

JEWISH FOOD HERO



Nourishing your mind, body, and spirit

About Feeding Women of the Talmud, Feeding Ourselves

[*Feeding Women of the Talmud, Feeding Ourselves*](#) is a community cookbook co-created with 129 Jewish women from around the world. 60 Rabbis, Rabbinical students, Jewish teachers, and emerging thought leaders contributed to the Talmudic narratives, and 60 female professional chefs and passionate homecooks contributed to the recipes. The addition of this female-focused point of view to these women's Talmudic stories—which were recorded and edited by men—is a bright and encouraging testament to a modern generation of women engaging in Jewish learning.

These community cookbook/studybook projects are collective efforts, involving diverse Jewish women from all around the world. [*Feeding Women of the Talmud, Feeding Ourselves*](#) is the co-creation of 129 Jewish women: 69 Rabbis, Rabbinical students, Jewish teachers and emerging thought leaders contributed to the Talmudic narratives and 60 female professional chefs and passionate homecooks contributed to the recipes.

- This cookbook is organized around female stories in the Talmud, alphabetically presented.
- Each chapter is devoted to one female character in the Talmud and has the following sections:
- Story: a concise “true to the text” recounting of the female character's story in the Talmud.
- Context: This section seeks to enhance the stories by exploring their context: providing historical, social, literary and/or liturgical context for the story; describing what falls before and/or after the particular story in the Talmud and exploring how the context and position of the story reveals more about its meaning.
- Aggadah: a modern commentary or fictional story, uplifting the subject's voice without attempting to neutralize her imperfections, flaws or struggles.
- Prompts: meaningful questions arising from the story, meant to inspire further reflection for readers today.
- Food offering: one vegan or plant-based recipe, each inspired by or honoring the female Talmudic character.

Kimchit

Story

Kimchit¹ is remembered as a modest woman who was the mother of High Priests. In a way her story remains hidden, but is inferred through her sons' spiritual standing and positions, and by the response she gives to a question from the sages.

Her son Yishmael, a High Priest at the *Beit HaMikdash*, is referred to as the "son of Kimchit."² One of Yishmael's duties was to prepare the incense and offer it at the Golden Altar on Yom Kippur. Yishmael would fill his hands with incense and transfer it into a large spoon, then enter the inner sanctum of the Temple with a shovel of coals in his right hand and the spoon of incense in his left. The Gemara relates that Yishmael had exceptionally large hands and could fill his spoon with so much incense it weighed as much as the coals.

When Yishmael scooped the incense, he stated: "All the mothers selected the best, the selection of my mother rose to the top."³ With these words, Yishmael seems to credit his mother for his impressive physical stature.

Similarly, it seems that the Gemara credits Kimchit with her son's spiritual standing, as Yishmael is known by his matronym "son of Kimchit."⁴

We then learn that when Yishmael was unable to fulfill his duties as High Priest his brother filled in for him, and thus Kimchit saw two of her sons serve as High Priest on

¹ Talmud.b.Yoma 47a, Talmud.y.Yoma17b

² This is highly unusual, compounded by the fact that the priestly caste, as all tribal affiliations, is transmitted by the father's line and not the mother. We know nothing about Kimchit's family before she was married, her husband's lineage or even his name. As opposed to the priestly affiliation, her personal significance is not inherited, it appears to be based on her own merit. This passage also implies that Kimchit is the head of this family, at least in a spiritual sense.

³ As his language is vague, the Gemara offers two possible explanations - either Yishmael is referring to the special flour his mother ate while she was pregnant to ensure her son's future health, or it is a euphemism for the sperm which her womb chose to fertilize her egg. Either way, Yishmael credits his mother for his impressive stature.

⁴This impression is reinforced as the Gemara further relates two occasions when Yishmael was ritually unclean and temporarily unable to perform the duties of the High Priest. In both cases, one of his brothers served in his place. The gemara concludes both these stories with the statement "Thus their mother [Kimchit] saw two [of her sons] serve as High Priest on the same day."

the same day. The Gemara relates that Kimchit had seven sons and all of them served as High Priest in the Temple, presumably filling in for one another when necessary.

The Sages ask Kimchit directly what she did to merit seven sons who all served as High Priests. She responds: “In all my days the beams of my house have not seen the braids of my hair.” The Sages end with a comment that many women have done the same without any advantage.

This is the story the Talmud tells about Kimchit.

Passages

*Talmud b. Yoma 47a*⁵

כל הנשים זרדו וזרד אימא עלה לגג איכא דאמרי בערסן

All the women selected the best, but the selection of my mother rose to the roof.

ת"ר שבעה בנים היו לה לקמחית וכולן שמשו בכהונה גדולה אמרו לה חכמים מה עשית שזכית לכך אמרה להם מימי לא ראו קורות ביתי קלעי שערי אמרו לה הרבה עשו כן ולא הועילו

Rabbis taught, Kimchit had seven sons, and they all served as High Priest. The sages said to her: “What did you do to merit this thing?” She told them: “In all my days the walls of my home never saw the braids of my hair.” They answered her: “Many have done so and it did not benefit them.”

Context

The meaning of Kimchit’s story is open to polarized readings. Either the Sages are holding her up as a paragon of modesty (an oxymoron), or rejecting her behavior as unnecessary. Either the Talmud is presenting Kimchit as a virtuous matriarch who birthed a dynasty of spiritual leaders, or as a superficially pious woman whose sons are emblematic of the problematic priestly leadership of the latter portion of the Second Temple period.

The story is read one way or the other depending on how the reader answers the following questions:

⁵ Trans. Debbie Zimmerman

Were the sons of Kimchit pious, and to what degree?

It is believed that the story of Kimchit and her sons takes place at some point in the last 200 years of the Second Temple. Both religious and secular sources from this era often critique the High Priests of this time as not particularly pious, and often corrupt. A symptom of this corruption was the turnover rate of High Priests, turning a position that had formerly been the lifetime appointment of a spiritual leader into a political commodity bought and sold at an alarming rate.

In this light, this story could be read as critical of Kimchit's behavior.

There are those who read this story as a cautionary tale of a woman who valued cosmetic and frivolous modesty and thus instilled her sons with a superficial spirituality that led to later corrupt behavior. They are another example of corrupt leaders at the end of the Second Temple Period. This popular interpretation may fit well with the time period this story is set in, but it clashes with the language of the Gemara, which is overwhelmingly positive when discussing both Kimchit and her sons.

Is it positive to have seven sons from the same family serve as High Priest?

Throughout the First Temple period, the position of High Priest was both hereditary and a lifetime appointment. Though this seems to be the case for much of the Second Temple period as well, it changed at some point during the Hasmonean dynasty, when the position became a political appointment with established term lengths.

So, why were seven of Kimchit's sons eligible to serve as High Priest? Were they dealing the position like a commodity, as many did in that time? Or perhaps, as the Gemara indicates, all of Kimchit's sons were as meticulous and pious as their mother - careful to observe the laws of ritual purity as it seems she observed her modesty.

What standards of modesty were expected from women during Kimchit's time, and is Kimchit's story a benchmark for Jewish modesty standards?

The Gemara in Ketubot 72a-b relates that the Torah prohibits a woman from going out of the home with her hair completely uncovered, and that there are further cultural norms that dictate the extent of hair covering outside the home. Yet nowhere in the Gemara is there discussion of hair covering inside the home. Orthodox authorities have consistently agreed that there is no law that requires a woman to cover her hair inside the home. Yet, generations of Rabbinic Sages have debated whether the description of

Kimchit's hair covering was utterly rejected by the Rabbinic leadership of her time, or whether it is a standard that all women should continue to strive to attain.

Aggadah

One must begin with the obvious - Kimchit's statement about her hair cannot be understood literally. At the very least she must have uncovered her hair to bathe. This was probably done relatively frequently, as one can assume she meticulously observed the laws of ritual purity that were especially relevant to the priestly class at that time which necessitated frequent bathing.

It seems that the Sages' inquiry is sincere. They truly want to know what she did to raise such exemplary sons. They are not asking how she raised corrupt leaders. Her answer, though, is curious. Are we meant to believe that Kimchit herself attributed the spiritual achievements of her sons to her extreme zealotry regarding the laws of modesty? More specifically hair covering? This seems unlikely and reductionistic.

Kimchit's son Yishmael dodges flattery of his physical stature with the words: "I owe everything to my mother." This is a man who understands that he did not achieve his lofty spiritual position on his merit alone. He understands that he is subject to God's authority. He is willing to step down from his position, albeit temporarily, and share the limelight with his brother when mandated by God's law. He is both meticulous and humble - welcome traits in a spiritual leader. Traits that both he and the Sages attribute to his mother.

Perhaps Kimchit's statement about covering her hair at all times is another form of modesty. The sages ask her to detail her merits, she demures. One of the more charitable explanations of the halachic obligation of a married woman to cover her hair is to leave some things private, between a woman and her spouse. Perhaps Kimchit is telling the Sages that just as she does not flaunt her physical beauty, so too she will not flaunt her spiritual beauty. There are some things a woman keeps to herself.

Many Rabbinic calls to female modesty sound dated and patriarchal. In this day and age it sounds tone deaf to claim that women should dress for the male gaze. Feminism is about choice; each individual woman should get to choose what they wish to reveal, when, and to whom.

And yet it often feels like modesty is a lost art. Not the modesty of policing dress and measuring hemlines, but the modesty of choosing to keep somethings private, of concealing the external so that the internal and spiritual are more clearly seen.

Prompts

- What place does modesty have in our modern world? For women? For men? For humans?
- Kimchit chooses to stay hidden - Is her modesty a form of patriarchal oppression? Is it a personal choice or one imposed on her by society? Can these things ever be separated?
- Do virtuous people have a special responsibility to share their story so others may learn from them?

Rabbanit Debbie Zimmerman graduated from the first cohort of Hilkhata – Matan’s Advanced Halakhic Institute in Jerusalem. After completing a BA in Social Work, Debbie studied Tanakh in the Master’s Program for Bible in Matan and Talmud in Beit Morasha. She is a multi-disciplinary Jewish educator, with over a decade of experience in adolescent and adult education. Debbie lives in Jerusalem and likes to experiment with gluten free and soy free cooking and baking.

Spiced Acorn Squash Breakfast Bake

Kimchit had to prepare breakfast every day for her seven sons. I imagine Kimchit quadrupling this recipe and placing a deep, steaming baking dish on the family breakfast table.

Like Kimchit, the mother of High Priests, the acorn squash is modest, concealing its earthy, colorful, delightful flesh under an unremarkable green skin.

This recipe will show you the joys of eating vegetables for breakfast, and can double up as a sugar-free dessert. Once you cut through the squash and clean out the seeds, this dish is simple to make. This baked acorn dish combines the creamy flesh of the squash and vegan yogurt, with the tartness of apples, the crunch of walnuts, and the melted sweetness of dates.

Prep Time: 60 minutes

Cook Time: 50 minutes

Yield / servings: 2

Tools

Knife

Deep sided baking dish

Aluminum foil

Soup spoon

Measuring spoons and cups.

Ingredients

- 1 acorn squash
- ½ tsp ground cinnamon (more or less to your taste)
- ¼ tsp of ground cardamom
- ¼ tsp sea salt
- 1 apple, cored and chopped into small pieces
- 3 dates, pitted and chopped
- ¼ cup (55g) chopped walnuts

- ½ cup (120ml) nondairy, unsweetened yogurt (plain or vanilla)
- tiny bit of oil to rub on pan
- 1 tbsp hemp seeds or 1 tsp ground flax seeds

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 400 F or 200 C.
2. Line a deep sided baking dish with tin foil. Rub with a tiny bit of oil.
3. Cut squash in half widthwise to make two little squash boats
4. Using a soup spoon, scoop out the seeds. Either discard them or set aside to clean and roast later.
5. Rub the fleshy part of the squash with cinnamon, cardamom, and a bit of sea salt.
6. Place squash on pan flesh side down, adding a little water to prevent burning.
7. Bake for about 40 minutes, or until squash is soft and can be pierced with a fork.
8. Flip the squash over. To the hollowed out middle, add the yogurt, walnuts, apples and dates, and put back in the oven for about ten minutes.
9. Take out and sprinkle with hemp seeds or ground flax. Serve warm.

Karyn Moskowitz is a food justice organizer, social entrepreneur, and culinary enthusiast working in the Ohio River Valley since 1998. She is a co-founder of the New Roots Fresh Stop Markets in Kentucky.