

FISHING FOR DEEPER REASONS

LET'S SEE WHAT WE CATCH

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There is a venerable custom on Rosh Hashanah to have various Simanim at our tables as a sign and omen that we should have a prosperous year. The Talmud (Horayos 12a and Kerisos 6a¹) both mention the concept of סימנא מילתא היא - omens are significant and thus the custom is to consume special foods at this time (Tur and Shulchan Aruch O.C 583:1 based on Nechemiah 8:10). Rabbi Yaakov Emden adds that we also say a short prayer after consuming each Siman for just like dreams follow their interpretation (Berachos 55b), so too we hope that these omens should materialise for us and our families.

are always open, it reminds us of the constant open eye of Hashem's providence עינא פיקחא (see Tehillim 121:4). Further reasons given include that our Mitzvos should multiply like fish² and that we should not be dominated by the evil eye (Berachos 20a) to which fish aren't subject as they are concealed under the water.

Additionally, it is also brought that one may have the head of a fish on one's table if one cannot source the head of a ram supporting the well-known custom of having fish at our tables (Aruch HaShulchan 583:3).



Although not mentioned in the Gemara or Shulchan Aruch, there is a custom to have fish on the night of Rosh Hashanah to symbolise that we should proliferate as fish (Abudraham quoted in the Shulchan Aruch HaRav O.C 583:2, 7, Aruch HaShulchan O.C 583:1, 3, Mishna Berura 583:5 and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 129:9). The Alter Rebbe in the Siddur also adds that as the eyelids of fish

It thus comes as a surprise that there are also Jewish customs to specifically avoid eating fish on Rosh Hashanah and thus the question is asked how we can justify having fish at our tables in light of the opposing views.



The Maharshal would not eat fish on Rosh Hashanah, as he particularly enjoyed its taste and he wanted to practise אֲתַכְפִּי אַ (diminishing one's physical pleasures) and not get distracted with the seriousness of the day (Magen Avraham 583:1, Birkei Yosef 583:5)³.

Some suggest that the practice of avoiding eating fish only applies during

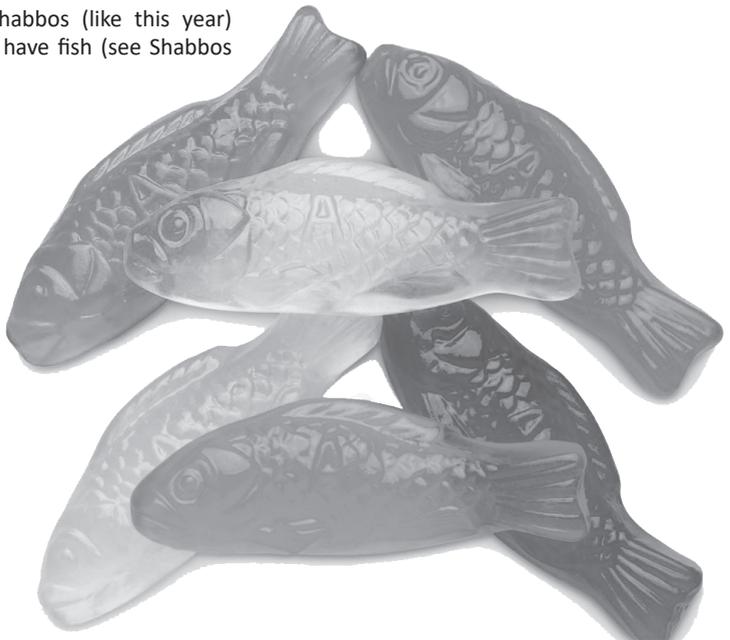
the daytime meal whereas at the night-time one is encouraged to have fish as a propitious sign⁴. Alternatively, a distinction is made when Rosh Hashanah falls out on Shabbos (like this year) when it is encouraged to have fish (see Shabbos 119a and Magen Avraham 552:2) as opposed to a regular year where it is to be avoided. The Aruch HaShulchan (O.C 597:2) justifies our widespread custom to not abstain from eating fish at all, for this practice was not a public ruling but rather the personal custom of a Torah giant and thus we are not affected by his practice. The Magen Avraham (597:1) also seems to learn like this, as the reason given by the Maharshal was to limit pleasure and enjoyment on the day of judgement and hence the ruling is somewhat subjective in nature⁵.

The Tashbetz though would refrain from eating fish for a linguistic reason due to the negative connotation of דג (fish) and דאגה (worry) (See

Nechemia 13:16). As Rosh Hashanah we are careful and superstitious of any negative omens (hence avoiding nuts that have the same numerical value as sin) (see Shulchan Aruch O.C 583:2), avoiding fish might be an extension of this idea to only have foods that have linguistic positive connotations. This idea of worry and concern may also be connected to the verse in Habakkuk (1:14), as men are associated with fish that can be swallowed up by larger and more dominating individuals (Avos 3:2) which we obviously wish to avoid.

**when
Rosh Hashanah
falls out on
Shabbos
it is
encouraged
to eat
fish**

While universal custom is generally to have fish, aside from the standard reasons for why we have



fish, perhaps using a number of Talmudic sources we may glean several reasons of what we can learn from fish.



The Gemara (Shabbos 77b) mentions the concept that there are three animals that get stronger with age with the only kosher one being fish. While most animals weaken as they approach maturity and beyond, perhaps we hope on Rosh Hashanah to internalise this message that each year we become stronger and look forward to another year of productive growth and development especially against the Yetzer Hora (Avos 4:1). Furthermore, as often quoted the Gemara (Berachos 61b) brings an analogy whereby the Jewish people are compared to fish in the ocean of Torah, as we highlight the importance of immersing ourselves in a Torah environment to be considered 'alive' (Avos 6:9). In fact, it is the Torah that gives us strength (Zevachim 116a) as we hope to recommit ourselves each year to the study (and teaching) of Torah as it is the Torah that helps us grow (Eruvin 27b-28a).

The Gemara also mentions the immediate value of a fish's consumption (Shabbos 155b), as we are aware that Torah has an immediate impact whenever we turn to it on a spiritual (and physical) level helping us navigate the turbulent waters that we may find ourselves in. Additionally, as fish are constantly swimming another lesson may be the importance at times of swimming against the current (Shulchan Aruch Y.D 55:7). The Talmud (Succah 18a) identifies that one of the differences between Kosher and non-Kosher fish is that the latter lacks a spinal cord limiting its abilities to swim upstream. We therefore may also have fish on Rosh Hashanah to remind us about the importance of not always going with the flow but at times swimming against the secular tides and currents that may not be in line with our Torah values.

May we merit to internalise these important values this year on Rosh Hashanah and be blessed with all the beautiful allusions and meanings behind the fish that we consume.

לשנה טובה ומתוקה

Notes:

1. There is a slight difference between the wording in the Talmudic sources, for in Horayos it highlights the importance of seeing the Simanim למיחזי הא רגיל למיחזי whereas in Kerisos it mentions the importance of eating the Simanim ריש שתא הא רגיל איניש למיכל ריש שתא While some are of the opinion that it is actually a dispute how to activate the Simanim, specifically through sight or taste, others opine that the former source applies to someone who can see the Simanim and thus receive their benefit by merely taking note of them whereas the latter is required when one is blind and only able to relate to the Simanim through taste. Common custom though is to consume the Simanim (perhaps fulfilling both opinions of sight and taste) without distinguishing פלוג between those who can see and those who can't (ו"ח). In a situation though when the fruit is rotten or there is an insect infestation, the Kaf HaChaim (583:6) rules one may rely on the opinion that it is sufficient to merely view them. The Meiri supported the version of only seeing the fruit to abstain from over indulgence on the day of Rosh Hashanah and that we should be reminded about the seriousness of the day.
2. We often find a connection between one's biological children and one's good deeds (see Rashi to Bereishis 6:9).
3. The story is told that one year in Vilna as the price of fish was hiked up, the Rabbis ruled that one may not have fish consistent with the Maharshal's ruling.
4. This would also be consistent with the Talmudic expression about having the Simanim at the beginning of the year ריש שתא which would theoretically only apply to the first night of Rosh Hashanah.
5. A subtle difference between the explanation of the Aruch HaShulchan and the Magen Avraham would be if eating fish was extremely pleasurable and whether one should avoid eating it to focus on the seriousness of the day. The Aruch HaShulchan would seem to permit it as the Maharshal's practise seemed to be unique, whereas the Magen Avraham might extend the concept to those whom it may also be relevant for.

לע"נ דניאל זאב בן חונא שיח'

