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# “FRUITS WHICH THE MOON BRINGS TO MATURITY”: GOURDS IN JEWISH CULTURE, FOLKLORE, AND SYMBOLISM

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(Received 18 February 2025, revised 25 June 2025)

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## Abstract

Gourds have played a role in Jewish texts from biblical to modern times. This article explores Jewish folkloric beliefs surrounding gourds, focusing on their rapid growth, association with the moon, and links to sorcery and prosperity. Deuteronomy 33:14 describes crops influenced by the sun and moon. Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century) interprets this as a reference to gourds and cucumbers ripening under the moon's influence, a view likely drawn from *Sifrei Devarim* (3<sup>rd</sup> century CE). Other scholars, such as the Vilna Gaon, extended this idea to all crops.

Gourds also appear in Jewish magical traditions. The Talmud mentions sages using incantations to grow and gather cucumbers instantly. Their rapid growth made them a symbol of prosperity, reflected in Rosh ha-Shanah (the Jewish New Year) customs. The *Kikayon* plant in the Book of Jonah, which provided shade before withering, is identified in the Quran and by some Jewish scholars as a calabash, emphasizing its fast growth in the story.

In European folklore, the story of Cinderella includes a pumpkin transforming into a coach, possibly influenced by ancient beliefs linking gourds to the moon. While modern science disproves lunar effects on plant growth, gourds remain symbols of rapid transformation, abundance and mystical beliefs in religious and literary traditions.

*Keywords:* Gourds, moon, Judaism, Beliefs, *Cinderella*

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## 1. Introduction

The gourds family (*Cucurbitaceae*) encompasses many cultivated plants used by humans for consumption and commercial purposes [1]. Some prominent species are watermelon (*Citrullus*), cucumber (*Cucumis*), calabash (*Lagenaria*), pumpkin (*Cucurbita*), and others.

Different types of gourds have been used by humans beginning from quite early periods, and many are mentioned in Jewish sources from biblical to present times [2].

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The Hebrew term *dla'at* mentioned in rabbinical literature is identified with the calabash (*Lagenaria seceraria*=*Lagenaria vulgaris*), also known as the bottle gourd. Notably, rabbinical sources do not refer to the genus *Cucurbita* that originated in America and only reached the Old World after its discovery in 1492 [3].

## 2. Purpose of the study

This Study examines several folkloristic outlooks and beliefs related to gourds, and particularly the calabash and pumpkin, namely their rapid growth and the effect of the moon on their cultivation, as well as their association with the occult and folk beliefs. These qualities and features are known across cultures, religions, and popular customs, and were documented in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian sources. In the current setting I shall focus on the Jewish culture [4].

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. The growth of the calabash as affected by the moon in interpretations of Deuteronomy 33:14

Deuteronomy 33:1-29 brings the blessings granted by Moses to the tribes of Israel before his death. It is easy to discern that the blessings granted to Joseph focus on the agricultural flourishing of the land apportioned to his tribe: “And of Joseph he said: Blessed of the Lord be his land with the bounty of dew from heaven, and of the deep that couches below; with ‘*tevuot Shamesh*’ (King James Version / KJV: “the precious fruits brought forth by the sun”; Revised Standard Version / RSV: “the choicest fruits of the sun”), and ‘*geresh yerahim*’ (KJV: ‘the precious things put forth by the moon’; RSV: ‘the rich yield of the months’) [5].

The traditional commentators focused on the meaning of two phrases in this quotation – ‘*tevuot Shamesh*’ and ‘*geresh yerahim*’. R. Shlomo Itzhaki (Rashi, northern France, 11<sup>th</sup> century) interprets this verse: “‘*tevuot Shamesh*’ – for this [Joseph’s] land lay exposed to the sun and it therefore produced sweet fruit. ‘*geresh yerahim*’ – there are some fruits which the moon brings to maturity, these are cucumbers and gourds. Another explanation of ‘*geresh yerahim*’: this refers to fruits which the earth puts out and produces from month to month” [6].

Rashi’s interpretation ascribes to the sun the quality of ‘sweetening the fruit’. Unripe fruit tastes bitter and is not palatable. Upon ripening, the sugar content rises and the fruit becomes sweet and tasty. The conception that the sun is responsible for ripening the ‘crops’ appears in the Talmudic literature. The sages claim that the barley, used for the sacrifice of the sheaves (*omer*) in the Temple on the 16<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, was brought from fields that were fully exposed to the sun, as the grain that grows there is of better quality. The Babylonian Talmud writes: “One brings the *omer* only from the southern fields [of Eretz Yisrael], as upon those [fields], the sun rises [and shines,] and from those [fields], the sun [also] sets” [7]. Further on it is also stated that the *omer* is not brought “from a field of trees”. Rashi explains that this is “because the trees shade it and the grain does not

grow properly” [8]; namely, shade does not facilitate optimal growth and development.

Rashi suggests two interpretations for the vague phrase ‘*geresh yerahim*’:

- A. *Yare’ah*, meaning moon – The moon affects the development of different types of gourd and cucumbers (*Kishuhin*) and as a result they grow better (KJV: ‘things put forth by the moon’) [9]. Namely, this will be prominently manifested in Joseph’s land and therefore the crops in his field will be the first to ripen and will be ready for gathering earliest. However, Rashi does not explain why the moon will affect the crops on Joseph’s land more than the land of other tribes, and we shall propose an explanation below.
- B. *Yerah*, meaning month. Namely, rapid development of the fruit and monthly growth cycles (RSV: ‘yield of the months’). This interpretation does not link the rapid development of the fruit to the moon, and certainly not specifically to gourds.

The question is: What is the source of Rashi’s interpretation regarding the moon’s effect on gourds? It seems to be Sifrei Devarim, which says: “‘With the bounteous yield of the sun’ – whereby we are taught that [Joseph’s land] was ‘open’ to the sun, and the best and sweetest fruit in the world are those that see the sun. And it was similarly ‘open’ to the moon, viz. ‘*geresh yerahim*’” [10]. Sifrei is a Tannaitic midrash redacted in Eretz Yisrael in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE [11]. Namely, already at this time there was a customary conception that the moon affects agricultural crops.

The Sifrei claims that Joseph’s land is open to both the sun and the moon and therefore has an agricultural advantage, albeit it does not address the types of crops affected by the moon and may not distinguish between them. Accordingly, ascribing the effect of the moon to gourds seems to be an independent addition by Rashi, influenced by contemporary views, and as I shall show below, the link between the moon and gourds was prevalent in medieval times.

Notably, unlike Rashi, other later sources state that the moon affects all crops or other plants, and not necessarily gourds. R. Yehiel Nissim ben Shmuel from Pisa (1507-1574), author of *Minhat Knaot*, claims that “From the sphere of the moon comes the force of growth that is the root of all natural forces”, namely, it affects the entire vegetative world [12]. In contrast, R. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the ‘Vilna Gaon’ or ‘The Gra’ (Lithuania, 1720-1797) attributes the effect of the moon in the verse ‘*geresh yerahim*’ (Deuteronomy 33:14) to barley, and he writes: “*geresh yerahim*: this is the barley that ripens from the moon at night” [13]. The Gra may have based his words on the word *geresh*, mentioned in the Scriptures regarding the sacrifice of the *omer*, which consisted of barley (Leviticus 2, 14), however the meaning of *geresh* in this context is clearly ‘crushed’ (*garus*) (i.e., crushed barley).

Notably, the conception whereby the moon causes gourds to ripen is also evident in medieval karaite literature. Yaakov ben Itzhak Qirqisani of Baghdad, who operated in the tenth century CE, notes that the moon ripens the chate melon (*Cucumis melo var. chate* in Arabic: مقاثي *makathi*, also: ففوس *fakus*), melons and watermelons [14].

### 3.2. *The calabash in the story of Jonah: a rapidly growing plant*

Several biblical commentators relate to the rapid growth of gourds in the context of the *Kikayon*'s growth and withering, mentioned in the account of the prophet Jonah who refused to give the people of Ninveh the message that they must correct and improve their evil ways. The author of Book of Jonah writes: "Then Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. And the LORD God appointed a *Kikayon*, and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant *Kikayon*. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm which attacked the *Kikayon*, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah so that he was faint; and he asked that he might die, and said, 'It is better for me to die than to live' " [15].

Jonah built himself a booth as protection against the burning sun, but its plant-based roof promptly dried up and provided no shade. God saved him from the scourge of the sun by creating a castor oil plant (*kikayon*), under which he found refuge from the sun's rays. Jonah enjoyed the shade of the castor oil plant provided by God, however the next day at dawn destructive worms invaded the tree and caused it to wither, which caused Jonah much aggrievement. The plant's rapid growth, evident from the text, is further emphasized in Midrash Jonah: "What did the Holy One Blessed be He do? [He] raised a *kikayon* over Jonah's head at night while he slept, and by morning it had two hundred seventy six leaves, each leaf four *zeret* and a handbreadth, and forty people could sit in the shade of the *kikayon* to be shaded from the sun" [16].

The midrash claims that the *kikayon* grew overnight into a plant with a wide treetop. This detail is not explicitly mentioned in the text, from which it appears that the event occurred during the daytime when Jonah needed the shade. The midrash also stresses the fact that the leaves of the *kikayon* were wide and thus provided the most effective shade. The question to be asked concerns the nature of this *kikayon*, and how the translations and commentators suggest that we identify it.

The Septuagint identifies the *kikayon* with the calabash [17]. This identification is also brought by R. Abraham Ibn Ezra (circa 1090-1164) in his commentary on the book of Jonah. He writes: "The sages of Spain say [=that the *kikayon* is] a gourd or calabash" [18]. In the Vulgata the *kikayon* is identified with *Hedera* and in the Jerusalem Talmud with *kisosa* [19], where both mean ivy (*Hedera helix*), an evergreen climbing plant. Many commentators identify the biblical *kikayon* with the *kik* of the Mishna, whose seeds are used to produce oil for lighting. This is the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), a relatively tall native shrub that could provide good shade, and this identification is the most common [20].

The suggested identification of the *kikayon* in this story with the castor oil plant suits the portrayal of Jonah as sitting outside the city, as the castor oil plant is an uncultivated plant. If so, what is the logic of suggesting that the *kikayon* in

the story be identified with the calabash, a cultivated plant grown mainly in private yards? This identification seems to rely on two features and characteristics of the calabash: its rapid growth, as stressed in the verse itself (Jonah 4:6), and the prevalent custom of trellising the calabash on huts for shade, as mentioned in the Mishna, Tractate Sukkah 1:4. The fact that gourds grow relatively quickly has a realistic basis, and this can be discerned at present by technological means. The ancients seemed to have ascribed its growth to the night, because in this span of time its growth is not visible and is thus more palpable.

The *kikayon* in the story of Jonah is depicted as a gourd in a relief on an Italian sarcophagus dated to the third century CE, namely, this is an ancient identification [21]. The Quran too identifies the *kikayon* in the story of Jonah with the gourd, seemingly based on its rapid growth. It says in the Quran: “Jonah too was one of the messengers. He fled to the overloaded ship [...] and a great fish swallowed him, for he had committed blameworthy acts [...] but We cast him out, sick, on to a barren shore, and made a gourd tree grow above him” [22]. The gourd has three main names in Arabic: *yaktin* يقطين, *kara* قراع, and *duba* دُبَاءة. The Arabic version of the Kuran has “And we made to grow over him a type of *yaktin*”, i.e., gourd, and that is the interpretation of most Muslim commentators [23].

### 3.3. Gourds and sorcery in Talmudic literature

Types of gourds are mentioned in Talmudic literature as plants utilized for acts of sorcery and trickery. The initial source reporting this phenomenon is from the Tannaitic period (c. 1-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE). The Mishna dealing with punishments meted out to those who engage in sorcery determines: “One who performs an act [of sorcery] is liable, but not one who deceives the eyes. Two gather cucumbers (*kishuin*) – one gathers and is exempt, and the other one gathers and is liable. The one who performs an act [of sorcery] is liable, and the one who deceives the eyes is exempt” [24].

The Mishna distinguishes between gathering cucumbers using sorcery and deceiving the eyes. A sorcerer who is liable for punishment by stoning is one who performs an ‘act’, i.e., something tangible, while one who merely deceives the eyes appears to have performed an act but in fact does nothing. Accordingly, one who gathers cucumbers using actual sorcery is liable, while one who only appears to be gathering them is exempt [25].

In the Babylonian Talmud, R. Eliezer attests to his proficiency in cucumber-related sorcery and notes that only R. Akiva (1-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries CE) was interested in this field of the occult, indicating R. Akiva’s intellectual inquisitiveness in esoteric areas. The Talmud writes: “I [=R. Eliezer] can teach three hundred *halakhot*, and some say three thousand *halakhot*, with regard to the planting of cucumbers, but no person has ever asked me anything about them, besides Akiva ben Yosef. Once he and I were walking along the way, and he said to me: My teacher, teach me about the planting of cucumbers. I said one statement and the entire field became filled with cucumbers. He said to me: My teacher, you have taught me about planting them; teach me about uprooting them. I said one statement and they were all gathered to one place” [26].

This description shows that Jewish sages engaged in practices of sorcery with the aim of acquiring direct knowledge of this field of the occult, for the purpose of determining the halakha (Jewish law) [27]. These acts of sorcery included planting cucumbers by using incantations, as well as uprooting them and gathering them in one place. Generating a field of cucumbers rather than some other vegetable seems to be associated with the conception that they grow rapidly, whereby they can be used to perform such acts of sorcery.

In the Jerusalem Talmud (Yerushalmi), R. Yehoshua ben Hanania (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), the teacher of R. Akiva, describes his outstanding sorcery skills, which allow him to transform gourds and watermelons into animals: “I am able to take gourds and watermelons and turn them into rams and deer who would produce rams and deer” [28]. In my opinion, also transforming gourds and watermelons into much larger animals, beyond their natural size, is related to the unusual growth of field crops. In addition, R. Yehoshua boasts that this is not mere deception but rather the animals created are capable of bearing offspring.

### 3.4. The growth of the calabash as reflected in customs: A symbol of prosperity

The Babylonian amora Abaye (circa 280-338 CE) lists the common calabash among the ‘signs’ upon which a blessing should be recited on *Rosh ha-Shana* eve (the Jewish New Year) to make requests for the new year: “A person should be accustomed to eat, at the start of the year, calabash (*Lagenaria siceraria*), fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), leek (*Allium porrum*), chard (*Beta vulgaris* var. *Cicla*), and dates (*Phoenix dactylifera*)” [29]. Nonetheless, he does not explain what they symbolize.

This custom is also associated with R. Hai Gaon (939-1038 CE), among the greatest Babylonian Geonim: “It was found in a missive by R. Matzliah son of R. Eliahu from Sicily that he entered [the home of] the late Rabbenu Hai on the days of Rosh Ha-Shanah and saw that he [R. Hai] came from the synagogue, followed by his disciples, and gourds (*deluin*) were brought to him [...] and he reached for the gourd and said *kara* – tear up (*kra*) evil decrees against us” [30]. Evidently, R. Hai Gaon recited a blessing on the *kara* without eating it, unlike the present-day custom, namely, the *kara* was placed on his table merely as a symbol. Moreover, it is explained here that the *kara* was chosen for this purpose due to its name, as it was used to request that God tear up evil decrees against human beings.

According to another interpretation, the *kara* was utilized not due to its name but rather due to its rapid growth that symbolizes prosperity and success. Rashi, in his commentary on *Kritut 6a*, writes: “*Kara* – gourd [...] as it grows rapidly” [31]. The rapid growth of the various types of gourds as a symbol of a blessed year was also embraced by other halakhic adjudicators as the reason for serving *kara* on Rosh Ha-Shanah eve. R. Yaakov ben Asher (Germany and Spain, c. 1270-1340), in his compilation *Arba’ah Turim*: “*Kari* – because it is quick to grow” [32]. R. Yosef Karo (Spain and Land of Israel, 1488-1575) explains the meaning of the custom in more detail: “The *kara* – we bring it because it grows quickly in the field and this action [=of its development] does not occur now before us” [33]. Namely, the rapid growth of the *kara*, particularly that which does

not grow in the vicinity of the house, symbolizes positive developments that are not visible. This is a message of hope, indicating that positive developments may occur with no advance notice, without man's knowledge, or even when no change is anticipated.

### **3.5. *The pumpkin in European literature***

The rapid growth of the pumpkin, which is transformed into a magnificent coach, is described in the fairytale "Cinderella". This story has many versions, both ancient and later; here I shall refer to the version related by French author Charles Perrault from 1697. In his story, the members of the household leave at night for a dance ball at the king's palace, while Cinderella remains at home alone, sad and crying. Then the fairy godmother appears and convinces her to attend the ball. Using her magic, the fairy godmother transforms a pumpkin that happens to be in the room into a magnificent golden coach, mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, and lizards into officers [34]. The transformation of the pumpkin into a coach specifically towards nighttime may reflect ancient beliefs linking the growth of the pumpkin at night to the moon's influence.

## **4. Conclusions**

The ancient Jews believed that the celestial bodies have positive or destructive effects on human beings and their property [35]. Then again, they also contended that people's actions affect the sun and moon, as manifested for example by solar eclipses or lunar eclipses [36]. The current article shows that the ancients ascribed to the moon an influence on all crops and some believed that its impact focused specifically on gourds. Others, in contrast, attributed the force of growth to the planet Venus [37].

The pull of the moon is responsible for high and low tides. It also affects the behavior of animals (timing of hunting, reproduction of water creatures due to the high and low tide). Nonetheless, as we know today, it has no effect on the different types of gourds. These summer crops naturally grow relatively rapidly. The impression that they grow quickly becomes sharper particularly after periods when they are not followed, which is why they have been taken to symbolize prosperity and success and were integrated into the world of the occult. In literary genres related to fantasy or sources that contain imaginary literary elements the rapid growth of gourds and the possibility of their transformation into other larger creatures is radicalized at times.

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