

## Latke-Hamantaschen Debate – 2/28/15

B'nai Israel Synagogue

Susan “Hamantaschen” Knoppow vs. Mark “Latke” Robbins

### Introduction (Mark Robbins)

Friends,

Welcome to our Latke-Hamantashen debate, which has been going on for almost 70 years, at locations throughout the United States. Debates between lovers of latkes and those hungry for hamantaschen have gone on informally for generations – from Kiev to California, from Bialystok to Boston. Since the first formal debate was held at the University of Chicago in 1946, university lecture halls, synagogue pulpits, and theater stages have been venues of great drama as the dispute rages on over the relative merits of these two great competing Jewish holiday delicacies of our winter months.

Representing the latke today will be me. Representing the hamantaschen will be the esteemed college-prep professional Susan Knoppow, who has travelled the world advocating the merits of hamantashen as a subject for college essays. I urge you to search your stomachs as you decide which delicacy you like best, open your stomachs to the possibility of change by our arguments, and then vote your conscience at the end.

What’s the better delicacy, latkes or hamantaschen?

## The Latke (Mark Robbins)

The answer is quite clear to me. Latkes! Potato pancakes. There's just no contest.

The heart of why the incomparable latke overwhelms the pedestrian hamantaschen is heart itself. The name for latkes in Hebrew is *livivot*. *Livivot* means little hearts. The Hebrew name for hamantaschen is *oznei haman*, Haman's ears. The ears of big, bad Haman, whose name we blot out with graggers every time we say it on Purim. What would *you* rather bring into your system, heart-sustaining, soul-enriching nourishment or a reminder of the hate-filled, sugary, slippery ears of Haman?

Case closed, but I'm still eager to pour oil on the fire of this debate, and to fry up the hamantashen.

So, another reason I'll take latkes over hamantaschen any day is because they're made of the great American food, the potato, and they're cooked in the great American way, fried. Like French fries, tater tots and the yummy jelly donuts we also eat on Chanukah.

I'm going to give you yet another reason that latkes rule the roost in this delicacy debate. What's your favorite shape? The square? The triangle? The rectangle? The circle? Something else? Whatever your answer, latkes fit the bill, because you can make latkes in any shape you want. Some are circular, others square, some look like footballs, many have no recognizable shape at all. Hamantaschen? You are pretty much stuck to triangles there – boring, linear, a little bit too stiff for a celebration, don't you think?

And eating latkes, you eliminate the danger of eating the dreaded poppy-seed hamantaschen. I must admit, sometimes you look down at a hamantaschen, and your heart goes pitter patter when you see what you think is chocolate in the middle. Then you take a bite, and it's poppy, or, even worse, prune! With latkes, there are no unhappy surprises like that. You know what you're going to get with the average latke, and you may even get better – the more onions and spices you throw into the recipe, and the more you eat the finest productions of the B'nai Israel kitchen.

Just to top off my argument, I can't forget the apple sauce. Hamantaschen and apple sauce? Yucky. Latkes and apple sauce. Yummy! And you have eight days to relish this delight instead of one.

I know most of you are on my side already, but, for those who aren't, I hope I've swung your scales in favor of the hamantaschen.

But just a couple of more points in case you're not convinced.

I realize that hamantaschen in many places have a lifespan that begins a month before Purim and last 2 weeks beyond. But, really, hamantaschen are the classic wannabee food. Desperate for the 8-day role of latkes, of matza, even the 2-day lifespan of the apples and honey. I can understand that it's unhappy with its short, pathetic, one-day in the sun. But just deal with it, hamantaschen. You are never going to be Jewish holiday food #1.

And, also, we're all looking at the bottom line – looking at what really need as opposed to what we want. And three things that we need are breakfast, lunch and dinner. Latkes, my dear friends, healthily and must I say, incredibly cheaply, fit nicely into any and all of our three daily meals. They meet the requirements of nutrition, satiation, and taste, can serve as a meal in their own right, or can stand proudly next to an egg in the morning, a salad at lunch time, or a piece of fish at dinner. Hamantaschen – pure luxury. Negative nutritional value. No matter how many hamantaschen you put together, you cannot make a meal. And I've never seen a hamantaschen come out a frozen box, let alone taste half-way decent, as those rokeach latkes do.

Lastly, can't we eliminate Haman from our book of life this year? Every time we eat Hamantaschen, a "Haman's ear," every time we shake the gragger to blot out Haman's name – paradoxically, we remember him, we keep him alive. Is that masochistic or not? At least we could invent a pastry to look like Esther's crown or Mordechai's horse! Latkes? We eat them and remember the good guys, the Jews who restored our dignity in the land of Israel, the fighters who cleaned up our Temple, the God who gave them the strength.

Madame, my arguments are as strong as a well-burned potato pancake. With all due respect to the hamantaschen – that petty, wannabee, snackfood – I'll take my meal of latkes any day.

## The Hamantaschen (Susan Knoppow)

Latkes?

Not-kes.

With all due respect, Rabbi, your arguments do not hold a Chanukah candle to those in favor of the glorious hamantaschen.

In keeping with the triangular shape of the cookie in question, I have built my argument on three fundamental principles: Safety ... Community ... and Diversity, representing the three points of every latke. As Temple Kol Ami member Melanie Gorman put it, “A hamantaschen makes 3 points. A latke makes none.”

Before I continue, however, I’d like to say a word about the sources I used to establish the hamantaschen’s superiority.

I found particular inspiration in the historical texts of the University of Chicago, which has hosted an annual latka/hamantaschen debate since 1946. Given the range of experts they’ve relied upon over the decades, one might even say that the university has created a mishna-like compendium, a true machloket latka-taschen. This is truly a continuation of Torah b’al peh, and I am honored to contribute to the debate here at Bnai Israel.

I was also drawn to more contemporary sages, my children, of course, and my friends – both real and imaginary – on Facebook. Presented with a request for hamantaschen-supportive commentary, they all came through with flying colors.

### **Safety**

So ... on to the first point of my triangular argument: the superior safety of the hamantaschen.

My first source, the esteemed numerologist David Saperstein looks to gematria for wisdom. Hamantaschen are known as Oznei Haman in Hebrew. The gematria adds up to 169 ... which we all know is a very important number. 169 is also reflected in the phrase Taim Li (it is tasty to me).

Levivah, or latka, on the other hand, adds up to 49, a dire figure. 49 is also the value of Ha-dam, or “the blood,” which is not surprising, given the danger of grating potatoes and onions by hand.

Bloody fingers are not the only dangerous aspect of latkes: The risk of an oil fire is ever-present. And even if the oil does not entirely catch fire, burns are almost a guarantee. In our family-centered religion, isn't it better to make hamantaschen together, a task that even a child can handle?

## **Community**

As Jews, we are committed not only to family, but also to community. And that brings me to the second side of my triangular (not triangulated) argument. Hamantaschen naturally build relationships. As Stacy Gittleman so eloquently put it, “They are portable and you can give them away to friends... or keep them in your purse when you need to bribe someone to do you a favor. Try that with an oily latke!”

Think of the children we can soothe with a cookie pulled out of a tallis bag or a backpack. Worried about noisy voices during services? Hand over a hamantaschen. They are quiet, and odor free. You can't say that about a latke.

The greasy smell lingers for days after one has fried a batch of potato pancakes. It's hard to build a community when your kitchen is filled by an odor reminiscent of last week's French fries.

A strong community is made up of self-confident individuals. Latkes hide under applesauce or sour cream. Hamantaschen can stand on their own.

## **Diversity**

The third point of my hamantaschen is dedicated to diversity.

Hamantaschen are nothing if not diverse. Of course, you can choose poppyseed or prune ... even apricot or cherry. But what about chocolate? Or dulce de leche? Lemon curd? Nutella? Last week, Josh even concocted a s'mores hamantaschen from chocolate dough and marshmallow fluff. Unfortunately, they fell apart, so we ate them before sharing them publicly. While we're sad that they didn't make it into mishloach manot packages, at least we were able to rescue them. If a latke falls apart you're out of luck – potato bits floating in oil. Yuck.

Susan Feber even shared a recipe for brisket hamantaschen. How about that?!

And let us not forget ... Chanukah commemorates the miracle of the oil. Not the miracle of the potato ... or any other vegetables, for that matter. Hamantaschen, on the other hand, directly represent the holiday in question, and teach us to face our enemies. Every time we eat Haman's hat, we are reminded of our ability to survive in a diverse society.

Never forget that a latke turned on any side points in three directions at once, reminding us to recognize God in the world and the people around us. And don't forget that enduring symbol, the Magen David – two intertwined triangles. Clearly, the triangle is an important Jewish shape.

In conclusion, I quote my friend and fellow congregant, Cheryl Berlin: "Baked not fried. Sweet not salty. The end."