

Vayikra April 1, 2017

וּנְפֹשׁ, כִּי-תִקְרִיב קֶרֶבֶן מִנְחָה לַיהוָה--סֶלֶת, יִהְיֶה קֶרְבָּנוֹ

Leviticus 2:1 *When a person presents a meal offering to Adonai, the offering shall be of choice flour.*



From the opening pages of Torah, we observe the significant role of food in the Jewish narrative. Adam and Eve's "tasting" of the forbidden fruit resulted in their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Noah cooked offerings for Adonai, who, after smelling the pleasing odor, exclaimed, "Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind." Abraham and Sarah's hospitable baking, Jacob's pivotal pot of stew - these are just a few examples that highlight the importance of gastronomy in Jewish tradition.

This week's portion relates the varied ways food was prepared - as offerings to Adonai and as meals to sustain the priests. The details are meticulously outlined - the preparations must be exact, ingredients are to be choice, some recipes call for baking (Lev. 2:4), some for cooking on a griddle (Lev. 2:5), and still other offerings are to be fried (Lev. 2:7). Indeed, food and food preparation in ancient Israel were more than just noteworthy, they were central to the development of the Israelite community and consequently to the Jewish people.

The food scene in modern Israel is one lens through which we can trace the evolution of the land's people and culture. By examining cooking methodology, use of particular ingredients, the agricultural industry, and regional claims of "whose food is it anyway?" we get a taste from the bottomless melting pot that is Israel. The recent film by Michael Solomonov, [In Search of Israeli Cuisine](#), illustrates the differing opinions about whether there is an "Israeli" culture. Is the country too young, too multicultural from the diverse immigrant cultures, too heavily influenced by previously residing and neighboring Arabs?

Hebrew University blogger Eythan-David Volcot-Freeman points out that gastronomy illustrates the tendency to oversimplify modern Israel's cultural complexities. In one [blog post](#), he asserts that diaspora

Jews, when asked about Israeli food, will refer only to the classic standards of *hummous*, *felafel*, and *shwarma*. But, he claims: “presented with the same query, a sabra (native-born Israeli) would likely describe a typical Israeli meal featuring Middle Eastern hummus as a starter, a Central European turkey schnitzel as an entrée, Turkish eggplant salad on the side, and a fresh native fruit for dessert.”

Still others see food as an excellent non-threatening entryway to foreign relations. Filmmaker Trevor Graham believes in the possibility of food contributing to Israeli peacemaking efforts, as exemplified in his 2008 movie: “[Make Hummus Not War](#).” In his wanderings around Israeli Jewish and Arab neighborhoods, Graham finds the common bond between the two peoples in their shared food group: hummus! Furthermore, a [Food and Wine magazine](#) article tells of the serendipitous meeting of Palestinian and Israeli chefs Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi in London. They now own a restaurant that serves up Middle Eastern fare boasting cross-cultural synergy. Roxanne Gold writes about the two chefs’ collaborative cookbook entitled: [Jerusalem](#). She states, “with more than 60 religious and ethnic communities, [Jerusalem] is a lodestar for spirituality, sharing and healing, along with a full measure of continuing strife.” In using the cookbook, Gold asserts, “we hold in our hands a gastronomic overlay to the region's millennial conflicts, through a universal experience that connotes peace and above all, pleasure.”

Through food, we can learn and teach about the history of Israel’s people. There was an inevitable fusion and overlap of Israeli society created by the merging of many immigrant populations. A look at past and recent *aliyot* will shed light on the many cultural influences on Israel’s gastronomic scene. The growth and recognition of Israeli culture on the global scene is easily recognized through food and wine. In [The Book of New Israeli Food: A Cultural Journey](#), author, prestigious food critic, and publisher of the culinary magazine *Al HaShulchan*, Jana Gur explains: “In less than thirty years, Israeli society has graduated...to a true gastronomic haven.”

One need not limit the teaching of Israel’s history, culture, and current events to the more commonplace use of maps and textbooks; rather serve up something much tastier that mirrors our biblical way of connecting people with the Divine and one another.

Discussion Questions:

1. How can Israel’s diverse and varied food culture be a window through which we see the complexities of the country’s multi-ethnic society?
2. How has food played a part in Israel’s economic and global prosperity?

Additional References:

Gold, Roxanne. "Israel’s Emerging Food Scene." The Blog: Read All About It. December 8, 2013. Accessed March 21, 2017.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rozzanne-gold/cookbooks-emjerusalem-a_b_4062693.html.

Jan Gur, [The Book of New Israeli Food: A Cultural Journey](#), Schocken Books, 2008