

# Goldilox?

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by Leonard Fein

At long last, I have figured it out. No, there is no need for us to be troubled by assimilation, that traditional terror of American Jewish life. Not, mind you, that there isn't assimilation, very much of it. But it works in exactly the opposite direction from what we've been led to believe: It is not the Jews who are assimilating into America, it is America that is assimilating into the Jews.

This blinding insight came to me as I read, just the other day, The New York Times report headlined, "The Shmeering of America," an article on the spreading (if you'll forgive the expression) of the bagel. Just four years ago, The Times tells us, bagel sales came to \$429 million; last year, they reached \$1.6 billion, and the estimate for this year is \$2.3 billion. Better yet: Since 1987, bacon's frequency as a breakfast food has dropped 29 percent, while bagel's frequency is up 143 percent. We've known which side we are on; now we know which side America's on: our side.

Yes, it is true that we've lost something in the process. The bagels that are rapidly becoming an American staple are as likely to come with blueberries, if you can imagine such a thing, as they are with onion. There are even chocolate chip bagels, sold as a dessert item. But such gastronomic grotesqueries aside, our homey stale-prone chewie is now ingested by millions of our fellow citizens, to the tune of an average 26 bagels per person – man, woman, child, Christian, Moslem, Jew – per year. Talk about "shared values!" (Note: That leaves an average of 339 bagel-less days a year, or 287 if you don't count Shabbat, on which let them eat challah, So the market, though fat, is not saturated.)

Others will detail the nutritional significance of the phenomenon. My own self-assignment is to plumb its sociological meaning. That meaning goes well beyond the sharing of our dough with others, even though it is said that you are what you eat, plus our philanthropy is well-established. But bagels are merely the doorway through the hole in

which we enter a realm of genuine understanding. Neil Gabler taught us several years back that it was, as the title of his delightfully informative and highly imaginative book puts it, the Jews who invented Hollywood – that is, this nation's way of seeing itself. Law, violinists, medicine, retailing, fiction, chess, to say nothing of sociology itself – would any of these be what it is had the Jews not arrived at these shores? And would America be what it is without law, violinists, medicine, retailing, fiction, chess, Hollywood, and bagels?

Perhaps all that is why you don't hear much today in the Christian (sometimes known as "non-Jewish") community regarding intermarriage. Yes, there are those who explain the others' calm by reminding us that a 40 percent (or so) rate of intermarriage among Jews translates into approximately a one percent rate of intermarriage rate among Christians, which is not exactly crisis level. But that misses the point.

Speaking of the point, bagels have none, which is what gives them their distinctive shape. Even broccoli bagels.

Take Melissa Kramer, for example, whom The Times quotes as saying, "Basically I think of them [bagels] as an American breakfast food. I know they probably are not, but that's what I first think of them as."

Some in our community will be distressed by Ms. Kramer's insouciance. Where are the 2,000 years of Jewish exile and the pogroms, where are the martyrs and the scholars and all the other baggage that give the bagel its weight? ("Bagel," in gematria, equals 27, while "history" comes to 114, which is 4 times 27 with 6 left over, and 6, of course, are the days of the week.) For that matter, where is the lox?

Lox, it turns out, has fewer calories than you probably think, which is nature's way of compensating for the cream cheese, a compensation devoutly to be wished.

In brief, Rabbi Steven M. Fink of Des Moines, quoted at some length in The Times, errs in suggesting that the rise in bagel sales "parallels the progress of Jews becoming mainstream." In fact, what it parallels is the progress of the mainstream in

becoming Jewish. While I say all this not in a spirit of triumphalism, I am not without some pride. We have not enticed our neighbors with pate de fois gras or other such sissy (and cholesterolly) foods, as the French have sought and failed to do, nor, as have the Italians with some success, with pizza. Our entry into the culinary lists is dense, earthy, plain. Good for us – except, of course, that if America is by this circular token becoming Jewish, are we not becoming Chinese?