



Symbols and Seders – Food and Fertility

There are many Kabbalistic (mystical) traditions in Judaism that include symbolic rituals (*segulot*) that are meant to be ways of making physical representations of our inner desires. Some may seem superstitious, some benevolent and heartwarming, others have a touch of humor. One of these mystical traditions dates back to the Talmud. The Sephardic communities had a custom to have a Seder on Rosh Hashanah with foods that represent wishes for the New Year. The most prominent symbolic food was apples dipped in honey to make wishes for a sweet year. The traditions played upon various traits of the foods including their shape, taste, behavior and name.

If you are feeling the need for some symbolic feasting, these mystical traditions do not have to remain with Rosh Hashanah and could be incorporated into a ritual for any time of year. Here are a few foods to include for wishes for fertility.

- Pomegranate – The pomegranate has often been connected to fertility in Judaism which may be in part due to its role in the sensual love poem in Song of Songs (e.g. 4:3, 6:11, 8:2) and because it contains so many seeds. There is also a tradition to eat a new food on the second night of Rosh Hashanah in order to say a blessing for a “first.” The pomegranate was commonly used for this.
- Apples – Apples are also referenced in the Song of Songs as a symbol of fertility (8.5). A midrash teaches that it was under the apple trees that the women in Egypt conceived during slavery. Putting extra apples in Haroset on Passover is also a good symbolic food for fertility.
- Fish – Fish are thought to represent fertility because they lay so many eggs at once. When Jacob is blessing his sons, he uses the word “vayidgu” meaning they should grow into multitudes. The word has the root “dag,” the Hebrew word for fish!
- Garlic - Ezra, a leader during the rebuilding of the second temple, encouraged people to eat garlic on Fridays. The rabbis in the Talmud said that Fridays were the night for couples to conceive and garlic was thought to be an aphrodisiac and to increase sperm count. (Bava Kamma 82a)
- Etrog – The etrog used in the Lulav on Sukkot also has a lot of seeds representing fertility. A Jewish folk tradition encouraged women who wanted to have a child to bite the etrog tip or eat marmalade made from the leftover etrog after Sukkot.
- Stars – Foods in the shape of stars represent God’s blessing of Abraham: “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And God added, “So shall your offspring be.” (Gen 15.5)

May your food be enjoyable, your holidays sweet, and may your wishes bring you strength.