

# A Sign of the Times: Symbolism during the High Holiday Period

Rabbi Joshua Flug

Community Fellow, Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future South Florida Initiative

The High Holiday period is marked with numerous events that are performed for symbolic purposes. Whether it is dipping an apple in honey, eating the head of a sheep, or waving a chicken over one's head, symbolic traditions are commonplace during this period.

There are a number of questions that one might ask regarding these traditions:

- 1) What is the purpose of the symbolic acts? Can a symbolic act really affect future events?
- 2) The Torah (Vayikra 19:26) states "*Lo Tinachashu*," you shall not engage in divination. The Gemara, *Sanhedrin* 65b, defines this prohibition as interpreting certain events or signs as omens that one should or shouldn't engage in certain activities. How do our symbolic traditions differ from prohibited divinations?
- 3) Do these acts have inherent value or do they serve as catalysts for something else?

One of the most significant sources regarding symbolism is a passage in the Gemara:

*Our Rabbis taught: The kings are anointed only at a fountain, that their sovereignty may endure, as it is said, And the king said unto them: 'Take with you the servants of your lord . . . and bring him down to Gihon'. R. Ammi said: He who wishes to ascertain whether he will live through the year or not shall, during the ten days between the New Year and the Day of Atonement, kindle a lamp in a house wherein there is no draught. If the light continues to burn he may know that he will live through the year. He who desires to engage in business and wishes to ascertain whether he will succeed or not, let him rear up a cock; if it grows plump and fine he will succeed. He who desires to set out on a journey and wishes to ascertain whether he will return home again or not, let him station himself in a dark house; if he sees the reflection of his shadow he may know that he will return home again. This,*

ת"ר אין מושחים את המלכים אלא על המעיין כדי שתמשך מלכותם שנא' ויאמר המלך להם קחו עמכם את עבדי אדוניכם [וגו'] והורדתם אותו אל גיחון אמר רבי אמי האי מאן דבעי לידע אי מסיק שתיה אי לא ניתלי שרגא בעשרה יומי דבין ראש השנה ליום הכפורים בביתא דלא נשיב זיקא אי משיך נהוריה נידע דמסיק שתיה ומאן דבעי למיעבד בעיסקא ובעי למידע אי מצלח אי לא מצלח לירבי תרנגולא אי שמין ושפר מצלח האי מאן דבעי למיפק [לאורחא] ובעי למידע אי חזר ואתי לביתא אי לא ניקום בביתא דחברא אי חזי בבואה דבבואה לידע

however, is not a proper thing to do, lest his courage fail him and he meet with misfortune in consequence. Said Abaye: Now that it has been said that omens are of significance, a man should make a regular habit of **seeing** at the beginning of the year, pumpkin, fenugreek, leek, beet and dates.

#### Horayot 12a (Adapted from Soncino Translation)

Said Abaye: Since you hold that symbols are meaningful, every man should make it a habit to **eat** on New Year pumpkin, fenugreek, leek, beet and dates.

#### Keritut 6a (Soncino Translation)

דהדר ואתי לביתא ולא מלתא היא  
דלמא חלשא דעתיה ומיתרע מזליה  
אמר אביי השתא דאמרת סימנא  
מילתא היא [לעולם] יהא רגיל  
למיחזי בריש שתא קרא ורוביא  
כרתי וסילקא ותמרי.

הוריות יב.

אמר אביי השתא דאמרת סימנא מילתא  
היא יהא רגיל למיכל בריש שתא קרא  
ורוביא כרתי וסילקא ותמרי.

כריתות ו.

The source for using symbolic foods on Rosh Hashanah is the statement of Abaye, who deduces from the fact that *simana milta* (signs are significant) that these foods should be used at the beginning of the year.

**Question:** What portion of the passage of Gemara is Abaye's source for the concept of *simana milta*? The answer to this question seems to be the subject of a dispute among the Rishonim that lays the groundwork for two different approaches to understanding these symbols.

## The First Approach

The first approach is presented by R. Menachem Meiri (1249-1306):

When kings were anointed, they would do so near a spring as a good sign that his kingdom should flow (like a spring). This is not divination, rather [its purpose is] to inspire him to behave in the way of a spring whose waters don't dry up ... There are many things that are permissible that are similar to divination but are not actual divination, rather a sign to inspire one to perform good deeds. This is what they said to **place on one's table** on the night of Rosh Hashanah pumpkin, fenugreek, etc., for some of them grow quickly and some grow to large sizes. In order that one does not violate the prohibition against divination, they instituted a recitation that inspires one to repent ... It is known that this is only a point of reference because it is not contingent on the recitation alone, rather on repentance and good deeds. However, acts that are performed in the manner of divination are categorically prohibited such as that which it states that certain people when they begin a business venture raise a rooster in the name of the business and if it grows nicely, they are confident in their success. This is what they stated that this and acts like this should

כשמושחין את המלך היו מושחין אותו על  
המעין לסימן טוב שתמשך מלכותו ולא דרך  
נחש חלילה אלא לעוררו שיתנהג בדרך  
מעייין אשר לא יכזבו מימיו... הרבה דברים  
הותרו לפעמים שהם דומים לנחש ולא  
מדרך נחש חלילה אלא דרך סימן לעורר בו  
לבבו להנהיג טובה והוא שאמרו ליתן על  
שלחנו בליל ראש השנה קרכס"ת קרא  
רוביא כרתי סלקא תמרי שהם ענינם מהם  
שגדלים מהר ומהם שגדלתם עולה הרבה  
וכדי שלא ליכשל בהם לעשות דרך נחש  
תקנו לומר עליהם דברים המעוררים  
לתשובה ... וידוע שכל זה אינו אלא הערה  
שאין הדבר תלוי באמירה לבד רק בתשובה  
ומעשים טובים אבל הדברים שנעשים בדרך  
נחש חלילה אין פקפוק באיסורם והוא  
שאמר הנה על קצת בני אדם שכשמתחילין  
בסחורה מגדלין תרנגול על שם אותה  
סחורה ואם הוא נעשה יפה בוטחים על  
הצלחתם ושאר דברים הדומים לאלו  
שהוזכרו הנה אמר על כולם ולא מילתא היא  
כלומר ואין ראוי לבטוח על אלו ההבלים

not be performed and it is not proper to rely on these omens ...

### Beit HaBechirah Horayot 12a

According to Meiri, all of R. Ami's litmus tests are rejected because they violate the prohibition against divination. The reason why it is permissible to serve symbolic foods on Rosh Hashanah is that they are not meant as a litmus test to check if one is going to experience a good year. Rather, their purpose is to focus on repentance and self-improvement. This is why there is a recitation accompanying all of these symbols. According to Meiri, one must conclude that Abaye's source for *simana milta* is the statement of the *Beraita* that one should anoint a king near a spring. This tradition is parallel to the symbolism of Rosh Hashanah in that the purpose is not to test the king, but rather to encourage him to rule with strength.

## The Second Approach

Mordechai (1250-1298) has a different understanding of the Gemara's passage.

*That which it states that this is not proper because his courage may fail him etc., only refers to one who is travelling and wants to test if he will return home. [The reason why this is not proper is] that the satan prosecutes during times of danger, like in the case of someone who is travelling ... and he is therefore easily susceptible to bad luck.*

### Mordechai Yoma no. 723

והא דאמר' דלאו מילתא היא דלמא חלש דעתיה ואיתרע מזליה לא קאי אלא אמאי דקאמר האי מאן דבעי למיפק לאורחא ובעי למידע אי הדר לביתיה אי לא משום שהשטן מקטרג בשעת הסכנה כגון בדרך וגרסי' בירושלמי דפרק תפלת השחר כל דרך בחזקת סכנה וכל החולים בחזקת סכנה ובדבר קטן חלש דעתיה ומיתרע מזליה.  
מרדכי יומא ס' תשכג

According to Mordechai, R. Ami's litmus tests to determine the success of future events are valid. The one test that is invalid is only invalid for technical reasons. As such, Abaye's recommendation to serve certain foods at the beginning of the year is based on the fact that certain events can have an impact on the future.

One must then ask: Why aren't R. Ami's litmus tests a violation of the prohibition against divination? R. Shmuel Eidels (1555-1631) addresses this question:

*The good that comes from G-d comes with certainty as it states 'a good trait that comes from G-d is not retracted,' but bad does not come with certainty because it can always be changed. For this reason, if someone creates a sign for the positive it is not considered divination, rather a symbol that one will receive positive benefits from G-d. However, if one creates an omen for oneself for something negative, it is considered divination because one assumes that it comes with certainty, when in reality, there is always a*

ולזה הטוב הבא ממנו ית' ב"ה בהחלט כמ"ש לא יצאה מדה טובה מפי הקב"ה וחזרה וכו' אבל הרע אינו בא בהחלט כי אפשר שישתנה ... ולזה הנותן לעצמו סימן בדבר מה לטובה אין זה נחוש אלא סימן טוב שיבא לו ממנו ית' ב"ה אבל הנותן לעצמו סימן בדבר מה בהפך זה ולרע לו הרי זה נחוש שתולה שיבא הדבר בהחלט ואינו כן דברחמי שמיא אפשר שישתנה ... ולזה אמר האי מאן דבעי למידע אי מסיק שתא אי לא וכו' לא בעי למימר אי לא מסיק שתא אלא דה"ק אי לא דהיינו דא"נ לא משיך

*chance for change ... For this reason, the Gemara states "one who wants to know if he will have a positive year," implying that if the test is not successful he may still have a positive year ... If he states that if the light does not burn, he will [certainly] have a negative year, it is considered divination.*

**Maharsha, Horayot 12a**

נהוריה לא ידע אי מסיק שתא אי לא וכאילו לא עשה כלום דלא יסמוך בניחוש לרעה ולזה בעשייה לא קאמר אלא דאי משיך נהוריה מסיק שתא וזה שנותן סימן לטובה דשרי שהוא דבר הבא ממנו יתברך בהחלט אבל לא קאמר אי לא משיך נהוריה לא מסיק שתא דזה הוה ניחוש.  
**מהרש"א הוריות יב.**

According to R. Eidels, the prohibition against divination only applies if one sees a certain event as an omen that something bad will certainly happen. However, if the event is an omen that something good will happen there is no prohibition. Therefore, R. Ami's litmus tests are only for the purpose of testing if there is a good omen. If the results of these litmus tests are negative, one may still experience a positive result. As such, Abaye's comments are based on the fact that one can create positive omens for oneself and it is not a violation of divination.

According to R. Eidels' explanation, these symbols have inherent value. They are not merely for the purpose of inspiring one to repent and improve oneself. One must then ask: how do these symbols provide one with success?

R. Avraham Danzig (1748-1820), *Chayei Adam, Hilchot Rosh Hashanah* 139:6, and R. Shmuel Borenstein (1856-1926), *Shem MiShmuel, Mo'adim*, Rosh Hashanah 5677, suggest that one can explain the inherent significance of the symbols based on a comment of Ramban (1194-1270):

*One should know that all heavenly decrees have a permanent effect when they are converted from a statement to an action. Therefore, we find the prophets performing acts to accompany the prophecy.*

**Ramban, Bereishit 12:6**

ודע כי כל גזירת עירין כאשר תצא מכה גזירה אל פועל דמיון, תהיה הגזרה מתקיימת על כל פנים. ולכן יעשו הנביאים מעשה בנבואות.  
**רמב"ן בראשית יב:**

According to Ramban, performing an act can concretize a positive judgment that has not yet come to fruition. This is the explanation of the symbolic acts that were performed by the prophets. Based on Ramban's comments, R. Borenstein explains that the purpose of the symbols on the night of Rosh Hashanah is to concretize any positive decrees that one may have earned before Rosh Hashanah so that they are not overturned during the judgment of Rosh Hashanah.

## Practical Differences

There are practical differences between the two different approaches to understanding how *simana milta* works. First, according to Meiri's approach, the recitation of the prayer is an integral part of the service. The recitation is what allows one to focus on repentance and improving oneself. According to Mordechai's approach, the recitation is not an integral part of the service.

Second, there are two different versions of Abaye's statement. In *Horayot*, Abaye is recorded as saying that one should see the symbolic foods at the beginning of the year. In *Keritut*, Abaye is recorded as saying that one should eat the symbolic foods. It is possible that these two versions

represent the two different approaches to understanding *simana milta*. According to Meiri, the symbolic foods serve to focus on repentance and self-improvement. As such, it should be sufficient to see the symbolic foods and not necessarily to eat them. In fact, Meiri, in formulating this practice writes "this is what they said to place on one's table etc." According to R. Danzig's and R. Borenstein's explanation of *simana milta*, an act must be performed in order for the symbolism to be effective. As such, it is arguable that seeing or serving the symbolic foods is not a significant enough act. One must actually eat the foods in order for the symbolism to be effective.

## Kaparot

These two approaches are reflected in how one understands the practice of *kaparot*. *Kaparot* is the practice where one waves a chicken around one's head and proclaims that the chicken should serve as atonement for one's transgressions. How can waving a chicken over one's head provide atonement?

Meiri notes that *kaparot* has historically been a controversial practice:

*Many objected to this practice but [their objections] were not accepted because most scholars allowed the practice as long as it is similar to the signs of Rosh Hashanah ... In my opinion, they wanted to say that the purpose of this practice is to inspire the individual and to instill fear in him; to see himself and his entire family as culpable to G-d because of his transgressions and if he repents to G-d with all of his heart, G-d will change curses to blessings and remove his initial decree because of his repentance. Because this is the purpose of this practice, it is combined with giving charity and sending food items to the poor with the chickens.*

**Chibbur HaTeshuva 2:8**

והלקו הרבה במעשה ולא נענו מפני שסמכו רוב הגאונים להיות עולם כמנהגו נוהג בענין זה כענין מה שאמרו בענין קרכס"ת השתא דאמרת סימנא מילתא היא ליחזי איניש בריש שתא קרכס"ת וכמו שבארנו במקומו ולדעת רצו לומר בזה שאין הכונה במנהג רק להעיר לב האדם ולהרעידו להיות מראה את עצמו כאלו הוא ובני ביתו מחויבים לשם מצד עונותיו ושואם ישוב לשם בכל לבו יהפך השם אליו את הקללה לברכה ויקרע גזר דינו בתכלית תשובתו והוא שהיה מכלל המנהג היותם סמוך לזה מרבים בצדקה לשלוח מנות לאביונים עם התרנגולים ההם איש כמתנת ידו.  
**חבור התשובה ב:ח**

Meiri, in justifying the practice of *kaparot*, references his own comments regarding *simana milta*. The purpose of *kaparot* is to inspire one to repent. This is why this practice is accompanied with providing the slaughtered chickens to the poor.

R. Ya'akov Weil (15<sup>th</sup> century) seems to explain *kaparot* in a similar manner:

*On Erev Yom Kippur one should perform kaparot ... and one should think that he is culpable for death like this (bird). This is the reason for sacrifices. We throw the bird to the ground, similar to stoning, the slaughtering is like death by sword, grabbing it by the neck is like strangulation and burning it like death by fire.*

**Teshuvot Mahari Veil no. 191**

בעי"כ יעשה כפרות ויאמר חת"כ ר"ת חליפתי תמורת כפרתי זהו שם החותך חיים לכל חי ויחשוב בלבו שהוא חייב מיתה כמו זה והיינו טעם קרבנות זורקו לארץ כעין סקילה שוחטו הרג תופסו בידו בצואר הבהמה היינו חנק שורפו היינו שריפה.  
**שו"ת מהר"י ווייל ס' קצא**

According to R. Weil, the purpose of *kaparot* is to instill a sense of fear in the participant that he is held accountable for his transgressions. Therefore, he is supposed to imagine going through the various processes of capital punishment while performing *kaparot*.

R. Avraham Danzig seems to understand that R. Weil's comments are based on the second approach:

*One should not think that this is his atonement, rather one should think that everything that happens to this bird should have happened to him (similar to the intent of sacrifices) and G-d in his mercy, in his response to the repentance, will overturn the decree and will enact it on the bird (similar to the comments of Ramban at the beginning of Parshat Lech Lecha regarding Avraham's walk).*

**Chayei Adam, Hilchot Yom Kippur 144:4**

אבל לא יחשוב שזהו כפרתו אלא יחשוב שכל מה שעושים לעוף הזה הכל היה ראוי לבא עליו (כענין הכוונה בקרבנות) והקב"ה ברחמיו עבור התשובה שעשה היפך הגזרה ונתקיים דוגמתו בעוף הזה (כעין שכ' הרמב"ן ריש פ' לך לך בענין הליכת אברהם) **חיי אדם הל' יום כפור קמ"ד:**

R. Danzig seems to place a different focus on the need to imagine oneself experiencing capital punishment. By referencing the aforementioned comments of Ramban, R. Danzig implies that *kaparot* serve as a confirmation of the repentance process. When one performs *kaparot*, it is assumed that he has already repented and the *kaparot* symbolize the fact that G-d has accepted the repentance and reversed any bad decrees. The *kaparot* concretize the acceptance of his repentance.

R. Danzig, in explaining *kaparot*, is consistent with his general approach towards symbolic acts. He explains the symbols of Rosh Hashanah night based on the comments of Ramban and uses the same general approach to explain *kaparot*.

## Summary

We have seen two basic approaches to understanding the symbolic acts of the High Holidays. One approach is that the symbols serve to inspire one to repent and improve oneself. The other approach is that the symbols serve to confirm a positive heavenly decree. One can apply these two approaches to many traditions that are practiced throughout the year. May this year be a year of self-improvement, repentance and blessing!

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