

Shabbat Remarks
Temple Emanu-El
July 16, 2010

I believe that cooking is like life. The best recipes are the ones we create ourselves.

Think about how a specific smell can transport you to another time and place. The smells of freshly baked pastries and coffee takes you right back to the boisterous conversations around your grandmother's kitchen table. The simplicity of that fresh tomato sauce with just a hint of basil served over the perfect al-dente pasta instantly brings me back to Italy. But more on Italy later...

These memories, evoked by the smells and tastes of cooking, are handed down from one generation to the next: an old cookbook with notes in the margins and stains on the pages; a tattered recipe card in your grandmother's handwriting – these recipes become a connection between generations.

When Judd and I got married, my mother-in-law Susan, mother of two boys, gave me an old recipe book from the Gadsden Service Guild that she had saved "for the day she would have a daughter." In it, are many of the recipes that are the memories of my husband's childhood.

Memories are learning to braid, not on a doll, but on slightly sticky fresh challah dough. My mother gently, carefully, showing me how to separate the three strands of dough and cross one over the other. Patiently she taught me how to tuck the ends under and then we painted – not with paints and paper, but with a feathered brush dipped in egg wash. The dough was our canvas.

I wasn't always interested in cooking. Through experiments, with successes and failures, I learned. I watched my mother in awe as she threw "a pinch of this" and "a fistful of that" into the pot. How did she know how much? Why didn't she measure each ingredient and follow the directions?

I learned from watching her that cooking is a little science, a lot of art, a good amount of experimentation, and just the right measure of love. Even if we follow a recipe exactly, it doesn't always turn out as we hope it would. The more we make that recipe, the better it turns out and the more comfortable we are with it. Life is like that – a bit science, a lot of art and a large measure of experimentation.

Cooking, like life, necessitates that we learn as we go. As we learn from our mistakes, we get better and more confident. We, then, can not only follow a recipe, but we can

ad-lib a bit. We can take a basic recipe, adjust it slightly and create something completely new. As in life, we just have to trust our instincts born from our experience.

Mistakes will be made. Entire entrées and side dishes will be discarded. Breads resembling three pound hand weights, without their requisite baking soda, will have to be discarded with care, so as not to break the garbage can. I will always remember my mother's story of my parent's first Shabbat dinner at home. She was so excited to make a traditional meal for my father. As she rolled the matzoh balls in her hand she remembered her grandmother's matzoh balls – so big, light and fluffy. So she made them big – grapefruit-sized big. As my sweet, kind father tried to cut into the rock-hard matzoh ball in his soup, they had a good laugh. You see, those are the stories, the recipes of life.

In Judaism, our religious rite of passage starts at the age of 13. As with many b'nai mitvot, food is plentiful and delicious. Food has always had a central role in our Jewish family life. Whether it was in rites of passage, moments of great joy or deep sorrow, we always gathered around in the kitchen and shared food. I think of my grandmother's chicken soup, my mom's dairy kugel and charoseth recipe that she and I have perfected over the years. Learning to make each of these special family recipes was another significant rite of passage for me.

I will never forget the first time I boldly hosted a Passover Seder by myself for my friends in Chicago. My parents were away and I was on my own. It was the first time I made my grandmother's chicken soup recipe without my mother by my side. I was nervous. I recalled a "pinch of this" and a "fistful of that," but what if I forgot something? What if I put in too much sugar and not enough salt? In the end, it turned out tasty enough to serve. I will never forget that first solo flight. It was a huge right of passage for me – a special moment when I caught a glimpse of my future as I embraced my past – the hope of someday making my grandmother's chicken soup for my husband and family in my own kitchen – a tradition, a memory, a gift bestowed upon me.

So often the kitchen is referred to as "the heart of the house" – the smells of cooking, pots simmering on the stove with savory sauces, treats baking in the oven. In my parents home, we spend more time together in the kitchen than in any other room. Cooking is what we're doing, but the conversation and being together is why we're there. Cooking is what connects us.

We all have our role. Mom has graduated to management. She is usually in a supervisory role, as I have happily accepted the position of head chef upon her promotion to management. My father is my sous-chef. And my dear husband Judd is the

official taster. It is a tough job, one that he willingly and graciously accepts. I believe that this time spent together – cooking and sharing – is the real essence of life.

In so many ways, food brings people together. Phrases like “breaking bread” conjure up images of people sharing time and conversation, connecting with each other over a meal. Travel introduces us to other cultures and new foods. Guide books are filled of sections about the local cuisine – how to order it, what to try (and avoid) and where to find it.

Several years ago, I had accepted a new job. With a few weeks to myself before I started, I decided to take my first solo international adventure. It was my dream trip – a cooking school in southern Italy.

Why Italy? My mother can trace her family history back to the ancient city of Porto, Italy. That, and how Italians take such pleasure (“piaciri”) in their food – in the process of preparing it and in coming together as a family to enjoy it – much like our Jewish traditions.

The details of the trip came together very quickly and five days after deciding on Italy, excited and nervous, I boarded a flight to Rome – alone.

Two days later, I awoke in an old villa on the hilltop overlooking the Mediterranean. In a spotless new addition, the owner had built an industrial, modern kitchen, complete with an old stone baking oven that produced the most perfectly crisp pizza crust. Later that morning, I rolled out my own dough for homemade tagliatelle pasta with fresh zucchini, cleaned my first fish, and discovered that Tiramisu really isn't that difficult to make.

The saying that the food just tastes better in Italy is true. In that kitchen, I began to understand the simplicity of taking only a few of the freshest ingredients that you need to prepare the meal. The tomatoes grown in the ash of Mount Vesuvius are redder than the reddest setting sun and burst with flavor. The mozzarella for our caprese salad was delivered fresh each day from Mama Rosa's lemon farm down the road (she made a knock-out Limoncello as well). The basil was freshly picked from the kitchen garden each morning. The ingredients were so simple and so fresh. The recipes evolved into the most delicious meals born from simplicity. I believe in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, it is important that we cherish moments of tranquility; when we stop "doing," and try to be completely present in the moment. In the kitchen of that Italian Villa, I discovered that cooking is how I can be calm, present, and completely lose myself in the moment.

I suppose one could call it a spiritual moment – a discovery. Cooking is inspirational. It is humbling. It is creative and exhilarating, challenging and satisfying. It is the thread that connects me to people and places, to my family and history, and to my religion and traditions. And it is spiritual. It asks me to have faith. It demands that I express myself and be present. You see, cooking is like life. The best recipes are the ones we create ourselves.

Thank you and good Shabbos.