

Introduction

A variety of symbolic foods, called simanim, are eaten at the beginning of the Rosh Hashanah dinner. The foods are each accompanied by a short wish for the new year which includes a pun based on the name or characteristics of the food. The most well-known example is an apple dipped in honey and eaten with the wish to be blessed with a sweet new year.

Below is an explanation of simanim and the practice of eating a selection of foods with their accompanying blessings. Read the texts and answer the questions below.

Machzor Rosh Hashanah Ashkenaz Linear, Kiddush 87

On the first night of Rosh Hashanah, it is customary to perform several symbolic rituals to serve as good omens for the coming new year.

At the beginning of the evening meal it is customary to dip a portion of the challah in honey and after eating a piece, the weight of an olive, say: "יהי רצון מלפניך שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה" — May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year."

Then, take a piece of sweet apple and dip it in honey. First make the blessing, "ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו" — Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the tree." After tasting it, repeat the above prayer, "יהי רצון — May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year."

It is also a custom to eat a piece of the head of some animal (preferably a sheep) and say: "יהי רצון — שנהיה לראש — May it be Your will that we be at the head."

We also eat certain vegetables, the names of which convey the connotations of good fortune, such as carrots which in Yiddish are called mehren (increase), and we say: "יהי רצון שירבו זכויותינו" — May it be Your will that our merits increase."

Machzor Rosh Hashanah Sefard, Rosh Hashanah Customs 1-19

It is customary to eat apples dipped in honey and to say afterwards: May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors that we should have a good and sweet new year.

When eating the head of a sheep or fish say: May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors that we should be as a head and not a tail.

When eating dates say: May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors that our enemies be destroyed.

When eating a pomegranate say: May it be Your will, our God and God of our ancestors that our merits increase, as the seeds of the pomegranate.

מחזור ראש השנה ספרד, מנהגי ליל ראש השנה א'-י"ט

ונוהגין לאכול תפוח מתוק בדבש ואחר שיאכל יאמר זה: יהי רצון מלפניך יהוה אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה:

ונוהגין לאכול גם ראש איל או כבש זכר לאילו של יצחק או ראש של דג ויאמר זה: באכילת ראש כבש או דג אומר: יהי רצון מלפני אבינו שבשמים, שנהיה לראש ולא לזנב.

באכילת התמרים אומר: יהי רצון מלפני אבינו שבשמים שיתמו שונאינו ואויבינו.

באכילת הרימון אומר: יהי רצון מלפניך יהוה אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו, שתרבה זכויותינו פרמון:

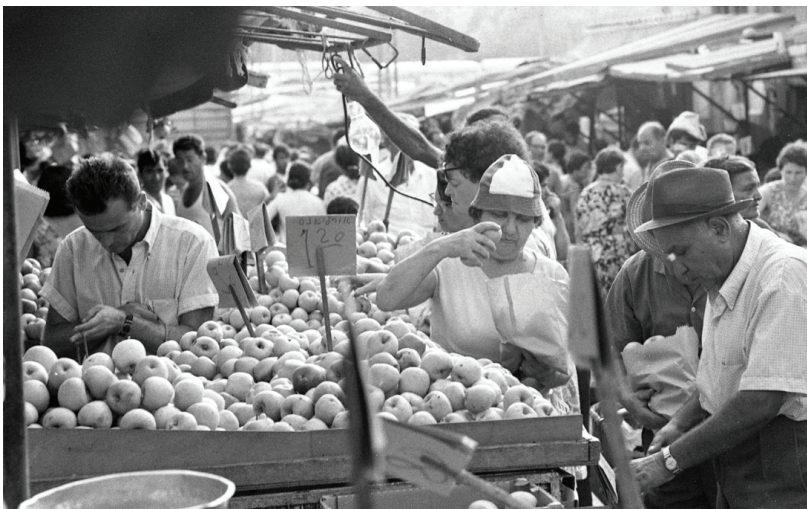
Simanim. Symbolic Rosh Hashanah Foods

1. What foods are mentioned in the mahzor texts?
2. What wishes or blessings (Yehi Ratzon) accompany the foods?
3. Which of the simanim, if any, do you eat on Rosh Hashanah?
4. Write a pun based on a food in the style of those listed above. The pun can be written in Hebrew or English and should reflect your wishes for the new year.

Simanim in National Library Resources

Below are two sources from the National Library of Israel collection.

Answer the questions below the pictures.



Carmel Market Before Rosh Hashanah, 1969
Dan Hadani Collection
The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection

1. What is being sold in the photograph?
2. What type of market (shuk) are the people shopping at?
3. What other foods might be available at the shuk before Rosh Hashanah?
4. Have you ever shopped in an outdoor market?
5. If so, how does it compare to shopping at a supermarket?
6. Which do you prefer?
7. If not, would you like to? Why?



Apples and Honey for Soldiers on Rosh Hashanah Eve
Dan Hadani Collection
The Pritzker Family National Photography Collection

1. What are each of the people in the photograph doing?
2. Why were apples and honey being given to soldiers?
3. Which holiday was approaching?
4. How do you think receiving apples and honey made the soldiers feel?
5. Why do you think the young people distributing apples and honey wanted to participate in this project?
6. How do you think it made them feel?
7. What can you learn about the connection between the Israeli public and soldiers in the IDF from the photograph?

Simanim in Additional Jewish Texts

The Kitzur Shulhan Arukh is a summary of Joseph Karo's Shulhan Arukh composed in Uzhgorod (c.1844–c.1864) by Shlomo Ganzfried. The Kitzur states what is permitted and what is forbidden without ambiguity, emphasizing the customs of the Jews of Hungary at that time.

The following section discusses the foods that were customarily eaten on Rosh Hashanah.

Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 129:9

At the evening meal it is customary to prepare symbolic dishes [as auspicious omens] for a good year. You dip the piece of challah of Hamotzi in honey, and after eating a kazayis [olive-sized piece] of challah, you should say: "May it be Your will Almighty, my God, and God of my fathers" shanah tovah umesukah [May it be Your will to renew for us a good and sweet year]. After this you should dip a piece of apple in honey, say the berachah, Borei peri ha'eitz, and eat it. Then you say again Yehi ratzon etc. It is customary to eat the head of an animal and say Yehi ratzon shenih'yeh lerosh, May it be Your will that we will be heads [leaders]. You should try to obtain the head of a sheep, which will also serve as a remembrance of the ram of Isaac. You should also eat vegetables the names of which, in the language of your country, allude to good things. such as in our country, carrots (mehren) [mehren is Yiddish for increase] and you should say Yehi ratzon sheyirbu zechuyoseinu [May it be Your will that our merits increase.] Some people have the custom to eat an elaborate fish course, symbolizing the blessing of fertility like the fish. The fish should not be cooked in vinegar because we must not eat sour or bitter foods on Rosh Hashanah. You should eat choice meats and all kinds of sweets. It is also customary not to eat nuts and almonds, because the numerical value of egoz [nut] is seventeen, the same as cheit [which means sin]. Also, nuts increase phlegm and mucus which interferes with praying. It is proper to study Torah during the meal. Some have the custom of studying the Mishnah, Masechet Rosh Hashanah.

קיצור שלחן ערוך קכ"ט:ט'

סעודת הלילה, נוהגין לעשות סימנים לשנה טובה. טובלין פרוסת המוציא בדבש. ואחר שאכל בזית, אומר, יהי רצון שתחדש עלינו שנה טובה ומתוקה. ואחר כך טובל קצת תפוח מתוך בדבש ומברך עליו בורא פרי העץ ואוכלו, ואחר כך אומר גם כן יהי רצון וכו', ונוהגין לאכל ראש של בעל חי ואומרים, יהי רצון שנהיה לראש. ויש להדר אחר ראש כבש, שיהיה גם כן זכר לאילו של יצחק. וגם ירקות אוכלים אותן שיש להן במדינה ההוא שם המורה לטובה. כמו זכר לאילו של יצחק. גם אוכלים אותן הירקות שיש להם במדינה ההיא שם המורה לטובה, כמו במדינתנו מעהרען (גזר), ואומרים יהי רצון שירבו זכיותינו. ויש נוהגין גם כן להדר לאכל דגים, שיש רמז לפרות ולרבות כמו הדגים. ואין לבשל אותם בחמץ, כי אין אוכלים דברים חמוצים או מרירים בראש השנה. ואוכלין בשר שמן וכל מיני מתיקה. גם נוהגין שלא לאכל אגוזים ולוויז, כי אגוז בגמטריא ח"ט, וגם מרבים ביחה וניעה המבטלים את התפלה (תקפג). ויש ללמד על השלחן תורה. ונוהגין קצת ללמוד משניות מסכת ראש השנה (חיי"א).

Highlight the names of foods in the text and answer the questions below.

1. Which foods are mentioned in this section of the Kitzur Shulchan Arukh?
2. What are some of the reasons for eating these foods?
3. According to the Kitzur, which foods should be avoided on Rosh Hashanah? Why?

Celebrating Rosh Hashanah in Historical Records

Read the following passage and answer the question below.

Rosh Hashanah in Czechoslovakia as recalled by Henrich Zinger and recorded by Centropa.



“Before Rosh Hashanah the shofar played after the morning prayer for the whole month of Tishri and Elul at the synagogue. On the eve of the holiday Jews had to offer an apology to those they hurt even if the hurt was unintentional. On Rosh Hashanah my father put on a white shirt and went to the synagogue with my mother. It was mandatory to wear white clothes. When we grew up we also went to the synagogue with our parents. My father had a special prayer book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My mother cooked traditional Jewish food: chicken, chicken broth and gefilte fish. We ate apples dipping them in honey and my mother explained that we did this to express our hope for a year full of sweetness ahead.”

1. Which of the traditions described by Henrich Zinger does your family also follow?

Wrapping It Up!

1. How does eating symbolic foods enhance your Rosh Hashanah experience?
2. Which is your favorite symbolic food? Why?