

Jewish Food = Jewish Identity

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December 2002

In an area largely populated by white protestant families, the congregation of B'nai Temple Israel has managed to settle and thrive despite their minority status. The Jewish faith is one that places a great deal of importance on the preservation of the past, and this emphasis has been a driving force behind the activities of the temple. One of the ways in which they preserve their heritage is through their foodways. In large part, it is this deliberate perpetuation of food-based traditions that has allowed B'nai Israel to flourish and retain their sense of identity and to pass it down to other generations.

Judaism uses food to reinforce identity and a sense of heritage both within the home and in the congregation as a whole. One example of a tradition in which the family celebrates their heritage is the Passover Feast. Passover is one of the most important Jewish holidays. However, the entire temple does not celebrate together. Instead, individual families prepare their own Seder meal. The reason for this, says Rivka Stein, is that "The Passover meal is a personal experience. Families would rather observe the holiday in their own homes where they can grow closer as a family." One reason that Passover is such a personal thing is because, as stated in the Passover service, "In every generation one must look upon himself as if he personally had come forth from Egypt." This demonstrates a desire to return to a sacred time in which "a primordial mythical time [is] made present. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past," which in this case is

the Passover (Eliade 68). In addition, the meal would be extremely costly for the entire temple to take on.

The temple does occasionally celebrate with meals for the entire congregation, as is the case of the Chanukah Brisket Dinner. The dinner is significant because it is one of the few all-inclusive meals that features meat. Serving meat is so rare because special care must be taken to ensure that the meal is entirely kosher. The temple frequently has potluck-style meals in which members prepare food at home to bring to the temple; however, no meat can be served if it was not prepared in the temple kitchen. At the Chanukah Brisket Dinner, brisket (a cut of roast beef) is served with side items such as a green bean casserole, potatoes, and doughnuts. It is all made in the temple kitchen so that the food can be carefully monitored to guarantee that it is entirely kosher.

Cooking and eating as a group are important parts of life at the temple, especially for women. When they cook together, the women of the congregation share their lives with each other. They exchange memories and recipes, with the older women passing down their knowledge and experiences to the younger. This ensures that traditions and even a sense of communal identity will continue to perpetuate itself. Also, the congregation sees these women as mothers and grandmothers to the entire community, who bring their people "both learning and sustenance" (Dean 2). Eating together also affects the group, as it gives the temple a chance to have fellowship and bond with one another, creating friendships that ensure that members will be there for each other during times of tribulation.

These deep-seated friendships are also important because they help to provide a sense of identity and an understanding amongst individuals. Eating as a group can be so

powerful due to the sense of *communitas* that arises in such a setting. As member Shelia Tanenbaum says, "Strangers don't eat together. Once you break bread together, you're not strangers anymore." Author Mary Douglas echoes that sentiment when she writes, "Drinks are for strangers [...] meals are for family, close friends, honored guests" (41). Here, social barriers are broken down and a sense of equality pervades the atmosphere. Members practice "open commensality" as class, race, and grudges cease to matter as the group fellowships over a good meal (Crossan 68).

It is through meals like this that the community grows stronger in its identity. While the kosher dietary laws have long been a deep-seated component of food traditions in the Jewish faith, those at B'nai Israel Temple are rapidly moving away from these stringent requirements. The temple is affiliated with Reform Judaism, which does not place so much emphasis on the purity laws, but rather tries to keep meals "kosher-style." This involves using at least some kosher products in the food preparation and observing the main kosher laws, such as not mixing meat and milk. However, when dining as a group, they still prepare strictly kosher foods out of respect for those who do still observe the dietary laws.

Once one of the key identifying trademarks of the Jewish faith both to insiders and outsiders, the kosher laws are a rapidly dying institution in this community. One can observe the decline even from generation to generation. Helen Price explains how "My mother was very careful to try and keep kosher. She would spend hours soaking raw chicken in saltwater to get all the blood out. She had a special platter and tools specifically for preparing kosher food. We of course had separate sets of dishes for meat and milk as well as for Passover. Me, I still try to be mindful of the laws. I also try to

keep a kosher kitchen, but I'm not nearly as strict about it as my mother was. My daughter, though, only observes kosher-style and does not keep a kosher kitchen." One reason that the dietary laws have survived at all could be that, as Mary Douglas explains, "It would seem that whenever a people are aware of encroachment and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk." (Douglas 52)

The dietary laws of the Jewish faith have always set its members apart from outsiders, as Jews have often been seen as outsiders wherever they have settled. The difference here is that the Jewish population has been assimilated into the surrounding community, thus weakening their need to set themselves apart so vividly, causing these "barrier[s] of exclusion" to become less and less important. (53) In addition, this more lenient attitude towards food preparation simply follows typical American trends of today, in which few people wish to put forth much effort to prepare an everyday meal.

There is, however, still a need for this community to distinguish itself, both from the inside and to outsiders. The annual bake sale at the temple has become one such an example of a distinguishing trademark. While all of the food is still kosher, the fact that the food is simply made and sold at the temple by Jewish people seems to set it apart as Jewish. Some of the food is traditional, but much of it is not. For example, the sour cream coffee cake, the dessert most in demand, is not Jewish. Yet it too is considered "Jewish" by both outsiders and insiders. The blending of Jewish and regional foods is nothing new, however. According to Marcie Cohen Ferris, southern Jewish women have been blurring the line between the two for centuries. She explains how "some women... chose to blend the cuisines by adding pecans, fresh tomatoes, okra, butter beans, and sweet potatoes to

their holiday menus, and substituting regional specialties such as fried chicken, gumbo, and beef ribs for the traditional roasted chicken at Friday evening Sabbath suppers."

Today, she says, "Jewish women effectively blend and distinguish southern and Jewish foods in ways that celebrate the distinctive foodways of both the region and their Jewish culture" (Ferris 16). This blending of foodways is seen in the temple's cookbook as well, titled A Little Bit of This & A Little Bit of That. It includes recipes for traditional Jewish foods, such as "Traditional Gefilte Fish," "Cholent," "Nicha's Noodle Kugel," and "Rabbi Cohon's Favorite Rugelach," as well as Southern fare, such as "Chicken Pot Pie," "Sweet Potato Souffle," and "Corn Muffins."

In conclusion, food is an integral part of the Jewish community in Spartanburg. As Dot joked, "You know what they say about Jewish people. You can't get two of them together without eating!" Food acts a vehicle through which members are able to experience *communitas* and share in fellowship. Foodways have helped the members of B'nai Israel Temple preserve their identity despite the fact that to some extent they have assimilated into Southern culture.

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