

Why is Sephardi Rosh Hashanah So Different from Ashkenazi ones?

– A High Holy Day Story from Guy Sasson



ROSH HASHANAH TRADITIONS

This was written when our dear friend Darren Silverne was still alive. He loved Sephardi food & we would talk for hours about it. Still miss him terribly!!!

Just before Yom Tov, I was talking to Michael and Darren about our traditions on Rosh Hashanah, and how shocked I had been over the years to find out the Ashkenazim celebrate the New year simply by dipping an apple into the honey!!

I told them what we do & they were so interested that they asked me to tell everybody about it.....and you know how persuasive these two can be!!!

As many of you know, Rachel & I at our roots are both Sephardi Jews, but I was brought up as Spanish & Portuguese Jew & Rachel as a Sephardi with Israeli & Indian influences!! Whilst courting, we attended each other's homes on Yom Tovim & found very few differences. It was not until our respective sisters & brothers went out with Ashkenazim that we found huge differences in both prayers and traditions. Their children, who are what I call Ashkephardi's now benefit from both cultures!!

On both Erevs of Rosh Hashanah, after Kiddush, we say blessings, called 'Deeneem', over certain foods representing different aspects of the festival. When I gave Michael a copy of these, he remarked that this was definitely non-Ashkenazi!

Hamotze with the usual round Challot is said & the bread is dipped into sugar to confirm that today is different and to start the year in a sweet way. The sugar is left on the table during all meals until the feast goes out. Salt does not appear on the table until the meal is served. A tradition of Rachel's family on all Yom Tovim is that there are no knives on the table until all the prayers are said & they must all be removed before Birkot Hamazon is recited.

The Challah

Normally, the two loaves of challah over which the Hamotzi (blessing) is said at a festive Shabbat or holiday meal are loaf- shaped or braided. For Rosh Hashanah, the traditional shape of the challah is round. This shape symbolizes the cycle of life and how we should be aware of it on this day. In some communities, the challah is shaped like a ladder, symbolizing the fortunes of people for the year ahead - some ascend and some descend life's ladder.

On Shabbat and other holidays, after the blessing and before partaking of the challah, it is dipped into salt. On Rosh Hashanah, Sephardim dip the challah in sugar. This custom symbolizes our hope that the upcoming year will be sweet. The sugar is left on the table during all meals until the feast goes out. Salt does not appear on the table until the meal is served. A tradition of Rachel's family on all Yom Tovim is that there are no knives on the table until all the prayers are said & they must all be removed before Birkot Hamazon is recited. A few years ago, we started having a round

Challah, with twelve 'bumps' to represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The Challot have to be specially made & ordered early!!

Many also have a custom to make sure that there are raisins in their challah. As far as I know, the raisins are there to enhance the sweetness of the challah. If you know of any other reasons for raisins, I'll be glad to hear them!

The '**DEENEEM**' comprise of the following & in this order: The Leek, Spinach & Pumpkin are (separately) mixed with egg & made into patties & fried. When I took over from my mum to make these, I replace pumpkin with courgette, added potato & matza meal & made them as big omelettes. Now much preferred by everyone.

DATES: Two are taken. On one you say Borei Peri Haetz & the other for the prayer. All prayers begin with 'Yehi Ratzon Milefanecha'. Date in Aramaic is 'Tamri' which is related to the Hebrew word for consumes. We ask therefore that those who want to destroy us be consumed.

BANANA or STRAWBERRY: For Borei Peri Haademah.

LUBYA (Black eyed beans): Also called 'Rubiyah' from the Hebrew to increase. We recite 'May our good deeds increase.

LEEK: Known as 'Karti' in Aramaic & related to the Hebrew for to cut. We ask that our bad deeds & our spiritual enemies be cut down.

SPINACH: I assure you it has nothing to do with Popeye! Spinach is now used today although originally it was Swiss Chard & is called, 'Salka', which sounds like, disappear in Aramaic. Therefore, we pray that our enemies disappear.

PUMPKIN/SQUASH/COURGETTE: Also called 'Kera' & is related to 'read or tear'. We ask that our negative judgements be torn up or that our good merits be read.

Rachel's mum simply boils the last three.

POMEGRANATE: Jewish folklore states there are 613 seeds in each one. My niece once sat down and counted them to make sure! She lost count after 600 but there were no more than 625!! There are 2 schools of thought here. One is to be as numerous as the seeds (613 kids?) & the other is to try & fulfil all 613 commandments & by doing so you will accrue a lot of merits with God. These fruits are now easy to get, but 30 years ago, it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Dad would go to Charlotte Street, which had then a rare Greek shop that stocked them. The blessing says 'May it be Your will that our merits be numerous (as the seeds of) the Pomegranate.

APPLE & HONEY: At last! Rachel's mum makes a lovely compote adding cloves. Like everyone, we dip the apple into the honey!

ROSH: If you're squeamish or vegetarian, turn the page now! Today, we use a large salmon head, which has been boiled. EVERYONE has to have a small piece. Many years ago, my parents used sheep's brain. The head of a sheep was to remind us of the binding of Isaac and there is a beautiful portion (Et Sha'arei Ratzon) that is sung in the morning service about this. The 'Rosh' to my parents

and my aunts/uncles was a great delicacy! My sister & I would have a contest as to who could have the minutest fragment! Once or twice we had chicken brain as well. It is no bigger than a pea and is quite delicious! When sheep brain was no longer allowed to be sold, we moved onto fish head!

SHEHECHEYANU: Over a new fruit not eaten that year. Easy as its Rosh Hashanah, but usually it is something exotic. This year we had Thai guava & they are the size of an orange & delicious!

Please note that neither sour nor bitter things are allowed. Only sweet & rich food to symbolise the beginning of a sweet New Year. No nuts are eaten as I'm told that the numerical value of the nut in Hebrew is equal to the numerical value of the word 'Chet', which means sin! On Rosh Hashanah we have to distance ourselves from sin!

ARE YOU FULL YET? ...AND NOW FOR THE MEAL!

I hope you've enjoyed this small insight into Sephardi custom. Though some of it may seem silly to some, it is something we all look forward to. It provides greater reverence & meaning to the festival on this important day. We have other customs for Pesach & Yom Kippur, which I will share with you in the future. If you have certain customs on Yom Tov, please let me know & let me share with everyone.

Some families eat only some of the aforementioned foods. Some families eat them all. One member of a Yemenite family confided in me, "By the time we get through all of these, I am too stuffed to even think about the main course!"

Though the whole thing may seem silly to some, partaking of these symbolic foods and reciting the appropriate prayers add a profound level of reverence and meaning to the festive meal on this important day. AND IT'S A LOVELY TRADITION, which we hope to keep sharing.

Over the years we have had the honour of inviting close friends, Shul members, Rabbonim etc. Everyone has been amazed at our 'Rosh Hashanah Seder'. Rabbi Michael still raves about it to this day!!!

GUY M SASSON

