

Traveling with Jewish Taste®

The Power of the Pomegranate

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



The pomegranate is the newest health food craze. Loaded with antioxidants, vitamins, potassium, folic acid, and iron, its juice is thought to prevent heart disease, cancer, and problems associated with aging. And, as Americans who operate on the theory that if a thing is good, making it ubiquitous is better, we have flavored just about every other food with it.

There's pomegranate juice, vodka, salad dressing, salsa, lollipops, and candy. On the non-food front, there is pomegranate-infused hair conditioner, as well as perfume and skin cream.

While it is the newest fad, the pomegranate is one of the oldest fruits on earth. Originating in ancient Persia, it traveled eastward to China and westward to Rome via Carthage.

The Moors brought the fruit to Spain around 800 C.E. In fact the city Granada was named for the pomegranate (in Spanish, *granada*), and the fruit is its municipal emblem.

In the sixteenth century, King Henry VIII is reputed to have planted the first pomegranate in Britain. The Spanish conquistadors then brought the pomegranate to its American missions in the eighteenth century. Today, domestically, the majority of pomegranates are grown in California.

The pomegranate has enjoyed a reputation as a symbol of health, fertility, and rebirth due to its many seeds. Due to the crown-like top, it also is considered a symbol of royalty.

Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Homer have all praised the virtues of the pomegranate; Juliet tells Romeo the night is young since it is the nightingale – and not the lark – that is “singing in yon pomegranate tree.”

While people concerned about their antioxidants have been rushing to buy pomegranate juice, we Jews have been enjoying the fruit since Biblical times. Some scholars believe that the pomegranate, not the apple, is the fruit that Eve gave to Adam in the Garden of Eden.

Tradition holds that the pomegranate contains 613 seeds, equal to the number of *mitzvot*, or commandments in the Torah. While a nice legend, it is not quite accurate.



Laden with pomegranates, this tree grows in a Central California orchard

I know this because my eldest son once took apart the pomegranate from our Rosh Hashanah table and counted the seeds. There were nowhere near 613 seeds. No matter; the metaphor is beautiful.

Representations of the fruit in Jewish artworks can be found in everything from tapestries to paper-cuts to paintings (My book's cover features a picture of a pomegranate broken open to reveal black seeds, signifying the number of *mitzvot* perverted when violence occurs in the home.)

Silver ornaments shaped like pomegranates, complete with tinkling silver bells, are popular as Torah crowns.

In ancient times, the pomegranate design was part of the Temple's pillars, and was also woven into the high priest's robes. As described in Exodus 39:24, we learn:

They made pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet (material and) twisted (linen) on the hem of the robe. They also made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates all around on the hem of the robe, alternating a



Proserpina, the ancient Roman goddess of agriculture and crops

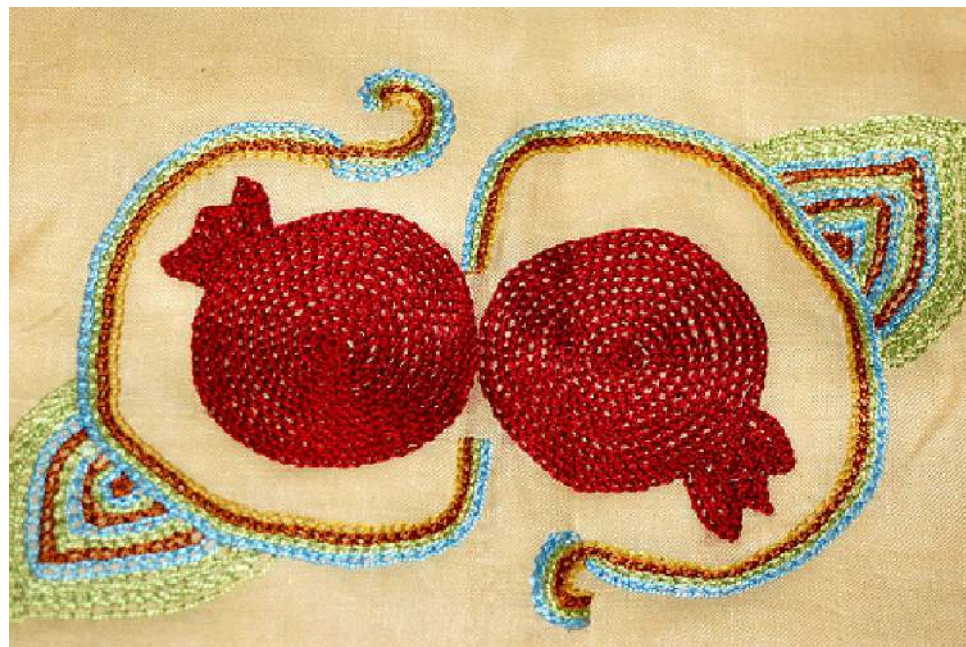
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Judaic honey dish in a pomegranate design



Hanging Pomegranate Judaica celebrates health, happiness, plenty, tranquility, friendship, success, and peace



Pomegranates decorate this challah cover

Ash-E Anar (Persian Pomegranate Soup)



Ingredients for the soup:

- 1 cup yellow split peas
- 1/2 cup basmati rice
- 1 bunch fresh parsley
- 1 ten ounce bag fresh spinach, chopped
- 1 tablespoon crushed dried mint leaves
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Salt to taste

- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 3 cups water
- 31 ounces pomegranate juice

Ingredients for the garnish:

- Olive oil
- 5 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 tablespoons dried spearmint
- 1/2 teaspoon turmeric
- 2 tablespoons pomegranate seeds

Directions:

Add split peas to water and bring to boil on high heat for ten minutes. Add rice to boiling split peas and let them cook together for about twenty minutes. Season the ground beef to taste with salt, pepper, and turmeric. Make small meatballs and add to the soup along with parsley, spinach, salt, pepper, sugar, and the pomegranate juice. Let the mixture boil for thirty minutes or until it reaches a creamy consistency. Heat the oil in a separate saucepan and sauté the turmeric in it. Remove the pan from the heat, add the crushed dry mint leaves to it and stir. Add the mint mixture to the boiling soup and let simmer for two more minutes.

In the meantime:

Heat 2 teaspoons of oil in a small pan and stir-fry the garlic until golden. Remove from heat and stir in the dried mint and turmeric. Garnish the soup with garlic and fresh pomegranate seeds just before serving.

Serves 6 to 8

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bell and a pomegranate all around on the hem of the robe for the service, just as the LORD had commanded Moses.

Other references to the pomegranate include some of the most romantic and evocative descriptions in the Tanach. In Deuteronomy 8:8, the Promised Land is described as: "A land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey."

In *Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs* 8:2, the lover states, "I would lead you (and) bring you into the house of my mother, who used to instruct me; I would give you spiced wine to drink from the juice of my pomegranates."

The pomegranate is not only used in art, however. Those readers who have spent time in Israel will recognize the *rimon*, the Hebrew word for both pomegranate and hand grenade. In fact, the French named their *grenade* after the seed-scattering characteristic of the pomegranate fruit.

Speaking of seed-scattering, be careful when partaking of the pomegranate: the juice of the fruit's seeds will stain anything with which it comes in contact.



The pomegranate graces the emblem of Granada, Spain



It's said that King Henry VIII planted the first pomegranates in Britain

Carol Goodman Kaufman, an organizational psychologist and writer, is the author of *Sins of Omission: The Jewish Community's Reaction to Domestic Violence* (Westview Press, 2003). She serves on the National Board of Hadassah and chairs the Jewish Community Relations Council of Central Massachusetts. Kaufman divides her time between Worcester, West Stockbridge, and the world.

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Torah crown topped by a pomegranate



A very old Jewish pomegranate symbol above a store in Granada, Spain

A Summer in Israel

By Jonathan Chabon

If I ever mention I was born in Israel, the next few minutes of conversation are like watching a replay over and over again. First I'm greeted with the initial doubt. Then two questions are bound to rear their heads: "Can you speak Hebrew?" "Do you remember anything?"

I'd like to say I could recall every moment. I'd like to say I could still speak my first language. But the memories I have are scattered and random, from a dinner in the kibbutz *chader ochel* to climbing on a concrete bomb shelter. After two semesters of college level Hebrew I can barely hold a conversation.

Am I actually Israeli?

I have an Israeli passport and citizenship. Legally I'm just as Israeli as the *sabra* who was born and raised in Tel Aviv, who never left the borders of the Promised Land, who dealt with the first and second Intifadas and served in the Israeli army.

In reality, I feel guilty when I say I'm Israeli. It's like adding another fact to my resume. Yes, I was born in a Middle Eastern country, but my small kibbutz sheltered me from any Arab-Jewish conflict.

I'm an American who feels like an imposter.

This past summer I got a taste of what it's like to be a citizen of Israel again – both culturally and legally. After two and a half months of *ulpan* at Hebrew University and a lot of traveling I feel as if I've moved beyond tourist to a point just shy of Israeli.

I'm not talking about just style wise 'cause I did try the

classic tight t-shirt, blue jeans look in ninety-degree weather, and will never do it again. However, the fact that I can find every five-shekel falafel stand within a mile of Jerusalem's "Old City" can attest to the matter.

Even better, I can point you in the direction of Abu Shokari, a hummus store so good that Jordanians buy it by the bucket-load in order to have enough for the year.

Besides the food scene, I explored every corner of Israel from Eilat's rocky beaches to Haifa's Baha'i Garden trying to get a full grasp of the country that I left behind. One weekend some of us from the *ulpan* took a midnight bus to Eilat, slept on the beach, and made our way to Jordan the next day.

I have never seen anything so magnificent as Petra and the opportunity to be in the capital of Amman during Ramadan was quite an experience. Our only problem was getting back into the country, as Israeli citizens are not allowed to enter at the crossing closest to Jerusalem. Instead we traveled an hour north and landed up in Beit Shean.

This happened to be a ten-minute bus ride from my childhood kibbutz. I had just recently visited the site with my family, but seeing the kibbutz through the eyes of my friends was quite an experience.

While they were comparing it to the stories they heard or the history books they read, I was looking at the differences between what I remembered

and what I saw. I felt at home especially when I was able to use my newly acquired Hebrew to prove to the guard that I was born there. His acceptance felt, in a way, like recognition that I am an Israeli, as corny as that may sound.

Not until I went to Ramallah did I feel extremely Israeli, purely from fear that someone might see my passport and that it is illegal for Israelis to be there. Only after calming our nerves with a strong coffee in a hookah bar full of only Arab men over the age of fifty were we comfortable enough to do some exploring.

We loved it.

The next day I was extremely eager to do some serious exploring of the Old City, past the warmth of the Kotel. We explored the temple mount, went through every Old City gate, and cruised through the smallest shuks hidden deep within.

We went to the Kotel on Friday night and had dinner with a stranger. It's Jerusalem's ability to absorb people, even a science major/history avoider, into its past and present that makes it so unique.

I truly think I lost a huge part of my life when my family and I left Israel, but this summer has proven to me that I can get it back, and I will.

So, a little piece of advice for anybody suffering from boredom or midlife crisis, move to Jerusalem and your life will never be the same.

Jonathan Chabon's summer in Israel was made possible by the Jewish Federation of the Berkshires. He is a sophomore at Wesleyan University.



Me with the Baha'i garden in Haifa behind, overlooking the sea



The sandstone carved monastery in Petra, Jordan. A nine-hundred step climb to the top.