

70 Faces of Kashrut

by Rabbi Brian Tice, M.Sci.

Talmud says there are “70 faces of Torah,” that is, there are numerous ways to look at the sacred texts of Judaism. Torah says there are seventy nations (3500 years later, there are even more). Could it be there are also seventy or more versions of Kashrut as well? That is not to say that kosher standards are violable, but that flavor profiles can vary from one Jewish community to another without compromising on Kashrut standards.

Jewish comedian Milton Berle once quipped, “Anytime someone goes into a delicatessen and orders a pastrami on white bread, somewhere a Jew dies.” When we in America think of Jewish cuisine, we probably think along those same lines – a pastrami on rye (or maybe a reuben) with a half-sour pickle on the side. Or, maybe it’s a bakery scene from *Seinfeld* that comes to mind – lauding the superiority of the chocolate babka over the cinnamon variety or philosophizing over the proper way to eat a Black and White cookie. While these Ashkenaz delights are uniquely Jewish, a Jewish family in another corner of the world might have a different image of Jewish cuisine enter their minds.

An Ashkenaz Jew in New York might relish a bagel with lox and capers for breakfast, with a generous schmear of cream cheese of course, but a Mizrahi Jew in Turkey would more likely make shakshouka, a baked egg and tomato dish, to start out the day with. Both options are equally Jewish, but not at all similar. If you were to visit a Beta Israel family in Ethiopia, you’d be served doro wot, a chicken stew with a specific spice signature differentiating it from hawayej blend used by their Teimani Jewish cousins in Yemen.

The Spanish Inquisition of 1492 scattered the Ladino-speaking Sephardim who had previously called Spain (Castile and Aragon) their home to several new locations across North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, Portugal, and Italy. So substantial was the Jewish population in Morocco, for instance, that the Moroccan flag and coinage even bore a Star of David for a time. Though few in number today, there is still a Jewish community in Morocco, and they have their own version of tajine (clay pot cooking) with a more African spice selection than what may be preferred in other Jewish communities.

By the next century, persecution in those locations spread the Spanish Jewry to even more remote locales, among them the Philippines and Cuba. In Cuba, pork is a staple ingredient, but Cuban Jewry will frequently be found opting for a dish for something called *ropa vieja*. It is a slow-cooked stew made from beef skirt steak. In a nation where pork is the most popular meat source, this is a meal with a Cuban flavor profile that meets the biblical dietary standard, though the skirt steak used in this recipe would not be considered kosher in some other Jewish communities. It is a cut made from the back half of the animal, which might call to mind the old Hebrew National motto – “no ifs, ands, or butts.”

Considering the number of centuries that a Jewish community has been present in Persia/Iran, dating back to before Queen Esther's time, it would stand to reason that the Perso-Jewish dining table might adapt to foods that are popular in that region. A Persian falafel is not exactly the same as an Israeli falafel, for instance. The Jewish communities of Kaifeng, China and Koshi, India are also long-established, so the kosher items one might find on a Chinese or Indian restaurant's menu might also be found on a Shabbat dinner table or in a Passover meal for some Jews.

In Yiddish, the phrase *kal ve-khoymer* has a dual meaning: [1] "light to weighty" (the opposite of what most of us would state as a weight goal) and [2] "a person whose head is always empty and whose stomach is almost full," meaning he doesn't think about what he puts into his body. A Jewish diet does have its limits, but in the final analysis, the menu is flexible. There are a plethora of ways to prepare the non-excluded animals listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The defining factor in Jewish cuisine is that there is no trayf... and of course, that Jews would eat it. What sets apart a Jewish diet from a non-Jewish one is that we accept Hashem's definition of what constitutes "food." No pork on my fork! L'chaim!