



## WHAT'S IN A WORD?

# The Rosh Hashanah **Simanim**

David Curwin

**O**n Rosh Hashanah, it is customary to eat symbolic foods (*simanim*) that express our wishes for the year to come. Let's look at the words for some of the most common ones:

### Tapuach b'dvash

The word תפוח appears only a few times in the Bible – five times in Shir HaShirim, and once each in Yoel and Mishlei. The identity of the fruit is not clear. Some scholars identify it with today's typical apple (*pirus malus*). Others say that fruit was not found in the Land of Israel in biblical times. By looking at the verses that mention the תפוח, they find several characteristics: it was pleasant to look at, it was sweet and fragrant, and the tree provided shade. Mishlei 25:11 mentions תפוחי הלב, so perhaps they were a golden color. Based on all this, they suggest that the most likely candidate would be the apricot, which was found in the Land of Israel during those times.



The identity of שבדב is not as debatable as תפוח. In the Bible, there are two kinds of honey: bee honey and date honey. Date (or fig) honey is much more prevalent; some scholars believe that of the over 50 appearances of the word in the Bible, only a few refer to bee honey.

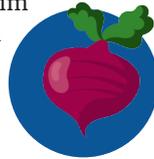
While today we enjoy both types of honey, only date honey was seen as a blessing in biblical times. When the Torah calls the land of Israel ארץ זבת חלב ודבש (“a land flowing with milk and honey”), it is referring to date honey, since that is a product of the land itself. On the other hand, bee honey is a sign that the land is not in a good state. When Ya'akov sent שבדב to Yosef (Bereishit 43:11), it was probably bee honey, since it was a time of famine.

At that time, only wild bee honey was available, and it was hard to obtain. But by Talmudic times, the techniques for beekeeping had advanced, and so in rabbinic literature, שבדב generally refers to bee honey.

Today many people understand that *silka* refers to beets as the word for beets in Modern Hebrew is *selek*. However, others say that *silka* refers to spinach, and Sefardim generally eat spinach for that *siman*. How could the same word be understood as both spinach and beets?

### Silka

Although the plants are very different, their leaves look similar to each other. In addition, the modern Hebrew word for spinach, *tered*, is identified in the Talmud as beets. This confusion can be even found in one Talmudic passage (Eruvin 28b), where Rav Hamnuna calls the plant תרדית and Rav Hisda calls it סלקא. To avoid this uncertainty, Ben-Yehuda suggested calling spinach קוציית, but it was never adopted. So while it might not be clear what *silka* is on the Rosh Hashanah table, in the Israeli grocery store *selek* always means beets, and *tered* always means spinach.



**Karti** (*כרתי*) certainly means “leek.” It is a secondary form of כרש, the modern Hebrew word for leek (although leeks are also sometimes called לוי, based on the Arabic). The biblical term for leek was קוציר, as in Bamidbar 11:5, where the people remember the קוציר they ate in Egypt. However, in Modern Hebrew, קוציר only means “hay,” so be sure not



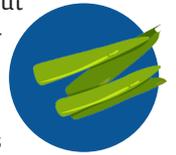
### Karti

to ask for that in the supermarket if you're looking for leeks.

Some people call the *siman rubia* (לוביָא). This is generally identified as “fenugreek.” The reason for the name *rubia* is unclear, but fenugreek was known from ancient times to increase milk production in nursing mothers. Along these lines, it may be that *rubia* derives from the root רבה, “to increase.”

### Rubia and lubia

Others call the *siman lubia* (לוביָא). *Lubia*, in Arabic, refers to black-eyed peas. Where did it get that name?



There are two theories. Some say that it is so-called because it originated in Libya – לויב in Hebrew. Others say that it comes from the Greek *lobos*, meaning “pod,” since that is how those peas grow.

While the root גזר, meaning “to cut,” is of biblical origin, the word *gezer*, meaning carrot, only entered Hebrew in the Medieval period. Hebrew borrowed it from Arabic, which in turn got it from either Persian or Pashto. This is not surprising since the carrot originated in Afghanistan.

**Gezer**

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David Curwin is a writer living in Efrat, and the author of the Balashon blog, [balashon.com](http://balashon.com).