

Coarse Bread, Pickled Turnips and The Miracle of Fermentation

1) Talmud Berachot, 40a

Raba bar Samuel said in the name of Rabbi Hiyya: One is not permitted to break bread before salt or pickled vegetables (*leaftan*) are placed before each person at the table.

אמר רבא בר שמואל משום רבי חייא אין הבוצע רשאי לבצוע עד שיביאו מלח או לפתן לפני כל אחד ואחד

Background Info: “The Talmudic term leaftan, derived from the Hebrew word for turnip (lefet), denotes both pickled turnips and pickled vegetables in general...In the ancient Middle East, bread was very different from the refined loaves of the modern world—bread was typically very coarse and hard, as it was frequently made from barley or emmer that was coarsely ground. Consequently, to make the bread palatable, people ate it with a (pickled) relish or salt.” From Gil Marks’, Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, p. 597.

2) Bereshit Rabbah, 94:2

“Before Adam transgressed a fully seasoned bread grew out of the ground and no pickled relish was required. And in the Messianic Age, bread will no longer require pickled relish.”

This text speaks to the ubiquity of pickled condiments as part of meals in the Ancient Middle East.

3) Talmud Sanhedrin, 70a

On the eve of the ninth of Av¹, one must not eat two courses, neither eat meat nor drink wine. And a Tanna taught: But he may eat pickled meat and drink new wine. Now, what length of time must elapse before it is regarded as pickled meat [as opposed to fresh meat]? — R. Hanina b. Kahana said: As long as the flesh of the peace offering may be eaten.² And how long is it called new wine? — As long as it is in its first stage of fermentation... and how long is this first stage? — Three days.

ערב תשעה באב לא יאכל אדם שני תבשילין ולא יאכל בשר ולא ישתה יין ותנא אבל אוכל הוא בשר מליח ושותה יין מגתו בשר מליח עד כמה אמר רבי חנינא בר כהנא כל זמן שהוא כשלמים ויין מגיתו עד כמה כל זמן שהוא תוסס והתניא יין תוסס אין בו משום גילוי וכמה תסיסתו שלשה ימים

According to this text, on the eve of Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning, one may not eat fresh meat or fermented (aged) wine. But one may eat, pickled meat or “fresh” wine—presumably because these foods were considered less desirable. The text then goes on to define how much time must pass before the meat and wine are considered pickled or fermented. While the Talmud here presents a clear definition of when something fresh becomes fermented, the process of fermentation is fluid and depends on lots of factors including the weather, which veggies you are working with and how much salt you use. Something that tastes sufficiently fermented to one person, may, for another, taste as if it

¹ The Ninth of Av, or “Tisha B'Av” is the most solemn day in the Jewish calendar. It commemorates the destruction of both the First and Second Temples as well as other tragedies in Jewish history.

² I.e., two days, which includes that of slaughter.



is just getting started (e.g. compare someone who prefers a “new” dill pickle to someone who prefers a “full” dill). One of the fun things about fermenting yourself is that you get to taste your fermented foods at various stages of fermentation. Only by doing a lot of tasting and experimentation will you figure out what tastes sufficiently fermented to you!

4) Sandor Ellix Katz, from interview with “The Jew and the Carrot,” -jcarrot.org

The practice of fermentation involves collaboration with invisible forces. When you stir your mead or sourdough over several days to incorporate wild yeasts into it, it is largely an act of faith. Tuning in to the importance of microbial life and learning to work with it increases reverence for life in general, invisible forces in our lives, and the dynamics of transformation.

- *What does Sandor mean when he says that participating in the act of fermentation is “largely an act of faith?”*
- *What are some of the “invisible forces” in your life that make your life possible and enjoyable?*
- *What value might there be in bringing “invisible forces” such as microbes to the level of our consciousness?*

5) Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man, p. 46.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.

- *Why do you think that Heschel feels so strongly about the importance of wonder?*
- *Heschel asserts that we should have a “will to wonder.” How might one attempt to cultivate a life filled with wonder?*
- *Can you think of occasions when a state of wonder comes naturally for you?*

6) Rabbi Jacob Fine

From the standpoint of Judaism, one of our primary spiritual challenges as human beings is to sustain a consciousness of appreciation and wonder—especially for those things that, by virtue of their familiarity, seem most unremarkable. Reciting *brachot* (blessings) before we eat or drink anything, smell a pleasant fragrance or experience the beauty of the natural world, is intended as a practice to keep us awake to the miracle of the ordinary.

- *Is Fine’s approach to brachot consistent with your impression of their purpose?*
- *What can be done to ensure that the habitual recitation of brachot does not itself becomes routine and mindless?*
- *Can you think of other practices that might help one remain awake to the wondrous quality of “normal” life?*



Turshi Left (Persian Pickled Turnips)

Pickled turnips, called *mkhelal lifet* in Arabic and *navets sales* in the Maghreb, are a mainstay of *mezes*. They are also pickled with assorted mixed seasonal vegetables. Beets are commonly added to impart a light pink color.

Ingredients:

2 pounds (about 6 small) white turnips, peeled and sliced or julienned
1 medium beet, peeled and sliced
5 to 6 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
1 small fresh hot red chili, whole or minced, or ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes, or 2 tablespoons chopped celery leaves (optional)

Brine:

2½ cups water
1¼ cups white wine or cider vinegar
2 tablespoons additive-free table salt, or 3 tablespoons kosher salt
½ teaspoon olive oil (optional)

1. Combine the turnips, beets, garlic, and, if using, chili. Place in a sterilized 2-quart jar.
2. To make the brine: Bring the water, vinegar, and salt in a medium saucepan to a boil and stir until dissolved. Pour over the turnips to cover. If desired, drizzle the oil over top to seal. Let cool, then tightly cover.
3. Place in a cool place for at least 10 days. Store in the refrigerator for up to 1 month. Serve chilled or at room temperature.

VARIATIONS:

Turshi de Culupidia (Middle Eastern Pickled Cauliflower): Substitute 1 large head (about 2 pounds) cauliflower cut into florets for the turnips.

Turshi Khodar (Middle Eastern Pickled Mixed Vegetables): Reduce the turnips to ½ pound and add ¾ pound sliced carrots, ½ pound cauliflower cut into florets, ½ pound sliced koosa (Middle Eastern squash) or zucchini, 1 or 2 seeded and sliced green or red bell peppers, 2 to 3 sliced stalks celery, and 1 cup (about 4 ounces) shredded cabbage or 5 to 6 small kirby cucumbers.

Makes about 2 quarts

Recipe from Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*

