

CULTURE

Why Jews Don't Eat Pork (Though Some Do)

REVIEW: 'Forbidden: A 3,000-Year History of Jews and the Pig' by Jordan D. Rosenblum

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March 9, 2025

... What do you think of the assertion that it is precisely the most proper type of meat that Jews avoid eating?

... I heartily agree with it, but I have another question. Do they abstain from eating pork by reason of some special request for hogs or from abhorrence of the creature? Their own accounts sound like pure myth, but perhaps they have some serious reasons which they do not publish.

—Plutarch



*Homer: Wait a minute wait a minute wait a minute. Lisa honey, are you saying you're *never* going to eat any animal again? What about bacon?*

Lisa: No.

Homer: Ham?

Lisa: No.

Homer: Pork chops?

Lisa: Dad! Those all come from the same animal!

Homer: [laughs sarcastically] Yeah, right Lisa. A wonderful, magical animal.

—The Simpsons, "*Lisa the Vegetarian*"

In the first century, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher journeyed to Rome to defend, in the presence of the emperor, against certain charges leveled at the Egyptian-Jewish community. But the Roman emperor Gaius, known as Caligula, had more gustatory matters on his mind. "Why," he asked Philo, "is it that you abstain from eating pig's flesh?" This, Philo ruefully recounts, provoked "a violent laughter" by his adversaries in the throne room, as "they wished to court the emperor out of flattery, and therefore wished to make it appear that this question was dictated by wit and uttered with grace." To this Philo did his best to explain Jewish law, but others were still stuck on matters culinary. "There are also many people who do not eat lamb's flesh which is the most tender of all meat," another Roman commented. To this, Philo reports, Caligula laughingly commented, "They are quite right, for it is not nice."

This ostensibly ludicrous scene actually captures the enormousness of Jewish history, and it is one of the many moments briefly referenced in Jordan D. Rosenblum's book *Forbidden: A 3,000-Year History of Jews and the Pig*. The subtitle is true to its claim: In a relatively concise work, Rosenblum takes us on a comprehensive tour, from classical sources to modern literature and movies. (Disappointingly, while Plutarch receives his due, *The Simpsons* is not a pop culture source cited by Rosenblum—not even a scene known to fans featuring a group styled "The Rapping Rabbis" chanting, "Don't eat pork/not even with a fork/can't touch this!") The historian introduces the reader to a veritable smorgasbord of sources that is a bona fide intellectual feast. And yet: As the book reached the modern era, Rosenblum appears to celebrate, or at least empathize with, Jews who have embraced the tabooed animal whole hog, and who defend themselves in Judaic terms. It is here that I lose my appetite for his argument.

Let us begin with the culinary conundrum. As described in the Bible, any number of creatures are designated as forbidden food to God's covenant people. A kosher animal must both chew its cud and feature split hooves; this, Leviticus further explains, would prohibit creatures that have only one of these signs (a camel is a ruminant but has no real hooves, and a pig has split hooves but is not a ruminant). Kosher fish must feature fins and scales, thereby forbidding shellfish, as well as other marine life such as shark and catfish. Nothing in sacred Scripture singles out the pig as *especially* forbidden, and a Jew who eats shrimp is violating Torah law as severely as one who ingests pork. Thus, there is no source in the biblical period that marks the pig as an animal that is particularly repugnant. Why, then, is abstention from pork so affiliated with Jewishness?

The answer, Rosenblum shows, lies in history. It was only during the Second Temple period, Rosenblum notes, that the Jews became particularly known by Gentiles for their refusal to eat pork, while Jews, in turn, began to see pork as forbidden food *par excellence*. This began, he shows, during the persecution of Judea by the Syrio-Greek Seleucid Empire, in which the Maccabean revolt, and the story of Hanukkah, ultimately unfolded. Stories of Jewish martyrdom, described in the second Book of Maccabees, described Jews who refused to

ingest pork on pain of death. Thus, for Rosenblum, "the particular role the pig plays in Second Temple martyrdom narratives directly leads to its outsized historical influence." Meanwhile, the fact that Jews refrained from enjoying what was, in Simpsonian terms, a "wonderful, magical, animal," attracted the attention and the curiosity of pagans, either because Jews were known for abhorring the animal, or because it was so strange to Romans that Jews would deny themselves this particular pleasure.

Eventually, as Rosenblum recounts, the rabbis returned the favor by utilizing the pig as a scripturally inspired metaphor for Rome itself. Because the pig was the one animal in the ancient world that featured the more noticeable kosher sign, split hooves, but still lacked the required rumination, the Talmud depicted the animal as an embodiment of hypocrisy, and therefore comparable to the abhorrent world power that had destroyed Judean Jerusalem and turned it into a pagan city: "Just as the pig, when it lays down puts forth its hooves as if to say 'I am clean,' so too does this Evil Empire commit robbery and violence [while] giving itself the appearance as if holding court." Rosenblum captures the rabbinic feeling about Rome precisely:

The pig publicly displays its cloven hooves, as if to claim that it is pure. But do not judge a book by its cover, because the external, seemingly pure body of the pig conceals its impure innards. It does not chew the cud and therefore is not kosher. So too, The Pig puts on a grand show in public, claiming to run impartial law courts. But scratch the surface, and you will find a violent and corrupt Rome.

This is exactly right, and the point deserves elaboration. Those who have admired the ancient Romans have also, at times, noted with disdain the way Jews resisted the pagan practices of the empire. Edward Gibbon rapturously recounted what he seemed to see as a pluralistic paradise: "We have already described the religious harmony of the ancient world, and the facility with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected, each other's superstitions." And yet, he scornfully continues, "A single people refused to join in the common intercourse of mankind," such that "a sullen obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and unsocial manners seemed to mark them out a distinct species of men." The Jews in the empire, for Gibbon, "yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors than to the evidence of their senses."

But of course, as Prof. Steven Smith has noted, for Gibbon to celebrate the empire as a harmonious place was to ignore "the vast slave populations, the ubiquitous brothels staffed by desperate and downtrodden women, the lethal savagery of the gladiatorial games, the widespread practice of infanticide, and the dismal tenement housing afflicted by fire and filth and disease." In a similar sense, rabbinic texts utilize a forbidden animal in order to make a homiletical point: to morally celebrate the Roman Empire is to put lipstick on a pig. To identify an animal that has one kosher sign but not the other with Rome is to reflect the way in which Jews disdained the pagan allure of the Roman world. To put it slightly differently, Jews have been proud of the fact that they have remained true to ways of their ancestors even when, to others, they appeared pigheaded.

It is with this in mind that we may approach a phenomenon that Rosenblum admiringly examines as his book reaches its conclusion: Jews who not only eat pork, but utilize Judaic concepts in order to explain it. For Rosenblum, this violation of Torah law is itself a Judaic act. "In my view," Rosenblum reflects, "these Jews should be understood as transgressing as a means of expressing; their rejection is a form of acceptance, and hence, it is a key part of the conversation." For Rosenblum, the humorist David Rakoff's essay is the truest "masterpiece" on "Jews, pig, and identity." Let us study the passage Rosenblum cites, in which Rakoff invokes the well-known tradition of shattering a glass vessel at a Jewish wedding:

And yet, with all of this, I almost never feel more Jewish than in that moment just before I am about to eat pork. Allow me to horrify kosher readers when I draw a parallel between that instant and the custom of breaking a glass at a Jewish wedding, the perfect illustration of the Jewish worldview. In this sober evocation of the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. is a reminder that all joy houses the Newtonian capacity for an equal and opposite sorrow. As a Jew Who Eats Pork, extolling the boundless perfection of the baby pig at NY Noodletown at the corner of Bowery and Bayard necessarily requires a simultaneous split second of acknowledgment along with my blithe rhapsody that this is meat ineluctably bound up with my grim history. Otherwise, I'd just be a guy eating pork.

Rosenblum embraces this. Here, he argues, "the act of eating pig is a bite-sized moment of sorrow and joy, of shattering glass and putting the broken pieces back together, and of transgression and affirmation."

To this rabbinic reader, such a statement is horrifying. While the tradition of shattering a glass at a Jewish wedding has, as Rosenblum notes, a complex history, it has come to be identified as a reminder of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and of all the horrors that followed Jews in exile. To celebrate a wedding as the glass is broken is to defiantly insist that Jewish identity continues in the face of all attempts to ensure the contrary. The glass ritual recalls, in other words, the tragedies *that Jews did not choose*, as well as the heroism with which Jews retained their patrimony during persecution.

Meanwhile, as Rosenblum himself teaches us, the pig came to be associated by Jews with the stubborn refusal to abandon their faith, even in the face of challenges they did not choose. Here, a total inversion of the past takes place: A Jew *chooses* to eat pig, and invokes the memory of those martyrs who died at the hands of the very empire Jews compared to this animal in order to justify and Judaize an act that those very same martyrs would have seen as a betrayal. It is to seek to create a sacred silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Explaining Jews that partake in pork need not be complicated. Pork is delicious (or so I have it on the authority of Plutarch and Homer Simpson). For some Jews today, that fact is more important than the fact it is forbidden by Jewish law, and more important, it seems, than the fact that other Jews have died a martyr's death rather than eat it. But a ham-eating Jew who guiltily reflects on the horror with which his ancestors would have regarded his meal is not

sanctifying, or Judaizing, his violation of the Torah. His meal is in no way comparable to a rite at a Jewish wedding, which is seen as the ultimate embodiment of Jewish continuity. In the end, he is just a guy with guilt eating a pig. All else is hogwash.

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Forbidden: A 3,000-Year History of Jews and the Pig

by Jordan D. Rosenblum

NYU Press, 272 pp., \$30

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