

Compelling corps of debaters set to clash over latkes and hamantashen

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An ancient historian, a nuclear engineer, a theatre director, a cantor, a Jewish educator, and an orthopedic surgeon walk into a debate. What issue could be so profound that such a notable and diverse group of professionals would take a side—and go to great effort to defend it?

It's latkes vs. hamantashen, *of course*. The Ruth Fredman Cernea Great Latke Hamantash Debate, sponsored by Congregation Ohev Sholom, returns for a fifth year—and this three-on-three showdown, set for Sunday, December 10, at 3:30 p.m., in the White Theatre, features perhaps the most eclectic and entertaining group of debaters yet.

Representing Team Latke are Jill Maidhof, Director of Jewish Experiences at The J; historian and teacher Debbe Trachtman; and Cantor Ben Matis, Fellow of the Kansas Jewish History Project. Team Hamantash includes Marissa Wolf, Director of New Works at Kansas City Repertory Theatre; nuclear engineer Neil Herman; and Howard Rosenthal, a respected orthopedic surgeon. The distinguished and very funny Professor Chris Kelts will return as emcee.

For Trachtman, the battle over latkes and hamantashen is ancient history—and biology and geology and physics. Trachtman has degrees in each of these disciplines (among others), and plans to deploy them all in the defense of Team Latke. Without giving her tactics away, she will only say, “I hope to inform and entertain in the myriad of ways that latkes have impacted our lives from ‘Fry-day’ through Shabbat and beyond.”

Wolf will likewise bring the full weight of her artistic expertise to bear on behalf of Team Hamantash. She has commissioned Kansas City-based playwright Michelle Tyrene Johnson to craft a script that will put forth the virtues of the hamantash in, well, a dramatic way. As her contribution to the debate on December 10, Wolf will stage the approximately three-minute world-premiere production with professional local actors.

The youngest debater is Herman. The 2015 graduate of the University of Michigan, currently employed at a local engineering consulting firm, says that he wanted to take part in the event because “a debate...can help us find the truth.” And, of course, his presentation will include a “quick” scientific analysis. “So, if you're looking for that ‘aha’ moment where everything suddenly makes sense, like when the apple fell on Newton's head and he said, ‘Oy, this would make a nice filling for a hamantash!’ I highly encourage everyone to come to the Great Debate,” he says.

The audience will have a chance to question the debaters before their vote is weighed alongside the judgment of a Beit Din that includes Rabbi Scott White (Congregation Ohev Sholom), Rabbi Daniel Kirzane (The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah), Hazzan Tahl Ben-Yehuda (Congregation Beth Shalom), Rabbi Jonathan Rudnick (Jewish Family Services), and Rabbi Monica Kleinman (Congregation Beth Torah). This will settle the issue once and for all. Or at least until next year.

Modeled on the hilarious latke-hamantash debates that have raged at the University of Chicago since 1946, this new Kansas City tradition was established by Ohev Sholom member Melanie Allmayer to honor the memory of her aunt, Dr. Ruth Fredman Cernea—a cultural anthropologist and editor of *The Great Latke Hamantash Debate* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

The event includes a delicious Vaad-supervised reception (yes, there will be latkes and hamantashen). There is a modest cover charge of \$10 per person ages 13 and older, and all attendees are encouraged to bring canned goods to donate to the JFS Food Pantry. More information about the event and a link to the video of other Great Debates are available at greatdebatekc.org.