

Sh'mot 5779

Why Jews Like Chopped Liver

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29 December 2018

On 12 December, in the Daily Mail – Yes, I'm sorry, it's very sad, but I do actually read the Daily Mail – there was an article about a comedian named Konstantin Kisin who was asked to sign an agreement which stopped him telling jokes in regard to racism, sexism, classism, ageism, ableism (whatever that is) homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, or anti religion and perhaps surprisingly anti-atheism. When I opened my Jewish Chronicle two days later, I was surprised to find a similar article, because Mr Kisin is Jewish. He refused to sign the agreement.

Now I am not a comedian, but I became so nervous that I might offend someone, that I decided to talk about something that cannot possibly offend anyone.... chopped liver. So, this morning I'm going to talk to you about chopped liver. In three weeks time on 19 Jan, we read in Parashat B'Shallach how Mannah fell from heaven and fed the Children of Israel in the desert. What did it taste like? Well the Talmud says it tasted of chopped liver. Mannah comes from the Hebrew "Man", which comes from the Egyptian Ma'an Na'ah, which means Liver chopped, or chopped liver.

Excuse me a moment, yes rabbi?

(Turns to Rabbi Lea) – Oh I'm not to talk about chopped liver, it might offend vegans and vegetarians and anyway I'm supposed to give a D'var Torah on Parashat Sh'mot, pardon, Oh Ok, very well – I'll get chucked out – Ok understood.

Right – so – Dvar Torah: Here we have the second book of the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch. The first parasha of the second book is called Sh'mot and this in Hebrew gives its name to the whole of the second book. In English the second book

is called Exodus, which rather more correctly describes what it is about, although the Hebrew Sh'mot means names and it starts off with a list of names.

It lists those who came into Egypt with Jacob. Joseph was in Egypt already, but dies in verse 6. The main character in this sidrah is Moshe, that is Moses. Regarding Moses's parents the parashah says very little. It says "there was a man of the house of Levi who took to wife a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son.

So who were they? Well we haven't a clue! Well actually we have, but we have to wait until the next sidrah Va-ayra, where it tells us that Amram, a man of Levi, married Jocheved, his father's sister, i.e. his aunt, so he married his aunt and she bore him Aaron and Moses.

No mention of their older sister, called Miriam!

I had a great aunt called Jocheved, anglicised to Jochebed, but I didn't marry her, she was married to great uncle Charlie not to Amram. Everyone called her Jocky and she lived to the age of 95. She drove her little car until she was 90, but one day she backed her Mini into a shop window and she was a bit peeved when her children stopped her driving.

In her latter years, she moved to a care home in Bushey, and me and 'er indoors went to see her. She said to the missus "Hello Ann, how nice to see you." Then she looked me up and down and frowned and said "who are you?" I said "I'm Spencer" and she said "Well you don't look like Spencer!"

Anyway where was I? Oh yes Parashat Sh'mot. The Israelites started out with 70 souls, it says, plus wives, children, servants etc, so could have numbered several hundreds, if not thousands. They did not have TV, so their numbers increased, the Hebrew says they swarmed and multiplied and this worried Pharaoh who set task masters over them, but still they multiplied. Pharaoh then said to the Hebrew midwives : kill all Israelite male babies. But the midwives feared God and did not do it. Knowing this, Jocheved hid the baby Moses for three months. When she could no longer hide him, she made him an ark of bulrushes. The Hebrew for ark is Teyvat, Teyvat gomeh, is an ark of bulrushes, the same word Teyvat as is used for Noah's Ark in Genesis.

Pharaoh's daughter found him, and the child became her son.

Pharaoh's daughter was named Bithiah. Bithiah, or Bitya in Hebrew (בִּתְיָה, literally daughter of God). The name of her father is not in the Bible, but Rabbinic Midrash makes her the daughter of one of the Pharaohs of the Exodus. Bitya looked for and found Moses's mother, Jocheved, and Bitya asked Jocheved to nurse the child until he was older. Bitya named the baby Moshe because she said: "I drew him out of the water". The Hebrew is Ki Min Hamayim M'shitihu.

Incidentally: Who was the pharaoh when Moses was born? Well, it was probably Thutmose II (1493 to 1479 BC). Thutmose II is best qualified to be the pharaoh of Exodus based on the fact that he had a brief, prosperous reign and then a sudden collapse with no son to succeed him. Other candidates are Rameses II, another is Merneptah, another is Amenophis IV, or Ikhnaton, another is Thotmes III. It all depends on which scholar you read and no doubt that your guess is as good as theirs!

You all know the story of when Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, that he smote the Egyptian and killed him and hid his body in the sand. Pharaoh gets to know of this, so Moses flees. He goes to Midian, lives with the priest of Midian named Reuel, who just happens to have seven daughters. They come to the well to draw water to water their father's flock, but the shepherds drive them away. Moses helped them. He marries one of them, Zipporah, meaning "Bird". Zipporah's father Reuel, was also known as Jethro, which means "His Excellence", so may have been an honorific, as in Numbers, he is called Hobab.

Later on a messenger of the Eternal one appears in a burning bush and of course, the bush was not consumed. Moses hears a voice calling his name: Moses, Moses. And Moses says, Hineni, Here I am. And the voice says, Don't come near. Take your shoes off because the ground on which you are standing is holy! This, being the Bible, the voice is of course God's voice.

I often hear a voice calling my name, Spencer, Spencer, but it's not God it's usually 'er indoors to order me to put the refuse out.

And God tells Moses to get a move on and deliver His people out of the hands of the Egyptians, and to bring them to the Land of the Canaanites, to a good and large land

– and that famous phrase – El Erets Zavav Chalav Ud'vash – to a land flowing with milk and honey.

Tell them that Ehye Asher Ehye another well known phrase– I am that I am - has sent me to you.

Moses returns from Midian to Egypt. They go to see Pharaoh. Moses says: “Let my people go!”

Pharaoh is peeved at this and orders the Israelites to make bricks without straw, an impossible task. Have you tried it? No nor have I. When you get home try making bricks without straw.

We end the Parashah there introducing the ten plagues with which the Eternal one shall smite Egypt.

I shall now say a very few words about chopped liver

My sister was recently in Costco with a non-Jewish friend. Her friend was behind a lady who had about 8 tubs of chopped liver. Her friend asked her why Jewish people like to eat chopped liver! My sister emailed me.

I replied: It could be because in the old country Jews were usually very poor and so ate every bit of the chicken including the liver, giblets, brains and other unmentionable nasty bits etc. It could also be because it was an Eastern European/German/Russian dish and as many Jews lived in the Pale of Settlement in Russia, they latched on to Russian style cuisine - Borscht bears this out. I've heard chopped liver called "a heart attack on a plate".

Anyway that's the short answer. Here are two stories from the Mishnah, which is part of the Talmud, from Tractate B'Dichah

A man goes into a delicatessen and asks “What makes you Jews so clever?” The owner replies, “It’s because we eat so much chopped liver”

The man comes back every day and buys chopped liver.

Then one day he comes in looking angry and says, "For four months now you've been charging me twice as much as they charge next door."

"You see" the owner says triumphantly, "it's working already!".

My Uncle Hymie always ate at the same restaurant for years and years. Then one day, they saw him go into the restaurant across the road. When he came back the next week, they asked, "Hymie, what's the matter, why did you go across the road to eat your chopped liver?"

Hymie replied, "What could I do? I went to the dentist and he told me to eat on the other side!". That's a terrible joke!

And that's it for this morning. And I'll end with a good old fashioned Rumanian Ashkenazi "Omein!".