

Jewishness Gets Americanized, Lox, Schlock and Pickle Barrel

Bethamie Horowitz | Fri. Dec 02, 2005

Of late, ethnic Jewishness in America seems to have taken on some new flavors. Consider the bagel.

Today, in addition to the traditional poppy seed and onion, one hears about heretical varieties like blueberry, rainbow and parmesan. And what's more, these bagels now seem to be available everywhere around the nation, whereas even 25 years ago one scarcely could find them outside of a few seriously Jewish locations.

Along with their near ubiquity, these doughy delights seem to have lost their very bagel-ness, to the point where what today passes for bagels should perhaps more appropriately be called "bagel-style bread." Their wide availability appears to have diluted the real thing, as if to suggest that the more it becomes American, the less authentically Jewish it seems — style traded for real content.

American ethnicity, as sociologist Richard Alba has noted, is typically expressed in food habits, but lately we've had some examples of Jewishness that go beyond gastronomy. Take "Bar Mitzvah Disco: The Music May Have Stopped but the Party's Never Over," a recently published book made up of embarrassing pictures from parties a quarter-century ago. The photos, solicited by the authors and posted on their Web site, function as a kind of time capsule to the American Jewish suburban world of the 1970s and '80s, where people seemed to have reveled more in the bar than in the mitzvah of that rite of passage.

It might all seem like nothing more than a sequel to Philips Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus," were it not for the book's attitude. It is packaged as a playful collective scrapbook, as if to say, "See how bizarre this was!" — and indeed, the authors' Web site describes it as "a journey... lived with an insufficient dose of irony... a story of style." The authors seem to be saying that the photographs here are so dated and unfashionable that they actually have become hip, similar to the way that horn-rimmed glasses, once so hopelessly square, now signal chic.

This book is yet another indication that today, being Jewish can be a ticket in, rather than a barrier, to entering the club. It's becoming a brand, not dissimilar to the way that Tribeca has morphed from being just a neighborhood into its role as a marker of cachet: Coach Leathers named a bag after it, and now Subaru has a car named after the neighborhood. Only 20 years ago, one had to know to decode its acronymous letters to learn its location as the triangle below Canal Street.

The idea that this kitschy form of Jewish is now cool involves a postmodern twist, where what matters are style and attitude, preferably irony combined with cynicism. Yet the social affairs that are the object of this book's laughs remain as wearying today as they must have been when they actually took place in the 1970s and 1980s. The photos

capture the bar mitzvahs as productions, all pomp but seemingly lacking any impulse to take the rite seriously in Jewish terms.

So we have Jewishness as the new enviable social status. It's ethnicity as a form of branding. But once you have the style, then what? How long will the irony retain its hold?

In contrast to this slick but ultimately banal form of Jewishness, I was heartened to hear about the Great Latke-Hamantash Debate at University of Chicago. It offers a counter-example of cultural inventiveness that seems more seriously Jewish, as it involves food but isn't really about food. Every November since 1946, scholars, nearly all of them Jewish, have bonded by debating a Big Question on par with issues like nature vs. nurture or free will vs. determinism: Is the potato latke or the Purim hamantash in fact the worthier food?

This veritable ethnic fest in high academic garb is a wonderful example of cultural invention built upon an older indigenous form — the tradition of Purim Torah, which since at least the Middle Ages included playful parodies of Talmudic reasoning and of rabbinic masters where performers and writers mimicked teachers and spoofed rabbinic styles of discourse. The debate melds that old form with the content of the elite academy, a place that in America has in many ways become a Jewish arena.

Bagels and lox has long been shorthand for the thinnest way to express Jewish connection, the kind that people may feel in their hearts and guts, but one that by itself lacks more substantive, enduring Jewish content. In contrast, the latke-hamantash debate provides us with an example that, while it involves foodstuffs, is more about food for thought and playful erudition — the tradition of scholars debating the virtues of pancakes and pastries.

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