

"Halacha Sources" Highlights - Eating for a Sweet New Year

Question: Why do we eat sweet things, such as an apple dipped in honey, on *Rosh HaShanah*?

Answer: As usual, we will divide our presentation of the subject into three parts:

- (1) the early *minhag* of having "sweets" on *Rosh HaShanah* (and its sources),
- (2) *specific* "sweet" *minhagim* (involving honey with apples and/or challah),
- (3) the Halachic twist regarding the *bracha* over the honey

Part 1: The Early *Minhag* of Having "Sweets" on *Rosh HaShanah* (and its sources)

The *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 583) discusses special *minhagim* for the nighttime meal of *Rosh HaShanah*. Based on the Gemara in *Krisus* (6a), there are a number of foods which we eat then. The *Shulchan Aruch* (ibid. *se'if* 1) says the *minhag* is also to say a few words (in the form of a prayer) about how the names of those foods symbolize something we want to merit on *Rosh HaShanah*, such as growth for the Jews and the removal of our enemies.

However, Rashi (ibid.) does *not* say that the *names* are symbolic, but rather the *qualities*: "Some of them grow quickly, and some are *sweet*." The *Gra* says this Rashi is the source of the *minhagim* to eat sweet things on *Rosh HaShanah* night, which the *Rema* brings (after the discussion of the other symbolic foods).

But there is another source for that which is cited by a number of the early authorities - the *pasuk* (*Nechemiah* 8:10): "Eat fat [foods] and drink sweet [drinks]." Rashi explains that it was *Rosh HaShanah*, and many of the Jews were crying, apparently thinking that would be appropriate for the Day of Judgment, and Ezra and Nechemiah told them that in fact *Rosh HaShanah* is a holy day on which we should *not* be sad, but rather we should hold meals including "the fat and the sweet."

The *Beis Yosef* brings the *Mordechai* [*Rabbeinu* Mordechai ben Hillel of Germany, ~1250 - ~1305, in his notes on *Yoma* - no. 723] who quotes a "Gaonic responsum" (also quoted by the *Ohr Zarua* [*Rabbeinu* Yitzchak ben Moshe of Vienna, ~1190 - ~1260, in chapter II:257 of his Halachic composition]): "As for the fact that [on *Rosh HaShanah*] we eat fat meats and drink honey and all kinds of 'sweets', we do so in order [to "symbolize"] that the coming year be a 'fat' one and a sweet one for us, and that is what is written in the *pasuk*, 'Eat fat [foods] and drink sweet [drinks]'." This application of that *pasuk* is also found in the Rosh [*Rosh HaShanah* 4:14] and the *Ra'avyah* [*Rabbeinu* Eliezer ben *Rabbeinu* Yoel HaLevi, ~1140 - ~1220, in section II chapter 537 of his writings].

Accordingly, the *Rema* concludes the above-mentioned *se'if*: "And the *minhag* is to eat fat meats and all kinds of sweet [things]."

Part 2: *Specific "Sweet" Minhagim (Involving Honey with Apples and/or Challah)*

However, *before* the *Rema's* above-cited *conclusion*, he quotes a *specific* "sweet" *minhag*, which he brings (in his *Darkei Moshe*) from the *Maharil* [*Rabbeinu* Yaakov HaLevi (Siegel) Mullen of Germany, ~1360 - 1427, in his *Minhagim* of Rosh HaShanah no. 6-7]: to eat a sweet apple with honey, and to say, "This should be the beginning of a [good and] sweet year for us." (The *Tur* says it is "the *Ashkenazi minhag*" to eat this at the beginning of the meal.)

Now we already saw that the "Gaonic responsum" singled out *honey*. But regarding combining it specifically with *apples*, the *Maharil* writes that we do *not* have a clear source. (In fact, the *Hagahos Ashiri* [*Rosh Hashanah* 1:5] brings the *minhag* to eat "a head" on *Rosh HaShanah* [which the *Shulchan Aruch* discusses in *se'if* 2] and says that the *head* is dipped in honey!) The *Maharil* suggests that the apples may hint to the mystical concept of "the field of apples." [A reference to this can be seen in the Shabbos song "*Askinu Se'udasa*". See also Rashi to *Bereishis* 27:27.]

The sources say the *minhag* is to use a "sweet apple". The clear implication is that a type of apples which is "not sweet" should *not* be used.

The *Mishnah Berurah* says that some have the *minhag* to dip in honey the piece [of challah or bread] over which the *bracha* of "*haMotzi*" was said. [Many have the *minhag* to continue to do so at every Shabbos or *Yom Tov* meal all the way through *Simchas Torah*.]

Part 3: The Halachic twist regarding the *bracha* over the honey

The *Mishnah Berurah* says that despite having already said the *bracha* of "*haMotzi*" [over the challah or bread], one still needs to say the *bracha* of "*haEitz*" over the apple. In addition, he says two things about honey: (1) The apple is "the main thing" [the "*ikkar*"] and the honey is "secondary" to it ["*tafeil*"], so there is no *bracha* over the honey. (2) Some have the *minhag* to dip in honey the piece [of challah or bread] over which the *bracha* of "*haMotzi*" was said. Now, this second point, which we already quoted, *seems* to be merely another "specific 'sweet' *minhag*." But the *flow* of these two points implies a different explanation:

It seems that the *minhag* to dip the challah in the honey comes from those who were not sure the honey is really "secondary" to the apple. We can understand the doubt, because as we saw, eating the *honey* is actually more strongly based in the sources. If the honey is *not* "secondary", then it should need a separate *bracha* (of "*shehakol*")! These "doubters" chose to resolve this issue by making use of the principle that when mixing bread (or "*mezonos*") with other things, the bread (or "*mezonos*") is *always* the "*ikar*" and the rest is "secondary" (unless the bread or "*mezonos*" is only a "binder" or the like). How can we use this principle to resolve the above "doubt"? First, when eating our first piece of bread or challah, we can dip *that* in honey, and eat it without a *bracha*. At that point, because of the principle that "the *ikar* includes the secondary", it would be considered as if we *already* said a *bracha* over honey. After *that*, when dipping the

apple in honey, the honey *definitely* does not need a separate *bracha*, because even if it's *not* "secondary", we can rely on *already* having eaten honey with a *bracha* that covered it (because *then* it *was* "secondary")!

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