

Good Shabbos Everyone. On Rosh Hashana, there is a custom to eat an apple dipped in honey. Before eating the apple dipped in honey we say a declaration: *"May it be Your will, Hashem, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that You renew for us a good and sweet year."* (Shulchan Oruch, Hagah 583:1) Many also have the custom of dipping bread into honey through Simchas Torah.

What is the significance of dipping into honey? Why not sugar or molasses? In order to answer our question, we must delve into the true meaning of Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana is a time when Hashem judges his creation. As the Mishnah tells us, *"on Rosh Hashana all who walk the Earth pass before Him [Hashem] like young sheep..."* (Rosh Hashana 1:2) Just as sheep are led through a narrow opening in the corral to be inspected by their loving shepherd, so too are we as individuals brought before Hashem for examination and judgment. All of our deeds, good and bad, are put on the scales. Hashem then opens the Book of Life and determines whose names will appear.

We want Hashem to judge us under the best possible light. Therefore, Rosh Hashana is a time of teshuva - introspection and examination of our deeds and resolution to change for the better. Teshuva is a mitzvah of the highest order, as the Torah tells us in this week's double portion Nitzovim-Vayeilech *"You shall return to Hashem your G-d and listen to His voice..."* (Devarim 30:2)

To summarize so far, Rosh Hashana is quickly approaching. Rosh Hashana is a day when Hashem examines our deeds from the entire year. Teshuva can help us pass the examination. Teshuva means seeking out those people whom we have wronged and beg forgiveness from them. If we have wronged others in personal or financial dealings, we must make good with them. Similarly, if we have done wrong in our relationships with Hashem, we should confess our violations and beg for Hashem's forgiveness. Hashem is the merciful King Who forgives His people if they do teshuva.

We can now come to answer our question from above, namely, why we dip apples and bread into honey during this time of the year. Honey is unique in that it is one of the few, if not the only foods which comes from a non-Kosher animal, the bee. We dip into honey to show that it is possible for good to come out of the bad. When we do teshuva we turn our misdeeds into 100% Kosher sweetness. As the Sages tell us, after teshuva, what was once a misdeed now becomes a source of spiritual reward. (see Yuma 76b) Bee honey therefore symbolizes teshuva - returning to Hashem. Teshuva makes life sweet. The following amazing story illustrates an incredible story of Teshuvah.

Rav Sholom Schechter, a prominent elderly rabbi, was on a TWA flight to Eretz Yisrael, with a stopover in Athens where he would board a connecting flight. It was two days before Rosh Hashanah, and the last few days in New York had been exhausting. Expending his energy in raising funds, selling sefarim, packing, and preparing for his trip had all taken their toll on this seventy-year-old man. Extremely tired, he fell into a deep sleep as the plane crossed the Atlantic. He asked to be awakened when the plane landed in Athens, but someone forgot to do so. On board were many people of many nationalities, heading towards many different destinations, so it didn't seem unusual that the rabbi with the long beard remained asleep even as the plane landed in Athens and people disembarked. He remained asleep throughout the stopover and awoke only as the plane roared down the runway, taking off to its next destination.

The captain greeted everyone and then detailed the flight plan. The next stop was Lebanon! Rabbi Schechter blinked his eyes a few times in disbelief. Lebanon? Were they being hijacked? What had happened to Athens? He soon realized that he had slept through his changing point and unlike a bus, he couldn't just get out and walk back to his correct stop. His baggage was probably on its way to Eretz Yisrael, but he most certainly was not.

This obviously Jewish-looking man would certainly be in danger in Lebanon, a land full of fanatics. He mentioned his predicament to the flight attendant who discussed the situation with the captain and then came to Rabbi Schechter with their advice. They suggested that since all the passengers were either American or European tourists who would in all probability not report the Jewish passengers to the Lebanese authorities, the crew might be able to protect him from being seen by any Arabs who might assist the disembarking passengers, or by Arabs who might come on board to check and clean the plane. He should pretend to be sleeping and blankets would be heaped all around him, covering him almost completely.

As the trip continued, Rabbi Schechter busied himself studying the sefarim he had taken along. When the plane eventually came to a halt in Lebanon, his heart was in his throat. For this landing he was wide awake. He sat trembling with fear, covered in darkness by the two blankets that the stewards provided for him.

No one gave the "sleeping" traveler more than a passing glance and then once again the plane took off, the next stop being India. Rabbi Schechter knew that there were Jewish communities in Bombay and Calcutta, but en-route the captain informed the passengers that due to civil disturbances in India, only those people holding Indian passports would be permitted to disembark.

Rosh Hashanah was only a day off. Checking plane flights and schedules, Rabbi Schechter realized that he had no chance of getting back to Eretz Yisrael on time for Yom Tov. He couldn't help but wonder where in the world this incredible journey might take him. He was confused and emotionally drained. Why was this happening to him? Was this wandering a punishment for something? Or was he destined to accomplish something special at some unknown destination? He would have to get off at the first stop after India, regardless of where it might be. He soon found out - Bangkok, Thailand.

By the time the plane taxied to a stop at Don Muang airport and Rabbi Schechter was cleared through customs, it was only a few hours before Rosh Hashanah. After some desperate inquiries he was told that there was indeed a

synagogue in the center of town. He made his way there, hoping that someone would be kind enough to invite him home. The people turned out to be more than kind.

He had no trouble conversing with the congregants, for most of the men who attended the synagogue were in Thailand on business, and they spoke English. He was invited by the president of the synagogue, a Mr. Atlas, to be a guest in his home, and it was there that Rabbi Schechter stayed for the next few days.

At Mr. Atlas' table, Rabbi Schechter ate only some cake, fruit and vegetables, that his daughter had packed for his trip, and matzah, which his host provided. He was introduced to Mr. Atlas' children, two of whom were brilliant young scholars studying at Oxford University in England. Among many things they discussed was the fact that in the synagogue tomorrow, aside from the regular Rosh Hashanah services, there was going to be a bar mitzvah. *"This trip gets more interesting every step of the way,"* Rabbi Schechter thought to himself.

When he came to the synagogue the next morning, he had another surprise waiting for him. Not only was there no mechitzah separating the men from the women, but the congregants were all sitting together. As an Orthodox Jew, Rabbi Schechter prayed alone in an anteroom to the side of the main sanctuary. After Shacharis (morning prayer), he asked the rabbi if he could address the people, to explain why he had not joined them for the prayers. He was granted permission.

"My dear brothers and sisters," he began, *"I am grateful to G-d that He granted me the privilege to be with you wonderful people this Rosh Hashanah. Surely many of you know that it was my original intention to be in Eretz Yisrael with my family, but G-d in His wisdom decreed that I be here with you in Bangkok. Perhaps some day I will know the reason. I appreciate your hospitality and friendliness. Because of your overwhelming kindness to me, I feel that I must explain why I did not pray with you this morning, but rather prayed alone in the anteroom."*

"Every synagogue is meant to be a model of the Holy Temple that once stood in Jerusalem. The sanctity of the synagogue is similar to the sanctity of that holy place. And because of the temple's holiness, men and women were separated during all services, to insure that there be no frivolity or diversion of attention from the prayers and the holiness of the place. A synagogue in which men and women sit together loses some of its holiness. Therefore, as you can see, I must pray in the anteroom."

Rabbi Schechter spoke about the importance of a child becoming bar mitzvah and studying Torah to understand and appreciate his Jewish heritage.

Rabbi Schechter's words were eloquent moving, and respectful. He did not talk down to the congregants nor criticize them, rather, he pleaded with them to start Torah-study groups so that they could become more familiar with the traditions, customs, and laws of their forefathers. He raised their spirits and when he finished his talk and unbelievable thing happened. A Dr. Frankel, one of the members of the synagogue, walked up to the podium and began speaking spontaneously. *"I'm sure that many of you feel as I do that it is an honor to have such a distinguished guest in our presence. In his honor, may I suggest that we separate the men from the women before we continue with the Torah reading and shofar blowing so that he can pray with us."*

The local rabbi was offended that something so drastic was done in "his" synagogue without consulting him. He got, up to protest, but it was too late. Two hundred people were already on the move, the men stationing themselves on the right side of the synagogue, the women to the left. And they remained so for the entire holiday service.

The next morning Rabbi Schechter spoke again, and once again the Atlas boys, sons of his host, were present. The older of the boys, Morris, possessed an inquisitive, analytical mind and was much taken with Rabbi Schechter. The conversations which had flowed between the young thinker and the older scholar had established a strong bond between the two.

Morris had never been to a yeshivah and he had no idea what Orthodoxy was all about, but here was an Orthodox man who touched his heart. By the time Rosh Hashanah was over, Morris had made a decision. He was going to interrupt his studies at Oxford and transfer to Ohr Somayach (a yeshivah with a program for boys with little Torah background) in Jerusalem. After much discussion, Mr. Atlas agreed that his son could try it for one semester. The young scholar went off to Israel and the one semester lasted three fruitful years. During those years he became a true ben Torah and eventually influenced his younger brother to come to Ohr Somayach as well.

Today, years later, the Atlas brothers are Orthodox Jews living in London, strongly committed to Torah and mitzvos and deeply indebted to the rabbi who slept through his stopover in Athens. Back in Bangkok, the classes which Rabbi Schechter organized have also borne fruit; some women now observe taharas hamishpachah (family purity) for the first time in their lives. When retelling this story Rabbi Schechter observes reflectively, *"It is true,"* he says, *"that I was punished. I could not be with my family in Eretz Yisrael for the holidays. Yet, because of my unscheduled trip, a chain of events was put into motion that accomplished much for Yiddishkeit. Hashem let me be involved in returning two Jews to authentic Judaism."* (The Maggid Speaks, Rabbi Paysach Krohn p.233)

Hashem is waiting for all of us to return. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**