Orthodoxy's Whisky Rebellion

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Before moving back to New York recently after an absence of nearly a decade, I had never heard of a "kiddush club." My Modern Orthodox friends tell me it's been going on for years: groups of guys, and the occasional woman, peel off from the Shabbat morning service in the synagogue's main sanctuary and gather inconspicuously in a classroom or alcove. There they say the morning kiddush blessing and knock back a few shots of schnapps or, more often, single-malt Scotch whisky. In fact, the ability to distinguish between a fine single-malt and an inferior blended whisky is the mark of a true kiddush cognescenti.

Kiddush clubs are controversial in some synagogues: no rabbi likes to see congregants heading for the exits before the service ends, unless they're holding crying infants in their arms. Yet so long as kiddush clubs don't encourage drunkenness or keep individuals from fulfilling their prayer obligations (usually the exodus happens during the Haftorah, the least obligatory portion of the service), there's little in Jewish law to prevent them. Kiddush clubs are a strictly kosher rebellion.

Like "holy war," "kosher rebellion" sounds like an oxymoron. But as the British critic Raymond Williams once put it, a culture spawns the terms of its own rejection. In other words, cultural memories establish patterns that persist even when taboos are being broken.

The classic Jewish example of this is the Jewish love affair with Chinese food, as discussed in "Safe Treyf," an article by the sociologists Gaye Tuchman and Harry Levine that appeared in the Summer 1996 issue of the Brandeis University alumni magazine.

Why Chinese? The simplest explanations Tuchman and Levine offer are gastronomic (it's almost too obvious to point out the similarity between a kreplach and a wonton) and social (for a "would-be cultural explorer," as the authors describe the rebellious immigrant, Chinese food was considered exotic, sophisticated, the most "un-Jewish" of cuisines).

And yet not so un-Jewish at all. Chinese treyf is "safe" because ingredients like pork and shrimp are invariably chopped and diced into hard-to-identify pieces, and Chinese cuisine rarely mixes milk and meat, another kosher taboo. Spared the stomach-churning sight of a pork chop or a cheeseburger, a newly secular Jew could have his treyf and eat it too.

The culture described by the authors of "Safe Treyf" is far removed from Modern Orthodox Judaism, which if anything is becoming more exacting in its ritual practices. And yet the kippah-wearing whisky-drinkers at morning minyan, like

the bare-headed fressers at Kwong Ming, also want to take a walk on the non-kosher side. It's just that they want their treyf to be even more safe. They could, after all, sneak off during Shabbat services for a cigarette or a ham sandwich. Scotch whisky, by contrast, is both "dangerous" (a potent drug with sedative-hypnotic effects) and incontestably kosher (there's nothing inherently forbidden about a mixture of barley and water, except at Passover).

The kosher rebellion theme is carried out in the ceremony itself: Sure clubbers are getting a tiny bit snookered, but the mischief doesn't begin until after the moment is sanctified with the morning kiddush: "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, Who creates the fruit of the vine."

Why whisky and not, say, wine? Here the tension between parochialism and cosmopolitanism comes into play. Under Jewish law, only kosher wines may be drunk by observant Jews. In recent years, the quality of kosher wine has improved in response to an increasingly sophisticated Orthodox market. Good as these wines are, however, kosher oenophiles know how much they are missing. Kosher wine is a gourmet ghetto.

By contrast, Jewish law presents no barrier between the Modern Orthodox Jew and his or her enjoyment of every exotic variety of single-malt whisky the gentile world has to offer: Glengoyne, Bushmills, Laphroaig, you name it (let alone pronounce it). An Orthodox Jew's enjoyment of single-malt is limited not by his bible, but by his budget.

Which is another aspect of whisky's appeal. Beer can also be "safe treyf" in that there are few restrictions on its consumption under halachah, or Jewish law. Beer, however, is a mass-market beverage, a lowbrow brew. Beer is what you drink by the six-pack, sprawled in front of the television, or chug by the pint, bellied up to the neighborhood bar. A single shot of single-malt, by contrast, can cost as much as a case of beer. Good whisky is enjoyed in small sips, its complicated flavors teasing the tongue and its heady aromas filling the nose. Whisky mavens can spend hours talking about the famed Scottish whisky regions: Lowland, Eastern Highland, Speyside, Campbeltown. They can compare "aromatics" or "volatiles," and whether the whisky cask was coopered out of French, Spanish or American oak. Such connoisseurship honors the Chosen People's traditional tendency to make fine distinctions, and to set themselves apart from the majority. With apologies to Lenny Bruce, I suggest that whisky is Jewish, beer is goyish.

In sum, sometimes a whisky is not just a whisky. For Modern Orthodox Jews, who inhabit that nervous-making territory between the shelter of the commandments and the wide world of choices just beyond, a taste of mainstream culture can be intoxicating. For a few minutes on Shabbat morning, they can be cultural explorers--and still make it back in time for the additional service.

The Jewish world seems increasingly divided between the less-observant Jewish majority in which I was born and raised and the more-observant world of which I am now a part. But maybe, just maybe, if people understood the possibilities for kosher rebellion on either side of the secular-religious divide, the less likely they would be to marginalize one other.

Of course, a few shots of whisky couldn't hurt either.