



SERMON K'DOSHIM:ⁱ AUBERGINES ARE HORRIBLE

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 11 May 2024
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

1 We're all familiar with the idea of certain meats being anathema to Jews. But what about vegetarian foods? Surely they're all allowed? Yet no. And for an aubergine-hater like me, I had a great feeling of vindication when I found a significant body of opinion which rules that aubergines should not be eaten by Jews. For example, the 14th-century Rabbi Ishtori ha-Parchi of Provence ruled, unambiguously, that the aubergine is "*forbidden absolutely*".ⁱⁱ

2 It all comes down to agriculture. As we read in this morning's parashah,ⁱⁱⁱ there is a commandment that, when a tree is planted, its first three years of produce must not be eaten, and its fourth-year produce is to be set aside as an offering. Only the fifth harvest onwards is suitable for human consumption. But aubergine plants – *Solanum melongena* – only grow aubergines in their first two years. If there's no fifth harvest onwards, then there's no melanzane parmigiana for you, my observant Jewish friends.

3 And yet we all know perfectly well that, not only do lots of Jewish people eat aubergines, the aubergine is in fact an integral part of a lot of traditional Jewish dishes, especially those in the Sephardi world. In her history of Jewish Spanish cuisine, H  l  ne Jawhara Pi  ner goes so far as to describe the aubergine as a "*Jewishness marker*",^{iv} citing an Italian cookbook from 1631 urging that aubergines "*must not*

ⁱ Leviticus 19:23-34

ⁱⁱ Kaftor va-Ferach 56

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 19:23-25

^{iv} H  l  ne Jawhara Pi  ner, *Jews, Food and Spain: the oldest medieval Spanish cookbook and the Sephardic culinary heritage* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022): 99.

be eaten except by people of the countryside or by Jews”.^v It was even known as “Jew’s apple” in the 17th and 18th centuries.^{vi}

4 So how do we reconcile these two poles – Rabbi Ishtori ha-Parchi leading a cavalcade of commenators who say that aubergines must be kept out of the Jewish kitchen, and the long cultural history of aubergines being very much in the Jewish kitchen?

5 This is where we need to turn to one of the most important rabbinic authorities of the Middle Ages, the Radbaz. The Radbaz spent most of his adult life as Chief Rabbi of Egypt, where he had always held to the idea that aubergines were forbidden. But then, at the age of 90, he retired from the rabbinate (a path I fear I may end up following if the British state pension age continues to rise) and moved to Jerusalem.^{vii} On his arrival in the land of Israel, the Radbaz had the shock of his life. Because he found that people ate aubergines!^{viii} Audible gasp!

6 Now, the 90-year-old Radbaz, faced with this astonishing scene, had two choices. He could have denounced the Israeli Jews as heretics, sinfully gulping down baba ganoush in wilful defiance of the Torah’s command. Or, he could have shown a little humility and conceded that maybe, just maybe, the way he’d been practising Judaism for nine decades wasn’t the only way.

7 He did the latter. In a really quite fascinating responsum, he sets out in some detail his reasons for supporting a ban on aubergines, but then does an about-turn: נחודו לי טעם, he said: “*I came up with a reason to justify their conduct.*” He decided that a plant which only yields produce in its early years must be exempt from the ‘no harvesting for the first four years’ commandment.

8 Now, on the one hand that reason is total nonsense. He invented it out of thin air – and he even admitted doing so, using the word נחודו from the root נ-ח-ד, meaning ‘new’. But on the other hand, how wonderfully refreshing to see an aged, bearded,^{ix} traditional rabbi,

^v Ibid: 101.

^{vi} Ibid: 104.

^{vii} *Jewish Encyclopedia* sv ‘David ben-Solomin ibn-Abi Zimra’

^{viii} Radbaz, responsum 3:531 (966)

^{ix} Presumably



conceding that he might have been wrong and going out of his way to find a justification for behaviour that was prevalent in the Jewish community he was serving! His ruling was an innovation, in the sense of completely-made-up, but whyever not? Better that, far better, than sneeringly condemning his new Israeli friends as sacrilegious and beneath him. *“We should not seek to undermine their custom,”* he argued, *“... nor treat them like fools ... That only leads to ... needless enmity and desecration of the Divine name.”*^x

9 He concluded his responsum by candidly offering people a choice: *“At the end of the day,”* he said, *“there is genuinely room for disagreement about the status of the plant known as ‘aubergine’ – although [personally I would observe that] one would be wise to act strictly.”*^{xi}

10 So he, the Radbaz, continued to turn down dishes containing aubergine. For him, it was one of those little things that reminded him in his daily life of God’s presence and his Jewish lineage: for some of us it might be kissing a mezuzah when we pass, or muttering a blessing when seeing a rainbow, or cooking lokshen pudding every now and then. The Radbaz found meaning in steering clear of aubergines. But for those who took a different view, that was fine too: each to their own.

11 But there was one final twist to his work: *“One would be wise to act strictly,”* he said, dot dot dot... *“especially as the aubergine is a horrible thing that blinds people and poisons them.”* That is fantastic. After 2,000 words of minutely detailed legal analysis of the aubergine and a final, tentative conclusion that it should be permitted as a foodstuff, he finally throws in: oh, and by the way, it’s disgusting and also toxic. How much more Jewish can you get?

12 To conclude, I need add little more. You’re all free agents and we don’t gain anything by judging each other for their religious choices. You can all decide what to do and not do in pursuit of your Jewishness. You can choose what you find meaningful and what you don’t. You can opt to reject aubergine dishes or opt to eat them. But just know that, if you eat aubergines, you won’t enjoy them and they might kill you!

^x Radbaz, responsum 4:296 (1,368)

^{xi} Radbaz, responsum 3:531 (966)

