

**BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES**

**Traveling with Jewish Taste**

**The People of the Book – and the Legume**

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



As we're getting ready to celebrate the festival of Purim, let's take a look at the Book of Esther before we jump into our food of the month. We all know the story in the Megillah that when Mordechai heard of the evil Haman's plan to kill all the Jews in Shushan, he sent a message to his cousin the queen, imploring her to intercede with King Ahashverosh "for her own people."

Esther must have been terrified, as she knew that to appear unbidden before the king was dangerous. If he did not extend his golden scepter inviting her to approach, it could mean a death sentence. Remember, Ahashverosh was a fickle man and easily manipulated. When his court officials goaded him into ordering first-wife Vashti to parade in front of them, didn't he go along with that despicable idea? And

when she refused, didn't he then agree to banish her for not acquiescing?

Esther really didn't want to risk her neck, but Mordechai sent her a message that helped resolve her indecision: "Don't imagine that you alone among the Jews will escape to the king's palace, and that this will save your life ... And who knows? Maybe it was for just such an occasion that you were made queen!"

Esther understood that she had to act, and quickly. She fasted and prayed for three days before daring to approach the king. The king did extend his golden scepter to her, thus setting the stage for the salvation of the Jews of Persia.

Tradition has it that Queen Esther, when she wasn't fasting, kept to a vegetarian diet to maintain kashrut while keeping her Jewish identity secret in the palace. Some scholars believe that, by adhering to her core values, she was able to gain the strength of character to go before the king to plead for mercy for her people.

According to Statistic Brain, 7.3 million American adults – a full 10% – follow a vegetarian diet. Another million are vegan, and while some may think that vegetarianism is a recent phenomenon, it has been around among our

people for a very long time. In fact, Jewish vegetarians believe that the implication, if not the mandate, for this way of eating is written in the Torah itself. They cite Genesis 1:29, where we read, "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which [is] upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which [is] the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." Not a word about pot roast or chicken fricassee.

According to the organization, Jewish Vegetarians of North America, "Rabbi Kook speaks of vegetarianism as an ideal, and points to the fact that Adam and Eve did not partake of the flesh of animals as all humans and animals were originally commanded by God to only eat plants ... God's original plan was for mankind to be vegetarian, and that God only later

gave permission for man to eat meat in a covenant with Noah as a temporary concession because of Man's weak nature."

Among the commandments that speak to the ethics of vegetarianism, one that modern vegetarians refer to is *bal tashchit*, the commandment that prohibits waste. A diet that includes meat is wasteful because it uses five times as much grain, 10 times more water, 15 times more land and 20 times more energy when compared to a plant-based way of eating.

Indeed, it isn't until Genesis 9:30 – after the Big Flood – that we read, "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things."

Hence, the popularity of brisket – but with strict guidelines as to how we obtain the meat. Vegetarians cite

scholars from medieval times to the present, including none other than the eminent Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who wrote that the laws of *kashrut* highlight the serious nature of killing a living being; they are meant to discourage the consumption of meat. The commandment *tza'ar ba'alei hayim*, the injunction not to cause pain to living creatures, is the source for the laws of *shechita* (ritual slaughtering), designed to prevent needless suffering of the animals. However, modern factory farming practices that turn a blind eye to the welfare of the animal, even before butchering, have caused new worries and support for the veggie argument.

So, in honor of the valiant Queen Esther, try making your *seudah* (feast) this year a plant-based one. You won't miss the meat.

**Vegetarian Stuffed Peppers**

Serves 9

This recipe is perfect for a Purim feast. Not only is this recipe healthy, its legume base and wonderful spices can bring a taste of ancient Persia into your home. The orange and yellow peppers provide cheerful color on a cold Adar evening.

**Ingredients for stuffing:**

- ½ cup lentils
- 1 c. long grain rice (I like the Rice Select brand blends)
- 2 medium yellow onions, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- About 1 t. salt
- ½ t. ground black pepper
- ½ t. ground cinnamon
- ¼ t. turmeric

- 1 t. dried mint
- 9 orange & yellow peppers with flat bottoms that will stand up

**Ingredients for the sauce:**

- ½ c. olive oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 1 48 oz. can diced tomatoes
- ½ t. turmeric

**Directions:**

To make the stuffing: Cook the lentils in 2 cups water until soft, about 20 minutes. Drain.

Combine them with the remaining stuffing ingredients.

Slice about one-half inch from the tops of the peppers, reserving the tops. Remove the core and seeds.

Spoon the stuffing mixture into the peppers.

Place the peppers closely together in a large Dutch oven so they are standing up straight, and replace the tops.

Pour the tomato sauce around the peppers.

Bring to a boil, then reduce to a simmer and cover.

Cook until tender, about 45 minutes.

**Poppy Seed Cake**

Serves 10

And, for dessert, a moist and scrumptious poppy seed cake fit for a queen, vegetarian or not. After all, it's not just about hamantaschen.

**Ingredients:**

- 3 cups flour
- 2 cups sugar
- 1½ t. baking soda
- ½ t. salt
- 1 t. vanilla
- 4 eggs
- 1½ cup oil
- 1 can evaporated milk
- 12.5 oz. can poppy seed filling (I like Solo)

**Directions:**

Preheat oven to 350° F.

In large bowl combine all ingredients except poppy seed filling.

Beat at low speed until blended.

Add poppy seed filling and beat for 2 minutes.

Pour into ungreased 10-inch tube pan

Bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until inserted toothpick comes out clean.

Let cool for 1 hour before removing from pan.



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Esther sups with Ahashverosh. (Image from Megillat Esther, Copyright JT Waldman, 2005. For more info go to megillatesther.com)

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at [carolgoodmankaufman.com](http://carolgoodmankaufman.com) and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.