

The Great Toldot Taste Test

לד וַיַּעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו, לֶחֶם וּגְזִיד
עֲדָשִׁים, וַיֹּאכַל וַיִּשְׂתֶּה, וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ;
וַיֵּבֶז עֵשָׂו, אֶת-הַבְּכֹרָה. {פ}

Gen. 25:34 And Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way. So Esau despised his birthright.

ל וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם מִשְׂתֶּה, וַיֹּאכְלוּ
וַיִּשְׂתּוּ.

26: 30 And he made them a feast, and they did eat and drink

ד וַעֲשֵׂה-לִי מִטְעָמִים כַּאֲשֶׁר
אֶהְבֶּתִּי, וְהָבִיָּאָה לִי--וְאָכְלָה:
בְּעֵבוֹר תְּבָרְכֵךָ נַפְשִׁי, בְּטָרִם אָמוּת.

27:4 and make me savoury food, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die.'

Our sages taught: One who eats in the street is comparable to a dog. There are those who say that he is disqualified from serving as a witness. (Talmud, Kiddushin 40b)

"Great is eating for it distances those who are near, and brings close those who are far."
(Talmud, Sanhedrin 103)

One who eats slowly lives long. (Talmud, Berachot 54b)

Worries go down better with soup. ~Jewish Proverb

Today we'll be judging 4 hallahs: Fairway, Trader Joe's, Beldotti and Stop & Shop...For freshness, density, sweetness, egginess, softness, symmetric appearance, artistry of the braiding, size, shininess, crunchiness of crust, and last but not least, French-toastability.

Parashat Toldot, 5776

Temple Beth El, Stamford CT

Jewish food is not what makes us Jewish. Like Esau, are we trading our spiritual heritage for a bowl of lentils?

OUR TORAH TEXT

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the open, famished. And Esau said to Jacob, "Give me some of that red, red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished [which is why he was named Edom (red)]. Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." And Esau said, "I am at the point of death, so of what use is my birthright to me?...."

Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate, drank, rose, went away and spurned his birthright. (Gen. 24:12)

THIS WEEK'S COMMENTARY

Rashi: red, red stuff lentils. On that day Avraham had died in order to not see his grandson Esau fall into degenerate ways...Jacob was boiling lentils to provide the customary first meal for the immediate mourners. Why should lentils be the mourner's food? Because they are

round like a wheel and mourning (sorrow) is a wheel that touches every spot in turn [ie. every person experiences sorrow and loss in their life cf. the mustard seed story in other traditions]. And a further reason is: just as lentils have no serrated edge [in Hebrew: peh- meaning mouth] so too, mourners have no mouth [ie. are silent] for greeting others [first] is forbidden to them. For this reason, it is also customary to give eggs to a mourner as the first meal, because they are [similarly] round...

PERUSH: OUR EXPLANATION

Take one cup of red lentils...No, this isn't the beginning of a recipe for lentil soup (but see below!). The Torah seldom describes characters eating, and rarely tells us the menu. In this week's parasha, food is central: Isaac makes peace with Avimelech with a feast: "the meal seals the deal" (Gen. 26:30). And food appears in both the scene where Jacob acquires his brother's birthright (*b'chorah*) and

in the final scene where he steals Esau's blessing (*brachah*). (Note the Hebrew play on words.) Lentils, in turns out, are an important ingredient in this week's parasha. Like a movie that zeroes in on the murder weapon in a series of ever closer snapshots until the object fills the screen, first we hear of Jacob cooking a stew. Then, the lens is brought into closer focus: red stew. Finally, the camera lingers on the critical object: lentils.

Lentils were considered a poor person's food. In Jewish communities where lentil dishes were common, they were usually not served on Shabbat, for example. The Torah wants to stress that Esau traded his birthright (something of great value) for a food that was not even highly regarded. (If you had traded it for foie gras, or truffles, we'd be more understanding.) I thought the Hebrew for lentils (*adashim*) sounds like the Hebrew word *adish*, (indifferent),

ANOTHER OPINION

famished: Soloveitchik sees Esau as desperately tired and hungry, not because of the exertion of hunting but because he lacks a sustaining faith to give meaning to his life on bleak days. He is weary of the pointlessness of life and the inevitability of death.

Etz Hayyim Torah Commentary, The Rabbinical Assembly, JPS

because Esau was *indifferent* to his birthright. This would have been a great midrash, except the two words are sadly not related: the Hebrew for lentils is written with an 'ayin,' but *adish* is spelled with an 'aleph.' A modern original midrash connects our lentils to another aspect of the story. The first magnifying glass was called a 'lens' because they were lentil-shaped (the Latin for lentil is in fact *lens*); in Hebrew too, the word for lentils (*adashim*) is used for lenses. Because later, Isaac had trouble seeing and thereby Jacob was able to deceive his father to wrangle the blessing, Isaac needed this second kind of seeing 'lens'!

In the ancient world, twins who were not identical, were often seen as complementary, each having what the other lacked. The Torah describes Esau as physical: impulsive and boorish, while Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes, is quiet, clever but underhanded and scheming. For the Rabbis, Esau is the quintessential non-Jew (the outdoors-type, physically skilled). Esau (renamed 'Edom' because of his red, hairy complexion and the red lentils of our story) is the father of the Edom [enemy] nation, but later becomes a symbol for Rome, and then a code word for Christianity. Esau in midrashic literature is routinely referred to as the 'wicked' Esau, and the Rabbis imagine him committing murder and rape before returning from the hunt.

Esau, returning famished from the hunt, 'trades' his birthright for a bowl of lentils. Because in some traditions lentils are served to mourners, Rashi in an uncharacteristically long commentary, suggests that Abraham had died [as if to suggest he couldn't bear to his grandson's wickedness]. (Although we read of Abraham's death in last week's parasha, if we calculate the genealogy of the Patriarchs according to the biblical narrative, Jacob and Esau are fifteen years old at the time of Abraham's death). The Rabbis also pick up on the verb, let me gulp down, '*haliteini*' (used only this one time in the Torah) to show how he ate like an animal [the word is used in later rabbinic texts to feed camels, for example]. And the word '*na*' which means 'please' is 'mis'-interpreted to mean (its homonym) 'raw'. He couldn't even wait for the lentils to finish cooking! And the very unusual verse with five verbs in a row "he ate, drank, rose, went away and spurned his birthright." convey Esau's disregard for his actions, satisfying his physical needs, and not giving his spiritual life a moment's thought.

Food (and physical sustenance) was more important to Esau than his spiritual heritage. Today, for many Jews, it's not that different. Some Jews seem to say, "I'm not really religious, I just like Jewish food." For such "gastronomic" Jews, Judaism is matzah balls and kreplach, bagels and lox. Jewish tradition certainly has a rich culinary tradition. But what makes food 'Jewish'? When Jews lived in many places around the world, they used the products that were readily available, and often borrowed (and adapted) the recipes from their non-Jewish neighbours. In Morocco they ate couscous, and in the Ukraine they ate borscht. Even the most so-called 'traditional' foods weren't introduced until relatively recently. Potatoes, (that feature prominently in Ashkenazic cuisine in latkes, kugel and knish recipes), weren't widely available in eastern Europe until the 1700s since they come from the New World.

Lessons for Today

Jewish food is not what makes us Jewish. Here in Toronto, we have many 'Jewish' style (but not strictly kosher) restaurants. They serve blintzes and bagels and lox. And we have kosher sushi, kosher Moroccan and kosher Chinese restaurants. Which is the authentic "Jewish" restaurant? Steven Lowenstein in *The Jewish Cultural Tapestry* describes the ironic scene in a grocery store before a Jewish holiday: a religious Jew's cart is filled with kosher sushi, and kosher risotto while the secular Jew's cart is filled with borscht, gefilte fish and kasha.

In fact, there is almost no such thing as a universal 'Jewish food' or 'Jewish cuisine'. (Even the

recipe for "religious foods" like Hallah or Matzah has regional differences). A typical Jewish food from one region could be totally unfamiliar to another region. Such foods would be considered exotic, horrible (or maybe delicious) but definitely unrecognized as Jewish! When in Italy, we were surprised to discover that artichokes are served 'deep fried- *a la giudea* (Jewish style)' even in regular restaurants! Until modern times, Jews who ate gefilte fish did not eat falafel or malawach (a Yemenite fried pastry).

Recipes and foods, like the other aspects of culture, evolve, and are heavily influenced by our surroundings. Today, the forces that helped develop regional 'Jewish cuisine' (together with other local customs of dress, language, music, and ritual) are no longer in effect. Many of the Jewish communities that lived in geographical isolation from one other for hundreds of years have been destroyed and many of their traditions are lost. Others have been preserved, and with the ingathering of the Exiles to the state of Israel, Jews of all stripes have had the opportunity to learn of each other's customs. Because Israel has become the Jewish melting pot, we now serve 'sufganiyot' (jelly doughnuts) (an east European tradition) along with the Ashkenazic potato latke for Chanukah. There is a whole repertoire of other Chanukah fried sweets (*bimuelos* from Rhodes); open a good Jewish cookbook from around the world and your eyes will be opened to foods and tastes that will seem quite exotic. Today, it is not unusual to borrow the traditions from other communities. (For the past few years, our family has conducted a mini 'Seder' on Rosh Hashanah based on a Sephardic custom of eating special foods and saying special blessings.)

Not only are we effected by the culture around us, but for the first time, we can even borrow from Jewish communities other than our own to create our own delicious 'Jewish stew.' Food sustains us, but so does Judaism. Most of us are well fed in the waist department (and maybe some of us- too much so). But is our Jewish spirit as well fed? Studying Torah (like with this parasha study) is one essential ingredient for a healthy spiritual diet.

It isn't 'traditional' (yet) to serve [lentil soup](#) this week, or make [mujeddrah](#) (a typical middle eastern rice and lentil dish, but I'm going to put it on the menu to remember Esau and Jacob. And while I'm eating, I want to think about what makes a food Jewish, what truly sustains me and my Jewish life, and whether I'm Jewish on the inside or the outside.

Betay'avon (bon appetit!).

Take the Jewish Food Quiz (myJewishLearning.com)

Question 1. "Jewish foods," such as bagels, knishes, and borscht originate from

- Western Europe
- The Middle East
- The Americas
- Eastern Europe

Question 2. Falafel, a food that it typically considered Israeli, originated from where?

- Russia

- Persia
- The wider cuisine of the Middle East
- Tunisia
- Morocco

Question 3. Chicken fat, formerly a staple of Ashkenazic cuisine, is also known as

- Schmaltz
- Schwartz
- Lard
- Shemen

Question 4. The Jews of Poland and Russia shared many of the same ingredients and preferences, including

- Carp and salt herring
- Turnips
- Sauerkraut
- Only A & B
- Only A & C

Question 5. Which food became a staple of German Jewish cooking after merchants traveled to Italy?

- Pizza
- Noodles
- Dried fruit
- Rice with herbs

Question 6. On Lag B'Omer, it is traditional to serve food that is

- Fried
- Roasted
- Grilled
- Baked
- Broiled

Question 7. The main ingredients of hummus are

- Chickpeas

- Red peppers
- Apples
- Chicken breasts
- Breadcrumbs

What Jewish Food Group are You?

(from Beliefnet)

You are a Tzimmes Jew.

Like this Sabbath-evening fruit and sweet-potato side dish, your Jewish identity is highly traditional, even as it adapts with changing times. A basic recipe is supplemented with various individualistic flourishes. Judaism plays an integral role in your life, though your identity is not defined solely by it.

You are a Lukshin Kugel Jew.

Like the traditional noodle kugel, your Jewish identity has withstood the test of time to remain relevant and meaningful to you. The kugel's recipe has been passed unchanged from generation to generation, like the Judaism you practice.

You are a Haroseth Jew.

Like this Passover fruit and nut mixture, your Jewish identity can take any number of forms, each blending tradition and innovation. Your cultural and ethnic ties to Judaism are stronger than your religious ones. Your religiosity and Jewish identity often revolve around holidays, lifecycle events, and other special religious times are important to you.

You are a Blueberry Bagel Jew.

Like this blend of Old World Jewish (the bagel) and New World secular (the blueberry flavor), your identity retains ties to its past, even as you have chosen to forge a new path. Your connection to Judaism is cultural, rather than religious, and your identity does not tend to center around Judaism.