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Of Ratner's Born

Daniel Morris

Tonight, in Indy after bringing newborn Hannah home to 52nd and Delaware from St. Vincent's Hospital off 86th and Ditch (our nurse, Wanda, a Sister, a cross in every room), I light the range, coat the frying pan with an excessive amount of oil, and then place the six frozen Ratner's cheese blintzes fold side down (as instructed on the package) in the pan to brown. These are "Kosher for Passover" blintzes, made, the package says, "with special matzo flour." Small world, this late capitalism. Even in Central Indiana we get blintzes from Ratner's! Even at the goyish Marsh Supermarket on 86th and Ditch!

No one else in this household that now includes three infants, two bewildered parents, and my in-laws is even trying to avoid chametz, though I did wolf the kosher, but breaded, soy chicken patties cold for lunch that 18-month-old Aaron and 30-month-old Isaac didn't touch. In an example of family resemblance by way of diet, not talent, I follow in the footsteps of Isaac B. Singer, whom I used to observe eating his hard roll and black coffee at a cafeteria in South Miami Beach. Am I a vegetarian because I thought the choice would inspire my Yiddishkeit muse to speak to me? Given my responsibilities, I think now more pragmatically about how the need for protein outweighs the strict adherence to Passover rules. For me, certainly not on a low carb diet, just avoiding my ersatz Einstein bagel (with heart healthy butter spread and decaf in the morning) seems sacrifice enough. And so, I eat the faux chicken dipped in the (need I say?) Tref mini plastic container of McDonald's barbeque sauce that accompanies the McNuggets that go with a trip to the Children's Museum, where I managed

not to lose either infant son yesterday. I went to the museum to keep our minds off their mom, who was delivering their baby sister.

When it comes to keeping Kosher for Passover, see, I bend the rules. More accurately, I invent my own. I decide, for example, that buying Kosher for Passover soaps and spices and dressings and jellies is simply going overboard. I refuse to line the pockets of Manischewitz, which gouges for items that range in taste and texture from glue to sawdust and yet somehow still everything is 300 calories for a tablespoon serving of salad dressing. If that sounds like a case of a self-hating Jewish commentary, so be it! They charge four dollars for a sugar-spiked coffee cake mix that is really enough for maybe two people at breakfast and takes 45 minutes to stir in their little aluminum pan. A cake mix that I believe should cost no more than 99 cents. I rationalize. I follow the *spirit* of the Passover laws. It is like being “mindful” of the Sabbath, even as I shop, drive and check my business email on Saturday. Isn’t the focus on spirit, rather than law, a Christian virtue?

Once icy pale planks of tough if eggshell thin white dough, the blintzes are now to my surprise frying quite nicely to golden brown in the bubbly hot oil. It is then that the blintzes transform once more into a symbolic image: The Lower East Side blintz. I have, in fact, eaten such storied cheese filled crepes myself, as did my late father, Ernie, before me, at the real places in Brooklyn and the East Village. I’m talking the now-defunct Ratner’s, where my father took my mother, Phyllis, who can’t be here in Indy right now because she has dialysis down in Pembroke Pines. I’m talking the now-defunct Kiev, where my friend Stephen once had Allen Ginsberg write a poem especially for him on a napkin (Ginsy used Stephen’s back as a desk). I’m talking even more authentic places with Hebrew names I never could pronounce, such as where my friend Norman, another poet, who lives in Cincy, once bumped into Donald, a neighbor from Cincy whom Norman hadn’t seen in years.

My blintzes are inauthentic, but they resemble the real item. (Of course, the New York blintz is itself a 20th-century re-creation of the humble cigar-shaped blins that for centuries filled the bellies of

Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern and Central Europe and Russia before their erasure by Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin and World War II). Granted, I used a hell of a lot of oil to get the blintzes to imitate the image in my head of the East Coast version, choosing the heart-unhealthy but potentially more Jewish of the two methods listed on the back of the box. The blintzes fried, but not too much, I offer two with applesauce to George, my Presbyterian but open-minded father-in-law. The blintzes are not so exotic to him as I had predicted (hoped?). It turns out George used to order sweet cheese filled crepes at the IHOP all the time in New Haven when he was a prep school Yale in the 1950s. Aaron, a year and a half, toddle hops in semi-circles with a piece of a blintz for a while before giving it back to me. To my pleasure, however, Aaron tastes some applesauce with a fork. He has a thing for sauces and dips — the ketchup not the fries, the orange French dressing not the iceberg lettuce, the maple flavor icing not the cake donut. Bread products for him are devices to deliver toppings. Bread is to be dropped when the topping has been completely licked off by tongue and teeth on mouth and hands and shirt and table. Aaron will do very well around Passover restrictions in the future, I suspect, as I put on pounds eating off the floor the various crusts left behind from peanut butter sandwiches and pizzas of long ago. I stuff in my mouth the rest of the still warm blintz Aaron rejected, then, sensing I'm the only one interested in having more, gobble the last two. That is four (of the six) blintzes in all for me.

I have motive. Who but me in this household could decipher the symbolic meaning of my gluttony? Who could know I prepared these blintzes as a private ritual act and consumed them in the same unruly manner on behalf of the memory of my late father, Irwin Walter Morris, among the heavy sons of Brooklyn, gone these 30 plus years, on the day we bring my daughter home, named for my mother's mother, Hannah?

Without Ratner's Dairy Restaurant, formerly of 138 Delancey Street on the Lower East Side, a case could be made I would not be here. Hannah would not be here. These blintzes now in my belly

would still be stacked in their box behind the glass cases in the frozen foods section of the Marsh on 86th and Ditch. It was Ratner's, after all, where my father took my mother, Phyllis, on their first date. My mother remembers with some repulsiveness and laughter. Her future husband inhaling the basket of warm onion rolls with loads of butter. God how he loved those famous free rolls with real butter!

I am myself daydreaming of those baskets of warm onion rolls and butter when my son Aaron toddles out the front screen door. I wasn't aware of Aaron's escape until I hear his shy "hi" in the darkness from the sidewalk. Thank God he didn't go into the street! It is a dead-end suburban street in a very good midwestern neighborhood, but still! Anything can happen.

When I am seven and it is summer, and it is 1969 and Daddy is still a third-grade teacher in a town called Hicksville. And we live on Long Island, and we are a family on Jones Beach. We are near where Daddy was stationed as a Coast Guard attendant in the tower at the drawbridge during World War II (the very tower he pointed out each time we passed it on the way to the beach). And now the riptides of the Atlantic are trying to take my seven-year-old self in for good. The undertow has me until Daddy rather nonchalantly bends his knees, and, like a primitive fisherman, clutches my left arm with his ham hock right hand. He refuses to let me leave this world too early, and now I am here in Indy, belly full and totally blessed.