

LENTILS AND THE JEWISH CONNECTION

Why are *Ashkenazim* forbidden from eating lentils (and other legumes and rice for that matter) on *Pesach* when *Sephardim* and *Mizrachim* enjoy eating them with impunity? It's a perennial and vexing question to which there appears to be no rational answer. "*That's just the way it is*" seems as good an answer as any.

Since at least the 13th century, Ashkenazi Jews living outside of Israel have been prohibited from eating *kitniyot* during the Passover holiday. It may be that this group of foods was originally banned because it was often mixed with wheat, only eaten during *Pesach* when made into *matzah*. Another possible reason is that Ashkenazi Jews often viewed lentils with some disdain, dismissing them as a '*food of the poor*' and only to be eaten in times of famine.

However, in a break from tradition, Conservative rabbis in the U.S. allowed *kitniyot* for its Ashkenazi members in 2016. This decision to lift the ban in the Conservative movement was made for several reasons including health and changing eating habits. As gluten-free and vegan diets have become more popular in recent years, people have had a harder time finding meals that acceptable to them while still following tradition.

Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, on the other hand, have always enjoyed lentils at any time of the year and eat them on a regular basis. Lentils stewed with onions and tomatoes '*a la djudia*' meaning 'in the Jewish style' are used to break the fast of *Tisha B'Av*. Moroccan Jews often serve lentil soup during Passover.

The connection between Jews and lentils goes back a very long way, to biblical times. They are first mentioned in *Tanakh* when Jacob convinced Esau into selling his birthright for a mess of pottage. When Jacob had cooked a stew, Esau came in from the field and he was ravenous. Esau said to Jacob, "*Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished*".

Crafty Jacob saw a golden opportunity and said, "*First sell me your birthright.*" Esau said, "*Behold, I am about to die; so, of what use then is the birthright to me?*" And Jacob said, "*First swear to me*" so Esau swore and thus sold his birthright (no small thing in those days) to Jacob.

According to Jewish tradition though, the lentil stew Jacob cooked was actually meant for his father, Isaac, who was mourning the death of his own father, Abraham, lentils being a traditional Jewish mourner's meal.



**Picture: Esau sells his birthright for a mess of pottage
(Rembrandt- British Museum)**

Other biblical allusions to lentils include; Ezekiel 4:9 *“Take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and spelt; put them in a storage jar and use them to make bread for yourself. You are to eat it during the 390 days you lie on your side.”*

Samuel II: 17:27-29 *When David came to Mahanaim, Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites and Makir son of Ammiel from Lo Debar and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery. They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese.”*

Samuel II 23:11 *Next to him was Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel's troops fled from them.*

Lentils are one of the earliest foods to be cultivated by humans. Evidence of domesticated lentils dating back to the Stone Age has been found on the banks of the River Euphrates. The ancient Egyptians also enjoyed lentils and believed that they enlightened children's minds, opened their hearts and made them more cheerful.

The Greeks thought that lentils softened the temper and disposed the mind to study. The playwright and poet Aristophanes referred to lentils as "*the sweetest of delicacies.*" They also utilised lentils for health. The legendary Greek physician Hippocrates, prescribed lentils for liver ailments and for ulcers.

On the other hand, the Romans believed lentils made men reserved, indolent and lazy from which we get their English name which derives from the Latin word '*lens*' meaning '*slow.*' (In Hebrew they are known as עדשים).

The gourmet, Giacomo Castelvetro, (1546-1616) an Italian expatriate in Europe and England, humanist, teacher and travel writer, took a similar view. In his book '*The Fruit, Herbs and Vegetables of Italy*', he said that lentils were one of the least healthy vegetables one could eat. He believed that were only fit for the '*lowest of the low*' although he did allow that lentil broth was a cure for smallpox.

Lentils have featured in Jewish cuisine dating back thousands of years. Bread was, in the biblical phrase, the staff of life but next in importance in the diet in biblical times were pulses such as lentils, beans, and peas. These could be made into a pottage or used to supplement bread in a variety of ways. Lentils appear to have been domesticated in the Near East, where carbonised seeds have been discovered dating back 8,000 years.

During the ancient Israelite period, cooking pots were made of earthenware and were placed on clay stands built in a horseshoe shape, the opening being used to light the fire under the pot.

Food was also cooked in pots suspended from tripods. Both stews and soups containing pulses and other vegetables were prepared in these vessels, while garlic and onions were probably used in a similar way by the Babylonians to add flavour.

Lentils were seen as a metaphor for the circle of life. According to Jewish legend, lentils are mourners' food because they are round with no opening like mourners, who are supposed to be silent. Lentils and hard-boiled eggs are traditionally served to Jewish mourners. They also serve as a meat substitute during the nine-day period leading up to *Tisha b'Av*, when meat is forbidden (except on Shabbat).

Lentils may be whole or split, shelled or unshelled and can vary in colour from deep purple to light green to tan, grey, black or mottled. When shelled they can be orange, yellow, green or brown. Brown lentils hold their shape during cooking, which makes them ideal for salads. Green lentils have a stronger, more earthy flavour than brown lentils but they take longer to cook and are usually more expensive.



Picture: 'Red', green and 'brown' lentils.

The finest green lentils are probably the small, greyish-green variety from Le Puy in central France, which are prized for their unique peppery flavor and ability to retain their shape after cooking. They are a favorite food of French gourmards and have often been dubbed "*the caviar of the poor.*"

Black lentils, called *urud dahl* in India, are said to be one of the most nutritious pulses in the world. Despite the name, split black lentils are creamy white when cooked, with an unusual, slightly mucilaginous (gelatinous) texture.

Red lentils, or Egyptian lentils, called *masoor dal* in India—which are, in fact, orange in colour—break down easily during cooking, so are commonly used for dahl or to make purees. They usually take about 20 minutes to cook, whereas brown lentils take 25 to 30 minutes. Green lentils, which have a harder outer coating, can take up to 45 minutes to cook, depending on the variety.

Lentils are an excellent source of protein, especially when combined with whole grains (several of the impoverished Impressionist painters in France survived on them for several months in the 19th Century). They are also a good source of dietary fibre, which make them good for your digestion and may even help with weight loss, as they are filling.

Lentils also help to lower cholesterol and may help to protect you against diabetes and colon cancer. They are also rich in B vitamins and minerals, especially iron, that is needed for the formation of red blood cells, as well as phosphorus and manganese, which are good for the health of your bones, skin, and hair.

Lentils are also rich in magnesium, which is said to lower the risk of hypertension, heart attacks, and stroke. They also contain high amounts of folate, which is thought to reduce the risk of many cancers. Folate is also important for pregnant women, as it is needed for the baby's development. Lentils are an admirable substitute for red or processed meat and may even prolong life.

Finally, *Ashishot*, are a fritters dish made with lentils and are mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud. They are believed to have been eaten at the Court of King Solomon and are thought to be the 'dainties' or sweet cake cited in the Song of Songs (depending on the translation).

ASHISHOT FRITTERS RECIPE

INGREDIENTS

2 cups red split lentils

1 cup flour

1 cup sesame seeds

2 eggs

Olive oil for frying

Honey (optional)

Rinse lentils well, add to a large pot with 4 cups water, so the lentils are covered. Place pot over medium high heat and cook for 15-20 minutes, uncovered, stirring frequently until lentils are soft.

Strain lentils, add to a bowl and mash with a potato masher or a food processor into a fairly smooth paste. Add flour and sesame seeds. Stir, add in eggs one at a time mixing well. The batter should be wet but thick. If it is too wet, add a little more flour.

Add a thin layer of oil to a *saute* pan bring over medium-high heat. Once hot, spoon batter into pan making small or large pancakes. Don't overcrowd the pan. Flip when the first side is browned and cook until done. Remove from pan, drizzle with honey if desired and serve hot.



