

What's the Truth About ... Pomegranate Seeds?



Misconception: According to rabbinic tradition, a pomegranate (*rimon*) has 613 seeds.

Fact: The pomegranate is used in rabbinic tradition as an example of a fruit that contains many seeds, but not necessarily 613.

Background: The pomegranate (*Punica granatum*¹) has been cultivated all over the Mediterranean region since ancient times, and was well known in the Biblical period. It is one of the *Shivat Haminim*, the Seven Species for which the Land of Israel is praised (Deuteronomy 8:8), and was one of the fruits brought back by the Twelve Spies (Numbers 13:23).² Both the decorative items hanging from the *Kohen Gadol's* robe (Exodus 28:33–34; 39:24–26) as well as the ornaments atop two columns in the Beit Hamikdash, built by King Solomon, resembled pomegranates (I Kings 7:13–22; Jeremiah 52:22–23; cf. *Tosefta Ohalot* 13:9). The pomegranate is mentioned in Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, as a sym-

bol of beauty (e.g., 4:3; 4:13; 6:7),³ and the Gemara suggests it be used as a decoration for the sukkah (*Tosefta Sukkah* 1:7; *Sukkah* 10a) and should be eaten when breaking the fast after Yom Kippur (*Shabbat* 115a). According to the Gemara (*Gittin* 19b), water soaked in pomegranate rind was used to reveal invisible ink. The pomegranate tree is also noted in Jewish sources: King Saul used it for shade (I Samuel 14:2), and because its branches are particularly dry, spits of the wood were used to roast the *korban Pesach* (*Mishnah Pesachim* 7:1). A pomegranate was used as a symbol on Jewish coins from the period of the Great Revolt and, in contemporary times, it was chosen to adorn the 1.20 shekel stamp (along with the shofar).

The pomegranate was valued in other cultures as well. Greek archaeologists recently found 2,700-year-old pomegranate seeds. The Romans tanned pomegranate skins and used them as leather, and the Great Harris Papyrus notes that the Egyptians imported pomegranates from Israel in the twelfth century BCE. The boiled rind of a pomegranate was used as a remedy for tapeworm, the juice was

used by some cultures as a natural dye (cf. *Mishnah Shabbat* 9:5) and Homer, Chaucer and Shakespeare all extol the pomegranate's virtues in their works. Because of its many seeds, the pomegranate denotes fertility and family in many cultures. Ironically, it was also prescribed by Hippocrates and others to prevent conception. Today, there are numerous varieties of the fruit, some with white—instead of the brilliant ruby—seeds.

In the last decade or so, pomegranates have become increasingly popular. Though the pomegranate is savored for its flavor, news about its medicinal value has made the fruit's reputation soar. Among other benefits, pomegranate juice may help fight the hardening of the arteries, which in turn can help reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. It also reduces signs of aging, and is full of antioxidants. It's a great source of vitamins and minerals, and research has shown that it may help fight prostate and skin cancers.

The misconception about the pomegranate having 613 seeds is widespread, but its source is readily apparent. In a discussion on the meaning of

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seeing the fruit in a dream, the *gemara* in *Berachot*⁴ explains that “seeing small ones portends business being as fruitful as a pomegranate, while seeing large ones means that business will multiply like pomegranates. If, in the dream, the pomegranates are split open, if the dreamer is a scholar he may hope to learn more Torah ... while if he is unlearned, he can hope to perform *mitzvot*” Drawing upon a verse in Shir HaShirim (4:3; 6:7), the *gemara* concludes by stating that even “the empty ones among the Jews are full of *mitzvot* like a pomegranate [is full of seeds].”⁵ Many misread this *gemara* to mean that there are precisely 613 seeds in a pomegranate, as there are 613 *mitzvot*. It should be clear, however, that the *gemara* uses pomegranates to imply an abundance. In fact, the very name “pomegranate” is derived from the Latin for “*pomum*” (apple) and “*granatus*” (seeded), alluding to the fruit’s many seeds.

In the *piyyut* (liturgical poem) “Eleh Ezkerah” about the Ten Martyrs, recited in the Yom Kippur Mussaf, the martyrs are described as being “full of

mitzvot as a pomegranate and as the corners [of the altar].” The *piyyut* essentially states that just as the corners of the altar were full of many drops of blood from the numerous sacrifices, so too were the martyrs full of *mitzvot*. It’s clear that the author does not mean that there were exactly 613 drops of blood on the altar; similarly, he does not mean to imply that a pomegranate has exactly 613 seeds.⁶

Metzudat David understands the reference to a pomegranate in Shir HaShirim (4:13) the same way; he states that the pomegranate symbolizes abundance because it is filled with [many] seeds. Similarly, the Rokeach (*Hilchot Rosh Hashanah*, 203) explains, based on a *midrash*, that on Rosh Hashanah the shofar is blown during Mussaf because at that point in the day, after we have recited the Shema, read the Torah and *davened* Shacharit, we are “full of *mitzvot* like a pomegranate.” Here, again, the pomegranate refers to an abundance of *mitzvot*, not 613.

Even though it is clear that the *Gemara* does not explicitly state there are 613 seeds in a pomegranate, the

Chatam Sofer, in a *derashah* (Shabbat Hagadol, 5591), and the Malbim in his commentary on Shir Hashirim (4:3)—both important nineteenth-century rabbinic scholars—mention the idea.

On Rosh Hashanah, a traditional practice is to eat *simanim*, or symbolic foods, in order to presage good things for the future. The specific “*Yehi ratzon*” recited before eating a pomegranate, one of the *simanim*, is another well-known source for the misconception. The origin of eating *simanim* can be found in the Talmudic discussion of omens (*Horayot* 12a; *Keritot* 6a). Abayei comments that since “*simana milta*,” “omens are of significance,” a person should make it a practice to “see” [other texts state to “eat”] five specific symbolic foods at the Rosh Hashanah table.⁷ According to the Talmud, these foods are “*qara*,” “*rubya*,” “*kartai*,” “*silka*” and “*tamari*” (gourd, fenugreek, leek, beets and dates). Other foods have been added over time, such as the pomegranate. The earliest source for using a pomegranate as one of the *simanim* is found in the writings of Rabbi Hai Gaon (tenth

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century, Babylonia); it is mentioned later by the Abudraham (fourteenth century, Spain; *Seder Tefillat Rosh Hashanah*) and thereafter it is mentioned by many authorities, including the Rema (OC 583:1).

The custom today is to bring each specific food to the table, recite an appropriate “*Yehi ratzon*,” and then eat the fruit or vegetable.⁸ The prayers recited are usually related either to the name of the food or to its qualities,⁹ such as its sweetness or its tendency to grow quickly.¹⁰ Thus, for instance, the request associated with the *rubya*, the fenugreek, is typologically different from that associated with the pomegranate, though both prayers mention the hope of “increasing [one’s] merits.” The prayer for the *rubya* states, “*sheyirbu zechuyoteinu*” (“may we increase our merits”). This is a play on the word “*rubya*,” which resembles “*yirbu*,” the Hebrew word for increase.¹¹ The prayer for the pomegranate is “*sheyirbu zechuyoteinu kerimon*” (“may our merits increase as the seeds of a pomegranate”). Because the term used is *kerimon*—translated as “like a pomegranate”—it is clear that the prayer refers to the fruit’s qualities—specifically, to its large number of seeds.

Interestingly, these two contexts in which the pomegranate is mentioned seem to be at odds with one another. The Talmud’s description of even “the empty ones ... are full of *mitzvot* as a pomegranate ...” is descriptive of the lowest rank, the worst elements of society.¹² Yet on Rosh Hashanah, we ask that we be as full of *mitzvot* as a pomegranate, as if it were an ideal, an attribute of the best and the finest. The *Elef Hamagen* (583:16; Warsaw) explains that the difference between these statements is as follows: even the lowest Jews have many merits, but they also have many counterbalancing demerits that leave them in the red. When reciting the “*Yehi ratzon*” on Rosh Hashanah, we are praying for an abundance of merits so that we can be assured of having “credit” in our heavenly accounts.¹³ The *Elef Hamagen* also directs the reader to the Peri Chadash (OC 583; Jerusalem, seventeenth century), who explains that those “empty ones” took a lifetime to accumulate as many *mitzvot* as a pomegranate, while we

are requesting to accumulate the same amount of merits in one year. A simpler explanation is that the difference lies in the terms used. The Talmud speaks of pomegranates as being full of “*mitzvot*”; on Rosh Hashanah, we beseech God to make us full of “*zechuyot*,” or “merits.”¹⁴ (This distinction is found in *Nishmat Chayah* by Rabbi Akivah Shalom Chayot.¹⁵)

It is clear that Chazal never stated that a pomegranate has 613 seeds but merely used the pomegranate as a symbol of abundance.¹⁶ ■

Notes

1. It was called “*Malum punicum*,” the Carthaginian apple, by Roman author Pliny the Elder. Although the fruit does not originate from China, a common nickname for it is “Chinese apple.” In Hebrew, “*rimon*” is also the name of a weapon, the grenade. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “grenade” originated in 1532, from the French word for pomegranate, “*la grenade*.”

2. The *midrash* envisioned the pomegranates seen by the spies as massive. The Ba’al HaTurim (Numbers 13:33) cites a *midrash* that all Twelve Spies fit into the shell of one pomegranate.

3. It was probably the pomegranate’s beauty that earned it a place among the Seven Species because, unlike the other species, it was never a significant part of the inhabitants’ diet (see Asaph Goor and Max Nurock, *The Fruits of the Holy Land* [Jerusalem, 1968], 70-88). The *midrash* (*Shemot Rabbah* 20:3), in describing the beauty of the Jewish nation, compares it to a grove of pomegranates.

4. See, however, the alternate interpretations of Abaye and Rava on 56a.

5. This *derashah* in defense of even the least learned of Jews is very popular in the Talmud and is found in numerous places, including *Eruvin* 19a (in the name of Reish Lakish); *Megillah* 6a; *Chaggigah* 27a; *Sanhedrin* 37a; *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 4:3 and the *Zohar*, *Mishpatim* 100a. The Chatam Sofer (*Pesachim* 49b) cites it when rendering a halachic decision. The Netziv (*Meromei Sadeh*, *Chaggigah* 27a) says the *mitzvot* the Jews are full of are *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim*.

6. The Midrash also likens the way schoolchildren sit in rows and study Torah to the arrangement of pomegranate seeds (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 6:11). In another analogy that draws upon the pomegranate, the Gemara (*Chaggigah* 15b) describes how Rabbi Meir continued to study under Elisha ben Avuya, known as “Acher” (“Other”) due to his becoming a heretic. The Gemara justifies his studying with Acher as he “found a date, ate the

surrounding fruit and threw away the pit” and he “found a pomegranate, ate the inside and discarded the rind.” The Maharshah (*Chaggigah* 15b) explains that Rabbi Meir needed to distance himself from Acher’s bad philosophies as well as his negative actions. Rabbi Meir accepted the outer, revealed Torah of Acher (ate the surrounding fruit of the date) and rejected his foreign philosophies (the pit). Similarly, Rabbi Meir accepted the halachah that Acher taught (the soft inside of the pomegranate) but rejected his unacceptable behaviors (the pomegranate husk, which is hard and inedible).

7. Based on this *gemara*, the Maharam Mintz (109) says that certain wedding customs are rooted in their being good omens. These include using torches to indicate light and joy and making the *chuppah* under the stars to symbolize that the couple’s descendants should be as numerous as the stars. See Rema, *EH* 61:1; *Otzar Haposekim* on that Rema; *Iggerot Moshe*, *EH* 1:93; *Levushai Mordechai* 48; *Torah Lodaas*, Vayigash (5766); Ari Zivotofsky, “What’s the Truth About ... Tuesday Weddings?” *Jewish Action* 67 (winter 2006): 66-69.

8. Halachic sources question at which point one is required to eat the *simanim* as well as which *berachot* one is required to recite. These topics will not be addressed here.

9. The name of the fruit or vegetable and the corresponding prayer should also be taken from the language commonly spoken by the local Jewish population (and not only Hebrew or Aramaic). This is based on the Magen Avraham (583: introduction), who says one should eat foods whose names mean “many” in the local language. At a later point, carrots were added to the list of foods. Carrots mean “decree” (*gezer*) in Hebrew and “increase” (*mehren* or *reiban*) in Yiddish. This might be the reason many eat *tzimmes*, carrots in honey, on Rosh Hashanah.

10. The Sanzer Rebbe (*Divrei Yatziv*, *OC* 253:4) notes that the appropriate phrase must be recited because many of these symbolic foods can just as easily be interpreted in the opposite manner.

11. In Arabic, fenugreek is called “*lubya*.” The Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, *parashat Nitavim*: 4) says that in line with the Magen Avraham’s principle of using the vernacular, Jews from Baghdad should say the prayer as “*sheyirbu zechuyoteinu v’tlaveveinu*” (“our merits should increase and we should be viewed favorably”).

12. Thus this phrase would seem not to be a compliment, and yet the Nodeh B’Yehudah (*Tinyana*, *EH* 23) uses it as part of the salutation when addressing a correspondent.

13. A similar answer is offered by Rabbi Yehuda Ayish (Algiers, eighteenth century) in *Mateh Yehudah* 583:1 and the *Peri Megadim OC*, *Mishbetzet Zahav* 583:2.

14. Note that in the Chida’s additions to the *Sefer Chassidim* (Margoliot ed., *Shomer Habrit* 1153) the “*Yehi ratzon*” is somewhat different. It states, “May we increase *mitzvot* like a complete pomegranate.”

15. For this and several other of these sources, see Boaz Spiegel in the *Bar Ilan University Parashah Sheet*, Rosh Hashanah 5764, available at <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/rosh/psph.pdf>.

16. Interestingly, while a graduate student at Columbia University, Alexander Haubold counted the number of seeds in a pomegranate. His experiment garnered him a bit of fame in the Jewish community. He calculated the average number of seeds in 206(!) pomegranates from around the world, and found it to be exactly 613. The number of seeds per pomegranate varied between 165 and 1,370; clearly each individual pomegranate did not have 613 seeds. When I spoke to Haubold on June 5, 2008, he noted that he has counted hundreds more pomegranates since his initial experiment. He suggested that this most likely would change the average and that his web site should reflect the new information. His experiment can be found at <http://www.aquaphoenix.com/misc/pomegranate/>.

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