

056: Flavors of Hanukkah, a Special Story

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HAPPY HANUKKAH! This is the 5th of 5 Hanukkah stories.

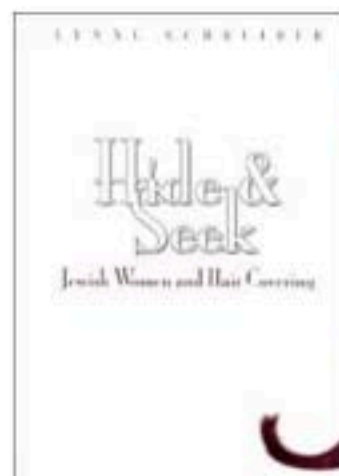
Click here to read: [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#), [Part 4](#), [Part 5](#).

It's Friday and we're bringing our special, week-long salute to the themes of Hanukkah to a close with one last story. We've saved a true gem for Friday, a short memoir from author Lynne Meredith Schreiber.

Sometimes we illustrate our stories with generic photos. But, two of the photos that appear with today's stories were taken at Schreiber's home. Pay special attention to those 2 images, below, of the beloved cookbooks from her family. To see those photos more clearly, click on them and they'll enlarge.

To read our recommendation and review of Lynne's book "Hide and Seek," click on that book cover.

Come back, starting on Monday, for some amazing stories about the spirituality of Super Heroes – and other comic characters. (No kidding.) Plus, in the coming week, we'll share a fresh Quiz – and lots more of your recommendations that you've sent to us about great spiritual books and fascinating Web sites.



But now, it's time to settle back and enjoy this gem. The story is called ...

Inheriting The Earth

By Lynne Meredith Schreiber

"Grandpa always made the salad," I say in the dark of my five-year-old son's room. "He chopped cucumbers and tomatoes very small and diced hard-boiled eggs to throw on top." Asher scrunches his nose; he doesn't like eggs.

Grandma's veal scallopine was made of thin slices of veal in bubbling tomato sauce. When I ate there on Friday nights as a child, Grandpa raced through the prayer over wine, sending me, my sister and grandmother into fits of giggles. Grandpa was Weeble-like with a hawk-like nose, but he laughed heartily and his hands were satin-soft. Even in my twenties, I held his hand, the wide square smooth nails, freckles from age and sun dotting his warm skin, holding on, both of us, as if for balance.

"Tell what you had for dessert," Asher urges. When I say, "Fudgsicles," he leans back on the pillow, arms behind his head. It's as if we ate gold.

Friday nights at my grandparents' house were lit by flickering candlelight and the low rumble of Hebrew prayers. They were the only people in my family to celebrate the Sabbath. Saturday mornings, I trailed after my grandfather's long wool tallit prayer shawl at services, sitting amid the hush of the sanctuary and sneaking single-bite chocolate layer cakes and plastic cups of grape juice afterwards. When I became religious in my 20s, I credited my grandparents with lighting my Jewish spark, even though I went beyond their observances - not driving from sundown Friday until three stars twinkled in the Saturday night sky and eating only kosher food, in restaurants and strict homes. That ruled out my grandparents' home.

"Are you never going to eat in our house again?" Grandpa asked me one cold winter night. The son of Orthodox immigrants from Poland, Grandpa revered ritual but compromised to bring people together. A candle flickered on our restaurant table, casting shadows against the white bread-basket napkin. Menus lay at the table edge. I would have the steak.

"I'm religious because of you," I whispered.

"What a legacy we're leaving," he said, hugging Grandma.

But it wasn't so easy. Cooking, food, the quest for control over the family table, brought us together as well as it ripped us apart.

Identity comes from so many places — my parents gave me fashion- and business-sense and a knowledge of the world while my grandparents grounded me in ancient traditions. As Hanukkah approaches, and Jews everywhere recall the destruction of the holy Temple by the Greeks and the subsequent miracle of a day's worth of oil burning for eight, so they could adequately rebuild, I think of the destructions and rebuildings that take place in our lives every day.

I'm lucky because, after a decade of being religious, I found a way to be respectful of tradition AND balanced — eating once again at the family table, making compromises as my family did so that we could all be together. That gift of family, of knowing who I am in a context of people, is priceless.

But there have been other gifts, too, like the creased, weathered cookbooks that Grandma gave to me after my grandfather passed away. My kitchen is home to 99 cookbooks with splattered, stained pages creased from years of beloved use. The titles I consider to be art. We decorate our rooms with details of what matters and in my home's heart, the warped white laminate kitchen where I bake zucchini-carrot bread and roll matzoh balls between wet hands, the counter on which my children sprinkle cheese and chopped olives onto homemade pizza and punch bread dough that we'll all shape into loaves, color comes from cookbooks.

Grandpa died after I'd been completely religious for four years. In his last months, he and Grandma cried when they looked at one another, knowing an end was near. Their sad passion was as intense as their joy singing over the Sabbath table. A few months after we buried Grandpa in the tree-lined cemetery, my grandmother gave me her cookbooks.

"Who would I cook for now?" she said.

I fingered the pile of four well-loved books. The binding had fallen apart on *The Settlement Cook Book*. Scotch-tape held the *1945 Jewish Cook Book* together, while a rubberband secured *A Treasure for My Daughter*. Hidden in *Guide for the Jewish Homemaker* and *Jewish Cooking for Pleasure*, I found note cards with Grandma's handwriting, shortcuts and commentary in the margins.

More than using them, I run my fingers over their cracked covers, trying to remember my childhood, my history in the pages. Did I scribble in thick black crayon across the pages? Or were those thick lines from my mother's childhood, Grandma in an apron and spray-frozen hair? I imagine Mom and her siblings in the yard or down the street or later, me and my sister pounding the piano keys as the old dog Clancy lay on the blue living room carpet.





As a child, my religion was food more than prayer and in a way it still is: velvety brisket strips in a bubbling tomato sauce and satiny chicken soup with fluffy matzoh balls; gefilte fish balls with hats of soft carrot, mashed fried cow's liver, and a shining, jewel-toned jell-o mold with fruit inside. The table – my

grandmother's, my mother's, my aunts', mine – holds china and white linens, as the kitchen emanates the coming meal's sweet husky scent. On Passover, the crowning moment at the seder table for me is not songs or stories but Grandma's light-as-air strawberry fluff dolloped atop sponge-cake.

When I took on religion, I was really immersing myself in the world of my ancestors. Tradition is the ultimate gift, I now know, which is why I lay in bed at night, recounting the way my grandfather made salad so my children will know this important part of him. They'll never touch his hands or hear his belly laugh, but at least they'll know the tastes he loved.

A friend once told me that Jews should be observant, first and foremost, because God told us to follow the ancient ways. That's not why I do it. I believe there is wisdom in all ways of living Jewishly and for me, the hours I spend in my kitchen, whipping eggs, mixing vegetables, roasting chicken with half-a-lemon inside, zest pressed into its skin, are some of the most important ways that I live my heritage.

Some nights, I try Grandma's recipes. I've mashed canned salmon with onion, paprika, cornflake crumbs and a well-beaten egg for patties, a favorite Settlement Cook Book recipe, modified with Grandma's notes. But most nights, I make modern favorites: vegetable-rich recipes or new ways to fry an age-old cut of meat.

"When I am grown up, will you come to my house?" my four-year-old daughter Eliana asks.

I nod and reach for her still-pudgy soft hand. "Of course. As much as I can," I say, thinking of the muffins and kugels and roasts and soups I'll make for her freezer. Just the way, when I was a new college graduate working in Manhattan, Grandma sent a clothing box filled with her velvety sugar-dusted brownies. I ate half a dozen, then took them to my office. Colleagues gathered around my desk until the box was empty, sharing their stories about family and food.

In the kitchen, Eliana stands on a chair next to me, tearing lettuce leaves into a wooden bowl. I chop scallions and tomatoes; she tastes a cucumber slice before scattering the rest over the salad. When I put garlic, mustard, oil and spices in a jar for dressing, she shakes it hard, her long blond hair swishing back and forth. Even my baby, Shaya, stands on a chair beside me, dipping his finger in batter for a taste. Dinner is salad, quiche, soup from the freezer. My eldest, Asher, will eat slices of smoked cheese and turn up his nose at what I've made. Eliana will try a little bit of everything.

Regardless of our preferences and personal tastes, my children will know that one of the best ways we give to others is to create heart-warming meals that not only fill our bellies, they sustain our souls.

Lynne Meredith Schreiber is a writer in Southfield, Michigan who focuses on how people find meaning in the mundane. Her work has appeared in Saveur, Better Homes and Gardens, AARP, and the Chicago Tribune. She has written six books, including "Hide and Seek: Jewish women and hair covering."



AS a special TREAT, Lynne also is sharing her grandmother's recipe for strawberry fluff, which is mentioned in this story. It's a traditional family recipe, so you'll find it quite different from the typical recipes for preparing fluff today.

[CLICK HERE](#) to find out more.