

FOOD FOR ROSH HASHANAH THOUGHT

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

An odd Rosh Hashana custom, duly recorded in the Talmud and halachic codes, is the lavishing of puns on holiday foods.

Most Jews know that on the first night of the new Jewish year, it is customary to eat a piece of apple dipped in honey, to symbolize our hope for a sweet year. Less known is the Rosh Hashana night custom of eating foods whose names augur well for the future. Though the Talmud's examples are, of course, in Hebrew or Aramaic, at least one halachic commentary directs us to find pun-foods in whatever language we may speak.

"Help us pare away our sins" before consuming a pear might thus be an appropriate example. Or an entreaty that G-d be our advocate, before eating a piece of avocado. "Lettuce have a wonderful year" might be pushing it a bit, but maybe not. One respected rabbi once smilingly suggested partaking of a raisin and stalk of celery after expressing the hope for a "raise in salary."

Such exercises might seem a bit out of place on the Jewish holy "day of judgment." But that is only because we regard the custom simplistically, as some quaint superstition. In truth, though, it is precisely Rosh Hashana's austere gravity that lies at the custom's source.

There are other telling Jewish customs regarding Rosh Hashana, like the recommendation that the Jewish new year be carefully utilized to the fullest for prayer, Torah-study and good deeds, that not a moment of its time be squandered. Mitzvot and good conduct, of course, are always "in season," but they seem to have particular power on Rosh Hashana. Similarly, Jewish sources caution against expressing anger on Rosh Hashana. The Jewish new year days are to reflect only the highest Jewish ideals.

The 16th century Jewish luminary Rabbi Yehudah Loewy, known as the Maharal, stresses the crucial nature of beginnings. He explains that the trajectory of a projectile - or, we might similarly note, the outcome of a mathematical computation - can be affected to an often astounding degree by a very small change at the start of the process. A diversion of a single degree of arc where the arrow leaves the bow - or an error of a single digit at the first step of a long calculation - can yield a surprisingly large difference in the end. Modern scientific terminology has given the concept both the unwieldy name "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" and the playful one "the butterfly effect," an allusion to the influence the flapping of a butterfly's wings halfway around the world could

presumably have on next week's local weather.

Rosh Hashana is thus much more than the start of the Jewish year. It is the day from which the balance of the year unfolds, a time of "initial conditions" exquisitely sensitive to our actions.

Perhaps the Rosh Hashana puns, too, reflect that sensitivity. After all, word-play is not suggested for any other day of the year.

Maybe by imbuing even things as seemingly inconsequential as our choice of foods with meaning on Rosh Hashana, we symbolically affirm the idea that beginnings have unusual potential. That there are times when the import of each of our actions is magnified. By seizing even the most wispy opportunities to try to bestow blessing on the Jewish new year aborning, we declare our determination to start the year as right as we possibly can.

While we are not explicitly informed by the Talmud about whether the puns actually have any direct effect on our year, they unarguably impress upon us the extraordinary degree to which our actions at the start of a Jewish year affect how we will live its balance.

And that is an invaluable lesson, one that should lead us to begin the new Jewish year working to make ourselves better Jews in our relations both to one another and to our Creator.

May all we Jews merit a Rosh Hashana with only sweetness and joy, devoid of sadness and anger. And may we seize every chance to make the start of 5768 as perfect as we can - ushering in a year in which the Jewish People's collective life and all of our individual lives take a distinct and substantial turnip for the better.

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