

Communicating Jewish Identity Through Taste: Jewish Flavour Principles as Culinary ‘Midrash’

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Jewish identity and values are communicated through the cultivation of certain tastes. There are Jewish taste preferences, shaped by Jewish historical experience and literary, religious and cultural heritage. They are not absolute, not every Jew has them at all times and in all places, but there are discernibly Jewish patterns of taste preferences for some foods, disgust for others. Indeed, these Jewish taste preferences have been prescribed or encouraged by Jewish religious and cultural traditions, by advocates with a stake in Jewish group identity and the continuity of the Jewish people as a group (e.g. rabbis, teachers, parents, Jewish recipe book writers, chefs, food producers and distributors, and other Jewish political and cultural leaders) – ‘ethno-political entrepreneurs’ in Rogers Brubaker’s term.¹ They use taste to communicate Jews’ historical experience and memories of their ancient Near Eastern Biblical origins and terroir, their dispersion among other peoples and nations throughout the world (‘the Diaspora’ or *galut* [Exile]) and a pattern of collective suffering and ‘redemption’, from the Exodus from Egypt to the Expulsion from Spain, from settlement of Eastern Europe to mass immigration to the US, from the Holocaust to the foundation of the modern Jewish State of Israel.

93

Jewish taste preferences are somewhat akin to what Elizabeth Rozin and John Prescott describe as flavour principles (really more than taste per se, i.e. the combination of certain patterns of preferred tastes, aromas, ingredients, textures, cooking methods, etc., characteristic of different regionally-based ethnic groups).² The principles can be traced back to sacred texts like the Bible and rabbinic literature that articulate them in religio-cultural prescriptions. Their effect makes some flavours pleasurable, others disgusting. For example classical Jewish texts and practices profess preferences for roasted, aromatic, salty, umami meat flavours; ‘sweetening the bitter’ (as in charoset and the ‘Hillel Sandwich’); greens in certain circumstances; refined wheat bread (vs. rice or maize) as a staple; and abhorrence for certain flavours and flavour combinations: pork, seafood, meat with dairy, mayonnaise on white bread. And there are seasonally prescribed preferences, too – certain foods on certain holidays, like unleavened bread during Passover in the spring, sweets at Purim, fried foods in the dead of winter during Chanukah. Basically, Jewish scriptural and ritual traditions ‘evaluatively condition’ certain flavours or combinations of flavours into what I am calling ‘Jewish flavour principles’.³

I have identified ten Jewish flavour principles, each to which I attach an exemplary

Biblical or rabbinic textual phrase suggesting why Jews ought to like or dislike them. Usually the texts evaluatively associate them with what *God* likes or dislikes Himself, or what God commands or encourages us to eat or not eat. And because Biblical sacrifices usually involve foods that God and the Israelites are to share, this is hardly surprising. Thus culturally specific Jewish language distinguishes between what tastes good and what does not: what God sees or says is good or not. Again, this should not be surprising in a culture whose foundation myth has humans learning to distinguish good from evil by tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. For God Himself acknowledges that after eating this fruit, humans have 'become like one of us, knowing good and evil' (Gen 3:22).

When I re-associate 'Jewish taste preferences' with representative classic Jewish texts that endorse these them, I'm engaging intentionally in culinary midrash. That is, I am interpreting and updating the meanings of verses of Torah in light of contemporary Jewish gastronomic experiences – these Jewish taste preferences. It's the reciprocal relationship between these tastes and Torah that I'm calling Jewish flavour principles.

So why take this to be anything other than one person's subjective, idiosyncratic interpretations about what's Jewish? I have two answers. First, I make these judgments as a Jewish 'insider', and more than that: I have certain relevant credentials and background to use my palate to make Jewish judgments. I am a Reconstructionist rabbi and an academic in comparative religious studies.⁴ I keep a kosher home and observe Jewish holidays with my family and community, albeit in a liberal/progressive way, and I am actively involved in the so-called 'New Jewish food movement'. In other words, I am recognized as a professional Jewish leader and academic teacher, a Jewish 'ethno-political entrepreneur' with a stake in the game. Second, are you persuaded? Do the tendencies I label as 'Jewish flavour principles' accord with your experience and observation of the phenomena I'm describing? So without further ado:

94

Ten Jewish Flavour Principles

1. *Preference for meat*: 'Keep yourselves holy because I am holy. This is the Torah of beast and fowl...' (Lev 11:45-6ff); 'no one unlearned in Torah should eat meat' (b.Pesachim 49b)
2. *Preference for roasted foods, especially umami, preference for cooked over raw foods*: God likes '*Re'ach nicho'ach*' (pleasing smell of roasting meat and incense)
3. *Preference for salted, aromatically assertive foods*: 'Do not eat the flesh with the blood in it'; sacrifices (meat, grain, and incense) with salt in them
4. *Qualified vegetarian preference*: 'Better a meal of vegetables with love, than a fattened calf served in hate' (Proverbs 15:17)

Communicating Jewish Identity Through Taste

5. *Abhorrence of certain mixtures (like the Mishnaic idea of kelai'im):* 'Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk'
6. *Preference for bread, but as a cooked and refined everyday and 'sometimes' food, and not a stand-alone food:* 'Not by bread alone' (Deut 8:3)
7. *Preference for 'Song of Songs' flavour combination – Sweet with bitter:* Passover food – *charoset*, with *maror*, bitter herb: 'Sweetening the bitter'
8. *Preference for talked about food:* 'Saying words of Torah about the table over the table' (m. Avot 3:4)
9. *Preference for Middle Eastern vegetarian flavours: foods of 'the promised land' - The Seven Species:* 'The Lord is bringing you into a land with wheat, barley, grape (wine), fig, pomegranates, olive (oil), and date (honey)' (Deut 8:7-8)
10. *Preferences for seasonal food:* 'Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv'

My brief discussion of each is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, to keep within the constraints of this paper.

95

1. Preference for Meat: 'Keep yourselves holy because I am holy. This is the Torah of beast and fowl...' (Lev 11:45-6ff); 'no one unlearned in Torah should eat meat' (b.Pesachim 49b)

Implicit in the Biblical rules of kashrut in the list of clean and unclean animals in Leviticus 11 is that they apply only to the flesh of animals – meat. They do not specify which plant-derived foods are or are not fit for Israelites to eat. Though these rules apply to all Israelites, they come in the context of lists of *torot* detailing which animals and grain offerings are fit to be sacrificed ('made sacred', or literally, *hikrivu*, 'brought near') to God, and how to prepare and divide them among God, the priests, their families and ordinary Israelites. In other words, there is a hierarchy of foods associated with a social hierarchy where meat, God and the priests are at the top. Moreover, this accords with Michael Pollan's suggestion in *Cooked* that roasted meat is special food, with notable elaborations of rules and taboos associated with its preparation, under the supervision of male elites, as in the case of ancient Israelite sacrifices or modern American Southern barbecue.⁵ Observing the 'Torah of beast and fowl and living creatures that move in the water' to distinguish between the *meat* of clean and unclean animals is what makes Israelites 'holy [like] I YHWH your God am holy' (Lev 11:45-47). Even after the rabbis

of the Talmud reinterpreted this priestly torah about meat-eating to refer to the rabbinic Torah of text study, they kept meat elevated as a perk reserved for Torah scholars (b. Pesahim 49b).⁶ Thus, the prominent role meat plays in Jewish cuisine around the world, especially in Orthodox Jewish diets, even today has the sanction of Judaism's most authoritative textual sources.

2. Preference for cooked over raw foods; roasted and stewed foods, especially umami: God likes 'Re'ach nicho'ach' (pleasing smoke/smell of roasting meat and incense)

Related to the preference for meat per se is a preference for the meat-like *umami* flavour of foods and methods of cooking them that bring out umami flavours, i.e. roasting and stewing. The ancient Israelites did not sacrifice raw foods on their altars, but rather *cooked* things. And according to the Bible, God took particular pleasure in the savoury aroma, the *re'ach nicho'ach*, of the burnt meat, grain, and incense offerings. A notable expression of this taste preference occurs in post-Biblical Sabbath dishes (slow-cooked in compliance with Sabbath legal restrictions on cooking) known among Sefardic Jews as *hamin* [hot dish] (as well as by other regional variant names, d'fina, ad'fina, etc.) and as *cholent* (or less commonly, *schalet*) among Ashkenazim, German and Eastern European Jews. Heinrich Heine's mock paean to *schalet* emphasized especially its aroma as food fit for the gods:

96

But at noon, as compensation,
There shall steam for thee a dish
That in very truth divine is –
Thou shalt eat to-day of schalet!

'Schalet, ray of light immortal!
Schalet, daughter of Elysium!'
So had Schiller's song resounded,
Had he ever tasted schalet,

For this schalet is the very
Food of heaven, which, on Sinai,
God Himself instructed Moses
In the secret of preparing,

At the time He also taught him
And revealed in flames of lightning
All the doctrines good and pious,
And the holy Ten Commandments.

Communicating Jewish Identity Through Taste

Yes, this schalet's pure ambrosia
Of the true and only God:
Paradisal bread of rapture
...

Then the princess hands her golden
Box of spikenard to her lover,
Who inhales it, fain to revel
Once again in pleasant odours.⁷

The one explicitly Jewish flavour principle Elizabeth Rozin includes in her list: 'Onion-chicken fat (Eastern European Jewish Cuisine)' accentuates both the aromatic umami flavour and the process of cooking the onions in the animal fat until browned that produces it, as anyone who has rendered chicken fat to make *gribenes* (chicken skins sauteed with onions until crunchy) can attest.⁸ Cooking buckwheat groats with browned onions and mushrooms achieves a similar effect even in vegetarian versions of the Eastern European Jewish dish *kasha varnishkes*.

3. Preference for salted, aromatically assertive foods: 'Do not eat the flesh with the blood in it'; sacrifices (meat, grain, and incense) with salt in them

In the Bible, God prefers his sacrificial offerings salted, presumably because it enhances their aroma ('a pleasing odour' to YHWH), and so should we. Thus the Israelites were commanded:

'You shall not omit from your grain offerings the **salt** of the covenant with your God; with all your offerings you shall offer **salt**.' (Lev 2:13)

'the firstborn of **a cow, a sheep or a goat**; they are holy. Splash their blood against the altar and burn their **fat** as a food offering, an **aroma pleasing to the Lord**. Their **meat** is to be yours, just as the breast of the wave offering and the right thigh are yours. Whatever is set aside from the holy offerings the Israelites present to the Lord I give to you and your sons and daughters as your perpetual share. It is an everlasting covenant of **salt** before the Lord for both you and your offspring.' (Numbers 18:17-19)

Salting meat to 'kasher' it became the way the post-Biblical rabbis assured subsequent generations of Jews could observe the biblical prohibition against eating meat with the blood in it (Gen 9:4; Deut 12:23). Hence, Jews acquired a taste for pungent, not bland foods – garlic, pickles, brisket, chicken soup, gefilte fish with horseradish, pastrami, corned beef, lox, etc.

4. Qualified vegetarian preference: ‘Better a meal of vegetables with love, than a fattened calf served in hate’ (Proverbs 15:17)

Biblically based preferences for meat were qualified. Originally human and animal diets were restricted to seed-bearing grasses and fruits (Gen 1:29-30). God conceded meat in the human diet only after the flood, to check human bloodthirstiness (Gen 9:3-6). But as the passage from Proverbs also suggests, it is more important to get along with your fellow diners than to eat meat, so even humble greens served with love are preferable to sacrificial calves.⁹ Former Pharisee Paul suggested going veggie to ease tensions between Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity caused by their divisive food preferences (Rom 14:21ff), and even today many Jews who eat meat in their kosher homes go vegetarian when they’re eating out to socialize with their non-Jewish or non-observant friends and work companions. And it’s nearly *de rigueur* in my Jewish circles to assume that some of our guests to Jewish holiday meals will be vegetarian and to accommodate them. And vice versa, when our Jewish culinary tour guide to the upper Galilee in Israel arranged for us to make and eat a meal at her Arab Muslim friend’s home in Nazareth, it was to be vegetarian, to accommodate the kosher observance of some of us. Indeed, observing the flipside of the verse from Proverbs, I ate the one thing our host served us that was not vegetarian, a freekeh soup in a chicken broth, lest my usual practice of kashrut get in the way of connecting across politically fraught Arab-Jewish ethnic lines at our mostly veggie shared meal.

98

5. Abhorrence of certain mixtures (like the Mishnaic idea of *kelai'im*): ‘Do not boil a kid in its mother’s milk’

The Biblical prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother’s milk has led to a whole range of Jewish culinary practices and preferences. Thus Jews typically use olive oil, goose or chicken fat instead of butter to cook meat. As olive oil is a staple component of most of the Mediterranean regional flavour principles Elizabeth Rozin lists, Jews in these lands found these flavour principles easily adaptable to kashrut-based preferences that avoided dairy-meat mixtures. And the Jews of Eastern and Central Europe easily substituted chicken, goose or beef fat for the lard in their neighbours’ flavour principles. But I suspect a deeper abhorrence and sensitivity to certain mixtures underlies and reinforces the separation of milk and meat in Jewish food preferences. Jewish tradition developed a whole system and conceptualization of forbidden mixtures, *kelai'im* (to which an entire tractate of the Mishnah is devoted) to be avoided in other spheres, such as the prohibition of sowing certain seeds together or of mixing no linen and wool together in garments (*shatnez*). In a people historically anxious about its own political and social boundaries, ritual concerns about forbidden mixtures might be ways to displace or attend to these anxieties, as Mary Douglas has suggested.¹⁰ Is secular Jewish abhorrence for meat with mayonnaise on white bread a modern expression of this perennial Jewish concern?

6. Preference for bread, but as a cooked and refined everyday and ‘sometimes’ food, and not a stand-alone food: ‘Not by bread alone’ (Deut 8:3)

In the Bible, God definitely wanted grain-based offerings, but if we still went by the kind of bread God preferred, we’d be eating flour ground finely, cooked with oil and salt in an oven, in griddles, or pans, but without yeast or honey, i.e. savoury and unleavened. Even roasted whole grains, ‘crushed heads of new grain roasted in the fire with oil’ (not unlike freekeh in contemporary Arab cuisine) with incense, was acceptable to God and his priests as a food offering (Lev. 2:14). Apart from the basic ingredients of finely ground flour, oil and salt, they’re a far cry from the braided, usually sweetened, egg-enriched and definitely leavened challah typically found on modern Jewish Shabbat tables.

Challah itself is a Biblical word, referring to one of the shapes of unleavened bread (*hallot matzah!*) fit for a *minhah* grain offering. Later, challah came to mean the portion of dough Jewish bakers (notably Eastern European Jewish women) separated from their loaves before baking them, to be burnt as God’s portion, a memorial of the sacrifices Jews no longer practice since the destruction of the Temple. Technically, it’s this separation that makes the Sabbath and holiday Jewish breads challah (even *matzah* has challah taken from it before being roasted), not its ingredients or shape. That comes from the braided sweet holiday breads Jews in medieval Germany adopted from their neighbours’ celebratory propitiatory *berchisbrod* offerings made to their Teutonic crone goddess Berchta, also known as Holle, according to Gil Marks.¹¹

Liturgically, a Jewish meal is not a meal unless bread is served over which the bread blessing *ha-motzi* is recited. The shapes of challah can vary seasonally (braided loaves weekly on Shabbat, round loaves often with raisins added at the New Year/Sukkot season, unleavened *matzah* during Passover and a special Mt. Sinai-shaped ‘Seven Heavens’ loaf for Shavuot). There are ordinary Jewish breads, too, Middle Eastern flat breads like pita (which non-Ashkenazic Jews probably used for holiday *hallot* until they adopted the Ashkenazic style loaves, especially in Israel) and the pungent pumpernickel and other ryes preferred by Eastern European Jews. The aromatic, earthy umami flavours of these whole grain breads seem closer to those of the Biblical *minhah* offerings.

Finally, Jewish breads (e.g. two loaves of challah on Shabbat) are associated with the miraculous manna the Bible says God provided us in the wilderness after our rescue from Egypt, suggesting not only bread’s heavenly origin, but its being a particular expression of God’s care for His people. The ‘not by bread alone’ quotation from Deut 8:3 refers to the miracle of manna; it is ‘not by bread alone, but all that comes out of (*motza*) of the mouth of the Lord’ that one needs to live. Bread is pedagogical food: food for thought as well as food for the body. It is a collaboration between human effort and divine grace; even the manna was ground, seethed or baked into cakes (Nu 11:9; Ex 16:23). Let’s say that there’s a Jewish taste preference for bread as both ordinary and extraordinary food, a regular (plain, whole grain; daily *minhah* offerings) and

‘sometimes’ food (i.e. special variations for the holidays; the one-shot but remembered miracle of the manna). Bread is the Jewish ‘go-with’ starch; while one can make other ethnic groups’ metonymic grains (e.g. rice, maize or millet) ‘Jewish’ by applying other Jewish flavour principles to them, wheat bread as described here is itself a Jewish flavour principle.

7. Preference for ‘Song of Songs’ flavour combination – sweet with bitter: Passover food – *charoset*, with *maror*, bitter herb: ‘sweetening the bitter’

Jews have a Song of Songs-inspired sweet tooth, a preference for combining the sweet with the bitter or with other tastes unpleasant by themselves. Thus, for the Jewish Passover dish *charoset*, the Talmud views the verse ‘Under the apple tree I aroused you’ (Song of Songs 8:5) as both an allusion to the Exodus from Egypt and the starting point for a recipe. In the Talmud’s view, apples have an ‘acid’ taste which the aromatic spices and fruits of the Song of Songs temper. Thus around the world Jews have incorporated cinnamon, nuts, raisins, dates, figs and pomegranates into recipes for *charoset*. This Jewish flavour principle is virtually identical to Elizabeth Rozin’s cinnamon-fruit-nut Central Asian flavour principle. Some Jewish communities’ addition of clay dust as an ingredient – a mnemonic for the bricks Israelite slaves made – is a literal take on the word that may have given *charoset* its name; *cheres* is Hebrew for ‘clay’.¹² The Hillel sandwich of matzoh, bitter herb, and sweet *charoset* eaten during the Passover seder explicitly spells out the flavour principle of sweetening the bitter, and subsequent Hasidic Jewish commentators turn this flavour principle in to a theological principle. The human condition necessarily combines the bitter and sweet.¹³

100

The principle of sweetening the bitter, or, better, of combining the sweet with other preferred tastes, can be expanded into a preference for ‘good mixtures’ that I call ‘the *tzimmes* principle’ (as opposed to abhorrent ones). The more festive the occasion, the more sweet, meaty, rich ingredients you add to the simple carrot dish *tzimmes*: On the harvest holiday of Sukkot, ‘The Holiday’, add meat and sweet dried fruits to it. On the festival of Passover, one can make *tzimmes mit a knaidl* (matzah ball). And every Jewish Sabbath and holiday meals is made more joyous by serving meat, and especially wine, as the Talmud says, ‘there is no joy/celebration without wine!’. It’s similar to the principle of meal elaboration in Mary Douglas’s ‘Deciphering a Meal’.¹⁴

8. Preference for talked-about food: ‘Saying words of Torah about the table over the table’ (m. Avot 3:4)

Jews preferred their food to be accompanied with talking. That both elevates it and makes it feel Jewish. Thus the rabbinic tradition:

If three have eaten at one table and have not spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as though they had eaten of the sacrifices of the dead, for it is written (Isaiah 28:8) ‘The

Communicating Jewish Identity Through Taste

tables are full of vomit and excrement, no place [for anything else].’ But if three have eaten at one table and have spoken over it words of the Torah, it is as if they had eaten from the table of God [lit., ‘The Place’], for it is written (Ezekiel 41.22) ‘He said to me, ‘This is the table which is before the LORD.’

Jewish celebrations are often meal rituals built around saying blessings or pertinent scriptural passages about foods before and after eating them, such as in a Shabbat dinner, the Passover seder, and the Tu Bishvat Seder on the New Year for the Trees, at which one recites blessings and scriptures praising tree fruits and the ‘Seven Species’ (the plant foods of the Promised Land mentioned next). The proliferation of Jewish cookbooks – far out of proportion to the world’s Jewish population – is a modern, secular version of this preference for talked-about food.

9. Preference for Middle Eastern vegetarian flavours: foods of ‘the promised land’ – The Seven Species: ‘The Lord is bringing you into a land with wheat, barley, grape (wine), fig, pomegranates, olive (oil), and date (honey)’ (Deut 8:7-8)

The establishment of the state of Israel has revived Jewish preferences for the ‘Middle Eastern’ vegetarian flavours of the foods native to the land of Israel, and praised in the Bible as the seven species of ‘wheat, barley, grape (wine), fig, pomegranates, olive (oil), and date (honey)’. Thus we have in Jerusalem today:

The Eucalyptus Restaurant, owned and led by Chef Moshe Basson, serv[ing] a modern interpretation of biblical cuisine. Chef Basson’s passions for biblical culture drove him to research and resurrect recipes, spices, and local and wild herbs that were part of the traditional cuisine, and were neglected and nearly forgotten for centuries. Every dish has its origins in biblical scenes and all the spices and herbs used grow, as in ancient times, in the surrounding hills of Jerusalem and Judea.¹⁵

101

And the tasting menus there have Biblically-themed names: the ‘King David Feast’, ‘Shir Ha-Shirim [Song of Songs] Feast’ and the ‘Queen of Sheba Feast’. However, these Jewish Israeli taste preferences are also Palestinian Arab taste preferences, and Jewish cultural appropriation of them, unlike the cultural appropriation of all the other flavour principles from cultures in which Jews were subject minorities, are much more politically charged and sensitive. Since much of the Jewish Israeli population came from the Middle East and North Africa, they originally acquired their taste preferences as minorities in dominant cultures. Thus many Israeli Jews brought Rozin’s Middle Eastern and North African flavour principles like ‘Lemon-parsley (Middle East), Tomato-Cinnamon (Middle East, Greece), Garlic-cumin-mint (Northeast Africa), and Cumin-coriander-cinnamon-ginger + onion and/or tomato and/or fruit (Morocco)’ to Israel, and indeed their Ashkenazi Jewish neighbours acquired them from them in turn. But if one lists the dishes Jews in and out of Israel identify as Israeli Jewish – such as

hummus, felafel, 'Israeli Couscous' (like *maftoul* or *mograbieh*), *maqluba* (the featured, dramatically presented Biblical dish at Eucalytus) or baklava – they're all staples of Palestinian Arab cuisine.¹⁶ This Jewish flavour principle thus communicates both belongingness and divisiveness among people, though in a sense, that's true of all of Rozin's ethnic terroir-based flavour principles. At the risk of sounding naively romantic, perhaps the missing ingredient is love.¹⁷

10. Preferences for seasonal food: 'Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you. Do this at the appointed time in the month of Aviv'

Finally, there's a strong preference for eating food in its Jewish season. Few Jews eat charoset except during Passover! So for Passover: matzah and charoset, no leaven, exceptional quantities of eggs, dense and crunchy textures, sweetness, maybe homemade gefilte fish for a change; fried crispy textures like latkes at Chanukah; hamentaschen at Purim; and dairy foods at Shavuot. It still weirds me out to see hamentashen available at some Jewish bakeries year round. Or better, I have no urge to eat them except around Purim. Where one eats Jewish food seasonally can make a difference. For the seven days of Sukkot many Jews eat outside in the *sukkot* they or others build, decorated with fall seasonal fruits. Easily conveyed one-dish casseroles or pies and harvesty fall foods predominate, warm and hearty foods, especially, as the nights can start to get colder. My point is that non-edible 'ingredients' can play a part in Jewish flavour principles – the timing and setting!

102

Conclusions

Jewish food and food practices need not be reduced to coercive dietary laws prescribing what to eat (or not), with whom and when. Jewish flavour principles, as opposed to Jewish food laws, provide a kind of script that maintains a basic sense of being grounded in our physical environment, the natural seasons, and our relationships with people, our own and Others. Jewish flavour principles are a diasporic strategy for maintaining cultural continuity and identity, while allowing for a great degree of flexibility and adaptability. Jewish flavour principles attach Jews to a kind of terroir, or better, terroirs:

1. Terroirs where the vagaries of Jewish history have placed and displaced Jews globally
2. Terroir of the fictive world of ancient Israel in the Bible, with its geography and seasons
3. Terroir of Torah – the Biblical and post-Biblical stories and rituals that 'evaluatively condition' the sensory topography of these other terroirs.¹⁷

Communicating Jewish Identity Through Taste

Jewish flavour principles provide intrinsic rewards. The stories and rituals that shape them make the foods concocted through them taste better. The stories and rituals, that is, the 'religious' components of the Jewish flavour principles allow for a kind of role-playing that makes 'food a *flexible* symbolic vehicle for Self-identity, precisely through the invocation of "inflexible cultural stereotypes which link particular foodstuffs to particularized local identities".¹⁹ Finally, Jewish flavour principles work as midrash, applying old wisdom to new situations in creative, dynamic, imaginative, adaptive and spiritually sustaining ways.

Grounding a Jewish culinary philosophy in certain taste preferences, or, for that matter, any culinary philosophy in specific flavours and combination of flavours, has two particular advantages for the groups that practice them. First, there is a built-in incentive for practicing the culinary philosophies communicated through evaluatively conditioned taste preferences: the pleasure in eating the foods that carry the cultural values. Not only are double braided challah loaves on Shabbat, cinnamon-nut flavoured charoset on Passover, pungent pastrami on rye at the Second Avenue Deli and freekeh-stuffed grape leaves shared by Muslims and Jews in Nazareth good to think, they are also good to eat!

Second, culinary philosophies grounded in taste preferences direct us to the foods that meet our biological-nutritional and social needs. In other words, our taste preferences are meant to be evolutionarily adaptive, so that time-tested Jewish (or Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, Meso-American, etc.) culinary philosophies should be 'good' for us, that is, nutritionally and ecologically sustainable.

In that sense, I hope what I've argued here suggests a way to re-couple what John Prescott calls the modern 'decoupling of pleasure and nutrition' with its detrimental consequences for both our health and our pleasure.²⁰ Jewish flavour principles, 'culinary midrash' – just as other time-tested culinary philosophies – can re-embed its practitioners in corporeal situations when they re-couple what tastes communicate through the mouth with what words communicate through the mouth, and to what the natural world (to which we often forget we belong) communicates to us through our mouths.

103

Notes

1. Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 10.
2. John Prescott, *Taste Matters: Why We Like the Foods We Do* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), p. 150.
3. Prescott, p. 69. About evaluative conditioning Prescott says, 'it is possible that we automatically form associations between the context or environment in which the exposure occurs and the exposed item [...T]he context in which a food is consumed is obviously a crucial part of the eating experience and thus the degree to which a food or meal is pleasurable. It has been shown that a familiar food or meal will be enjoyed more if it is eaten in an environment that is highly regarded'.
4. That I approach the 'myth-ritual complex' of Jewish food from both insider and outsider perspectives is particularly important. Religious studies scholar and comparatist Jeffrey Kripal calls this interpretative dynamic the 'Insider-Outsider Möbius': 'There are no myths inside a religious worldview, but

every religious narrative is a myth to someone standing completely outside of it' (*Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms* (Chichester: Wiley/Blackwell, 2014), p. 139). As such I am 'aware of and sensitive to this insider-outsider "flip", that is, whether [I am] "inside" or "outside" a particular myth-ritual complex [...]. To the extent that we all inhabit a language and culture, we are all living inside a story and acting it out, be this religious or secular in nature. The central question then becomes: Are we aware of this?' I think I am.

5. 'Barbecue is like kashrut for goys' (*Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York, Penguin, 2013), pp. 98-99).
6. See Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, 'Meat-Eating and Jewish Identity: Ritualization of the Priestly "Torah of Beast and Fowl" (Lev 11:46) in Rabbinic Judaism and Medieval Kabbalah', *AJS Review*, 24.2 (1999): 227-62.
7. 'Princess Sabbath', trans. by Margaret Amour, in *The Standard Book of Jewish Verse*, comp. by Joseph Friedlander, ed. by George Alexander Kohut (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1917), ll. 97-144. (Sherry Ansky in her Hebrew book on cholent, *Hamin*, translates Heine's 'pleasant odors' as *re'ach nicho'ach* ((Jerusalem: Keter, 2008), p. 62).
8. 'Flavour Principles: Some Applications', *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. by Carolyn Korsmeyer and David Howes (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 43.
9. See Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "'Better a Meal of Vegetables with Love": The Symbolic Meaning of Vegetables in Rabbinic and Post-Rabbinic Midrash on Proverbs 15.17', *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 104.1 (2014). pp. 46-56.
10. 'Deciphering a Meal,' *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (January 1, 1972), pp. 61-81.
11. 'Challah', *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), p. 98.
12. Susan Weingarten, 'Charoset', *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005*, ed. by Richard Hosking (Totnes, UK: Prospect Books, 2006), p. 424.
13. E.g. in the Sfas Emes's nineteenth-century commentary on the Passover haggadah: 'And therefore we need to eat the bitter herb because we are now in exile, and by eating the bitter herb [with the matzah and charoset] we are able to sweeten the bitterness on this night. And thus when swallowing the bitter herb, we will not feel the taste of the bitter herb more than the matzah, but the bitter herb is sweetened now'.
14. Douglas, pp. 67-68.
15. Ronny Basson, 'About Us', *Eucalyptus* <<http://www.the-eucalyptus.com/restaurant/our-story/>> [accessed 24 July 2012].
16. Liora Gvion, *Beyond Hummus and Falafel: Social and Political Aspects of Palestinian Food in Israel* (University of California Press, 2012).
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