Sisterhood Address October 1996

I love saying the word Kugel. Kugel is just one of those fun words in the Jewish lexicon, right up their with Mesuganah, shvitz, klutz, and the ever delightfully fun to say, gefiltah. In fact half the fun of eating Kugel is being able to ask for it passed to you from across the table. Bubie can you pass the Kugel, Grampa is their any kugel left? I have been told that when I was a child I liked my grandma's kugel so much, that I would on occasion break into chant, kugel, kugel, kugel.

And oh did my grandma make a great kugel. It was a lukshin kugel, made with curly egg noodles, raisins, cinnamon, real butter and sugar. The noodles were boiled and drained then tossed hot into a baking dish with the raisins, cinnamon, sugar and butter. She would then mix it all together till it was brown and goopy. Then my grandma would bake it in the oven till the tops of the noodles got a little crispy and dark brown. When she would serve it she would spoon it out in big dark brown syrupy globs of noodles raisins and cinnamon. It would reluctantly easy of the end of the spoon, adhering itself now to your plate, your fork your teeth. It was just one giant glob of goodness, a 1000 calories or more per serving, and it was heaven on the end of fork.

I used to love going to my grandma's for Shabbat and holiday dinners, because you could always count on her great kugel. The smell of it would waft through the house and greet you as you came in the door. For me kugel was Shabbat, the candles and wine and Challah were all in celebration of the kugel. The chicken and matzahball soup, just extra things to have on your plate so the kugel would not get lonely. You have never had a kugel till you tried my grandma's kugel.

When my grandma got sick and couldn't have us all over for the big Shabbat dinners anymore, my Mom would invite grandma and papa to our house for Shabbat. The first few times my grandma would bring a kugel with her, but after a while she announced that it was too much trouble for her to keep making it and my mom would have to carry on the tradition.

Now my mom is a great cook, she makes a great turkey, matzahballs so light they float above the broth, and Challah so soft and tasty that some friends ask her to bake for them, but being a great cook, even of my mom's caliber doesn't necessarily mean you are a great kugel cook. So when my mom first tried her mother's recipe I was a little skeptical, I was about 12 years old and being the kugel connoisseur that I was I would be the judge if the kugel passed the test.

So on Friday night, out came the Challah, the matzahballs, the turkey, and then the white corningwear kugel dish. She uncovered it, and to my utter surprise it wasn't the dark brown of grandma's but sort of golden brown, instead of curly egg noodles my mom used macaroni, and when she reached in her spoon to dish it out, it fell loosely on my plate, dropping off the spoon bit by bit rather than the big glob I was used too. I was in shock, this wasn't kugel, it was pasta with raisins, Shabbat was ruined, I was dejected. Why did you change it I asked pointedly. She explained that she was trying to make it a little more healthy. She was using margarine, and half the sugar, and had substituted macaroni for the egg noodles. At her insistence I reluctantly took a bit of the unfamiliar dish, and was delighted and surprised by a familiar taste, a sweet sensation. Mom's kugel didn't look anything like grandma's but it tasted almost the same. Maybe a little less sweet, and certainly not as goopy in your mouth but it was still really good. Shabbat was saved and I asked for another helping.

When I moved away to college and into my own apartment Shabbat with my family became less and less frequent we would get together for holidays, but on a regular basis I was on my own for Shabbat. A kugel is not something you normally make just for one so for most of my college years Shabbat dinners were without the family kugel. Knowing what I do now about how fattening and artery impairing even my mom's 'healthier version' really are, this was probably not a bad thing.

But three years ago when Kim and I got married, I gained not only a wife, but a Shabbat buddy, a reason to make a special dinner on Shabbat. One of our first Shabbatot together I took over the kitchen and made the family kugel, albeit with a few more adjustments for health and fat content. We sat down together at dinner, excited to be in our home together, excited to have Shabbat together, me excited to eat the kugel again. I asked her if I could serve her some, and she rapidly declined. "I thought you liked my mom's kugel, my grandma used to make it on Shabbat, you always eat it at my folk's house. What's wrong?" She turned to me, sensing the pain, the anguish, the delicacy of the moment, and replied, "Honey, I love you, I love having Shabbat with you, but I don't like kugel and I only eat it at your parent's because I don't want to be impolite." But this is the family kugel, its Shabbat, you are my soulmate, my b'shert, my buddy, if you don't like the kugel, how will be able to pass it on to our kids, our grand-kids?" She calmed me down, and said, "Honey, we don't have kids, and when we do I am sure they will like something else that we make and maybe one day make that for their own children." I was confused, discombobulated, she made it sound so simple, so obvious, I asked frightened by what I was about to say, "Kim, are we allowed to do that, can we just make somethings else? What about family, what about custom, what about tradition?" She looked at me and said, "Danny

its just a kugel, get a grip." It was at that moment that I understood the magnitude of the issue before me, a dilemma that I can only call, "The Kugel Crisis".

You see in so many ways, the passing down of the Kugel in my family from generation to generation is only a small indication of an even greater challenge facing Kim and I. The questions facing us is how similar or different will the Judaism of our home be from that of our parents and grandparents. What responsibility do we have to them to continue traditions and practices that they started and how much freedom do we have to embrace new practices, new forms of Jewish expression and living. Its not just a question facing the Moskovitz family, but it is a question facing every Jewish family. In what way is the Judaism we practice similar or different from what our parents practiced? What will be our recipe for a Jewish home?

In trying to answer this question I have to wonder what kind of Kugel my great-grandmother made. I never knew her but I am told that even she got the recipe from her own mother. What kind of kugel did they make? Was it exactly the same as my grandmother's? Probably not, this great Kugel of our family, much like Judaism appeals to differently to different people's tastes. I can no more readily believe that my grandmother made the Kugel exactly as her mother did, than I can believe that she practiced Judaism in the very same way. No child practices Judaism in exactly the same way as their parents, some are more observant, some less. Some keep kosher, others don't. Some host a Seder, others attend a Seder. Some go to Temple twice a month, others twice a year. The important thing is not that you practice Judaism in the way that tasted best to your parents or grandparents, but that you practice Judaism in the way that tastes best to you. We have absolute freedom to choose the flavor of Judaism that best nourishes our soul, but we must choose a flavor.

So often in our lives we struggle with the issue of tradition, in fact we make the sanctity of keeping the tradition alive the reason why we practice what we do. What did the father sing as he danced down the street in Fiddler on the Rood, Tradition! But it is not for tradition's sake that we practice Judaism. Making your home a Jewish home, going to Temple, teaching your children Torah, traveling to Israel, these each have a reward far greater than simply keeping a tradition alive. Their reward is that they are the essence of Judaism, the seed from which all traditions blossom. Making the decision to engage in any or all of these Jewish practices is the only tradition that absolutely must be passed on and continued. When each family, each individual decides that they will lead a life committed to the teachings of Torah then they have continued the tradition, it doesn't matter so much if they serve Kugel or french fries at their Shabbat dinner, the important thing is that they are having a Shabbat dinner, that they are living a Jewish life. God doesn't care if you say pass the kugel or pass the french fries, what matters to God is that if you say it on a Friday night their are Shabbat candles on the table, a Kiddush cup by your side and the presence of the Sabbath queen in your home.