



# The Rosh Hashanah Seder: Who Knew?

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

As an Italian Jew I always knew my traditions were different from the Ashkenazi Jews I grew up with in Pittsburgh. Like the time I included couscous at my Passover seder, much to the horror of my best friend's Polish grandmother! There were many customs for Passover, Hanukkah and even Purim that our Sephardic/marranos family brought from the Old Country and over the years. I thought I knew them all.

Later on when I accepted a rabbinate in Italy, I was surprised to learn that one important Italian Jewish tradition never made it from Italy to America. As rabbi for a small pluralistic community in Milan, I was stunned to learn that for Italian Jews, Rosh Hashanah eve did not include a synagogue service. Instead the night before the New Year was dedicated to the Rosh Hashanah seder!



Traditional Italian Jews place a fish head at the center of the Rosh Hashanah seder. But nobody will complain if you choose a head of lettuce instead.

From north to south, from the "thigh" of the Italian "boot" all the way down to the "toe," Italian Jews gather around the family table and share symbolic foods, blessings, stories, poems and songs to welcome the New Year.

"Ricorda, Rabbina, Remember, Rabbi," my school director Eva explained. "It's the birthday of the world so the Rosh Hashanah seder is our way to have a birthday party." And what a party it is.

The seder itself has its origins in the Talmud (Horayot 12a) where Rabbi Abaye writes about eating those foods that grow in abundance at this time of the year, symbolizing our hopes and dreams for the coming year. The seder itself is called, "Seder Yehi Ratson," ("The seder of God's will") and begins with prayers asking that we be blessed with bounty, strength and peace.

Seven bowls are arranged in a circle on the table, with a different fruit or vegetable in each one. We use dates, pomegranates, apples and honey, string beans, pumpkin, spinach and scallions. Traditionalists place a fish head or sheep's head in the center. For those who don't have the stomach for an animal's noggin, a head of lettuce works just as well.

The Rosh Hashanah Haggadah contains readings from Genesis which describe the creation of the world and when and how to eat the symbolic foods. As each bowl is passed around, each guest samples its contents while the seder leader makes each specific blessing.

The seder concludes with the passing of the head of lettuce. As each person breaks off a piece, the leader prays, "May it be Your will, Adonai, that we be heads, not tails. Leaders, not followers, never stragglers but at the head of what is right and what is good in the year to come."

A lively version of "Ken Yehi Ratson," complete with a rousing Ladino melody, concludes the seder experience. Then, just like on Passover, a festive meal is served.

Shanah tovahs are exchanged with hugs and kisses all around. On both cheeks. After all, it's Italy.

## Mini-Haggadah

In Sephardic Jewish homes there are several ways to prepare and conduct the Rosh Hashanah seder. These traditional foods and blessings represent a combination of my family's Sephardic traditions from Italy, Gibraltar and Morocco.

To conduct the seder, you'll need seven bowls placed in the center of the table. Each bowl is filled with one of the following:

- Dates
- Pomegranates
- Apples and honey
- String beans
- Pumpkin
- Spinach and scallions
- Fish head/sheep's head (or head of lettuce)

The leader begins the seder.

Leader: Seder Yehi Ratzon

The group responds: Seder Yehi Ratzon ... Baruch HaShem.

## Dates (Tamarim)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass around the bowl and have each person take one date.

Leader: May it be your will, G-d, that all fighting will end. May we date this New Year with Peace and Happiness.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon.

All take a bite.

Leader: "Baruch atah Adonai, elohenu melech ah-olam, borei p're ha-etz. Blessed are you, Adonai, Ruler of the universe who has created the fruit of the tree."

## Pomegranate (Rimon)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass the bowl around and have each person take a piece of pomegranate or one fig.

Leader: May it be your will, G-d, that in this new year we keep your commandments.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon.

All take a bite.

## Apples and honey (Tapuah ba-d'vash)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass around the apple slices and have each person hold a dipped slice.

Leader: May it be Your will, G-d, to renew for us a year that is as good and sweet as honey.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Eat the apples.

Sing "Apples and Honey for Rosh Hashanah."

## String Beans (Rubia o Lubia , in Italian "Fagiolino")

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass around the beans.

Leader: May it be your will, G-d, that we increase our merits.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon

Leader: Baruch atah Adonai, eloheinu melech ha-olam, borei p'ri ha-adamah. Blessed are you, Adonai, ruler of the universe, who has created the fruit of the earth.

## Pumpkin or Gourd (K'ra)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass pumpkin around.

Leader: As we eat this pumpkin, may it be Your will, G-d , to guard us. Tear away all evil decrees against us and remember the good things we have done in the past and will do in the new year.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Eat the pumpkin.

## Spinach or Beetroot Leaves (Selek)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass them around, each person taking a leaf.

Leader: May it be Your will, G-d, to banish all the enemies who might beat us.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon.

## Leeks or Scallions (Karti)

(for details on preparation, click [here](#))

Pass these around the table.

Leader: May it be Your will, G-d, that mazel (good fortune) find us in the year to come.

Group: Ken Yehi Ratzon

## Fish head/Sheep's Head/Head of lettuce

Pass the head around with each person taking a piece.

**Leader:** May it be Your will, G-d, that we be heads, not tails. Leaders, not followers, never stragglers but at the head of what is right and what is good in the year to come.

**Group:** Ken Yehi Ratzon.

Sing "Hi Ne Ma Tov."

*With thanks to Rahel Musleah, whose Sephardic Indian traditions form the basis of this seder.*

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