

Of Apples, Honey, and Black-eyed Peas

The How, Why, and Why-not of Simanei Rosh ha-Shana

Some of the great joys of learning and studying halacha and minhag are the grand vistas and big ideas that we often discover in the exploration of problematic details. As part of our Rosh ha-Shana preparation, an examination of one such detail of practice — the colorful array of foods that annually adorn our Rosh ha-Shana tables — can also inspire and equip us for a more profound yom tov experience. Moreover, this intellectual journey can provide us with globally important skills and insights particularly relevant for 21st-century Jews, enabling us to appreciate and discern authentic, sophisticated religious experience throughout the year.

While it is somewhat curious that eating honeyed apples on Rosh ha-Shana night — a minhag mentioned some seven centuries ago by the *Tur*¹ — is far more prominent among Ashkenazim than consuming leek, black-eyed peas, and the other items cited more than 1½ millennia ago by the Gemara in *Massechtos Horayos* 12a and *Kereisos* 5b,² the most surprising and most troubling aspect — as we are about to discover — is that we allow *any* of these foods at our yom tov tables.



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I. Superstitious Se'uda?

In *Parashas Shofetim*, the Torah forbids many occult practices, particularly *nichush*:

לֹא יִמָּצֵא בָּךְ מַעֲבִיר בְּנוֹ וּבִתּוֹ בְּאֵשׁ קֶסֶם
קְסָמִים מְעוֹלָן וּמִנְחָשׁ וּמִכַּשֵּׁף.

*Let no one be found among you who ...
practices nichush ...*

Devarim 18:10

In the *Sifrei* (the *midrash halacha* on Bamidbar and Devarim), the tannaim defined “*nichush*” as engaging in superstitious behavior:

ומנחש – איזהו מנחש? כגון האומר נפלה
פתי מפי, נפלה מקלי מידי, עבר נחש מימיני
ושועל משמאלי ופסק צבי את הדרך לפני; אל
תחיל בי – שחרית הוא, ראש חודש הוא,
מוצאי שבת הוא.

Who qualifies as a “menachesh”? [One who interprets natural happenings as signs or portents] e.g., “His bread fell from his mouth; therefore ...,” “his stick fell from his hand; therefore ...,” “a snake on his right, a fox on his left, a deer crossed his path; therefore ...,” and one who says “Do not begin” (a new enterprise) — it is morning; it is the New Moon; it is the end of Shabbath.”

Sifrei 171 trans. adapted from Sefaria

This *Sifrei* is quoted in *Masseches Sanhedrin* 65b, and it is codified as a matter of halacha by Rambam (*Avoda Zara* 11:4) and *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yore De'ah* 179:3). Yet this seems to stand in direct contradiction to the Gemara mentioned above, which appears to recommend consuming particular foods as a way to magically ensure a year of beracha!

Both Meiri and Rav Yaacov of Lisa address this quandary, and both of their answers actually flow from a third, striking Gemara.

II. Superstitious or Simply Super?

In discussing the bounds of forbidden *nichush*, we learn in *Masseches Chullin* 95b, that:

אמר רב כל נחש שאינו כאליעזר עבד אברהם
וכיונתן בן שאול אינו נחש.

Rav said: Any nichush unlike that of Eliezer (Avraham's servant) and of Yonasan (son of Shaul) does not qualify as nichush.

Rav points to two episodes in Tanach that serve as paradigms of *nichush*: Eliezer selecting a wife for Yitzchak by waiting to hear the significant phrase, “I’ll water your camels as well” (Bereishis 24), and Yonasan deciding whether or not to charge up the hill at the enemy Pelishti camp by testing whether the Pelishtim stream down the hill at Yonasan or invite him uphill (Shemuel I 14). Acting based on a sign — as did Yonasan and Eliezer — is the paradigm for forbidden *nichush* according to Rav.

Ba’alei ha-Tosefos are shocked: are these tzaddikim, Yonasan and Eliezer, actually models of sin? *Ri ba’al ha-Tosefos*³ answers that Yonasan and Eliezer planned to act regardless, Yonasan relying on his judgment and Eliezer upon *zechuso shel Avraham*, the merit of Avraham; the signs were merely an additional *siman* but were not dispositive whatsoever. Truly acting based upon signs, though, would indeed violate the prohibition against *nichush*.

In his *chiddushim*, Rabbeinu Nissim⁴ offers an alternative *teirutz*:

וכך נראה לי בתירוץ של דברים, שהנחש שאסרה תורה הוא התולה את מעשיו בסימן שאין הסברה נותנת שיהא גורם תועלת לדבר או נזק, כגון פתו נפלה לו מידו או צבי הפסיק לו בדרך שאלו וכיוצא בהן הם מדרכי האמורי. אבל הלוקח סימנים בדבר שהסברה מכרעת שהם מורים תועלת הדבר או נזקו אין זה נחש, שכל עסקי העולם כך הם, שהרי האומר אם ירדו גשמים לא אצא לדרך ואם לאו אצא אין זה נחש אלא מנהגו של עולם. ואליעזר ויהונתן – בכיוצא בזה תלו מעשיהם, שאליעזר יודע היה שלא היו מזוגין אשה ליצחק אלא הוגנת לו לפיכך לקח סימן לעצמו שאם תהא כל כך נאה במעשיה ושלימה במדותיה עד שכשיאמר לה הגמאיני נא מעט מים תשיבהו ברוח נדיבה גם גמליך אשקה אותה היא שהזמינו מן השמים ליצחק. וכן יהונתן שבקש להכות במחנה פלשתים הוא ונושא כליו בלבד לקח סימן זה: שאם

יאמרו אליו עלו אלינו יהא נראה שהם יראים ממארב, ובכיוצא בו בטח יונתן בגבורתו שהוא ונושא כליו יפגעו בהם, שכן מנהגו של עולם ששנים או שלשה אבירי לב יניסו הרבה מן המופחדים. ואם יאמרו דומו עד הגיעו אליכם יראה מדבריהם שאינם מתפחדים, ובכיוצא בזה לא היה ראוי ליהונתן שימסור עצמו לסכנה וכל כיוצא בזה מנהגו של עולם הוא. וכי מייתי לה בגמרא לענין איסור ה"ק, שכל נחש שהוא מהדברים שאסרה תורה שאין הסברה מכרעת בהן כל שאינו סומך על מעשיו ממש כמו שעשו אלו השנים בדבר מותר אינו נחש ואינו אסור אע"פ שהוא מדרכי הנחשים האסורים.

I believe the solution is as follows: The Torah forbade nichush when one relies upon a siman for which there is no logical basis to presume it causes benefit nor harm, such as divining based upon bread falling from one's hand or a deer crossing one's path. These examples are indeed superstitious. If, however, one employs simanim with a logical basis — why, that is typical everyday living! For instance, "I shall not travel if it will rain, but I shall travel if it won't rain" is typical practice, not nichush.

Eliezer and Yonasan employed the second [and permissible] type of siman. Eliezer sought a woman who would be appropriate for [the great tzaddik] Yitzchak, and so he took the following as his siman: if she is so refined and of developed character as to generously respond to my request for water with an offer to water my camels as well, she is a good fit for Yitzchak. Similarly, Yonasan — who sought to attack an entire Pelishti camp with only one companion — took the following as his siman: if they say to us, "Come up the mountain [to fight us]," they must be frightened of ambush, and then we can reasonably rely on our capabilities, as a couple of courageous soldiers can effectively disperse a large group of frightened ones. However, if they say to us, "Wait and stand your ground, we are headed

towards you [to fight]," then they seem unafraid, and logically we ought to flee rather than fight.

The Gemara referenced these episodes in order to teach us even if a siman is illogical, it is only forbidden if one acts upon it as did these two [Eliezer and Yonasan].

Acting based upon signs is prohibited provided that the signs are nonsensical, as are the examples mentioned by the *Sifrei* above. There is no rational reason to avoid business subsequent to bread dropping from one's mouth or a deer (or black cat) crossing one's path, so such avoidance violates the biblical prohibition against *nichush*, superstition. By contrast, choosing to take an umbrella based upon sky color (grey rather than blue) is a sensible, scientifically-based heuristic and is therefore permitted. Similarly, volunteering unasked to provide several hundred gallons of water⁵ certainly indicates exceptionally proactive and insightful *chesed*, and a mountaintop garrison's surprising hesitancy to charge down at a pair of enemy soldiers reveals the garrison's remarkable weakness or low morale, so Eliezer and Yonasan violated no prohibition. Combining his explanation with that of *Tosefos*, Ran writes there are two criteria that must be met for violation of *nichush*: **truly acting upon a meaningless sign.**

This pair of concepts is quoted by rishonim in discussing an adjacent Gemara as well. As the sugya progresses, a *baraisa*⁶ teaches us that sometimes what seems like prohibited *nichush* is in fact permitted, a mere *siman*:

תניא רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר בית תינוק ואשה אף על פי שאין נחש יש סימן *Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: "home," "wife" and "child" are not nichush, but rather a siman.*

What distinguishes a permitted *siman* from forbidden *nichush*? Rambam writes:

[ד] אין מנחשין כעכו"ם שנאמר לא תנחשו ... וכל העושה מעשה מפני דבר מדברים אלו לוקה. [ה] מי שאמר דירה זו שבניתי סימן טוב היתה עלי, אשה זו שנשאתי ובהמה זו שקניתי מבורכת היתה מעת שקניתי עשרתי; וכן השואל לתינוק אי זה פסוק אתה לומד אם אמר לו פסוק מן הברכות ישמח ויאמר זה סימן טוב כל אלו וכיוצא בהן מותר הואיל ולא כיון מעשיו ולא נמנע מלעשות אלא עשה זה סימן לעצמו לדבר שכבר היה הרי זה מותר.

It is forbidden to practice nichush

... **And whosoever commits an act as a result of any one of such divinations, is lashed.**

One who said: "This dwelling which I built was of good prefiguration," "this wife whom I married has brought a blessing to me" ... Likewise, one who asks a child, "What verse are you studying?" if he mentioned to him a verse of the blessings, he may rejoice and say: "This is of good omen." All such and the like is permitted;⁷ seeing that he neither regulated his actions nor withheld himself from performing them by these signs, save that he made for himself a mark of a thing which already had come to pass, this is permitted.

Rambam (Avoda Zara 11:4-5); trans. adapted from Sefaria

In other words, "a mere *siman*" means that one does not actually decide and act based upon this sign. It is esthetic, not heuristic. *Hagahos Maimoniyos*⁸ notes that this understanding of *siman* aligns with the Ri *ba'al ha-Tosefos* and the first criterion above. He goes on to cite Rabbeinu Eliezer of Metz who developed the second criterion above, that of *davar be-lo ta'am* versus *ta'am ba-davar*.

III. Take One: Meiri

Returning to *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* and the question of *nichush* raised above, one solution is offered by Meiri:

הרבה דברים הותרו לפעמים שהם דומים לנחש, ולא מדרך נחש חלילה אלא דרך סימן לעורר בו לבבו להנהגה טובה. והוא שאמרו ליתן על שלחנו בליל ראש השנה קרקס"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 – והוא שאומרים בקרא "קראו זכיותינו" ... ובכרתי "יכרתו שונאינו" ר"ל שונאי הנפש והם העונות ... וידוע שכל זה אינו אלא הערה, שאין הדבר תלוי באמירה לבד רק בתשובה ומעשים טובים ...

Many behaviors are permitted despite seeming to be nichush, for these are not surely not actual nichush but are instead a siman to inspire an individual to proper conduct. This explains why the Gemara instructed that one serve various plant foods at his table on the eve of Rosh ha-Shana, as some of these plants grow rapidly and some grow to significant height. And, in order to avoid this being done in a superstitious fashion, the rabbis instituted that we recite repentance-oriented formulae in conjunction with these foods ... It is well-known that these are but inspiration, as the real crux is not these formulae, but rather repentance and good works.

Meiri Horayos 12a

According to Meiri, *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* are not meant to directly, intrinsically determine our *gezar din* (verdict) for the coming year, but are instead a tool, an instrument for inspiring us to do teshuva. It is teshuva that does impact our *gezar din*, and the brief tefillos that accompany the foods serve to ensure that we do not mistake the foods for anything but teshuva-catalysts. (Note as well

that Meiri interprets the language of each of those tefillos as references to teshuva.) This explanation is cognate to the first criterion above, *siman be'alma*; according to Meiri, *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* are meant to be psychologically inspirational, not materially influential.

IV. Take Two: Rav Yaacov of Lisa

Rav Yaacov of Lisa⁹ suggests in his *Emes le-Ya'acov* that the basis for *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* lies in the Tanach-wide concept of *po'al dimyon* developed by Ramban in his *Peirush al ha-Torah* (Bereishis 12:6).¹⁰ Ramban writes that a *nevua* (prophecy) that is both spoken and acted out by the *navi* (prophet) is more potent than one that is only delivered verbally. It is for this reason that throughout Tanach, a *navi* may be instructed to both pronounce a given *nevua* and concomitantly perform a *po'al dimyon*, an action that portrays and mimes the content of that particular *nevua*.

By analogy, a tefilla that is both spoken and mimed is even more powerful than one that is only spoken. The objective of *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* is to serve as *po'alei dimyon*, enhancing and multiplying the power of the tefillos "Yehi ratzon ..." which they accompany. Instead of a solely verbal request for a *shana tova u-mesuka* (a good and sweet year), for *ribbui zechuyos* (increase in merits), and for *kerisas sone'einu* (destruction of our enemies), we both say those tefillos and mime them by eating corresponding foods, thus equipping our Rosh ha-Shana with enhanced tefillos.

This second explanation is cognate with the second criterion above in the definition of *nichush*, namely *ta'am ba-davar*. According to Rav

Yaacov of Lisa, *simanei Rosh ha-Shana* are permissible because while they are meant to effectively impact our year, they do so in an explainable, rational fashion — by leveraging and multiplying our verbal tefillos.

V. Reflections

Two reflections flow from this approach of Rav Yaacov of Lisa. First, it highlights the critical importance of uttering the tefillos “*Yehi ratzon ...*” (To instead focus solely on consuming the array of *siman* foods while neglecting the tefillos is to embrace the *tafel*, secondary, while ignoring the *ikkar*, primary.)

Moreover, the Rav¹¹ famously developed the notion of *teki'as shofar* as a primal, wordless form of tefilla. Taken together with Rav Yaacov of Lisa’s insight, Rosh ha-Shana emerges as the tremendously consequential yom ha-din (day of judgment), which understandably requires us to employ not only routine methods of tefilla, but rather the full suite of tools in our tefilla arsenal, including both wordless and mimed forms of expression. Certainly, its more standard tefillos similarly demand singular effort and unique focus.

As we prepare to organize and energize our toolkit of tefillos — our Rosh ha-Shana panoply — to the best of our ability, may we merit *kabbalas ha-tefillos*.

אָחוּת קִטְנָה תְּפִלוּתֶיהָ
 עוֹרְכָה וְעוֹנָה תְּהִלּוּתֶיהָ
 בְּנֵעָם מְלִים לָךְ תִּקְרָאָה
 וְשִׁיר וְהַלּוּלִים כִּי לָךְ נִצָּאָה
 לְצוּר הוֹחִילוּ בְרִיתוֹ שְׁמֵר
 תְּחַל שְׁנָה וּבְרִכּוּתֶיהָ

Endnotes

1 *Tur* (*Orach Chayim* 583). Interestingly, the *Gra* (*loc. cit.*) suggests that the apple recreates the episode of *birkas Yitzchak*, and that it occurred on *Rosh ha-Shana*.

2 According to *Tosfos* (*Avoda Zara* 5b), it is already indicated in a *mishna* (*Chullin* 83a).

3 Quoted by *Tosfos* and *Ritva ad loc.*

4 *Ad loc.* See also the commentaries on the above-referenced *Rambam*, particularly *Kesef Mishne* who expands upon this thesis of *Rabbeinu Nissim*, as well as *Hagahos Maimoniyos* who references an earlier partial source for this position in *Sefer Yere'im*.

5 nationalgeographic.com/weepingcamel/thecamels.html.

6 This *baraisa* appears as well in *Bereishis Rabba* 85:5 in the context of Yehuda’s refusal to marry his third son Sheilah to Tamar (*Bereishis* 38:11).

7 In his comments, Ra’avad (*ad loc.*) disagrees with this reading of the passage in *Masseches Chullin*. He believes that the Gemara is concerned with the efficacy of the *siman*, not with its halachic permissibility. Ran explores Rashi’s position on this question. *Hagahos Maimoniyos* supports the position of Rambam and *Tosfos*; see especially the strong language in his closing sentence: “כל זה הארכתי נגד המשחיתים המלעיגים על פסקים אלו – I have written on this at greater length in order to counter those who destructively belittle these halachic rulings [namely, the halachic distinctions accepted by Rambam and *Tosfos*].”

8 *Ad loc.* 11:5:4*.

9 He is better-known for his *Nesivos* (*ha-Mishpat*) and *Chavvos Da’as*. *Emes le-Ya’acov* is a 94-page sefer on *aggados ha-Shas*.

10 Ramban sees this notion of *po’al dimyon* as lying at the core of *ma’ase avos siman la-banim* — the episodes of the forefathers are a *siman* for the history of the Jewish people to come — a concept that he takes as fundamental in globally understanding sefer Bereishis.

11 See *Mi-Peninei Ha-Rav* (*Shofar* 8, p. 126), *et al.* For the Rav, this perspective on shofar also explains why mitzvas shofar is fulfilled during tefilla — unlike other mitzvos such as lulav, hallel and *keri’as ha-Torah* which are fulfilled in the synagogue but not during Shemone Esrei.

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