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## THE POMEGRANATE: SACRED, SECULAR, AND SENSUOUS SYMBOL OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

MARY ABRAM

The pomegranate, a globular-shaped fruit filled with juicy red seeds inside a hard shell, appears in the mythologies and artifacts of several ancient Near Eastern cultures. Cheryl Ward's description of this fruit as a luxury item in *World Archaeology* charts the discovery of pomegranate representations in high-status contexts: a vase decoration in an elite residence of fourth millennium Uruk, a pomegranate-shaped wooden box with dried remnants of the fruit in a 17<sup>th</sup> century bce Hyksos tomb at Jericho, a gold bowl with fruits in another elite residence at 14<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century bce Ugarit, and a variety of depictions in 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty Egyptian tombs and temples.<sup>1</sup> A vessel shaped like a pomegranate, fashioned from rare silver, accompanied other treasures in the tomb of the young Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun.<sup>2</sup>

Pomegranate representations continued into later centuries: on a bronze cultic tripod from 13<sup>th</sup> century bce Ugarit, on ninth to eighth century bce Assyrian palace reliefs, and as ivory carvings in eighth century bce Phoenicia.<sup>3</sup> Pomegranate seeds featured in ancient Greek explanations of seasonal cycles.<sup>4</sup> Early Christian art picked up the pomegranate motif as "the symbol of hope of eternal life" due to this fruit's legendary association with the Garden of Eden's Tree of Life.<sup>5</sup>

Well-attested in archaeological discoveries, the pomegranate "was widely used as a symbolic and decorative motif in the sacred and secular art of

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1. Cheryl Ward, "Pomegranates in Eastern Mediterranean Contexts during the Late Bronze Age," *World Archaeology* 34.3 (February 2003): 529, 533, 536.

2. Ana Ruiz, *The Spirit of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2001), 71.

3. Nahman Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate from the 'House of the Lord,'" in *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed* (ed. Hillel Geva; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 134–35; 137.

4. Richard Stoneman, *Greek Mythology: An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend* (London: The Aquarian Press, 1991), 142.

5. Harold Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1952), 191.

various cultures in the ancient Near East.<sup>6</sup> This multi faceted fruit, appreciated in diverse geographical regions and throughout different eras of time, reveals an even more fascinating role as a symbol of ancient Israel. Three distinct contexts emerge from the biblical text: the sacred pomegranate of Exodus, the secular pomegranate of Deuteronomy, and the sensuous pomegranate of Solomon's Song. These three perspectives of the pomegranate, in turn, define ancient Israel's collective character.

### The Sacred Pomegranate of Exodus

Ancient Israel likely encountered the pomegranate motif in other older cultures before incorporating it into its own iconography. Ritual objects discovered in a 13<sup>th</sup> century bce Canaanite temple at Lachish included two ivory scepters topped by stylized pomegranates.<sup>7</sup> According to Ward, pomegranate representation and remnants appeared most often in tombs, indicating this fruit's connection with the underworld.<sup>8</sup> In ancient Israel, however, the pomegranate is most often attested in the sacred, cultic practices of the living.

*The Pomegranate and Sacred Vestments.* The first biblical reference to the pomegranate occurred after the ancient Israelite exodus from Egypt and before their entry into the land of Canaan. Through Moses, the Lord instructed that a portable sanctuary, the Tabernacle, be constructed. Further revelation included details regarding the vestments of the officiating priest.

And thou shalt make the robe of the ephod all of blue. . . . And beneath the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; and bells of gold between them round about; A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about. (Exod 28:31; 33–34)

Harold Mokdenke, author of the book *Plants of the Bible*, proposed the view that both the pomegranate embroidery and the golden bells on the hem of temple robes were patterned after the pomegranate flower while the ripe fruit became the model for other objects.<sup>9</sup>

Theories also exist to explain the presence of pomegranates on sacred vestments. Besides adding sound to rituals performed by the priests, the golden bells shaped like pomegranates dispelled demons.<sup>10</sup> Some symbolists see fertility connotations: "The pomegranates with the bells on the priestly vestments

6. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 133.

7. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 134.

8. Ward, "Pomegranates in Eastern Mediterranean Contexts," 530.

9. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible*, 190.

10. Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1992), 128.

represent fecundating thunder and lightning.”<sup>11</sup> Others suggest that the bells were for the people; when they heard the sound, they would think of the high priest and pray for him.<sup>12</sup> Still others say that the sound sent a message to the high priest. Since “the pomegranates symbolized the Word of God,” the tinkling bells reminded the high priest of his duty to teach Torah to the congregation just as the people, when hearing the bells, remembered the tribe of Levi’s part in these procedures.<sup>13</sup> In his article about the pomegranates of the high priest’s mantle, C. Houtman concludes that “pomegranates, representatives of pleasant fruits, were intended to create together with the bells a pleasant atmosphere in order to propitiate YHWH. Being favourable to the high priest, YHWH would be favorable to Israel, too.”<sup>14</sup>

The sanctity of the ceremonial robe first assigned to Aaron was reiterated in Exod 29:29: “And the holy garments of Aaron shall be his sons’ after him, to be anointed therein, and to be consecrated in them.” These sacred garments and their symbols, then, were to be passed from one generation to the next, thereby maintaining a tradition of holiness.

*The Pomegranate in Temple Architecture.* The earlier priests of Israel carried out their duties in the portable Tabernacle. When Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the pomegranate as an art form became part of that sacred structure. Three separate biblical references describe the chapters (column capitals) of the temple’s twin entry pillars decorated by a network motif of pomegranates. 1 Kgs 7 details the temple’s construction. Hiram, an artisan from Tyre, fashioned the two pillars named Jachin and Boaz. He also ornamented these with pomegranates:

And he made the pillars, and two rows round about upon the one network, to cover the chapters that were upon the top, with pomegranates: and so did he for the other chapters . . . And four hundred pomegranates for the two networks, even two rows of pomegranates for one network, to cover the two bowls of the chapters that were upon the pillars. . . . So Hiram made an end of doing all the work that he made king Solomon for the house of the Lord. (1 Kgs 7:18, 40, 42)

2 Chronicles confirms the presence of pomegranates on the capitals and adds the information that at least some pomegranates were attached to chains. “And he made chains, as in the oracle, and put them on the heads of the pillars; and made an hundred pomegranates, and put them on the chains” (2 Chr 3:16).

The prophet Jeremiah mentions the chapters and pomegranates in the context of the brass booty taken from Jerusalem by Babylonians in the sixth century bce.

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11. J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), 134.

12. C. Houtman, “On the Pomegranate and the Golden Bells of the High Priest’s Mantle,” *Vetus Testamentum* 40.2 (April 1990): 225.

13. Houtman, “On the Pomegranate and Golden Bells,” 225.

14. Houtman, “On the Pomegranate and Golden Bells,” 227.

And concerning the pillars . . . a chapter of brass was upon it; and the height of one chapter was five cubits, with network and pomegranates upon the chapters round about, all of brass. The second pillar also and the pomegranates were like unto these. And there were ninety and six pomegranates on a side; and all the pomegranates upon the network were an hundred round about. . . . The pillars of brass that were in the house of the Lord . . . the Chaldeans brake, and carried all the brass of them to Babylon. (Jer 52:17, 21–23)

*The Pomegranate and Cultic Objects.* Recent attention has focused on an ivory ornament shaped in pomegranate form and purported to be the only surviving artifact from Solomon's Temple. Some scholars claim that this two-inch tall carving with a hole bored at its base was placed atop a ceremonial scepter and used in Solomon's Temple during the time of Hezekiah.

This exquisite carving . . . served as the decorative head of a ceremonial scepter carried by Temple priests. The fragmentary inscription around the neck reads "holy to the priests, belonging to the House of Yahweh." The paleo-Hebrew script dates to the late eighth century bce, around the time of King Hezekiah who attempted to centralize all Israelite worship in the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>15</sup>

The authenticity of the ivory pomegranate has been disputed. French scholar Andre Lemaire examined and photographed it at a Jerusalem antiquities shop in 1979. He concluded that even though caked dirt had been scraped from the incised letters, the original remaining patina "confirmed . . . that both the inscription and the artifact were genuine."<sup>16</sup> The pomegranate then vanished for six years. It reappeared at a Paris art exhibition in 1985 and was subsequently purchased and presented to the Israel Museum in 1988.<sup>17</sup> At that point, "curators asked Nahman Avigad, a senior archaeologist from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, to authenticate the object. Avigad and his colleagues examined the piece with a microscope and declared it to be genuine."<sup>18</sup> These assertions were based on three main factors: (1) Chemical analysis undertaken in the Israel Museum laboratory showed that the ancient patina covering the ivory pomegranate was present also inside the incisions of the letters, (2) the edges of several letters were worn, "merging with the surface of the object . . . the result of long wear," and (3) the broken surface "bears distinct signs of forcible destruction and of having been buried in the soil for many years."<sup>19</sup>

The pomegranate itself is generally accepted as genuine. Questions still exist, however, about the inscription. In 2003, Yuval Goren, chairman of Tel

15. Herschel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel* (Washington, D. C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999), 126.

16. Andre Lemaire, "Probable Head of Priestly Scepter from Solomon's Temple Surfaces in Jerusalem," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10.1 (January/February 1984): 26.

17. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 128.

18. Haim Watzman, "Antiquities Fraud: Reality Check," *Nature* 434 (March 2005): 13.

19. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 131.

Aviv University's Department of Archaeology, examined the pomegranate with high-tech equipment and concluded: "although the pomegranate does date to the bronze age—the period 3300–1200 bce and before Solomon's Temple is believed to have been built—the inscription is a modern addition."<sup>20</sup>

The pomegranate's authenticity had always been an issue because its provenance could not be traced. Concern escalated recently due to the pomegranate's association with Obed Golan, a private antiquities dealer indicted for forgery in Israel. Other inscribed objects associated with Golan and pronounced as fakes include the Jehoash tablet and the James ossuary.<sup>21</sup> The ivory pomegranate came to be regarded as guilty through association, if nothing else. Some scholars say the criticism is unjustified and maintain that the pomegranate, complete with inscription, is authentic. Hershel Shanks, editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, stated in 2005 that there is a "very substantial question as to whether it [the pomegranate inscription] is authentic or a forgery" and points out evidence suggesting the former because "an ancient break cuts the inscription."<sup>22</sup>

While a validated inscription might confirm its use in a temple setting, the fact that alleged forgers used the already-ancient ivory pomegranate to simulate a temple artifact supports its recognition (even by criminals) as a sacred symbol. The cultic use of pomegranate-topped scepters was not confined to the Israelites. In addition to the Lachish ivory scepters from a Canaanite temple mentioned previously, an excavation at Nami, south of Haifa, exposed two bronze pomegranate scepters on a 13<sup>th</sup> century bce skeleton. Bronze incense vessels were also found, which indicate the deceased was probably a priest. "The excavator, M. Artzy of Haifa University, suggested that the person interred . . . was a priest and that the tomb deposits represent cultic implements used by him when performing his office."<sup>23</sup>

The cultic use of the pomegranate motif was not confined to scepters. Their natural form easily facilitated their function as vessels.

The very use of pomegranate-shaped objects for cultic purposes is attested to by a number of clay vessels in the form of globular pomegranates which were found in various excavations of sites in Israel dating to the 10<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> centuries bce. They are either individual vessels or attached to a bowl or to a kernos (a hollow ring base on which are mounted pomegranates and other objects believed to have been used for libation).<sup>24</sup>

*The Pomegranate and the Torah.* The Torah, always important, became even more central to the Jewish faith after the destructions of the Jerusalem temple. Attention focused on scriptural injunctions, and rabbis used the pomegranate, which apparently maintained its status as a sacred symbol, to illustrate concepts.

20. Watzman, "Antiquities Fraud," 14.

21. Watzman, "Antiquities Fraud," 14.

22. Hershel Shanks, "The Editor of BAR Responds," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 68 (2005): 76.

23. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 135.

24. Avigad, "The Inscribed Pomegranate," 134.

According to the midrash, there are exactly 613 seeds within a pomegranate, corresponding to the number of mitzvot [commandments] prescribed in the Torah. Israel is compared to a pomegranate, as full of good deeds as this fruit is of seeds.<sup>25</sup>

Torah study became an essential part of Jewish life. At one point in their history, “the Jews concluded that education must be universal and that people must do with the absolutely barest minimum of existence, if need be, even self-deprivation, in order to find the happiness of [Torah] study.”<sup>26</sup> The nature of the pomegranate, continuing in its new role as a teaching tool, facilitated the internalization of a valuable concept: to choose the good in learning.

Unlike the seeds, the peel is very bitter, hence the pomegranate was used metaphorically for a pupil who selected only the good. . . . Schoolchildren sitting in their rows and learning Torah were compared to the compact kernels of the pomegranate.<sup>27</sup>

The pomegranate, originally associated with the Torah, is today an integral part of the Torah scroll throughout Jewish congregations. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the two wooden rollers holding the Torah scroll became ornamental with the top pieces fashioned in the shape of fruits, especially pomegranates. These decorative caps placed on the Torah staves are even called *rimmonim*, the Hebrew word for “pomegranates.”

*Rimmonim*, generally made of silver, have assumed many shapes throughout the centuries, reflecting the inventiveness, artistic traditions, and pocketbooks of their various communities. . . . Even though these ornaments were fashioned in a variety of architectural and botanical shapes, . . . they continued to be called *rimmonim*, in memory of their earliest form.<sup>28</sup>

## The Secular Pomegranate of Deuteronomy

The term “secular” is, by definition, the opposite of “sacred.” In contrast with heaven, an earthly realm might include matters relating to the land, its production, and its governance. Delineation between sacred and secular in ancient Israel, however, isn’t easily distinguished. The attachment of ancient Israel to the land was also a religious attachment, and religious devotion may also have been linked with the land. “These major forces of God, Torah, Land, and Mitzvot interact, each of them evolving from the other, each of them leading to the other. We cannot separate them.”<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the pomegranate motifs, while

25. Frankel and Teutsh, *Jewish Symbols*, 128.

26. Leo Trepp, *Judaism: Development and Life* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1982), 31.

27. Jehuda Feliks, “Pomegranate,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 16:364.

28. Frankel and Teutsh, *Jewish Symbols*, 129.

29. Trepp, *Judaism*, 7.

presented in a secular context, also retain their sacred character corresponding with the dual-natured elements they represent.

*The Pomegranate and the Land of Ancient Israel.* Shortly after the exodus from Egypt, Moses sent out spies to investigate the new land. Numbers 13:23 records that these twelve representatives brought back from their scouting expedition, along with grapes and figs, the pomegranate as evidence of Canaan's fertility. Later, Deuteronomy lists the pomegranate as "one of the seven species emblematic of Israel's agricultural fertility."<sup>30</sup> These seven species are named in connection with the land given to Israel by the Lord. "For the Lord thy God bringeth thee into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of oil olive, and honey" (Deut 8:7–8).

Along with other first fruits of autumn, the pomegranate traditionally was part of the Israelite festival Shavuot, a harvest celebration.

When a Jewish farmer saw the first cluster of grapes or the first pomegranate or the first ripe figs, he would not pluck the fruit and eat it. Instead, the farmer would tie a ribbon around the branch of the fruit. This ribbon served as a sign to all that these fruits were *bikkurim*, first fruits, to be brought to Jerusalem and eaten in the Holy City.<sup>31</sup>

Since the pomegranate was included as one of the seven specific species associated with the land's productivity, it also assumed the nature of an appropriate sacrifice, thereby solidifying another link between sacred and secular.

Once the Israelites settled in Canaan, they were commanded to bring their first fruits to the Levites as offerings. Although no specific fruits or grains are mentioned in the Bible, the rabbis dictated that this law applied only to the seven species mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8.<sup>32</sup>

These seven species contributing to physical health related also to spiritual well-being. The Lord's favor could be gauged by the condition of these plants. Joel foretold that the symbols of the land's productiveness would become barren due to Israel's disobedience. "The field is wasted, the land mourneth . . . the vine is dried up, and the fig tree languisheth; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, . . . even all the trees of the field, are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men" (Joel 1:10, 12).

Hope accompanies this judgment. Even as Israel would be restored, so would the land's fertility, and the pomegranate back in blossom would be an emblem that the Lord was no longer displeased with Israel. "Haggai (2:19) includes it [the pomegranate] with grapes, figs, and olives as an indication of restoration to God's favor."<sup>33</sup>

30. Trepp, *Judaism*, 7.

31. Naomi Black, ed., *Celebration: The Book of Jewish Festivals* (New York: Jonathan David, 1989), 132.

32. Frankel and Teutsh, *Jewish Symbols*, 150.

33. J. C. Trever, "Pomegranate," IDB 3:840.



*The Pomegranate and Kingship.* According to tradition, Solomon's crown was fashioned in the shape of a pomegranate.<sup>34</sup> The archaeological discoveries of pomegranate-topped scepters suggest that these may have been used in royal along with cultic contexts. Again, a clear separation of sacred and secular is difficult. In ancient Israel, the first requirement for legitimate kingship was selection of the king by the Lord (Deut 17:15). The divine calling and subsequent prophetic anointing of the king would give the regalia of his office a certain cache: mingled sacred and secular symbolism. The pomegranate effectively accommodates a combination of both sacred and secular iconography.

*The Pomegranate throughout Israel's History.* The pomegranate as an art form reflecting the values of ancient Israelite and later Jewish society is documented in a variety of artifacts. The pomegranate's likeness appeared on ancient eighth to seventh century bce seals and on Jewish coins of the first century ce.

On bronze coins of John Hyrcanus I (135 bce), one sees on the reverse double cornucopias with a pomegranate between horns. The pomegranate was used again on silver coins of the First Revolt (66–74 c.e.). On the reverse one sees within the inscription "Jerusalem the Holy" or "Jerusalem is Holy" three pomegranates on one branch.<sup>35</sup>

The modern State of Israel uses the pomegranate motif in coins and stamps.<sup>36</sup> The pomegranate as a favored art form in both ancient and modern Israel may be due to the fruit's connection with the land. "The pomegranate played a role in the biblical period, and it continued to be used on coins, glass, sarcophagi, ossuaries, in synagogue art, and in tomb art. . . . In Jewish art that features the agricultural richness of the land, pomegranates are likely to be found."<sup>37</sup> Although the pomegranate motif exists in secular contexts, these instances cannot be fully separated from the sacred traditions connected with this particular fruit.

### The Sensuous Pomegranate of Solomon's Song

Webster distinguishes the term "sensuous" from "sensual." The latter term with more negative connotations focuses on an indulging of the physical senses while cutting intellectual and spiritual links. The word "sensuous," however, "suggests the strong appeal of that which is pleasing to the eye, ear, touch . . . [and] implies susceptibility to the pleasure of sensation."<sup>38</sup> Given this definition and combined

34. Frankel and Teutsh, *Jewish Symbols*, 128.

35. Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 492.

36. Frankel and Teutsh, *Jewish Symbols*, 128.

37. Neusner and Green, *Dictionary of Judaism*, 492.

38. Michael Agnes and David B. Guralnik, eds., *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (Ohio: Wiley, 2002), 1306.

with its appeal to and gratification of certain senses, namely sight and taste, the pomegranate may be categorized as a “sensuous” fruit.

*The Pomegranate as Pleasurable Food.* Pomegranate seeds are compacted within a hard, outer shell. Once this shell has been opened, the sudden display of juicy scarlet seeds appeals to the eye as well as the appetites of those who have acquired a taste for this particular fruit. This is especially the case in the Middle East with its long tradition of pomegranate cultivation.

The pomegranate . . . has been cultivated since prehistoric times and is now common in the Holy Land, Egypt, and along both shores of the Mediterranean. . . . The pulp of the fruit has been used extensively since the days of Solomon for making cooling drinks and sherbets, and is also eaten raw. . . . Pomegranate fruits in their native haunts attain a fine sweetness which makes them highly valued in those hot climates.<sup>39</sup>

The first evidence of the pomegranate as a desirable fruit for eating comes in the form of a complaint to Moses by the children of Israel. “And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink” (Num 20:5). Obviously, the absence of the pomegranate contributed to ancient Israel’s lament.

*The Pomegranate Connection to Fertility.* The adjective “sensuous” cannot fully escape from its cousin term “sensual,” which is itself attached to “sexual.” Nor can the pomegranate, despite all its other characteristics, disconnect from its association in many cultures with sexuality and fertility. The pomegranate’s many seeds, its red color paralleling the blood of life, and its link with the land’s productiveness—all suggest this fruit is a symbol of human fertility. The fertility traditions embedded in biblical culture, particularly in connection with the pomegranate and combined with its recognition as a pleasant fruit, make it a likely candidate for inclusion in love poetry.

The Song of Solomon lovers link the pomegranate and its juice with romantic encounters. “Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves” (Song 7:12). This scene intensifies as it moves from the gardenlike setting to an actual partaking of the fruit in a more private, walled situation. “I would lead thee, and bring thee into my mother’s house, who would instruct me: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate” (Song 8:2).

The pleasant and desirable nature of the pomegranate is apparent when a man uses this fruit to poetically describe his beloved: “Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate within thy locks” (Song 4:3). Perhaps only those who recognized the pomegranate’s symbolic associations could appreciate such imagery.

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39. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible*, 90–91.

*A Higher Level of Sensory Pleasure.* Certain elements of society, often mystics, use the understandable emotions of lovers' relationships to describe the inexpressible joy of union with deity. Some biblical scholars regard the Song of Solomon in this way, as a literary device in addition to a literal romantic description. These verses could be a love song between God and his people.

In proportion to its size, no book of the Bible has received so much attention and certainly none has had so many divergent interpretations imposed upon its every word . . . Interpretations of the Song of Songs fall first of all into either allegorical or literal mode. The allegorical approach is the older and prevailed both in the Synagogue and the Church. The Jewish interpretation saw the Song as depicting the relation of Yahweh and the Chosen People, Israel, as his bride.<sup>40</sup>

Talmudic scholars, taking the allegorical viewpoint, broke down the phrases of the Song 6:11 and offered an alternate interpretation of this text:

“I went down into the garden of nuts”—this is the world;

“To look at the green plants of the valley”—these are Israel;

“To see whether the vine had blossomed”—this is synagogues and houses of study;

“And the pomegranates were in flower”—these are young children who sit occupied with Torah and are arrayed in row upon row, like the seeds of a pomegranate.<sup>41</sup>

Even a sensuous view of the pomegranate, particularly in its context of a human fertility symbol, is colored by sacred overtones.

## Conclusion

The pomegranate has been an integral part of many world cultures. Ancient Israel savored its colorful, juicy fruit and depicted it in art forms. The pomegranate shared the stage with leading stars, grapes and olives, as the classics of religious symbolism. Others of the seven species, such as the cereals, may be more essential to the sustenance of life. But no fruit but the pomegranate best combines the diversities of sensory pleasure, earth's seasonal cycles, worldly kingship, and holiness. These three primary qualities—sacred, secular, and sensuous—parallel the pomegranate with ancient Israel.

The pomegranate's round shape suggests a circular pattern connecting this

40. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), 89.

41. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 420.

fruit's symbolic attributes. The secular aspects of both the pomegranate and ancient Israel link with the sacred and both of these merge with the sensuous. The pomegranate's crown-shaped calyx could represent ancient Israel's monarchy or, on a higher level, God as Israel's true king still attached to the nation he made covenants with. His original covenant with Abraham, reiterated in subsequent generations, involves promises of land and seed, thus laying the foundations for the ideology of sacred/secular/sensuous bonds. These three interwoven qualities permeate the history and culture of Israel. The pomegranate, replete with these same connected characteristics, therefore qualifies as a worthy symbol of ancient Israel.