

HOW DOES JUDGMENT BECOME SWEET?

The Simanim, Leah and Rachel, Channah, and Bee Honey

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Three Clusters of Questions at the Rosh Hashanah Table

Before offering any answers, let us place three clusters of questions on the table. We eat apples, honey, pomegranates, a fish head, and foods whose names become prayers for the year. But why should food serve as a *siman* at the moment when the world is standing in judgment?

The custom questions: Why do we use simanim during judgment? Why do some communities perform the seder of simanim only on the first night? If these foods are our prayers for a good year, why would we put them away halfway through Yom Tov?

The inner-structure questions: Why does the Bnei Yissaschar identify the first night with Leah and the second with Rachel? What do the mekubalim mean when they call the first day dina kashya and the second day dina rafya? More importantly, how does concentrated judgment become softened judgment?

The human-avodah questions: Why does the first-day haftarah tell Channah's familiar story, and why does the Gemara place in her mouth the same three mitzvos that another source identifies as Rachel's secret signs? Finally, why do Ashkenazic communities prefer bee honey? If the goal is merely sweetness, sugar or date honey could serve just as well.

These questions appear to travel in different directions. The sources will allow them to converge into one answer - but we should not rush to it.

First Night: Leah; Second Night: Rachel

בְּלֵילָהּ רִאשׁוֹנָה הָיָא בְּחִינַת לֵאָה, וְלֵיל ב' בְּחִינַת רָחֵל, וְרָחֵל מְסַכָּה הַסִּמָּנִים לְלֵאָה.

The first night corresponds to Leah, and the second night corresponds to Rachel; and Rachel gave the signs to Leah.

Bnei Yissaschar, Ma'amarei Chodesh Tishrei, Ma'amar II, §11

A point of precision matters here: in this source, the order is **Leah first, Rachel second**. The first-night simanim belong to Leah because Rachel placed Yaakov's private signs into Leah's hands. That explains the association, but it sharpens the

question: why should Rachel's transfer of the signs become the key to the first night of the year?

This is not a ruling that simanim belong only on night one. Many established customs use them on both nights. The Bnei Yissaschar is explaining the inner architecture of the particular minhag that limits them to the first night.

What Are Dina Kashya and Dina Rafya?

הָא' בְּלֵאָה מְרֵאשׁ שְׁלֵה, שְׁהוּא דִּינָא קִשְׂיָא; וְהב' מְרֵאשׁ כְּחַל, שְׁהִיא דִּינָא כְּפִיָּא... כִּי בְּנִסְיָהּ לְעוֹלָם נִמְתְּקָת.

The first [day] is through Leah ... severe judgment; the second is through Rachel, softened judgment ... for through nesirah, sweetening always takes place.

Pri Etz Chaim, Sha'ar Rosh Hashanah, chapter 1

The Kabbalistic structure identifies the first day with Leah and **dina kashya**, judgment in its concentrated or severe form; the second with Rachel and **dina rafya**, judgment after it has been softened. The Bnei Yissaschar places the custom of the simanim inside that same Leah-Rachel structure.

The Pri Etz Chaim explains the distinction through the mystical process of **nesirah**. On the first day the din is still concentrated and has not yet undergone its full sweetening. By the second day a further stage has been separated and sweetened: *ki bi-nesirah le-olam nimtekes - through nesirah, sweetening takes place*. We need not pretend to master the Kabbalistic mechanics in a short drush. The practical question is clear: **what is the human avodah that corresponds to this movement from concentrated judgment to sweetened judgment?**

We now have the structure, but not yet the answer. Leah is first; Rachel is second. The first day is hard din; the second is softened din. Rachel gave Leah the signs. What, precisely, did she give?

What Were Rachel's Three Signs?

A medieval Torah commentary identifies the signs themselves. The Daas Zekeinim writes that Rachel had received three signs from Yaakov and passed them to Leah: **niddah, challah, and hadlakas ha-ner** - the laws of family purity, separating challah, and kindling the Shabbos lamp.

מִתּוֹךְ הַשְּׁלֵשָׁה סִימָנִין שֶׁמָסְכָּה לָהּ: נִדָּה, וְחֵלָה, וְהַדְּלָקַת הַנֵּר.

[Rachel acted as Rachel] by means of the three signs that she transmitted to Leah: niddah, challah, and kindling the lamp.

Daas Zekeinim mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafos to Bereishis 29:25

Those same three mitzvos reappear in the Gemara's account of Channah's prayer. Channah says before Hashem: You created three crucial tests in a woman's life -

niddah, challah, and kindling the lamp. Have I violated any one of them? Then she asks for a child.

שְׁלֹשָׁה בְּדִקּוֹי מִיתָה בְּרֵאֶת בְּאִשָּׁה... וְאֵלּוּ הֵן: נְדָה, וְחֵלָה, וְהַדְלַקְתָּ הַנֵּר. כָּלֹּם עֲבַרְתִּי עַל אֶחָת מֵהֵן?

You created three grave tests for a woman ... niddah, challah, and kindling the lamp. Have I transgressed any one of them?

Talmud Bavli, Berachos 31b

The initials form a memorable name: חלה - נדה - הדלקת הנר: חנ"ה. This is a mnemonic by *roshei teivos*, not a numerical gematria. What Rachel transferred to Leah becomes the vocabulary in which Channah stands before Hashem on Rosh Hashanah. It is therefore striking that Channah's story is the haftarah of the first day - the day associated with Leah and dina kashya.

Channah's Question Becomes Our Answer

Channah's familiar story need not be retold at length. The crucial detail is that her intensely personal request already contains her promise to dedicate the child to a purpose beyond herself.

וַתֵּדֶר נָדָר וַתֹּאמֶר, ה' צְבָאוֹת, אִם־כִּי־אֶחָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵינֵי אֹמְתֶךָ וַזְכַּרְתִּי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֹמְתֶךָ וַנִּתְּנָה לְאֹמְתֶךָ זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים, וַנִּתְּנִיו לַה' כְּלִימִי חַיִּים.

She made a vow and said: Hashem, Master of Legions, if You will truly see the suffering of Your maidservant, remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and give Your maidservant a human child - then I will give him to Hashem for all the days of his life.

I Shmuel 1:11

You give him to me; I dedicate his life to Hashem. The request and the dedication are one movement. Channah does not say: First fill the emptiness in my life, and afterward I will decide what this child is for. She tells Hashem at the moment of asking that the answer will not terminate in her private satisfaction. This child will become Shmuel HaNavi, a leader of Israel.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe develops this point in Likkutei Sichos: Channah's prayer cannot be understood as a merely private demand. Her vow, *u-netativ laShem*, reveals that she seeks a child whose life will belong to a purpose larger than her own. The very woman asking for the gift is already making herself its steward.

Now the answer begins to emerge. Rachel gives away the signs designed to protect her marriage; Channah promises to give back the son for whom she is pleading. Neither woman lacks longing. Rachel wanted Yaakov. Channah wanted a child. Their greatness is not that they ceased to want; it is that their wanting did not imprison them inside themselves.

How Does Dina Kashya Become Dina Rafya?

We should state the bridge carefully. Neither the Pri Etz Chaim nor the Bnei Yissaschar writes a simple formula that an act of generosity mechanically changes Heaven's judgment. The sources do, however, place Leah and Rachel, the transfer of the simanim, and the movement from hard to softened din inside one spiritual structure. I want to suggest the human avodah reflected in that structure.

Rachel takes what was supposed to secure her own future and uses it to protect Leah's dignity. Channah asks Hashem for the most private blessing imaginable, but she refuses to let that blessing end with her. In both cases the self is no longer the final destination. ***The din begins to sweeten when the blessing I request is no longer intended to end with me.***

This is not passivity or self-erasure. Rachel still becomes Rachel Imeinu; Channah still becomes Shmuel's mother. The transformation is that another person's dignity, Hashem's purpose, and the future of Klal Yisrael enter the request itself. The blessing is received as a trust, not merely possessed as private property.

Why Bee Honey?

This brings us to the honey. Bee honey is not the only halachically meaningful honey, and it is not the universal form in every Jewish community; date honey has an ancient and honorable place in Jewish usage. But an early Ashkenazic source records a preference for bee honey on Rosh Hashanah and explains its symbolism with remarkable precision.

וְדָבַשׁ דְּבוּרִים מִן הַמִּבְחָר, כִּי הַדְּבוּרִים דְּמִי לַמִּשְׁפָּט... וְמֵה שְׂיוֹצֵא מֵהֵן מְתוּק. וְסִימָן לַדָּבָר
שֶׁאֵנִי יוֹצֵאִין מִמֵּדַת הַדִּין לַמֵּדַת הַרַחֲמִים.

Bee honey is preferable, because bees resemble judgment ... yet what emerges from them is sweet. It is a sign that we pass from the attribute of judgment to the attribute of mercy.

Leket Yosher, Orach Chaim, p. 124, recording the practice of the Terumas HaDeshen

The sourced symbol is precise: the bee can sting, and therefore evokes *mishpat*; nevertheless, what comes from it is sweet. The honey does not deny the existence of din. It demonstrates the possibility that din itself can issue in sweetness.

That is the movement from ***dina kashya*** to ***dina rafya***. The first day is not bypassed. Judgment is not wished away with sugar. Rather, Rachel, Channah, and the honey teach us how judgment may be sweetened: a protected sign becomes a gift; a requested child becomes a servant of Hashem and Israel; an image of sting yields sweetness.

What Are We Asking For?

On Rosh Hashanah we are supposed to ask. We ask for life, health, children, parnassah, shalom bayis, clarity, protection, and nachas. Nothing in this teaching asks us to suppress those needs. Channah certainly did not suppress hers. The question is whether we can add one more clause to every request: ***If You give this to me, what will I give through it?***

Life: If Hashem grants me another year, whose life will become lighter because I lived it?

Health: If Hashem restores my strength, where will that strength be spent in service, kindness, and responsibility?

Parnassah: If Hashem gives abundance, what will I build, support, and share?

Children and nachas: Am I asking only for their success, or also that their gifts become a blessing to Klal Yisrael?

A sweet year: Whose year am I prepared to sweeten?

The simanim are therefore not charms and not predictions. They are prayers placed into edible form - and, in the Bnei Yissaschar's reading, the first simanim are born from an act of surrender. ***The simanim do not merely represent what we hope to receive. They represent what we are prepared to do with what we receive.***

A Story to Close: The Child of the Tekios

In the early years of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's leadership, a husband and wife had already waited nine years for a child. The husband traveled to Crown Heights for Rosh Hashanah, hoping to stand near the Rebbe during the tekios and pour his entire longing into one prayer: that they might finally be blessed with a child.

He arrived early and secured a place nearby. The Rebbe recited the berachos and raised the shofar - but no sound emerged. He tried another shofar, and then another. Still nothing. The congregation stood in frightened silence.

The man had a painful thought: Perhaps my desperate concentration upon my own need is holding back the tekios of the congregation. Silently he turned to Hashem: ***If my request is standing in the way, I relinquish it. I am prepared to remain without a child - only let the shofar sound for Klal Yisrael.***

At that moment the Rebbe lifted the shofar once more, and a clear tekiah emerged. The man wept. The congregation had received its tekios, but he believed that he had surrendered the hope he had carried for nine years.

During that year, however, the couple was blessed with a son. Later, the father brought the little boy to receive a berachah from the Rebbe. He had never told the Rebbe what had taken place silently in his heart that Rosh Hashanah. The Rebbe looked at the child and asked: ***Is this the child of the tekios?***

Rachel surrendered the simanim that seemed to secure her future. Channah placed her hoped-for child into Hashem's service. This unnamed Jew surrendered his most personal request so that a congregation could hear the shofar. In each case, surrender did not erase the longing; it transformed a private longing into something large enough to carry another Jew.

The Sweetest Siman

Channah teaches us how to stand before the King with an aching, honest request without making the self the boundary of that request: Remember me. Give to me. And I will give back.

Rachel says: These signs will protect my sister's dignity. Channah says: Give me a son, and his life will belong to Hashem. The father says: If my prayer holds back the congregation, I will release even this. The honey says: even what bears the image of judgment can produce sweetness.

Perhaps the sweetest siman we can place before Hashem is not only what we ask Him to give us, but what we are prepared to release so that another Jew may receive. Whatever You give me this year will not end with me.

May Hashem inscribe us for a year of life and peace, health and parnassah, children and nachas, clarity and closeness - and may every blessing He places into our hands become sweetness in somebody else's life.

Source Notes

Primary sources and points of precision

1. Simanim on the first night. Bnei Yissaschar, Ma'amarei Chodesh Tishrei, Ma'amar II, §11. The sefer explains the custom of those who perform the simanim only on the first night by identifying night one with Leah and night two with Rachel, since Rachel transferred the signs to Leah. This is an explanation of a particular minhag, not a universal ruling; many communities perform the simanim both nights.

2. Leah/Rachel and the two forms of din. Pri Etz Chaim, Sha'ar Rosh Hashanah, chapter 1; compare Bnei Yissaschar, Ma'amarei Chodesh Tishrei, Ma'amar II. The first day is associated with Leah/dina kashya and the second with Rachel/dina rafya.

3. Rachel's three signs. Daas Zekeinim mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafos to Bereishis 29:25: niddah, challah, and hadlakas ha-ner.

4. Channah's three mitzvos. Berachos 31b. Channah invokes niddah, challah, and hadlakas ha-ner in her prayer. The letters נ-י-נ function here as roshei teivos (initials), not as a numerical gematria.

5. Channah's vow. I Shmuel 1:11. Channah's request for a child and her promise, 'u-netativ laShem,' appear in the same vow. See also Likkutei Sichos, vol. 19, the discourse for Rosh Hashanah-Vav Tishrei, on the non-private purpose of Channah's request.

6. Bee honey and sweetened judgment. Leket Yosher, Orach Chaim, p. 124, recording the practice and explanation of the Terumas HaDeshen: bees resemble mishpat, yet what emerges from them is sweet - a sign of moving from din to rachamim. Bee honey is not the exclusive custom in all communities. Worker bees do consume honey; therefore, the often-repeated claim that they never taste what they produce is inaccurate.

7. The Child of the Tekios. Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, a shiur delivered in Tzfas on 16 Elul 5772 and published under the title 'Titateirer, Titateirer'; English adaptation: 'When the Rebbe Couldn't Get a Sound Out of the Shofar,' Inner.org. Rabbi Ginsburgh reports that the story was related by the son of the Crown Heights family who hosted the man. It is an identified oral family testimony rather than independently documented archival history.

8. Interpretive bridge. The formulation that blessing becomes sweet when it does not end with the recipient is the organizing interpretation of this class. It is built from the juxtaposition of the sourced Leah/Rachel, Channah, and honey texts; it is not presented as a verbatim statement of any one source.

A Deeper Layer: Repairing Adam's World

The Yerushalmi (Shabbos 2:6) connects the three mitzvos to Chavah's role in the sin of Adam: Adam was the world's blood, challah, and lamp, and these mitzvos become modes of repair. Since Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of Adam's

creation and judgment, this supplies a further layer: Rachel's three signs and Channah's three mitzvos are not merely domestic details; they are acts through which a fractured world is rebuilt.