

This year the youth department drew pictures and made Rosh Hashana greeting cards for Seth Brooks who stationed at a US Army base in the middle east right now. As I considered what to include within the lovely initiative taken by Michele and executed by Kira and Andrew, it forced me to engage with how to translate Rosh Hashana into a card. One version is apples dipped in honey – a card that reflects the sweetness we hope for each other “shana tova umetuka”, the big meals, the uplifting children’s tunes etc. Another version reflects the gravity of the day, the trepidation of standing before the King’s court and includes a somber call to humility and teshuva. What card to write? But more importantly, what is the true message of Rosh Hashana – are these two themes two different versions or is there perhaps a way to harmonize them?

This question is sustained by the Torah’s ambiguous description of the day of Rosh Hashana as yom terua. The way we practice this is with a terua surrounded by tekiyot. Tekiyot are a long consonant and confident sound. Whereas teruot are broken, meant to sound like cries.

Do these sounds reflect a dual nature to the day: one of hope and confidence, another of fear and shame or is there perhaps a harmony in the sounds of the shofar?

This morning, let’s take a look at the custom that most epitomizes the notion of sweetness on Rosh Hashana: the custom to eat apples and the custom of honey and see if those symbols are in concert or in conflict with the notion of judgment.

Let’s begin with honey.

The 15th cen. ashkenzic rishon, The Maharil, who was the most authoritative source for the Rama in his ashkenazic response to the Shulchan aruch cites the custom of dipping foods in honey and provides an intriguing biblical source. He

says the custom is stems (pun intended) from the incident at Mara where after traveling for 3 days from Kriyat Yam Suf, Bnei Yisrael come upon a bitter water source at Mara; the Jewish people cry out in despair, for they have no water! What happens next... וַיִּצְעַק אֶל־ה' וַיֹּרְהוּ ה' עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל־הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם וְשָׁם לֹא חָק וּמִשְׁפָּט וַיִּשָּׂם נֹסֶהוּ - Hashem shows Moshe a branch to throw into the water which would sweeten it. Of all the possible sources for the custom, the Maharil explains that the authentic source/orientation of the sweetness we are engaging in is from a story where something was not naturally sweet, but naturally bitter and then was miraculously sweetened. Therefore, the sweetness we hope for on Rosh Hashana is to sweeten something naturally bitter. We do suffer. On rosh hashana, we present God with that suffering, we have frustration, fear and trepidation in our lives regularly, so many people, exasperated by COVID have crippling anxiety. We come to rosh hashana the holiday when we stand in trepidation and yet we sing to our children and grandchildren about dipping the apple in the honey? The maharil explains that it is only because of the branch that Hashem miraculously provides that sweetens the water. **The honey we use is a prayer that Hashem provides us with the insight and ability to sweeten our otherwise bitter circumstance.**

Imagine having an audience with the ultimate authority of the universe, the Creator, the King. There are a lot of concerns to raise. Climate change, societal deterioration, political polarization, the crisis of water in Jackson, the largest school district in NJ - Newark for the first time is not teaching the holocaust and is actively encouraging BDS in its syllabus on the Arab-Israali conflict.

Who's driving this ship?! There is a sense of foreboding bitterness to this birthday of the world; unless that Melech who is reigning over it all is Hashem. The kingship of Hashem sweetens, things might seem tough like they did after 3 days without water in the wilderness – but just like then, think about what Hashem has

done! He is the master of the universe, he can and does split the seas and salvage the enslaved! Right now, there is fear; but Hashem can end that in a split second with a salvation we could not have foreseen, despite it already being in sight. Honey is our prayer that Hashem should please sweeten or help us see how to sweeten it ourselves.

That's honey... What about apples?

The Maharil suggests a fascinating association as the reason for apples on Rosh Hashana (that goes beyond apples being in season and available in Europe in early fall). He cites the Zohar which suggests that Yitzchak gave Yaakov and Esav their brachot on Rosh Hashana and on that day Yitzchak had to judge whether it was Yaakov or Esav standing in front of him – he wasn't sure - *hakol kol Yaakov v'hayadiim y'dei esav*, until finally he comes close and smells (27:27) *וַיִּגַּשׁ וַיִּשְׁקֶלְלוּ* – Rashi quotes the gemara saying it was the coat imbued with the smell of the kahal tapuchim – the apple orchard in gan eden. Yitzchak chooses to bless Yaakov due to the smell of apples. In this story, the smell of apples has the capacity to influence a judgement of a father (maybe even a Heavenly Father) between Yaakov or Esav – to see us a connected children or wayward imposters.

The Maharil explains that we use apples to invoke the hope that Hashem will turn to Israel the way Yitzchak turned to Yaakov, that we smell as like kahal tapuchim, a fragrance that identifies us as fitting to receive blessing rather than scorn.

Put together, the apple and honey signify that we come into Rosh Hashana like Yaakov to Yitzchak and Bnei Yisrael to Marah – entirely vulnerable. And then we take our apples – the smell/the sensation of spirit ruach that Yaakov has when he wants to be chosen for physical and spiritual bracha and then dip it in honey –

recognizing our inability to achieve our desires on our own merits, asking Hashem to show us what we need to do to sweeten our lives.

Just in case you're not convinced about the association, amazingly, the pasuk which describes the miracle at Mara “and he cried to Hashem, and Hashem showed him a tree and he threw it into the water and it sweetened the word. There He put for him decrees and law and there He tested him” - וַיִּצְעַק אֶל-ה' וַיֹּרְהוּ ה' לֵעָז וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל-ה' וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם ends, oddly emphasizing that there we were given chok and mishpat. These words chok and mishpat might sound familiar to you as David Hamelech in Tehillim understands it: “Blow in the month – shofar; on the full moon for the holiday. For it is a decree for Israel, law of the God of Yaakov” - תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר בְּכֹסֶה לַיּוֹם תִּגְנוּ: כִּי חֹק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל הוּא מִשְׁפָּט לְאֱלֹקֵי יַעֲקֹב - this is the essence of Rosh Hashana.

So perhaps there is harmony in the meaning of the day, just not in the way we thought.

Here is the **true, underlying meaning** of apples and honey as our symbolic mechanisms of hoping for sweetness: **The honey** is meant to remind us to feel feeble and fearful like Bnei Yisrael in the midbar. **The apples** are meant to help us recognize ourselves as vulnerable frauds like Yaakov in front of Yitzchak asking for Esav's bracha and from there we pray for Hashem to provide us (1) with a cloak to shield us from shame and (2) show us a branch to improve and sweeten our difficult circumstances.

Rosh Hashana is not a holiday of confidence and certainly not fake confidence, but it is a holiday where we reflect that in the desperate circumstances of our history, Hashem has come through for us in subtle, beautiful and miraculous ways. As we confront the perils of the coming year, may we do so with apples dipped in honey - recognizing that we are unworthy and incapable of resolving most of our

quagmires and quandaries, but confident in the power of Hashem and hopeful that He will look favorably on us and provide us with what we need to overcome our obstacles. In that, may we be blessed with a sweet new year – shetichadesh aleinu shana tova umetkua