

When people ask me how it is that I became a Reform rabbi, since I was raised in the Conservative movement, am a graduate of a Solomon Schechter Day School, and actually served as a board member of a United Synagogue affiliated congregation in college, I answer with one word, Jello.

During my growing up years, it seemed to me that the question of the kashrut of Jello was all that anyone in the Conservative movement wanted to talk about—and I just didn't get it. Perhaps if you were raised in the Conservative moment in those years, you might remember it that way as well.

Last week browsing through new books at the Saratoga library, I found Roger Horowitz's recently published, Kosher USA, How Coke Became Kosher and Other Tales of Modern Food. This book, part memoir, part history, part halachic discourse, gave me new insight into what was really going on in the great Jello debate and added to my understanding of American Judaism and its tensions around assimilation and identity.

Horowitz begins by describing a break-the-fast meal at his paternal grandparent's home. His father had invited his new fiancé and her parents to join the family, but the dinner nearly ended his engagement.

On the table that night, beautifully laid out on one of his grandmother's best platters, was a sturgeon, a fish whose kashrut status had been debated for over a thousand years, but whose status at that moment was becoming the dividing line among American Jews on the question of assimilation.

Sturgeon is an issue because of its scales. Unlike the scales of other fish, the scales of a sturgeon don't easily come off, leading some to insist that these aren't really scales. The Biblical word for scales is the same word as used for armor, the coat of mail that Goliath wore- and armor is removable. For centuries halachic authorities have debated whether that is just something that happens to be true about armor, or something that has to be true of scales for a fish to be kosher. As Jews dispersed across the world, different communities developed different answers and the Shulchan Arukh, the classic code of Jewish law, preserved both pro and con opinions, perpetuating the debate, which continued into the 20th century.

When Horowitz's family gathered for Break-the-Fast, the Conservative movement had declared sturgeon acceptable, based on centuries of rabbinic interpretation, but his mother's family was Orthodox and objected to this leniency. For the wedding to go forward, the sturgeon was removed to the kitchen.

Beginning in the 1950's as Jews moved out to the suburbs, the Conservative movement grew until it was the largest movement in America through the end of the 20th century. Until 1880, the dominant movement in American Jewish life had been the Reform movement, which opened its rabbinical school, the Hebrew Union College in 1875 and created a union of congregations in 1885. But between 1880 and the immigration restrictions that followed World War I, almost 3 million Jews came from Eastern Europe, ten times the size of the pre-existing American Jewish community. These Jews were not all observant, some were Yiddishists, Bundists, or Socialists, but because there had been no Enlightenment in Czarist Russia, none of these Jews had experience with any form of progressive Judaism. If you were religious, then you were Orthodox. But by the 1950's trying to be Orthodox in the Suburbs, second generation Eastern European Jews faced new challenges. First of all, they were too spread out and couldn't walk to the synagogue. Secondly, they were eager to participate in American life and that included drinking Coke-a-Cola and buying the new convenience foods, available at the supermarkets. Vegetable oil had begun to replace lard, and the Jewish suburban housewife didn't want to have to go to a separate Jewish bakery for all her breads and cookies. The Conservative moment allowed for some compromises, and Orthodoxy was losing ground.

Reading Kosher USA I learned that the issue with the kashrut of coke was not, as I had thought, its secret formula, but rather, the use of glycerin as a taste diffuser. This was not unique to Coke, but was a widely used method of insuring uniform taste in all bottled foods. The creation of glycerin from cottonseed oil, rather than an animal product, was a major breakthrough for Coke which became a favorite not only year round, but also on Passover, but it left open issues that would pop up again and again as chemistry entered into food production, and the kashrut of non-food ingredients would be debated.

Jello was the quintessential American dessert in post-World War II America. It had been used in Jewish homes since the 1910's when it began to be advertised in Yiddish newspapers. But despite its initial acceptance, in the 1960's and 70's Jello became the litmus test for Orthodoxy. The issue here is gelatin, which is a collagen protein, usually extracted from dead animals. The argument for its acceptance as kosher is that it is so chemically transformed that it is no longer of the animal from which it is extracted. There is precedence for this reasoning in Jewish law in the concept of *ponim chadashim*, that is literally, a new face, meaning that the bones became *afra d'alma*, mere dust, and the gelatin was a new item, in its chemical transformation. Others also argue the concept of *bitul*,

nullification, in that it did not influence flavor and was less than 1/60th of the final content.

But as Horowitz argues so effectively, the issue was less halachic than sociological.

It wasn't about the Talmud but about identity and drawing boundaries. While earlier each shopper read ingredients to determine the kashrut of an item on their own, now organizations existed to label what was acceptable to a particular community. The story of American Orthodoxy is a story increasing stringency in food supervision and also in other behaviors, such as social dancing. The very Orthodox Young Israel movement was established originally to reach out to the younger generation of Orthodox Jews, and organizing dances was central to their mission. 40 years later, mixed dancing was nowhere to be found in the Orthodox community; it was part of how they knew they were not Conservative Jews.

Horowitz also talks about more recent history including the Agriprocessor meat company scandal of the early 21st century, and the emergency of new organizations in the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform communities inserting ethics into food supply and consumption. A straight line can be drawn from Uri LeTzedek an Orthodox group to the more new age organizations of Hazon and Urban Adama, and even to our own Shir Hadash food justice committee buying

fair trade coffee for Oneg, serving whole wheat pizza to the teens, and encouraging meatless Mondays.

Eating is a basic behavior of all animal life, but the choices we make about what and how we eat are an expression of culture and identity, and so we should not be surprised that they are issues of tension within our Jewish family. 100 years ago the children of immigrants were struggling with the question of how far should they go towards becoming part of American society and how should they deal with the temptations of modernity. What we eat and what we don't eat today, reflects our own answers to those same questions.