

The Origins of Hamentashen in Jewish Literature: A Historical-Culinary Survey Revisited*

By Eliezer Brodt

I. Introduction

As Jews, most of our holidays have special foods specific to them; and behind each culinary custom, lays enveiled the reasoning behind them. Shavuot brings with it a vast array of customary dairy delicacies – in some parts of the world, cheesecake is practically obligatory – not to mention different customs in regard to how and when to eat them. Rosh Hashanah is renowned for the different fruits and vegetables eaten as physical embodiments symbolizing our tefillot; Chanukah has fried foods (no trans-fats please); whether latkes sizzling in the frying pan, or the elusive Israeli sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts) seen for a month before but not to be found a minute after Chanukah's departure, and on the fifteenth of Shevat a veritable plethora of fruits are sampled in an almost 'Pesach Seder'-like ceremony. Of course, on Purim we eat hamentashen.

Hamentashen. Those calorie-inflated, Atkins-defying, doughy tri-cornered confections filled with almost anything bake-able. The Mishpacha reports that this year in Israel alone, an astounding 24.5 million hamentashen will be sold, weighing 1225 tons, and yielding an approximate 33 million NIS in sales.[1] The question that many will be asking themselves is "where did this minhag to eat hamentashen come from?"

Recently I started researching this topic; thus far (and I hope to find more) my results are as follows.

II. Origins

The earliest source I have located so far can be found in the first Jewish comedy called *Ztachus Bedechusa Dekidushin*. This play was written in Hebrew by Yehudah Sommo (1527-1592) from Italy. He was a friend of R. Azariah Men Hadomim and is even quoted in the *Meor Eynamim* (at the end of chapter eighteen). This comedy was written for Purim as he writes in the introduction:

הוא ספר חדש מדבר צחות אשר בדה מלבו פ' בימי בחרותו לצחק בו בימי הפורים ובשעת חדוה

In one of the scenes the following conversation take place:

יאיר: אם בדברים כאלה אכפרה פניו, כבר יש לי קושיא אחת אשר ייעפו כל תוספי התורה להתירה, כי הנה כתוב במגלת פורים "ויתלו את המן" ובפרשת בלק נכתב בפירוש "ויאכלו בני ישראל את המן". ואיך יאכלו היהודים הנשמרים מכל רע את נבלת התלוי ההוא ואל הכלב לא ישליכו אותה?

יקטן: גם זה ראיתי אני וכבר תרץ הקושיא הזאת רב בלעם בן בבי בשם אביו: כי מה שאמרה התורה "ויאכלו את המן" היא אזהרה וציווי לנו שנאכל בימי הפורים האלה מאזני המן – הן המה הרקייקם הנעשים בסולת בלולה בשמן, וזהו שאמר אחרי כן "וטעמו כצפיחית בדבש".

יאיר: יפה פירוש בן ביבי זכור לטוב!

Professor Schirman who printed this play from manuscript notes that יבב נב סעלב בר is the name of one of the characters in the Massekhet Purim of R. Kalonymus ben Kalonymus. [2] In connection with Yehudah Sommo's play, it is possible to understand an enigmatic statement in the *Tishbi*. Specifically, R. Elijah Bocher writes:

ערך "מנלך" - מנלך להמן מן התורה שנאמר ויאכלך את המן, גם זו מלה מורכבת מן ב' מלות אן ולן

R. Yeshaya Pick in his notes on the *Tishbi* asks, the Gemarah in Chulin which asks this same question has a different source for Haman min Hatorah where does the *Tishbi* get this Chazal from? He suggests that maybe he had different chazal which we do not have. However in the new edition of *Tishbi* they printed notes of R. Mazauz who suggests that it is highly probable that there was no such Chazal rather the *Tishbi* was referring to the famous lezunuot about eating hamntashen. This suggestion is all the more probable after seeing the words of Yehudah Sommo in his play written a little after the *Tishbi*. [3]

The next source I have located is in the poetry of the brothers Yakov and Emanuel Pranosish (1618- 1703) in one piece [4] they write:

אמנם נזרק העט ונקצר ענינים,

כי יום פורים זה בא, נכין לו מעדנים,

נכין מרקחות ממתקים מכל מינים,

נגדיל אזני המן מאזני השפנים,

Ben-Yehudah, in his dictionary also cites to a manuscript excerpt of a Purim comedy penned by R. Yehudah Aryeh de Modena, where he is supposed to mention this food Hamantashen. [5]

Mention can also be found in some liturgical parodies [6] from the seventeenth-century, where it includes references to eating hamentashen:

שתו אכלו אזני המן

Thus, from the above, it seems that the original word was *aznei Haman* the name Hamantashen only came later.

In an 1846 cook book called *The Jewish Manual* by Lady Judith Cohen Montefiore we find a recipe for "Haman fritters." [7] R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, in his *Mekor Barukh*, relates the following interesting anecdote which highlights the importance his grandfather placed on eating hamentashen:

One year in the beginning of the month of Adar he [my grandfather] noticed that the bakeries were not selling hamentashen. When he inquired as to why this was so, he discovered that

there was a shortage of flour. He promptly went ahead and gave the biggest bakers in the city a large sum of money to enable them to buy flour to bake hamantsashen.[8]

In a nineteenth-century Lithuanian memoir again the import of hamentashen is apparent. The author recalls that “my sister spent the day preparing the baked delicacies of Purim. Most important were the hamentashen.”[9] R. Michael Braver in his excellent memoir of Galicia written in the mid 1800’s also describes the sending of Hamantashen on Purim. [10] A. S. Sachs in his memories on shtetl life notes that his “grandma would add a Haman-tash for the kiddies” in the meshloach manot.[11] Chaim Hamburger also mentions the baking of Hamantashen on purim in his memoirs. [12]. Professor Simha Assaf, in an article describing Purim, also writes that people made special foods called hamentashen.[13] Shmarya Levin recollects in his autobiography with great detail the hamentashen:

The much-loved little cakes, stuffed with nuts and poppy seed, which are called ‘Haman’s ears’ – sometimes ‘Haman’s pockets’ – had been prepared for us in vast numbers. Their shape alone was a joy. They were neither round, like rolls, nor long, like the loaf; with their triangular shape they were like nothing else that we ate during the year. The stuffing was made of poppy-seeds fried in honey, but there was not enough of it, so we used to eat the cake cagily, in such wise that with every mouthful we got at least a nibble of honeyed poppy seed.[14]

Similarly, David Zagier in his memoirs of Botchki writes about his childhood there: We commemorated Purim . . . Lesser Miracles came in the wake of the Purim miracle . . . the invention of Hamentashen, the best cakes one could dream of, all poppy seed and honey (p. 69).[15] We also find hamentashen being eaten in Amsterdam[16] and Jews from Bucharia, as well, make *נזא ינזא*, similar to hamentashen. [17] *ינימ נמה ינזא האל* [17] is a comedy listed in Avraham Yari's bibliographical listing of comedies.[18]

III. Other possible early origins for Hamentashen

As we can see, the custom of eating hamentashen is widespread and common from at least the 16th century. In fact, R. Shmuel Ashkenazi pointed to some sources which may demonstrate that hamentashen were eaten even earlier. Ben Yehuda in his dictionary claims that as early as the time of the Abarbanel (1437-1508), hamentashen were consumed. The Abarbanel, discussing the food which fell from heaven, the *mon*, describes these cakes as:[19]

וצפיחית הוא מאכל הקמח מבושל בשמן כצורת צפחת המים הנאכל בדבש והוא כמו הרקיקים העושים מן הבצק
כדמות אזנים מבושלות בשמן ויטבלו אותם בדבש ויקראוהו אזנים

This sounds like our hamentashen although there is no reference to eating them on Purim. But R. Ashkenazi pointed out to me that if this is the source, you might then be able to suggest that hamentashen was already eaten much earlier, as this piece of the Abarbanel is word for word taken from R Yosef ibn Kaspi who lived several hundred years earlier (Kaspi was born in 1298 and died in 1340)!

Another possible early source for our Hamentashen could perhaps be found thru the words of Emanuel Haromi. In *Machbres Emanuel* [20] he writes:

מה אומר המן? לכל זמן

וזרש? לא תקלל הרש!

And then again:

ואם אמר: ארור המן וזרש! ישיבון: אל תקלל, דוד, לחרש!

Dov Yarden when he was preparing his excellent critical edition of *Machbres Emanuel* composed a list of statements of Emanuel that Yarden was unable to locate sources for. One of these was this line regarding Haman's deafness. Yarden suggests that this maybe this has to do with why we eat *aznei Haman*! And maybe that is also tied to the banging and using of gragers when we say Haman name. [21] Interestingly Dov Sadan also writes in his youth he used to hear that Haman was deaf.

So to conclude it seems from all this that the original word was *aznei Haman* the name Hamantashen only came later and earliest origins are from Italy. [22]

IV. Ta'am ha-Hamentashen

Irrespective when the custom of eating hamentashen began, the question we need to now explore is why hamentashen, what connection do hamentashen have with Purim?

Hayyim Schauss explains that in actuality the origins of the hamentashen are not Jewish, rather, we originally appropriated them from another culture. He explains that “the hamentashen are also of German origin. Originally they were called mohn-tashen, mohn meaning poppy seed and tashen meaning pockets and also signified dough that is filled with other food stuffs. The people therefore related the cake to the book of Esther and changed the mahn to Haman [due to its similarity]. In time the interpretation arose that the three cornered cakes are eaten because Haman wore a three cornered hat when he became prime minister to Ahasuerus. The three corners were also interpreted as a symbolic sign of the three patriarchs whose merit aided the Jews against Haman.”[23]

Another reason offered for eating hamentashen also deals with the meaning (more correctly a pun) of the word – hamentashen, because Haman wanted to kill us out and Hashem weakened him, preventing him from doing evil to us. Thus, the treat is called שׁתּ נְמָה (Hamen became weakened). Eating these pastries is representative of our faith that the same result will befall all our antagonists.[24]

The next reason offered by *Menucha u-Kedusha* has to do with the pastry itself, more specifically, how the filling is hidden. Until the events which occurred on Purim, the Jews were accustomed to open miracles like those in their battle with Sisra, whereas the Purim miracle appeared to be through natural events – only Mordechai knew that this was a miracle. To remember this, we eat pastries that the main part – the filling – is hidden in the dough, similar to the miracle which was hidden in nature. The filling chosen was specifically *zeronim* (seeds – poppy seed - mahn) to remind us of Daniel having eaten only seeds (and not non-kosher food) while in captivity at Nevuchadnezar's court. Furthermore, according to this

source the triangular shape also has meaning. The Talmud (Megillah 19b) records a three way argument from where to start reading the megillah. As the halakhah is to follow all three opinions and start from the beginning, we cut the pastries in triangular shape to symbolize our accordance to all three opinions. Another reason mentioned in *Menucha u-Kedusha* for the filling is based on the writings of R. Moshe Alsheikh, who states the Jews did not really think they were going to get completely wiped out until Mordechai finally convinced them so. The possibility arises that Mordechai was afraid to keep on sending out letters, so pastries were baked and the letters hidden therein. These pastry-letters saved the Jews; in turn we eat filled pastries. This reason is a bit interesting for itself, but what is even more interesting is that he never calls the pastries hamentashen.[25] A possibility might be kreplach, meat filled pockets boiled in soup, but the theory is unlikely as kreplach are not something special eaten exclusively for Purim – we eat it other times such as Erev Yom Kippur and Hoshana Rabah.

R. Yaakov Kamenetsky offers yet another reason for eating hamentashen on Purim. As we eat the hamentashen and eating is a form of destroying the item being eaten. Therefore, in eating hamentashen, we are fulfilling the commandment (figuratively) of destroying Amalek we are eating Hamen.[26]

Yom Tov Lewinsky and Professor Dov New both suggest that the reason for eating the hamentashen is because the custom in the Middle Ages was to cut off the ears of someone who was supposed to be hung,[27] to remember that we eat pastries from which a part had been cut off. Another point mentioned both by these authors is an opinion that the filling in the pastries [this is specific to poppy seeds] is in remembrance to the 10,000 silver coins that Haman offered to contribute to Achashverosh's coffers.[28]

Aside from the general merrymaking on Purim, there is also a long tradition of written fun. Specifically, since the famous Massekhet Purim of R. Kalonymus ben Kalonymus (1286-1328), there have been many versions of these type of comedies written throughout the ages. One such was R. Avraham Mor, *Kol Bo LePurim* (Lemberg, 1855), which is a complete sefer all about Purim written to be humorous. Included therein is a question regarding changing the way hamentashen should be made from a triangle to make them square shape! He answered that it would be terrible to make hamentashen square. If the hamentashen are square they would have four corners which in turn would obligate the attachment of tzitzet like any clothes of four corners.[29]

One last interesting point in regard to hamentashen can be found within Prof. Elliott Horowitz's recent book-length discussion related to Purim[30] where he notes that as recent as 2002, a Saudi 'scholar' Umayna Ahamad al Jalahma claimed that Muslim blood can be used for the three cornered hamentashen.[31] Horowitz also notes that in middle of the Damascus affair in 1840, a work from 1803 was discovered which claimed that Christian blood was used in the ingredients for Purim pastries.[32] Again in 1846, Horowitz writes that “on the holiday of Purim it was claimed the Jews would annually perform a homicide in hateful memory of Haman, and if they managed to kill a Christian the Rabbi would bake the latter’s blood in triangular pastries which he would send as mishloach manot to his Christian friend.”[33] In 1938 the Jews were once again accused of murdering an adult Christian and drying his blood to be mixed into the triangular cakes eaten on Purim.[34]

Thanks to Rabbis Y. Tessler, A. Loketch and Yosaif M. Dubovick, and the two anonymous readers, for their help in locating some of the sources.

* This article has been heavily updated from last year's version with many important additions and corrections.

Notes

[1] Mishpacha (27 Shevat 5767), 30.

[2] This play was printed for the first time from manuscript by C. Shirman in a critical edition in 1946 and then reissued by him with additions in 1965. This piece with the quote of *aznei Haman* can be found in the second edition on page 67. This particular passage was also reprinted by Shirman in his *Letoldos Hashira vHadrama Haivrit*, 2, pg 52-53. Shirman includes a nice introduction and background on Yehudah Sommo printed in both these places.

This play is the first known play performed for Purim. From this time period and onwards we have a very rich literature of plays and musicals. They were performed especially on Purim but on other occasions such as Simchas Torah and weddings (Shirman, *Ibid*, pp. 63-67; 80 - 85). To be sure these plays were also met with opposition most notable by R. Samuel Abhuv [See, *Shu"t Davar Shmuel*, siman daled and Shirman, *ibid* pg 47, 56]. This is the one and the same that was against *Meschtas Purim* and cross dressing. However, it could be there was not so much out rage against it as the Rabonim felt it was a lost battle or the lesser of two evils to go to ones of Gentiles. Of the many play writers some were very famous gedolim most notable the author of *Ikrei Dinim*, R. Moshe Zechuto and the Ramchal. This whole topic has been dealt with very much in depth by C. Shirman in his *Letoldos Hashira vHadrama Haivrit*, 2, pgs 44-94. On the Ramchal see: Shirman, *ibid*, pg 84-85 and 161-175.

This era in Italy was followed by a long period of Yiddish plays many of which were collected by C. Shmirk. Until today in many circles especially yeshivas plays are performed on Purim. In Europe some of the plays were performed by the bochrin to raise money for themselves. In many memoirs we have accounts of how much the masses enjoyed these plays. Just to list a few of the very many sources on this topic. See the accounts in Pauline Wengeroff, *Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century* pp. 31- 32; A. S. Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, pp. 232-234 ; *Zechronot Av Ubeno*, p. 356.

On purim plays in general much has been written see: Israel Abrahams, *Jewish life in the Middle Ages*, pgs 260- 272; H. Pollack, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648-1806)*, pp. 184- 190 and 332-335; Sperber, *Minhagei Yisroel*, 6, p. 201 who writes this was from outside influences; M. Breuer, *Ohele Torah*, pp. 418-419; E. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 84-87; [3] New edition of Tishbi p. 162.

[4] Printed in *Kol Shirei Yakov Pronsish* p. 363. On these brothers see the Introduction printed in this edition. See also: C. Shirman, *Letoldos Hashira vHadrama Haivrit*, 2, pp. 57, 138.

[5] Though I was unable to pin-point the comedy, it might be the one called La Reina Esther; see Mark R. Cohen, *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's Life of Judah* (Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 235. This play was written in Italian and is extremely rare. Recently Marina Arbib wrote an excellent article called 'The Queen Esther Triangle: Leon Modena, Ansaldo Ceba and Sara Copio Sullam', printed in the book *Aryeh Yeshag* pp. 103-135. See also C. Shirman, *Letoldos Hashira vHadrama Haivrit*, 2, p. 55.

[6] Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York, 1907), p. 193.

[7] Lady Judith Cohen Montefiore, *The Jewish Manual* (London, 1846)

[8] R. Barukh ha-Levi Epstein, *Mekor Barukh* (vol 1, p. 974)

[9] Pauline Wengeroff, *Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman, trans. Henny Wenkart (University Press of

Maryland, 2000), p. 29.

[10] *Zechronot Av Ubeno*, p. 24.

[11] A. S. Sachs, *Worlds That Passed* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1928), p. 229.

[12] *Shloscha Olmos*, 3, p. 22.

[13] Simha Assaf, *Sefer Hamoadim*, p. 29.

[14] *Forward from Exile: The Autobiography of Shmarya Levin*, ed. and trans. Maurice Samuel (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967).

[15] Botchki, p. 69.

[16] *Minhagei Amsterdam* p. 149 # 12

[17] *Yalkut ha-Minhagim*, pg. 210

[18] *Hamachazeh Ha-Ivri*, p. 76 n.654.

[19] Parashat Beshalach, end of chap. 16; [This source is also quoted in the *Otzar ha-Lashon ha-Ivrit*, however the editors simply describe it as a "phrase from the Middle Ages" (vol 1 p. 59).] When I first wrote this suggestion from R. Askenazi, R. M. Honig pointed out to me that it is more likely that they were referring to Sufganyuos as it is evident from the words of Rav Mamion the father of the Rambam where he says:

אין להקל בשום מנהג ואפילו מנהג קל. ויתחייב כל נכון לו עשית משתה ושמחה ומאכל לפרסם הנס שעשה השם יתברך עמנו באותם הימים. ופשט המנהג לעשות סופגנין, בערבי אלספינג, והם הצפחיות בדבש ובתרגום האיסקריטין הוא מנהג הקדמונים משום שהם קלויים בשמן לזכר ברכתו (כלומר לנס שבפך שמן)

(See my [earlier post](#) on this). This could be further supported with the words of Emanuel Haromi in *Machbres Emanuel* where he writes (p. 168):

בכסליו... ואחרת תבשל הרקיקים, וצפחית ומעשה החבטים.

This could be another early source for Sufganyuos. However in light of these words of Yehudah Sommo where he says:

לנו שנאכל בימי הפורים האלה מאזני המן – הן המה הרקיקים הנעשים בסולת בלולה בשמן, וזהו שאמר אחרי כן "וטעמו כצפחית בדבש".

So it could very well be that the Abarbanel and Kaspi were referring to Hamantashen.

[20] *Machbres Emanuel* pp. 109, 169. According to this that the possible source for eating *aznei Haman* comes from Emanuel Haromi! It is not clear if he had a source from Chazal for this statement that Haman was deaf as much of what he says is based on Chazal. However there is a good chance that this was just a joke of his. This would not be the first time that a joke of his became accepted in our regular literature. R. Askenazi pointed out to me one such example in the Tur Al Hatoroah, Bresheis (pg 7) where he writes as follows:

ויאמר האדם האשה אשר נתתה עמדי הוא נתנה לי מן העץ ואכל. לפי הפשט שהכתיני בעץ עד כי שמעתי לדבריה.

The source for this is really Emmanuel Haromi (pg 400) where he writes:

ויגש העשרי ויאמר: אמר נא, פלא יועץ מה רצה הכתוב באמרו היא נתנה לי מן העץ והיה לו לומר מפרי העץ, לפי הנראה ועתה אמר נא, בחסדך מה פרוש בו אתה רואה? ואען ואמר: חייך, ידידות נפשי! פרוש הפסוק הוא: היא נתנה לי מן העץ על ראשי ודכאה לארץ חיתי עד שאכלתי על כרחי, שלא בטובתי.

R. Askenazi noted that this pirish which was meant as a joke was accepted by many besides for the Tur amongst them the Moshav Zekanim R. Yakov Meveinia.

[21] *Yedah Haam*, 3, p. 70.

[22] See the excellent article of Dov Saden printed in his work *Shay Olomos* (pp. 25-38) on

the development of this word hamantashen, based on an incredible wide range of sources. This piece helped me find some of the rather unknown sources. See also Yehudah Avidah in his work on Yiddish Foods 'Yideishe macholim' pp. 46-49. See also Dov New, Machanaim (# 43) and the recent issue of the Kulmos (#60) p. 17.

[23] Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals* (Random House, 1938; Hebrew, 1933), p. 270. The source for the first reason can be found in Judah David Eisenstein, *Otzar Dinim u-Minhagim* (New York, 1917), p. 336, and for the last reason in Yitzhak Lifshitz, *Sefer Ma'atamim* (Warsaw, 1889), p. 86.

[24] Avraham Eliezer Herszkowitz, *Otzar Kol Minhaghei Yeshrun* (St. Louis, 1918), p. 131. See also R. Cohen in his book *Puirm VChodesh Adar*, pp. 116-117 and R. Kamile, *Shar Reveun*, p. 206.

[25] R. Yisrael Isserl of Ponevezh *Sefer Menucha u-Kedusha* (Vilna, 1864), pp. 271-72.

[26] Yaakov Michael Jacobs, *Bemechitzas Rabbeinu: Hagaon Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, zt"l* (Feldheim, 2005), p. 142.

[27] Yom Tov Lewinsky, *Sefer Hamoadim* (pp. 153-154); Dov New, Machanaim # 43. New quotes a piece from Yashar which I have been unable to locate on this topic if any one knows its location please be so kind as to let me know. This source is also quoted by Ben Yehuda in his dictionary under the entry *aznei*.

[28] Ibid.

[29] R. Avraham Mor, *Kol Bo LePurim* (Lemberg, 1855), pg. 6. See Israel Davidson, *ibid.* pg 234-235, #191.

[30] Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton University Press, 2006)

[31] Ibid, p. 9.

[32] Ibid, p. 218.

[33] Ibid, p. 219.

[34] Ibid, p. 228.