Title: Rosh Hashanah: 10 Symbolic Food Customs by David B Levy and their relation to Rabbinic mikorot

I. HONEY (Devash)

On Rosh Hashanah there is the custom of dipping the first piece of challah into honey and saying a blessing over the challah and then dipping apple slices into honey and saying a prayer asking G-d for a “sweet year.” Honey is said to “sweeten the judgment” at a time when all the world passes before G-d’s throne like sheep in a flock. The land of Israel is called the land flowing with “milk and honey.” The gematria or numeric equivalent of honey is 306 which is the equivalent of the phrase “Father of Compassion” noted by the Benei Yisachar. The collection of mystical sermons by Rabbi Yonatan Eibeshutz is titled, “The Honeycomb’s flow” (Yerat haDevash) as was a philosophic work by Rabbi Judah Messer Leon. Honey may represent the secrets of mystical wisdom. We find warnings in the Talmud for the immature to delve into such esoeterica. The sage Ben Zoma in the account of the “Four who entered Paradise” (arba She’niknasu biPardes) in the Talmudic tractate Hagigah 12b-14b is said to have “eaten too much honey.” Only Rabbi Akiva was able to cognitively and hermeneutically enter and exit the PaRDeS in peace because he was grounded in enough balanced halakhic knowledge and employed discriminate methods of Peshat, Remez, Derosh, [as well as “Sod”] in interpreting texts. The Talmud’s warnings may come to show that one may be at risk for delving into Kabbalah, indeed “eating too much honey” or as Pirke Avot likens it to a diet solely consisting of “after dinner drinks” which were flavored with honey. If one only focuses on the “secrets” of Jewish Mysticism in their studies then one may be unable to coherently and safely (the case of ben Azai) receive the shefa (pleromatic emanation from the heavens) that may occur when one encounters mystical texts [without an authoritative rabbinic reception history to well ground oneself in halakhah]. During Rosh HaShanah many people eat honey cake spiced with cloves, cinnamon, oranges, etc to remember the symbolic importance of honey.

Other symbolic foods are eaten the nights of Rosh Hashanah based on the teaching of Abaye (Horayos 12a, Kerisus 6a). Rashi indicates that these symbolic foods represent an abundance of merits. The names of these foods symbolize an increase in Israel’s mitzvah performance, allude to the forgiveness of Israel’s sins, and triumph over enemies (Mordechai; Or Zarua). In the Talmud the theurgic efficacy of reciting benedictions with these foods functioned as a sign of a favorable omen, in an age where the power of the ‘spoken word’ was believed to effect the course of events for the upcoming year. Today we can also view this ceremonial custom of reciting benedictions over various foods as “symbolic” and representing the wonderful linguistic play of the Rabbis to engage in puns, as all the names of foods conjured in the benedictions, suggest alternate blessings based on ‘clang associations,’ or words that mean different things but sound almost the same. These symbolic foods are:

a. Apple: In Genesis 27:27 Isaac says of Jacob, “See, the fragrance of my son is like the fragrance of a field which Hashem has blessed.... The Talmud (Taanis 29b) identifies this fragrance as that of a field of apple trees (Biyur HaGra; Maharil cited in Darkhei Moshe). According to the hymn of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, “Bar Yochai happy are they who are your disciples - fortunate are you, anointed with joyous oil [i.e. wisdom], over and above your companions. Bar Yochai...[While still alive] you ascended to the Field of Apples [Garden of Eden] to gather remedies [for the souls of your people]. Secrets of the Torah whose fragrances are sweeter than blossoms and flowers. For you alone the entire creation of Man was worthwhile. The apple is a symbol of the sefirah of Tifereth.

b. Fenugrek or carrots: Fengreek’s Armaaic name is Roobiya, a word that also implies increase and abundance. Magen Avraham writes that one may use any food whose name carries that implication.
even if the name is not Hebrew. Based on this view it has become customary in many communities to eat ‘carrots’ because their Yiddish name is ‘mehren,’ is a word which can also mean “to increase.” The Bircas Chaim records that Ukrainian Jews would give their children ‘livers’ on Rosh Hashanah for the Yiddish word for livers, leberlach is homophonous with leb ehrlich, or live honestly.

c. Beets: סלקא Related to the word סלק—to depart. Benediction in Hebrew recited to effect: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that our enemies, haters and those who wish evil upon us shall ‘depart.’ Sour borscht according to the Pri Megadim should not be served on Rosh Hashanah but only sweet foods should be eaten, as putting raisons in the round hallah. The Hallah is round on RH symbolizing the continuity of Creation. Indeed the whole cycle of the Torah will come ‘full circle’ on Simchat Torah when we chant the last sections of Deuteronomy and begin again with Genesis.

d. Dates (Tamarim)- Related to the word סתם—to end. The benediction is: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that there come an end to our enemies, haters and those who wish evil upon us. We are also reminded that the righteous Tamar in Genesis acted in a way that prevented “embarrassing in public” (halbanat panim) the leader Judah.

e. Small beans. Related to the words, רבים—to many, and לב—to heart. Also said after a benediction is then: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that our merits shall ‘increase’ and that You ‘hearten’ us.

f. Leek. Related to the word חטאן—to cut. We say: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that our enemies, haters, and those who wish evil upon us shall be ‘cut down.’

g. Gourd; קרא Related to the word קרא—to rip apart, and also קרא—to announce. Benediction recited to effect: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that the evil of our verdicts be ‘ripped,’ and that our merits be ‘announced’ ‘before you.

h. Pomegranate; רימון according to Rabbinic lore the Pomegranite has 613 seeds symbolizing the TARYAG HaMitzvot or 613 commandments. We say a benediction to the effect: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that we be filled with mitzvot like a pomegranate [is filled with seeds]. The Kabbalistic work Pardes Rimonim by the Remak is famous for expounding on this symbolic fruit of fertility and blessing. The Kohen Gadol’s hem of the ephod was decorated with weavings of pomegranites separated by bells.

i. Sheep or fish head: The phrase “li-Rosh ve-lo li-zanav” As the head and not as the tail is a prayer based on the verse in Deuteronomy 28:13 “And Hashem shall place you as a head and not as a tail…” Targum Onkelos paraphrases: As a mighty one and not as a weakling.” A sheep’s head is used for this symbolic food because it serves as an additional reminder of the merits of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, at which a ram replaced Isaac on the Altar. (see: ppt at http://libguides.tourolib.org/c.php?g=114143&p=74298) The Magen Avraham) instructs us to intone the benediction: May it be Your will, Lord our God and the God of our fathers, that we be a head and not a tail. The fish is symbolic as they were commanded to be fruitful and increase, they are not susceptible to the “evil eye” (malicious wishes out of envy), and the great Tanaitic sages are called “big fish” in the Kinneret or Sea of Gallilee as the Talmud is liked to a “sea.” According to a Hasidic parable fish also come to the surface of the water when it rains to drink the extra drops of water although they are surrounded in waters, to come to show that although one is surrounded in Torah, one can never get enough, even
an extra drop. Al pi Kabbalah, eating fish is also thought to help the reincarnations (gilgulim) to eventually perfect the souls to come to be with the souls of the Tzadikim under the throne of G-d in the 7th heaven.