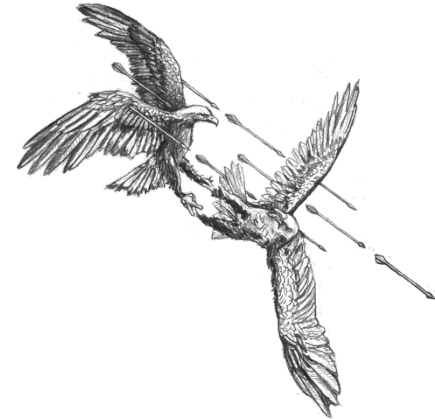




# GASHMIUS MAGAZINE

Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism



## Raspberry Medicine from The Shtetl: Two Recipes and a Brief History

Naomi Spector February 26, 2024

VOLUME  
III

---

In historic Jewish communities of eastern and central Europe, the gathering, harvesting and preserving of plants for use as food and medicine each year was a matter of communal survival. Traditional foods are medicine, and the preparation of foods and home remedies was often combined with the spiritual medicine of prayer. Psalms, or *Tehilim*, regularly “served as a cure for many Jewish troubles, communal and personal.” [1] In hasidic communities, a *segula* (amulet) might be prescribed to help someone recover from illness or to enhance their fertility, and would often combine herbs with prayers for healing. *Segulot* would even sometimes include elements considered to be imbued with spiritual power, like oil used for hanukkah celebrations or an *etrog* left over from sukkot. [2] **From a Jewish perspective, the healing power of any remedy, whether it be a chicken soup or an herbal tea or a balm, is strengthened by the prayers of the people who lovingly prepared it.**

Fresh fruits, especially fruits grown in clean soil and water, hold tremendous power to heal and strengthen the body. Jews relied on fruit preserves during the long, cold winters, when most fresh fruits were no longer in season. Fruit teas, jams, wines, cordials, brandies, and syrups were all important sources of vitamin C and many other essential nutrients. These medicines were shared between community members all winter long.

Among our most precious resources for learning about life, culture, and folk medicine in historic Jewish communities of Europe are the **Yizkor** books, which are memory books written by survivors of the Shoah, the genocide carried out against Jews in multiple countries in the 1930s and 1940s. These books richly describe Jewish life before World War II, and also reveal the vibrant systems our ancestors developed over time in order to care for one another.

The Yizkor book of Gorlice, Poland, for example, describes multiple active local Jewish organizations, such as the Medical Assistance (Biker–Khoylim) Society, which raised funds anonymously each year during the weeks of Passover and Sukkot to pay for care for the sick, or the Society for Women in Childbirth and Healing that “took care of penniless women giving birth, as well as of sick people who were admitted to the city hospital, and supplied them with kosher food.” **[3]** Many individuals who contributed to these organizations, whether as official members or volunteers, lived values of interdependence and communal care, creating networks of support for their people and contributing to the overall survival of the community. In addition to creating such organizations and structures, people lived these values through their weekly routines, for

example by sending gift baskets to those in need on Shabbat, or by visiting people who were sick.

The Yizkor books often reference fruit preserves as communal Jewish medicine. For example, the memorial book of Dokshytsy, Belarus describes a Jewish committee appointed to look after people who were sick. This committee gathered to prepare jams and preserves every year during the summer from raspberries and other fruits, in anticipation of using them to heal the sick during the winter. [4]

According to the Yizkor book of Mlawa, Poland:

“Rifka-Rachel, Wolf Breindel's wife, cooked jams, and fermented black berries, cherries, and red forest berries for the entire town as remedies against bellyaches and to promote sweating.” [5]

In these communities, people relied on each other, on the earth, and on their knowledge of folk healing, passed down from generation to generation. Even if they could not access hospitals or formal healthcare, they had their own internal communal systems in place for caring for their sick, keeping them company, and supplying them with food and homemade medicine syrup. Fruit syrups, preserves, cordials, wines, and liqueurs were staples in the folk medicine cabinet. Cherry brandy, for instance, was a popular remedy for a stomachache, as was bilberry cordial. [6] These remedies carried the love and the healing energy of those who made them as well as the vitamins and other nutrients already contained within the fruit. There was even a folk saying referring to raspberry preserves: “May there be no need for them!” [7]

Many Jews went foraging for raspberries and other fruits in forests and meadows, both to make medicine for the winter and also in order to diversify their income. Some of these fruits would be sold at the market fresh, dried, pickled, or in the form of jams and other preserves.

In Jewish folk belief, herbs that caused sweating were considered to be powerful healers, because sweating was considered to drive disease out of the body. Raspberry cordial was often taken to help the body to sweat out a sickness. [8]

In some towns, raspberry syrup was known as “the shtetl wonder drug,” and was given to anyone who was sick as a popular all-purpose medicine. [9] In fact, ‘syrup maker’ was a popular folk profession, usually associated with women.

A classic Ashkenazi healing tea, especially for children’s ailments, combines a teaspoon of raspberry juice or berry syrup mixed into hot raspberry leaf tea. Many popular Ashkenazi teas are infused dried herb teas with either fruit syrup, fruit jam, or fruit liquor added.

One traditional Ashkenazi recipe for boosting the immune system and protecting the body from illness [10] combines dried raspberries with dried elderberries and linden leaves and flowers. All three of these herbs are beloved in Jewish folk healing tradition, and are considered to increase perspiration. This first version of the tea includes three herbs and honey.

# Ashkenazi Raspberry, Linden, and Elder Immune-Boosting Tea: 2 Ways

## Method One

### Ingredients:

- 1 part dried linden leaf and flower
- 1 part dried raspberry fruits
- 1 part dried elderberry
- Raw honey

### Instructions:

1. Heat up your water. Once it is almost at the boiling point, remove from heat.
2. Pour the hot water into your cup containing your herbs (I recommend using a strainer to avoid having many plant particles in your tea).
3. Allow your tea to steep for 5-10 minutes, then strain.
4. For extra throat support, add a spoonful of raw, local honey to your tea. This is also a traditional Jewish remedy for a sore throat.

## Method Two

### Ingredients:

- 1 part dried linden leaf and flower
- 1 part dried elderberry
- Raspberry jam

## Instructions:

1. Follow the instructions above for infusing and then straining your tea.
2. Once your tea is strained and ready, add a spoonful of raspberry jam, and mix in. Among Ashkenazim, this is a popular and traditional way to enjoy herbal tea.

## Endnotes:

- [1] "Superstitions, Remedies and Cures." *Yizkor Book of Mlawa, Poland*, 7 July 2017, [www.facebook.com/JewishGen.org/posts/1460067377348746](https://www.facebook.com/JewishGen.org/posts/1460067377348746).
- [2] Geoffrey W. Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2007).
- [3] <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/gorlice/gor043.html>
- [4] <https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/dokshitsy/dok059.html>
- [5] <https://www.facebook.com/JewishGen.org/posts/1460067377348746>
- [6] Marek Tuszewicki, *A Frog Under the Tongue: Jewish Folk Medicine in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Liverpool University Press, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021).
- [7] Yizkor book of Lubtch, Belarus.
- [8] Tuszewicki, *A Frog Under the Tongue*, p. 60.
- [9] Deatra Cohen and Adam Siegel, *Ashkenazi Herbalism: Rediscovering the Herbal Traditions of Eastern European Jews* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 214.
- [10] Tuszewicki, *A Frog Under the Tongue*, p. 60.

# Glossary

Term	Definition
<i>Segula</i>	Lit, “protection,” a <i>segulah</i> is a ritual, charm, or amulet understood to provide protection to the owner.
<i>Etrog</i>	One of the four ritual objects for the Holiday of Sukkot; a type of citrus fruit.
Yizkor Books	<p>Yizkor means “may [God] remember,” from the Hebrew root <i>zachor</i>. (<a href="https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yizkor-the-memorial-service/">https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/yizkor-the-memorial-service/</a>)</p> <p>Yizkor (memorial) books document the history of Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust. (<a href="https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books">https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yizkor-books</a>)</p>
<i>Tehillim</i>	<p>Tehillim is the Hebrew word for The Book of Psalms, which is an ancient anthology of poetic prayers. It is the first book of the third and final section of the Hebrew Bible, known as <u>Ketuvim</u> (Writings).</p> <p>(<a href="https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-book-of-psalms/">https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-book-of-psalms/</a>)</p>