

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SIMANIM ON ROSH HASHANAH

The Power of our Actions

In the course of teaching about the anointing of kings, *Horayos* 12a brings a Baraisa stating that we only anoint kings by a spring so as to symbolize that their monarchy will endure like the endless flow of water, which is regarded as a good omen. The Gemara then develops the subject of good omens with various examples. Rabbi Ami said: This person who seeks to know if he will complete his year or if he will not, i.e., whether or not he will remain alive in the coming year, let him light a lamp, during the ten days that are between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, in a house in which wind does not blow. If its light continues to burn and does not flicker, we know that he will complete his year. And one who seeks to undertake a business venture and wishes to know if he will succeed or if he will not succeed, let him raise a rooster. If the rooster grows plump and healthy, it is an omen that he will succeed. One who seeks to embark on a journey and wishes to know if he will return and come back to his home or not, let him stand in a dark house. If he sees the shadow of his shadow, know that he will return home. The Sages are critical of these practices because omens are unreliable and can be misleading and can have negative results. He may be disheartened if the omen fails to appear and it is this that causes him to fail. Abaye said: Now that you recognize that an omen is a significant matter, a person should always be accustomed to seeing these at the beginning of a year: a gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates, as each of these grows quickly and serves as a positive omen for one's actions during the coming year. This passage is repeated in *Kereisos* 6a, but the version there writes to eat the foods rather than just looking at them as in our version. This is the source for our custom of eating *simanim*, significant foods, on the night of Rosh HaShanah.

ARE OMENS PERMITTED?

The poskim are concerned as to why these practices do not constitute a violation of *nichush*, divination (*Vayikra* 19:26). *Sanhedrin* 65b teaches that it is prohibited to follow an omen, that is to interpret a particular happening to decide one's future course of action. Besides the omens mentioned above, there are several instances recorded elsewhere in which Amoraim seemed to do just that. The Gemara in *Chullin* 95b cites Rav, who refers to signs followed by Eliezer the servant of Avraham and Yonason son of Shaul as being examples of omen interpretation. Based on this passage, the Rambam (*Hilchos Avodah Zarah* 11:4) rules that devising a sign to determine what to do in the future in the manner of Eliezer is forbidden. Since the Torah apparently endorsed Eliezer's action, how could he have devised such a sign? Tosafos (*Chullin* 95b s.v. *ke'Eliezer*) explains that Eliezer did not actually rely on the stated signs, but he first asked Rivkah about her family and only after hearing that she was a relative of Avraham did he give her the jewelry and thereby seal the engagement.

OMENS AS INSPIRATION

This issue was already raised in a *Teshuvas HaGeonim*, as quoted in Rishonim such as Or Zarua (*Hilchos Rosh HaShanah*) and Mordechai (introduction to *Yoma*). They explain that these omens signify good because they are not initiated by the individual but are based on pesukim and teachings of Chazal. According to the Radak (*I Shmuel* 14:9), omens are prohibited only if they reflect commonly accepted superstitious beliefs, where the sign was not stipulated in advance. The examples in Sanhedrin are where he is concerned that harm will befall him because his bread fell from his mouth, his staff fell from his hand, his son calls him from behind, a raven calls him, a deer crossed his path, a snake approached from his right, or a fox approached him from the left. They are forbidden because of his belief that the omen itself has the power to cause bad fortune. However, if one designates something as a positive sign to inspire him in that direction, that is permitted. The Meiri (*Horayos* 12a) also follows this approach and explains that food omens are a source of inspiration, to stimulate one to teshuvah. This is reflected in the prayers which are said in conjunction with each food, linking their nature, such as quick growing or being particularly sweet, with his own wish that his fortune should blossom and he will enjoy a sweet year. The Tur (*Orach Chaim* 583) maintains that the significance of several of these foods lie in their names. רְוַפְּאָה (fenugreek/beans) resembles the Hebrew הרבה, many – our prayer is that our merits will be many. כְּרָתִי, is like cutting off, alluding to כְּרָתוֹ שְׂאָנוּ, our enemies will be cut off. סִילָקָה, beets, akin to סִילָקָה אֶזְבָּינוּ, our enemies will be removed. תְּמִירָה (dates), associates with תְּמִירָה אֶזְבָּינוּ, our enemies come to an end.



SYMBOLIC ACTS FIX POTENTIAL DECREES

The Maharal has a remarkably different approach to understanding the function of the *simanim* (*Be'er HaGolah* 2:7) based on a foundational Ramban on *Bereishis* 12:6. The Ramban is discussing the significance of the Torah detailing Avraham's various stations upon his arrival in the land of Canaan, and asserts a principle which is fundamental to understanding the stories of the Avos recorded in the Torah. The concept is encapsulated in the maxim: **כל מה שארע על אבותינו לבענין** - everything that occurred to the Avos is a sign for their descendants. Whenever the Torah records an incident that occurred in the personal lives of the Avos, it is because that event foreshadowed some parallel event that would affect the Jewish people in the future. For that reason, the *pesukim* recount their travels, their digging of wells and other incidents. One may think that these matters are superfluous, but in reality, when an incident occurs to the Avos who were prophets, there can be understood from it an allusion to something that was decreed to happen to his descendants. The Ramban continues to explain the purpose of such signs and writes: You should know that any heavenly decree when it transitions from a potential decree to become a symbolic act, that decree will be fulfilled in any event. (Potential decrees are conditional, but when they are accompanied by a symbolic act, that actualizes the decree in the physical world so that it becomes irrevocable.) Ramban continues: This is why the prophets often perform some act in the course of their prophecies as can be seen with Yirmiyahu's statement, commanding Seraiah, that when he finishes reading this book, he should tie a stone onto it and throw it into the Euphrates, saying: "Thus shall Bavel sink." (*Yirmiyahu* 51:63-64) (The sinking of the document in the river symbolically foretold Bavel's sinking in defeat.) The Ramban provides several more examples of symbolic acts performed to actualize a potential prophecy. He thus explains why Avraham symbolically took possession of Shechem first, even before HaShem promised to give it to him. That was an allusion to him that his children would conquer Shechem before acquiring Eretz Yisrael. HaShem told Avraham that he would have to wait several centuries until the promise could be fulfilled because the Canaanites had not yet sinned enough to deserve the punishment of being driven out of their land – that is the meaning of the pasuk: "The Canaanite was then in the land" (*Bereishis* 12:6). The children of Yaakov conquered Shechem long before the conquest of Eretz Yisrael under Yehoshua, and Avraham's stop in Shechem before he was given the land augured his descendants' early conquest of that city.

THE POWER OF ROSH HASHANAH SIMANIM

The Maharal applies Ramban's above concept of *simanim* determining destiny to the *simanim* eaten on Rosh HaShanah. The function of the *siman* is not to create a good heavenly decree, for that may be regarded as divining. Its purpose is to latch onto heavenly decrees which are being formulated on Rosh HaShanah and with our symbolic act we can enable the good potential decrees already in the making and fix them as irreversible. This same idea is expressed by the Chayei Adam (139:6). We can now understand the comparison in *Horayos* between the Rosh HaShanah *simanim* and the omens foretelling a person's future fortune. These omens simply link to the heavenly decree to ascertain information about it but do not create any new decrees, which would be forbidden as divining.

A SWEET NEW YEAR

We noted above the two versions of the Gemara, one referring to looking at the *simanim* and the other says to eat them. *Sefer Hamanhig* (p. 304) brings the custom to take the *simanim* and put them on the table without mentioning eating them. The custom of the geonim has been preserved in their *teshuvos*. Rav Hai Gaon would return from shul together with his *talmidim* and the *simanim* were placed in front of him. He then picked up the pumpkin, beans, honey and other foods and said the appropriate *tefillos*, and the *talmidim* then took the food from the basket to do likewise at home. (*Otzar HaGeonim*, *Rosh Hashanah* 32b). I have always wondered why our former custom was to make the first *berachah* on the apple and honey, whilst the *poskim* point out that dates have priority. Surely the earlier generations knew that *halachah*, so why was the apple eaten first? I would like to suggest that the original custom may have been just to handle the *simanim* and not to eat them, but honey is different. One can only appreciate the sweetness of the honey by tasting it, whilst the other foods can be seen to be quick-growing, or their names may be significant. We pray for a good year, but in reality, all decrees from HaShem are for the good. We therefore also ask for a sweet new year, so that we should be able to perceive the sweetness, to appreciate that everything is always for the good. Only the apple and honey had to be eaten to sense the taste, but the other foods may have been held, so the *berachah* was traditionally made on the apple.