

Jewish Food

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Food plays a very important role in Jewish life. I am not talking about the laws of what one may or may not eat. I am not talking about the kosher certification wars—mine is better and holier than yours and if you have to pay more for it, it must be good for your soul.

This week I am talking about something else. It seems there is something called “Yiddishe food”, which means that if you eat sushi, mango and pear salad, or smoked salmon instead of schmaltz herring, zimmes, and gehakte leber, you are opening the doors to assimilation. You are lost, gone, doomed! It’s in the same tradition as not allowing your baby to be surrounded by pictures or toys of treifa animals, like teddy bears or pandas, for fear that their kosher soul will be forever damaged.

I kid you not. Hamodia, the mouthpiece of Agudah in Israel is now available in English to counteract the assimilationism and deteriorating values of the Anglo Jewish press. It recently carried an interview with a prominent USA Rosh Yeshivah who said that eating foods that are not traditional would have a deleterious effect on the Jewish soul, schvartz oif veiss (black on white, as they say in Yiddish, which must have been spoken by Moishe Rabbeinu, because anyone who doesn’t speak Yiddish can’t be a REAL Jew).

So Eastern European fatty food is Jewish but the Sefardic diet of rice (on Pesach too) instead of tatties, or healthy salads are not! Manna turned into chulent and the Israelites cooked their food with fat and grease the way Eastern European peasants did. So I guess the Jews of Muslim origin who eat food closer to Arab culture cannot count as REAL! And chappati fressers, like me, are really Indian non-Jews masquerading as Jews. If you eat curry on Friday night you are breaking Shabbos. I know my father-in-law really thinks that carp is a Jewish fish and since I don’t like it there must be something wrong with my Yiddisher soul. What is more, I cannot abide what Americans think defines Jewish food: a knish.

On Shabbat we sing the traditional songs that include such lines as, “We delight in meat and fish and fattened goose, quail, and fish.” Does this mean a vegetarian cannot be a Jew? Or one who cannot take wine, is he to be excommunicated? If you could get the manna in the wilderness to taste of whatever you wanted, what if you wanted it to taste of passion fruit ice cream?

I accept there is pressure to conform. You see it in clothes. How come a Jew brought up in a Muslim country of jellabas, shifts and turbans is expected to wear the black trilby, black frock coat, and white shirt of St Petersburg? Does a Yemenite mystic have to adopt the fur hat of medieval Polish gentry? Joining a club and adopting its uniform is fine, if that’s what you fancy. But on what basis does one call it authentic when it is cultural and a historical accident? It reinforces the current myth that authentic Judaism

can only be lived in the recreation of an Eastern European ghetto.

According to some people, non-kosher foods build up a kind of spiritual cholesterol in your bloodstream that alienates you from God and spirituality. Most treifa foods are associated with the earth and dirt and that is why eating kosher elevates you, it is argued. Never mind you can eat kosher and still eat like a pig. Never mind the fats and carbohydrates that make up the highly unhealthy diet of poverty that much of traditional kosher catering is based on. Tradition, as Tevya might have said, is more important than reality.

The Biblical sacrifices are called Korban in Hebrew, from the root word meaning "to get closer". One shared food with God and priests, burning the unhealthy fats, draining the blood, and giving part of the meat to the poor. The ceremonial of the Temple was far removed from the butchery of the abattoir and one could offer breads and grains, fruit, and vegetables if one did not want to or could not afford to sacrifice animals. All the laws of food and eating were designed to make food a conduit between man and God. But it was the process of thought, and the way you ate, and with whom you ate that elevated the food, rather than the biological content. It didn't matter whether your diet was from the Mugreb, China, India, Italy, or Amsterdam. So long as you accepted the Biblical restrictions, it was how you ate that counted.

And health has always been a factor in Jewish Law. Now that it is clear that a diet low in fatty foods and high in pulses and grains is healthier than high cholesterol diets, surely a God-fearing person would want to protect and nurture the body God has given him. But no. It seems that, in pursuit of delusionary values of conformity in a mythical Eden, we must eat unhealthy food because it is more authentic. Even if this authenticity pertains only to one section of our people, in the last couple hundred years of a history that, in fact, extends for thousands, and was constantly fluid and changing in matters of dress and diet. If we really want to be authentic, we'd best dress in shifts, eating with our hands, sitting on the floor, and popping sheep's eyes instead of sashimi.

If the Rosh Yeshiva had lamented the loss of honesty and kindness, I would have applauded and added my voice. But to tell me, as I pore over my Daf Yomi, that the whiskey I drink is not the authentic drink in Omsk and Tomsk, and vodka and schmaltz herring will make me a better Jew, must be a joke. Kosher bacon anyone?