

חֲצִיץ – Black Seed – Nigella Sativa



Black Seed Sprinkled on Bread since Talmudic Times

My Shabbat guests – a new couple in Bat Ayin – brought delicious, ‘homebaked’ sour-dough rolls sprinkled with black seeds and sesame seeds, yum! If you haven’t seen Nigella sativa seeds they are round resembling sesame seeds, but completely black. It is interesting that just as we use black seed with sesame seed as a crust for various baked goods or in the dough today, exactly so were they used in Talmudic times. They used N. sativa similarly to sesame seed for sprinkling on bread or matza: “Come and hear, if [the matza] was seasoned with black seeds, sesame seeds or other kinds of spices, it is kosher [to eat on Pesach]. It is still matza but is called seasoned matza” (*Babylonia Talmud, Menachot 23b*). Black seed was a common agricultural crop in Israel from the times of the prophets as well as in Talmudic times. Five kinds of black seed grow wild in Israel today, in addition to the cultivated black seed garden flowers. Unfortunately no black seed plant chose my garden as its home, but I plan to choose it as my garden flower! I have never ever seen a black seed flower for real, but its beauty, testified by these photos, made me decide that I’m going to find a way to get some for my garden.

Black Seed versus Black Cumin

Albeit commonly mistaken for ‘black cumin’ (*bunium bulbocastanum*), nigella sativa from which the sought after oil is made, is actually not related to cumin at all. Whereas black cumin is an annual plant from the Ranunculaceae family, black seed is a plant species in the Apiaceae family. Plenty of products now erroneously label themselves as black cumin, yet the two should not be confused (*Shea Terra Organics, September 5, 2016*). Ra’avd’s commentary that cumin is a bit longer than black seed, supports the fact that these two plants are different. Perhaps the confusion arose due to the powerful scent of both these plants. Black seed has been cultivated and used for medicine and to flavor food since biblical times. Modern research has revealed many antioxidant compounds in black seed that have numerous health benefits. The black seed plant is native to the Mediterranean, Africa and southwestern Asia. It has been grown since antiquity for its aromatic and flavorful seeds that can be used as a spice or as an herbal medicine. The seeds have an aroma similar to fennel with a pungent flavor somewhat similar to nutmeg, though the plant is not related to either. The seeds are commonly roasted and ground as a spice and are widely used in India, the Middle East, and parts of North Africa to season curries, rice, breads, and sweet confections. Black seed is also traditionally used by Yemenites, howbeit sparingly, as a flavoring spice in baking Shabbat bread known as ‘Koubana.’ The Yemenites eat Koubana instead of ‘Kugel’ as part of their traditional Sabbath meal.

Black Seed in the Torah

It’s too bad that black seed is no longer used as an agricultural crop in Israel as previously. Rashi explains that black seed is a kind of food – a seed grown in Arab countries, during his time. We find it mentioned twice in the book of Yesha’yahu, three times in the Mishna, and twice in the Talmud.

ישעיהו פרק כח פסוק כה הֲלוֹא אִם שָׂוָה פְּנִיָּה וְהַפִּיץ קֶצֶח וְכַמֵּן יִזְרַק וְשָׂם חֲטָה שְׂוָרָה וְשִׁעֲרָה נִסְמָן וְכִסְמָת גְּבִלְתוֹ:

“When he has prepared a smooth surface, he then scatters the black seed, and casts the cumin, and puts in wheat by rows, and barley in the marked spot, and spelt along its border” (*Yesha’yahu 28:25*).

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This passage describes the various ways of sowing different agricultural crops in Israel. Both black seed and cumin need to be sown in finely crushed soil. (Radak ibid.). Whereas sowing cumin involves throwing the seeds in the field, black seeds, which are lighter, don't need to be thrown down hard, but only to be scattered. These two crops are also a parable for giving rebuke: In the beginning, we scatter sweet words like black seed, and only afterward do we throw the cumin which has a sharper taste (Alshich). Malbim interprets our verse as a parable for the exile of the Jewish people. Just as every crop needs ploughing, so does the general community of Israel suffer equally during exile. The kind of sowing that refers to Torah learning and prophecy relates to the individual levels of each Jew. Those who are prepared for wisdom only need a mere allusion – like the scattering of the black seed. However, the masses are compared to wheat and barley with each having its specific row or marked spot, since they need to have the Torah clearly explained to them in detail and order. Further on, the prophet compares various ways of harvesting different crops:

ספר ישעיה פרק כח פסוק כז כִּי לֹא בַחֲרוּץ יוֹדֵשׁ קִצְחָ וְאֹפֶן עֲגָלָה עַל כֶּמֶן יֹסֵב כִּי בַמַּטָּה יִחַבֵּט קִצְחָ וְכֶמֶן בַּשֶּׁבֶט

For not with a grooved [implement] is black cumin threshed, [neither] does a wagon wheel turn around on cumin, but black cumin is beaten with a staff and cumin with a rod (*Yesha'yahu* 28:27).

Since black seeds are so tiny, they cannot be subjected to threshing which may break and damage them (Radak ibid.). Rashi notices that the black seeds are easy to separate from their pods, therefore they do not need to be threshed, beating them lightly with a rod is sufficient. With this passage the prophet hints that if only Israel would be quick to accept rebuke, there would be no need for harsh decrees.

Waiting for Mashich to Explain Black Seed Mentioned in the Talmud

Black seed is mentioned in the Mishna as a plant whose status as a food was disputed by Beit Hillel and Beit Shamai. This dispute affects the laws of impurity and purity concerning black seed. "Beit Shamai considers black seed pure, whereas Beit Hillel considers it impure" (*Mishna Eduyot* 5:3). It also affects whether or not black seed needs to be tithed (*Mishna Uktzin* 3:6). Rambam explains that since Beit Shamai doesn't consider black seed a kind of food, therefore it neither becomes impure nor does it need to be tithed, whereas Beit Hillel considers it a food and therefore it both receives impurity and must be tithed. Black seed is also mentioned in *Mishna, Tuval Yom* 1:5. Rav Ovadia Bartenura considers black seed a food customarily sprinkled on bread in order to avoid heart burn as stated in Talmud, Berachot:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף מ"א אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא הרגיל בקצח אינו בא לידי כאב לב מיתיבי רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר קצח אחד מששים סמני המות הוא והישן למזרח גרנו דמו בראשו לא קשיא הא בריחו הא בטעמו אימיה דרבי ירמיה אפיא ליה ריפתא ומדבקא ליה ומקלפא ליה:

"Rabbi Chama ben Chanina said: One who eats black seed regularly will not suffer from heartburn (literally, pain in the heart). The following was cited in objection to this: Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel says, black seed is one of the sixty poisons of death. If one sleeps on the east side of the place where it is stored, he is responsible for his own death (literally, his blood will be on his own head), [because the west wind will carry the odor to him and poison him]. There is no contradiction: The latter statement speaks of its smell, the former of its taste. The mother of R. Jeremiah used to bake bread for him and stick [black seed] on it [so that it should absorb the taste], and then scrape it off [to remove the smell] (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 40a).

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The mother of Rabbi Yermiyah baked him a loaf of bread, and sprinkled the black seed on it just long enough to impart its flavor but not its injurious smell. The reason why Beit Shamai didn't consider black seed as a food, is due to its harmful smell, and it possibly being one of the sixty deadly poisons. On the other hand, according to Beit Hillel, black seed was indeed considered a food since eating it is good for the heart, as "Rabbi Chanina said, one who eats black seed regularly will not suffer ailments of the heart." Likewise Tiferet Yisrael explains that black seed is considered food as it has healing properties and is used in bread. Beit Hillel holds that the health benefits of eating it override the harmful effects of its smell. Conversely, according to Beit Shamai, its harmful effects override its healing properties. I'm having a hard time coming to terms with the Talmudic statements regarding the harmful effect of black seed. I have never heard that its taste or its smell ever affected anyone adversely. Since no one has ever suffered ill effects by eating or smelling *N. sativa* seed, perhaps the black seed in Talmudic times were much more potent, or perhaps there is a secret here which will be revealed when Mashiach arrives.

Medicinal Properties of Black Seed

Black seed has received a renaissance in recent research, especially black seed oil which is considered to have amazing health benefits. My friend uses it successfully to relieve itchy skin hives. According to [Dr. Axe](#), there is clinical evidence that the synergy of black seed oil's phytochemicals, thymoquinone and thymohydroquinone have potent antibiotic, anti-fungal, anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory and anticancer properties. Studies also demonstrate *N. sativa*'s tumor suppression, as well as its antimicrobial and anti-parasitic, properties. Scientific literature acclaims black seed oil's ability to kill antibiotic-resistant 'superbugs,' boost liver health, treat high cholesterol and blood pressure, heal and prevent various kinds of cancer, diabetes, obesity, hair loss, skin disorders like acne and eczema as well as infections like MRSA. Black seed and its oil is widely used in traditional Islamic medicine and Ayurveda to treat asthma and bronchitis, diabetes, hypertension, fever, inflammation, bronchitis, dizziness, rheumatism, skin disorders, and gastrointestinal disturbances. It is also used as a liver tonic, digestive, antidiarrhoeal, emmenagogue, and to control parasitic infections and intestinal worms as well as boost the immune system (Goreja, 2003). The seeds have been used to stimulate lactation and to alleviate menstrual and postpartum problems. In an article titled, 16 More Reasons Black Seed is 'The Remedy For Everything But Death,' Sayer Ji documents black seed oil's ability to prevent Alzheimer's associated neurotoxicity, brain pathology associated with Parkinson's disease, its ability to treat kidney and radiation damage and protect against damage from heart attack. It is interesting that both the interpretations of the Talmudic statement that – eating black seed regularly prevents pain in the heart – correlates with the recently discovered health benefits of *N. sativa*. If 'pain in the heart' refers to heartburn it relates to the ability of black seed to relieve gastrointestinal disturbances aka digestive troubles which cause heartburn. If it refers to heart disease, black seed indeed has been proven to have Cardio protective influence including protecting against damage from heart attack.

Hands On

Nigella sativa seeds have been used for years as a spice and food preservative. Black seed has been added as a spice to a variety of Persian foods such as yogurt, pickles, sauces and salads (Hajhashemi et al. [2004](#); Venkatachallam et al. [2010](#)). The seeds are used extensively as a spice for flavoring purposes, especially bakery products and cheese. Seeds are of importance as a carminative; often they are used as a condiment in bread and other dishes (Lautenbacher [1997](#); Eschborn [1997](#); Burits and Bucar [2000](#); Ramadan [2007](#)). Try experimenting with black seed, adding them into various salads and casseroles.

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Spicy Lentil Snacks with Black Seeds

Makes about 30 golf ball sized balls, each about 45 calories. You can eat them as-is, or with 5% fat goat cheese, or cashew and sundried tomato spread to keep them vegan.

- 2 Cups red lentils or dal
- ½ Cup cooked bulgur wheat or brown rice
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 2 Chopped garlic cloves
- ¼ Cup olive oil
- 1 Teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1 Teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 Teaspoon hawajj (Yemenite spice mixture) or garam masala (Indian spice mixture)
- 1 Teaspoon red chili pepper flakes, or to taste
- Sea-salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- Black seeds and sesame seeds

1. Rinse the lentils, and put in a pan with enough water to come up to about 2cm /1 inch above the lentils. Add 1 teaspoon sea-salt. Cook the lentils until they are tender and mushy, about 15-20 minutes. Drain off any excess water.
2. Sautee chopped onions, garlic and spices in the olive oil. Let it just barely simmer over a low heat until the mixture is a golden brown, and the onions are softened. Add the bulgur or brown rice near the end.
3. Mix everything together and let cool until you can handle it. At this point, the mixture should resemble a thick, almost dry paste that you can gather up with your fingers and form into balls.
4. If it's too moist, cook the mixture over a very low heat until some moisture evaporates. If it's too dry and falls apart, add a little water until it forms a paste.
5. Heat up an oven to 180°C / 360°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or silicon baking liner.
6. Prepare a plate with mixed black seeds and sesame seeds. Form the lentil mixture into small balls. Dip lightly into a bowl of water, then roll in the seed mixture.
7. Place the balls on the lined baking sheet, and bake for about 20 minutes or until the surface is a bit crispy.