



## Our High Holidays history

For the majority of the year, food is the absolute central element of my connection to Jewish culture. Ordinarily, I'd be going on and on about all the foods central to this or that holiday, their origins, why I'm excited to prepare them and with whatever slant I'm exploring that year. Sure, I love brisket, round challah, honey cake & tzimmes as much as the next Jew, but truthfully, the High Holidays have always been about taking time to think about how I interact in the world, how I could do better, and about reinforcing my connection to some of the fundamental elements of being Jewish. I mean, there is more to being Jewish than simply loving deli culture, musical theater, asking questions and complaining, isn't there?

Some of my oldest memories are those of the traditions surrounding the High Holidays growing up. For many Jews, my family included, the High Holidays were some of the only days that we actually went to synagogue, and I have distinct memories of skipping school, dressing up, sitting in a hot sanctuary and understanding very little of what was happening around me. I would hum along with the familiar tunes, pretend to read the siddur wondering when the next break or snack would be, and usually get chastised for being too fidgety or talking to the kid next to me. Isn't it funny how something like that – not exactly recalled as a “fun time” – has transformed, over the years, into such a fond memory?

Of course, there were all around great memories: the blowing of the shofar (my signal that the service was almost over), the apples & honey, the brisket (one of my mom's specialties, with help from Phil the butcher), and the fun kid chaos that would always occur while the parents enjoyed an expansive Rosh Hashanah dinner. For Yom Kippur, our family tradition was to have a big, heavy meal the night before – usually a trip to the Ringside for a steak, which I didn't learn until later on in my life is actually not typical (nor particularly helpful) for soon-to-be fasting Jews, especially not AFTER the evening service. Though definitely outside the norm, I think back on our big, post- Kol Nidre dinners as more of a secret familial celebration...and a way to sneak in a delicious feast prior to the solemn day of atonement (and fasting) to come. More on that specific tradition later.

Truthfully, as a kid, the High Holidays were my only real connection to Judaism in a religious sense (aside from my Bar Mitzvah prep), separate and aside from the more regular cultural components. And it wasn't until I moved away, to college in Montana, where being Jewish and attending services wasn't quite as easy, that I even realized how much I missed the traditions.

After Montana, when I was 21 and moved to NYC, it seemed like everyone I met was Jewish, but no one was really practicing. So one day, I was wandering down 6<sup>th</sup> street in the East Village, looking for an Indian restaurant, and I stumbled upon a local synagogue. It must have been sometime in September so I took note, and when Yom Kippur rolled around, I wandered back over there to see if I could drop in for Kol Nidre (Yom Kippur Eve). I walked up the stairs in the old shul and immediately realized it was orthodox, as I was shuffled by the usher off to the right, while the women were all going left. I put on my tallis (prayer shawl) and sat down. The entire service was in Hebrew. At this point in my life, this synagogue might as well have counted as international travel, and I could not have felt more out of my element. But then the music started, and it all came back to me. I remembered it – the melodies, the haunting rhythm and music of the service, and even though I didn't understand a word, my Bar Mitzvah training came back to me, and I felt that connection, that communal experience instinctively. Other secular Jews may have been turned off by this long, serious, overheated, Hebrew service. But for me, on that night, after years

in the Jewish wasteland of Montana and being 21 and alone in NYC, it felt like home. Even down the part when, as a nod to those taboo Ringside dinners, I enjoyed the Indian food across the street after the service.

The Sixth Street Community Synagogue was my shul, where I went exclusively for the High Holiday services, by myself, every year, for nearly a decade before I met my wife. I never got to know anyone there, I never brought anyone with me, and I never got to thank them for being there for me, for all of those years when they opened their doors to me, without asking any questions, and were my only real remaining connection to the religious part of my Judaism. During these years alone in NYC, the deli was my shul the rest of the time, and instead of round raisin challah, I celebrated the High Holidays with rye bread and instead of brisket, pastrami.

Later on in NYC, when I met my wife, we were extremely lucky – we realized early on that we had extremely similar Jewish upbringings, which meant there were a lot of tough conversations that we never had to broach, and we have always been grateful for that. That being said, my wife was raised kosher, and more observant than me, so for years, she taught me what the more “traditional” Jewish food customs were.

“You mean your family didn’t go out for steak dinner the night before Yom Kippur?!” I asked her incredulously. “Your family didn’t eat brisket on both Rosh Hashanah and for Break-the-fast?!” Having such different food connections to these holidays presented Dori and I with the opportunity to find our own traditions. The first year together, because I had lived in NYC much longer, we agreed to let me take the lead. I took us to the Javits center for Kol Nidre alongside nearly 4000 other people, which still, to this day, showcases the most outstanding choir I have ever heard in any religious service. Afterwards, we were starving and as we walked down 10<sup>th</sup> avenue, looking for a suitable place to stuff our faces (Dori was breaking the rules), something caught her eye – a large lobster, swimming in a tank, inside a fancy steakhouse. I am certain to this point that she had NEVER had any shellfish, let alone lobster, but I could tell her interest was piqued. I suggested we go, because we obviously couldn’t NOT eat dinner before a day of fasting, and I offered to selflessly trade her lobster for my steak, should it prove disgusting to her. It did not, and she adeptly polished off a 2 pound lobster, mere hours after apologizing for all of her years worth of sins.

Since then, Dori and I have created new traditions. We still always eat the requisite apples & honey, round raisin challah & brisket for Rosh Hashanah, and the dairy only break-the-fast as my in-laws taught me was proper (and, of course, we indulge in the sneaky post-Kol Nidre feast as our own mini rebellion). But truthfully, the High Holidays will always be about family, introspection, and the opportunity to use the next year to become better versions of ourselves. For us, the Days of Awe are a chance to rely on those tried-and-true High Holiday culinary standards to be ever-present but not to pull focus. We Jews love our food- so much so it seems like sometimes, it’s ONLY about the food. But during this time of year, I get so much more enjoyment seeing my kids laughing when I attempt to blow the shofar, or the excitement in their eyes when they get to make a mess with the apples and honey than I do from any brisket, no matter how good it is. For these holidays the food is the supporting role. If the food is great, it is simply a nice surprise, while we stand around with friends and family, talking loudly over each other while our kids run around creating chaos, until we finally have to take them home after the honey rush hits its peak. They are a chance for us to look a bit deeper, connect with our Jewish community, and remind ourselves why we are here, what we are doing and where we hope to be in the year to come.

We here at Jacob & Sons hope that we can be there for you, our Portland Jewish Community, to provide those effortlessly delicious Jewish foods to enhance you and your familys’ High Holiday experiences, and we wish you all L’shana Tovah.