

JEWISH WOMEN: CHIEF COOKS OF CULTURE, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY

Lesson plan for adults and women's groups

This lesson plan is part of a larger lesson entitled "Jewish Diversity and Innovation: the View from the Kitchen," which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/nov06/>.

Food is so much a part of our identity and culture that trying to examine its role in our lives can be difficult. It's almost like asking someone to describe her or his mother in objective terms.

Sometimes Jewish food becomes the primary way that people identify Jewish culture. "Lox and bagels," "corned beef on rye" and "chicken soup" have become stereotypes for the superficial ways Jews are often represented in the broader American culture.

Nevertheless, food and its history tap into issues that are key to understanding who we are. Food tells us about our identity, our values, and our histories. It gives information about women's and men's roles in the family and the Jewish community. As we learn about food, we learn how the family survived as an economic entity in different periods of history.

For Jewish women, the story of food preparation is a story of our strength and our leadership in Jewish families. Women have smuggled food to save their families during wars or periods of anti-Semitism. Many women were caught by the Spanish Inquisition due to their desire to maintain Jewish cooking practices. Women have been the chief preparers of food, often while they were also the sole wage earners. Generations of hardship and oppression honed the survival skills of women so they became fierce in their struggle to feed their children and give them the best shot at surviving and thriving.

Jewish women's determination earned them not only appreciation but also the stereotype of being overbearing and overprotective "Jewish mothers."

Jewish women have also built bridges with women of other religions, cultures, and races while cooking. Women formed close relationships with each other in kitchens while chopping and mixing, kneading and baking. They swapped and melded recipes as they formed alliances with each other. These relationships came in handy when war and unrest turned communities against each other.

For men this is also an important story. Although men have not been the traditional preparers of food, it was often the men who were the food merchants, bringing different ingredients to communities around the world. Their literacy and the common languages of Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino made it possible for Jews to set up trade routes around the world. In contemporary times, many men are enjoying cooking more in Jewish kitchens.

Today we'll discuss the relationship between food preparation, Jewish identity, gender relations, and diversity in our lives.

Suggestion to Group Leader: You may want to bring in some cookbooks that include Jewish recipes from a variety of countries, regions, and traditions for people to look at. Here are some possibilities:

- *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York*, by Claudia Roden (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996)
- *A Drizzle of Honey: The Life and Recipes of Spain's Secret Jews*, by David M. Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson (St. Martin's Griffen, 2000)
- *Jewish Cooking in America*, by Joan Nathan (Alfred A. Knopf, 1998)
- *The Jewish Heritage Cookbook: A Fascinating Journey Through the Rich and Diverse History of the Jewish Cuisine*, by Marlana Spieler (Lorenz Books, 2002)

- *Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South*, by Marcie Cohen Ferris (The University of North Carolina Press, 2005)
 - *Olive Trees and Honey: A Treasury of Vegetarian Recipes from Jewish Communities Around the World*, by Gil Marks (John Wiley & Sons, 2004)
1. The recipe for Moroccan pumpkin soup highlighted in this month's *Go & Learn* lessons explores Jewish continuity and innovation through cooking. (Download the recipe from <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/nov06/>.) **Read the recipe together and solicit responses.** Would you ever think to combine these ingredients into one soup? Can you think of other examples of Jewish foods or recipes that have become part of American holiday traditions?
 2. Batsheva Levy Salzman prepares her soup to celebrate holidays. How do you express your Judaism at home? Do you perform rituals? Observe holidays? What role does food play in observing Jewish holidays? **List all the foods associated with holidays that you know, and any stories you know about any of the foods.** (Here are some examples, but keep rolling with the group, listing as much as you can, and as many different meanings as anyone has heard for each food):
 - Challah and wine on Shabbat as remembrances of Temple sacrifices
 - Passover seder plate foods, i.e. maror for the bitterness of slavery, salt water for Hebrew slaves' tears, matzah for the rapid escape from Egypt, eggs and parsley for spring and rebirth, etc.
 - Apples and honey for sweet new year, round challah for the cycle of time
 - Latkes and doughnuts for the miracle of the oil lasting on Hanukkah
 - Hamantaschen to make fun of Haman on Purim
 3. **Consider as a group**—If these stories were all you knew about the holidays, would you know enough? Even though it is not necessarily the case today, traditionally women prepared food, and taught their children

these types of stories about Jewish holidays in relation to the foods. The foods represented and encompassed prime parts of the narrative for each holiday, and allowed everyone to celebrate holidays without needing to learn about them in the classroom.

4. Invite responses to the following statement:

“Dishes are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, a symbol of continuity. They are that part of an immigrant culture which survives the longest, kept up even when clothing, music, language, and religious observance have been abandoned. Although cooking is fragile because it lives in human activity, it isn’t easily destroyed. It is transmitted in every family like genes, and it has the capacity for change and for passing on new experiences from one generation to another. It is possible, by examining family dishes, to define the identity and geographical origin of a family line.” Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food*, p. 11.

Do you agree with this statement? Does it resonate with your experience of food culture? Can you think of specific examples in your own life that reflect this role of food in family identity and/or immigrant culture?

5. Discuss some of the following topics:

- Where are your parents and grandparents from?
- What did your parents or grandparents hand down to you in the way of food traditions?
- How did your mother or grandmother teach you cooking? Did you learn by watching her? Did she give you recipes? Did she not teach you at all?

- How was your mother or grandmother's life defined by her role as a cook? Did she enjoy cooking? Was it a burden that took her away from other things she loved or was it one way she enjoyed spending her time or both?
 - Was there ever not enough food in your parents or grandparents home? How did that affect their relationship to food? Did that influence you? Has it influenced the way you bring up your children?
 - Can you give examples of how you became friends with someone through cooking? Have you developed relationships with women from other cultures through cooking?
 - Do you enjoy cooking? Do you enjoy eating?
 - How have the stereotypes of the "Jewish mother" affected you?
 - What is the relationship between formal conversion and "learning to cook Jewish" for people who marry Jews? When does one become part of the chain of Jewish transmission? How does one learn how to cook Jewish? Also, if you come from a different ethnic tradition (Irish, Italian, etc.), do you carry your family traditions into your current life?
- 6.** There is a whole world of recipes for Jewish holidays which is largely unknown in America, recipes from North Africa and the Middle East. **Explore the cookbooks you have brought in, and consider the following questions:**
- For Sephardic Jews: Are there recipes you are particularly proud of from the Sephardic tradition? What would you like Ashkenazi Jews to know about Sephardic foods?

- For Ashkenazi Jews: Are there recipes you are particularly proud of from the Ashkenazi tradition? Have you tried recipes that are Sephardic, Middle Eastern, or North African? When you cook one of these, how do you make it feel like an authentic part of your own Jewish traditions?

7. Concluding Questions:

- How did today's discussion make you more aware of your own food culture?
- What did you learn about foods from cultures other than your own?
- Are there Jewish recipes and food traditions you would like to explore further?

Additional Reading:

Heretics or Daughters of Israel? The Crypto-Jewish Women of Castile by Renée Levine Melammed (Oxford University Press, 2002)