

A Night—and a Year—of Blessings

From the Sephardic Educational Center

The beginning of the New Year is an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start again. Aware of life's complexities and that no year is ever going to be perfect, Jewish tradition offers us the opportunity to begin anew, with the hope that any negativity from our past will be wiped away, and that we will hopefully avoid all potential negativity in the coming year.

In the Sephardic tradition, the first night of Rosh Hashanah is filled with prayers and symbols whose theme is the ushering in of a blessed year. The *Arvit* (evening) prayers on Rosh Hashanah open with a beautiful liturgical poem – *Ahot Ketanah*. Each stanza of the *Ahot Ketanah* poem concludes by saying “*Tikhleh Shanah V’Kileloteha* — May this year and all of its curses come to an end.” The finale of the poem is “*Tahel Shanah U’Birkhoteha* — May this year with all of its blessings now begin.” We then greet each other by saying *Tizke L’Shanim Rabot* – *May you merit (to live) many years* (in plural – *Tizku L’Shanim Rabot*). The response to this greeting is *Tovot u’Neimot* – *may the many years indeed be good and pleasant*.

Our Rosh Hashanah dinner opens with *Kiddush* and *Hamotsi*, but before eating our actual meal, we eat a wide array of symbolic foods whose theme are either the elimination of negativity or the aspiration for blessings. These foods are called the *Simanim* (signs or symbols), and they form what many today call the *Sephardic Rosh Hashanah Seder*.

Each of the *Simanim* was chosen either due to its potential for a creative word play, its physical structure or its sweet flavor.

We eat dates, leeks, beets and pumpkin, all of which symbolize the rooting out of negativity. The Hebrew word for date is *tamar*, and before eating the date we say “*She-yitamu oyvenu*” (May our enemies be consumed; *yitamu* — consumed — sounds like *tamar*). The Aramaic term for leeks is *karti*, and before eating the leeks we say “*She-yikartu oyvenu*” (May our enemies be cut off; *yikartu* — cut off — sounds like *karti*). The Aramaic word for beets is *silka*, and before eating the beets we say “*She-yisalku oyvenu*” (May our enemies disappear; *yisalku* — disappear — sounding like *silka*). We eat pumpkin, which in Aramaic is called *kra* (in Hebrew the word for “tear up” is also *kra*), and we pray that God will “tear up [*kra*] any evil decrees against us.” These *Simanim* reflect our innermost desire to begin a year void of some of life's most brutal curses: strife, conflict, war and evil.

Moving away from negativity, we now aspire for positive blessings. We eat small fish and say, “May our good deeds multiply like the fish in the sea.” Ever since my kids were little, my family uses gummy fish for this blessing, and many years later, it's still our tradition! We then eat pomegranate seeds and say, “May our lives be filled with mitzvot like a pomegranate is filled with seeds.” According to an “ancient tradition,” there are 613 seeds in a pomegranate. If you have little kids who are curious as to the accuracy of this tradition and actually wish to count each seed in a pomegranate, I suggest doing what my wife did: put

the kids in the bathtub with a pomegranate and have them verify the count there. Otherwise, you're in for lots of permanent stains around the house!

Additional customs include: string beans, who, when opened, are filled with small beans, and we say "May our merits increase" (like the beans that are multiple). There are some who eat the meat of a sheep's head and say, "May we always be as the head and not the tail." My family (dating back to my father's traditions in Morocco) has the custom of eating sesame seeds mixed with sugar, and we say, "May our mitzvot be as abundant as sesame seeds, and our lives as sweet as sugar." Of course, there is the apple dipped in the honey (not originally a Sephardic custom). As a variation, some Sephardim cook the apple in honey and sugar.

As we eat this dazzling array of symbolic and tasty foods, we pray that God will bring upon us, our families and the entire world a year of peace, prosperity, health and joy.

Tikhleh Shanah V'Kileloteha, Tahel Shanah U'Birkhoteha