

The symbolism of Rosh Hashanah's holiday table



A Rosh Hashanah holiday table with apples, honey and challah.

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By Carol Goodman Kaufman Rosh Hashanah falls this year on the heels of Labor Day and, no, it's not early this year. It is precisely when it should be on the lunisolar calendar, so Jews around the world are busy preparing foods both familiar and symbolic for the festive New Year meal, even if they're still shaking beach sand out of their shoes.

First among the familiar foods on the holiday table is the round challah, the sweet, egg-rich bread whose shape represents the cyclical nature of the year. Then there are newly harvested apples to dip in honey, reflecting the desire for a sweet new year. In fact, we are loath to include anything sour or bitter in our repast lest we bring sadness into our lives.

But, beyond these basic traditional foods are myriad others that reflect the Jewish love of both symbolism and wordplay. The Talmudic sage Abaye wrote that it is not enough just to see these symbols of good luck; we must eat them. So, pull on your elasticized waistband pants and pull up a chair.

The first food that Abaye says should be a part of a Rosh Hashanah meal is the gourd or, more specifically, the pumpkin. One Hebrew word for pumpkin is *kara*, which sounds like the word relating to 'read' or 'proclaim.' Our hope, then, in serving a dish based on pumpkin is that our merits may be proclaimed.

Next we come to a culinary misinterpretation. An early translation of the Aramaic text of the Talmud indicates that *rubiya* are black-eyed peas, so dishes based on them became popular because *rubiya* relates to the Hebrew word *rov*, meaning 'plenty,' something that we wish for in the coming year. Although the actual word for black-eyed peas in Hebrew is *luyva*, it hasn't stopped Egyptian Jews from enjoying them, as do Sephardic Jews (those whose families came from the Iberian Peninsula) who settled in the southeastern United States.

Next on Abaye's list of symbolic foods is leeks. The Aramaic *karsi* means leek and is similar to the Hebrew *kara*, 'to tear.' We eat leeks in the hope that our enemies will be torn out so that we can live in peace.

Rosh Hashanah offers the opportunity to prepare one of my favorite vegetables, the beet. The Hebrew word for beet, *selek*, sounds like the Aramaic word *silka*, or 'remove.' In other words, as with the leek, we eat the beet in the hope that our enemies will be removed. But beyond that fervent wish, the deep, rich scarlet of the beet makes one think of royalty. We should both treat others and be treated as kings and queens.

Everybody loves dessert, right? Rosh Hashanah is replete with apple cakes and honey cakes. But, for evocation of the biblical land, it's hard to beat dates, the last item on our Talmudic list. The Hebrew word for the date and the palm tree on which it grows is *tamar*. It is related to *teemayr*, 'to rise straight up.' We wish to be righteous and erect like the date palm. And, I would add, sweet and sensuous!

Jews have been around for four thousand years, and with every generation it seems that another symbolic food takes its place on the table. Among them is the fish head. As icky as this may sound, on many Rosh Hashanah tables you will find one, the word for 'head' being *rosh*. In the coming year we wish that we may be leaders, or heads, rather than tails, or followers. Fish are also a symbol of the fecundity and abundance to which we aspire. My suggestion is to get a smoked whitefish that you can then serve at Sunday brunch.

It is customary to partake of the pomegranate at Rosh Hashanah, based on the Jewish legend the fruit has 613 seeds, the same number of commandments found in the Torah. We enjoy the pomegranate's glistening ruby red seeds at the New Year in the hope of increasing the number of commandments that we fulfill. In recent years, the pomegranate has become an 'it' food due to its wealth of antioxidants. The good news for us is that the fruit's new popularity makes it much easier to find in the grocery store.

One last traditional food among Ashkenazi, or Eastern European Jews, is the carrot, most often found in *tzimmes*, a sweet and scrumptious side dish. I have found several explanations for this inclusion. The first is that the Hebrew word for carrot is *gezer*, which is similar to the word *gzayrah*, or 'decree,' and on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that comes ten days after Rosh Hashanah, the Book of Judgment will be sealed with the decree for each of us for the coming year. Another explanation is that the Yiddish word for both 'carrots' and 'more' is *merren*. Thus, we eat dishes prepared with carrots with the hope that we will have more of all good things, such as health, wealth, knowledge.

Having prepared all of the above dishes, they may spill over your dining room table. Then again, a life overflowing with abundance and joy is precisely what our foods symbolize.

Hoppin' John Serves 4-5

It's customary in the South to eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day for good luck. Some culinary historians believe this custom was adopted from the Rosh Hashanah tradition of the Sephardic Jews who settled there. This recipe accomplishes several things. First, it includes black-eyed peas, which is on the Talmudic sage Abaye's must-have list of symbolic foods. Second, it is a terrific dish to offer the vegetarians among your family and friends. Full of protein, folate, fiber and vitamins A, C and K, it is very healthy. And, it is absolutely delicious.

Ingredients:

3-4 tablespoons olive oil

2 large onions, chopped

6 cloves garlic, minced

2 cans black-eyed peas

Vegetable broth as needed

1 bay leaf

Cumin, red pepper, coriander, salt – all to taste

1 can diced tomatoes

Fresh spinach, kale, collard or mustard greens, trimmed and washed

Directions:

Heat the oil in a large, heavy pot and sauté the onions and garlic until the onions are tender.

Add the beans and 1 cup broth, bay leaf, the spices, and canned tomatoes.

Heat until the liquid and the spices are well absorbed. Don't let this get too dry.

Add the fresh greens about 5-6 minutes before serving.

Remove the bay leaf before serving.

Serve with rice and corn bread.



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