



The fragrance of apples

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For many Jews, their immediate association with Rosh Hashana is apple dipped in honey. Not the Shofar (a Biblical Mitzvah), not the Rosh Hashana Prayers (a Rabbinic Mitzvah), but a custom.

The Gemara¹ records that on Rosh Hashana one should eat² certain food types including; squash, beets, leeks and dates. These foods represent different omens that are alluded to in their names in Loshon Hakodesh (Hebrew). Eating these foods is symbolic that these omens or blessings should be fulfilled. Some recite a 'Yehi Ratzon' prayer before eating each food type to request that these omens be fulfilled.

The Tur³, Rabbi Yakov ben Asher (approx. 1269-1343), records that the custom in Ashkenaz is to eat a sweet apple with honey at the beginning of the meal as if to say 'let this year be sweet for us.' Apples are not mentioned in the passage of the Gemara referred to above. Unlike the species mentioned in the Gemara, the symbolism of the apple is not connected to its name.

The Mahari"l⁴, Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Halevi (Segal) Moelin (approx. 1365-1427) also records this practice. In his laws of Rosh Hashana, Mahari"l writes that on the night of Rosh Hashana after Kiddush it is customary to eat sweet apples in honey. This is the custom referred to by the Tur and it is brought by the Ram"o, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (approx. 1520-1572), in his glosses on the Shulchan Aruch⁵.

Mahari"l is known as the father of Ashkenazi Minhagim and records the customs and practices of Ashkenazi communities. Many of the glosses of the Ram"o on the Shulchan Aruch which reflect the Ashkenazi practice are based on the writings of the Mahari"l.

Many reasons have been offered for this Minhag. Many, including the Tur, write that the symbolism of the apple is its sweetness. By eating the apple, we are asking that we be blessed with a sweet year. This is reflected in the customary 'Yehi Ratzon' prayer that we say when eating the apple and honey – "May it be Your will that You renew for us a good and sweet year'.

Mahari"l questions this understanding that the custom of eating a sweet apple is like eating other sweet foods - so that we be blessed with a sweet year. He asks "Are there no sweeter fruits than the apple?" Instead, the Mahari"l offers a deeper allusion and significance of the apple specifically, writing; "It is obvious that the reason for dipping an apple is related

to the apple orchard's Kabbalistic connotations, which are alluded to in the Book of Breishis 27:27."

The fragrance of apples, the fragrance of Gan Eden

Breishis Chapter 27 is the Torah's account of the episode in which Yakov ended up receiving the Brachos from his father Yitzchak instead of Eisav. In this passage lies the Kabbalistic secret of the apple orchard which, according to Mahari"l, our Rosh Hashana apples allude to.

Yitzchak was advancing in age and wanted to bless his oldest son Eisav before he passed away. He sent Eisav to hunt game and prepare delicacies for him. After eating these delicacies, Yitzchak would give him the blessings.

Rivka overheard Yitzchak's words and devised a plan to ensure that Yakov, the younger but more deserving son, should receive the Brachos instead. She prepares a meal and dresses Yakov in Eisav's clothing, placing goat's hair on his arms and neck so that he would feel hairy like his older brother. Pretending to be Eisav, Yakov entered his father's tent.

When Yaakov came in to his father Yitzchak in order to receive his blessings, Yitzchak noticed how he mentioned Hashem's name, something that Eisav would not likely do. Yitzchak became suspicious and asked Yaakov to come closer so that he could feel him. At this point, the Torah says;

וַיְרַח אֶת-רִיחַ בְּגָדָיו וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר רָא אֱלֹהִים בְּנֵי כְרִים שָׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר בְּרִכּוֹ ה'

"And he smelled the fragrance of his garments and he blessed him. And he said see the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field that has been blessed by Hashem".

Even though Yakov was wearing the skins of goats which have a pungent odour, the Midrash records that the fragrance of Gan Eden accompanied Yakov⁶. It was this fragrance that Yitzchak smelled when he smelled the clothing that Yakov was wearing, describing it as being like the fragrance of a field blessed by Hashem. Rashi quotes a Midrash, that this fragrance was the fragrance of an apple field.

Garments of skin, garments of light

Yakov was wearing the clothing of Eisav. But before belonging to Eisav, this garment had many other owners. As chronicled by the Midrashim,

this was no ordinary 'hand-me-down'. This was a garment with a history – a history that goes back to the beginning of everything.

The Targum Yonason writes that these clothes were the clothing of Adam Harishon. That day Eisav did not wear these clothes. He left them in the house and she (Rivka) put them on Yakov.

How Adam received this garment is a story in itself.

Before eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Torah states that Adam and Chava “were naked and they were not ashamed”⁷. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Chava became aware of their nakedness and were ashamed.

Before they sinned, there was no shame associated with their nakedness. Rashi teaches that this was because at that point they did not have a Yetzer Hara and an awareness of good and evil. Therefore they did not know the ways of modesty.

Sforno elaborates. Prior to the sin, all of their limbs and all of their actions were devoted to serving Hashem and not to pursuing personal physical pleasure. They had no lust or desire for physicality and therefore even the act of intimacy was like the act of eating and drinking a simple meal for subsistence (as opposed to indulgence). For them, their private areas had no associated lust just like our hands and face are for us.

By consuming from the fruit of the Eitz Hadaas, Adam and Chava ingested negativity and the Yetzer Hara became a part of their consciousness. They now experienced worldly desires and awareness of lust. This brought physical desire to their intimacy and hence a natural sense of Tznius. Their nakedness was now a source of embarrassment.

At the end of the Parsha, after assigning their punishments, the Torah concludes with the Posuk;

ויעש ה' אל-הים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבשם

“And Hashem made garments of skin עור and he dressed them in them”.

The Midrash⁸ records that in the Sefer Torah of Rabbi Meir, the word עור is written אור with an Alef⁹. Whereas כתנות עור means “garments of skin”, אור כתנות אור means “garments of light”.

The commentaries explain that both descriptions are true. Before the sin of the Eitz Hadaas, their garments were of “light”. But after their sin, their garments became a “garment of skin”.

This change in garment from “light” to “skin” reflects the change in the physicality of the world and in man as a result of the Sin.

At the inception of creation, the forces of evil and negativity were separated from our worldly reality, residing in their own sphere¹⁰. The very physicality of the world was holy. Not only did it not conceal Hashem’s presence within Creation, on the contrary, physicality itself radiated G-dliness in an open way.

So too, before eating from the Eitz Hadaas, Adam and Chava’s bodies radiated the light of their Neshama. The G-dly light was able to shine openly and unhindered. The body and physicality did not conceal their soul but revealed and expressed it. The body itself was holy and therefore there was no lust or desire associated with it.

But upon eating from the Eitz Hadaas in violation of Hashem’s command, Adam ingested negativity, internalising it and bringing it into his



consciousness. With a Yetzer Hara to lust, the physical became a temptation of self-indulgence. The physicality of their bodies became corrupted as well, so that instead of revealing and expressing G-dliness, their bodies became coarse and obstructed this revelation.

Because Man is the ultimate purpose of Creation, Adam ingesting the fruit affected the entire world. No longer separate, good and evil became mixed together, so that there is nothing out physical world which does not have an element of negativity. Like man’s body, physicality became corrupted and now concealed and hid the presence of Hashem.

In the future Messianic state, the physicality of the world will be completely refined and once again the body will be elevated to the level of garments of light¹¹.

This is the deeper allusion of the “garment of skin” and the “garment of light”.

The pre-Sin “garment of light” represented a state where the physicality of the world and the body of Man revealed and expressed G-dliness, radiating the light of holiness.

The post-Sin “garment of skin” represented the corruption that was effected by the Sin, giving rise to coarse negativity that opposes and conceals the Divine light. Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer records that the garment that Hashem made for Adam was made from the skin of the snake itself which was the embodiment and incorporation of evil¹².

From Adam, this “garment of skin” was passed down from generation to generation, eventually coming into the possession of Noach. Noach took it with him into the Ark during the Flood¹³. On emerging from the Ark, Noach’s son Cham took the garment for himself. Ultimately he bequeathed it to Nimrod¹⁴.

This garment had a wondrous power. When Nimrod put it on, all beasts, animals, and birds, when they saw the garment fell before him. This is why Nimrod is referred to as a “great hunter”. It was possession of this garment and its power that led the people to crown Nimrod as king.

One time, Eisav saw Nimrod wearing this garment and coveted it. He killed Nimrod and took the clothing for himself. Eisav, like Nimrod was a great hunter. This theft is alluded to in the Torah in the Posuk¹⁵;

וַתִּקַּח רִבְקָה אֶת-בְּגָדֵי עֵשָׂו בְּנֵה הַגְּדֹלִים הַחֲמֹדִים אֲשֶׁר אִתָּהּ בְּבַיִת וַתַּלְבֵּשׂ אֶת-יַעֲקֹב בְּגֵה הַקָּטָן

“And Rivka took the clothing of her older son Eisav Hachamudos that were with her in the house, and she dressed her younger son Yakov it”

The garment that Hashem made for Adam was made from the skin of the snake itself

The clothing is described as being Hachamudos. Rashi offers two explanations of this term. According to the first explanation it means clean. Alternatively it comes from the word meaning to desire or covet (תאווה) because he coveted these clothes from Nimrod.

It was this garment that Yakov wore when he entered his father's tent to receive the Brachos. This was the garment of Eisav, which belonged beforehand to Nimrod, both of whom were wicked and sinful. It was the "garment of skin" made for Adam Harishon, a garment that embodied the corruption of Man and the entire world that came about through the ultimate Sin. This garment was the garment of the snake itself.

How is it possible that this garment had the fragrance of Gan Eden?

When Yakov put on the garment of Eisav he corrected the Sin¹⁶ which had brought about its corruption. The garments were transformed back to their original state of purity as a "garment of light". Yitzchak smelled the fragrance of Gan Eden, the pre-Sin reality where the physicality of the world was holy and there was no concealment or corruption.

The rectification of sin is the process of Teshuvah. Like Yakov wearing Eisav's garment, Teshuvah erases the effects of sin, restoring purity to the person and reinstating their relationship with Hashem, so that the Diving light shines within them.

"The fragrance of the rebels"

On the verse describing how Yakov "smelled the fragrance of his clothing" - ריח בגדיו, the Midrash says that this word should not be read as בגדיו, "his garments", but rather בוגדיו, "his rebels". The Midrash¹⁷ gives two examples of who these rebels are who generate such a sublime fragrance. One of them was Yosef Meshisa.

Who was Yosef Meshisa? When the Romans came to destroy the Second Beis Hamikdash, they were afraid to enter it. They said let one of the Jews go in first to defile the sanctity of the Beis Hamikdash. Yosef Meshisa was an apostate Jew who was willing to help them. They told him that he could go into the Beis Hamikdash and take anything that he wishes for himself from the Temple treasures. Yosef entered and came out carrying the Golden Menorah.

Even the Romans felt that this artefact was inappropriate to be in the hands of simple commoner. They said that he should go in a second time and take something else. But this time Yosef refused to go in. They promised him rights to collect taxes for the next three years, but still he refused to enter the Beis Hamikdash. He said to them "it is enough that I have angered my Creator once, should I now anger him a second time?"

The Romans tortured Yosef to death. But throughout his brutal torture, all he could say, over and over again, was "woe to me for I have angered my Creator".

Yosef was a traitor, the lowest of the low. He was prepared to desecrate the Holy Temple by entering it and thereby assist the Romans in their cause. He was willing to plunder the holy Menorah for his own personal use. Yet something struck him and his inner core, his pintele Yid, was revealed. In one moment he became completely transformed and sacrificed his life Al Kiddush Hashem.

This, says the Midrash, the fragrance of those who rebel against Hashem, is the fragrance that was present in Eisav's clothing. It is the fragrance of the purity of Gan Eden generated by those who were distant and returned; the Baalei Teshuvah in whose presence even the perfectly righteous cannot stand.

"This took place on Rosh Hashana as it is known"

In his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, the Vilna Gaon comments "like the fragrance of a field blessed by Hashem: the Aramaic translation refers to this as the fragrance of apple orchards. He adds and this took place on Rosh Hashana as it is known".

The Zohar¹⁸ teaches that the entire account of Yakov receiving the Brachos from Yitzchak is a metaphor, describing that which takes place in the Heavenly spheres each year on Rosh Hashana.

'On Rosh Hashana Yitzchak goes out on his own'. Yitzchak is the embodiment of the Attribute of Judgement which is manifest on Rosh Hashana, the day of Judgement. Yitzchak sits on the Throne of Judgement.

He calls to Eisav, the Satan (the angel of Eisav), to go out and bring before him delicacies from the world according to their deeds. These are the evil deeds of mankind that Hashem will judge.

Rivka speaks to Yakov, her beloved son, representing the Jewish people, arousing him to bring his own delicacies. Yakov arises from below dressed in prayers and supplications. When Yitzchak says "the voice is the voice of Yakov", this refers to the sound of the Shofar that arises before Hashem on Rosh Hashana.

When He smells the fragrance of the garments, the prayers that arise, He blesses Yakov, the Jewish people. His anger recedes and He rejoices and all becomes Rachamim (compassion). All of the anger and judgements

disappear and are no longer to be found and Yisroel emerges from their judgement with joy and blessings.

By the time Eisav returns carrying the evil deeds of the world to be judged, it is too late. Yakov has already received the blessings and been forgiven.

Every year on Rosh Hashana we come before Hashem like Yakov coming before his father Yitzchak. Through our Rosh Hashana prayers and Teshuvah, expressed in the heartfelt call of the Shofar, we transform ourselves and our lives from being 'garments of skin' into 'garments of light'. No matter how far we have strayed, our return to Hashem elicits the fragrance and purity of Gan Eden.

Perhaps this is the allusion that Mahari"l is referring to and a meditation to think about as we eat the apple on Rosh Hashana night. The apples remind us of the fragrance of the Field blessed by Hashem, the fragrance of Gan Eden, the fragrance of Teshuvah.

May Hashem bless us this Rosh Hashana with the blessings given by Yitzchak to Yakov; "and Hashem will give you from the dew of the heavens and from the fat of the earth", representing all of the blessings for spiritual and material success and prosperity.

"The voice is the voice of Yakov" refers to the sound of the shofar that arises on before Hashem on Rosh Hashana

1. Kerisus 5b
2. There are divergent texts of the Gemara, some of them require eating the food types. Other versions teach that one should see the food types i.e. place them on the table but there is no need to eat from them.
3. Orach Chaim 583
4. Minhagim. Customs of Rosh Hashana
5. Orach Chaim 583:1
6. Rashi
7. Bereishis 2:25
8. Breishis Rabbah 20:12
9. This cannot be understood literally since any letter which is changed from the Mesorah invalidates the Sefer Torah. In Talmudic times, the sages would learn Torah directly from the Torah scroll. It is possible that Rabbi Meir had noted on the side of his scroll that the words could be interpreted as though written with an Alef.
10. Ariza"l Likutei Torah Bereishis
11. Ramchal
12. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 20
13. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 24
14. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer ibid
15. Bereishis 26:15
16. Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer records that Yakov sensed the power of this garment and after receiving the Brachos he buried the garment so that it could not fall into the hands of the wicked and unworthy.
17. Breishis Rabbah and Yalkut Shimoni
18. Emor 99b Raya Mehemna