

Blessings over symbolic Rosh Hashanah foods

(Translated from Hebrew)

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Most of the blessings that open the New Year are actually curses or requests to cancel curses. Rabbi Dalia Marx wonders whether our good is necessarily connected with the bad of others and offers a positive alternative: to begin wishing only for good!

In one of my earliest childhood memories we are sitting around the festive holiday table, the New Year candles are lit and my grandfather, with a sparkle in his eyes, picks up a date and blesses it with feeling, pleading, "*May it be Your will, Eternal our God and the God of our fathers, that there come an end to our enemies, haters and those who wish evil upon us.*" I didn't understand what he meant by "our enemies, haters," and why they wish evil upon us, but it was clear to me, even as a child, that this was a dramatic and very important moment.

The requests and wishes for the New Year take many forms, one of the most mysterious among them the ceremony of "symbolic foods" and "May it be Your will" (*yehi ratzon*) practiced on the holiday eve. The custom is to make special blessings over particular foods and then eat them. The blessings, which are made mostly over sweet foods, are derived either from the shape or the name of the food.

The Bible teaches us to eat sweet and appetizing foods on Rosh Hashanah, but it does not instruct us to say a blessing over them. The Prophet Nehemia (8:10) spoke to us saying, "*Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy unto our Eternal; neither be ye grieved; for the joy of the Eternal is your strength.*" In contrast to this verse and in a completely unexpected context the Talmud presents the Rabbi Abaye's suggestions about the foods that should be eaten on Rosh Hashanah:

Abaye said, "Now that you have determined that omens are significant, at the beginning of every year a person should accustom himself to eat gourds, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates ..." (Bavli Kritot 6, 71).

Abaye's recommendation is part of a section on advice on deciphering the future based on certain signs: the first suggestion comes from Rabbi Ammi, who says that if a person wants to know if they are going to live out the year and not die they must light a candle during the Ten Days of Repentance. If the light "goes forth" it is a sign the year will be completed and they will live through it. Another suggestion addresses the question of whether one will succeed in business. They must raise a chicken and see what happens to it. If it fattens and grows fine it is a sign their business will succeed. If someone wants to know if they will safely return from a journey, they must go into a dark house and look for their shadow. If they see it they will know that they will return home safely. Here the Gemara adds a warning not to do it, so as not to be anguished and have bad luck. But what about Abaye's recommendation regarding the symbolic foods of Rosh Hashanah?

Signs of the future?

Does his instruction mean that the symbolic foods of Rosh Hashanah have, or at least originally had, a magical significance? By eating them can we decipher the future or even influence it? The brief passage about the symbolic foods eaten on the holiday does not indicate whether eating the foods creates the blessing or whether the act is symbolic and educational. Elsewhere in the Talmud (Horayot 12:71) Abaye's saying appears with a small but significant change. Instead of eating the symbolic foods it suffices to look at them! The difference between the two versions is fascinating. Saying something, thinking about its form, taste or the sound of its name, is not the same as actually tasting it, swallowing it, and in fact turning it into a part of the body of the person who consumes it. Eating combines different senses: sight, touch, smell, and of course taste.

The Talmud does not mention blessings that need to be recited in the context of the symbolic foods. We learn about these later in the Gaonite and Rishonite literature. Still, we ask ourselves about the meaning of the symbolic foods. Is the act of eating these foods an attempt to influence reality using magic? Rabbi Menachem Hameiri (Provence, 1249–1306), opposed this position and argued that,

“Many things have been permitted at certain times which resemble a snake but are not an actual snake, God forbid, but a symbol that should arouse one's heart to good behavior. That is the case of saying to put on the table on the night of Rosh Hashanah gourds, fenugreek, beets and dates, some of which grow quickly and some of whose growth is arduous. And so as not to fail like a snake, it was ordained to say over them words that arouse to repentance” (Kritot 12, 71).

Hameiri chose to emphasize the educational aspects of eating the symbolic foods. He believed the purpose of the blessings was to transform an inappropriate attitude towards the food, like being reminded of a snake, into a sacred act.

In different Jewish communities different customs were adopted towards foods eaten on Rosh Hashanah. Some communities have many such foods and some have few. Even the language of the entreaties for each of the different symbolic foods changes from one community to the next. It is noteworthy that the most familiar and widespread symbolic foods – apple dipped in honey, pomegranate, and the head of a fish or a lamb – do not appear in the Talmud but were added later in the Gaonite and Rishonite literature. Rabbi Joseph Karo made the custom more permanent including the recitation of blessings or wishes. The blessings are based on wordplay, using the names of the foods in Hebrew.

A person must eat on Rosh Hashanah gourds, fenugreek, beets and dates, and when eating the fenugreek say: May our merits be many. Leeks – may all the enemies of God fall. Beet – may our enemies depart. Dates – may an end come to God's enemies. Gourds – May our decree be ripped and may our merits be called up before you. When you eat a head of a Lamb say: May we be a head and not a tail, and a reminder of Isaac's ram (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim, 583, 1-2).

In his commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Rabbi Moses Isserles added the Ashkenazi custom:

Some are of the custom of eating an apple with honey and saying: "May it be Your will, that You grant us a beautiful, sweet year." And some eat pomegranates and say: "May our good deeds increase like the seeds of the pomegranate fruit!" And the custom is to eat fatty meat and all kinds of sweets.

In addition to the recommended foods for Rosh Hashanah, the sources also list foods that are undesirable on that day. Rabbi Moses Isserles recommends not to eat nuts because in gematria the numeric value of nut (*egoz*) equals that of sin (*het*). The Gaonim also instructed us not to eat meat cooked in vinegar.

A little sister and a large blessing

In Sephardic communities the prayers for the Days of Awe open with the hymn [Little Sister](#) by Rabbi Abraham Girondi (Spain, 13th century). The importance of this hymn is partly the fact that its words are the first words that are uttered in the New Year. Each verse ends with the words, "*May the year and its curses end,*" based on Tractate Megilla 31b, except for the final verse, which ends with the words, "May the year and its blessings begin." This hymn teaches us about the expectation that with the outgoing year that fades away as darkness falls, so will its "curses" and stains. Only after successfully departing from the last year can we welcome in the New Year and make a wish for its blessings.

As we can see, most of the blessings that open the New Year are actually curses or requests to cancel curses. I remember clearly that as I matured little I wondered about the contradiction between the sweetness of the date and the request to eliminate our enemies, and about the tension between the wonderful taste of my aunt's leek dumplings and the wish "*May it be Your will to cut out our enemies and haters and anyone who wishes us evil.*"

Does our good necessarily require the ill of others? In order to be blessed does someone else have to be cursed? Perhaps in our imperfect world it is so, at least in certain contexts, but must we really curse in order to feel blessed? As the New Year dawns can we wish well without wishing others ill? Can we focus on the sweetness of the date and wish for that sweetness to prevail in our lives in the New Year?

Perhaps we should think about revising the blessings? After all, this is not the format of traditional blessings (Blessed are You, Eternal our God, King of the universe) but a wish, a plea that is not constructed in the formal and compelling structure of a typical blessing. Therefore, it can change and take on new forms. Here are some suggestions for new blessings:

*On the date: May it be Your will... To make the New Year as sweet for us as a date.
On the gourds: "May it be Your will... For us to be called and to respond, for us to respond and to call.*

On leeks: May it be Your will... To know that we did not come to this world to argue and fight (based on Rabbi Nachman of Braslaw).

And why don't we just add whatever good blessings and wishes occur to us such as:

On water: "May it be Your will... To make this a rainy and blessed year.

On cucumbers: May it be Your will... To wrap us with good deeds and charity (the word *melafefon*, cucumber sounds like words from the root wrapping up).

On grapes and figs: May it be Your will ... For us to sit under our vines and fig trees (based on Michah 4:4).

On Tehina: May it be your will... To hear the sound of our pleading (the word *tehina* sounds like *tehinah* (supplication)).

And what should we bless over tomatoes, lettuce, cheese, peanuts, sunflower seeds, eggs, ice cream or cake?

Our holiday table can in this way turn into a creative workshop full of smiles and heartfelt greetings.

Have a sweet and blessed year!

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