



SEDER FOR THE  
EVE OF ROSH HASHANAH

סדר סימנים  
ליל ראש השנה

Though not included in the Rosh Hashanah prayer books of the Congregation of London's Spanish and Portuguese Jews, the custom of displaying and eating a number of fruits and vegetables representing *simanim* (omens or signs) for the coming year is practised widely by Sephardim and others throughout the world.

This practice, mentioned twice in the Talmud (3rd to 6th centuries),<sup>1</sup> is of ancient origin. In one reference the *simanim* were simply displayed, and in the second they were also eaten. The addition of blessings came later. Rav Hai Gaon (late-10th-century Baghdad) was reported to have blessed each one of a basket of different fruits presented to him by his disciples.

The proceedings were codified in the *Tur* (14th century) and then in the *Shulhan Arukh* (16th century). It was actively promoted by *HaAri*, Rabbi Isaac Luria (16th century) and gained widespread acceptance. Different communities substituted fruits and vegetables more readily available to them for their *simanim*, so customs varied from country to country. That of apple dipped in honey came from Ashkenazi Europe.

The Torah forbids all acts of superstition; and it is stressed that the *simanim* are not to be regarded as magical devices intended to influence future events, but rather to remind us of our hopes for the coming year and to ask for God's bounty in granting us prosperity, strength and peace.

The particular order (*Seder*) of *simanim* herein is based on *Prayers for the New Year* by David de Sola Pool, Minister of the Congregation Shearith Israel, New York (1937). It has been varied slightly to accord more closely with that of the Ben Ish Hai (19th-century Baghdad) and a fresh translation with explanatory notes added.

1 BT Horayot 12a, Keritot 6a.

## (SEDER) SIMANIM

## סדר סימנים

*May the year with all its misfortunes cease...  
and the New Year with its blessings now begin.*

תְּכַלֶּה שָׁנָה וְקַלְלוֹתֶיהָ.  
תִּנְחַל שָׁנָה וּבְרִכּוֹתֶיהָ:

On both nights of Rosh Hashanah in the home, Kiddush is recited over wine, the hands washed for eating bread, and the blessing recited over *hallot*. The Seder then commences with the display and eating of the following symbolic foods, each accompanied by an appropriate blessing.

### DATES

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂשִׁיתֶמוּ אוֹיְבֶיךָ  
וְשׁוֹנְאֵיךָ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ:  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָעֵץ:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that as we eat this date, the New Year just beginning will be one of happiness, blessing and peace for all.*

*Blessed are you Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the tree.*

The symbol of the date (*Tamar* in Hebrew) is a play on the word *Tam*, meaning 'to end' or 'to extinguish'. This *siman* is a request to end those who seek to harm us and for peace in the coming year.

### RUBIA

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂשִׁירְבוּ זְכוֹתֵינוּ:  
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הָאֲדָמָה:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that our good deeds increase.*

*Blessed are you Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who creates the fruit of the earth.*

*Rubia* is one of the symbolic foods mentioned in the Talmud, now usually taken to mean green string beans. Its symbolism relies on a pun on the Hebrew word *Yirbu*, meaning 'to increase' or 'to be plentiful'. Instead of beans, Jews from Libya mix sugar and sesame seeds to symbolize plenty, because the grains are too tiny and numerous to be counted.

## LEEK

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂיִכְרְתוּ אוֹיְבֶיךָ  
וְשׂוֹנְאֶיךָ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that as we eat this leek, we may never lack good fortune in the coming year.*

*Karti* in Hebrew, Leeks, resembles the Hebrew word *Yikartu*, meaning, ‘cut off’. The traditional wish associated with this symbol is for our enemies and those who seek evil to be removed.

## BETROOT

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂיִסְתְּלְקוּ  
אוֹיְבֶיךָ וְשׂוֹנְאֶיךָ וְכָל מְבַקְשֵׁי רַעְתָּנוּ:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that as we bite into this beet, those who have beaten us in the past and sought our harm should hide away in the coming year.*

The Aramaic word *Salka*, beets, resembles the word *Lehistalek* (‘to retreat’). In this blessing, we ask that our enemies should disappear, and that we be freed from those who wish us harm.

## GOURD (Pumpkin or Squash)

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂתִקְרַע רַע גְּזוֹר  
דִּינְנוּ וְיִקְרָאוּ לְפָנֶיךָ זְכוֹתֵינוּ:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that the coming year grow as a gourd full of blessing and, that as we eat it, guard us against our enemies.*

*Kara* in Hebrew is a pumpkin or gourd. *Kará*, similarly pronounced, means ‘to tear’. With a slightly changed spelling, it also means ‘to proclaim’. A traditional interpretation of this *siman* is the wish that bad decrees against us be torn up and a list of our good deeds be proclaimed instead.

## POMEGRANATE

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂנַהֲיֶה מְלֵאִי  
מִצְוֹת כָּרְמוֹן:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that we be as full of good deeds as the pomegranate is full of seeds.*

A midrash (rabbinic teaching) states that there are 613 seeds in a pomegranate, each symbolizing one of the 613 mitzvot (commandments) in the Torah.

## APPLE IN HONEY

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׁתַּחֲדֵשׁ עָלֵינוּ  
שָׁנָה טוֹבָה וּמְתוּקָה. מִרְאשֵׁית הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרֵית הַשָּׁנָה:  
וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם. לִכְנֹס אֲכָלוּ מִשְׂמָנִים וּשְׁתוּ מִמֵּתֻקִּים. וְשִׁלְחוּ  
מִנּוֹת לְאֵין נֶכֶן לוֹ. כִּי־קָדוֹשׁ הַיּוֹם לְאֲדֹנָינוּ. וְאֶל־  
תַּעֲצְבוּ. כִּי־חֲדוֹת יי הִיא מַעֲזוֹכֶם:

*May it be your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, to grant us a year as good as the apple and as sweet as honey.*

*'And [Nehemiah] said to them, go and eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks. Send portions to those who have nothing ready, for today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve; for your strength is in the joy of the Lord.'* (Neh. 8:10)

Apple dipped in honey is a common Ashkenazi tradition for Rosh Hashanah. The Iraqi custom is to eat an apple baked with sugar, while in Yemen, quinces were served instead of apples. All variations represent the wish for a sweet year to come. The Hafetz Haim (19th-century Belarus) reminds us to avoid anger on Rosh Hashanah for sweetness should also be reflected in our mood.

## SHEEP OR FISH HEAD

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׁנֵהֵיָה לְרֹאשׁ  
וְלֹא לְזָנָב:  
וְנִתְנֶהָ יי לְרֹאשׁ וְלֹא לְזָנָב. וְהֵייתָ רַק לְמַעַלָּה. וְלֹא תִהְיֶה  
לְמַטָּה. כִּי־תִשְׁמַע אֶל־מִצְוֹת יי אֱלֹהֶיךָ. אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה  
הַיּוֹם לְשִׁמּוֹר וּלְעִשׂוֹת:

*May it be your will, Lord our God, and God of our fathers, that we go ahead in all we undertake in the coming year.*

*'And the Lord will set you forward and not back, up and not down when you listen to and observe all the commandments of the Lord your God.'* (Deut. 28:13)

This *siman* represents a wish for the New Year to see us at the head of all our undertakings and not at the tail, a leader not a follower. When a lamb's head is used, it also serves as a reminder of the ram sacrificed in the account of the Binding of Isaac, a Torah portion read on Rosh Hashanah.