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Interview with Michael Cooper

Michael Cooper

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Accession number: ELFS-SJS-A020201.A

Event: Interview with Michael Cooper, director of Kenyon Hillel (Jewish student organization).

Place: Rural Life Office, upstairs in Davis House.

SS: This is Sarah Schwenk with Michael Cooper, director of Hillel. It is 11am on the second of february, we are in the Rural life room and this is accession number ELFS-SJS-A020201.A. Okay, I think that's it.

MC: Can I say happy ground hogs day?

SS: Yes, yes you can...happy ground hogs day! I'm just going to ask you a few questions about food. First, are you from Knox County originally?

MC: no.

SS: Okay, where are you from?

MC: I'm from the Cleveland area.

SS: What brought you to Knox County? The job?

MC: Kenyon. Hillel. The Job.

SS: Okay. Mainly what I want to know about is ritual foods. Whether it is your own personal family, or something that's more broadly in the Jewish community. What comes to mind when I say 'ritual foods'?

MC: Well, uh, this is a broad topic when it comes to Jewish dietary recipes and foods and culinary items. I guess, I was thinking, did you want to know anything about the dietary traditions?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MC: Because that's a very fundamental Jewish, part of Jewish culture and Jewish religion. Kosher is a Hebrew word that means proper or ritually fit. So it's not only food that's Kosher, it's anything relating to Jewish tradition. You know the prayer shawls that Jews wear? The fringes are supposed to be tied in a certain way. And it's very specific, so you could have a Kosher talus, Kosher prayer shall. Or, if the torah is handwritten you know, by a Jewish scribe who is trained in the calligraphy, if there is something, a word is misspelled and it doesn't go corrected, or if something happens where the Torah gets damaged it's no longer a Kosher Torah. So, so, in order for food to be Kosher it has to meet certain specifications. The way it's prepared, and of course certain foods, certain animals, meats, are not permitted, liked swine, shellfish.

SS: I never realized shellfish was prohibited...

MC: Yeah, the rules are, when it comes to meat the Kosher animals are animals that have a cloven hoof, a split hoof and chew their cud. So a pig has a split hoof, but it doesn't chew it's cud. And then when it comes to fish it's animals that have scales and fins. And then birds of prey are not Kosher, can never be Kosher. There's this rabbi, I read a book, he was on a plane and flying some where and of course he kept Kosher, so the airline gave him the special dishes you know, for passengers that kept Kosher. And the Stewardess asked if, he asked the stewardess, he was just curious, he said 'do you know what makes food Kosher?' and she said it's something blessed by a Rabbi. And that's a common misconception because a rabbi can bless a pig all he wants and it's not going to be Kosher. The pig wouldn't be kosher, and you would wonder if the rabbi is Kosher.

SS: Because he's blessing a pig!

MC: Right. Um...but, that's one aspect of the dietary laws. The other aspect is, you have separate dishes and separate utensils for milk and meat. Dairy and meat are in a traditional Jewish household, one that observes these as religious commandments, would never eat a cheeseburger. Well, the origin if this is biblical in, I'm not sure that I can remember the exact citation, probably Deuteronomy, where it says you shall not boil a kid in his mothers milk. So, you might ask, how do you go from that, to never mix milk and meat dishes. Well, Jewish law is not just based on the bible by itself. The bible is the foundation. From there it's what's called the oral tradition. And the Oral tradition because codified and makes up the whole body of what's called Challa-Cha, or what most people call Jewish Law. And so, the rabbi's and the sages, when they were interpreting this, in order to make this law applicable and fit they said, well this must mean some how milk and meat shouldn't be mixed in, you know. And maybe there were some practical reasons like how do we know that were not taking that kid from the mother, you know, how do we always know. Well, in order to be sure, don't mix milk and meat. And so that became broadened out over time and understood as dairy products should be eaten separately from milk products. And then, there's even special or specific, I would say the two most important, this is my opinion I can't say I speak for all of Jewish law, Jewish tradition but probably, or maybe I should just say, two among the most significant dietary related events in Jewish life are the Sabbath and Passover. Now, uh, Passover is very elaborate. There are symbolic ritual foods that stand for the events commemorating the exodus from Egypt. Which is like the fundamental core even in Jewish history because that's what made the Jewish people the Jewish people, right? And so you have, to remember the bitterness of slavery, you, at the, during the ritual meal, each participant eats something bitter, a bitter herb. And then there's the flat unleavened bread, the Matza, which is called the bread of affliction, to remember in haste how our ancestors had to leave Egypt and they couldn't wait for their cakes to rise so they had to take, literally on the run more or less. So this transports a Jew back to those events, symbolically through food. There's a ground up, chopped up, apple and nuts mixture which represents the stuff which bricks are made of because it looks kind if like mortar.

SS: What's that called?

MC: It's got a Hebrew name called Charosis, I think it's something meaning chopped up. And, um, so again there's all these, so you're, what do they call that? Um, when you are trying to teach young students' lessons and they use all the sense, what is that tactile?

SS: yeah, tactile.

MC: So this is sort of an example of that. Where you are trying to recall all the significant events in your religious history, and for those that are reaching for some spiritual connection, it's done through history because there was this divine intervention that resulted in this deliverance. And so, you have an egg on the table which represents one of the ancient sacrifices and also a renewal or rebirth and you have a green vegetable that you dip in salt water. The Green for spring because Passover is a spring holiday and the salt water represents the bitter tears that the slaves suffered, you know. And then one of the most important ones is, remember, if you know the exodus story, the people were supposed to paint, they were supposed to sacrifice the lamb and paint the blood of the lamb on their door posts. Well, in remembrance of that symbolic Passover sacrifice you have a roasted shank bone of the lamb on the Passover table. So all these foods....

SS: They're all directly tied in, they all have ritual significance.

MC: right. So, that's one of the fundamental, most significant events where food really plays a prime part. The other one is the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the day of family and celebrating Jewish values. It's also, you know, there's time for prayer and time for release from all the so-called 'worldly' creative aspects. Because you imitate god by resting on the seventh day and then sanctifying the Sabbath. And it's done with wine or something fruit of the vine, and a special bread that's called Challah – it's a twisted egg bread.

SS: Yeah, it's really good.

MC: Oh! You've had it. And it's specially baked for the Sabbath. And this is to be reminiscent of, when the temple stood in Jerusalem there used to be daily sacrifices of animals. You know, that's how the rituals were done. But since the temple was destroyed, these sacrifices can no longer take place because they were supposed to take places in a designated area in a designated spot by the designated people. So, what's replaced the temple and the temple altar is the family table. And therefore the Challah that you have represents symbolically that ancient sacrifice. And the people that do the rituals represent these ancient priests. So, traditionally on the Sabbath you have one bread representing the daily sacrifice and a second bread representing the Sabbath sacrifice. And so you're table in your house, therefore, stands in for this ancient temple and it becomes a holy place. And food plays an important part in that.

SS: Yeah. Family rituals and religious rituals are pretty much the same.

MC: And it's a time again, for joy and celebration, but not like a raucous, you know like it's party time. But you know, it's, traditionally in very orthodox they try to create this atmosphere of singing and eating and enjoying real meal together. And then like, when they come back from Sabbath morning prayers there will be more food. And there is sort of a, now this isn't necessary ritual this is where you get into ethnic within a broader Jewish, there's Ashkenazi Jews they are people whose parents came from central and eastern Europe. Like I would be considered an Ashkenazi Jew because my family is from Poland and Lithuania. And then Jews who came from countries like Portugal, morocco, Spain, north Africa, Egypt, are Sephartic Jews. And they represent the, sort of the, Spanish speaking world. And there are different customs and different traditions that are, sort of, products of these two, you know, because they intermingle with the cultures they live among.

SS: Definitely, and there is different things available to them.

MC: Right, right. And so, I'm not an expert on Sephartic Jews, well, I'm not really an expert on Ashkenazi Jews, but I know more about that than I do Sephartic. But there's all kinds of cookbooks, you know, I don't know what they have from the library, but it would be fun to look at some of these these traditions.

SS: just to see the ingredients.

MC: Right, right. And the variations of what was popular. Well, I don't know if there is any of the students here, I would say that most of the Kenyon Jewish students are Ashkenazi Jews, but there may be someone who comes from a Sephartic background. But anyway, what I was leading up to, with this little digression, I said, traditionally, like a Jewish household that is basically observant, Saturday morning the family or parts of the family will go to the morning Sabbath service. See you're not allowed to light, there is certain works that are not permitted like light a fire – like driving a car and turning on the oven. So, a lot of what they do, before Sabbath starts, before sundown on Friday night they'll have their main Friday night meal but then they'll have this slow cooking stew, that stays in the oven and cooks, can cook all night, slowly and it's called Chowland. It's basically, well there's probably a lot of variety, but it's basically like potatoes, carrots, some kind of maybe beef and it just cooks and maybe some kind of lentils or something. So when people come back for their main meal on Friday, I mean Saturday afternoon, it was the custom to have this dish called Chowland. I'm not exactly sure how to translate that. But uh, that's one of the popular, among the Ashkenazi jews, I mean, um, you probably know about Matza ball soup?

SS: uh-huh.

MC: And there's another dish called Kreplaugh. Kreplaugh is kind of like, I don't want to call it like a pirogue, but I'm not sure that's accurate. Maybe a little bit like a ravioli but you eat it in soup. It's like dough and then stuffed with meat,

SS: Oh, yum.

MC: yeah, I love it.

SS: Sounds good!

MC: It's my family's custom and a lot of family's custom is to have that on the Jewish New Year. Um. I don't know that it, I don't think it has any ritual, it doesn't have any ritual significance, it's more of a cultural thing. But, and then, well see, at New Year there is also this custom of introducing the new year, so you may have a sweet year, taking a slice of apple and dipping it in the honey.

SS: Sounds good.

MC: and that's to represent the wishes for a sweet New Year, Jewish New year. Um, Hanukkah time, one of the customary foods is, I don't know if you may have heard of something called Potato latkas...

SS: Yeah.

MC: it's fried in oil and because of Hanukkah represents the miracle of the oil, so it's customary to eat foods that are, you know, heavy in oil. Israeli's started this custom of having Jelly doughnuts.

SS: Ha Ha, because they're fried in oil!

END OF PERTENANT INFORMATION

Further discussion on:

- feminism and Judaism
- religion in general