

Sacred Stories

A Living Commentary on American Jewish History and the Hebrew Bible

SHEMINI APRIL 6, 2013

Food Matters

By Rabbi Brad Hirschfield



Artifact:

Poster, *Levy's Rye Bread*, ca. 1975

National Museum of American Jewish History

Peter H. Schweitzer Collection of Jewish Americana

Food Matters

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“You are what you eat,” we often hear, but is that really true? Perhaps not entirely so, as demonstrated by the fact that most Americans are not walking burgers or slices of pizza. But there is, however, much wisdom to be found in appreciating the connection between what’s on our plates and what’s in our hearts.

Simply put, we eat our values. From biblical times to the present, and many times in between, as you experience in the halls of NMAJH, the connection between what we eat and the values we most deeply cherish, can be seen time and time again.

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From a piece of fruit in the Garden of Eden, to the code of permitted and prohibited animals found in Leviticus 11:1-47, the Hebrew Bible makes it clear: food matters. The food choices we make reflect who we are and who we hope to be.

For the ancient Israelites, and still central to traditional kosher laws today, that meant a code instructing people to eat in a way reminiscent of how the world was created in the Genesis story – land, sea, and sky creatures each distinct from the other – and each meal a reminder that humans, like God, are creators with the power to bring order and meaning to life.

What was true then has remained true through the ages. It’s why a simple frying pan used to prepare blintzes would be preserved through the generations – evoking not only the memory of cheese-filled crepes, but of the nurturing presence of the one who prepared and served them.

And as the iconic rye bread ads of a generation back reminded us, “you don’t have to be Jewish to love Levy’s.” Meaning, among other things, the power of food to convey profound messages, knows no boundaries. A “Jewish food” can belong to anyone able to appreciate its qualities, just as other foods can become “Jewish foods” as they become a part of how Jews live their lives and celebrate their story.



Perhaps Franz Rosenzweig said it best when teaching that some day, a grandmother’s recipe for gefilte fish will be passed down with the same sense of tradition as formal commandments or customs. Why? Because at the end of

the day, even if we are not defined entirely by what we eat, the foods we eat help us define who we are and who we hope to be.

Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, President of CLAL, has been ranked several years in a row in Newsweek as one of America’s “50 Most Influential Rabbis,” and recognized as one of our nation’s top “Preachers & Teachers,” by Beliefnet.com.

ARTIFACTS

Poster, *Levy’s Rye Bread*, ca. 1975 (cover image)

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The Levy’s ad campaign created by the Doyle Dane Bernbach, Inc. agency featured people of various nationalities enjoying a stereotypically Jewish bread.

Frying pan of Sarah Leavitt, Medford, Massachusetts, ca. 1910 (interior image)

National Museum of American Jewish History

Gift of Pauline Levitsky in memory of her parents Benjamin and Sarah Leavitt

Sarah Leavitt used this frying pan, made by her husband, to cook blintzes.

What is Your Food Worth? is a two-year long conversation about food, ethics, sustainability, and eating Jewish, presented by Temple University’s Feinstein Center for American Jewish History, in partnership with the Gershman Y, the National Museum of American Jewish History, and Congregation Rodeph Shalom. Learn more at <http://whatisyourfoodworth.com>



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About this partnership:

Both the Jewish People and the United States of America are rooted in a quest for greater freedom and human dignity. Inspired by this parallelism, the National Museum of American Jewish History is collaborating with Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and its Rabbis Without Borders program to launch a new initiative, **Sacred Stories: A Living Commentary on the Hebrew Bible and American Jewish History**.

Sacred Stories weaves together Judaism's foundational sacred text, the Torah, with one of the most successful expressions of freedom in human history, the story of Jewish life in America. **Sacred Stories** explores our shared values by linking these two vital and compelling stories through contemporary commentary and 21st century media.

The **Torah** is a central feature of Jewish tradition. Used to refer generally to Jewish wisdom, it also refers specifically to the 5 Books of Moses which makes up the Hebrew Bible. A portion of the Torah text, a **Parsha**, is read on **Shabbat** (Sabbath). The whole Torah is read sequentially over the course of the year. Shabbat is the Jewish day of rest and begins on Friday evenings and ends Saturday night. Many Jews observe Shabbat to emulate God's resting on the seventh day of Creation. The fourth commandment is to keep Shabbat holy which Jews do with festive meals, resting, and learning.



The National Museum of American Jewish History, on Independence Mall in Philadelphia, presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Its purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity of the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire.



Clal—The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership is a think tank, leadership training institute, and resource center. Bringing Jewish insights to a wide American audience, Clal makes Jewish wisdom an accessible public resource. A leader in religious pluralism, Clal builds bridges across communities to encourage diversity and openness. Linking Jewish texts and tradition with innovative scholarship, Clal promotes Jewish participation in American civic and spiritual life, reinvigorating communities and enhancing leadership development.