

ROSH HASHANAH

You Idiot!! You Didn't Buy Enough Honey!!

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

(This year, we will only blow the Shofar on Sunday. Technically, we are permitted to blow the Shofar on the Sabbath. Why don't we? See "The Silent Shofar".)

"Tis the season to eat honey!" We dip apples and our Challah into it. It's in our cakes and in our Teglach (false tooth and crown remover). Why?

In addition, it is the "Pickle Free Season." In our quest for a sweet year, the codes of Jewish Law & Custom call upon us to consume all types of sweet foods (including fatty meats) and to avoid bitter foods made with vinegar. We should eat lamb heads (or fish heads, or possibly even lettuce heads!) in the hope that we should be "...as a head (i.e. powerful) and not as a tail (weak)." (Deuteronomy, 28:13)

Many people have the custom on Rosh Hashanah night to engage in a veritable Seder of traditional foods whose names or properties suggest positive hopes for the coming year. We eat pomegranates in the hope that we will be as filled with good deeds as the pomegranate is with seeds, and dates ("**TAMar" in Hebrew) with the hope that *yiTAMu son'einu* – our enemies will be consumed. Carrots, (*Mehren* – "to increase" in Yiddish) indicate our prayer that our merits should increase.

Many communities developed Rosh Hashanah customs of their own. Ukrainian Jews (ed. note: my son happens to be in the Ukraine for Rosh Hashanah, as we speak!) had the custom of giving their children chicken livers on Rosh Hashanah. The Yiddish words for "livers," "*liberlach*," suggests "*leb erlich* – live honestly."

This is, to say the least, a little difficult to understand. I don't know about you, but a couple slices of honey cake (no, it's never just one!) are all I need to knock my low-carb diet out of whack for days. And there's nothing sweet about that!

WHAT'S THIS ALL ABOUT??! Why are we playing word-and-symbol games? Rosh Hashanah is one of the most serious days of the year. Our very lives lie in the balance. Doesn't it seem a bit superficial to try to stack the deck by eating positive sounding foods? [Someone I know has even suggested eating a raisin cut in half together with some lettuce and some celery with the prayer of "Lettuce half-a-raisin celery." – Read it a few times fast if you don't get it yet. :o)]

So what's going on here? Do these foods possess mystical powers, based upon their names or their physical attributes? What's this all about?

The emphasis is clearly not on the foods. The Mishneh Berurah writes that when eating these foods, we should recite the appropriate prayer: “May it be Your will, our G-d, and G-d of our fathers, that... (our merits should increase, etc.)” He adds that one should awaken within himself feelings of repentance, and recite these prayers with a full heart.

The Mishneh Berurah goes on to explain the importance of avoiding negativity. When describing the avoidance of bitter foods, he writes: “... All of these practices are to serve as a positive sign. It is, therefore, obvious that one must be extremely careful during these days to avoid getting angry (in addition to the great prohibition in general!) ... Rather, one should have a happy heart, and should have faith in G-d with repentance and good deeds.

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