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Parashat Behar-B'chukkotai: Your enemies shall steal your recipes?



When we're lucky and the baby goes to sleep relatively compliantly, my wife and I manage to sneak an episode of *Masterchef* into our daily routine. But I must say, I've been becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the presenters' attitude towards non-European cuisines. It started when one of them suggested that a Thai dish should have "strong Asian flavours" - as if 'Asian flavours' means one coherent thing across the entire 17 million square miles of that continent. Then a contestant from Hong Kong received a stern warning about the proper way to cook egg-fried rice. It all feels just a little bit inappropriate.

Of course, food raises all sorts of complicated issues around cultural appropriation. I like eating (and making) pasta, but I'm not Italian. It's often said that curry is the national dish of Great Britain. On a visit to Lithuania, I learned that the local delicacies include borsht, latkes and other items which I'd previously assumed were 'Jewish food'. Fusion, in which a chef uses their own background to change and develop food from another, can end up displeasing the culture of origin. And let's not even get started on the hotly-debated 'Is hummus Israeli or Palestinian?' debate.

In Parashat B'chukkotai, amongst the spine-tingling array of curses known as the 'Tochachah', or 'admonition', we find: "In vain you will sow your seed, for your enemies will eat it" (Leviticus 26:16).

An early midrash, Sifra, questioned the logic of this warning. If the seed is being sown in vain, which we must assume means it isn't sprouting properly, then what, exactly, is it that our enemies are eating? The answer: in the first year the seed doesn't sprout properly, then in the second year our enemies come and eat it.

Although in either case, we end up with a famine, it is the second year of this cycle which must be the most galling. Having a bad harvest is one thing; having a good harvest and then seeing the crops taken away from our savouring mouths - and by those who hate us, no less - is far worse. This is surely the root of the bitterness in the hummus debate, the fact that its backdrop is an intense geopolitical and ethnic conflict. On the flipside, this is why there is no controversy as to whether beetroot borsht is Lithuanian or Jewish, because Lithuanians and Jews simply aren't involved in a conflict of remotely the same nature. Enmity makes every bad situation worse; it makes food go sour.

That said, we also have to remember that the verse from the Tochachah was written specifically about *food*, as opposed to recipes. Food is what is called a rival good. It can only be used by one person at a time: if I eat the grape, nobody else can eat that grape. *Recipes*, though, are non-rival. I can follow a recipe as many times as I want, and so can anyone else. I can make subtle or not-so-subtle changes, and in doing so I don't interfere with anyone else's ability to make their own. Taking someone's crops leaves them without crops; 'borrowing' someone's recipe has very little direct impact on their life. The concept is well captured by the Talmudic phrase, "A lamp for one is a lamp for a hundred" (Shabbat 122a) - and a dish crafted by one is a dish that can be cooked by a hundred.

Enemies coming along and eating the food we have laboured hard to grow is a bad thing. But others coming along and developing the cuisine we came up with - and making it shine - at worst, that has no impact on our lives, and at best it can be a great compliment. As Sifra acknowledged, sometimes it is only when others enter the scene that food truly comes alive. Enemies can do this too, however, appropriating rather than developing; lifting our recipes rather than borrowing.

What is the difference between an 'enemy' and an 'other'? What makes the difference between good and bad repurposing of cuisine? I think it comes down to attitude. While food and recipes are entirely different concepts, they have one thing in common, and that is the level of respect due to their creators. The farmer who works hard to grow crops should not have them taken without so much as a by-your-leave; the culture that came up with a delicacy should be credited, or at least treated with respect, even when changes are being made. Gratitude towards those who create the tools with which we work - whether those tools are physical foods or conceptual recipes - is a must. A patronising, sneering tone, however - the attitude of 'I went to catering college and learned the best way to cook egg-fried rice, and you, the woman from Hong Kong, should ignore what your mother and grandmother taught you and instead listen to me' - makes one an enemy.

"In vain you will sow your seed, for your enemies will eat it". In this week's parashah, we get only curses. When the Tochachah makes a reappearance in Deuteronomy, however, it is accompanied by countervailing blessings. What could the countervailing blessing be here?

In vain you will sow your seed, for your enemies will eat it...

...but...

...when you share your seed, your friends will share theirs.

As soon as the first person to travel outside their local area tasted other cultures' foods, that was the moment when borders broke down. Appropriating and sharing are two sides of the same coin, and it's the spirit in which it is done which determines whether the one doing it is an enemy or a friend.

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