



## Why is this night different from all other nights? <sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: Memories are called up by many different methods. Jewish family life is so tightly wound up with mothers and chicken soup that these memories are best accessed via the kitchen. This fragment of culinary memoir attempts to convey the way in which certain foods conjure competing images of brown-eyed Jewish mothers and desolation in the desert. Enjoy already!

Key terms: collective memory, foodways, ritual, cultural superfood, Seder.

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### Why is this night different from all other nights?

Looking at family photos always stir our memories, but the organ most prone to take me home is my Jewish nose. It's not just the sight of a pot of chicken soup boiling on the stove which evokes my mother, but the smell of it. After all, what are the most prolific images of Jewish life? Chicken soup and the stoic Jewish mother, my Jewish mother:

Mama cooks dinner every night and it's such a comforting place to be, perched on my wooden stool, lecturing mama's back. I wanted her to be 'mama', not plain 'mum', wanted her to cover her head with a shawl when she lit the candles on Friday night. Wanted a mother of image, of warm brown eyes, big soft bosoms and open heart. Wanted a 'yiddische mama', which was, in fact, what I had.

I see her standing before a steaming pot, ladling out bowls of pee-yellow chicken soup. How tenderly she scoops two glistening, plump matzo balls into each one and I wonder whether Monroe really asked Arthur Miller's mother what you do with the rest of the poor little matzo? Because it's always two, you know, except for Dad, he gets three, and maybe Robin, my big brother. We all get three, in the end, but first you have to eat two and then cajole, and promise to eat the rest of your dinner. But who wants it anyway when you can eat light as air, starchy dumplings, clear broth and just the loneliest bit of carrot?

Now I look back in awe, remembering how she was always home from work with the shopping before we came back from school to spend a stolen half hour resting her swollen legs. And she never seemed to mind, or didn't let me see, as she heaved herself from her bed and the newspaper to take up her position by the stove.

Was there ever a meal without three movements? And the up and down and backwards and forwards, me too, sometimes, while the boys sat, and we served.

And I never even noticed, that she did it every day and how little we children helped and how late it was before she finally sat down and rested those legs.

And now that I know about the monotony of work that will never be finished, I marvel at her acceptance and the time that she did find for me. Ah, breathe deep, remember all the glorious matzo balls of my youth, beat the eggs, boil the water and cook my little light as air dumplings for my family. What could make me happier than feeding my baby chicken soup and matzo balls?

Matzo balls are called kneidlach in Yiddish and they are a cultural superfood,<sup>1</sup> their meaning is embedded in our collective memory and they are comfort food. I cook kneidlach and I think of my mother: broad hips, weary legs, before her stove, bestowing endless soup, kneidlach and love.

At Passover observant Jews cannot eat chametz,<sup>2</sup> indeed the Jewish housewife must clean all traces of leavened bread from her house. She cannot put lokshen,<sup>3</sup> in the soup. The Jewish mother's response? The kneidel. Within Jewish cuisine there is a specific cuisine for Passover. Matzo meal and potato flour replaces flour. Eggs, which are neither milschig nor fleischig,<sup>4</sup> are utilised to replace the thickening and binding quality of wheat flour.

Kneidlach are always served at Passover and every year mothers wait to hear, "your best ever!" Kneidlach are also eaten at other times of the year, but whenever I prepare them, that starchy chicken smell conjures images of Seder night.<sup>5</sup>

So why do I feel compelled to celebrate this meal, still imprinted on my memory when so much else has gone? It can't be God I long for. God and I, we have our issues. He sits on my shoulder too heavily, God the father. So why is this night

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<sup>1</sup> Cultural Superfoods is a phrase used by Barbara Santich to describe the meaning and value of foods particularly associated with their cultural context. She explains that:

Even when material characteristics frame food preferences, culture makes such eating habits respected, and in this way turns them into traditions. (1996 69)

These foods may be everyday:

Humble foods indeed, but in the context of today's values they assume the character of cultural superfoods. (58)

<sup>2</sup> Chametz: as in leaven, yeast. Because only unleavened bread may be eaten during the period of Passover, the Orthodox housewife must clean the house in order to remove any trace of leavened bread.

<sup>3</sup> Lokshen are noodles.

<sup>4</sup> milschig and fleischig: Yiddish for milk (dairy) and meat which observant Jews do not under any circumstances eat together.

<sup>5</sup> Seder is the name given to the banquet celebrated for Passover. Seder means 'order' and the order is written in the Haggadah, a special of prayer, song and story used to follow the order. Each food item is laden with symbolism, eaten at a precise moment and sandwiched between prayers.

Margaret Visser stresses this aspect of Passover when she says:

The commemoration continues as the annual Seder celebration, a ritual dinner (*Seder* means "order") that remembers and makes present the Jewish past, the story of which is retold by the partakers in both meal and history. Yearly repetition makes it a cyclical feast, but it relives initiatory historical events: it knows time as both linear and circular at once. It is about the creation of the world, its preservation, and the cleansing of old imperfections so that new life can begin and continue. (1991 36)

different from all other nights? Because on this night we celebrate our freedom, each of us, as though Moses had led us out of the wilderness, only yesterday:

In every generation let each man look on himself as if *he* came forth out of Egypt. As it is said: "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt" [Exod. 13.8] (sic) (Glatzer 1996/53 59)

This meal tells our story. And what a story, of loss and longing, of wandering in the desert then redemption by the hand of God. We remember a land we have never known, to which we may never return. Israel may not even be our homeland, after all who knows where Abraham really came from? But the image of the land of milk and honey is more powerful than a homeland, because it is *the Promised Land*.

What of the lands we have known, of constant movement, of exodus? For my family the Pale of Settlement<sup>6</sup> with its shtetlach<sup>7</sup> is the homeland, the old country, the cradle of Yiddishkeit, which is Yiddish Jewish life. These lands have touched us, as we have them. They have lent something to our food, to our language, to our dreams, our nightmares and our memories.

Jewish foodways change to accommodate the ways of new lands. My tzimmes, which was once a dish of hunks of meat stewed with prunes, is now a rolled roast stuffed with prunes and walnuts, it has become more beautiful. This is food which has travelled, which has its own stories. In a world in which Jews had no proper place, the home, the family became everything.

The Old World is gone. If I could return, I would find no trace of my family there. Ashkenazim have only their stories, their past is kept in family Haggadoth,<sup>8</sup> precious faded photos, in spidery hand written recipes and the meals which come from them. In Eastern Europe they learnt to live on potato, cabbage and carrot, to slow cook winter foods, to guard their chickens for their eggs, then sacrifice them to make the golden soup of healing, of legend.<sup>9</sup> Yellow like the sun, fatty globules glisten, plump matzo balls bob mindlessly beside carrot rings sliced to resemble gold coins.<sup>10</sup> The soup must be full of flavour, of goodness and maternal love. The Jewish mother is

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<sup>6</sup> Pale of Settlement refers to the regions of pre-revolutionary Eastern Europe where Jews were permitted to live.

In 1772, when the Polish territories of the Ukraine, Lithuania, Courland (now in Latvia) and Belorussia were annexed by Russia, the great Jewish masses living in those territories became Russian subjects under the rule of the tsars (before that, Jews had not been allowed to live in Russia). ..It came to represent the largest Jewish population in the world, and was the stronghold of the Ashkenazi culture. (Roden 1997 44)

<sup>7</sup> Shtetlach: (Yiddish) Plural of shtetl, the Jewish village of Eastern Europe, origin of Yiddishkeit - (Ashkenazi) Jewish life, which was rural. The so-called Jewish ghetto mentality is perhaps more accurately a shtetl mentality.

<sup>8</sup> Haggadoth (Hebrew): plural of Haggadah, the book of prayer, story and song used for the Seder.

<sup>9</sup> An old Yiddish proverb goes: If a poor man eats chicken soup, either he or the chicken must be ill.

<sup>10</sup> According to Claudia Roden: In Yiddish lore, sliced carrots are associated with gold coins, and carrot tzimmes are eaten at Rosh Hashana (the New Year) as a symbol of prosperity and good fortune. (149)

crucial to the performance of Judaism; she is according to the Bible, dearer than jewels:

She is described as a merchant ship travelling to the end of the earth to get food for her family, she wakes in the middle of the night to prepare the meal for her kin. (Schwartz 1992 69-70),

and in the days before food processors, how else could she prepare the feast in time?

A Jewish mother is a hard act to follow. A Jewish woman should be beautiful and charitable. My family shared Passover with non-Jews, as I do. We open our private world a little, show off perhaps. But as they say in the Haggadah:

This is the bread of poverty which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry enter and eat; let all who are needy come to our Passover feast. (Glatzer 25)

### **We must share our Seder.**

To find my place I must make a Seder. Seder means order. I must find my place in the order of things. Each food has its meaning and its place, as does each member of the family. Most families have their particular Seder rituals, Jewish feminists fill a glass for Miriam, the sister of Moses who hid him in the bulrushes and saved his life and therefore, the nation.

But most significantly, this is a festival for children to learn their place in the story. Its performance is crucial to the performance of Judaism. And those of us who have fallen by the way, strayed from the centre, from the family, from the comfortable suburban ghettos of our childhoods, we long for our allocated roles, the knowing who we are, just for one night, or two.

When we return to the Seder, we search for the place from which we came, to discover who we have become. I place my matzo balls in Granny's china bowls, they are lovely but more important, they were hers. Perhaps my father ate his kneidlach from this very bowl which I place before my child. I know I am performing, but this is a role I was born to play.

I first celebrated a Seder, as matriarch in my own home in 1997. The issues of gender and power, which the enactment of that Seder raised, are the issues which led me away from the Jewish community so many years ago. That Seder was in part, a reconciliation, however uneasy, with my origins. It also formalised a relationship which has never known the formality of a marriage ceremony, and was an apt celebration of our return from exile in the desert. (We spent 1996 in a Pilbarra mining town, those memories are best left unrevisited). More than that the Seder elicited recognition of my matriarchal status from my visiting mother as we celebrated Passover in my home. It expressed my respect for our origins and traditions as we blessed my new home with a ritualistic feast.

I knew the ritual would test my feminism but I also understood that ritual is eminently well suited to adaptation. It is the systematic nature of ritualistic procedures which define them. The framework of familiar forms provides enough support to allow for disruptive practice without collapsing the entire edifice. Indeed,

Rituals provide, within social settings, precise boundaries of tradition, which allow one to dare great feats with safety because the form itself suppresses any denial of tradition. (Prell-Foldes 1978 98)

That year's Seder went well so well that I held one the following year. My child was then three. I could by no means rest on my laurels and assume she might remember these. If I wanted my child to experience being Jewish as I had, I would have to produce Yiddishkeit for her. I would have to repeat the practice annually. So I have locked myself into this demanding, time-consuming practice and, of course, I'm getting better at it. Indeed my last Seder was orchestrated ethnography, rather than devotional practice as I sought materials which would aid my quest to explain how the performance of the Seder enables non-observant Jews to experience and express being Jewish.

Seder night recalls the happier moments of my childhood, the loving ritualistic yet riotous family atmosphere for which the Jews are famous, or is that infamous? What do I remember of the Seders of my childhood? The oddness of the occasion. The stress on difference which defines Judaism. The most colourful symbolic expression of this difference: the Seder with its echoes of sacrifice, suffering and delivery by the hand of God.

We dip bitter herbs in salt water and then pour salt water on boiled eggs. The egg, symbolising the wholeness and perfection of life, the salt reminds us of the tears of the children of Israel.

There are dozens of superstitions and ancient customs surrounding salt - a mysterious, pure, but dangerous substance which people have always treated with respect. (Visser 1991 158)

And it really is an odd thing to eat, bald and slippery boiled egg bathed in the tears of the children of Israel (eat of my body, drink of my blood?) but perhaps no odder than the bitter herbs, symbolising the bitterness of the lives of the children of Israel, strangest of all, the burnt bone. Well it never really was a burnt bone, just an overcooked lamb shank but they said it symbolised the sacrifices made by the children of Israel, and it made me feel that I was a member of a proud and ancient people.

"Five thousand years", they kept telling you but that burnt bone said it all, sitting in the middle of all that good food, good silver and good linen like something the dog had dragged in. And watching all of this, God, looking just like Charlton Heston in the 'Ten Commandments', yes I do know he was Moses.

And if that wasn't bad enough, the back door is left open and a place is set, for Elijah. At a Jewish Seder, a goblet of wine is set out ready for the prophet Elijah, who is invited to the feast and expected to attend. (Visser 109)

Well we all knew Elijah wasn't going to show, but it gave the evening that added edge. As though I wasn't excited enough watching the heavy linen tablecloth thrown over the table, placing little dishes of nuts and raisins up and down its length, straightening the silver, cramming the chairs together, hearing myself ask:

"Why is this night different from all other nights?"

Thinking:

"Because on this night we eat matzo balls!"

So it's not the theology which connects me with my ancestral past, it's the food. That chicken soup oozes Yiddishkeit, not chicken fat. Those matzo balls evoke a past beyond my memory, or my mother's. I can't recreate the Seders of my childhood, but I can evoke them by attempting to recreate the food of my childhood. My daughter may not remember Seder, but she will remember future Seders, and

perhaps in years to come she will also want to evoke them. My memories compel me to create hers.

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**Note on the author:** Felicity Newman is a South African-born Australian Jew of Eastern European origin. Having spent her between-degrees years in the inappropriately named 'hospitality' industry, it is not surprising that her concern is with a better understanding of the role of foodways in ethnic identification. She is a postgraduate research student and tutor at Murdoch University in the school of Media, Communication and Culture and occasionally lectures on the subject of Food and Culture. Her doctoral thesis, Dining in the Diaspora: A nice Jewish meal, attempts to show *how* foodways are learned, reproduced and serve to enable Jewish identification amongst Ashkenazi Jewry by closely examining secular celebration of Passover.