

Lentil Stew and the New York Times



by Phyllis Chesler

I have been reading the *New York Times* all my life. Once, I fervently believed in it. That is no longer possible given their unbalanced and defamatory coverage of Israel and Jews. I do not write about such coverage very often anymore—I've already done so hundreds of times—but every so often, something crosses even their (or my) "red line" and I'm compelled to say something.

Today, the Sunday magazine (3/27) in the "Eat" column, describes a recipe for lentils. It includes lentils, cumin, onion, cilantro, flour, garlic, oil, etc. All very familiar ingredients. It is titled "Humble Beginnings: In the Middle Eastern dish rqaq w adas, the simple lentil becomes pageantry

on the plate.” So far, so good. There is a photograph of the dish which looks absolutely luscious. It draws me in.

The piece is by Ligaya Mishan, who grew up in Hawaii. This is her inaugural column. Mishan tells us that this lentil dish “has its origins in thrift. As the Palestinian artist and chef Mirna Bamieh explains, it was traditionally a way to use scraps of dough left over from baking bread. Bamieh was “born in Jerusalem” but did not “grow up eating at home...she found it later in life when she began to research the cuisine of her heritage in 2017...she was worried about what was being lost in the fragmentation of life under occupation.”

Bamieh then interviewed individual families, one after the other, in order to document their cooking practices and “repeated displacements.” Bamieh went on to found The Palestine Hosting Society, a platform which has allowed her (in my view) to politicize her otherwise quite creative “staged dinner performances.” In her own words, in “This Week in Palestine,” in a piece titled “Rooted in the Future,” here’s what Bamieh says she’s about:

“Everybody loves food! We Arabs love food. But Palestinians always feel a certain bitterness because we see how the Palestinian kitchen is being appropriated and taken away from us by Israel, which is building its national cuisine out of it: hummus, falafel, couscous, etc. We are not allowed to collect wild herbs such as zaatar (wild thyme) or akub (the edible root of a thistle). Israeli prohibitions are put in place not to protect the plants but to create a rupture in the everyday practices of Palestinians. These rules and laws aim to prevent us from going to our land and disrupt our direct connection to the land, the soil. They know that once you break this connection and you render the land an abstract concept, then it will be easier to take it away from the people, easier to make us forget our past or our rights and settle for easier solutions. At least that is their reasoning. But I created this project at a time when many

young Palestinians are starting to reclaim their land and customs.”

“Occupation?” What “occupation?” That of Gaza by Hamas? Or that of the West Bank first by Jordan, then by the Palestinian Authority? Are there really Israeli laws against Arabs—only Palestinian Arabs—collecting zaatar? Have Israelis really stolen or culturally appropriated falafel and hummus?

Don’t get me wrong. I support “food activists” (Bamieh describes herself as such). I also support women creating their own independent platforms. I especially appreciate a woman who identifies as “Palestinian” and who has found a way to create a safe, possibly women-only Society, given the horrendous Islamist oppression of women in Gaza and on the West Bank.

But here’s a reality check. Lentils became one of the first farmed crops in the entire Middle East region—even long before Jews reigned in sovereign Israel, certainly long before the rise of Christianity, Islam, or the Ottoman and British Mandates.

Lentil stew, presumably so red, so tasty, is precisely what Esau traded his birthright for—and this is written in Bereshit, Genesis, the first book of our Torah. Moreover, I easily found fifteen such lentil dishes on the internet consisting of red, brown, and yellow lentils, all with similar ingredients, none pegged to a specific country, tribe, group, or identity. I even found Israeli versions of such lentil stews, sometimes known as mujaderra or majadara, a staple in the cuisine of Jews around the world.

With all due respect to Bamieh’s entrepreneurship and artistry, (she’s a graduate of the very Jewish Israeli Bezalal Academy for Fine Arts—named after the Biblical artist who constructed the Mishkan, the Tabernacle), the *New York Times* is finding every way possible to poison and propagandize its

readers, drop by drop, article by article, into the belief that there once was a country known as Palestine and it should be restored, if not “from the river to the sea” (which would obliterate Israel) then close enough.

Mina Stone, at MOMA’s PS1, writes about Mirva Bamieh in this way:

“Her descriptions of Palestinian cooking, the landscape, the herbs, and wild edible plants made me long to be there, suddenly feeling a sense of nostalgia for a country I have never been to.” She quotes Bamieh:

“What colonization does is flatten your sense of identity. I grew up not knowing another Palestine other than the one that has been occupied—the one that has been dispossessed. What we have is our voice, and for me, that’s one way of making peace. Once you’ve discovered that there’s a richness to who you are, that you didn’t know of before, openings happen.”

I would have found Mishan’s piece about Rqaq w adas in the New York Times totally acceptable if somewhere, anywhere, she had noted, in passing, that people in every single country in the Middle East (Lebanese, Egyptians, Iraqis, Syrians, Jordanians, Saudis, etc.) use lentils to create such dishes; people including Jews worldwide, Jews in Israel, Israeli Christian and Muslim Arabs and those Arabs who live in Israel but consider themselves Palestinians—all cook wonderful lentil dishes.

But Mishan did not.

Ironically, parenthetically, Bamieh also refers to a sweet Persian pastry. What other roots might Mirva Bamieh someday claim?