

א ביסל תורה!

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כ"ט אלול תשפ"ה · ראש השנה

The Meaning and Purpose of the סימנים on ראש השנה

By Adina Cheses '28

Many families have the custom of eating several different foods during the night-time meal on ראש השנה. These foods originate from various lists of סימנים in the תלמוד and the שולחן ערוך. Different families have developed slightly different lists over time, but some of the classic ones are: carrots, cabbage, beets, dates, gourds, pomegranates, fish, and the head of a fish or sheep. Each one has its own short prayer that goes along with it, which is connected to each associated food.

Here are a few examples. The prayer before carrots is about the increase of our merits, since the Yiddish word for carrot - מערן, also means increase or abundance, and because the Hebrew word גור - carrots is very similar to the word גזרה - decree, the carrot is associated with Hashem increasing our merits and decreeing only good for us. Cabbage represents the destruction or 'cutting off' of our enemies, since the Hebrew word for cabbage - כרתי is very similar to the word כרת - to cut off. Similarly, since the Aramaic word for beets, סלקא, sounds like סלק - to depart, beets are associated with a prayer that our enemies will go away from us. Dates share a similar significance, being associated with the destruction of our enemies, since the word תמר is similar to the Hebrew word תם, meaning end or finish. Gourds are accompanied by a prayer that Hashem should tear away His

negative decrees for us and instead call out our merits, since the word קרא - gourd also means to tear and to call out.

One of the most well-known symbols of ראש השנה, the pomegranate, is associated with plentiful merits and מצוות, because of how pomegranates are known for having many seeds. Fish are generally associated with multiplying very quickly, they are a symbol of prosperity within nature, and so, we eat fish along with a prayer that we should be fruitful and multiply like fish. Lastly, the prayer said before eating the head of a fish or a sheep is that we should be "like the head and not like the tail" - motivated leaders, and not lazy followers.

These prayers are important ones to focus on while entering the new year, but what is the purpose of accompanying them with a food tasting? Why do we not just turn these ideas into a normal prayer?

When we are trying to work on or manifest something in our lives, vocalizing them is important, but actually doing something physical is as important a step. Doing something real - even a very small act can be the push we need to really start working on our goals. Similarly, our relationship with Hashem is not just about going through the motions and asking for the right things; we need to make an effort to put in the work on our side. Working on ourselves requires us to use our internal motivation to give ourselves a small physical push. Whether it is picking up a work of תורה or showing up to Shul, no matter how

small an action, doing a real physical action, can help us develop the habits that we really want and reach our goals.

Therefore, while it might seem a little silly to eat a piece of fruit or fish as a way to reach towards things that we cannot even control, once we put in the effort to really manifest something, Hashem will handle the rest. The small act of preparing a couple of extra dishes for our יום טוב meals can actually have a huge impact on really getting us in the right mindset and prioritizing the right things going into the new year.

Being an Individual and a Community at the Same Time

By Anna Szalat '28

As we enter the ימים נוראים, we are reminded that these are days of deep personal reflection - but they are also days of unity within עם ישראל. The תורה says, "אַתֶּם נֹצְרִים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם" "You are all standing today before Hashem your G-d (דברים). Every Jew, from the greatest leader to the simplest worker, stands together before Hashem as one nation.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt"l taught in his book *The Lonely Man of Faith* that there are two covenants binding the Jewish people: the covenant of fate (ברית גורל) and the covenant of destiny (ברית ייעוד). The covenant of fate binds us together through the challenges of Jewish history - persecution, exile, and shared suffering. We did not choose this fate, rather

it chose us, and it has united Jews across all times and places.

The Rav, however, emphasized that fate alone is not enough. Judaism also calls us to the covenant of destiny — a life of מצוות, תורה, and holiness. This covenant is chosen, not imposed. It is the life we build when we embrace our mission as Hashem's children, when we live not only as Jews by circumstance, but as Jews by commitment. As the Rav wrote in his book קול דודי דופק: "The covenant of fate expresses itself in shared suffering, while the covenant of destiny expresses itself in shared goals and a shared way of life."

The ימים נוראים highlights both of these covenants. On ראש השנה, we stand before Hashem as individuals whose deeds are to be judged. Yet we also come as a community, united in prayer, bound together in fate. On יום כיפור, we confess not only our individual sins but our communal sins as well. We recognize that we are responsible for one another, and that our destiny is linked.

In our generation, this message speaks powerfully. The Jewish people are bound together - in times of crisis, we feel the ברית גורל. When Jews anywhere are attacked or threatened, we all feel the pain. But the Rav urged us not to stop there. We must also embrace the ברית ייעוד: to live lives of קדושה, to study תורה, to perform acts of חסד, and to sanctify Hashem's name in the world.

As we stand together before Hashem in these days of holy davening, may we renew both our fate and our destiny - be proud of our shared history, and committed to our sacred mission. In doing so, may

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we merit to be inscribed in the Book of Life, as individuals and as one people.

The Goal of the ימים נוראים

By Amiel Jotkowitz '28

The ימים נוראים are days of awe, but they are also prophetic days. They remind us not only of where we have fallen short, but of what we can still become.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l often spoke about the need for spiritual ambition. Too often, he said, people practice religion with an attitude of "doing enough to get by." But the תורה does not call us to be people who follow only the letter of the law. It calls us to greatness - not only in learning, but in character. Rav Lichtenstein wrote: "Our ultimate aspiration is to become not only great, but good; not only accomplished, but humble; not only religious, but righteous."

This is the spirit of the ימים נוראים. We declare Hashem's kingship on ראש השנה, acknowledging that our lives have more meaning. We confess our sins on יום כיפור, not because we are not worthy, but because we know we can be more. וידוי is hardly a list of failures; it is a statement of hope. Each of these sins we speak of is a chance to develop, an affirmation that Hashem believes we can move beyond weakness and live more in His service.

Rav Lichtenstein also stressed that religious life and moral life cannot be separated. תורה without דרך ארץ, without חסד and integrity, is not complete. On the ימים נוראים, we are not judged by how often

we prayed or learned, but by our actions towards other human beings: Did we speak nicely? Did we act honestly? Did we have a sense of responsibility to our community? As חז"ל teach, On יום כיפור we do not just request for forgiveness between ourselves and Hashem for sins, but for sins against another human being as well. We must first seek forgiveness from them before we can be fully forgiven.

The שופר, then, is not only a wake-up call to fear, but a call to greatness. Its sound is harsh and unsophisticated, but it pierces into our נשמה and says: you are capable of more. Do not settle for smallness. Do not let habit or fear stand in your way. Choose to grow, to strive, to sanctify הקדוש ברוך הוא in both greatness and goodness.

As we begin the new year, let us take Rav Lichtenstein's message to heart. Let us approach Hashem not only requesting forgiveness but striving for greatness - in תורה, in תפילה, and in our ethical lives. Let us be written in the ספר החיים, and let us lead lives that are deserving of its blessing.



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