

THE SONG OF THE POMEGRANATE TREE

רִמּוֹן אוֹמֵר: כְּפֶלֶח הָרִמּוֹן וְרֵקֶתְךָ מִבְּעַד לְצִמְתְּךָ. (שיר השירים, ד, ג)

The pomegranate-tree says: “Like a slice of pomegranate is the appearance of your cheekbones, behind your veil¹.”

The pomegranate sings of the innumerable Mitzvos and merits of every member of Hashem’s nation.

The pomegranate is one of the seven symbolic species of the Land of Israel. It has a grand appearance, topped with a characteristic crown, and is filled with innumerable sweet seeds. It speaks the praise of the land and the Jewish nation that inhabits it.

The pomegranate’s song is an excerpt from Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs, in which Hashem praises the perfect spiritual greatness of His nation using the analogy of a flawlessly beautiful bride. He compares her rosy cheekbones to the color of a pomegranate’s interior.² The figurative meaning of this praise is that the Jewish people have 613 Mitzvos which fill their lives with goodness and meaning, in the same way that the pomegranate contains hundreds of pulpy seeds.³ Moreover, each seed has the potential to bear a new pomegranate tree, the same way that each individual Mitzvah is a channel to connect a person with Hashem.

In particular, the pomegranate tree speaks the praise of even the spiritually emptiest of our nation.⁴ Its fruit are covered over with thick husks, yet, the crown of each fruit – like the Crown of the Torah⁵ - hints to the majestic spirit within. Even “a slice of pomegranate” contains multitudes of seeds, and so, too, even a Jew who only manages to fulfill a “slice” of the precepts of Torah, still boasts innumerable merits.

¹ R’ Saadya Gaon, Menachem ben Saruk, Ibn Janach, Ralbag, R’ Shlomo Alkabetz, and others. See Metzudos who writes that the veil is transparent. However, some of the earlier translations describe as an Arabian head-covering, which was obviously opaque. Cf. Rashi and others who translates differently, apparently supported by the Midrash, that it is that which ties the hair down.

² “Cheekbones” is from Rashi, explaining that they are depicted as round and red like the exterior of a pomegranate. The Vilna Gaon, too, understands that it refers to the exterior. However, I chose to explain that it refers to the interior based on Bava Metziah 84a, as well as *Perek Gan Eden*, which describe red facial beauty with the analogy of the shiny red, interior seeds. Perhaps both translations are true in different ways. Other commentaries identify “רקתך” differently. I have followed Rashi’s rendition here, “cheekbones”, since it alone matches the popular conception of the beauty of rosiness, seeing as cheekbones are commonly blushed cosmetically. In truth, though, the abovementioned Gemara seems to be talking about the burning-holy shine of the entire face.

³ Malbim writes that it has 613 seeds, which is apparently an approximation. The Lechem Rav points out that רִמּוֹן is the Gematria of 306, half of 613, symbolizing that even half a Jew has uncountable seeds.

⁴ In greater detail, the Midrash expounds from the word “רקתך” that even the “ריקנים”, relatively empty Jews, contain Mitzvos like the pomegranate. The *Kol Rina* explains that “behind your braids” means that they modestly cover their merits, like the pomegranate is covered with its husk. Alternatively, the Vilna Gaon explains that just as the upper face is bare of hair, they are bare of Torah. Nevertheless, they are covered over “behind your ties of hair” which symbolizes how the empty ones heed the teachings of the wise.

⁵ Original understanding.

Mitzvah encounters abound wherever a Jew turns. Even restraint from sin is considered by Hashem to be a great Mitzvah in of itself. And each year, when the nation fasts and repents on Yom Kippur, their transgressions – which they now regret – are transformed into merits.⁶

The true nature of every Jew is like the glorious interior of the pomegranate, covered over by its simple husk, as the bride covers her face with a modest veil.

Throughout world history, like a perpetual orchestra, pomegranate orchards across the Land of Israel bear fruits filled with the song of Hashem's love for His nation.

Living with Song

The pomegranate's song sounded in the Bais Hamikdash. The Kohen Gadol wore a sky-blue M'eel cloak. Attached to its bottom hem were spheres which resembled pomegranates. These resonated against small golden bells alongside them wherever he walked, expressing before Hashem the myriad merits of His people – the song of the pomegranate. This garment also functioned to atone for Lashon Hara⁷, since it symbolized the proper usage of the mouth, to speak of people's praise, as opposed to destructive slander. These days, we may not have the M'eel, yet it is still true that whenever our mouths speak of the good within each other, the angels in heaven speak of our goodness before Hashem.⁸

On Rosh Hashanah night, as you take the pomegranate in hand and pray for a year similarly filled with goodness, listen to its song. Live according to its timeless message throughout the year. Learn to discover and appreciate the hidden greatness of every single Jew, who contains within more merits than can be counted.

Even more, realize your own spiritual wealth within, and at the same time, do not overlook your areas that are yet undeveloped. Cultivate the seeds of your soul and grow its eternal fruits. The older and wiser you become, the greater your capacity for self-development. Complete yourself with the 613 Mitzvos – yet remain modestly humble – like the husk-covered pomegranate. It is our symbol – and we are the living manifestation of its song.

⁶ Talmud Rosh Hashana.

⁷ Talmud Arachin. Based on Rokeach.

⁸ Midrash.