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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel

Yael Raviv

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*'It used to be when a Jew came to Israel he kissed the ground and gave thanks
Now as soon as he gets off the plane he has a falafel.'*¹

The days of hegemonic *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* as manifestations of Israeli identity are long gone. However, the legacy of these movements and similar practices during the *Yishuv* and early *aliyot* live on through their symbolism, as images of a once thriving connection of the Jewish people to the land they sowed: a living breathing image of a Jewish nationalism. The daily lives of modern-day Israelis are very different than those of the early Zionist settlers in Palestine. With the rise of the state and citizens' standards of living, their desires, interests, and practices have shifted. And with this shifting facets of daily life, one must note the ever-changing notion of what it is to be Israeli. Nowhere is this more acutely recognizable than in the homes of the Israeli people. The culinary practices of the Israeli people provide a unique lens for understanding how they see their place within an enigmatic nation.

In *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel*, Yael Raviv delves into an analysis of food in Israel and its role in forging a national identity. Throughout the book, Raviv focuses on what she sees as a deliberate and concerted effort to use food as a tool for fomenting Jewish national sentiment and a single Jewish nationalism. In doing so, Raviv implicitly calls upon the contributions of a number of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians who worked to deconstruct and examine ethnicity from a theoretical standpoint. Though Raviv's work is highly focused in its substance (there is very little other original research done on Israeli culinary nationalism), it is by no means narrow in its methodological approach. Raviv uses a tremendous amount of empirical data to support her arguments and utilizes a multidimensional approach, discussing not only ethnicity, but also religion, gender, and class. Raviv herself is not a sociologist.

¹ Kantor, Jodi. "A History of the Mideast in the Humble Chickpea." *The New York Times*, 10 July 2002.

She uses the lens of performance studies to study the importance of food as a performance medium in order to explore the realm of culinary anthropology with clear influence from sociology in both her methods and focus. Raviv's research presented in this book is an expansion on her 2002 dissertation.² Though the different sections of the book are ordered to provide a fluid passage through the analysis of different culinary spheres and venues, Raviv emphasizes chronology both within each chapter, as well as between them. She moves from the agricultural work of early settlers for sustenance to the concerted effort to push early Zionist settlers toward *totzeret ha-aretz*, or products of the land. She goes on to explore the different venues of culinary expression: the home kitchen, the virtual kitchen, the professional kitchen, and the public sphere. As one can notice from the subjects of the chapters alone, Raviv seeks to emphasize the shift from a culinary nationalism based on connection to the land which emphasized Hebrew labor and subsistence consumption to a thriving commercialism in which food was less of a deliberate tool, but nevertheless played a vital role in transforming Israeli identity. Raviv tries to emphasize that early Zionist thinkers in Israel sought to forge a single Jewish national identity from the influences of many cultures. However, in more recent years, deviations from this dogmatic idea of what it is to be Israeli have allowed for exploration of the global culinary scene, the retaining of primordial identities, and the recognition of historical imbalances between the different groups that comprise the Jewish populace in Israel.

For the purposes of her book, Raviv seems to frame her research around two main prevailing arguments: the first being that food played a pivotal role in the deliberate construction of a Jewish nationalism, while the second argument emphasizes the shift from a subsistence-first culinary culture to a consumerist and diversifying image of food in contemporary Israel. We will begin this analysis of Raviv's book by focusing the first argument. By exploring on 'Hebrew labor' and the roots of the agricultural industry in Zionist communities of Palestine, Raviv sets the foreground for an idea she goes on to emphasize throughout this work: *mizug-galuyot*. This institutionally led practice is the Israeli equivalent of what is known in much of Western scholarship as 'the melting pot' vision of nation-building. As put forward by David Ben-Gurion and other early Israeli political leaders, this state-led policy sought to forge an identity that was uniquely Israeli, while drawing upon influences from the Jewish diaspora. A melding of mainly

² Maltz, Judy. "Falafel Nation: How the Israeli Food Scene Went From Local to Global." *Haaretz*, 26 Oct. 2015.

Middle Eastern and Eastern European cultures, this vision of a new Israeli identity was a calculated construction by institutions and the elite. This identity reconstruction process was often exclusionary. This is seen quite clearly in Raviv's description of the propaganda campaigns of the Women's International Zionist Organisation (WIZO), Hadassah, the Jewish Agency, and other organisations. Despite the fact that Mizrahi Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern origins) would have been more acquainted with the agricultural products and climate of the Levant, it was them and not the Ashkenazi Jews that had to undergo a stringent re-education process. They were taught by the Ashkenazi elite to cook in a manner which would support unified culinary practices, often being urged to give up their endogenous cultural activities. This indication of social hierarchy within Israel gives a glimpse of the historical imbalances and exclusionary practices within Israel's culinary history. While Raviv describes the drawing upon many influences both from 'East' and 'West' in Israeli *mizug-galuyot* ideology, she fails to adequately describe why this melting pot process often favored one group over the others. Most of the Jews in the *Yishuv* and early *aliyot* were of Ashkenazi descent and thus the cuisine of early Zionists, though it was adapted to the climate and available products, reflected this demographic reality. However, Raviv treats these early Zionists as a monolithic bloc that helped to solidify predominant agricultural practices and foodstuffs in Palestine. She crucially ignores the active exclusion of Mizrahi Jews from this process. The most noticeable example of this exclusion is the refusal of some early kibbutzim to hire Yemenite Jews as laborers.³ Raviv understates the role of the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi power dynamic, which to some extent still governs Israeli society to this day. 'We no longer talk in broad terms about Ashkenazi and Mizrahi food. Now there's Moroccan and Yemenite cuisine, and Russian and Czech food,' Raviv stated in an interview with Haaretz.⁴

By so strongly linking food with national identity, perhaps overemphasizing its role, Raviv errs in her assessment of increasing Mizrahi inclusion in the culinary scene being transformed into a larger identity shift. Here, Raviv gives a false sense of resolution to the historical imbalances in Israeli society. Whereas in reality, the Ashkenazi elite pick and choose which elements of Mizrahi society are 'acceptable,' with food being a benign and thus agreeable aspect of Mizrahi identity

³ Shabi, Rachel. *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2010.

⁴ Maltz, Judy. "Falafel Nation: How the Israeli Food Scene Went From Local to Global." *Haaretz*, 26 Oct. 2015.

that can be brought into the larger Israeli consciousness. However, that's not to say that acceptance of Mizrahi culinary traditions is not an important step in rectifying historical wrongs.

Connected to the previous point is the fact that Raviv ignores some other simultaneous factors that constructed national identity, giving a skewed view of food's contribution in this process. In order to paint an accurate picture of Israeli national identity, Raviv should dedicate a larger portion of the book to at least mention some of the other contributing factors that worked in conjunction with food as a cornerstone for a sole constructed Jewish nationalism. Much of Raviv's focus during this portion of the book deals with Israel's preoccupation with its image abroad. She repeatedly describes Israel's intention to use the culinary arts as a medium for projecting a positive image of the controversial nation to the outside world. In Israeli political circles, this public relations ploy is known as *hasbara*. At points Raviv's focus on food and *hasbara* goes too far, to the extent that it overestimates food's role in creating an international image of Israel and undermines the importance of how food allows Israelis to see themselves rather than how outsiders see them. While food succeeds in part with projecting a positive image in Israel, maybe food's purpose is to allow for an internal dynamism and an exploration *by* Israelis about what it is *to be* Israeli. Raviv's argument about the important role of food for the construction of a Jewish nationalism is explained within the temporal boundaries of 1905 to 1967. However, in order to adequately explain the historical context and the future of Israeli identity, Raviv goes beyond these parameters, making them loosely defined at best. While the expansion of temporal boundaries in Raviv's in-depth exploration of Israeli culinary culture is meant to facilitate understanding, her unclear spatial dimensions do the opposite. Raviv does not adequately define the crucial dimension of space in her work. And while one can reasonably assume that her analysis of Israeli cuisine is focused within the borders of the State of Israel, that in itself is enigmatic. Israel's borders are disputed and while many nations do not recognize Israel's right to settle in the occupied territories, Raviv's omission of post-1967 settler food practices leaves the reader with much to be desired, especially as conceptions of Israeli cuisine shift over time.

The second of *Falafel Nation's* strongest arguments is that over time there has been a shift from an exclusionary culinary nationalism predicated on survival and connection to the land towards a diversifying culinary experience that can be used for exploration of foreign cultures and expression of previously subjugated culinary pasts. Raviv masterfully illustrates how the process of globalisation and growing commercialism have led to a break from the singularity of culinary

nationalism. She is able to do this by relying on empirical evidence from cookbooks, statistical accounts of supermarket visits, and analysis of practices that are considered challenges to the culinary status quo. All of this research is extremely valuable, when one analyzes it over a temporal dimension to note the shifts. In trying to explain the commercialisation of Israeli cuisine, Raviv emphasizes the importance of the professional kitchen, choosing to examine dining in hotels and army kitchens. However, this analysis is severely lacking because Raviv chooses to omit the analysis of restaurants, claiming they could not be studied adequately within the scope of her book. Critics have lamented this, stating that an analysis of restaurants is essential because ‘non-specifically Israeli restaurants are changing the face of the national cuisine or how Israelis perceive what we call “new” Israeli cuisine in the Diaspora.’⁵

Some of Raviv’s most compelling examples of shifts in the Israeli culinary scene are seen in her case-studies of Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia and the Former Soviet Union (FSU). She writes that the perceived unity of Israeli cuisine is now being challenged by new immigrant groups that do not assimilate and retain, to a certain degree, separate cultural and culinary spheres. These groups do not contribute to a singular classifiable Israeli culinary nationalism. While Raviv pays some close attention to these groups, she is constrained by the fact that there is insufficient research on the culinary practices of these groups as well as on growing numbers of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa and guest workers from Southeast Asia. Another dimension which Raviv attempts to tackle here is the increasing acceptance of Mizrahi culinary practices. Through festivals like *Mimouna*, described in the last chapter, and symbols of Mizrahi, Arab, and Bedouin culture such as *mangal* (a type of outdoor barbeque) and the *kumzits* (who gathered around fires, eating drinking and singing songs). This begs the perhaps unanswerable question: Is incorporating these practices into the Israeli mainstream an attempt to recognize marginalized Mizrahim, or is it cultural theft from Arabs?

Turning to views on Raviv’s work in academia and the media, much of the criticism surrounds the fact that Raviv ignores the contributions of non-Jewish Israelis almost entirely. Raviv conflates Israeli national identity with the expression of a Jewish nationalism, a disservice to all Israel’s non-Jewish citizens. While the projection of a singular Israeli culinary nationalism by a Zionist elite could be seen in early Israel, it is certainly no longer the case on the ground.

⁵ Rabinovitch, Lara. “‘Falafel Nation’: How Food Helped Create Israeli Culture.” *Tablet*, 6 Nov. 2015.

Raviv's arbitrary selection of what is within the scope of the book and what is not results in bias by omission. With journalist Lara Rabinovitch condemning Raviv's 'avoiding the subject of Israeli Arabs and their assumed "making of national identity in Israel," as her subtitle suggests. What would Birthright Israel be, for example, without the obligatory stop to eat among the Druze? Does that not affect how Israeli food culture—and Jewish nationhood—is being created and disseminated? What about all the Israeli foodies (Jews and Arabs, and likely others) who worship at the hummus altar of Abu Hasan? Israeli food culture is not—and perhaps never has been—limited to Jewish food, whatever that is.'⁶ This critique is perhaps best understood within the context of the changing identities of new generations of Israelis. Avi Shilon has recently expounded the characteristics of an identity that is undoubtedly Israeli but equally grounded in Palestinian culture. 'The Israeli-Palestinian identity is a civil and cultural component, whose recognition does not threaten the fundamental identities, which both parties have the right to preserve, and so the Israeli-Palestinian identity would be easier to accept.'⁷

Haaretz journalist Judy Maltz has praised Raviv for her unique analysis of a recent break from culinary singularity, summarizing by stating that 'the country's up-and-coming foodie scene is a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism.'⁸ Raviv herself has corroborated this, evaluating a new and undoubtedly Israeli cuisine as one that 'may be constantly changing and reimagining itself, but that's true of cuisine everywhere in the world.'⁹ The biggest detriment to Raviv's work is also what makes it most unique: her specificity blurs the connection between empirical data and theory. While she attempts to connect her empirical research to theoretical findings, the connection between the modernist visions of Hobsbawm and Anderson with Israel-specific findings are weak at best. As a result, the theoretical bases for Raviv's work appear as broad generalisations with no context in the Middle East & North Africa region. While Raviv was thorough in collecting archival data, she presents little of her own field research in Israel, leaving the reader with more to be desired. Raviv describes this as a 'nostalgia work' in her conclusion, describing the guilt she felt writing from New York while distant wars were being waged in her home country.

⁶ Rabinovitch, Lara. "'Falafel Nation': How Food Helped Create Israeli Culture." *Tablet*, 6 Nov. 2015.

⁷ Shilon, Avi. "Five Decades of Occupation Have Created a Sort of Israeli-Palestinian Identity." *Haaretz*, 16 Mar. 2016.

⁸ Maltz, Judy. "Falafel Nation: How the Israeli Food Scene Went From Local to Global." *Haaretz*, 26 Oct. 2015.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Falafel Nation presents unique and compelling arguments about the role of food in the construction of Israeli national identity. Raviv makes two main arguments. First, she claims that during the Yishuv and early aliyot there was a calculated effort to use food in order to construct a united Jewish nationalism. Her second argument is that over time the original idea of Israeli culinary nationalism diversified to reflect the growing commercialism and globalisation of Israeli society. Despite some flaws in Raviv's work relating to her omission of certain groups from her analysis and her overall methodology, *Falafel Nation* makes for a comprehensive and fascinating read. However, now more than ever, as Israel's society is changing in demographics, cultural composition, and political persuasion, it may be essential to ask a new question: How are the practices of Jews and non-Jews alike shaping a new Israel that is Jewish in name but pluralistic in its composition?