

The Month of Tishrei:

Rosh Hashanah's Physical Doorways into the Spiritual World

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Welcoming the New Year in a Spiritual Spiral

As always I look forward to Rosh Hashanah, it's my time of devotion for heartfelt prayer. I love the Rosh Hashanah davening in Bat Ayin. Several weeks into Tishrei I will find myself humming the uplifting heart opening melodies of the communal prayers. The sound of the shofar is like an open channel. Through it, we can connect and draw down the innermost, supernal realms, allowing their vibration to be heard in this world as the physical sound. I am in awe with the depths of the Shofar cry which pierces directly into my heart and I always meditate on flying to another dimension while the Shofar is blowing. I can almost feel the serenity of the spiritual world filled of light and dancing angels. One of the highlights for me is dinner at our home the first night of Rosh Hashanah. We welcome the New Year with a fruit and vegetable Seder and with recital and singing of many Torah verses with promises of blessings, light and goodness. We repeat the verses over and over until it makes us go into sort of a trance. Then it becomes time for Kiddush and the dipping of the fresh-baked *challah* into delicious flowing honey. Most people believe that we eat round *challot* to symbolize how the year repeats its yearly cycle throughout the holidays of each month. However, the Hebrew word for year שנה/*shana* means both to 'repeat' and to 'change.' Therefore, the Rosh Hashanah *challot* may actually be spiraled as a sign that we wish for the New Year to elevate us towards change and positive transformation. Each year we will climb higher and higher, creating a spiritual spiral. The shape of the Rosh Hashanah *challah* reminds us to engage in the creative spiritual process which lifts us out of the repetitive cycle, and directs our energies toward a higher end.

A Sign has Reality

Rosh Hashanah is a holiday filled with physical doorways into the spiritual world. The traditional signs '*simanim*' we perform on Rosh Hashana offer the opportunity for spiritual elevation. Conducting a traditional Rosh Hashanah Seder is an amazing gateway for drawing down within ourselves and our world, the blessed influence from above. In addition to eating apples dipped in honey, we prepare several foods and recite a prayer that contains an allusion to the food's Hebrew name. *Shulchan Aruch* mentions the custom to eat several different foods and recite a certain prayer over each food (*Orach Chayim* 583). This ritual has a very deep significance. As Chazal says, סימנין היא מילתא/*simanin milta hee* – "A sign has reality" (*Babylonian Talmud, Bechorot* 6a). The matter is that the eating is a *siman tov* (sign for good) just as the names of the foods. At the time of Creation words of Torah were the center of the world. Therefore, eating, the maintenance of life, was connected with ingesting words of Torah. The reason all this changed was that the eating from the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil caused all the good in the world to become mixed with evil. However, when Rosh Hashanah arrives – the day of the beginning of the world – it is possible to return back to the original purpose of Creation and the reality before eating from the Tree by receiving a taste of only the good. The Hebrew names of everything in reality teach us about the root of its life force. When we eat



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something, which is called a head, the root of its life force shows that we will become the head. Abaye stated: "Now that you have concluded that a sign has reality and can affect the future, let everyone be accustomed to eat on Rosh Hashanah: gourd, beans, leek and beets" (*Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 12a*). Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach explains that we give signs to one another and Hashem in order to recall the signs that Rachel gave to Leah. With these '*simanim*' (signs) they became elevated to the realm before Creation when there were no words – only signs. Our relationship with one another on Rosh Hashana is also like before the Creation of the world – Just '*simanim*.' Words can kill, but *simanim* are always holy. All the signs we give Hashem tell how much we want to be a better person and Jew. The signs we give to one another tell how much we love each other and want each other to live. When Mashiach arrives we will all stream to Yerushalayim to the sound of the Shofar. Mashiach will not give long speeches, but the world will understand from the '*siman*' of the shofar's sound that Mashiach has arrived.

Becoming the Head and not the Tail by Fulfilling our Potential

During the Rosh Hashana Seder it is a custom to eat the head of an animal and ask "That we may be the head and not the tail." This request is connected with the last *bracha* which was said in Mount Grizim.

וַיְהִי כִּשְׁמֵי הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה רֶגֶל לְמַעַלָּה וְלֹא תִהְיֶה לְמַטָּה... (ספר דברים פרק כח פסוק יג)

"Hashem shall make you the head and not the tail and you shall be above only, and you shall not be beneath, if you listen to the commandments of Hashem your G-d which I command you this day to observe and to do them" (*Devarim 28:13*).

How is it possible that we all become the head, isn't it natural that some people are on higher ranks than others? We're asking that all Israel shall become heads and not tails each one according to his level and potential. This is what it says in *Midrash Tanchuma Nitzavim*: "Although you have appointed for yourselves heads, you are all equal before Me." The explanation of this is that every Jewish person corresponds to a letter or a part of a letter in the Torah. If any part of a letter is missing then the whole *Sefer Torah* is *pasul* (worthless). Therefore, when we fulfill our potential to its fullest we really become all heads all equally important in the eyes of G-d. In the world to come there will not be a division of levels and ranks of importance, as it says: "In the future H' will make a dance (in a circle) of Tzadikim..." (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 31*) Every point in a circle is equidistant from the center, there is no difference in level.

Why Sweeter than Good?

On Rosh Hashana it is a custom to dip an apple in honey and say the following prayer:

יְהִי רָצוֹן לְפָנֶיךָ שֶׁתַּחֲדֹשׁ עֲלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה / *Yehi ratzon lefanacha sh'titchadesh aleinu shana tovah u'metukah* – "May it be your will to renew for us a good and sweet year." Why do we request both a good and sweet year. What is the difference between good and sweet? אֹרֶץ לְצַדִּיק וּלְיֹשֶׁרִי לֵב שְׂמֵחָה: "Light is sown for the *tzaddik* (righteous), but happiness for the upright in heart" (*Tehillim 97:11*). There are two kind of righteous people a *tzaddik* (righteous) and a *yashar* (upright). The *tzaddik* walks in the way of the Torah and keeps Hashem's mitzvot without feeling the

taste and sweetness of being happy about serving Hashem. However, a *yashar* not only walks in the ways of Torah, he moreover feels the taste and sweetness of his worship to the extent that he becomes filled with *simcha* (happiness) with each mitzvah he is able to perform. When we pray for a sweet year we don't just ask for a fun filled year where we're having fun at the movies, going out with our friends etc. What we're really asking for is that living a Torah life, *shiurim*, *tefilah*, Shabbat, *chesed* etc. should not just remain exterior acts which we do out of obedience. Rather, we pray that we will be able to feel the taste (meaning) of the mitzvot to become so sweet that we fulfill them with a complete heart – filled with *simcha* – happiness. Another way of understanding the difference between good and sweet is that everything that Hashem does is good as Nachum *Ish Gam Zu* taught us (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Ta'anit* 21:1). Yet, much of all that goodness is hidden goodness. It may be good but nevertheless it feels bitter; like a bitter medicine that heals but is hard to swallow. When we pray for a sweet year we pray that we will merit experiencing all the goodness that Hashem has in store for us as complete revealed good. That we won't need any bitter lessons of healing, but that our year will be blessed to the extent that it's not only objectively good, it will also feel subjectively good to each one of us. The Hebrew word for sweet מתוקה/*metukah* derives from the word מתוקן/*metukan* – rectified. When we rise to a realm of expanded consciousness revealing the root of our existence, even harsh judgments become sweetened. This is when we not only accept our destiny but actually embrace it. This is the greatest rectification!

The Apple – Representing the Tree of Life

Why do we dip an apple in honey instead of any other fruit? We eat apples on *Rosh Hashana*, as the apple is distinguished in taste, appearance and fragrance. The apples are a sign of children, life and sustenance throughout the New Year (*Ben Ish Chai*). Chazal teaches us that Israel is compared to an apple. Just as the blossoming of the apple tree precedes the formation of leaves, so the Jewish people agreed to perform the Torah's commandments even before hearing them. When we willingly accepted the Torah by proclaiming נעשה/*na'aseh* – we will do, prior to ונשמע/*v'nishma* – and we will hear and understand (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Shabbat* 88a). The first step נעשה/*na'aseh* – we will do entails performing the good act – (Torah & Mitzvot) obediently without feeling the taste (meaning) of the mitzvot. However, the next step ונשמע/*v'nishma* – we will hear is the feeling of the taste of the words of Torah through the understanding of their meaning. The apple alludes to the good deeds which we hope to be able to do in the following year this is the meaning of the word *tovah*. The honey alludes to the sweetness and understanding of the good deeds, which we pray to be able to experience in the following year this is the meaning of *metukah*.

Apple	Honey
טובה/ <i>tovah</i> – good	ומתוקה/ <i>u'metukah</i> – sweet
נעשה/ <i>na'aseh</i> – we will do	ונשמע/ <i>v'nishma</i> – and we will hear
צדיק/ <i>Tzaddik</i> – Righteous	ישר/ <i>Yashar</i> – Upright
אור/ <i>Ohr</i> – Light	שמחה/ <i>Simcha</i> – Happiness

Just as the apple heals all, so the Holy One heals all. Just as the apple has various colors (white, red, green) so the Holy One has various supernal colors (white, red and green corresponding to the attributes of *chesed*, *gevurah* and *tiferet* (*Zohar Acharei Mot*). Most people who are not learned in the Torah think that the Tree of Knowledge was an apple. Little do they know that the apple is actually the exact opposite it is the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life refers to Hashem Who is called “the apple tree.” (*Pri Zaddik, Parashat Shelach 52*). Rosh Hashanah celebrates the birthday of the first human being who ate from the Tree of Knowledge the very first day of his creation, and brought down death and mortality to the world. On Rosh Hashanah we return to the beginning of Creation where we have the opportunity to rectify the misdeed of the eating from the Tree of Knowledge through eating from its anti-dote – the apple which represents the Tree of Life. This is our non-verbal eating prayer ritual that will b”H inscribe us in the Book of Life.

Rosh Hashana Blessings

On Rosh Hashanah it’s a custom to bless one another. As Rav Shlomo teaches, when we bless on Rosh Hashanah evening we are telling our friend: “If I merit to be written above in the book of life, I am saying before Hashem that I want it to be together with you, only together with you! The world that I want to live in is the world that we are all alive and happening. My being written in the book of life includes those I bless, we are together mamash!” The very deepest moment on Rosh Hashanah is when we bless each other. I wish to bless you on Rosh Hashanah itself with so much life flowing over into an abundance of vessels that you will create with your kindness of spirit and action. I bless all of us to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, that our upcoming year should be not only good but that it will be b”H be the Sweetest of Sweets! May we all fulfill our potential to become the head and not the tail!