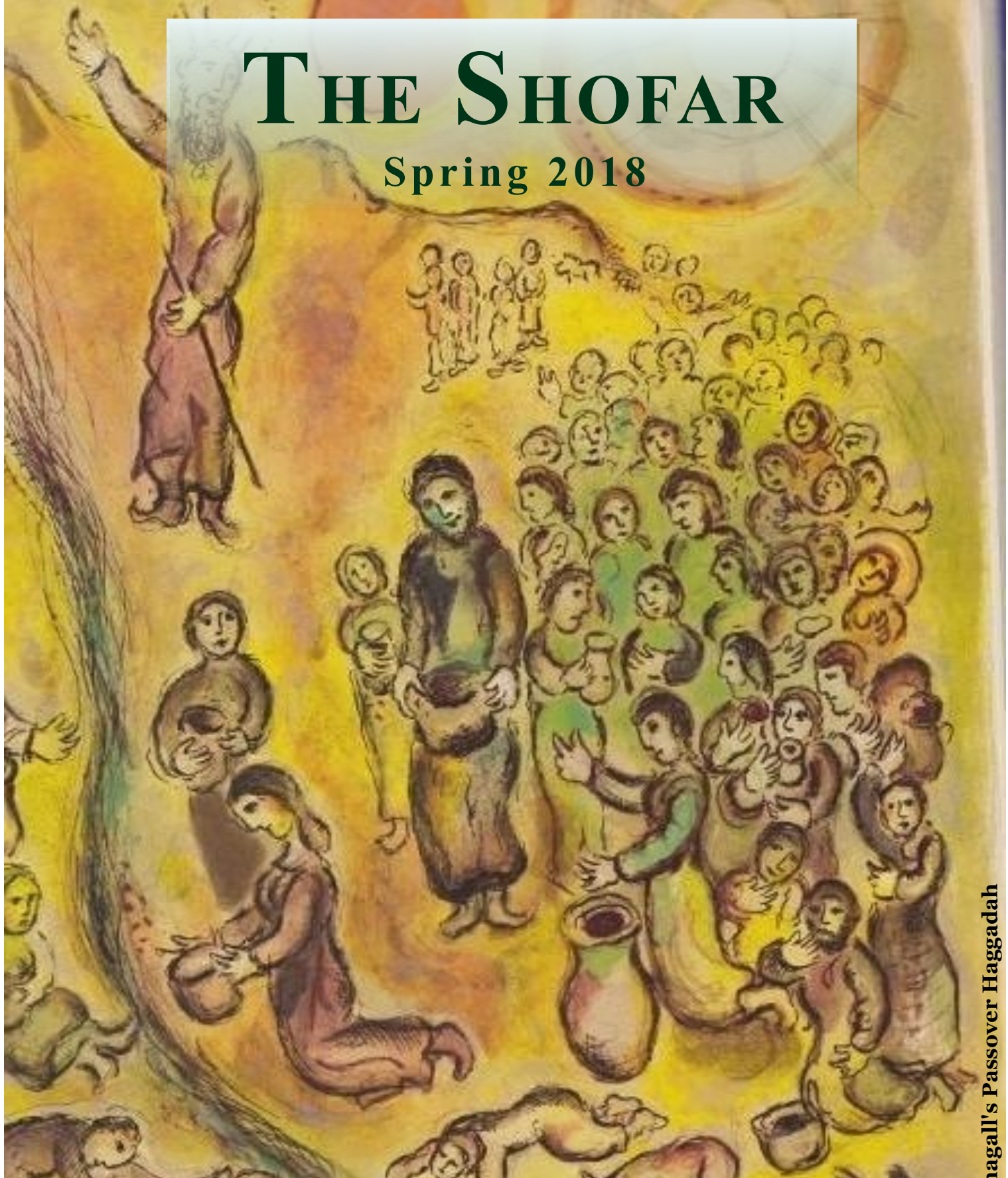


THE SHOFAR

Spring 2018



Chagall's Passover Haggadah

Wood River Jewish Community

"The Wood River Jewish Community is a gathering place that strives to perpetuate Jewish tradition through worship, fellowship and learning. Founded in 1976, we seek to provide a welcoming and caring community in the Wood River Valley."

About our Members

Why Cook? Why do I cook?

Marlene B. Samuels



We can feel Passover nipping at Purim's heels as we follow Hamantaschen and rich bean soups with Matzo, macaroons, and Charosis. Bean soups and Purim? Yes, bean soup! The beautiful Queen Esther was a devout vegetarian who loved rich bean and lentil soups and her favorites: poppy seed filled pastries. During most Jewish holidays, celebrations, and even during sorrowful times, food plays a significant role. Some foods are traditional while others actually are stipulated by our religious texts, for instance; latkes on Hanukkah, Charosis or Matzo for Passover, and who doesn't love Purim's sweet Hamantaschen?

Throughout history, across all the world's continents, among Jews and non-Jews alike, culture and cuisine always have been inseparable and remain so to this day. For us, as Jews, so many of the foods we enjoy during special times have been passed down through multiple generations. And regardless of how common these foods might be, their flavors have been fine-tuned by country, city, town, Shtetl, and even by family of origin, (definitely, my potato latkes are vastly better than my aunt's). Preparations are replete with subtle nuances akin to an artist's signature on a canvas or an author's dedication on her manuscript.

I began contemplating our cultural foods — and my cooking specifically, from the perspective of exactly how Judaism's culture and traditions are preserved, regardless of our individual levels of observance.

It's only fair to mention that my ruminating was inspired by David Fishman's recently published book entitled, *The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis*. In his review of Fishman's book, Gerald Steinacher made an incredibly

significant observation that pushed me to think on a more analytical level about my cooking and the impact my own Jewish heritage has had upon it. Steinacher noted that, "the Nazis did not merely want to murder all Jews, but they were also determined to eradicate all of Jewish culture, its art, and (its) literature".

As I read those words, I realized that yes, art and literature definitely communicate culture but shouldn't we also acknowledge that culture is transmitted through vastly less erudite means — mundane ones fundamental to all of us, independent of our educational attainment, our levels of sophistication, or economic standing. Jewish cuisine prevails despite numerous efforts throughout history, most systematic during the Holocaust, to eradicate Jews as an identifiable population. While we certainly can't overlook the incredible amount of Jewish art and literature stolen and destroyed, we can revel in the knowledge that it's near impossible to rob or destroy our ability to re-create and continue our culinary traditions.

During my growing up years, nothing material accompanied my parents in their arrival to Canada following their liberation from Hitler's concentration camps. Instead, only my mother's efforts to recreate the foods prepared by her mother during her own Romanian childhood evoked so many of the stories she told me as she cooked. My mother's special dishes and the stories that accompanied them connected me to a family I would have an opportunity to know.

These observations all beg a vast and complex question: why do I cook?

Four weeks after my wedding, that event that had kept her hanging to life by a disappearing thread, my mother died. It was 1983 and she was 63 years old, relatively young by contemporary standards. It was then that I began to cook — my efforts earnest, systematic, and daring. Often, I struggled to re-create dishes I wished would taste like home, the one in which I grew up, dishes that embodied flavors and aromas with a Romanian flare wholly unique to my mother. They were her culinary creations that evolved in concert with her life's progression.

My mother never owned a cookbook. She carried nothing tangible forward from the destruction of her past into her re-created life of the present. In many ways, the obliteration wrought by a Holocaust my mother survived deleted my history as well. Foods she cooked were grounded in her recollections of life in Romania before World War II. They were not to be found in any recipes scribbled on yellowing and stained notecards handed down from grandmother to mother to daughter or from aunts to nieces and beyond.

When I'm in my kitchen, I reminisce about those meals entirely unique to my mother—the ones my brother and I still challenge one another to recreate. My mother's cooking spanned the wide range of our economic status: poverty to plenty and all that lies between. Those memories weave the responses I proffer to friends and strangers alike, when they ask, "Why do you cook?" Or "Who taught you to cook?"

I cook a great deal, blog about cooking, watch shows about cooking when the world news is replete with tales of destruction. I write articles about cooking that occasionally are published. I've even taught cooking! Can I answer these seemingly straightforward questions without ruminating about women passing their recipes and cooking secrets onto their progeny?

At times, I'm compelled to ask: who actually did teach my mother to cook? My mother — that smart young woman from an Orthodox Jewish family growing up in a remote Romanian village; my rebellious mother who pursued education in lieu of culinary skills during the era, historically, when Jewish girls married young and rarely ventured beyond their garden gates. My mother couldn't learn from her mother, one of millions of mothers and would-be mothers killed in places bearing names like Dachau or Auschwitz or Ravensbruck.

So what is my answer? It's not one answer but rather a complex web of interdependent answers, most of which are ingrained in my Jewish roots.

I cook to create what reminds me of the scent of home and the security of family. I cook because cooking distracts me from life's problems as I become absorbed by the ingredients' sensory elements; because going to a restaurant when I'm tired or harried does the chef a disservice and deprives my taste buds of due appreciation. I cook because it's the consummate way I can show family and guests how much I care about them — like a hug around our most basic of senses with the power to unite strangers. Cooking, tasting, and memory become inseparable.

I cook to celebrate spring's intense colors; fruits and vegetables picked before they've grown large and tough. I cook as an adieu to the vestiges of summer, to welcome fall's heartiness with pumpkins, apples, peaches, and squash. I'll reconfigure them into spreads and soups and pies. They'll become the flavors of summer that live on in my kitchen, helping me brace myself for the winter ahead, one of short days and cold, early evenings.

I cook to boost my self-esteem of which a large part depends upon being better at one thing than anyone else in my family is, a family comprised of men who know everything about most things yet vastly less about cooking than I do. Cooking is my avenue to creativity like the many

short stories I write and books I savor. I cook to progress in life. Cooking is progressive. And, as I progress, I know that all those meals I've cooked over the years will help my sons remember me when they are far from home or I am no longer here.

I cook to invent and to be creative. Then, I'll reinvent, edit, and test again — exactly as I reinvent myself every morning and with each edit of my stories. To cook is to challenge myself to grow, to travel the world, befriending it by meeting the foods and flavors of unfamiliar lands and cultures. When I do, I'll inhale their scents, touch the delicate and coarse, and if ever the opportunity to visit those lands arrives, then their familiarity will welcome me in like a friend inviting me to share a meal.

I cook because it provides an incomparable avenue into understanding others, observing what they will and won't eat, what they like and dislike. Not to cook would render me incomplete; not to cook would deprive my senses of one of life's crucial components. Cooking is an avenue by which I can nurture myself and all those around me, to calm and soothe, to make merry and celebrate.

Cooking legitimates my sporadic excursions into ethnic neighborhoods and to the out-of-the-way markets where I become a student of foreign spices, herbs, and aromas, a discoverer of sauces and pastes, cookies and cakes. The vendors' sounds are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. In their tones, I recall childhood's long forgotten memories; the French farmers coming into the city to sell their goods in my old Montréal French Quarter neighborhood. Mine are memories of Polish butchers selling homemade sausages, Jewish survivor immigrants hocking kosher pickles and apple strudels, and the newly arrived Greek immigrants peddling their herbs and unfamiliar cheeses.

When my table is cleared and all who've graced it are content, I know that every reason I cook is intertwined with my understanding exactly who I am, what I'm capable of, and connecting to my Jewish values. Always during these times I'm reminded not of what I can do with ingredients at hand but more importantly, everything I'm able to do without while still being capable of satiating, feeling whole, and imparting what I've learned to all those for whom I'll cook.

Marlene Samuels is a writer, independent research sociologist, and an instructor who focuses on creative non-fiction, short stories, essays, and sociological articles that deal with emerging problems in contemporary America. She teaches research methodology to writers of nonfiction.

Marlene holds a PhD from University of Chicago and serves on the Advisory Council to the Graduate School, Division of the Social Sciences. And, in case you didn't know, Marlene also is passionate about cooking! Read more of her writing or learn about Marlene's current work by visiting her website: www.marlenesamuels.com