A Rosh Hashana Seder

adapted by
Brian Rosman and
Rabbi Barbara Penzner

I. INTRODUCTION

The original ritual foods for Rosh Hashana are mentioned in the Talmud (Horayot 12a) as part of a discussion of omens and the efficacy of symbolic acts:

Abaye taught: Now that you have said that an omen is significant, each person should make it a habit to eat at the beginning of the year, kara [gourds, e.g. pumpkins or cucumbers], rubia [fenugreek, a seed herb], karte [leeks], silka [beets] and tamrey [dates].

Rabbi Hai Gaon (10th century), reported the custom of reciting a short prayer over each of the above foods which contained a wordplay on the name of the food. While this ritual continued to practiced mainly by Sephardim, among Ashkenazim the custom arose of eating apples and honey, as an allusion to a sweet year, and of dipping the challah in honey as well, in place of the salt usually used with the challah. In kabbalistic literature, the apple in Songs of Songs (see 2:3 and 7:9) symbolizes both Israel and God. The kabbalists also noted that the Hebrew word for honey (d’vash) has the same numerical equivalent — 306 — as the phrase Av harachamim, Father of mercy, and thus evokes Divine compassion. The challah and honey ritual is said to derive from the juxtaposition of the images in a verse in a Psalm (81:17) sung by the Levites in the Temple to accompany the Rosh Hashana sacrifice: “He fed them [Israel] the finest wheat [i.e., the challah]; I sated you with honey from the rock.”

Added to the tradition was the eating of pomegranates and fish (based on their fecundity, and not on a wordplay), and the head of a sheep, which reminds us of the ram that took Isaac’s place in the akedah, the binding of Isaac. The statement made while eating the head, “that we be as the head, and not as the tail,” comes from a verse in Deuteronomy (28:13) meaning, may we be strong and not weak. The authorities also allowed heads of other animals to be used.

The foods and prayers associated with this seder have always been reconstructed in light of the vernacular of the community. In Eastern Europe it became customary to eat carrots for Rosh Hashana, because the Yiddish word for carrots, mehren, also means “increase.” Similarly, Ukrainian Jews would give their children chicken livers because their Yiddish name, leberlach, sounds like leb ehrlich, meaning “live honestly.”

We too, continue this chain in our seder today. In our blessings we add imoteinu (our mothers). We have also adopted a few unusual food items, which we call “minhag America.” These additions are marked by an asterisk(*) to prevent any confusion. We hope you enjoy them.

We wish you a sweet and blessed New Year! Shanah tovah!
II. THE SEDER

1. Kiddusha Raba:
Blow the shofar at the moon’s renewal,
at the time appointed for our festive day,
for it is a decree for Israel,
a judgment for the God of Jacob.
(Psalm 81:4-5)

*Tik’u vachodesh shofar bekeseh leyom chageinu ki chok leyisra’el hu mishpat l’eilohei Ya’akov.*

ברוך אתה על חסימת תשלומי יום חגינו כי חוק לישראל הוא משפט לאלוהי יעקב.

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, borei pri ha-gafen.*
Blessed is the Eternal One, Source of all, who creates the fruit of the vine.

2. For apple dipped in honey:

ברוך אתה על פרי העץ.

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, borei pri ha’etz.*
Blessed is the Eternal One, Source of all, who creates the fruit of the tree.

עשת הערץ עליי משנת טוב הע릿ו והמיירתינו

Yehi ratzon milpansecha Adonai Eloheinu v’eilohei avoteinu v’imoteinu she-tehadesh aleinu shanah tovah umetukah.
May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that you renew us for a good and sweet year.

3. For pumpkin, (*kara*):

ברוך אתה על פרי האדמה.

*Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, borei pri ha’adamah.*
Blessed is the Eternal One, Source of all, who creates the fruit of the earth.

עשת האדמה עליי משנת טוב העמיתו והמיירתינו

Yehi ratzon milpansecha Adonai Eloheinu v’eilohei avoteinu v’imoteinu she-yikra g’zar dineinu, v’yikr’u l’faneca zechuyoteinu.
May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that the decree be torn up (*yikra*) and may our merits be proclaimed (*yikr’u*) before you.
4. **For fenugreek, (rubia), we substitute peas or stringbeans**, mentioned as substitutes for *rubia* in Sephardic cookbooks:

\[
\text{Yehi ratzon milpanecha Adonai Eloheinu v'eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu she-yirbu zechuyoteinu.}
\]

May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our merits increase (*yirbu*).

* We also wish for a year of **peace**, peace among our families, our communities, and the nations of the world.

5. **For leeks, (karte):**

\[
\text{Yehi ratzon milpanecha Adonai Eloheinu v'eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu she-kartu son'einu.}
\]

May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our adversaries\(^1\) be cut off (*kartu*).

6. **For beets, (silka):**

\[
\text{Yehi ratzon milpanecha Adonai Eloheinu v'eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu she-yistalku oyveinu.}
\]

May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our enemies be removed (*yistalku*).

* And may this be the year that all nations beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

7. **For dates, (tamrey):**

\[
\text{Yehi ratzon milpanecha Adonai Eloheinu v'eilohei avoteinu v'imoteinu she-yitamu son'einu.}
\]

May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our adversaries be consumed (*yitamu*).

\(^1\)According to *Pri Megadim*, "adversaries" in this context does not refer to external enemies of the Jewish people, but rather to accusing angels created by the commission of sins. Thus this prayer and the others should be seen as asking for Divine help in avoiding the urge to do wrong.
8. For **hearts of palm and artichoke hearts**:

Yehi ratzon milfanecha Adonai Eloheinu v’eilohei avoteinu v’imoteinu shenif-tach et levaveinu
May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our hearts be opened.

9. For a **pomegranate** (found in some versions of the seder):

Yehi ratzon milfanecha Adonai Eloheinu v’eilohei avoteinu v’imoteinu sheyirbeh zechuyot kerimon.
May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that our merits increase like the seeds of the pomegranate.

10. **The head of a sheep or fish is customary; we raise a head of lettuce**:

Yehi ratzon milfanecha Adonai Eloheinu v’eilohei avoteinu v’imoteinu she-nih’yeh l’rosh v’lo l’zanav.
May it be your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors that we may be as the head, and not the tail.

* Each participant adds a prayer as to what he or she hopes God will let us achieve in the coming year.

11. **Ha-motzi, over challah dipped in honey** (rather than salt which is customary the rest of the year):

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha’aretz.
Blessed is the Eternal One, Source of all, who brings forth bread from the earth