



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

ROSH HASHANA 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 25, 2014
Rosh Hashana - Day 1

Honey Jew



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5775*

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Honey Jew: To Bee Or Not To Bee?

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ABSTRACT

Honey is the word. We dip apple in honey, we dip challah in honey, we wish one another *Shanah Tova u'Metuka*, a Happy and Sweet New Year.

Why honey? Of all the adjectives that could be applied to the year, is "sweet" the best that Judaism could do? Why not "peaceful," or "beautiful," or "prosperous," or "successful," or any other possible blessing?

Why specifically honey and why specifically sweet? What is the lesson here?

On the High Holidays, Jews who would normally not be found within a hundred yards of a synagogue, suddenly show up to connect with their Creator - and they are, more than at any other time of the year, receptive to learning something. What single, powerful lesson can a rabbi convey in this short time that will stick (no pun intended) with them throughout the year?

The answer lies in the paradox of honey. And in the dip. On one hand, honey is sweet; on the other, no one eats honey straight up. You've got to dip - dip your material apple in your spiritual honey.

Two stories - one from Volozhin, one from the Baal Shem Tov - convey the sweet paradox of honey in a candied way.

Honey Jew

HONEY JEW: TO BEE OR NOT TO BEE?

1. A Sweet New Year

Shanah Tova U'metuka – a happy and sweet New Year to all!

After all that Israel (and the world) has experienced in the past year, we pray and hope that this New Year will be one of complete peace. And on the personal level, for each of us, may this year be full of health, happiness, blessings, and sweetness.

It is precisely the last adjective – sweetness – that sticks in my mind (you could say it is sticky).

So, let us delve into the crystalline confection of sweetness until we reach the essence of the syrupy honey pot.

And that reminds me...

2. Bee Advice (Joke)

Two bees run into each other. The first bee inquires as to how the other one is doing.

“Really bad,” says the second bee. “The weather has been terribly wet and damp. There aren’t any flowers or pollen, so I can’t make any honey.”

“No problem,” says the first bee. “Just fly down five blocks and turn left and keep going until you see all the cars. Shlomo Goldstein’s son is having his Bar Mitzvah. There are all kinds of flower arrangements and fruit sculptures with nectar aplenty. Buzz around there for a little while and you should be able to produce all the honey in the world.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” says the second bee and flies off to the Goldstein Bar Mitzvah.

A few hours later the two bees run into each other again and the first bee asks, “Nu, how did it go?”

“It was great,” says the second bee. “It was everything you said it would be. And more. Thanks again.”

“My pleasure. I’m glad everything worked out,” says the first bee. And as he was about to fly off to his hive, he sees something peculiar on the second bee’s head and asks him what it is.

“Why that’s my yarmulke,” says the second bee.

“Why are you wearing a yarmulke?”

“Well, I didn’t want them to think I was a WASP.”

3. Why We Are Here

We sit here in synagogue, on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, with these yarmulkes perched atop our heads like stiff toupees.

Not unlike that bee at the Goldstein Bar Mitzvah, we all come here on this day (making sure we don’t get confused with WASPS) to digest some soulful nectar, so that we can make spiritual honey throughout the year.

But, as we do sit here, praying to God – asking for a blessed year, health for our families, the wealth to support them, and peace and serenity in all facets of our lives – there seems to be an acute challenge that passes through the heart and mind of every Jew: How to translate the spiritual energy infusion of the High Holidays into the rest of the coming year?

It is one thing to recharge on Rosh Hashanah, but what can we do to ensure that the charge remains with us long after we have left *shul*?

In a sense, we buzz around on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, gathering nectar, imbibing pollen, digesting spirituality and inspiration so that we can go back to our hives and produce honeyed sweetness throughout the whole year. Yet, invariably, a minute or two after it is over, all the inspiration begins to fade away.

As a rabbi, what kind of message can I share that will stick (no pun intended) with every single one of you throughout the year, wherever you may find yourself. When you are back in your normal everyday life, what Rosh Hashanah message can transform every detail of your life?

The answer lies in one of the best-known Rosh Hashanah customs, involving that sticky bee product: Honey.

4. Apple in the Honey

On Rosh Hashanah, we all dip an apple in honey and say:

May it be Your will to renew upon us a good and sweet year.

Honey is the embodiment of sweetness, and it is with honey that we wish one another , “A happy and sweet New Year.”

Furthermore, many Jews have the tradition to dip their challah in honey as well. And some even continue this custom all the way through the festival of Sukkot!

Honey is wonderful. And dipping apples or challah into it is beautiful. Wishing one another a sweet New Year? Fantastic! But why? Why honey? Why sweetness? Why dipping?

When we examine our dreams for a blessed year, I don't know if “sweetness” is the first adjective that comes to mind. What about “peaceful,” or “beautiful,” or “prosperous,” or “successful,” or any other possible blessing? Why not dip the apple in, say, tofu pesto and ask for a healthy year? Or why not dip it into wine and ask for an intoxicating year?

Why specifically honey and a sweet year? What is the significance? What personal lesson does this convey to us?

And why do we *dip*? I know this sounds like a Passover question, one of the immortal four, but why do we dip apple or challah into honey on Rosh Hashanah? What does this dipping symbolize?

5. The Value of Torah

In the Book of Psalms, King David describes the value of Torah, its commandments and awe of God in this fashion:

They are more desirable than gold and rare jewels, sweeter than honey and choice nectar.¹

And in the Book of Ezekiel, the Prophet compares Torah to honey, and its study to sweetness, with these poetic words:

And He [God] said to me; "Son of man, that which you find, eat. Eat this scroll and go, speak to the House of Israel." So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. And He said to me, "Feed your stomach and fill your insides with this scroll, which I give you." So I ate, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.²

These verses have given rise to a beautiful custom. When a child goes to school for the first time, it is customary to cover a laminated sheet of the Hebrew alphabet with honey. Then, the child licks off the honey, by-and-by associating the Aleph Bet and Torah with honey and sweetness.

Honey, then, not only represents sweetness in general but indeed it is representative of Torah and its words.

6. The Other Side Of Sweetness

But sweetness is only one side of the story. There is another side to the honey narrative.

On its own, honey really isn't edible. Were you to eat more than a couple of spoonfuls, you'd feel nauseous, as is explicitly stated in the Book of Proverbs: *If you have found honey, eat only what is sufficient for you, lest you become sated with it and vomit it out.³*

¹ Psalms 19:11.

² Ezekiel 3:3.

³ Proverbs 25:16.

Indeed, the Talmud⁴ references this verse when relating the famous episode of the four sages who entered the “Orchard” (*Pardes*), a metaphor for raw spiritual consciousness. The overwhelming energy, like walking into the heart of a nuclear reactor, had different effects on the four. One entered peacefully and exited peacefully. One lost his faith. One lost his life. One lost his mind. Of the latter, the Talmud states, *If you have found honey, eat only what is sufficient for you, lest you become sated with it and vomit it out.*

This concept is also found in Judaism’s mystical teachings,⁵ where the concentrated, viscous sweetness of honey, represents a level of unbearable sweetness (what it calls *gevurah d’gadlus*) that can be indigestible.

Philosophically, honey resembles the indigestible elements of existence. As Rabbeinu Bechai writes in “Duties of the Heart” (*Chovot Halevavot*):

Since the blessed Creator is hidden from all the hidden, beyond all the beyond, it is impossible for the finite mind to comprehend the essence of the Creator’s being; it can only know that the Creator exists. Therefore, we would do well to simply study and analyze the world at hand, the Creator’s creations, by-and-by learning about the Creator Himself.

But if we would try to wrap our mind around the vastness that is the blessed Creator, we would merely create graven images in our head and subjective representations (which are really misrepresentations) of what the Creator really is. All we would accomplish is to distance ourselves from the Creator’s true being.⁶

And then Rabbeinu Bechai concludes:

If you have found honey, eat only what is sufficient for you, lest you become sated with it and vomit it out.

From all of this, we see that, while honey is sweet and wonderful, it also is representative of an indigestible element, one that could be *too* sweet.

⁴ Chagigah 14b.

⁵ See *Likkutei Torah*, Shelach p. 38a; *Hemshech Ayin Beis*, III p. 1’339; *Bnei Yisachar*, Maamarei Chodesh Tishrei, #13 (p. 5).

⁶ “Duties of the Heart,” *Shaar Hayichud*, ch. 10.

7. The Honey Paradox

Honey represents a paradox: On one hand it is sweetness personified; but on the other hand, it is *exceedingly* sweet, to the extent that if we eat too much of it, we can become nauseous. This is why no one eats honey straight; we always use it to complement other foods.

What do these two sides of honey teach us? What lies within the beehive of this honey paradox?

The answer is that we have to taste the honey to know that it is sweet, but we have to know how to consume that sweetness in the right/digestible way.

These two lessons are best conveyed through the following stories.

8. The Value of Honey (First Story⁷)

The Academy of Volozhin in Russia (today, Belarus), was considered one of the most prestigious yeshivas in the world. The most brilliant students would travel from far and wide to study in its great hall, Talmudic debate reverberating across its walls.

One such prodigy was once traveling, on his way to the yeshiva, when he stopped in an inn along the way. The inn was all lit up, and inside there was music and merriment. The aroma of good food filled his nostrils. The student was famished, not having had a decent meal in many days, but, unfortunately, he didn't have a penny to his name.

"How much does a meal cost?" he asked the innkeeper.

"Five rubles," was the reply.

"I don't have five rubles but I can pay you for a meal by giving you something more valuable than money. I will recite some wisdom from the Torah, whose words are *more desirable than gold and rare jewels, sweeter than honey and choice nectar*.

⁷ Treasures Of Knowledge by Rabbi Noah Kaplan (Pester Press, 1955, p. 7-8).

When the innkeeper and all the patrons who had gathered around heard this young man offer to pay with Torah, they began to laugh hysterically. “Ha, you are going to pay us with Torah? More valuable than gold, sweeter than honey? Ha!” After they stopped laughing, they roughed up the student and threw him out of the inn.

When the boy arrived in Volozhin, he talked to no one and didn’t open a book for days. The rabbi who was the Rosh Yeshiva saw that there was something wrong with him and asked him what the trouble was. The boy related his sad story and asked the rabbi for an explanation of the Psalmists words, *more desirable than gold and rare jewels, sweeter than honey and choice nectar*. “I couldn’t even get a piece of bread, never mind the value of gold or the sweetness of honey, for all my Torah knowledge!”

Before responding, the rabbi gave the student his gold pocket watch and chain and told him to put it in front of the horses in the stall. The boy did as he was told, but the horses didn’t touch the gold watch and chain, instead they shied away from it.

“Now,” instructed the wise leader of the Volozhiner yeshiva, “go and put a bale of hay in front of the horses, and see what happens.”

The student did as he was told, and as soon as he dropped the hay in front of them, the horses flared their nostrils, salivated at the mouth, and started to do an excitable jig. Then they attacked the hay with unbridled abandon.

The yeshiva student understood immediately. Horses do not appreciate the value of a precious gold pocket watch, and it is therefore worthless to them. But horses know very well the value of hay, and thus will do anything to get some. That’s just their nature.

Some people do not appreciate the value and sweetness of Torah, and thus deem it worthless and tasteless. They see that honey is sweet, but their palates don’t taste the sweetness of Torah. They know how gold is precious, but they do not know the preciousness of a mitzvah.

This is why we have Rosh Hashanah; this is why we have Yom Kippur; this is why we have Sukkot and all the holidays. To remind us of the golden honey, the honeyed gold that is the Torah and the Jewish way.

To remind us of the fact that what we have is honey and gold; it is as relevant, precious, and sweet today as it was 5775 years ago. Maybe even more so.

Thus the first lesson of the honey paradox is to educate ourselves as to the honey sweetness of Torah. Then the next lesson is learning how to consume the honey in the right/digestible way. Once we know and recognize the sweetness of Torah, we can begin to dip our lives into it. And this is conveyed by the second story.

9. Free Sample (Second Story⁸)

A man once came to the Baal Shem Tov and poured out his heart: "Rebbe!" he cried. "I don't understand what is happening to me. On Rosh Hashanah, I decided to dedicate myself to the service of the Almighty, and I immediately found myself invigorated with spiritual life. When I prayed, my soul soared in ecstasy; when I studied Torah, the gates of wisdom opened before me; when I did a mitzvah, I was suffused with a wonderful joy. But soon after Rosh Hashanah, as regular life began to kick in, I lost it all. My prayers went dry. Now, when I try to study, I stare for hours at the page without comprehending a word. My good deeds have become mechanical and devoid of meaning. Rebbe, what happened?"

"Let me tell you a story," said the Baal Shem Tov. "A man once entered a shop in which all types of delicacies were displayed. He noticed that people were partaking of the food free of charge, with the consent and encouragement of the shopkeeper. So, he decided that he, too, would take advantage of the shopkeeper's generosity. After sampling each dish on the counter, he served himself a generous helping of a particularly appealing food.

"Wait a minute, my friend," objected the shopkeeper, "That'll be two kopecks."

"But I don't understand," said the surprised customer. "Why are you suddenly demanding payment? Up until now, you allowed me to eat for free!"

⁸ Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from "Living Jewish" - Chabad of the Cardo.

“‘Only because it is in my interest that people sample my wares,’ replied the shopkeeper, ‘so that they may learn how delicious they are. But after you have already tasted them and have appreciated their worth, it’s time to start paying for your pleasure.’

“‘Nothing worthwhile in life is free of charge,’ concluded the Baal Shem Tov, ‘particularly in matters of the spirit. The sublime pleasures of divine service can be acquired only with the currency of perseverance and toil. Nevertheless, the Almighty offers a free ‘taste’ of His intimacy to all who seek Him with a true heart. But once you have sampled these heavenly delicacies, it’s time to get to work.’”

Rosh Hashanah is a culinary tasting of the divine menu. It is the time to sample the sweetness of Torah and appreciate how it can sweeten our whole year. Then comes the work to earn its continuous flavors and delights. But there is nothing tastier than dipping our mundane experiences into this honey – because then the mundane become sacred, the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the blandest of ingredients becomes the sweetest of experiences.

10. Words or Bees (Optional)

The Book of Deuteronomy – the fifth book of the Torah which we will conclude reading the day after Rosh Hashanah – begins with these words: “*Aylu ha’devarim ... These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel...*”⁹

The word *devarim* can also be read as *devorim* which means “bees.” For the words of the Torah are like bees – they either can be honeyed sweetness or they can sting painfully.¹⁰

As we have seen, honey, like the honeybee, also has these two paradoxical properties. Honey can either be used to sweeten or to nauseate, to make all things more pleasurable or more painful. The secret is in the dip.

⁹ Deuteronomy 1:1.

¹⁰ See Ta’amei Mesoret Ha’mikra from R’ Yehudah Hachassid; Midrash Pinchas.

On Rosh Hashanah, with the dipping of the apple and challah in honey, the Torah provides the solution to this problem and teaches us a lesson that is meant to stay with us throughout the whole year.

God does not want you to eat only honey by itself, to spend all your days trying to wrap your mind around the mystical masteries of the cosmos. All that will do is cause you to lose your mind. Simply, dip your apple in the honey; dip your bread in the honey. Do not eat the apple plain; do not eat your bread plain. Do not eat the honey alone; do not pour a jar of sweetness down your throat. Simply take the fruits of your labor and dip them in your spiritual honey, in the sweetness of life that is Torah. Simply take your bread – the bread/dough that you make – and dip it into the sweetness that is Heaven. That is it.

Even if you come to the synagogue just once a year, if you internalize this message, your entire year is changed. Now, everything you do on a Monday in January or a Thursday in June is suddenly being dipped in honey, in the sweetness of Torah.

By making a blessing on your kosher food, you dip it in the honey of heaven. By giving your hard-earned money to a poor person, you dip your hard-earned bread into the honey of mitzvah.

I am not asking you to stick a straw into a jar of honey and slurp it all up. First of all slurping is not polite; and second of all that rich sweetness will overwhelm you and cause you to regurgitate that viscous bee product. I am simply asking you to acknowledge the honey, taste it a little, and dip whatever you have in it.

Today, the day of creation, the beginning of a happy and sweet New Year, consists of simply trying to dip all things in the honey pot of the Creator.

11. To Bee or Not to Bee (Conclusion)

How to?

The first step is to study and understand that Torah and Judaism are the honey of the world, sweetening all things.

To understand that is to discover the difference between a precious heirloom gold pocket watch and a bale of hay.

Once that is achieved, the second step becomes the simple act of dipping all things in that sweetness.

Now, privy to the inner dimension of honey, the ultimate bee product, the question is not, "To bee or not to bee?" Rather the question is: "How can I be the best bee I can possibly be?"¹¹

Indeed, today we all must ask ourselves:

How can I dip the apple of my life into the honey of my Judaism? How can I take the different elements of my hourly, daily, weekly, monthly, yearly life – my family, my work, my religion, my leisure, my pain, my pleasure – and dip each element respectively into the sweetness that is my soul?

Perhaps, in the coming year, with the mitzvah of Shabbat, I can sweeten the six days of my workweek. Perhaps with the mitzvah of a kosher home, I can sweeten up my family life. Perhaps with the honey of Torah, studying its nectar and sweetness, I can sweeten my world view.

The honey begins to pour today, and it drizzles upon all the days of the coming year.

With this priceless knowledge in hand, we can truly and meaningfully wish one another the ultimate and eternal blessing of:

L'Shana Tova *U'metuka!* A happy and *sweet* New Year to all!

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¹¹ Bee Trivia: 1) Bees fly close to 50,000 miles – the equivalent of twice around the globe – to produce just one pound of honey. 2) Bees are the only non-kosher animals to produce a kosher product. 3) One pound of honey contains 1,500 calories – now that's instant energy. 4) The manna is described in the Torah (Exodus 16:31) as having the flavor of wafers made with honey. 5) The Hebrew word for "honey," *dvash* has the numerical equivalent of *Av Harachamim*, or *Av Harachaman*, meaning "Father of Compassion" or "Merciful Father." (See *Pri Etz Chaim*, Gate 25 [Tefilos Rosh Hashanah] ch. 6; *Bnei Yisachar* *ibid.*)