

"Cravings:" Food and the Jewish experience

by Leah Berkenwald | Oct 14 2009



Belle Linda Halpern in *Cravings: Songs of Hunger and Satisfaction*

This weekend I went to the **Central Square Theater** to see *Cravings: Songs of Hunger and Satisfaction*, a cabaret set in a Jewish kitchen that explores themes of hunger, success, acceptance, nourishment, fame, and sex. *Cravings*, starring cabaret artist Belle Linda Halpern, accompanied by Ron Roy, and directed by Sabrina Hamilton, was originally created to close the **Ko Festival's** 2008 series, themed on food.

As I entered the theater I was surprised to find myself in a Jewish kitchen. The only thing out of place was the piano. Belle Linda Halpern made charoset, and kibbitzed with us in between songs. She even called on Ron to help peel apples. As a Jewish woman, I found everything in this show relatable. (Except, where did they find such a quiet food processor!?) But what struck me most of all was the connection Halpern draws between the Jewish craving for food and the craving for success and achievement.

Halpern tells a story about starting a catering company as a teenager; both for the sake of her own career and interest, but also for her parents' approval. In a Jewish family,

success means a lot. Success is a form of love. A good Jewish son or daughter becomes successful out of love for his or her parents, to honor them, and to give them something to brag about on the phone. And it works in the other direction too. Jewish parents want the best for their children. They want them to reach their potential, to be recognized for their brilliance and hard work, and to be financially and professionally secure. For Jews, security is safety, and that is just as important as fame in our cravings for success.

But in a Jewish family, food is love. I grew up hearing this constantly. My grandmother, a survivor, was never very good at expressing her love through words or gestures, but boy did she feed us! She seemed to take no greater pleasure in life than to watch us eat. Food is love. Success is love. We crave food the way we crave love, we crave love the way we crave success, and we crave success the way we crave food.

Cravings explores a number of other themes including nourishment and satisfaction, but the success/love/food comparison seemed to get at the heart of my own personal experience as a Jew. In the tradition of the Ko Festival, the show finished with a talkback with the audience. I was struck by the stories people shared about cooking with their grandmothers, discussing food, love, ambition, memory, and tradition. Without a doubt, food is the basic element of the Jewish experience. It is inextricable from our prayers, our traditions, our rituals, and as *Cravings* demonstrates, the foundation of our ideas of nourishment, satisfaction, success, safety, and love.

This leads me to a question. Many Jewish organizations, including **Tablet** and **MyJewishLearning** feature dedicated sections of their websites to food, discussing history, tradition, new developments in Jewish food, and recipes. Is this something you might like to see on the **Jewish Women's Archive** website? Could food be a more prominent focus for JWA? Should it be? (Is food a women's issue?) Please leave a comment, we are curious to know what you think!

Cravings: Songs of Hunger and Satisfaction is still showing for another two weekends. If you live in the Boston area, check out the Central Square Theater's **schedule** for dates and tickets.