

The New Jewish Food Movement and the Jewish Consumer

Andrea Lieber



Students at the KoVe, Dickinson College, 2010. Photo credit: A. Pierce Bounds.

The line to get food from the KoVe, the new KOsHer-VEgan concession in our college dining hall, often winds around the corner. On a typical day, while the regular menu features a standard burger and fries, at the KoVe, you can choose honey-glazed salmon with a Jack Daniels pineapple topping, or an oat nut burger, each served with side dishes of sugar snap peas and butternut squash seasoned with ginger and cilantro.

Students willing to wait out the long lines say that the food offered by the KoVe is healthier and fresher, compared with the regular fare. “It’s just better,” one student declared when I asked her if it was worth the wait. A small minority of students choose the KoVe because of its Star-K kosher supervision—in fact, there is only one student on campus who observes a fully halakhic definition of kashrut. Many of those who frequent the KoVe are vegetarians, excited about the gourmet vegan choices. According to Louise Powers, one of two full time *mashgichot*, “Keeping kosher doesn’t have to mean eating matzoh ball soup. . . Anyone can eat kosher food, and we want to be sure it is tasty enough so anyone may want to. Food can be kosher *and* delicious.”

What does it mean for kosher dining and vegan dining to form an alliance in the marketplace of a college cafeteria? In some respects, the kosher-vegan alliance reinforces the popular assumption that “kosher” equals “healthy,” an idea explored at length in Sue Fishkoff’s recent book, *Kosher Nation*, which chronicles the story of kashrut’s Americanization. The fact that a small liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania is literally “catering” to two niche dietary needs is also a symbolic attempt at inclusivity and an acknowledgement of student diversity. But, what interests me most about the success of the KoVe on campus is the extent to which it is a product of what has been called a “new Jewish food movement”—a popular current that marries kashrut and environmental sustainability toward a new reading of traditional Jewish practices.

The new Jewish food movement is a specifically Jewish phenomenon that intersects with a broader, national conversation about food sourcing and food consumption in the United States. The conversation has been fueled by best selling books like Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, and Matthew Abelman’s *Fields of*

Plenty. These works, like the documentaries *Super Size Me* and *Food Inc.*, each highlight the way politics, economics, and big industry all intersect at the American dinner table. The growing popularity of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, as well as the Obamas’ backyard organic garden, are indications that people nationwide are taking the conversation seriously.

While the broader food movement in the U.S. is grounded in an implicit critique of the American consumer culture that gave us factory farming and McDonald’s, the new Jewish food movement also argues for a shift in the way we think about Jewish consumption. In articulating a model of the Jewish consumer that centers around an ethic of sustainability and environmental awareness, the new Jewish food movement offers a paradigm for American Jewish consumption in the post-Madoff era that challenges twentieth-century postwar images of the Jew as a materialistic (over)consumer. The new ideal of a just, restrained, and sustainable Jewish consumer thus stands in blatant contrast to the portrayal of the Jew as a stereotypical driver of capitalism, exemplified by overly lavish bar mitzvahs, suburban

McMansions, and stereotypes of the Jewish American Princess that had been the stock and trade of pop cultural representations of Jews for decades.

The loudest voice of this emerging movement is HAZON, a nonprofit organization that promotes experiential education around issues of environmental sustainability. Partnering with similarly focused organizations like Jewish Farm School, The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Urban Adamah, and the Teva Learning Center, HAZON's programming is trans-denominational and appeals to Jews at various life stages, but especially young adults. Providing immersion experiences, such as short-term internships in a Jewish farming community, bike rides to raise funds for environmental projects, and CSAs with a specifically Jewish educational component, HAZON's programs emphasize Jewish tradition as a pathway that opens up to an engagement with universal concerns.

The Jewish food movement's redefined ideal of ethical consumption is expressed primarily through a re-reading of classical texts, where Jewish sources are read for their alignment with more universal, contemporary values about sustainability and social justice. In HAZON's educational materials, *berakhot* over food are re-interpreted as a system of mindfulness that fosters our awareness of food sourcing, and kashrut itself is emphasized as an ethical discipline. Many of the agricultural laws in the Bible become aligned with contemporary issues concerning the ethical treatment of food laborers and feeding the world's hungry. Shabbat, in a new application of Heschel's classic work, is read as a practice that fosters restrained consumption.

While rereading classical sources in new ways is perhaps the cornerstone of any progressive movement in Jewish culture, there are some trends in this latest phenomenon that really stand out. The new Jewish food movement is characterized by what Andrea Most, in a session devoted to this topic at the 2010 AJS

annual meeting, called a "neo-pastoral" mood that echoes "back to the land" projects in modern Jewish history, which of course found its greatest expression in Zionism. Through hands-on educational experiences that introduce farming and agriculture in a Jewish context, the movement promotes a spiritual connection to the local environment through a deep engagement with Jewish texts and traditions that relate to both food production and consumption.

One implicit assumption evident in many of these reinterpretations of classical sources is that Judaism, in its twentieth-century materialism, has become alienated from the true meanings of its own texts. In earlier periods of Jewish history, Jews' alienation from the land was figured as an overemphasis on text; the Jewish condition of diaspora caused Jews to privilege text over place. Now, in the new Jewish food movement, this situation is reversed. In the twenty-first century, our alienation from the deepest meaning of Jewish texts is actually the result of our own alienation from land—from our pastoral roots, and from the primary ways of reading Jewish law in its original agricultural context. Urban farms, synagogue CSAs, and biblical gardens are the new laboratories where younger generations of Jews can experiment with a Judaism that seems relevant in a cultural moment when everyone seems to be thinking about food.

Tensions between new and classical readings of kashrut came front and center last fall when a drama erupted surrounding the use of disposable tableware at the KoVe. The KoVe functions as a single station within a larger dining facility that serves the entire student body. Students use regular dishes and silverware in the main facility, which are later washed by industrial dishwashers and reused again later. In order to maintain the necessary standards of kashrut, the KoVe serves food only on disposable plates with disposable utensils. This enables students who eat at the KoVe to mingle with their friends in the

cafeteria, regardless of what's on their plates. But, it also means that you can't bring a dish from another area of the cafeteria to the KoVe counter.

The KoVe uses all biodegradable and compostable disposables, and composts them in house at Dickinson's own 180-acre organic farm that then provides fresh produce to the KoVe. Nonetheless, the vegan student community became outraged by what it perceived as rampant waste at the KoVe. The fact that the Star-K certification authority sanctioned this waste in the name of keeping kosher was confusing—after all, wasn't environmental sustainability a Jewish value? One student was concerned enough to write about the dilemma in an independent student publication on campus, stating "The choice to use all bioplates represents a relatively fair, although, I would argue, ultimately damaging, ethical compromise between a Jewish food ethic and a sustainable environmental ethic."

Students were very vocal about what they perceived to be hypocrisy on the part of the KoVe *mashgichot*. If keeping kosher meant eating sustainably, how could the halakhic requirements of the Star-K authority trump *bal tashkhit*, the biblical prohibition against waste? And, of course, the *mashgichot* were completely baffled as to why students would even want to put kosher food on a non-kosher plate to begin with. In the field of environmental ethics, tension between competing ethical priorities is often resolved by positing a hierarchy of values. If the KoVe has to answer to "a higher authority," to quote the iconic Hebrew National campaign of the 1970s, I wonder which authority will ultimately prevail?

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