

JEWISH CUSTOMS LAW, OR FOLKLORE?

COMPILED BY PAULA LEVIN

WHAT IS A CUSTOM? COULD IT BE A PAGAN PRACTICE adopted by Jewish communities and given a Jewish spin? For example, could Tashlich (casting one's sins into a body of water) have originated from a pagan practice of feeding the river gods? Impossible! Adopting (or adapting) pagan practices is expressly forbidden by the Torah verse: "Do not follow any of their traditions." (Leviticus 18:3). This specific injunction not to adopt the customs of the non-Jewish world is repeated in Leviticus 20:23 and Deuteronomy 12:30.

Does this mean that Jews cannot use Velcro, the internet, and other inventions of non-Jewish society? Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (19th century Germany) explains: "You may imitate the nations among whom you live in everything which has been adopted by them on rational grounds. But do not imitate anything which is irrational, or has been adopted on grounds derived from their religion, or for forbidden or immoral purposes. You must not, however, do anything which disturbs their holy days, and do not parade your non-participation in a manner that might arouse animosity." To cite one practical example, Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg writes that it is forbidden to play the organ in a synagogue, since it is copying non-Jewish religious practice.

Furthermore, there are even precedents in Jewish law where we adopt practices specifically because they are the opposite of non-Jewish practices. The Taz (17th century Europe) explains this as the source for wearing a yarmulke, either all the time, or at least in synagogue. In the times of the Talmud, it was only an act of piety to wear a head-covering, but it later gained widespread Jewish acceptance. The reason is because non-Jews would traditionally take off their hats as a sign of respect, for example, when meeting a dignitary or when praying in Church. (When I visited Lenin's tomb in Moscow, everyone was required to remove his hat before entering.) So because of the Torah directive "not to follow their traditions", Jewish men began wearing a head-covering at all times.

A minhag is a custom that developed for worthy religious reasons, and has continued long enough to become a binding religious practice. They are not commandments from G-d written in the Torah, so why do they have the status of halacha – law? As the sages of the Talmud put it, "minhagei yisroel, Torah hi" – the customs of Israel are Torah. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik said they are Torah even to the extent that we must study them in order to understand them and discover the basis for them in the Gemara and Rishonim. Here we explore the origins, meanings and practice of some of the customs of Rosh Hashanah all the way to Sukkot, Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

With thanks to "Ask the Rabbi", at Aish.com



APPLES AND HONEY

By Berel Wein

"The sophisticated doubters among us have stated that the apple is used because it is the fruit that was most available in all of the areas of the world of the Jewish exile."

We're all familiar with the Jewish custom of dipping an apple into honey and eating it on the night of Rosh Hashanah. All Jewish customs have Torah, historical and traditional origins, though many of them may be now somewhat obscure due to the passage of time and the circumstances of the long exile of Israel.

So why the apple? Is not placing honey on the piece of challah that we begin the meal with sufficient to symbolise a sweet year? What is the special symbolism of the apple that makes it the fruit that most graces our Rosh Hashanah table?

The sophisticated doubters among us have stated that the apple is used because it is the fruit that was most available in all of the areas of the world of the Jewish exile. However, such reasoning begs the question and misses the entire point of the reasons for the preservation of Jewish customs. Jewish customs come to reinforce Jewish identity and memory. They serve to remind us of our special responsibilities and duties toward G-d and man. They reinforce our sense of solidity with all previous Jewish generations, and provide an effective method of transmitting our tradition and heritage to our children and grandchildren.

One of the tragedies of the alienation of many Jews currently from their heritage is

their ignorance and non-participation regarding Jewish customs. Thus, the custom of the eating of the apple dipped into the honey on the night of Rosh Hashanah does have a special traditional significance over and above the ready availability of the fruit at this season of the year. And it is this special significance of memory that enhances the beauty and even the sweetness of the custom.

FRUIT OF AFFECTION

One of the fruits to which the Jewish people are compared in Solomon's Song of Songs is the apple. "As the apple is rare and unique among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved – Israel – among the maidens (nations) of the world."

The Midrash informs us that the apple tree puts forth the nub of its fruit even before the leaves that will surround and protect the little fruit at its beginning stage of growth are fully sprouting. The Jewish

people, by accepting the Torah with the statement that "we will do and we will understand" – placing holy action and observance of Torah commandments even before understanding and rational acceptance – thereby imitated the behaviour of

“THE APPLE ALSO SERVED TO REMIND THE JEWISH PEOPLE OF THEIR ENSLAVEMENT IN EGYPT AND THEIR DELIVERANCE FROM THAT BONDAGE.”

the apple. Thus, the apple became a Jewish symbol, a memory aid, so to speak, to the moment of revelation at Sinai.

The apple also served to remind the Jewish people of their enslavement in Egypt and their deliverance from that

bondage. Again, according to Midrash, the apple served as the fruit of affection between husband and wife during the long and painful period of abject slavery. It provided them with hope for the future and the determination to bring a future generation into the world, despite all of the bleakness of Jewish circumstance. The apple therefore also became the symbol of the Jewish home and family, of optimism for a brighter Jewish future, of the tenacity of Jewish spirit and determination. >



PHOTOGRAPH (THIS PAGE): ILAN OSSENDRYVER

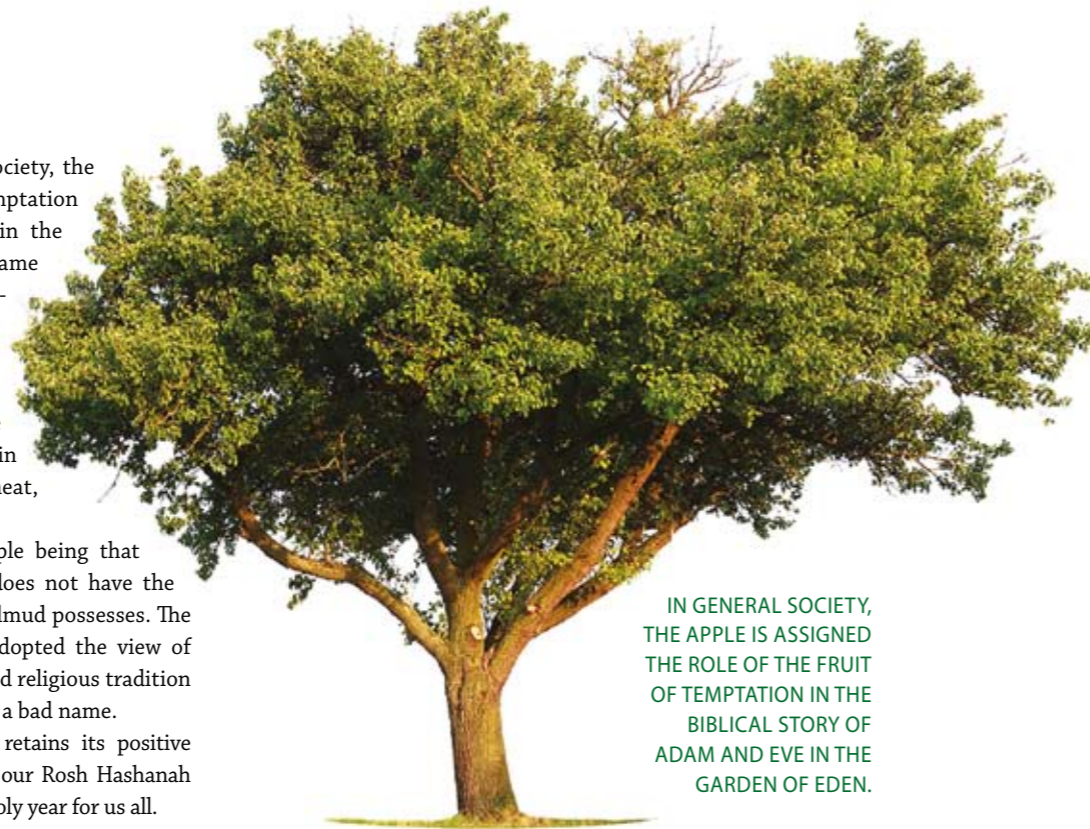
GARDEN OF EDEN

It is interesting to note that in general society, the apple is assigned the role of the fruit of temptation in the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The apple therefore became the symbol of human weakness and downfall, even of death itself.

However, the Talmud, when listing the possible “fruits” that may have been products of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, does not include apples in that list. The “fruits” mentioned are wheat, figs and grapes.

There is one Jewish source for an apple being that fateful fruit, quoted in Midrash, but it does not have the weight of authority that a statement in Talmud possesses. The Christian world, for unknown reasons, adopted the view of that Midrash and all Christian art, story and religious tradition for the last 1 500 years has given the apple a bad name.

Not so among Jews, where the apple retains its positive symbolism and has its place of honour on our Rosh Hashanah table – as a harbinger of a good, sweet and holy year for us all.



IN GENERAL SOCIETY, THE APPLE IS ASSIGNED THE ROLE OF THE FRUIT OF TEMPTATION IN THE BIBLICAL STORY OF ADAM AND EVE IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN.

HEY HONEY!

Another favourite food staple in the Jewish home during the High Holy Day season is honey. Traditionally, from Rosh Hashanah until after Sukkot, honey is served with every major meal. It is smeared on the bread over which we recite the “Hamotzi” blessing, the sweet apple is dipped into honey on the night of Rosh



Hashanah, sweet baked goods are baked with honey, and honey is used in the preparation of foods such as glazed carrots and sweet desserts.

Aside from the caloric disaster that this custom entails, one is really hard pressed to find a negative thing to say about honey.

The custom of honey on the Jewish table during the High Holy Day period is an ancient and universal Jewish custom. It is already recorded in the works of the Babylonian Geonim in the 7th century, and probably dates back to even much earlier times. It is no exaggeration to say that Jews always seemed to possess a sweet tooth.

The obvious reason for the use of honey on our table at this time of the year is the symbolism of our desire for a “sweet new year”. Sweet means dear, precious, enjoyable, satisfying, serene, secure and something most pleasing. Well, that about sums up our hopes and prayers for the new year, and therefore honey serves as our representative in expressing these fervent hopes and prayers.

However, honey represents more than

sweetness per se. It is one of the attributes of the Land of Israel, which is described in the Bible as being a land that “flows with milk and honey”. Thus honey on the table always reminded the Jew wherever he or she resided of their ancient homeland of Israel and of the Jewish attachment to its history and holy soil.

Actually, the honey referred to in the land flowing “with milk and honey” is not the common bee honey that we use today, but rather describes the honey of biblical times that was primarily produced from overripe dates. Even today, here in Israel, date honey is produced and sold, though the overwhelming majority of honey on the market comes from bees. Its symbolism of sweetness in life, its connection to the Land of Israel, its role in halachic discussion, decision and precedent concerning its kashrut, all have combined to make honey a ‘Jewish’ food. The use of honey as a food is certainly one of the more enjoyable customs of Jewish tradition. May its symbolism of sweetness truly be a harbinger of delight for the good year for us all.

SIMCHAT TORAH

Adapted from the writings of Rabbi Berel Wein:

It is the holiday basically created by the Jewish people itself, replete with customs and nuances developed over the ages that have hardened into accepted practice and ritual. In Israel, Simchat Torah and Shmini Atzeret occur simultaneously, and Simchat Torah, the folk holiday, has almost pushed Shmini Atzeret, the biblical and halachic holiday, aside in thought and practice. This is a practical example of how sometimes Jewish custom, based upon intense love of and attachment to Torah, frequently overwhelms Torah ritual itself.



KOL HANEARIM

Moshe Rabbenu ordained that the Torah be read every Shabbos. On this joyous day when we conclude the yearly cycle of Torah readings, it is customary for everyone to take part in the celebration by receiving an aliyah. Children also receive an aliyah on this day; all the children are gathered together, and together with the adult who received the honor of leading this beautiful rite, recite the traditional aliyah blessings. In many congregations a tallis is spread over the heads of the children, and after the conclusion of the aliyah, someone pronounces Jacob’s blessing: “May the angel who redeemed me from all harm bless the youths, and may they be called by my name and the name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and may they multiply abundantly like fish, in the midst of the land.” The next two aliyot will conclude the Torah (Deuteronomy 33:27-44:12), and then we begin the new cycle of the reading from the beginning of Genesis. For we never finish the Torah; as soon as we conclude studying the Torah, G-d’s infinite wisdom, we immediately start again.

Adapted from Chabad.org >

PHOTOGRAPHS: (RIGHT): ILAN OSSENDRYVER; (HONEY & TREE): BIGSTOCKPHOTO



TASHLICH

From Aish.com

The Tashlich prayer is said on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashanah by a pool of water that preferably has fish in it. These prayers are symbolic of the casting away of our mistakes. The custom of Tashlich is only a few centuries old. It is not mentioned in the Talmud (5th century) or in the codification of Maimonides (11th century). It was first mentioned by the Rama (16th century) in his notes on the Code of Jewish Law (O.C. 583:2). Thus, Tashlich came about many centuries after idol worship was an issue, when nobody believed in feeding the river gods!

Actually, many commentators do not approve at all of emptying the pockets during Tashlich, for the specific reason that it may be originally a pagan custom of “giving the devil his due”. (Primitive man believed that evil spirits lived in streams and wells.) Of course, it is foolish to think one can rid sins by shaking out his pockets. Rather, the Jewish approach is deep introspection and commitment to change.

So what is the source of Tashlich? It is derived from the Midrash, which says when Abraham went to the Akeida (binding of Isaac) he had to cross through water up to his neck. This was G-d’s way of giving Abraham added reward for overcoming an obvious excuse to turn back. The Akeida occurred on Rosh Hashanah, and represents

the quintessential act of commitment to G-d (see Mishna Brura 583:8).

(By the way, blowing a ram’s horn on Rosh Hashanah is also partly related to the fact that the Akeida occurred on Rosh Hashanah, where a ram’s horn was caught in the bush – see Genesis 22:13.)

If Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbat, Tashlich is pushed off until the second day. If Tashlich was not said on Rosh Hashanah itself, it may be said anytime during the Ten Days of Repentance.

Both the body of water and the fish are symbolic. In Talmudic literature, Torah is represented as water. Just as fish can’t live without water, so too a Jew can’t live without Torah!

Also, the fact that fish’s eyes never close serve to remind us that, so too, G-d’s eyes (so to speak) never close; He knows of our every move.

This is the text of Tashlich:

Who is like You, G-d, who removes iniquity and overlooks transgression of the remainder of His inheritance? He doesn’t remain angry forever because He desires kindness. He will return and He will be merciful to us, and He will conquer our iniquities, and He will cast them into the depths of the seas.

Give truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham like that you swore to our ancestors from long ago. From the straits I called upon G-d, G-d answered me with expansiveness. G-d is with me, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me? G-d is with me to help me, and I will see my foes (annihilated). It is better to take refuge in G-d than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in G-d, that to rely on nobles.


Many people also read Psalms 33 and 130.

Adapted from ABCs of Rosh Hashanah, based on research by Rabbi Moshe Lazerus

ROUND CHALLAHS

By Aliza Bulow

Round challahs are unique to the High Holy Day season. Some say they represent a crown that reflects our coronation of G-d as the King of the world. Others suggest the circular shape points to the cyclical nature of the year. The Hebrew word for year is ‘shana’, which comes from the Hebrew word ‘repeat’. Perhaps the circle illustrates how the years just go round and round. But Rosh Hashanah challahs are not really circles; they are spirals... In addition to ‘repeat’, shana also means ‘change’. As the year goes round and round, repeating the same seasons and holidays as the year before, we are presented with a choice: Do we want this *shana* (year) to be a repetition, or do we want to make a change (*shinui*)? Hopefully, each year we make choices for change that are positive, and each year we will climb higher and higher, creating a spiritual spiral. The shape of the Rosh Hashanah challah reminds us that this is the time of year to make those decisions. This is the time to engage in the creative spiritual process that lifts us out of the repetitive cycle, and directs our energies toward a higher end.

Read the full article at aish.com, the leading Judaism website 

FURTHER READING:

Why Jews Do What They Do: The History of Jewish Customs, by Daniel Sperber (1999), available through amazon.com. For more scholarly sources, see *Tosfot* (Avoda Zara 11a), *Sefer HaChinuch* #262, *Maharik* 88, and *Igrot Moshe* Y.D. 2:53