

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Rosh Hashanah

A table of symbolic foods and blessings, a month of predawn prayers, and the many ways Sephardic and Mizrahi families welcome a sweet new year.

WHEN

The 1st and 2nd of the Hebrew month of Tishri, in September or October, beginning at sundown.

AT THE TABLE

A *seder* of *simanim*: symbolic foods, each paired with a short wish that begins *Yehi ratzon*, "May it be Your will."

THE SEASON

Sephardic communities recite *Selihot*, prayers for forgiveness, for the whole month of Elul, about forty days before Yom Kippur.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

The symbolic foods go back to a Babylonian sage of the fourth century, and every community has shaped them in its own way.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, opens a season of reflection that ends ten days later with Yom Kippur. In the synagogue, its signature sound is the shofar, the ram's horn. At home, Sephardic and Mizrahi families gather for a festive dinner that begins with a ritual all its own: a *seder*, or "order," of symbolic foods. Dates, beans, leeks, squash, pomegranates, and a sweet apple are passed around one by one, each with a hope for the year ahead. From Aleppo to Baghdad, Fez to Rhodes, and today in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Jerusalem, the foods and melodies change, but the idea is the same: to begin the year with blessings you can taste.

The seder of simanim

In the Talmud, the sage Abaye, who lived in Babylonia in the fourth century, said a person should make a habit of seeing five foods on Rosh Hashanah (some manuscripts say holding or eating them): gourd, fenugreek, leeks, beets, and dates (Horayot 12a and Keritot 6a). In the centuries that followed, rabbis in Babylonia and beyond added a short wish over each food, built on a pun between its Aramaic or Hebrew name and a hope for the year. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews kept and expanded the ritual, often serving six to eleven foods, while Ashkenazi Jews came to focus on apples with honey. Many families follow an order associated with Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad, known as the Ben Ish Hai.

FOOD	NAME	THE WORDPLAY	THE WISH
Dates	<i>tamar</i>	Sounds like <i>tam</i> , "to end"	That hatred and harm against us come to an end
Beans or fenugreek	<i>rubia</i> or <i>lubia</i>	Sounds like <i>rav</i> , "many"	That our good deeds increase
Leeks or scallions	<i>karti</i>	Sounds like <i>karet</i> , "to cut"	That those who wish us harm be cut off
Beet or chard	<i>silka</i>	Sounds like <i>silek</i> , "to remove"	That our enemies depart
Gourd or squash	<i>kara</i>	Sounds like "to tear" and "to call out"	That any harsh decree be torn up and our merits announced
Pomegranate	<i>rimon</i>	Full of seeds	That we be full of good deeds
Apple with honey or sugar	<i>tapuah</i>	Sweetness	A good and sweet year

Main sources: Chabad.org; David Golinkin, Schechter Institutes; My Jewish Learning; University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies. Many families reword the older wishes about enemies in gentler language, and vegetarians may use lettuce or cauliflower for the "head."

Selihot, shofar, and greetings

- **A month of Selihot.** Sephardic Jews begin *Selihot* the day after Rosh Hodesh Elul and continue through Yom Kippur, about forty days, recalling the forty days Moses spent on Mount Sinai. Ashkenazi Jews usually begin only a week or so before Rosh Hashanah. Selihot are said before dawn or after midnight, and in some Sephardic synagogues they are sung with energy and joy.
- **The shofar.** The ram's horn is sounded during the Musaf prayers. Before it is blown, many Sephardic congregations sing *Et Sha'arei Ratzon*, a poem on the binding of Isaac by Rabbi Judah Samuel Abbas of Fez, written in the twelfth century.
- **Tashlikh.** In the afternoon, people recite prayers beside a river or other water, symbolically casting away their sins.
- **Greetings.** In Hebrew, *Tizku leshananim rabot*, "May you merit many years." In Ladino, *Anyada buena, dulce i alegre*, "A good, sweet, and happy year." Persian Jews may say *Sale no mobarak*, "Happy New Year."

New Year cards in Sephardic Seattle

Joseph Albert Souriano arrived in Seattle from Istanbul in 1920 and opened the Columbia Printing Company, becoming the city's Ladino printer. Each year before Rosh Hashanah, cards arrived for his family from Istanbul and beyond, written in Ladino, Hebrew, Turkish, French, German, and English. Many carried the wish to be inscribed in the book of life.

The University of Washington's Sephardic Studies program has shared the cards online, where students can study them as primary sources.

Community by community

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Rhodes, the Balkans)

Families call the seder *yehi ratzones* and serve apples, dates, leeks, spinach, squash, black eyed peas, and a fish head or cow cheek. Rhodes families make savory dishes like spinach *quajado* and leek patties. In Turkey, many dipped apples in sugar instead of honey. Rhodes Jews avoided wearing new shoes on the holiday, and their Seattle descendants still chant High Holiday poems in Ladino.

Sources: University of Washington; JTA; Chabad.org

Syria (Aleppo)

Many Syrian Jewish tables feature stuffed vegetables, such as cabbage, zucchini, and grape leaves, in a sweet and sour sauce of apricots, prunes, and tamarind. In Aleppo, some customers exchanged an Arabic blessing with the barber at their haircut before the holiday.

Sources: The Nosh (My Jewish Learning); Chabad.org

Iraq and the Baghdadi diaspora

Some families had a ram slaughtered the night before the holiday and served its head separately. A prayer book in the Iraqi Jewish Archive includes the text of the home ritual. Iraqi tables include dates, spinach, zucchini, beans, and apple jam scented with cardamom, served without salt. Baghdadi families in Calcutta made an apple preserve called *maraba*.

Sources: Iraqi Jewish Archive (U.S. National Archives); The Jewish Independent; Distinctions; Chabad.org

Morocco

Some Moroccan families serve seven cooked vegetables on the eve of the holiday. The blessings are sung to ornate melodies, and the meal may bring lamb tagine with chickpeas and raisins, chicken with prunes and almonds, couscous, and pumpkin soup.

Sources: Chabad.org; Institut Européen des Musiques Juives; Sephardic U

Iran

Some Persian Jewish families hold a seder of nine simanim. In some families leeks are torn in half rather than eaten, and a light food such as cow lung or even popcorn is added for a "light" year. A bean stew may also be served.

Sources: J. Weekly (Donna Maher, via Alma and JTA); My Jewish Learning

Libya

Libyan Jews often use sugar mixed with sesame seeds in place of beans or fenugreek. Many families open the meal with *aharaimi*, a spicy fish in tomato sauce. Some scatter new wheat on the tablecloth for abundance and leave out salt for a sweet year. A large Libyan community lives in Rome.

Sources: Joan Nathan (New York Times, via Moked); My Jewish Learning

Yemen

Yemenite Jews have their own ancient prayer traditions. Among those who follow the Baladi rite, some rise early on Rosh Hashanah to sound thirty blasts of the shofar at or before dawn, in addition to the regular blowing later in the morning.

Source: Chabad.org

Tunisia (Djerba)

On the island of Djerba, some children pickled fallen olives and offered them to passersby in the street, calling "*zeitun yehi ratzon*," a playful echo of the holiday blessings.

Source: Chabad.org

Common misconceptions

- **"The Rosh Hashanah seder is a modern invention."** Its roots are in the Talmud, and rabbis described wishes over the foods more than a thousand years ago.
- **"Apples and honey are the whole story."** That is the best known Ashkenazi custom. Sephardic and Mizrahi tables often hold six to eleven symbolic foods.
- **"The foods are lucky charms."** Teachers explain the simanim as reminders that prompt prayer and reflection, not as magic.
- **"Selihot start the week before Rosh Hashanah for everyone."** That is the Ashkenazi custom. Sephardic communities recite Selihot through all of Elul.

Words to know

Simanim *Hebrew*

"Signs." The symbolic foods of the Rosh Hashanah seder.

Yehi ratzon *Hebrew*

"May it be Your will." The opening of each wish.

Yehi ratzones *Ladino usage*

The Ottoman Sephardic name for the whole seder.

Seder *Hebrew*

"Order." A ritual meal with a set sequence.

Selihot *Hebrew*

Prayers for forgiveness, said before dawn in the weeks before Yom Kippur.

Elul *Hebrew*

The month before Rosh Hashanah, a season of reflection.

Shofar *Hebrew*

A ram's horn, sounded in the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah.

Rubia or lubia *Aramaic and Arabic*

Fenugreek or beans, eaten for an increase in merits.

Tashlikh *Hebrew*

"You will cast." Prayers said beside water.

Anyada buena *Ladino*

"A good year," the start of a Ladino New Year greeting.

Bringing Rosh Hashanah to life

In the public school classroom

- Explore the simanim as a language lesson: how do puns work, and what foods would make wordplay in English, Spanish, or Arabic?
- Use a primary source: compare the Souriano family's multilingual New Year cards in the University of Washington's digital collection.
- Map the communities in this explainer and compare their foods, following school allergy rules.
- Be aware of the holiday on school calendars, and avoid scheduling tests on Rosh Hashanah.
- Teach about the blessings and the shofar. Do not have students recite blessings or prayers or take part in ritual.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Hold a class seder with simanim from several communities, and let students write new wishes of their own.
- Listen to recordings of *Et Sha'arei Ratzon* from different communities and compare the melodies.
- Visit an early morning Sephardic Selihot service during Elul.
- Design New Year cards in Hebrew, Ladino, or Judeo Arabic, inspired by the Seattle collection.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Which foods were on your family's Rosh Hashanah table? How were the blessings sung?
- Cook a family siman together, such as an apple preserve, a pumpkin dish, or stuffed dates.
- Read *A Turkish Rosh Hashanah* or *Anyada Buena, Shanah Tovah* with young children.
- Record an elder's holiday memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a community choose to express its hopes through food and wordplay rather than through words alone?
- Many families have reworded the older wishes about enemies. How do traditions change while staying recognizable?
- The Souriano family's cards came from many countries in many languages. What do they tell us about Sephardic life in the twentieth century?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Pre Rosh Hashanah Sephardic Community Seder (JIMENA and the Sephardic Educational Center, 2021)
vimeo.com/596916113

Sephardic High Holidays (PBS Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, 2012)
pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/09/14/september-14-2012-sephardic-high-holidays/13019

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

A Turkish Rosh Hashanah, by Etan Basseri, illustrated by Zeynep Özatalay (Kalanit Books, 2024). Picture book set in Istanbul.
pjllibrary.org/books/turkish-rosh-hashanah,-a/if02207

Anyada Buena, Shanah Tovah, by Sarah Aroeste, illustrated by Maria Mola (Kar-Ben, 2025). Board book with Ladino words.
lernerbooks.com/shop/show/25738

Aromas of Aleppo, by Poopa Dweck (Regan Books, 2007). Syrian Jewish cuisine.
hm.catalog.lionlibraries.org/Record/.b17392184

The Book of Jewish Food, by Claudia Roden (Knopf, 1996).
penguinrandomhouse.com/books/156485/the-book-of-jewish-food-by-claudia-roden

Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, by Gil Marks (Wiley, 2010).
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/encyclopedia-of-jewish-food

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Religious Rituals Lift the Abstract of Resilience from Conceptual to Tangible," by Rahel Musleah A Calcutta Baghdadi family's Rosh Hashanah seder and other holiday rituals.
distinctionsjournal.org/resilience-through-holiday-rituals

"Drawing Our Traditions into the Story," by Etan Basseri The author of *A Turkish Rosh Hashanah* on writing Sephardic and Mizrahi picture books.
distinctionsjournal.org/basseri

Explore online

What Are Sephardic Rosh Hashana Customs? (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/what-are-sephardic-rosh-hashana-customs

Sephardic New Year Cards and a Seattle Printing Press (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-new-year-cards-seattle-printing-press

The High Holidays in Ladino: a Rhodesli Custom (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/high-holidays-in-ladino

Rosh Hashanah Seder, according to Sephardic custom (Chabad.org)
chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/905170/jewish/Rosh-Hashanah-Seder.htm

10 Rosh Hashanah Customs From Around the World (Chabad.org)
chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5226660/jewish/10-Rosh-Hashanah-Customs-From-Around-the-World.htm

A Sephardic Rosh Hashanah Seder (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/a-sephardic-rosh-hashanah-seder

Why Do We Eat Special Foods on Rosh Hashanah? (David Golinkin, Schechter Institutes)
schechter.edu/why-do-we-eat-special-foods-on-rosh-hashanah-responsa-in-a-moment-volume-3-issue-no-1-september-2008

Halacha According to the Sephardic Practice: The Month of Elul (Orthodox Union)
ou.org/holidays/halacha-according-to-the-sephardic-practice-the-month-of-elul

Iraqi Jewish Life: Constancy and Change (Iraqi Jewish Archive, U.S. National Archives)
archives.gov/exhibits/ija/node/54

High Holidays in Jewish languages (Jewish Language Project, with a lesson plan)
jewishlanguages.org/high-holidays

From JIMENA

JIMENA's Rosh Hashanah guide
jimena.org/jewish-traditions/rosh-hashanah-guide

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history
jimena.org/oral-history



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the University of Washington Strum Center for Jewish Studies; Chabad.org; My Jewish Learning and The Noshers; David Golinkin, Schechter Institutes; the Orthodox Union; the Jewish Link; PBS Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly; the Institut Européen des Musiques Juives; Sephardic U; JTA; J. Weekly; Joan Nathan via Moked; The Jewish Independent; the Iraqi Jewish Archive; the Jewish Language Project; and Distinctions. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.