

The Good and The Sweet

BY RABBI DR. DAVID GEFFEN

The second Temple had been built, and the walls of Jerusalem had been fortified under the leadership of Nehemiah. A call went out to all the people, the returned exiles, to assemble as "one" on the first of Tishri in the open area in Jerusalem near the water gate. Of one mind and spirit they gathered there and listened to the words of the Torah, as read by Ezra and explained by the Levites.

Moved by God's Law, a Law they had not heard for very many years, they began to weep. Ezra bolstered their spirits, counseling them to eat what was sweet and to have no remorse, for as he said "the joy of the Lord is your strength." This striking incident described in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah is, according to the Maharil of Prague, the source of the beautiful Rosh Hashana custom of eating an apple dipped in honey and praying for a year which will be good and sweet.

The two ingredients of this particular cere-

mony capture, in their own way, many of the themes of the holiday itself. In the Bible the apple appears frequently and in particular in the Song of Songs. There in Chapter 2 the apple is the special gift given to one's beloved. Understood metaphorically, the Song of Songs is referring here to God's gift of the Torah to His beloved, the Jewish people. On Rosh Hashana, a season of return, we are expected to recast ourselves anew to continue to practice and study the precepts of God's law. The Jewish people, as we are told, is ever to be the apple of God's eye.

This delicious fruit captures another theme of the season. We are bidden on Rosh Hashana to face up to our inadequacies and to renew and renovate ourselves. On Rosh Hashana the Jewish people, indeed all mankind, are called before God for an inspection of their deeds during the past year.

The second ingredient in this ceremony is the honey. Ezekiel tells us in Chapter 16 that honey represents all those benefits bestowed on us by God. In fact when David was in exile, having fled from Saul's wrath, honey was sent to nourish him and his followers. Honey, therefore, is symbolic of all the sweetness of the divine blessing on mankind.

The Talmud picks up this theme specifying in Berachot that honey is one of the "seven healing substances." On Rosh Hashana the potency of the honey with its curative, restorative and rejuvenative powers combines with the apple to produce a really dynamic duo for humanity.

The double blessing of "goodness" and sweet-

ness which the apple and honey engender is especially pertinent to the beginning of a new year. "Goodness" stems from the Hebrew word "tov" whose literal meaning is hitting the mark - obtaining one's objective. No more fitting wish could we have for a New Year. The honey is of course the sweetness; while it cannot remove all the bitterness, it does encourage us to move forward with head held high and with "sweetness under our tongue."

Hence, on Rosh Hashana when we eat the apple, "The noble work of God" dipped in the honey whose sweetness is "One sixteenth that of manna," the heavenly food rained down in the time of the desert wandering, we are renewed by these unique elements in God's creation. Together they fortify us and stimulate us to face the New Year and derive from each day a measure of "the good and the sweet."

NEW YORK (WNS) -- The Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) has announced a new national program to organize grassroots support for Israel's security, according to a report here.

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