

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A ROSH HASHANAH SEDER

Even though many Ashkenazim have not heard of a Rosh Hashanah Seder, it is a long-standing custom among many Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews worldwide. The one custom you almost certainly know from it is apples and honey but there are in fact many more symbolic foods as well. Some take Nehemiah 8: 9-10 as the source text for the custom, where Nehemiah tells the people on Rosh Hashanah to “go your way, eat your fat, and drink the sweet.” Certainly by the time of the Talmud, it was an established custom so that Abaye could say that “a person should always be accustomed to seeing kara (gourd/pumpkin), rubia (peas/beans), karti (leeks/chives), silka (beets) and tamri (dates) on Rosh Hashanah.” The idea, as explained by the 13th century Rabbi Ya’akov Anatoli, is for a person to see the foods and think about the similar-sounding words that relate to seasonal themes. For example, the name kara (gourd/pumpkin) is very similar to the word yikara (torn), so as we eat the pumpkin we say a prayer hoping that the evil decree against us is torn up. The number of foods increased after Abaye and every item on the table has important symbolism for the New Year. Seemingly mundane foods are elevated with a sense of purpose and holiness. Of course, the traditional Rosh Hashanah Seder takes place after (not during) a prayer service, and that is where our seder is more creative because we’ll be combining both elements into one. As such, we’ll explore this tradition of Hebrew word play, sacred eating and traditional prayers for Rosh Hashanah together.

The seder starts the same way as any other festive meal: *hadlakat neiros* (lighting candles), *kiddush* (blessing over the wine or grape juice) and *motzi* (blessing over the challah which is usually round to symbolize the cycle of the year). Following that, we will dive into our liturgy and our culinary *simanim* (symbols).

To prepare for the Seder, you will need a Haggadah, which we will make sure you receive in time. The joy of the Rosh Hashanah Seder is that while there are some traditions, there is no established text for the Haggadah, which provides us an opportunity to create something uniquely ours – traditional and simultaneously modern. It will start with the *Achot K’tanah piyyut* (liturgical poem) that is traditionally recited and then we will add *piyyutim* written by our members. There will be fun readings and stories, and traditional Rosh Hashanah prayers.

In terms of food, you’ll need:

Pomegranates or pomegranate seeds
Green beans or peas
Carrots

Dates
Beets (some use spinach leaves here)
Fish
Pumpkin
Leeks
Scallions or chives
Apples (some use quince here)
Wine or grape juice

The idea is for us to eat the actual foods, so some preparation is necessary – for example, steaming or cooking the green beans or peas, or cooking and mashing the pumpkin. Some go further and prepare special dishes, for example, by splitting the dates and stuffing them with walnuts, or by turning the carrots into a salad. This isn’t the Pesach seder where we eat foods to be reminded of bitter things – this is a celebration of the New Year so you are encouraged to create extravagant dishes if you wish. Talk to friends, suggest recipes... have fun!

Of course, having fish on the table is only appropriate for omnivores. The prayer for the fish is for us to “be fruitful and increase like fish”, so if you wish you could replace that with anything else fruitful and abundant and change the prayer accordingly. All the dishes should be separate so that we can say a different prayer for each one.

This has the potential to become a long-standing custom in our community, either on Erev Rosh Hashanah or another time on the New Year. By giving primacy to Sephardi and Mizrahi custom, it is deliberately inclusive. It is also fun and accessible, full of food, it involves traditional prayers as well as prayers carefully crafted by our members, and you will be able to participate on Zoom or follow along live with just one click on our Temple website (www.sftbs.org).

If you have any questions beforehand, please email rabbineil@gmail.com

We look forward to seeing you for our inaugural Rosh Hashanah Seder.



¹Horayot 12a, Keritot 6a