The Rosh Hashanah Simanim

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On 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紫色 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紫色, they find several characteristics: it was pleasant to look at, it was sweet and fragrant, and the tree provided shade. Mishlei 25:11 mentions מַשְׁקִית, 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紫色 is not as debatable in the Bible. 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 מַרְאֵי חַצִיר (“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 Yaakov sent紫色 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,紫色 generally refers to bee honey.

Silka

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

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 תופסין and Rav Hisda calls it סילקה. To avoid this uncertainty, Ben-Yehuda suggested calling spinach תופסין, but it was never adopted. So while it might not be clear what紫色 is on the Rosh Hashanah table, in the Israeli grocery store selek always means beets, and tered always means spinach.

Karti

Karti (קרית) certainly means “leek.” It is a secondary form of紫色, the modern Hebrew word for leek (although leeks are also sometimes called גזר, based on the Arabic). The biblical term for leek was קָדִיר, as in Bamidbar 11:5, where the people remember the紫色 they ate in Egypt. However, in Modern Hebrew,紫色 only means “hay,” so be sure not to ask for that in the supermarket if you’re looking for leeks.

Rubia and lubia

Until now, we’ve seen Hebrew words that either have debatable translations or have meant different things over time. With this siman, there isn’t an issue of translation, but the word itself is subject to question.

Some people call the siman רבין (רָבִּין). 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 רָבָה, “to increase.”

Others call the siman לוביה (לֹבְיָא). 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 – לוב in Hebrew. Others say that it comes from the Greek λόβος, meaning “pod,” since that is how those peas grow.

Gezer

While the root כל, meaning “to cut,” is of biblical origin, the word גזר, 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.

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