

LIVES

BY JOSHUA J. HAMMERMAN



# The Forbidden Oreo

As the outlaw cookie goes kosher and kosher goes mainstream, a rabbi wonders if Jews are becoming too assimilated.

**T**he news came racing across the Internet with apocalyptic urgency. My rabbinical chat group was abuzz. Could it finally be true? No, we don't have a Jewish President yet, but something almost equally astounding has transpired, a sign that Jews have finally made it. After 85 years in the gentile larder, Oreos are going kosher.

With the possible exception of Santa Claus and the Big Mac, the Oreo has long been the most infamous prohibition for observant Jewish children. We longed to taste this delicacy, whose ingredients included forbidden lard, but had to make do with inferior sawdust-textured substitutes. Some kids dreamed of catching a Mickey Mantle foul pop; I fantasized about unscrewing an Oreo and licking the middle.

In truth, Oreos could have passed muster seven years ago when Nabisco replaced lard with vegetable shortening. But only recently has it received official certification from the Orthodox Union, and over the next six months or so, packages sporting the Orthodox Union symbol will hit store shelves.

Oreos aren't the only prohibited food to become kosher. Chips Ahoy!, Honey Maid Grahams and many other products have also gone kosher. In fact, domestic sales of kosher products exceed \$3 billion annually, having achieved double-digit increases for each of the past five years. Because food companies produce mock sausage links and veggie burgers (these certified-kosher nonmeats can be consumed with dairy products), increasing numbers of nonobservant Jews and gentiles who happen to be vegetarians, or just health-conscious, buy kosher, as do Muslims, whose dietary taboo against pork is similar to that of Jews.

Many people naively assume when they see a kosher symbol that a pious old religious guy, somebody's grandpa, personally inspects and gives God's blessing to each item. While this is an exaggeration, the kosher symbol is perceived by an increasing number of people as a kind of Good Housekeeping Seal.

But now that kosher is in and Oreos will be O.K., I'm not sure I want them to be. I know that in some perverse manner my Oreo envy kept me safely at the outer edges of middle America, shielding me from total absorption into the vanilla masses. Oreos were the equivalent of white bread. More than anything else, the Jewish contribution to American culture has been the communication of the experience of marginality, of having survived Otherness. Oreo denial

was, for me, a direct extension of Egyptian slavery — it made me uncomfortable enough to feel different and different enough to feel proud.

Now with Oreos becoming acceptable, I can still rely on that other forbidden food, the Hostess Twinkie. I can recall my first Twinkie: I was around 8; it was blond, soft and spongy, sweet and sensational. Mamie, my matronly Irish baby sitter, knew little of the tribal taboos in our household. Sure, she kept her ham sandwiches to herself and never fed me milk with meat. But how was she to know that this innocent, though unkosher, snack was as forbidden as a slab of bacon? It was just a Twinkie, and Mamie offered it to me. I was vulnerable. I was hungry. I was hooked. For weeks on end Mamie supplied me with Twinkies. Eventually, both Mamie and the Twinkies disappeared. She never had the chance to get me on to Oreos.

IT IS ALMOST MIDNIGHT. I'M SITTING IN MY KITCHEN, SAMPLING a batch of Oreos I requested from Nabisco. Holding one up to the light, I scrutinize the marvelous black medallion with the embossed OREO surrounded by a wreath of posies. I feel so normal. So American. I shudder. Has the Jewish condition ever been compatible with normalcy? Can we survive this?

A more formidable problem now lies before me: to dunk, bite or unscrew? As I hum, "A kid'll eat the middle of an Oreo first, . . ." I begin to twist the top carefully with my left hand, holding the bottom cookie steady with my right.

The top breaks in half. I eat the broken cookie. It's good, but I crave a Twinkie. The thrill of the cookie is gone. The Oreo, a symbol of hollowness for African-Americans, reveals the masks Jews wear as well. As noble distinctions continue to crumble and cherished customs gain universal appeal, I am beginning to understand that a faith community cannot live by food taboos alone. True, we are what we eat, but we must be more. ■

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