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November 16, 2010

A Thanksgiving epiphany and the Jewish obsession with food

BY ROBERT GOTTLIEB

http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/a_thanksgiving_epiphany_and_the_jewish_obsession_with_food_20101116/

“Etes-vous des consommateurs ou bien des participants?”
(Are you consumers or participants?)
Graffiti on the walls in Paris, May 1968

Google “food” and “Jewish culture” and you will get about 2.4 million results — we are a food-obsessed people. Our holidays give full vent to that obsession, but so do many non-Jewish holidays, such as Thanksgiving.

Now, there are emerging efforts in the Jewish community to turn that obsession into social action — to establish a food justice agenda that can change how food is grown, produced, sold and consumed; to make it healthier, cleaner and more accessible to all.

To understand the forces helping to turn the Jewish obsession with food into a Jewish call to what is popularly called food justice, it helps to delve into another culture in which food has also been an obsession — Italian — and look at where and how that obsession has also been turned into a call for action. In Italy, the home-grown slow-food movement and its founder and grand ideologue, Carlo Petrini, made that transition to action.

That moment of transition happened in part due to an epiphany about food and justice. It took place in February 1989, a few years after Petrini founded the Slow Food movement, which up to then was more focused on the pleasure of food and the obsessions around it than an action agenda.

When Petrini arrived in Caracas, Venezuela, on that February day for a meeting of like-minded slow-food advocates, he wasn't quite prepared for the scene he experienced when his plane touched down. Venezuela was in the midst of a social upheaval. The country had fallen into a severe economic depression, with hundreds of thousands of people out of work and going hungry.

Petrini arrived at his destination to break bread and meet with several of Venezuela's slow-food sympathizers. But in witnessing the scenes after he arrived in the country, Petrini recognized that while he was “socializing with the well-to-do, the only ones who could afford those meals, the general population was starving.” Instead of extolling the gourmet meals associated with the slow-food concept, Petrini realized that his gathering “would have been better off discussing pobillion, the national dish of meat and beans.” “Fortunately,” Petrini recounted, “we were able to get back to Italy, but only just before they closed the airport. The whole experience exposed an immense contradiction: eco-gastronomy [the conceptual underpinnings of the emerging Slow Food movement] had acquired an elitist dimension, in some places representing no more than a haute bourgeois amusement.”

There was some irony regarding Petrini's concerns. One of the origins of the slow-food idea could be traced to the December 1986 publication of “Gambero Rosso” (or “Red Shrimp”), a new monthly insert in the Italian left-wing daily paper, *Il Manifesto*. But despite its origins, slow food, for some, came to be associated with the pleasure of eating, divorced from its social context. Petrini, himself a one-time union organizer from the Piedmont region, had come to realize that the Slow Food concept of “the right to pleasure” in eating needed to address who did or did not have the right to that pleasure. This concern about equity and class bias led him and others to include the term “Fair” to the Slow Food slogans of “Good” (more pleasure in the eating, connection to nature and local food) and “Clean” (food grown sustainably).

This shift can be extended to other core elements of an alternative approach to food that emphasizes food as healthy and as local or community-based. It involves the justice-related issues of how we produce the food and the role of the producers: the farmers, farm laborers, food processing and manufacturing workers, and all those who toil at the markets, restaurants and other places where food is produced and sold. It involves the health of our eaters and producers. And it also represents, as many food justice advocates argue, the deep connections between food as culture and food as justice.

So what happens when this Slow Food ethic merges with the Jewish obsession with food? It's not only an epiphany that needs to happen when the holidays are before us, but a recognition that the eater, as Petrini likes to say, is also a political actor. And if there is a Jewish desire for social justice, then involvement in the myriad of food justice organizing can also become the basis for that transition from obsession to action.

Such involvement could include participating in helping transform the school food environment by facilitating farm-to-school programs or school gardens. It could involve increasing access to healthy, fresh and local food for low-income

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residents through programs and policy. And it could include helping initiate change even among preschoolers — whose weight gain and obesity levels have begun to skyrocket — by working with new farm-to-preschool and other healthy food initiatives at preschools and child-care centers.

The possibilities are there to reorient the Jewish food obsession into a platform for change.

Robert Gottlieb is the co-author with Anupama Joshi of "Food Justice" (MIT Press; foodjusticebook.org). He is Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and director of the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute at Occidental College. Gottlieb will be speaking about his new book, "Food Justice," at a talk co-sponsored by Progressive Jewish Alliance and Beth Shir Shalom, in Santa Monica on Nov. 21 at 3 p.m. For details and to RSVP, visit pjalliance.org.

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