

Apple Dipped in Honey: What's the Real Appeal?

My family is full of picky eaters. We rarely change our yom tov menus; even trying a “new fruit” on Rosh Hashana can be challenging. For that reason, we are grateful to be Ashkenazi Jews with the sweet and simple *minhag* (custom) of dipping the apple into the honey on Rosh Hashana night.

Should we have been born into the Sephardic culture or adopted some of the “*simanim*,” (auspicious foods) mentioned in the Gemarah, one can only imagine the reaction at our dinner table. “Ma, really? You expect me to eat fenugreek? Leeks? Or black-eye peas? You have got to be kidding...”

Let's face it, the custom isn't complicated. Every preschooler knows the simple song with easy instructions. “Dip the apple in the honey, make a bracha loud and clear. Shana Tova U'metuka, have a happy, sweet new year!” The actual “*Yehi Ratzon*” prayer that accompanies it is similarly both standard and meaningful:

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו
שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה.
*May it be Your will, HaShem, our G-d
and the G-d of our ancestors, that You
renew for us a good and a sweet year.*

Grateful that I am to be dipping the apple into the honey, and not have irritable family members at our yom tov table, I delved a bit further into the tasty “apple dipping” custom. Not only did I find some fascinating tidbits, but there are some lessons that



Rebbetzin Marjorie Glatt, JD

Special Projects Coordinator, YUConnects

can be applied to each person seeking greater insight.

A Little Background

When and where did this *minhag* first appear? Is it mentioned in the Gemarah or by the Geonim? Interestingly, while the earliest sources for *simanim* on Rosh Hashana precede the Second Temple and some are mentioned in the Gemarah, the apple *siman* does not “make the cut.”

Indeed, there are two separate passages in the Gemarah that discuss the *simanim* for Rosh Hashana.¹ Those *simanim* are listed by Abbaye² as *kara* (gourd) *karsi* (leek), *silka* (beet), *tamri* (date) and *rubia* (fenugreek or black-eyed peas). These particular foods are singled out for their specific positive attributes: their sweet taste, their rapid growth or that their name simply alludes to, or reminds us, of a good omen.³ Apples, however, did not even get a shout-out.

We do know that it was on Rosh Hashana when Ezra and Nechemia, the leading sages during the building of the Second Temple, told Bnei Yisrael to “go and eat fat [foods] and drink sweet [drinks]” as a sign for a

prosperous and good year.⁴ The early Geonic responsa singled out honey as one of those sweet drinks, though there was no dipping of fruit.

And what about the apple's connection to *Gan Eden*, on this holiday that celebrates the New Year and the beginning of creation? It is worthwhile to dispel the misconception in the secular literature attributing the apple to the fruit of the Garden of Eden's Tree of Knowledge. In fact, there are at least four opinions in the Gemarah and midrashim (*grape, fig, esrog or wheat tree*) regarding which fruit was plucked from that Tree of Knowledge. Apples are not one of them! While there is a fascinating notion that the tree was actually an orchard — and thus all four opinions can be considered correct — no Tannaitic source suggests it was an apple.⁵

The Root of the Custom

Yet dipping the apple in the honey is a very old custom, mentioned in our halachic literature in the 13th century by the *Tur*,⁶ who stated it is an ancient Ashkenazic (Germanic) *minhag* to dip the apple in the honey at the “start” of

the Rosh Hashana meal, to symbolize having a “sweet new year.” The Maharil adds that the custom is to pick up a sweet apple,⁷ dip it in honey and say aloud the *Yehi Ratzon*.⁸

The “*borei pri ha’etz*” blessing is said first, a small bite is taken, and then the *Yehi Ratzon* request is made after the first bite is consumed so as not to make a *hefsek*, interruption, between the *bracha* and the bite.⁹ The *minhag* is done on the first night of Rosh Hashana, after making kiddush and eating challah.

So why is the apple the preferred fruit of Ashkenazic Jews? Is it simply because it was abundant in Europe, not too expensive, and tasty? Some of the well-accepted reasons brought down by our *Gedolim* (sages) explain the selection of the apple for the custom.

- **On the external level**, an apple is a fruit that has a pleasant fragrance, appearance and taste. Not many fruits have all of those qualities. Would one say a “dragon fruit” has a pleasant appearance? Or that carobs, known in yiddish as “bukser,” have a pleasant aroma? The apple is the one that “has it all” — with wholesome qualities and many ancillary

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healing benefits as alluded to in the Tosefta and Zohar.¹⁰ These qualities correspond to the totality of *brachos* that we would want Hashem to grant us all — nachas from children, good health and sustenance.¹¹

- **On a more abstract, philosophical level**, eating the apple with unusual botanic properties reminds us of a unique quality exemplified by Bnei Yisrael. The Midrash tells us that in an apple tree, the blossoms appear before the leaves, the little nub peeks out even before the leaves that will protect it. So too, the Jews, at the time of receiving the Torah, first said: *naaseh*, we will do, and then said *v’nishma*, we will understand. On this judgment day of Rosh Hashana, as we submit ourselves to the will of Hashem, we are reinforcing our commitment to the mitzvos, even before our rational understanding and learning of the Torah.¹²
- Likewise, **on a kabbalistic plane**, apples were chosen because they are the ideal fruit for this omen. When Yitzchak blessed Ya’akov with wealth and power, there

was the “scent of an orchard” surrounding Yaakov as he approached Yitzchak to kiss him.¹³ Since the Gemarah attributes the aroma to an apple orchard,¹⁴ the Maharil¹⁵ gives this as the source for the use of the apple on Rosh Hashana, the actual day many believe the blessing to Yaakov was given.¹⁶

Questions Remain

Two questions, however, still remain and will provide “food for thought” in these days of awe. First, we know the sources for the apple-dipping custom, but are we merely asking G-d for a sweet year? Can this Ashkenazic ritual demonstrate a deeper relevance to our everyday lives? A lesson perhaps? Second, can there be another perspective of the relationship between the apple and the honey? If we are truly eating the apple for its sweetness, why do we put the fruit into an additional sweet sticky substance?¹⁷ Why is the apple uniquely singled out in this ritual with an added delectable layer?

The answer to both of these questions can lend insight into our request



for a “good, sweet new year” by demonstrating the ideal mode of behavior during these most holy days.

Apples are, quite simply, wholly good. “Appealing” in its colorful attractiveness, its aromatic fragrance, and its crunchy, scrumptious taste, the apple is an all-around treasure. Additionally, the very same fruit produces little buds before its leaves first develop; it is a fruit that is “eager” to appear on the tree, paralleling the pinnacle moment of *naaseh v’nishma*. Our “*tapuach*” is even mystically connected to the holy avot and the entirety of our nationhood. This perfection couldn’t possibly get any better, could it?

Actually, it could, and perhaps that is the take-away message for the *chag*. Our tradition is not to simply consume an apple slice and be content with the taste. No; instead we pick up this piece of natural perfection and dip it into something even sweeter, honey. We demonstrate that every item — and truly every person — can be made sweeter and better, can be improved upon.

The dipping of the apple into honey can be viewed not just as another Rosh Hashana *siman*, but as a

paradigm of the way Jews should act during this time of intense introspection. Just as the apple is a perfect fruit that can be made sweeter, we too can, and must, demonstrate our own eagerness to improve and enhance ourselves.

When we think we are good, we can always do better. If, for example, we have worked long and hard to virtually stop speaking *lashon hara*, we can now turn to making *berachos* with more *kavana* (meaning). If we currently treat our spouse with respect and kindness, let’s focus on honoring our parents. There is no end to self-improvement, and that is what a new year, new commitment, and an added layer of sweetness to the apple is about.

Perhaps this is why we seem to favor this *minhag* over all the rest of the *simanim*. The apple doesn’t stand alone as a *siman*. It is the combination of sweet with sweeter, good with better, which is the exemplification of self-improvement and development.

On a contemporary note, each year, around the *Yamim Noraim*, Apple Inc. unveils its newest iPhone. They offer an upgrade to their current device equipped with advancements previously unimagined. An amazing

piece of Apple technology, initially perceived as perfect, was somehow, incredibly, improved. Aren’t we fortunate as Jewish people to make our own free upgrades, to have these days of opportunity to enhance our ways and make a newer version of our former selves?

So, the apple accessory on our yom tov table gets dipped into the honey. The flawless fruit just became better, tastier, and upgraded. As we take a crunchy bite this year, let us hope for a sweet year with continuous improvement on Version 7.0 of ourselves and our actions.

Endnotes

1 *Horayos* 12a, *K’risos* 6a.

2 In *Maseches Horayos 12a Abbaye* is quoted as saying that the beneficial properties are gained by “gazing” at these items, while in *Maseches K’risos* 6a the text states that these same items must be “eaten.”

3 It is interesting to note that many poskim allow other foods to be introduced, based on the linguistic connotation of their name. Rabbi Moshe Shuchman, in *Kosher Kurrents* (Star K), Fall 2010, quoting Geonic and Rishonim sources, points out that these original *simanim* also have dual meanings to their names. *Rubia* indicates that our merits or assets should increase in the coming

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year. *Karsi* suggests that our enemies should be “cut down”; *silka* and *tamri* refer to the removal and “obliteration” of our enemies. Additionally, he notes that the *Magen Avraham* has allowed foods that sound like the word “abundance” in any language to be used. Carrots are popular since “*mehren*,” carrot, in Yiddish is similar to “more.” Rav Moshe Heinemann of Baltimore is credited for introducing lettuce, half a raisin and celery as a positive siman for “let-us-have-a-raise-in-salary.” And naturally, at the YUConnects office we recommend some “dates for dates.”

4 Rashi in Nechemia 8:10.

5 Rabbi Aaron Glatt, National Council of Young Israel in *Toras Aish*, Volume XIII, Number 4, Beraishis 5766, quoting from numerous sources including *Berachos* 40a; *Sanhedrin* 70a and *Bereishis Rabbah* 15:7.

6 *Orach Chaim* 583.

7 It is preferable to use a sweet apple and not a tangy or sour one. See Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, *Emes L'Yaakov* to *Orach Chaim* 583, Footnote 538.

8 *Darchei Moshe* quoting the Maharil 583:3.

9 *Magen Avraham* 583:2.

10 *Baba Metzia* 7:2; Zohar, *Acharei Mos*; *Ziv HaZohar*, *VaEtchanan*.

11 *Ben Ish Chai*, Year 1, Nitzavim Section 4.

12 See Rabbi Berel Wein's excellent article, “Apples and Honey” from www.aish.com. http://www.aish.com/h/hh/rh/guide/Apples_and_Honey.html, quoting the Gemara, *Shabbos* 88a.

13 Beraishis 27:27.

14 *Taanis* 29b.

15 *Taz* in *Orach Chaim* 583:2, quoting the Maharil, *Hilchos Rosh HaShanah* 7.

16 The Vilna Gaon, *Biur HaGra*, *Orach Chaim* 583, states “it is well known” to have occurred on Rosh Hashana. However, not all agree with this chronology, as Rashi and Targum Yonasan ben Uziel to Beraishis 27:9 believe the bracha of Yitzchak was given to Ya'akov on Pesach.

17 Rabbi Wein, *ibid*, notes the connection of honey to the common Biblical phrase describing Eretz Yisrael as the “land flowing with milk and honey,” although the aforementioned “honey” was made from overripe dates, not bee pollen. Rosh Hashana is an apropos time to use honey as the word *d'vash*, honey, has the same *gematria* (numerical value) as *Av Harachamim* or “merciful Father.”

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How do the Simanim work?

We find two very different approaches as to how eating (or looking at) the simanim of Rosh HaShanah can help bring about a good year.

הרבה דברים התרו לפעמים שהם דומים לנחש ולא מדרך נחש חלילה אלא דרך סמן לעורר בו לבבו להנהגה טובה והוא שאמרו לתן על שלחנו בליל ראש השנה קרס"ת קרא רוביא כרתי סלקא תמרי שהם ענינם מהם שגדלים מהר ומהם שגדלתם עולה הרבה וכדי שלא ליכשל בהם לעשות דרך נחש תקנו לומר עליהם דברים המעוררים לתשובה. ... וידוע שכל זה אינו אלא הערה שאין הדבר תלוי באמירה לבד רק בתשובה ומעשים טובים. הרב מנחם מאירי בית הבחירה הוריות יב.

There are many things that are permissible that are similar to [the prohibition against] divination (using omens to predict the future) but are not actual divination, rather a sign to inspire one to perform good deeds. This is why they said to place on one's table on the night of Rosh Hashanah pumpkin, fenugreek, etc., for some of them grow quickly and some grow to large sizes. In order that one does not violate the prohibition against divination, they instituted a recitation that inspires one to reflect on one's actions. ... It is known that this is only a point of reference, a catalyst, because it is not contingent on the recitation alone, rather on action, repentance, and good deeds.

R. Menachem Meiri, Beit HaBechira, Horayot 12a

יתבאר ענין סימנא מילתא שאנו עושין בליל ר"ה על פי מה שכתב הרמב"ן (לך לך) שכל גזירת עירין כאשר תצא מכח גזירה אל פועל דמיון תהיה הגזירה מתקימת על כל פנים עיין שם ועל כן הגזירות שנגזרו לטובה מפי השם יתברך בכבודו ובעצמו בליל ראש השנה למען תהיינה מתקימות על כל פנים. הרב שמואל בורנשטיין שם משמואל ראש השנה תרע"ז

The concept that symbolism is significant and what we do on the evening of Rosh HaShanah can be explained based on the comments of Nachmanides, that all heavenly decrees have a permanent effect when they are converted from a statement to an action. Therefore, in order to concretize the good decrees that God bestowed upon us, [we eat these foods] so that they have a permanent effect. [Note: This approach represents a more mystical view of the simanim. The judgment of Rosh HaShanah is determined at the beginning of the holiday at night, but is not finalized until the morning. By eating these foods, one can solidify a good decree through action and that might prevent its reversal over the course of Rosh HaShanah.]

R. Shmuel Bornstein, Shem MiShmuel, Rosh HaShanah 5677

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