

Matzo Ball Soup For The Soul

When I was growing up, one constant of our dinner rotation was matzo ball soup. I know this may seem wrong to some who view matzo ball soup as strictly a Jewish holiday recipe, but I offer no apologies. For me, matzo ball soup is a comfort food like spaghetti and meatballs or lasagna.

At dinner, my three brothers and I would talk about our schoolwork and our social lives over matzo ball soup. My dad would explain the Jets' most recent loss over matzo ball soup. My grandmother would come visit, apparently just to critique my mom's matzo ball soup. Too much salt, she would say, as she brought the ladle to her lips. Despite the lighthearted competition, these dinners were always a friendly commotion, full of laughter and animated conversation.

A matzo ball is a soup dumpling made from matzah meal, a flour substitute that is kosher for Passover. When you bite into it, it feels like you are eating a cloud: soft and pillowy, warm and salty. In my house, we serve matzo ball soup in chicken broth, with carrots, celery, fresh dill and roasted chicken.

But what I enjoy about matzo ball soup transcends its ingredients. It has a curative quality. I've even heard some refer to it as Jewish penicillin. What is so magical about matzo ball soup to me is its role in my family as a cure-all — a regular treatment for sniffles, broken bones, and everything in between.

When my older brother broke his nose in a go-cart accident and couldn't chew any solid foods for a week, my whole family ate matzo ball soup for five days in solidarity.

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During my sophomore spring, I hit a rough patch. It was only one class, but its challenges slowly eroded my ability to think about anything else. My academic disappointment felt like complete failure. I was drowning. Instead of the spring break trip with my block mates that I had once been excited for, I went home. I remember walking into my kitchen and being greeted with a hug and bowl of matzo ball soup.

That week, I slowly built up my confidence again, working on the course material at my kitchen counter. I didn't master the class, but I returned to school with a smile.

I have made our matzo ball soup, so I know that no one is actually dissolving medicine into the pot on the sly. So why do I keep coming back to this soup as a cure? For one thing, matzo ball soup cannot be eaten in a rush. It's hot, and I like to make sure the right ratio of matzo ball to chicken to broth is on my spoon. This takes patience and focus. My mind must succumb to the task at hand, and in doing so, I lose myself in the luxury of sitting down and eating a meal.

There is no one true matzo ball soup recipe, every family makes it differently. I have been presented with bowls of soup at friends' houses and restaurants that taste so different from my own, it is hard to believe they share the same name. Some matzo balls are dense and small. Some broth is clear and some broth is a dark amber color. Each soup represents a home and a distinct recipe.

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Matzo ball soup has taught me that medicine can come in all shapes and sizes, not just a little orange cylinder with an unpronounceable label and important instructions. Take one in the morning and one just before bed. Don't take on an empty stomach. Don't operate a motor vehicle. You know the drill.

I have learned a lot of important lessons in my pre-med classes. I expect to learn more before I am a doctor. These facts, stories, and problems will each play a role in my understanding of medicine. And while I haven't come across matzo ball soup in my MCAT studying yet, without it my appreciation for my studies would be incomplete.

Matzo ball soup has taught me an intangible truth that I am constantly thinking of. It reminds me to expand how I think about treatment, that medicine isn't just a set recipe, either. Treatment can change to fit the patient, and it should. Healing can include culture, and experience, and soup.