

**What's Your Sign?**  
**Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5775**

There we were, on a bright Thursday morning at the beginning of Elul last year, in a well appointed home in the *yishuv* of Talmon. We were a group of North American Rabbis on a solidarity mission under the auspices of the Orthodox Union. As we filed in, we were greeted by our gracious hosts, who tried to serve us some coffee and cake- but we were too nervous to partake, because our hosts were Ophir and Bat Galim Sha'er, the parents of Gil-ad, who had been murdered only two months earlier in the vicious kidnapping attack in Gush Etzion. My eyes darted around the living room, taking in the bookshelves groaning with Torah books, paintings hanging on the wall of nature scenes done by Bat Galim herself, and then my eyes alighted on the dining room table. On it was a fish bowl, festively decorated, with a fish swimming in it. I didn't think much of it, until the Shaers told us that the fish belonged to was Gil-ad's. He fed it, cared for it, and, on one memorable day, he put some red dye into the bowl and said he had performed a bris on the fish! I did a double take; Gil-ad was no longer, but his fish lived on. Suddenly, the fish was so much more than just longer just a fish. Instead, it was a living link to a beloved son. It was a living reminder of a life full of potential, a world that was tragically torn asunder, a link to an ideal and idyllic world that could have been.

Every year, on the first night of Rosh Hashanah (and, in many communities, on the second night as well), we enact a bizarre ritual in which we simple foods beyond their humble origins in what

we call the *simanim*, or signs. The Talmudic sage Abaye<sup>1</sup> tells us סִימָנָא מִלֵּתָא הִיא - these signs are significant, so it is propitious to partake of them at the beginning of the year. Over time, this practice of *simanim* has greatly expanded beyond the few fruits and vegetables the Talmud describes. Carrots, black-eyed peas, apples in honey- all these are later additions to the *simanim* repertoire. Indeed, Rabbi Avraham Abba Gombiner, in his commentary Magen Avrohom on the Shulchan Aruch<sup>2</sup> encourages people to use any food item whose name evokes good wishes and positive tidings in the local vernacular, a dispensation has led people to stretch this idea to its outermost limits. My friend and colleague Rabbi Daniel Yolkut of Pittsburgh showed me a book that included kiwis as a siman, referring to a verse we say at the end of Mussaf today- כִּי בִי יִרְבוּ - יָמֶיךָ, for in me (referring to the Torah) your days shall be lengthened. But how does this really work? Do we really think that eating a beet, for example, will cause our enemies to be beaten? What is the purpose of this bizarre charade?

I believe there are three important Rosh Hashanah lessons we can learn from the *simanim*:

In his essays on Rosh Hashanah in the work *Bnei Yisaschar*, Rav Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov explained that when two people are separated by a language barrier, they often communicate through mutually intelligible symbols. The medium of speech is not sufficient, so a more primitive and concrete expression is needed- that is a *siman*, and there is no better *siman* than the Shofar. The *simanim* on Rosh Hashanah are vehicle for the expression of the feelings and phrases we leave unsaid the rest of the year- and there are so much that we leave unsaid, out of

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<sup>1</sup> Kereisos 6a

<sup>2</sup> Orach Chaim 583

pride, insecurity, or fear. There is one phrase in particular that we avoid like the plague—a phrase the Talmud<sup>3</sup> tells us we must teach ourselves to say with great regularity. The economists Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt describe it, in their book “Think Like A Freak,” as the three most difficult words to say in the English language<sup>4</sup>. That phrase is ***I Don’t Know***. Our sages<sup>5</sup> teach us that the hallmark of intelligent people is *אָמַר לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי*—they admit it if there is something they haven’t heard, or don’t know. If we go through life trying to save face, pretending to be experts, saying we have heard that which we haven’t—on politics, on sports, the arts or especially on religion—we will never open ourselves up to actually learning about these subjects, and to personal growth and improvement. And it is pride that prevents us from uttering other phrases that are equally difficult to say but equally important, like “I was wrong” or “I am sorry” to a spouse we’ve offended, to a friend we’ve fought with and even (or perhaps especially) to our children, whom we have disappointed, ignored or hurt. *סִימְנָא מִלִּילָתָא*—by engaging in this ritual, we show that this year, we are prepared to repair our relationships by bringing into the realm of speech that which needs to be said by us.

*Simanim* are the way we express outwardly what is inside, but they also represent an internal expression. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was fond of quoting the passage in the Talmud<sup>6</sup> that describes the deceit surrounding Yaakov’s marriage. Yaakov knew the capabilities of his conniving father-in-law Lavan, so before marrying Rachel, he devised a secret code—*סִימְנִים*—they could share to prevent any funny business. In advance of the wedding night, however, Rachel

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<sup>3</sup> Berachos 4a

<sup>4</sup><http://freakonomics.com/2014/05/15/the-three-hardest-words-in-the-english-language-a-new-freakonomics-radio-podcast/>

<sup>5</sup> Avos 5:7

<sup>6</sup>Bava Basra 123a

realized that if she were to marry Yaakov first, her sister would end up marrying the wicked Esav. To save her sister from that ignominious fate, Rachel revealed the סימנים to her. סימנים are like a secret handshake, an inside joke siblings enjoy when describing an experience they alone shared. We have these in our families, and we have them in our Jewish family. Have any of you ever heard the term “bageled,” or experienced it? It’s a term coined by a Montreal native named Duddie Miller to describe the situation we’ve all been in; someone who doesn’t look Jewish says something only a Jew would understand, so we’ll know they are<sup>7</sup>. We don’t even have to be looking especially Jewish ourselves- all they have to have is a suspicion. I was “bageled” here in Dallas a few weeks ago, not long after I arrived in town, in one has to be one of the most instances of this phenomenon ever. I was standing on line at the grocery store and a man who did not look stereotypically Jewish *at all* says to me, “So, are you reviewing the Parsha?” I must have looked a little dumbfounded, because he continued, “It’s the second Parsha in Deuteronomy.” That should possibly have set me off, because that week was the third Parsha in Deuteronomy, but in retrospect, that wouldn’t have been dispositive- sadly, many people have no idea what parsha it is on any given week. He then said to me, “I’m a congregational leader,” a term I’ve never heard before as a job title, but I took the bait as he obviously wanted me to ask which congregation he led...at which point he then mentioned the name of a local so-called Messianic congregation...You have never seen a smile leave someone’s face so quickly as it did mine. He knew, from my face, that the conversation was over, so he said, “Sorry to ruin your day. You know, with us, it all starts from the Torah.” I said, “With us, it *ends* the Torah.” And I left. On my *probbah* weekend, I was asked if I would be working together with other faith

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/34034/have-you-ever-been-bageled/>

leaders, and I said I look forward to it, but this is *not* what I had in mind...most “bageling” experiences are a little more successful than mine, because they show commonality of experience, interests and destiny. On Rosh Hashanah, we enact these rituals to show that we are part of a unique society, a special club called the Jewish people. As we do so, we are challenged to live up to this lofty designation by asking ourselves some difficult questions: how will we take care of our people and our community this year? How will we move ourselves to live up to our spiritual commitments and obligations? How will we become more learned and educated Jewishly in the coming year? What kind of experiences will we gather in our arsenal that will keep us Jewishly inspired, and how can we share them with others? This is what it means to possess the *simanim* on Rosh Hashanah.

Finally, סימנים are a powerfully optimistic declaration that we really believe that our actions- even the most seemingly insignificant- have an effect on our own future and the fate of the world. In the second book of Kings<sup>8</sup>, we read a miraculous story about the prophet Elisha and the impoverished wife of one of the prophets. She approached Elisha with a painful tale of woe and anguish; her husband died, leaving her destitute, and creditors were threatening to take her children as slaves. Elisha turns to her and asks her, “What can I do for you?” The woman replies, “I have nothing in my home, save for a pot of oil.” Elisha makes her borrow pitchers and vases, pots and pans from the neighbors and then he starts pouring from that pot- and pouring, and pouring, until they were all full. The woman sold all the oil and was no longer in dire financial straits. It was an incredible miracle, to be sure, but there is one strange aspect to it. If Elisha

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<sup>8</sup> II Kings 4: 1-7

could cause the oil to pour miraculously, why did he need her to bring pots? Surely he could make some kind of magic happen without them! Perhaps we can suggest that Elisha wanted her to bring the pots because he needed her to show, physically, that she was “in the game” as well. This is what we do with the *simanim*. We believe God is the one who renders our verdict, but we want to show, tangibly, that we are part of the process and that everything we do counts. The act of eating date, a *tamar*, is elevated beyond simply eating a dried fruit to a full throated declaration of hope that *יתמו שונאינו*, that our enemies shall be vanquished. This act of faith shows we believe we have the power, through our actions, to transform the world into one where Iran’s existential threat to the State of Israel is neutralized, where ISIS is vanquished, where hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees are not meeting tragic and gruesome ends. The fish at the center of our table is no longer just a fish; it’s a step we take, a powerful statement that we can effect a year in which we will be a head, and not a tail. That means a world in which Israel is viewed with admiration, and not used as a political football and scapegoat while the rest of the world gets a free pass for far more heinous offenses. It means a world in which Jews are not suspected of having dual loyalty explicitly or implicitly, and where Jews will never feel unsafe or unwanted anywhere. And when we dip the drizzle the honey over the Challah, we declare our belief that we can create a year free from illness and tragedy, free from strife and pettiness, free from financial challenges and loneliness- and can create a year full of blessing and happiness, health and prosperity.

סימנא מילתא - Even our symbolic actions have real significance. Let us seize the opportunity this Rosh Hashanah to embrace the real values and actions the *סימנים* challenge us to uphold: To say

the important things we often leave unsaid, to care for our people and live up the standards required to be one of them and to show we are a part of our fate, by demonstrating our faith. In that merit, may God bless us with a סימן טוב, a good sign, for all of us this coming year.