

Dvar Torah Outline — Rosh Hashanah: Simanim, Avoiding Darkei HaEmori, and Awakening Zechut Avot

Abstract

Rabbi Shulman explains the Gemara's practice of eating symbolic foods on Rosh Hashanah and addresses the obvious concern: isn't this superstition and therefore a form of **דרכי האמורי**? He develops two approaches—first, that the effectiveness of **simanim** depends on **תשובה** and inner intention expressed through **יהי רצון**; second, that physical symbols can serve as an “anchor” for spiritual ideas, following the Ramban's principle seen throughout prophetic actions. Rabbi Shulman then presents the Maharal's deeper framing: the simanim are meant to awaken **זכות אבות**, and each food corresponds to a distinct quality associated with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

I. Setting the moment: entering “hayom” before Rosh Hashanah

A. “Hayom” as a loaded word in rabbinic language

- Rabbi Shulman notes that **היום** in many sefarim is a reference to **ראש השנה**.
 - The dvar Torah is framed as being “one day away” from Rosh Hashanah—already beginning to enter its mindset.
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II. The Gemara in Horayot: the practice of simanim (0:30)

A. Simanim as meaningful

- The Gemara discusses **סימנים** in relation to **מקום** and **זמן**.
- Abaye's conclusion: **סימנא מילתא היא**—a sign is a significant matter.

B. The foods Abaye recommends for Rosh Hashanah

- a person should make a practice of eating symbolic foods at — “יהא רגיל איניש למיכל בריש שתא” — the start of the year:
 - קרא (pumpkin/gourd)
 - רוביא (black-eyed peas / beans)
 - כרתי (leeks)
 - Some versions also include:
 - סלקא (beets)
 - תמרי (dates)
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III. The problem: isn't this Darkei HaEmori (2:00)

A. The Torah prohibition of living superstitiously

- Rabbi Shulman raises the challenge: there is a לא of דרכי האמורי.
- “Superstitious life” examples (black cat, broken glass, etc.) represent the kind of thinking the Torah rejects.

B. Why the Rosh Hashanah simanim are different (Meiri)

- Rabbi Shulman cites the מאירי:
 - These סימנים are not magic; their value depends on תשובה and תיקון המעשים.
 - The focus is the inner mindset—expressed through יהי רצון.
 - Key principle:
 - If one thought the food itself “makes you rich” or “guarantees success,” that would veer into superstition.
 - Instead, the food is used to **awaken the heart**—personally and within one's family.
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IV. The Maharal and Ramban: physical actions as anchors for spiritual power (3:30)

A. The Ramban on Brit Bein HaBetarim as a model

- Rabbi Shulman references the famous רמב"ן (Parashat Lech Lecha):
 - Avraham asks במה אדע—how will I know Hashem's promise will be fulfilled?
 - Hashem instructs him to perform the physical process of the covenant (taking animals, cutting them, etc.).

- Afterward, **is reassured** **אברהם**—his mind is settled.

B. Why physical symbols matter

- The Ramban's explanation (as presented by Rabbi Shulman):
 - Prophets often take a lofty spiritual reality and attach it to a **physical vessel** (staff, brick, pot, etc.).
 - The physical act does not work mechanically; it becomes effective when it serves as a **receptacle** for an already-real spiritual power—helping it “land” in this world.

C. Application to the simanim (and a brief note about kapparot)

- Rabbi Shulman explains that this framework supports the practice of simanim.
 - He notes that **כפרות** invites a similar kind of discussion: symbolic actions must be tied to authentic spiritual work.
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V. The simanim as Zechut Avot: the Maharal's mapping (6:00)

A. Midrashic directive: invoke the Avot on Rosh Hashanah

- Rabbi Shulman quotes the Midrashic idea:
 - Hashem says: “**תהיו מזכירים לפני זכות אבות בראש השנה ... ותהיו ניצולים מן הדין**”
 - Mentioning the merit of the Avot on the Day of Judgment becomes a source of salvation from **דין**.

B. Why Zechut Avot helps: roots and identity

- The Avot are described as the **שרשים** (roots) of Jewish spiritual makeup—our “spiritual DNA.”
- “Who is standing before Hashem in judgment?”
 - A child of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov—this itself reframes the **דין**.

C. “Mentioning” as spiritual activation

- Rabbi Shulman connects this to **זכרונות** of Rosh Hashanah:
 - Mentioning righteous figures (“**זכר צדיק לברכה**”) doesn't just recall history—it **arouses spiritual כוח** toward goodness in the world.
- So too, **מזכירים זכות אבות** means awakening their spiritual qualities within ourselves.

D. The practical bridge: foods that awaken those qualities

- The Maharal (Gur Aryeh) is presented as reading the simanim as intentional reminders of the Avot and their middot.
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VI. The three core foods and their spiritual correspondences (8:00)

A. קרא (pumpkin) → Avraham: “גדולה” and expansion

- Rabbi Shulman describes the pumpkin as a **דבר פלא**—extraordinarily large, even able to be carved out.
- This symbolizes Avraham as “**האדם הגדול בענקים**”:
 - Not physical size, but **greatness of vision**—expanding concern beyond one’s own world.
 - Avraham’s mission of drawing others close to Torah reflects caring for humanity.
 - Avraham as **אב להמון גוים**—the spiritual father of converts.

B. רוביא (peas/beans) → Yitzchak: “גבורה” and ריבוי (multiplicity through restraint)

- Rabbi Shulman points out:
 - Peas are tiny; their significance comes only in **large quantity**—hence the association with **ריבוי**.
- He defines **ריבוי** not as endless expansion, but as a cycle:
 - growth → restraint/cutting back → division → multiplication.
- This maps to Yitzchak:
 - The promise “**והרביתי את זרעך**” is specifically said to Yitzchak.
 - Yitzchak represents **גבורה** and also **עושר**:
 - wealth as many individual units accumulating (coins, dollars), “מאה שערים.”

C. כרתי (leeks) → Yaakov: transcendence and cutting off enemies at the root

- Rabbi Shulman connects **כרתי** to Yaakov’s power to overcome:
 - “**כי שרית עם אלקים ועם אנשים ותוכל**” (because you strove with God and with men and prevailed)
 - The idea:
 - Yaakov’s higher, transcendent spiritual stature enables him to defeat opposition—“cutting off enemies at the root.”
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VII. Closing: what to think about at the Rosh Hashanah table (12:30)

A. Not self-serving superstition, but avodah

- Rabbi Shulman emphasizes:
 - The foods are not merely about “getting good things for ourselves.”
 - They are a כלי (vessel) to remember and activate זכות אבות and the inner work of teshuvah.

B. Final tefillah

- The goal: that our זכרונות should go “before Hashem for good,” concluding with **אמן**.
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In Summary

- Rabbi Shulman frames the Rosh Hashanah **simanim** as permitted and meaningful because they depend on **יהי רצון**, **תשובה**, and inner awakening—not superstition (**דרכי האמורי**).
- Using the Ramban’s principle, physical symbols can serve as an “anchor” that helps spiritual aspirations become real in this world.
- The Maharal’s approach: simanim are designed to awaken **זכות אבות**—invoking the Avot’s rooted spiritual power on the Day of Judgment.
- Each food becomes a meditation on an Av: **קרא** (Avraham’s greatness/expansion), **רוביא** (Yitzchak’s gevurah and multiplicative abundance), and **כרתי** (Yaakov’s ability to prevail and cut off evil at its root).