today?

The original decree of *Gevinat Akum* was made for cheeses that required animal rennet, ensuring kosher standards. As the definition of "cheese" has broadened to include products that do not fit this category, extending the decree to these items raises questions.

Hardly anyone considers yogurt or sour cream to be *Gevina*. However, those who argue that cheeses like American cheese and similar products—despite not normally containing animal rennet—should still be considered *Gevina* must grapple with why they include these items but exclude yogurt and sour cream. My father's position offers clarity: The decree applies only to traditional cheeses requiring animal rennet, not modern alternatives.

Types of Cheeses that are OK if vegetarian without extra Rabbinical supervision

- American
- Camembert
- Cheddar
- Colby
- Colby Jack
- Cottage
- Cream
- Emmental
- Farmer
- Feta
- Fontina
- Goat
- Havarti
- Monterey Jack
- Mozzarella
- Muenster
- Paneer
- Parmesan
- Pepper Jack
- Provolone
- Ricotta
- Swiss

Final Thoughts

Understanding the nuances of *Gevinat Akum* helps ensure you observe Kashrut while appreciating the variety of dairy products available today. If a cheese does not require animal rennet for its production, it is not *Gevina* and does not fall under the Sages' decree.