

Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010), 223 pp.

When you say you are Jewish, many people (and you yourself) may ask, “What does that mean?” We have heard about the Jewish “race,” “religion,” “ethnicity,” as well as “people,” as possible answers. Thus, the chance to review a book entitled *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* offered a potential historical insight into these issues.

Rosenblum cites Shaye Cohen’s explanation of Jewish identity—which he labels “Jewishness”—as emerging in the Hasmonean period (circa second to first century B.C.E.), when the term “Judean” took on religious, rather than ethnic connotation. Judeans are all of those, of whatever ethnic or geographic origins, who worship God, whose temple is in Jerusalem. From this time on, Jews in the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods emphasized their distinctiveness primarily via their practices, including circumcision and commensality regulations. According to Rosenblum, the authors (*Tannaim*) of these texts innovate and manipulate food practices to construct a distinctly Jewish, male and rabbinic identity.

Rosenblum proposes that

Through commensality practices, individuals act out their self-conceptions as members of a group, and their public identifications with that group form distinct identities which are enacted daily, turning the biological need to ingest calories into a culturally significant activity (p. 49).

He uses “edible identity” to refer to this matrix of interrelated practices, the range and depth of which form his thesis.

Rosenblum discusses various anthropological approaches (Barthes, Douglas, Harris, MacClancy) and refutes their claims for Jewish food taboos (usually focused on the anomaly of the pig), as the data “is too slender.” He suggests that

The biblical food taboos are understood to serve as a reminder to Jews not only about how to eat, but also how to think. “Rational” man eats animals whose own eating process is itself a symbol of “proper reasoning” (the pig lacks the physiological apparatus to ruminate—literally and figuratively) (p. 49).

Pork is the metonymic food for the “other” in Jewish sources; the abstention from pork marks the “other” in several Roman-period texts. On the other hand,

Consumption of hoof-parting cud-chewers encourages the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, [and] enhances the memory, the central faculty in the mastery of wisdom.... The parted hoof reflects the

way of life as twofold, one branch leading to vice, the other to virtue, and Jews must turn away from the one and never forsake the other (p. 49).

Rosenblum's description suggests this is multisensory participation in a biblical meal, the visual consumption of material culture. The practice of eating special foods, "manna" (the heaven-provided sustenance for the post-Exodus Israelites wandering in the desert, p. 58) at special times (e.g., Passover, Sukkot) is a way of embodying Torah knowledge. Israel (the Hebrew nation or the people traditionally descended from Jacob), on both the individual and commensal levels, is embodied in these foods and commensality.

Through both theological and culinary monotheism—worshipping one god and eating one food commanded by that one god—Israel/Judeans create an identity distinct from others. The preparation of the food is directly correlated to the status of the preparer (non-Jews and women can assist, but not be the main chefs...). Women may transform food in the preparation stages, but their monthly impurity can also undermine the whole system. "One learns more about the male authors of the rabbinic texts than about their subjects, women" (p. 106). Rosenblum suggests that "rabbinic stereotypes of women reveal rabbinic understandings of, and anxieties about, their own masculinities.... Women's experiences are reconstructed on the sole basis of men's interpretations" (p. 106).

The *Tannaim* constructed a network of culinary and commensal practices that cumulatively constitute a uniquely Jewish food way by understanding certain foods as metonymic and embodying. What is probably most interesting about this discussion is that, despite the seeming rigidity of the rabbinic doctrines that forged an identity making Jews and Gentiles distinct, this identity did not require Jews to live completely apart from Gentiles, perhaps owing to economic necessities.

This is a thoroughly researched thesis turned into a book. For a broader reading public, the footnotes could have been greatly reduced and/or worked into the discussion. As the author makes clear in his conclusions, this is a synchronic historical study that relates the prescriptive texts but does not necessarily describe the practices of all Jews in Roman-period Palestine. It would have been interesting to read an excerpt from some contrasting descriptions of commensality during ritual celebrations and the impact on identity and continuity during these very formative times in Jewish history.

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