It isn't Rosh Hashanah without duvshaniyot.

Apples dipped in honey and honey cakes are popular across the Jewish world around Rosh Hashanah. But if you grew up in Israel, you most likely came across a unique variation of honey treats: duvshaniyot. These dense, dark, round honey cookies are a must in many families' High Holidays nosh rotation.

The modest duvshaniyot (their name derives from the Hebrew word dvash, meaning honey) seem to have been part of the Israeli repertoire forever and you can find them on the cookie shelves in every supermarket in the country. They are cheap, pareve and last forever, so no wonder they have become a regular for Rosh Hashanah afternoon tea, for breaking the fast on Yom Kippur, and for dipping in a cold glass of milk in the sukkah. But these unassuming cookies hold a long history, as most Jewish and Israeli dishes do.

Duvshaniyot are the Israeli adaptation of a popular Russian cookie called pryaniki. Dating back to medieval Russia, pryaniki were made with honey, rye flour and berry juice, and were known simply as "honey bread." Starting around the 12th or 13th centuries, when Russia started opening up to imports from the Middle East and India, spices and dried fruit were added to the cookie. In different regions throughout Russia, people experimented with new additions to this cookie, from jam filling to a later invention of sweetened condensed milk. Some versions were imprinted using delicate wooden forms, and some were simply rolled by hand and dipped in sugar glaze — the same version that's still popular in Israel today.

People sometimes confuse pryaniki with German lebkuchen (aka gingerbread cookies), but it is rare to see ginger added to these classic Russian cookies, and even lebkuchen don't always have ginger in them. Traditionally, pryaniki were spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, coriander, and even black pepper and cumin. In fact, their name, pryaniki, comes from the Russian word for spiced, pryanik.

Different versions of pryaniki can be found around Eastern Europe, like piernik in Poland and lect cookies in Slovenia, which are heart-shaped, painted red and artfully decorated with colorful icing. These Eastern European versions were traditionally served around Christmas, but were adapted by Jews for their own holidays, mainly Rosh Hashanah, for the use of the symbolic honey.

From Eastern Europe, the little honey cookie made its way to Israel and the United States. “The Settlement Cook Book,” a classic 1901 American Jewish cookbook by Lizzie Black Kander, includes two versions of lebkuchen, both with citrus and almonds, but no ginger. Even more interesting, is that neither include honey, but instead call for brown sugar or molasses.

An early Israeli cookbook, “Folklore Cookbook” by Molly Bar-David, has recipes for honey cookies that are similar to pryaniki *and* for lebkuchen. Bar-David suggests adding ginger to the honey cookies and calls for margarine instead of butter, maybe to keep the cookies pareve.

Today, Israeli manufacturers of duvshaniyot must be doing a good job, as I notice the same Israeli brand cookies at many Russian stores in the United States. But maybe because duvshaniyot are readily available in every supermarket, most Israelis do not prepare them at home. That’s a shame, because as is the case with most baked goods, homemade is better. And when the recipe is as easy as the one below, there’s no reason not to.

You can add any of the classic gingerbread cookie spices (cinnamon, nutmeg, cardamom, coriander, clove, and even black pepper and cumin) as well as cocoa powder, strong coffee or chopped chocolate. Candied citrus peel or any tart candied fruit, as well as citrus zest. You can try to replace some of the flour with rye flour to be closer to the original Russian version, or replace some of the flour with almond meal and make it closer to the German lebkuchen. It’s up to you.

Some recipes, including centuries-old recipes, suggest letting the dough rest for a few hours and up to a week before baking the cookies. This will deepen its flavors and will make rolling the dough easier. But even if you bake it right away, the cookies will improve with time, so I suggest baking them at least two days before serving. You can easily prepare them the week before Rosh Hashanah and then serve them for break the fast on Yom Kippur.

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