

Spring 2020

Rewriting the Haggadah: Judaism for Those Who Hold Food Close

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Recommended Citation

Wax, Rose Noël, "Rewriting the Haggadah: Judaism for Those Who Hold Food Close" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 176.

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Rewriting the Haggadah: Judaism for Those Who Hold Food Close

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2020

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents for teaching me to be strong in my convictions.

Thank you to all of the grandparents and great-grandparents I never knew for forging new identities in a country entirely foreign to them.

Thank you to my adviser Peter Rosenblum for always challenging me and sharing a laugh.

Thank you to Susan Rogers for making a writer of me and never being afraid to point out a passive verb.

Thank you to my housemates, Adam and Christina, for weathering all of this with me.

Thank you to Zuri, my rock.

Thank you to the Class of 2020 and all of my friends for making Bard my home.

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Dad: Well because I'm a big fan of Jewish food and I grew up eating it.

R: So does it remind you of your childhood?

Dad: No.

Inventing Jennie

For Christmas of 2019 my mom gifted me *The Jewish Cookbook*, by Leah Koenig.¹ It was a hefty book, blue with gold lettering on the cover that resembled an encyclopedia. After receiving the text I brought it home and promptly placed it on a shelf next to the other Jewish cookbook by the same author that my mom had gifted me for my birthday a year earlier.² Both books fell prey to a common cookbook woe that irked me to no end and often resulted in neglect on my part: not every recipe had an accompanying picture. More significantly, I rarely cooked Jewish food. I certainly enjoyed it during holidays, and at restaurants, but outside of those venues I almost never visited it. Latkes were messy, brisket took too long, and matzo ball soup was a hassle.

As a result, both books remained untouched, collecting dust, until very recently when I found myself stuck at home for extended periods of time due to the outbreak of COVID-19, a respiratory infection that prompted federal, state, and local governments to advise residents to remain inside as much as possible and eliminate social contact of any kind in order to reduce the spread of the disease. Restaurants were shuttered and grocery store trips were infrequent. My final semester of college moved online, where I would meet with my classmates via video chat and post on forums.

I slowly came to terms with the implications of the disease. Some classmates, people who I saw at parties or in class that I talked to but never really became close to, returned home. With this came the possibility that I may never see them again, which was oddly sad to me. My graduation would be pushed back. The brunch my mom had been planning with all of my friends and their parents during graduation weekend would probably never happen. Unless I went to

¹ Leah Koenig, *The Jewish Cookbook* (London: Phaidon, 2019).

² Leah Koenig, *Modern Jewish Cooking* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2015).

graduate school, I would most likely never sit in a classroom as a student again. My post-college plans, moving to Los Angeles, where my brother lived, and getting a job there were ruled out. Although I was grateful to be healthy, with healthcare, and in a safe home, I felt like my world had been turned upside down.

In this time of great uncertainty and change I found myself cooking a lot. Most of this was due to the fact that I *had* to; restaurant eating, something I took great pleasure in, was no longer an option. But I had also always found comfort in food and cooking for myself and others. Prior to the outbreak, I had set out to become a “dinner party person” and had hosted two parties during the year, one tropical themed, complete with fish tacos and mojitos the other an ode to my favorite New York Times food writer, Alison Roman (another Jew!). I had been in the process of planning a Passover dinner in April. Now I was stuck in my house for days on end other than the walks I took from time to time. I cooked dried beans from scratch--something I had never had time for--and ate them with their broth and anchovied toasts. I turned to dishes from my childhood, like chicken cutlets with lemon, and pasta with butter and cheese (which we lovingly call in my current house “kid’s pasta”). I played with the fermentation of the white baguette doughs I had learned to make the summer I worked in a bakery.

But I also engaged in another kind of cooking: Jewish cooking. So, it was when I felt the most uprooted, lost, and disconnected from my family and friends that I turned to the two Jewish cookbooks my mom had gifted me. Part of me told myself that I did it because I finally had the time and energy to carry out the dishes that were so labor-intensive and messy, and thus reserved for special occasions. But another, more sentimental part of me, knew that Jewish food meant home. It reminded me of my parents, who I knew I wouldn’t be seeing any time soon because of their old age and the risk I potentially posed to them as a carrier of the disease. Jewish food was

the holiday tables that I shared with my cousins and family friends, full of brisket, charoset, and roasted carrots. Far flung across the country, I had no idea when the next communal Passover or Rosh Hashanah may be. The Jewish food I looked to connected me to my family.

Jewish Food, to me.

In my world there are three realms of Jewish food. The first are dishes that my family actually makes. This includes brisket, latkes, the specialties we enjoy at Passover like *charoset* and chopped liver, matzo ball soup, roasted carrots, challah, roast chicken, and more. My mom, who converted to Judaism shortly after marrying my dad, usually cooks most of the Jewish food we enjoy around the table.

Kugel, however, represents one of the dishes my dad would take the lead on. *Kugel* is always a point of contention in my family. We used to have Jewish holidays, usually Passover, with my cousins in Westport, Connecticut. The Dicksteins were the only extended family we had, and their oldest relative, Howie, was my Dad's first cousin. Going to their mansion-like house, which had a pool and a finished basement, our family always felt like the poorer rag-tag Jewish cousins hailing from the dirty streets of Brooklyn. They usually asked us to bring *kugel* and we always fought with my dad over whether to bring a savory or sweet one. Almost everyone voted savory, which basically would have entailed a giant latke, complete with a crispy top, baked in a Pyrex dish. Despite this, my dad never failed to prepare the sweet mixture of mushy egg noodles, cottage cheese, and cinnamon. The dish felt distinctly geriatric and I rarely touched it. It served as a constant reminder of my dad's inability to cook Jewish food and frankly, I still can't stomach it.

My mom, on the other hand, and somewhat ironically given her upbringing as an Episcopalian, is a deft Jewish cook. She makes brisket by flouring and browning the meat in one of two large red enameled Dutch ovens we have, then covering it in with an entire bag of onions we slice and putting it in the oven for at least three hours. The magic lay in the fact that no liquid is added and yet the meat emerges filled to the brim with fatty, rich, gravy perfect for spooning over egg noodles or mashed potatoes. The result is unbelievably rich and often, as a child, I ate so much of it and felt so sick that I had to lie down immediately after dinner.

She is also always in charge of making the *charoset*, a mixture of apples, dried fruit, nuts, white wine and other accoutrement that used to come together in our tiny yellowed Cuisinart food processor (it has since been retired, passed down to me and now sits as a permanent fixture on my kitchen counter). She seasons it with lemon juice, cinnamon, and honey and the final product is a rubbly mixture that's sweet, tart, crunchy, and a little sticky. We eat it atop matzo during our Passover ceremony and my mom has been known to take it straight off of a plate with a fork.

Latkes are a constant fixture at every holiday for our family. My mom has always despised them because they wreak havoc on our kitchen. Grating the potatoes and onions on a box grater is messy enough, but the mixture needed to be bone-dry to actually brown in the pan, which requires depositing them into a clean kitchen towel that then gets wrung out into a bowl set in our tiny sink. The starchy liquid inevitably gets everywhere, creating a powdery white film on whatever it touches. Actually frying the latkes, which we do in a mixture of vegetable oil and *schmaltz* (chicken fat) typically results in oil flying all over our stovetop. Finally, and perhaps the nail in the coffin: they are impossible to keep crisp once they are finished. This means that we've been forced to devise a "batch system" wherein we eat the pancakes as we finish them and

then return to the kitchen to make more, resulting in several “rounds” of latke eating and a constant dance between kitchen and table. Despite the effort and mayhem they entail, we make and eat them because they are unequivocally Jewish. Also, because they taste great.

For us, the holidays we enjoy simply would not be the same without the foods that we make. The presence of these dishes is either traditionally prescribed, like the *charoset* on Passover (which is involved in the actual ceremony), entirely invented, like the Mexican wedding cookies my mom makes for Rosh Hashanah, or somewhere in between, like the brisket that is loosely associated with Jewish American cuisine but has no actual grounding in textual tradition.

Also present in the cookbooks my mom gifted me were dishes that I have only enjoyed in restaurants and some that I have never even heard of, indicative of the far-reaching diaspora of Jewish food. *Kreplach* are small dumplings that are usually filled with meat and resemble pierogis. Usually served in soup or fried and absolutely delicious, I have only eaten them at the various Lower East Side establishments my dad dragged me to as a child.

Breads are obviously included in this not-at-home category, given the fact that both my parents worked and barely had time to make us dinner, let alone tend to a rising dough. Bagels, a food that is almost more New York than Jewish, have been a fixture in my life from birth, though we never make them ourselves. In high school, when I lived with him, my dad regularly bought a dozen bagels weekly, which we, as a household, would slowly eat through. The order at which they disappeared was always representative of our personal preferences. The everthings vanished almost instantaneously as they were universally loved by my brother, dad, and I. The bright orange egg bagels were next to go, followed by sesame. By the end of the week all that were left were plain. No brunch at our house, today and historically, is complete without a bagel

spread. This usually includes some kind of smoked fish, usually lox and sable, sliced red onion and tomato, capers, lemon wedges, and plain and scallion cream cheese.

Challah is also something that we enjoy as a family but never bake. Instead, we buy loaves and enjoy them with eggs and jam. As they grow stale we transform them into spongy French toast that we slather in salted butter and top with powdered sugar. The evolution of the loaf was something my mom wrote about in her conversion journal, which she bestowed upon me after I interviewed her for this project. Early on in her conversion, when she was still carrying out weekly Shabbat dinners with my dad and then, two-year-old brother, she admitted that she often, in fact, overbought challah purely with the intention of it going stale and making French toast out of it. This, along with her countless personal recipes, represented part of the habits and recipes that she developed and contextualized as Jewish.

Jewish foods always make me feel connected to my identity as a Jew. My dad's bagel spreads and my mom's brisket, to me, are distinctly Jewish experiences. I felt this acutely when, on Passover this year, I decided to make *kreplach*. My mom and I had faceted into my brother's Seder, which he was carrying out with his housemate and his girlfriend in LA. I felt very sad—far from my family during a time which I had always spent with family. I knew that making Jewish food would allow me to feel connected to them. In a larger sense, I took comfort in the idea of Jews all over the world participating in similar acts, cooking, eating, and celebrating from afar.

Rolling out the dough with a wooden pin on my butcher's block, I looked down at my hands and could imagine my paternal great grandmother, Jennie, who owned a Jewish restaurant in the Lower East Side, going through the exact same motions. In my mind, she wore an apron tied around her waist, with her dark hair pulled back low. As I stuffed the rounds of dough with

beef, fragrant caramelized onions, and paprika, I could picture her rough hands dropping tablespoons of filling into her own dough, enclosing it, and finally pressing the edges together to create a completely sealed dumpling package. I imagined her making hundreds of these, boiling them in huge vats of salted water and serving them with fried onions or in clear chicken broth with pools of fat dancing on the surface. I wondered if mine tasted similar to hers, or even, how she would judge mine were she present in my kitchen with me.

The reality is that I have never met Jennie; I barely even knew her son, my grandfather—he died when I was five. I saw my first photograph of her only days before Passover. It was sepia-toned, with blurry edges. She stood on some kind of lawn, her two daughters flanking her sides and my grandfather standing in front of her, hands in his pockets and smiling sweetly. Her hands, the ones I had pictured, rested on his two shoulders. Loopy script on the border of the photograph designated the subjects: Celie, Temmie (which my father and I assumed was Jennie’s name in Russia before she came to the States), Hymie (my grandfather, Hyman, although he went by Elliot), and Anne. This was the only photo of Jennie that we have—my dad’s family existed somewhat mysteriously and we know very little of them beyond two generations back.

Thus, the images I conjured of Jennie making *kreplach* were entirely invented. I never tasted her food and I had no clue if she even made the dumplings. Despite this, I boiled them, spooned them into chicken stock, and ate them standing up before I attended my virtual Passover, thinking of her constantly. Lacking a clear historical record of my own and longing for one, I created one. Jenny, the relative who I knew cooked and who I felt I knew through her photograph, practically could have been standing there with me. Similarly, feeling the absence of a Jewish community, I imagined one for myself, where thousands of other American Jews, even Jews outside of America, were celebrating Passover the way that I was.

Embarking on my project, which aimed to explore the ways in which non-observant American Jews hold food close to them, revealed to me that Jewish cuisine, in fact, represents an extremely important factor in the determination and expression of identity to many American Jews. I am not alone in my association between my Jewish identity and Jewish food. Perhaps most important, I am not unique in my invention either. Finally, I am not alone in my lack of non-observance. There are others like me. They do not attend temple regularly, do not keep kosher, and have little identification with Judaism outside of ethnicity and holidays. These are the Jews I grew up with and who I believed were largely endemic to my New York City childhood. However, my research revealed that these Jews were everywhere.

American Jews, specifically those who do not observe, often turn towards food as a performance of Jewish identity, both publicly and privately. Longing for roots, these Jews reach for a piece of Jewish culture that can make them not only feel Jewish, but also grounded in a longstanding tradition that explicitly ties Judaism to a dynamic food culture. In doing so they invent traditions, creating habits sometimes loosely based in prescribed or familial tradition, sometimes not at all. In this way, food, through invented traditions, allows modern non-observant American Jews to make their Jewish identity tangible.

My project is largely based upon my own experience as a barely-there Jew in America. I certainly grew up knowing I was Jewish, but this was not reaffirmed through a bat mitzvah or synagogue attendance. Framing most of the project through this lens, my own, made it easier to work through tricky questions about what Judaism in American actually looked like.

Additionally, I looked to my parents. Obviously, they are the original makers of my Jewish experience. Without them, I would not be Jewish nor have any conception of my Jewishness in the first place. They were responsible for what I believed a Jew to be and what I

believed Jewish food looked like. Thus, their food practices, history, and beliefs about Judaism itself factored heavily into the framing of my project.

I also conducted interviews with college-age Jews and their parents. I interviewed my parents and a friend of my dad's who owns a deli in Brooklyn. Interviewing made sense to me in the same way that thinking about my family's experiences did; in order to get a fuller picture of Jews and their individual food practices I needed to talk to actual Jews and learn about their habits. A lot of the literature I consulted spoke of modern Jews as the creators of Judaism. Therefore, talking to Jews meant accessing what Judaism in America really means and looks like today.

I emerged from my research with a few different stories that needed to be told in order to explore the fuller picture of American Judaism and food. The first is the Judaism story itself, where I explore what it actually means to call oneself a Jew and who is able to do so. Using the framing of Michael Satlow, a researcher at Brown University, I argue that Jews in America today have an extremely broad sense of agency. According to his argument, anyone can call themselves a Jew and anything a Jew does is Jewish. Satlow's argument sets the stage for a discussion of Judaism where Judaism can really mean anything, as long as a Jew is the one acting. Defining Judaism this way allows for a range of different Jews who all perform practices that can be designated as Jewish, regardless of their relation to textually prescribed Jewish practice. Additionally, Satlow stresses that Judaism has a long legacy of operating this way. He firmly believes that Judaism has never had a unifying core, and has always been made up of inventors. What I considered to be outsider behavior, my invention, was actually endemic to Judaism from the start.

Next came the food and Judaism story. In the beginning, the food and Judaism story explored the inextricable tie between Jews and food. I thought that, naturally, American Jews would give attention to food because of Judaism's historical link with food through the kosher laws, regardless of the user's adherence to *kashrut*, the Jewish food laws, Hebrew for "fit" or "proper."³ It seemed, to me, that religious law was food and food was religious law. But how did this consider the Jews that had no clue what *kashrut* was? Those, like me, whose grandparents, the first generation of American born Jews, had not even kept kosher? I knew that there was inarguably something special about me eating Jewish food with my dad, but what was it? And why was it there?

The relationship between food and Judaism appeared to be more complicated than my original thinking. Obviously, stringent kosher laws framed Judaism. But, according to Satlow, it was also defined by the disagreements over those laws. Jews, to my surprise, had never really been able to agree about what *kashrut* meant. In this way, Judaism's historical relationship with food was fraught with the very same variability that it is today.

This constant reframing of what it meant to eat as a Jew was particularly pertinent in the story of Reform Judaism and the "*Trefa* Banquet", a meal that marked the first graduating class of a Jewish college in the nineteenth century. The guests came from a variety of denominations and some kept kosher, yet the menu served was unintentionally filled with non-kosher fare. The presence of *treyf*, un-kosher, dishes, especially being served to Jews who could not eat them, caused a stir among the denominations. After the meal, those in charge of the Reform Jewish movement came forward as openly against the practice of *kashrut*. This symbolized a

³ Rela Mintz Geffen, "Dietary Laws," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 5:650.

theological, and official, green light; the food laws would no longer define Jewish food in America. Further, the food laws would no longer define Jews in America.

After this comes the immigration story. Jews have been present in America since the colonies.⁴ However, America experienced an influx of Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who, amending their already existing food traditions to include those of America, created many of the dishes we call Jewish today.⁵ Looking at cookbooks published in the mid-twentieth century sheds light on the way that Jews were acting upon the Reform Jewish movement away from the food laws; they were forging a new Jewish cuisine, one that, unlike the old world's, did not need to be kosher to be considered Jewish. In exactly the same way that these Jews partook in adaptation and creation and were still considered Jewish, so do today's Jews.

The interviews, which came next, complicated the story even more. American Judaism, according to the Jews that I talked to and in line with Satlow, is extremely tricky to nail down. Some, like my mom, have an entirely invented experience, authenticated through the fabrication of a Jewish "history." Others, like Peter, the deli-owner, begrudgingly accept a Jewish identity based on ethnicity but only go that far, despite the fact that his livelihood, his restaurant, is a Jewish deli, a living, breathing manifestation of his relationship to Jewish food culture.

Ultimately, the interviews reveal the variety of ways that American Jews conceive of their own Jewishness, and how food, more often than not, plays a part in their manifestation of that conception of Judaism.

⁴ See Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 1 or the timeline on 429.

⁵ *Ibid*, 431.

A Word on Terminology

Moving forward, I use the term “practice,” sparingly, to refer to repeated actions that reaffirm a user’s Jewish identity. I argue that anything a Jew does that they call Jewish and makes them feel Jewish is Jewish. My mom’s assertion that baked salmon is Jewish, although not textually or perhaps even traditionally supported, holds water given that she, a Jew, is calling salmon Jewish. Furthermore, other people agree; I was shocked to discover that two of my interviewees considered roasted salmon a Jewish dish. Thus, salmon can be considered Jewish food on the basis that it is not only Jewish in intent, that my mom makes it with the belief that it is Jewish, but also because other Jews agree. When my mom bakes salmon adorned with lemon slices, which she does often, this makes her, and others, feel Jewish and as a result enters the lexicon of “practice.”

I employ phrases like “prescribed” practice to refer to what is textually prescribed and in turn, most typically associated with Jewish practice. These actions fall within the umbrella of general practice because they, too, allow Jews to access and reaffirm their Jewish identity. “Observant” Jews--I deem this group as those who follow the laws set forth in holy texts--usually practice this way. Keeping kosher, wearing specific garments, and regularly attending synagogue are all prescribed practices that observant Jews may carry out.

The concept of “cultural” Jews arose frequently. I define it using my own conception, but also that of the people that I interviewed. Cultural Jews were those, like myself and many of my interviewees, who often staked a claim to Judaism ethnically, but also through traits and practices associated through Judaism outside of prescribed practice. This could mean humor or Jewish food. It often entailed celebrating holidays like Passover and Rosh Hashanah, albeit in some kind of abridged and personalized way. The cultural Jew, typically, did not go to

synagogue regularly. They may not have gone to Hebrew School. Their Judaism, largely, was experienced and performed outside of the temple.

What is a Jew?

My mom, to me, is the original inventor. The captain of the Jewish ship that is our family, she steers us through holiday after holiday, cooking dinners, inviting friends, and ultimately, guiding us through ceremonies. I have always conceived of her as purely Jewish. She knows more about the religion than my dad. She was who we looked to when, as children, we came across a word in Hebrew that was unpronounceable. For holidays she cooks briskets, latkes, and roasts whole birds. She crafts scripts from formal Haggadahs for Passover, cutting sections she felt were extraneous and dotting in Pablo Neruda poems when she thinks appropriate. Each guest receives a hard copy with names handwritten in the margins designating a speaker for every section.

Judaism is my mom and my mom is Judaism. It only made sense that she would become the fulcrum of my project. One aspect of her Judaism complicates things, though: her role as a convert. Unlike my dad, she has no Jewish history, no Jewish ancestors, no recipes passed down, and no memories of a Jewish childhood. Then, how does she construct such a robust Jewish identity? Further confusing her Jewish identity was the fact that, our family rarely, if ever, frequents synagogues. Our practice is entirely within the four walls of our home. How could cultural Jews, people who had no association with a formal institution, who barely knew Hebrew, and who only thought of Rosh Hashanah as apples and honey call themselves Jewish?

Before exploring the domain of the cultural Jew, a bit on how some Jews characterize themselves as such is useful. For some, like my father, being Jewish is simple and nothing short

of biological. His parents were Jews, children of immigrants who came here from Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine in the early twentieth century. Some people, myself included, certainly view Judaism this way; as an ethnic identity shared among people that come from the same region. Within the ethnicity, Jews are typically considered either Ashkenazi or Sephardic. The former refers to Jews who originated from Germany, although the definition has widened to origins in Eastern Europe. Sephardic Jews came from the Iberian Peninsula, usually simplified as Spain.⁶ My dad's parents came from Eastern Europe, specifically Russia and the Ukraine, as Ashkenazi Jews. As a result, he considers himself Jewish by blood: an Ashkenazi Jew. The same goes for my brother and I.

But Judaism also, obviously, has a religious element. People deem themselves Jewish through religious practices they have learned and then carry out. They may keep kosher, go to temple, or read holy texts. They may live in insular communities like the Ultra-Orthodox. They probably engage their kids in their religious practice, hoping that they, too, will be Jewish in the same way when they grow up. In this way, Judaism can be passed down through two avenues; the ethnic/biological and the religious. Jews who engage in prescribed religious practice most likely consider themselves Jewish ethnically as well although outliers, converts, exist.

Michael Satlow works to build a definition of Judaism in his text, *Creating Judaism*. His definition begins to clear up some of the questions regarding how so many Jews, living drastically different lifestyles, can exist all at once and call themselves Jewish. Instead of arguing that all forms of Judaism have a “core”, or one unifying aspect, he asserts that scholars should interpret Judaism as a “family of traditions” that can overlap, like circles on a Venn diagram.⁷

⁶ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004), 5.

⁷ Michael Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 6.

These traditions are then framed through historical and social contexts unique to their respective practitioners. This point in particular holds significance: that individual “Judaisms” can exist at once and are shaped according to their performers and the world around them.⁸

Satlow stresses that Jews themselves, not Judaism, have agency. In this way, Jews alone construct and create their own communities, often outside of prescribed religious law.

Considering Satlow’s definition, American Jews represent both the playwrights and actors of their Jewish identity. They create, define, and perform individual forms of identity. In this world, anyone can be considered a Jew. He addresses this, writing that any person who calls themselves Jewish is valid and that “however much other Jewish communities contest their identity, their own self-characterization puts them on the map.”⁹ Satlow calls the idea that Jews can self-determine “*am yisrael*.”¹⁰

This represents one of three maps (Israel, textual tradition, and religious practice) that he claims all forms of Judaism can be plotted onto.¹¹ Like a Venn diagram, the maps can overlap, and some Jews may fall onto just one or all three. Essential to Satlow’s argument, though, is that any placement on one of the maps, no matter how insignificant, can make someone a Jew.

Satlow’s definition of Judaism certainly pushes the boundaries of what can and cannot be considered Jewish--it seems that the possibilities for Jewish classification are boundless. He suggests an outer limit, though, in his discussion of Messianic Judaism, sometimes referred to as Jews for Jesus. Messianic Judaism proclaims Jesus as the messiah.¹² Satlow concedes that other Jews, such as the Lubavitch Hasidim (who believe in a biblical messiah in the form of a late

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 54.

Rebbe), share some of the same beliefs as Messianic Jews. However, Satlow distinguishes them from one another, writing definitively that “Jesus is not the Rebbe.”¹³ After all, while all Jewish groups partake in relatively the same rabbinic tradition, Messianic Jews do not. In this way, and also in Judaism’s unilateral rejection of Jews for Jesus, the group is set firmly apart from and denounced by mainstream Jewish groups. Satlow also suggests that some may perceive Messianic Judaism, in their ascription to Christian beliefs, as actively anti-Jewish. Jews have suffered violence at the hands of Christians “over the last two thousand years” and thus view Christianity as a “frightening other.”¹⁴ Finally, Satlow points to the group’s lack of success outside of America as evidence of their outlier status.

In his widespread, reaching definition of Judaism, Satlow draws a line in the sand with his discussion of Jews for Jesus. Although hesitant to give his own conception of whether Jews for Jesus are, in fact, Jewish, he unequivocally points to their blatant rejection of Jewish tradition as grounds for other Jews to reject them. Having one foot in the map can designate an individual as Jewish—members of Jews for Jesus certainly call themselves Jewish—but they also must be accepted, or perhaps, not actively discredited by the larger Jewish community.

This definition, one of acceptance, still raises questions about non-observant Jews, who the Ultra-Orthodox and other extremist groups certainly revile.¹⁵ However, Satlow asserts that a definition of American Judaism that omits non-observant Jews would not represent Judaism at all. The majority of Jews in America today make up this group of non-observance; data from the National Jewish Population Survey, conducted in 2000, that he cites shows that “only 40 percent of American Jewish households belong to synagogues.” Satlow concedes that, “Judaism in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sarah Bershtel and Allen Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* (California: UC Press, 1992), 3.

America, whether on an institutional or individual level, is hardly simple to describe.” Despite this, all American Jews are distinctly American and “linked by their shared cultural assumptions.”¹⁶

According to Satlow, American Jews are American in their insistence upon and engagement with individual freedom. The “religious life” of the non-observant is “patched together”, loosely based upon “incomplete snippets of knowledge of the textual tradition and rituals to which they have often nostalgic connections.”¹⁷ Likewise, more observant Jews, such as the Ultra-Orthodox in Williamsburg, know that they can practice relatively comfortably. American Jews, then, operate on the assumption that they can practice, and in turn, perform their Judaism both privately and publicly, however they choose to. In this definition of American Judaism, that Satlow constructs, of a distinctly *American* Jewish populace, one can begin to understand the essence of American Judaism itself.

Satlow’s definition of Judaism certainly raises questions about what one needs to actually *do* to be a Jew. It works to define what traits Judaism has to carry to be considered Judaism. It also describes a textual tradition, something that is not really up for interpretation. Certainly, most Jews would agree that Judaism is heavily based in the Tanak. However, it leaves the concept of practice, what Jews are actually doing that is *considered* Jewish, entirely open-ended. Although he notes that many practices are firmly grounded in ancient texts, like the prescription of kosher laws in Deuteronomy, he also acknowledges that practice can loose from text and become entirely free-standing, subject completely to the whims of the Jews that carry them out.¹⁸

¹⁶ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice.*, 57.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

He also argues that Judaism is entirely filtered through the user's cultural and historical lens.¹⁹ Judaism, then, differs from individual to individual, or even community to community, based on the context Jews are living in. Satlow, using this argument, highlights the inability to pin down a unified "Judaism" or set of practices associated with Judaism.²⁰ Although, certainly, there are activities widely considered to be Jewish in nature, like keeping kosher, Judaism exists on such a wide spectrum that a concept like Satlow's maps represent the only way to formulate some kind of definition.

Jews wholly decide how they practice. Satlow notes this, writing that "different communities, and their individual members, use different strategies for identifying as Jews."²¹ These strategies, in my view, varied greatly. How did my dad eating a reuben at Katz's differ from a Hasidic man ritually dipping into a mikvah before Shabbat? Both were processes that reaffirmed the subject's Judaism within themselves. My dad certainly considered himself Jewish and eating Jewish food maintained that identity. The same went for the practices of those that follow rules written in sacred texts. In thinking through the various forms of practice I knew of, I realized that practice exists entirely on a spectrum; it comes in many forms. The diversity present in practice, however, fails to dilute its meaning to the individual. Whatever a Jew does to feel Jewish is Jewish.

While I use Satlow's far-reaching definition of Judaism to frame my entire paper, I must admit that I myself have trouble with it. Satlow may not argue explicitly for the existence of limits, but I certainly have my own. I consider myself "less" Jewish than others who are more

¹⁹ Ibid, 7.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 8.

observant and I view my Judaism as less than. That in itself points to my own belief in a spectrum of Judaism where not all Jews are created equal.

Many of my interviewees felt the same way. They were insistent upon a core. Using terms like “more religious” or “actual Judaism” revealed their belief in a set of limits that guarded some form of legitimate Judaism from their own semblance of cultural Jewishness.

Despite this, I use Satlow’s framing because I believe it is the most objective way to discuss Judaism. Everyone has their own core. All Jews, including the observant ones, have some idea of what it means to be Jewish. Satlow’s definition works to legitimize and include everyone.

Imagining a Jewish Community

During my interview with my mom, she talked at length about my dad’s Jewishness and how that influenced her conversion. She told me that she was “fascinated” with his family’s history and that it felt different than any of her own, that it resonated with her in a way different from her own. I asked her what she meant by their history; did she mean their religious practice which was nonexistent? She responded that she felt like “they were connected to something really big” which she never experienced nor was a part of. What was so weird about it, she continued, was that my “dad wasn’t connected to it and yet he [was] whether he” cared to admit it or not.

What my mom so aptly detailed in our interview together is a phenomenon that I experience but have never voiced or been able to explain: the fact that I feel connected to Jews everywhere. Despite the diversity present in Judaism, my family and I all agreed that we felt like we were part of a greater Jewish community. We knew that the Jewish men wearing great, big

beaver hats that we saw in Williamsburg were living lives entirely different from our own but we felt connected to them in our Judaism nonetheless.

This was something I encountered in a text I had read, as well. *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America* by Sarah Bershtel and Allen Graubard weaves together interviews with American Jews and sociological commentary to make the argument that American Judaism has taken a new form, highly divorced from prescribed ritual and tradition, that is still Jewish. One passage in a chapter where they interview a film director, Michael Stone, struck a particular note with me. Describing his thought process when meeting people, he tells the interviewers, “I find myself very surprised now that I want to know right away, is this person Jewish? And I think, how fucked up.... I like working with Jews. I do feel an instant connection to people who are Jewish. I think ultimately there is a bond among Jews.”²² Considering Stone’s words, my mom’s conception of my dad as connected to a greater Jewish entity, and my own feelings led me to wonder how Jews could consider themselves part of a large Jewish community, and thus connected to all other Jews, despite our vast differences.

To consider myself Jewish, and most importantly, a Jew among other Jews, according to Satlow means joining what political scientist Benedict Anderson coined an “imagined community.”²³ Jews in this fictitious community are “held together by a gripping narrative of origins that succeeds not only in providing a coherent past, but one that also generates value and meaning.”²⁴ Anderson set out to explain how nations were built, specifically, how vast and diverse populations can consider themselves one entity. Picking apart the term, he describes this phenomenon as “*imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know

²² Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*, 19.

²³ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 10.; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."²⁵ According to Anderson, members of imagined communities need not be alike in nature at all, they only have to believe that they are to enter into the community.

The conception of American Judaism as an imagined community underscores just how much of the religion, to the non-observant, is invented. According to Bershtel and Graubard, modern Jews in America “are a people not ‘chosen’ but choosing.”²⁶ Satlow agrees, reaffirming the agency afforded to Jews in America throughout his introduction in his conception of *am yisrael*, mentioned earlier. Thus, to be a Jew in America today means being able not only to pick and choose what aspects of the religion appeal to you, but also, to create anew.

²⁵ Anderson, 6.

²⁶ Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*, 300.

One: A Cuisine Undetermined

To some, Jewish cuisine is that which is kosher. In America, though, people tend to think of Jewish food as the dishes brought over from Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century, which were then propagated into the foods featured in delicatessens. To others, Jewish food was more far-reaching, representing any dish that a Jew made.

I knew what I believed Jewish food to be, but what did other Jews think? Looking at historical and religious-oriented writings proved to be somewhat fruitless; they mostly talked about Jewish food in ancient times, so I turned towards texts that actually contained what I was interested in—the prefaces to Jewish cookbooks, which almost universally dealt with my question, perhaps an indication to variety of answers, and also, the possible unanswerable-ness of the question itself.

The two I mentioned in my introduction follow a trend that I had noticed is common in Jewish food studies recently: the reframing of Jewish cuisine as not just Ashkenazic, but a diaspora that includes Sephardic dishes as well.²⁷ Both books wanted to prove that Jewish food didn't just have to consist of potatoes, bread, and meat. Instead, it could include pulses and various vegetable preparations. This, obviously, held merit, but was not quite what I yearned for. Clearly Judaism was a diaspora, consisting of a global system of different Jews cooking dishes according to their varied histories and surroundings. Instead, I wanted an answer to the question of how far the limits of American Jewish cuisine could stretch.

Was Jewish food, like my interviewee had said, anything that a Jew cooked? I knew that my gut reaction was no, but why not? If the diaspora was so far-reaching, the diversity of Jews so broad, then where was the limit?

²⁷ Koenig, *Modern Jewish Cooking*, 10.; Koenig, *The Jewish Cookbook*, 8.

I longed to view the introduction to Joan Nathan's *Jewish Cooking in America*. Nathan is somewhat of a Jewish American celebrity chef and an authority on the subject, authoring multiple cookbooks, hosting a PBS cooking show, and contributing regularly to the New York Times food section. Despite her stardom, no online copies of the text existed, and her columns in the Times were too specific to answer anything.

Instead, I employed what I had at hand, or perhaps within phone's reach: my mother and her scanner. She lovingly sent me the preface to (aside from holiday specific ones) the only American Jewish cookbook she owned, *The Jewish American Kitchen*, written in 1989 by Raymond Sokolov. I like the candidness and humor present in Sokolov's writing. In thinking my way through Jewish food, I often found myself thinking of an answer, then challenging the answer and reframing. Sokolov works the same way, going through a process of elimination-like bracket until he reached a final answer.

The book's preface, aptly titled "What is Jewish Food?" begins by asking "what is a Jew?" and covers the various avenues I have already explored (although he includes Hitler's conception of Jews, that is, anyone with a Jewish grandparent, which I did not). Moving forward, he challenges the notion that anything a Jew eats is Jewish. He notes that despite the fact that Jews all over the world eat potatoes, "so does the Pope" along with all of the Irish and "no one in his right mind would call the potato a Jewish tuber."²⁸ But then he backtracks... why not? In comparing the lowly potato (always kosher in its raw form, he notes) to bagels and lox, though, he concedes that "certain foods are marked as Jewish" but that also, foods that Jews consistently eat, like "celery" and "coffee" (and the potato) are not necessarily Jewish per say.²⁹ So then Jewish food cannot just be the food that Jews eat.

²⁸ Raymond Sokolov, *The Jewish-American Kitchen* (New York, New York: Workman Publishing, 1989), 9.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 9.

He ponders the various iterations of Jewish cuisine, all influenced by the social, historical, and geographical context in which the users reside. In doing so, he determines that no ingredient is inherently Jewish at heart. “No raw material” he declares “starts out as Jewish, not even chicken fat.”³⁰ Specific dishes, certainly, were “*not* Jewish, from shrimp cocktail to Szechuan pigs’ ears.” Jewish foods that were entirely Jewish in essence, he says, would possibly include dishes that resulted from the laws of *kashrut* or specific holidays, like “matzo balls or cholent.”

And yet, Sokolov concedes that “even this list would shortchange the Jewish kitchen.” And this, to me, is when Sokolov begins to sound Satlow-ian. Sure, Jewish food could be considered that which was essentially Jewish, but to view the cuisine that way “would cut the heart out of the Jewish menu” which, to Sokolov, is “a conglomeration of dishes borrowed from here and everywhere, dishes that have survived the trials of the Diaspora, dishes born of emigration and resettlement, and finally dishes that grow out of the creative assimilation of American ways.”³¹ Sokolov argues that to omit the dishes that are not utterly Jewish in essence would be an inaccurate representation of Jewish food entirely.

Backtracking again, though, he argues against the universalist approach in a cookbook. Sure, he acknowledges that Jewish food is broad, but a recipe book that speaks to that and includes recipes from every corner of Jewish life will fail to tug at the heartstrings of any Jew; “a complete Jewish cookbook would be authentic for no one.”³²

Where does he lie? Pure Jewish food was too narrow, and diasporic Jewish food, while an accurate representation of Jewish food, was too broad for any cookbook. He chooses to focus

³⁰ Ibid, 10.

³¹ Ibid, 10.

³² Ibid, 11.

on American Jewish cuisine where “context is everything.”³³ The user, first of all, needs to think of themselves as a Jew. Sokolov uses the example of radishes served with sour cream. Outside of the Jewish context, a radish is simply that, a radish. But served to a Jew with sour cream, suddenly “they are eating what is for them Jewish food, marked as Jewish, whether they keep a kosher home or not.”³⁴ To him, for Jewish foods to be classified as such, they need to be experienced in some kind of Jewish context. This could mean your Jewish grandmother serving you chicken soup. It could also mean getting a pastrami sandwich from a Jewish deli. Historical context even frames the bagel, a food that I consider almost entirely divorced from its Jewish roots. Accordingly, those aware of it regard the bagel as a Jewish food.

In this way, Jewish food is amorphous, constantly stepping in and out of Jewishness based on the eater’s experiences and knowledge. There is no core. But is this really true? It raised another question that had been nagging me all along, and that I dealt with in my section on what it means to be Jewish, the existence of my own personal limits when it came to conceptions of what Judaism is.

My interviewee who claimed everything she cooked was Jewish certainly believed that to be true. She believed that there was no core. But did I? In a way, yes. I knew her cooking had Jewish origins because she told me that she had learned to cook from her grandmother. Maybe everything she made was contextualized by this history. She told me this herself, that she used a lot of onions in her cooking and considered that Jewish. Obviously other cultures use onions as well but her use came from a uniquely Jewish place of learning and she, accordingly, considered it Jewish. Would I view it that way, had she not told me? Probably not. But she *had* told me. Then again, did she need my approval, that of another Jew, to believe her cooking to be Jewish?

³³ Ibid, 12.

³⁴ Ibid, 11.

Certainly not. If there was one thing I knew from growing up Jewish it was that we are a stubborn people, unwilling to bend to the will of others, and in some cases, reluctant to even listen. She definitely cared little of my, or frankly of any Jews' opinion; what was Jewish to her was Jewish to her and that was all that mattered.

So then, to follow Satlow, there is no core to Jewish food, but instead, a conglomerate of overlapping circles. There are dishes that are unequivocally Jewish to everyone, like latkes (but perhaps only when presented as latkes, and not potato fritters). There are also, obviously, dishes that lie outside of the American Jewish cuisine that make up the large diaspora of Jewish food.

But then I diverge from Satlow, albeit with some difficulty. In my section about what a Jew is I argued that the perception of other Jews is important, as seen in the case of the widespread rejection of Jews for Jesus. I hesitate to apply this argument, that others need to deem Jewish food Jewish, to the cuisine. If a Jew was the one doing the cooking and believed the food to be Jewish, why not?

In talking about my interviewee, though, I have left out part of the story: that she kept somewhat kosher in her home and did not cook pork, shellfish, un-kosher cuts of meat, or mix meat and dairy. Would I feel differently had she been cooking shrimp and served it to me, telling me it was Jewish? I think yes. So then perhaps a limit does exist, and the larger community, informed by history, can determine the bounds of that.

And of course, that limit, while also existing on a broader scale, is also in part the result of individual opinions. Would I think of a cut of pork, seasoned, steamed, and smoked like pastrami and then served on rye bread with mustard as a Jewish sandwich? Yes. I have never kept kosher and do not think those laws as a limit to Jewish food, so could conceive of biblically unclean foods as Jewish. Would an Orthodox Jew agree? Certainly not. Why would my

interviewee cooking me shrimp, another unclean food, not be Jewish in my eyes but a pork pastrami would? I have no idea. Jews employ little rhyme or reason when determining which *treyf* foods make their way into Jewish cuisine. Others, somehow, remain perpetually trapped in the historical realm of unclean, which will be shown in the following pages. Also, who cares about my opinion anyway? Some Jews would challenge my identification as Jewish entirely given that my mother converted. My opinion, really, only matters to me.

So then perhaps the agency afforded to Jews in determining Jewish food truly depends on who you ask. Some might say Jewish food is that which is deemed kosher. Others, maybe from Montreal, will say it is smoked meats. Others will say it is hummus and crunchy vegetables. Perhaps we can all agree it is not shrimp, but who knows? There might be a Jew out there who cooks shrimp and calls it Jewish, and that is their prerogative.

Limits to what Jewish food is, then, to me, exists on an individual scale. I can determine which dishes are Jewish to me and which are not. Others may not agree, but ultimately, I only ate Jewish food to feel Jewish, which in itself represents an entirely personal experience, not open to the vindication of others.

This also existed on the community scale though. Cookbooks, historically and today, represent a way of reframing the idea of “Jewish.” A Jewish recipe book that includes pork recipes engages in a negotiation of what Jewish food entails. It reframes Jewish food to include pork, an ingredient most would consider distinctively un-Jewish.

Jewish food, then, to return to Sokolov’s argument, really is about context. The pure Jewish exists: the latkes and the cholent. But so does the grey area: the bacon served at a kosher-

style deli, the beef stroganoff that includes cream presented in a Jewish cookbook.³⁵ It is messy and historically, socially, culturally, but also individually informed. So much of defining Jewish food is about identity, where one comes from, what they believe and what they have learned, that it almost becomes an identity itself.



This section of the project arose out of one question: why food and why invented food? Why was food time and time again the medium that Jews choose to perform, both publicly and privately, their identity with? Part of this was obvious, food would always be associated with Judaism because of the food laws, *kashrut* in Hebrew.

But part of the answer to my question, aside from the food laws and their sheer existence, was less obvious. Something looser and less tangible connected the non-observant Jewish identity to food. They could be inexplicably far from any memories of *kashrut* and still hold Jewish food close to them in a way that mere history could not explain. Instead, these Jews constructed and invented narratives surrounding food because food always framed Judaism in this way, through debate, messiness, and reinvention.

This was clearly seen in the story of Reform Judaism, and in particular, a historical event called the “Trefa Banquet” which led to the denomination’s insistence upon the laws as archaic. I chose to focus on this meal because it represented the moment when a major American theological movement shifted Jewish food practice away from kosher laws and into unknown territory. In denouncing the laws, Reform Jews radically reframed the relationship between food

³⁵ Mile End, a Montreal-style delicatessen in my old neighborhood in Brooklyn serves bacon on their menu alongside a plug for their catering services: “why *schlep* to the restaurant?” (“Menu,” Mile End Deli, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.mileenddeli.com/new-page-1>.)

and Judaism, giving Jews permission to move away from the laws and paving the way for the birth of American Jewish cuisine which kosher-ness would not determine.

Jews, throughout history, had consistently engaged in a reinterpretation of what it meant to eat as a Jew. The disagreements over what Jewish food looks like told a Satlow-ian story of Judaism, as a religion where food had never been determined, which left room for and inspired invention today. The negotiation of kosher laws and the banquet were part of this tale.

Finally, a word on Judaism and food in sacred texts. Recently, scholarly attention has been given to food's ubiquity in the Old Testament and the meaning associated with food's presence. Food is not simply just there, it also conveys themes. Obviously, this is significant. Food has been meaningful to Jews from the very beginning, and is considered important not only in lawful practice, but also in the stories contained in sacred texts that observant Jews study and reference daily and during significant life events. As a subject, I felt I could not give it the attention it deserved in this paper. Plenty of books and articles exist that cover this and I will footnote a few here.³⁶



We never had an official plate designated for the holiday of Passover. Proper Seder platters typically have six spots with raised circles designating each component of the plate: the *matzo*, *zeroa* (shank bone), *beitzah* (egg), *maror* and *chazeret* (bitter herbs), and *karpas* (vegetable, in our family usually parsley).³⁷ Sometimes the plates have a star of David in the middle, each point of the shape angled at one of the outer-lying circles. Sometimes they have

³⁶ Lipton, Diana. *From Forbidden Fruit to Milk and Honey: A Commentary on Food in the Torah*. Urim Publications, 2018.; Nathan Macdonald, *Not Bread Alone: The Uses of Food in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁷ Susan R. Friedland, *The Passover Table: New and Traditional Recipes for Your Seders and the Entire Passover Week* (William Morrow Cookbooks, 1994), 4.

images of each component. Other times they have labels in Hebrew or English. When I asked my mom, in her interview, why we never had a Seder plate, she told me that they were often really expensive. “That, or they’re really ugly!” and we laughed. She usually chose to use a glass plate with a gold edge that we owned--it was given to us by my paternal grandfather’s second wife, Mary. My mom claimed this plate meant more to her than any Seder plate she could purchase and that was why she used it.

Preparing for the Seder usually meant a frenzied effort to figure out exactly what went on the plate and what it was called in Hebrew. My mom certainly knew all of the components, but I remember distinctly remember being charged with creating labels for each one, and subsequently frantically thumbing through our copy of *The Passover Table*.³⁸ I created placards for all six items with images next to each. This meant that our non-Jewish guests could know what was on the plate, but also that we would know what to call everything in Hebrew.

Disaster, and in turn, absence, marked some years. The *beitzah*, or egg, present on the plate is supposed to be hard boiled. One year, my mom insisted on putting it in the oven (the egg on the cover of our book appears to be roasted) with the lamb shank. As we were setting the table, mere moments before our guests arrived, we heard a loud pop, only to open the oven and discover that the egg had quite literally exploded. That year, there was no egg. Some years, we struggled to procure the lamb shank from our local market. Other years, we just forgot about it. Absence, however, was never taken too seriously. Our Passovers were purely my mother’s creation, subject to her whims, desires, and shortcomings.

The focus of our Passovers is always food. A script, which my mom compiled in 2001, clearly illustrates this. Although she types and prints the pages, her loopy script designated the

³⁸ Ibid.

speaker of each stanza and gave instructions, such as when and who would hide the *afikomen*. On the last page, after what must have been at least an hour of ceremony, during which the various children (and probably adults) present were certainly starving, her usual script changes to all caps, emphasized by an asterisk: “EAT!”

The meal is always central to the ceremony. Some years it seemed that we only performed the ceremony so that we got to enjoy the meal at the end. The running joke in our family was that the ceremony was so long (despite my mom’s drastic abridging) that by the end of it we were starving. My mom always makes brisket and some kind of starch, usually potatoes. She also serves all of the Seder plate’s components, to be eaten alongside the main meal.

Passover represents one of the stages where my mom chooses to perform her Judaism. Nothing more Jewish exists, to her than the preparation of the plate, the ceremony, and the foods that we share as a table. She relishes every moment of it, from the blitzing of the *charoset* in the Cuisinart to the writing of her customized Haggadahs.

Food represents a unique medium for the expression and determination of identity. People eat every day, multiple times per day. Mealtime symbolizes a constant negotiation of self. To me, my family’s consumption of Jewish food represented one facet of our identity as Jews. This was particularly acute on Jewish holidays, but was also present in all of the subtler ways we enjoyed Jewish food, outside of prescribed ceremony, like when we ate bagels. Simply put, we felt Jewish when we ate Jewish food.

A Word on Denominations

The Torah sets forth the laws of *kashrut* which dictate how and what observant Jews eat and partially constitute the body of Jewish law known as *halakhah*.³⁹ From keeping meat and

³⁹ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* has a sprawling entry on *halakhah*. Simplified, *halakhah* represents “the whole legal system of Judaism” outlining in detail “laws and customs.” The laws themselves are typically considered to have

dairy separate to abstaining from the consumption of shellfish and pork products, Jews who maintain the Kosher laws constantly think about food. They influence almost every facet of civilian life for Jews. As Sokolov puts simply, “the purpose of kashruth... is to exclude non-Jews from Jewish tables and to force Jews to spend time together as Jews.”⁴⁰ While his definition ignores the various conceptions of meaning associated with *kashrut*, it certainly gets at the insular nature of the practice, albeit bluntly. The rules determine who observant Jews associate with entirely. As one of my interviewees pointed out, many people who had kosher parents and in adulthood decided to maintain the practice did so so that their parents could share a meal in their home; they would be unable to if their children failed to keep kosher. They regulate where those that follow the laws can shop and what they can buy. Obviously, they limit what restaurants they can frequent.

The laws order every meal that an observant Jew eats. Land animals eaten must have cloven hooves and also chew cud. They cannot eat birds of prey. They exclude shellfish. Strict laws standardize the method of slaughter, allowing observant Jews to only buy certain cuts of meat that have been butchered specific ways. Foods fall into three categories, meat, dairy, or *parve*. Observant Jews will not mix meat and dairy in accordance with the laws. *Parve* foods can be eaten with either meat or dairy. The insistence upon separation of meat and dairy extends farther than recipes, though. Jews must keep separate plates for meat and dairy meals. Some Jews keep separate sinks, dishwashers, even refrigerators.⁴¹

been given to Moses by God on Sinai.; Benjamin De Vries, “Halakhah,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 8:251.

⁴⁰ Sokolov, *The Jewish-American Kitchen*, 11.

⁴¹ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 168-169.

And yet, Satlow and Andrew Buckser, an anthropology professor at Purdue University, challenge the notion of *kashrut* as ordered.⁴² While Buckser concerns himself with the difference in interpretations of *kashrut*, Satlow writes about the lack of meaning accorded to the practice. Both cases point to the ever-present perception of Judaism, and by association, Jewish food, as orderly. Instead, as Satlow and Buckser's narratives suggest, *kashrut*, the very set of laws intended to order Jewish life, is a lot less simple, and has always been a story of messiness and disagreement. The food laws represent one of the many arenas where Jews negotiate and determine identity. In this way, even observant Jews have constructed Judaism as a religion not only defined by food, but also a constant renegotiation of what that looks like.

Separate denominations of Judaism treat the food laws differently. Important to note, though, are the drawbacks associated with viewing Judaism through a solely denominational lens. Satlow talks about this at length, writing that the scholarly practice of dividing Judaism into denominations, and in turn, viewing American Judaism as "tightly linked to membership in Jewish institutions, organizations, and movements" is outdated.⁴³ Most scholars argue against Jewish practice occurring only in the synagogue, and thus "a focus on ideological movements yields a seriously distorted picture of what it means to be Jewish today in America."⁴⁴ Given this, I will proceed in defining dominations with caution; most American Jews do not associate with denominations. However, looking at the different denominations, and in particular, Reform Judaism, provides a look into how affiliated Jews choose to relate, and not relate, food practice to their individual theologies. These theological debates served as the basis for a movement away from *kashrut* defining Jewish food.

⁴² Ibid, 170; Andrew Buckser, "Keeping Kosher: Eating and Social Identity among the Jews of Denmark," *Ethnology* 38, no. 3 (1999): 191–209, 204.

⁴³ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 27.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Most people, when thinking about Jews in America, immediately point to images of Orthodox and Hasidic Jews, whose physical appearance, specifically what they wear, clearly identifies them as Jewish. However, three distinct sects of Judaism are most commonly referred to in America: Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism. All three are considered relatively modern, having arisen in the mid nineteenth century.⁴⁵ My mom's conversion journal delineates the three in a few simple words:

“Orthodox: Torah as direct word of God/divine

Conservative: [arrows pointing up and down] a little of each

Reform: Torah as beginning of many revelations.”⁴⁶

Although perhaps simplified to the extreme, my mom's understanding of the three denominations as a person coming into Judaism can serve as a point of entry for others. I generally keep to her definitions, but elaborate on them a bit. Particularly significant, and worth mentioning early on, is the agency associated with Reform Jews—they see the Torah as just the beginning, the jumping off point, of their Jewishness.

Orthodox and Hasidim represent a sect of Judaism wholly committed to the Torah in its entirety.⁴⁷ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* writes that “Orthodox came to designate those who accept as divinely inspired the totality of the historical religion of the Jewish people as it is recorded in the Written and Oral Laws... and as it is observed in practice according to the teachings and unchanging principles of the *halakhah*.”⁴⁸ At its core, the religion “stressed not so much the profession of a strictly defined set of dogmas, as submission to the authority of *halakhah*.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ David Golinkin and Michael Panitz, “Conservative Judaism,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 5:171.

⁴⁶ Mom's conversion journal, no page numbers.

⁴⁷ Hasidic Jews are a faction of Orthodoxy. All Hasidic Jews are Orthodox, but not all Orthodox Jews are Hasidic.

⁴⁸ Emanuel Rackman, “Orthodoxy,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 15:493.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

Given this, all Orthodox Jews stringently maintain the laws of *kashrut* as prescribed by *halakhah*.

Reform Judaism, which had its beginnings in Germany before arriving in America in the nineteenth century, differed greatly from the Orthodox ideology. The Pittsburgh Platform, a document created in 1885, laid out the main principles of Reform Judaism and unified the movement.⁵⁰ It emphasized the creation of a form of Judaism firmly grounded not in the past, but in the present. The Platform argues that the Bible reflects “the primitive ideas of its own age” and as a result Reform Jews would “accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.”⁵¹ Specifically pointing to *halakhah*, and in direct opposition to Orthodoxy, the Platform continues:

We hold that all such Mosaic rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.⁵²

Two things made these claims radical. First, that the text that historically makes up the faith can be considered outdated. But second, that Reform Jewish platform considers the rituals prescribed in those texts, the very ones that before this were thought to make a Jew a Jew outdated. As a result of their obsolescence, Reform practitioners can set them aside and forget them.

Significantly, the Platform implies the notion that Judaism as a whole can be separated from food practices. For the Reform Jews of the time, and in opposition to every other denomination, keeping kosher and specific dress could not, and would no longer reflect Judaism. Today,

⁵⁰ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

Reform Jews, concordant with the Platform, encourage communities to forge their own path, albeit in line with the denomination's larger belief systems.⁵³ In Satlow's words, "Reform Judaism gives to tradition a voice, but not a veto."⁵⁴

Finally, Conservative Judaism arose out of opposition to Reform Judaism and the Pittsburgh Platform.⁵⁵ Its origins lie in the creation of a "rabbinical seminary... more hospitable to traditional Judaism," opened in New York City in 1887. One of the faction's originators, Zechariah Frankel, hoped Conservatism would represent "positive-historical Judaism" which *Encyclopaedia Judaica* clarifies as "a predisposition to accept much of the 'positive,' ceremonial substance of Jewish practice while allowing for moderate changes."⁵⁶ Thus, Conservative Judaism lies between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, interested in maintaining traditional practices yet not to the extent that the more observant factions did.

Kashrut as Contentious

Arguments about food exist between all of the denominations. A couple are worth noting purely for the simple comparison between how their fussiness pales in comparison to Reform Judaism's sweeping denouncement of all food laws. They provide a backdrop upon which the Reform movement's radicalness can truly be seen. Additionally, *kashrut*'s incoherence allows room for other Jews to question their integrity, and in turn, drop it. Since Jews cannot agree upon a single interpretation of the laws, perhaps they fail to define Judaism at all.

Conservative and Orthodox Jews engage in one such battle, fighting over the consumption of swordfish. The fish, which "begins its life with scales and then loses them in

⁵³ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 35.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 12.

⁵⁵ Golinkin and Panitz, "Conservative Judaism," 172.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 171.

adulthood”⁵⁷ challenges the *halakhic* regulation for kosher fish, which asserts that they must have fins and scales. Since swordfish eventually lose their scales, are they considered clean? Conservative Jews say yes. Orthodox Jews do not agree. The two factions waged another similar fight over the consumption of rennet, a common ingredient in cheese that causes curdling.⁵⁸ Conservatives permit the consumption of rennet while Orthodox Jews do not.⁵⁹

Halav yisrael, the designation of milk as kosher, sowed discontent within the Orthodox faction itself. Different interpretations of the halakhic rule exist, but some believe that in order for milk to be kosher a Jew must supervise the entire production process.⁶⁰ Satlow emphasizes how Orthodox Jews have divided themselves based on the disagreement; those who believe in the importance of *halav yisrael*, as a result of their steadfast belief, have stopped sharing meals with other Orthodox Jews. The division’s implications are severe. *Kashrut*, “the... wedge that limits social interaction between Jews and non-Jews... is now being deployed not only between Jews, but between Orthodox Jews.”

The *Trefa* Banquet

Another historical event that created a fissure between Jews, known as the “Treyf Banquet” happened in 1883, two years before the Pittsburgh Convention and resulting platform and culminated in the creation of an entirely new denomination.⁶¹ The event was meant to celebrate the first graduating class of Hebrew Union College, and accordingly featured an expansive catered banquet intended for all of the guests.⁶² However, the Jewish caterer “took no

⁵⁷ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 48.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Golinkin and Panitz, “Conservative Judaism,” 172.

⁶² Hebrew Union College, the “oldest rabbinical seminary in the United States,” was originally intended to educate all Jews. However, after the publication of the Pittsburgh Platform, it cemented its status as an institution solely

account of the fact that traditionalists had been invited to the celebration and created a banquet like so many other lavish Jewish banquets held in his club—akin to non-Jewish banquets, minus the pork.⁶³ At the time, most Reform Jews consumed all food groups except for pork, an exclusion which they believed distinguished them from their non-Jewish peers.⁶⁴ The menu included “clams, crabs, shrimp, [and] frogs’ legs”; all profane foods according to the dietary laws.⁶⁵ Other laws were violated as well. Milk was mixed with meat—“the fifth course featured frog legs in cream sauce.”⁶⁶ The “beef tenderloins” served as the third course were certainly not koshered.⁶⁷

Quite ironically, Isaac Wise, Reform rabbi, first headmaster of the college, and mastermind behind the banquet, hoped for a broad coalition of American Jews. The banquet represented an attempt at this. He hoped that the ceremony and following meal would strengthen the discordant state of American Judaism, symbolizing unity between all American Jews.⁶⁸

The banquet, despite its status as *treyf*, caused little disruption in the moment. According to one attendee “two rabbis left the table without having touched the dishes... and three more... ate nothing and were indignant but signified their disapproval in a less demonstrative manner.”⁶⁹

associated with the Reform movement; “History,” Hebrew Union College, accessed May 4, 2020, <http://huc.edu/about/history>.

⁶³ Jonathan D. Sarna, “Why the Original Treyf Banquet Backfired,” *The Jewish Forward*, January 16, 2018, <https://forward.com/food/392217/why-the-original-treyf-banquet-backfired/>.

⁶⁴ Sarna, “Why the Original Treyf Banquet Backfired.”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Lance J. Sussman, “The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 57 1–2 (2005): 29–52.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Sarna, “Why the Original Treyf Banquet Backfired.”

⁶⁹ Sussman, “The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism.”

The outcry came out afterwards in print. The *Hartford Courant*, from Hartford, Connecticut, wrote that,

our Jewish contemporaries seem to be a good deal exercised in mind over the menu of a dinner recently given by Cincinnati Israelites to visiting rabbis and laymen... The *American Hebrew* speaks of these dishes as ‘the abomination of Talmud and Poskim (?) and wants to know whether the eleventh chapter of Leviticus is omitted from the edition of the Pentateuch in use in Cincinnati (sp.)⁷⁰

Rabbi Kaufman Kohler, president of Hebrew Union College after Wise, recognized the embarrassment of the event in a letter. According to him, it exemplified “how little judgement laymen have in religious matters.”⁷¹ Wise, (despite the fact that he kept a kosher home at the bequest of his Orthodox wife) “lashed out against critics, insisting that the dietary laws had lost all validity, and ridiculed them for advocating ‘kitchen Judaism.’”⁷²

The term “kitchen Judaism” emerged a few times in my research, although it was hard to pin down its origins and uses. According to Jenna Weissman Joselit, Professor of Judaic Studies at George Washington University, Heinrich Heine popularized the phrase, originally in German, “fressfrömmigkeit,” which referred to the “expression of piety through the eating of holiday foods.”⁷³ It is not dissimilar to another that I came across, which literary critic Leslie Fiedler employed in 1949: “Kugel Jews.”⁷⁴ Interestingly enough, Fiedler and Joselit’s definitions inverted Wise’s. Instead of referring to Jews married to the kitchen through the food laws, like Wise, Fiedler and Joselit referred to assimilated Jews whose last vestiges of the religion were gastronomic.

⁷⁰ “Current Comment,” *Hartford Courant*, August 6, 1883, https://www.newspapers.com/clip/31422660/comment_on_the_socalled_trefa_banquet/.

⁷¹ Sarna, “Why the Original Treyf Banquet Backfired.”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Robert Seltzer and Norman S. Cohen, *The Americanization of the Jews* (New York: NYU Press, 1995).

⁷⁴ Nora Rubel, “A ‘Jewish’ Joy of Cooking? How a 20th Century Cookbook Containing Frog’s Legs, Snails, and Ham Became a Beloved Jewish Icon,” in *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Audience* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2015), 268–98.

The Trefa Banquet along with the Pittsburgh Platform crystallized the distinctions between the Reform school of Judaism and, essentially, everyone else. Wise, after the incident, completely relinquished his earlier hope at unity and instead threw himself wholeheartedly into the pursuit of a Reform Jewish faction, eventually participating in and aiding in the creation of The Pittsburgh Platform two years after the fateful meal. Jonathan D. Sarna, professor at Brandeis University and professor of American Jewish history, highlighted the significance of the incident and its relevance today, “symbolically, the Trefa Banquet... separated American Jews into two opposing camps that could no longer even break bread together.”⁷⁵

Lance J. Sussman, Jewish historian and rabbi, writes of the significance of the banquet as a food story related to Judaism. According to him, the banquet “confirmed the centrality of food practices in traditional Jewish life... viewed broadly, *kashrut*, is part of an essentially universal phenomenon in religious life in which food is imbued with extraordinary symbolic and social value.”⁷⁶ His assertion supports the point made earlier in reference to swordfish, rennet, and *halav yisrael*: food creating division among Jews proves its status as an essential core of Jewish practice and belief.

The term “laymen”, employed in Kohler’s response, signified his belief in a spectrum of Judaism. There were the laymen, those who had little knowledge of the laws of *kashrut*, and then there were the Jews who kept kosher, who understood the “religious matters.” This dichotomy persists today, appearing frequently in my interviews, and points to the existence of individual beliefs regarding a core. To Kohler, a Jew who kept kosher was more legitimate than one that did not.

⁷⁵ Sarna, “Why the Original Treyf Banquet Backfired.”

⁷⁶ Sussman, “The Myth of the Trefa Banquet: American Culinary Culture and the Radicalization of Food Policy in American Reform Judaism.”

The Reform Jews disagreed. How could food that a Jewish caterer cooked, served to a room packed with Jews, not be considered Jewish? To Reform Jews, the laws of *kashrut* failed to define their Judaism, and thus, they dined on traditionally *treyf* foods. They negotiated the food laws, tailoring Judaism to their own wants, needs, and beliefs. The banquet and the Reform Jews make up the backdrop to a twentieth century food story where American-Jewish food would be born as a cuisine that the food laws no longer determined.

Two: Clams without Consequences

My dad, in our interview, said that his great-grandparents, who emigrated from the Ukraine and Poland in the early years of the twentieth century “weren’t particularly religious.” But they certainly cooked. When they lived in the Lower East Side, where my grandfather, Elliot, was born, Jennie worked as a cook and later owned a restaurant. We have no record of where it was, what it looked like, or what kind of food she served. However, my dad told me that he would be “surprised” if it had more than ten tables.

He described going to Abe and Jennie’s house, in Long Beach, California, as a child. Oftentimes they would make a pilgrimage to the local delicatessen where they would spend time with Abe and Jennie’s friends and then they would go home and eat. Jennie would immediately draft his sister, Nina, into the kitchen while barring the boys, my dad included, from the room. Jennie’s meal, my dad told me, was always a stewed chicken. Sometimes they ate lox and bagels procured from the local delicatessen. Jennie always sent them back to Marin City in Northern California, where they lived, with a giant shopping bag full of food which my grandmother would begrudgingly accept.

My dad describes the food of his childhood mistily. While interviewing him, I wonder whether his exclusion from the kitchen, in concert with a somewhat bleak childhood and a memory marred by age, has rendered him unable to remember the foods of his past. Besides Jennie’s meals, he recalls his mom’s cooking. Libby’s menu included strudel, pot roast, and beef stroganoff. I remember the gravlax Elliot would make. I also remember my mom’s story, indicative of Elliot’s gruffness, where he scolded me, at three, for eating too much of it.

The food of my grandparents, and even great grandparents, represents an amalgamation of Eastern European kosher dishes, some *treyf* meals that we consider Jewish today, and American additions. A stewed chicken could have certainly been on the plate of an Eastern European Jew, depending whether the slaughter of the bird and its preparation made it kosher. Some may consider beef stroganoff Jewish, despite the unclean mixing of meat and dairy. Also notable in my father's lineup is the presence of pot roast, a distinctly American dish that appeared multiple times when I asked interviewees to describe the foods of their childhood.

Jews who immigrated to America from Europe, like my great grandparents, faced a few realities that caused them to alter their cooking and eating habits. First and foremost, America confronted the notion of kosher-ness being explicitly tied to Jewish food. This resulted in somewhat of a split—some Jews maintained the practice while others dropped it for a variety of reasons. A number of rural Jews experienced logistical challenges with procuring koshered meat.⁷⁷ Others forgot about the practice because they felt they could. Some believed that keeping kosher limited their ability to assimilate fully into an American identity. Additionally, America gave Jews access to more foods, notably, more meat.⁷⁸ This reinforced some Jews' perception of America as a new, rich, world full of opportunity and potential wealth. The movement away from the old-world food customs of Europe reflected this: suddenly, Jewish cuisine could not only include copious amounts of meat, but also, it did not have to be kosher to be Jewish.⁷⁹ Finally, America represented freedom to most, and this also translated to religious freedom.⁸⁰

Satlow provides an interesting framework through which to view the interaction between the European and American Jewish food, which bore Jewish cuisine as we know it today.

⁷⁷ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 29.

⁷⁸ Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), 180.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 30.

Clearly, the Jewish immigrants of the twentieth century felt comfortable participating in their own kind of invention and imagining. However, one wonders what the limits of that invention were. Satlow's argument supposes that a boundary exists, determined in part by history but also by the perception of other Jews.

Why does Jewish food today, the product of twentieth century immigration, still tend to exclude some *treyf* foods? Mixing meat and cheese on a reuben is considered commonplace at kosher-style delis today, but one may be hard-pressed to find one that serves pork. Thus, Jewish food today operates in a somewhat liminal space, not quite entirely *treyf* but also not exclusively kosher. Jews, surely, feel free to invent. But their past and community still limits them. A look into these limits, specifically what, historically, Jews deemed acceptable or not sheds light on how today's Jews invent their own food traditions.

The Cookbooks

Kashrut no longer defined Jewish cuisine when Eastern European immigrants arrived in America. Hasia R. Diner, a professor of history at NYU, describes a phenomenon where, in Europe, Jewish foodways distinguished Jews from non-Jews. Jews in Europe kept kosher. This distinguished them from gentiles. "America," on the other hand, "challenged that basic way of life."⁸¹ The occasional spurning of *kashrut* sowed discontent in others. A movement away from the laws, to some, threatened to blur the line between Americans and Jews.⁸²

And blur it did. Difficulties associated with procuring kosher meat as well as, for some, a calculated movement away from *kashrut*, resulted in an amalgamation of American and Jewish

⁸¹ Diner, *Hungering for America*, 178.

⁸² *Ibid.*

cuisines, which Diner refers to as “kosher style.”⁸³ Thus, American Jews could live the best of both worlds; they chose to perform both American and Jewish identities. In doing so, they decided to leave behind aspects of their previous, wholly kosher lifestyles.

Cookbooks, while not necessarily a direct indicator of how Jews actually ate, can shed light on the representation of Jewish food in the mainstream. Many Jews, particularly new immigrants interested in becoming more American or making their way up the social ladder, looked towards Jewish cookbooks as a way to structure not only their cooking, but also their homes and parties.⁸⁴ In this way, they consulted Jewish recipe books in constructing their Jewish identities both publicly and privately.

The recipes featured in early Jewish cookbooks mark the birth of “kosher-style” cooking in America. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor at NYU, defines this cuisine as “the expression of a sentimental attachment to culinary traditions on the part of those who have rejected the dietary laws.”⁸⁵ Documenting the divorce between *kashrut* and Jewish food, she explains the emergence of “food associated with traditional kosher cooking [which] comes to embody Jewishness, even when it is not itself kosher’.”⁸⁶

One Jewish cookbook, the *Junior Jewish Cook Book*, aimed to present Judaism in an American and less strictly religious way. KTAV, a Jewish publishing house, produced the book in the 1950s. Interestingly enough, it aimed to educate American Jewish children about Judaism and Jewish culture—something the creators feared American acculturation was threatening—albeit in a “fun”, distinctly American fashion.⁸⁷ Rachel Gross, professor of Jewish studies at San

⁸³ Ibid, 185.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 89.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Benjamin ed. Zeller, *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 101

Francisco State University, notes the book's similarities to secular cookbooks of the time, like those of Betty Crocker. While the text featured Ashkenazi recipes, such as potato *kugel*, it also featured dishes like hamburgers while constantly urging young cooks to "participate in normative American culinary practices by purchasing canned and packaged goods, using modern kitchen implements, and arranging food in fanciful forms according to current mainstream tastes."⁸⁸ In this way, the text aimed to show American Jews that they can perform both identities at the same time.

Jews, in adopting a dual-identity, abandoned aspects of practice traditionally associated with Judaism. The cookbook's downplay of *kashrut* demonstrated this attitude. Despite the fact that the recipes featured all adhered to the dietary laws, the creators did not market the book as such and, instead, featured a small note on the third page that designated it clean.⁸⁹ It contained no explanation of what adhering to *kashrut* entailed. Additionally, recipes were not separated by dairy and meat, typical for Jewish cookbooks at the time. Gross notes that the deliberate choice to distance the book from *kashrut* left children and parents to forge their own paths; they could decide whether they wanted to keep kosher or not.⁹⁰ From the start, then, a sense of agency defined, and specifically, agency regarding food and the laws. Jewish Americans could forget about *kashrut* and still be Jewish. Gross writes that the book promoted "Jewish unity" not through formal institutions, education (and a unified, law-abiding cuisine) but instead "through the tangible, sensory experience of making food and eating in celebration of Jewish holidays."⁹¹

While the *Junior Jewish Cook Book* featured only kosher recipes and left observance up to users, other books decidedly asserted that *kashrut* did not need to define food practice and

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 103.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

Jewish identity. Another cookbook, published somewhat earlier, *The Settlement Cookbook*, questioned the boundary between Jewish food and distinctly non-Jewish, American values, a little more. Elizabeth Black Kander, a German Reform Jew, derived the text from cooking classes that she conducted at the Milwaukee Jewish Mission in the early twentieth century.⁹² She aimed to introduce recent Eastern European immigrants to “New World ingredients” and habits.⁹³ Kandler always taught menus that followed the food laws, albeit composed of decisively non-Jewish dishes.⁹⁴ Additionally, she separated meat and dairy classes in order to keep the test kitchen entirely kosher.⁹⁵

Kandler, tired of her pupils spending time transcribing recipes, set out to release them in print form, which arrived as a pamphlet composed of various “American” dishes.⁹⁶ The pamphlet presented no recipe as explicitly kosher.⁹⁷ A note, however, preceded the meat chapter that described the process by which meat became kosher.⁹⁸ A few pages later, a recipe called for placing butter on top of a steak and later iterations of the book included shellfish recipes, and even ham.⁹⁹ Despite this, many readers treated the text as Jewish, even going so far as looking to it to find specific Passover recipes, and to their dismay, discovering those recipes simply were not there.¹⁰⁰

Up until the present, Jews have largely regarded *The Settlement Cookbook* as “the Jewish cookbook.”¹⁰¹ Joan Nathan, the famed Jewish cookbook author who hosted a PBS special on

⁹² Rubel, “A ‘Jewish’ Joy of Cooking? How a 20th Century Cookbook Containing Frog’s Legs, Snails, and Ham Became a Beloved Jewish Icon,” 271.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 272.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 274.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 276.

Jewish-American cooking in the early 2000s admitted that “eighteen different editions of the book” live in her library.¹⁰² The *Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink* presented it as “probably the most important cookbook for many American Jews during [the first half of the twentieth century].”¹⁰³ But how can a text full of blatantly *treyf* recipes be considered Jewish in nature at all? And at that, by so many Jews?

Nora Rubel, a professor at the University of Rochester, argues that Kandler did not explicitly present the book as Jewish. However, Jews still treat it as such due to its inclusion of any Jewish recipes at all. She posits that the text, which some describe as “a discreetly Jewish cookbook” achieves that classification because of what the author chooses to include, as opposed to what she omits.¹⁰⁴ This “codes the text as Jewish” in comparison to other recipe books of the time, like *Joy of Cooking* which included no Jewish recipes at all. Rubel argues that Kandler, was tactful, reprinting vaguely Jewish recipes that Jews would recognize as such, but would go over the head of the average gentile reader. The most obvious example of this occurs in a section on buffet entertaining, where a suggested menu includes “Lincoln House Fish Balls¹⁰⁵... Cold Salmon with Horseradish Sauce... Pickled Herring with Sour Cream” and “Herring Salad with Beets” among other decidedly non-Jewish recipes like “Molded Ham or Tongue Salad.”¹⁰⁶ The menu clearly features foods that are decidedly Eastern European Jewish in origin, yet presents them alongside non-Jewish recipes and, thus, frames the whole menu as secular.

However, simply including a smattering of Jewish recipes in the book did not make it Jewish; Jews had to conceive of it as such too. Rereading Rubel’s argument in Satlow-ian terms,

¹⁰² Ibid, 277.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 269.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 271.

¹⁰⁵ Rubel notes that these are identical to the book’s recipe for gefilte fish, although not stuffed into the skin of a carp and instead formed into balls; *ibid*.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 281.

the book was considered Jewish despite its *treyf* status because Jews were considering it Jewish. American Jews grafted it into their cultural history; they embraced the text and it became a seminal piece in the long legacy of food tradition in Judaism. The possibility also exists the representation of the text as Jewish interested Jews because it signaled an opportunity to acceptably assimilate their own cuisine. Thus, to see traditional Jewish recipes, like gefilte fish, alongside not-so-traditional recipes, like ham and cheese balls, mirrored exactly what they wanted to see in their own lives: some amalgamation of Jewish and American food culture where both could peacefully coexist at once.¹⁰⁷

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, in her piece titled “Kitchen Judaism,” also documents this sentiment. Speaking about another Jewish cookbook, “*Aunt Babette’s*” *Cook Book*, written in 1889, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that it “spoke persuasively to the social aspirations of American Reform Jewish readers” presenting a familiar “central European bourgeois cuisine... but in an American idiom.”¹⁰⁸ *Aunt Babette’s* falls prey to many of the same woes as *The Settlement Cookbook*, it also presents as Jewish, even going so far as to include a Star of David on its inside cover. It still includes numerous *treyf* recipes.¹⁰⁹

In presenting *treyf* dishes alongside traditional European Jewish ones, the authors of cookbooks argue that adherence to *kashrut* does not equal a Jew. In fact, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that *rejection* of *kashrut* was integral to how some constructed their Jewish identity.¹¹⁰ This represents a flipping of the traditional narrative, where, in Europe, keeping kosher designated Jew from gentile. Now, instead of “‘unaesthetic’ ceremonial practices” defining

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 279.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Kitchen Judaism,” in *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home 1886-1950* (New York: Jewish Museum of New York, 1990), 79–105, 80.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Judaism, America's Jews, some of whom were interested in modernizing their practice, were interested in "religious concepts and ethical principles" as the markers of Jewishness.¹¹¹

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett begins to explore the limits of eating *treyf* though. She notes that most books adopted a form of selective *treyf*, often including shellfish and cured pork, like bacon or ham, but generally abstaining from uncured pork or lard.¹¹² Because of disgust and a perception of specific *treyf* foods as repulsive, she argues, Jews tended to stay away from them.¹¹³ At the same time they viewed other foods, like oysters, shrimp, and clams, as "seductive."¹¹⁴ She gives no explanation as to why Jews view certain foods as clean and others as unclean. The ones that they did reject, like lard, "were rejected on aesthetic grounds, a remnant of the internalization of religious taboo."¹¹⁵ Years of conditioning led Jews to truly believe in these foods as intrinsically unclean. Even as their diets separated from the actual food laws, joyfully cooking and eating *treyf* foods, they still held onto remnants of their previous homes.

Nancy, my friend Leo's mom, echoed the sentiment of *treyf* foods as unappealing in my interview with her. She grew up fully kosher, adhering to every law, and Conservative Jewish. She even told me about her grandfathers, "black hat" (Orthodox) Jews.¹¹⁶ Although both Leo and his brother had gone to Hebrew school, been bar mitzvahed, and the family went to synagogue on High Holy Days, Nancy never went to the synagogue she belonged to by herself. Given that both of her kids did not live at home she had a Puerto Rican husband who grew up Catholic, she attended synagogue extremely infrequently.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ Mintz Geffen, "Dietary Laws," 657.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ One of them had either written the popular Jewish song "S'vivon sov sov sov." That, or "Dreidel, dreidel, dreidel."

She did, however, keep her own form of kosher in their home. The family never ate meat and dairy together. Additionally, they never had pork or any un-kosher cuts of meat in the fridge. When I asked her why she decided to maintain “somewhat kosher” she said plainly, “oh, because I’m not comfortable with all of those other things.” By “other things”, she meant *treyf* foods. She told me simply, “I don’t want any of those things in my house.” Although she bought meat from a non-kosher butcher, she told me that she only purchases kosher cuts of beef, like skirt steak. She abstains from cuts like filet mignon, which are un-kosher. She had no interest in keeping separate plates (in her words: “what a pain in the ass!”).

Nancy’s discomfort with *treyf* foods, carried over from her childhood as an observant Jew, was significant. Some foods, to her, like shrimp, were simply inadmissible—she never touched them. Leo however, in his interview, told me that they would all partake in *treyf* foods, like a cheeseburger, or pork at a barbecue restaurant, outside of the home, although his mom far less frequently.

That comfort, or discomfort, manifest in her construction of her home and family life. Her beliefs in personal religious liberty were too steadfast to limit her children from partaking in *treyf* foods, but if they did, it would be on her own terms and thus, outside of her household. Speaking of her variable adherence to the laws, she told me that “it’s my own version and it has nothing to do with reality, it’s just a way I developed in my own head of how to deal with it.” Her maintenance of somewhat-kosher at home represents her endeavor to square an American, largely non-religious lifestyle, with a personal history rooted in food practice so stringent that it causes some foods to, no pun intended, leave a bad taste in the mouth.

Equally as significant was the detachment of Nancy’s kosher-ish practice from religious law. To her, the rules of kosher were simply that, rules. They seemed to be devoid of any

religious context. This was particularly apparent in her purchasing of meat. She did not need any of the koshering process, the “ritual slaughter,”¹¹⁷ but instead, felt comfortable with a physically kosher cut. Of course, a kosher cut of meat still has roots in religious law. After all, Genesis deems filet mignon *treyf* because of its proximity to the sciatic nerve.¹¹⁸ To her, the purchase of kosher meat didn’t entail the entire song and dance. Nancy implemented her rules because it was just the way she grew up, not because she believed in any of the ritual significance associated with the laws. Additionally, as seen in her indifference towards the law regarding separate plates, she had the power to determine what her own practice looked like, abandoning those she considered onerous.

Historically, Nancy’s conception of control over her home as Jewish was hardly unfounded. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explores the phenomenon briefly, writing that the emphasis placed upon children pursuing Jewish lives meant that women were particularly pressured to maintain Jewish homes in the late 1920s.¹¹⁹ This went hand in hand with a belief that home life as a whole “was disintegrating.”¹²⁰ In turn, Jewish women were drafted to the front lines in maintaining a healthy, young, Jewish population through upholding Jewish values in the home.

Jewish food was seen as an important weapon in this battle. To most, the Jewish table represented a place where families met and Jewish rituals and standards were upheld.¹²¹ The home table signified a place where mothers, interested in having Jewish kids, could exert control

¹¹⁷ Mintz Geffen, “Dietary Laws,” 650.

¹¹⁸ The practice of abstention from eating the sciatic nerve is called *gid hanasheh*, and refers to a wrestling match, symbolic of man’s inner turmoil between light and dark, fought by Jacob and the angel of his brother, Esau, in disguise. In the tale, Esau dislocates Jacob’s hip, the origin of sexual desire. In the *Halakhic* interpretation of the story, Jews abstain from cuts of meat close to the sciatic nerve in an attempt to distance themselves from darkness like Jacob. (Menachem Posner, “Why Don’t We Eat the Sciatic Nerve?,” *Chabad.org* (blog), 2008, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/784896/jewish/Why-dont-we-eat-the-sciatic-nerve.htm.)

¹¹⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Kitchen Judaism,” 100.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

over their family through the food that they served and the rituals that they carried out. They had power in determining the religious and cultural direction of their family.

Nancy, then, serves as an example of how the legacy of *kashrut*, to the individual, translates into modern terms. She still holds food close to her, but in a method seemingly devoid of religious ties. Her discomfort with pork and shellfish have everything to do with the laws that her family upheld, and at the same time, nothing at all. She maintains the kosher-ness of her family, a relic of her old home, out of pure comfort. As a result, she can mold the laws to her own needs, picking and choosing which ones she observes at her own discretion based purely on her own level of enjoyment. Her performance of these values occurs entirely within the home, itself the construction of her Judaism.

Looking at Nancy's kosher-ness, a result of her upbringing, offers hints as to why some *treyf* foods are acceptable and others are not. Perhaps it occurs entirely on the individual scale, at the mercy of subjective whims. Following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's argument, Leo's mom feels distinctly uncomfortable with certain foods, and yet permits others, although outside of the bounds of her own home. Her parents who kept kosher, however, would not have enjoyed any of the foods, or any of the preparations that Nancy takes part in. She acknowledged this, telling me that someone who kept kosher "definitely couldn't eat" at their house. In this way, the legacy of her kosher past gets filtered through her own subjective lens.

Cookbook authors made similar decisions and although on the individual scale at first, these ideas had the potential to become widespread due to their circulation. Some books relished in oysters, while finding uncured pork repulsive. These sentiments were put into text, in the form of recipe books, and their beliefs were disseminated to other Jews, sometimes presented as Jewish. In this way, certain foods made their way into the lexicon of "Jewish" despite their *treyf*

status. To come back to Satlow's argument, some foods were simply deemed unacceptable, and thus, even if a few Jews ate them, they would never enter the mainstream Jewish cuisine.

An argument can be made that the further one gets away from the generations who kept kosher, the more lenient and wide-reaching the moniker of Jewish becomes, and the more *treyf* foods will be included. Leo's family demonstrates this. Nancy amended her upbringing to fit her needs and wants, and Leo told me that he intends to do the same. He admitted that the "restrictive parts of it... don't make a lot of sense" to him but he felt it was possible to take those regulations and work them into his own attitudes. To him, it is possible to take those rules "in your own direction as opposed to" a scenario where you carry out acts, in their original form, purely because they were part of your childhood. Explaining his mom's version of kosher-ness, he explained "yeah, tradition, you bring it from the past and it's something that you want to do but it's within reason. It's like, yeah, I'm gonna go out and eat a clam every once in a while and no one's gonna die."

Three: “Bacon’s Not Pork”

I heard stories about whole, cooked briskets frozen, wrapped in yards of aluminum foil, and then brought from Florida to New York by plane for a Passover Seder. I travelled to delis, brought whole smoked fish on Amtrak trains, and was filled in on my mom’s love life in college. I spent days upon days transcribing, eventually realizing that it was far easier to accomplish with my eyes closed, head atilt to rest on the back of whichever chair I happened to sit on.

I spent so much time listening and poring over my interviewees words that it felt as if I knew their families more than my own. And then there were my own parents, both of whom I talked to, and who revealed to me far more than I had ever known about them and their pasts.

The interviews I conducted, while hideously labor intensive, allowed me to see into the lives of the Jews that my paper revolved around. They all conceived of Judaism in different ways. Everyone had their own limits to what could be considered Jewish, their own understandings of what was more and less Jewish, and their own ideas of what “real” Judaism and cultural Judaism was and where they fell on the spectrum.

My interviewees, if all somehow present in a room together, would certainly engage in a nasty dispute. Per Satlow, they were all Jews with entirely different grasps of what that meant to them. There was plenty of overlap but also a torrent of controversy.

Some had connections to food and some did not. Ultimately, the interviews revealed the vast variety of ways that one’s personal Jewish theology relates to their understanding of Jewish food. How they employ that understanding through eating Jewish food represented a large part of many Jewish stories.

Mom

I talked to my mom in the early days of December. She had moved out of Brooklyn a few months earlier to her new home in Germantown and we talked there. The house, which she dubbed “The Blue Barn,” was a converted barn from an old apple farm. The neighbors across the way owned the white, sprawling plantation-style home where the original farm’s owners lived previously. The past inhabitants of the barn who she bought the house from renovated a bit, adding an addition that she used as a studio for her hat making and a single-car garage. The main space remained largely the same: a big room in the center where the living room and dining room were, a kitchen that flanked one side, a sunken tv room on the other side, and two lofts for bedrooms.

We spoke in the living room on the white couch that used to live in our old apartment in Brooklyn. Roux, our now geriatric cattle dog, interrupted us from time to time, hungry or wanting to go outside. Tall church-like windows that faced east allowed us to look out at the birds that visited the expanse of lawn and pond on the eastern side of the property.

My mom wore all navy and her hair was grayer than I remembered it. Behind her, a bookshelf held various artifacts from my brother’s and my childhood: a painting of my friend Jacob I did in high school, a menagerie of Gabe’s white clay animal sculptures, and pictures of both of us as kids, red-haired and smiling. Had I not insisted on taking a photo of her on this day I may have missed the horizontal stack of books at the very bottom right of the shelf, almost on the ground. They went from large and imposing to hand-held, something you would read on a plane or in bed before sleeping: *The Jews*, *The Jews in America*, *Something from Nothing* (my favorite Jewish children’s book), *The Jewish Home*, *A Passover Haggadah*, *To Be a Jew*, *Gates*

of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays, I Asked for Wonder, and finally, the smallest, What is a Jew?

What was Judaism to my mom? In the interview it quickly became clear that she conceived of Judaism in her own way. She considered some people more Jewish than others. So, per Satlow, she believed in a core. To call herself a Jew she needed to enter into that core and fulfill her own constructed requirements.

Her status as a Jew always nagged me. My mom was always Jewish to me. But the reality was that, by most standards, her Judaism was not legitimate. She had converted under a Reform rabbi; the 5.3 million American Orthodox Jews would not consider her Jewish.¹²² She had no ethnically Jewish background. On top of that, she hardly practiced. Sure, she underwent a ceremony through a Reform temple that made her Jewish (according to that specific denomination), but was she Jewish in her life? She did not keep kosher. Friday evenings and Saturdays were normal days for her, not days of rest. She hardly knew a word of Hebrew. But she *always* celebrated holidays.

So what was her core? What would make her Jewish? It involved having Jewish parents and a Jewish history. It entailed practicing holidays and understanding the meanings present in them. Being Jewish, in her eyes, also meant inventing.



My mom began by taking me through her lengthy religious history before her conversion to Judaism, from growing up Episcopalian to various South Asian influenced paths. In high school and into college she dated a born-again Christian who became increasingly threatening

¹²² “A Portrait of American Orthodox Jews” (Pew Research Center, August 26, 2015), 2.

with his religion. This frightened her and she eventually broke it off. At one point in college, she consulted the texts of an Indian philosopher, Krishnamurti while her brother practiced transcendental meditation in Westwood, California. She talked about how Sister Clarita, a Catholic nun who made woodblock prints, influenced her. Finally, she talked about marrying a Jewish man, my dad, when both of them lived in Boston in the 1980s. She was in her thirties at the time.

My mom's long and (somewhat) tortured journey through religion pointed to her inability to find a spiritual practice that suited her needs. This was a question that nagged me throughout our interview: why did she ultimately choose Reform Judaism? She had cycled through so many others, what about Judaism stuck out to her? She had her own reasons for converting, mostly that it brought us together as a family, but I suspected that her choice had a lot to do with who she was as a person, someone always interested in making things meaningful. To me, it was clear that Judaism to her meant room for invention. She could tailor the religion to her own belief systems and needs.

Judaism, for my mom, meant a few things. Most of all, it represented a family religion. Judaism included my dad, who worked too late to ever go to temple with her during her conversion, but who relished the Shabbat dinners my mom would hold. It intimately involved my brother, who, during her conversion ceremony, insisted on being held the entire time on stage with my mom. Judaism, to my mom, represented a space where we could come together as a family. To her, this existed in no other religion. She told me that "spirituality and being a good person," principles she held close to her, could be attached to any religion. But Jews get to have "ceremonies that you can have at home."

It was also accessible, through the various Jewish friends she and my dad knew. Unlike Buddhism or Hinduism (both of which she mentioned as religions she previously practiced), my mom had plenty of Jewish friends. This meant that her formal learning in the synagogue could also be paired with religious experiences involving people she knew and was close with. She could share meals with friends, even have dinner parties or attend events, all within a Jewish context. Judaism could be acted out socially, which was important to her.

Undeniably, though, Judaism meant the potential for invention. Certain aspects of other religions, to her, were unwavering and demanding. Christianity meant “proselytizing”; she had no desire to take Jesus as her “one and only savior.” Buddhism required “sitting for hours” which she refused to do, “no matter where” it took her. “Demands like that” did not exist for her in Judaism.

And yet they do. We know that some people define Jews as those who keep stringently kosher. Or only those that dress a specific way. But by the time my mom reached for Judaism, in the early nineties, Reform Judaism had flourished, proving that rigorous practice and rule did not determine the religion. The success of Reform Judaism meant that Jews could still be considered Jewish even while ignoring the historically conceived tenets of Judaism. My mom may have associated Judaism with the beaver-hats in Williamsburg, but she also knew it meant individuality and invention. Her definition of Judaism included those Jews that were not observing holidays, or anything Jewish at all, like my dad. In her words, she “decided to convert because it was a way to share something” with our family. Judaism, to her, could have “aspects for spirituality that could go as deep as I wanted them to go or it could just be about the food and the ceremonies.” From the start, then, her religion was marked by her agency within it.

Her Passover Haggadahs, to me, aptly demonstrated her tendency for invention within Judaism. The creation of a personal Haggadah was not my mom's original idea, though. Melissa, her friend from my brother's school, who was "very religious," also made her own Haggadah. Melissa, who belonged to a Reform temple in Brooklyn, was "changing hers too" which made my mom feel like it was okay to alter hers as well.

My mom's assertion of Melissa as very religious points to her belief in a Jewish spectrum, from more Jewish to less Jewish. In her eyes, Melissa was more religious because she was a member of a temple. She was also raised Jewish and had Jewish parents. This made Melissa an authentic Jew, authoritative and capable of "allowing" my mom to invent. If she was altering her Haggadah then, in my mom's eyes, that was Jewish and acceptable.

Other Jews influenced her Jewish life as well. She constructed a Jewish history for herself, created through the various Jews that dotted her past. There was Jennifer Pin, who she grew up with in Long Beach. There were all of the Jewish kids who lived on one street, Burlinghall Lane, Stevie, Aaron something, and another family. My grandmother, Noël, had Jewish friends, the Hartsteins, Stevie and Dorothy, and the Ludmers. And then there was, perhaps, the most important Jew, my dad, and all of the connections that were made through him. With my dad came Howard and his wife Helene. From Howard came Lilla and Andy, who lived in Housatonic. There were my dad's cousins, the Dicksteins, in Westport, Connecticut.

My mom built a network of Jews. They started from early childhood, giving her tastes of Judaism that she would only come to recognize later in life, and moved into adulthood, and eventually her marriage, guiding and making her the Jew she is today. The Pin's introduced her to Jewish food. Mrs. Pin made "Jewish" dill pickles and really good bacon, even though, my mom conceded, "Jews aren't really supposed to eat bacon." Jennifer's brother's bar mitzvah was

where my mom had her first knish. Helene, who was “High Holy Days religious,” invited my mom over to ceremonies and fed her almond cakes. Melissa did the same, introducing her to the synagogue near my school where she helped with a women’s shelter.

Throughout our talk, my mom continued to remember Jews, interject with their names and bring them into the conversation. In a Satlow-ian way, she felt that these Jews, the ones who had given her Judaism, taught her all of the traditions, and then let her loose to practice on her own, validated her practice. Framing her Judaism this way, through the pedagogy of other Jews, cemented her identity as a Jew despite her potentially precarious position as a largely non-observant convert and someone without a Jewish ethnicity or childhood.

But also, her inclusion of Jews relayed a carefully invented Jewish history and one that adhered to her conception of what “Jewish” is. From Mrs. Pin’s kosher dills to Passover at the Dickstein’s, my mom, through the construction of a narrative, insisted that she had always *been* Jewish somewhere deep down and Jewish by her conceived standards of what that meant: ethnically Jewish with a history. She spoke longingly of my dad’s past, his communist parents who felt they had to choose between Judaism and political beliefs, and his resulting lack of interest in any holidays at all. His Jewishness, now, was manifested through his family history and the retelling of those stories only and she knew that. He was Jewish, without even doing anything, because of this. She lacked this, so she created it.

In marrying my dad, she gained Jewish parents. Although my paternal grandmother died decades earlier, when my dad was in college, my paternal grandfather, Elliot, was still alive. She told me that he, notorious for being egotistical and moody, cried when she told him she was converting—he was just “so proud.” His cohort of Jewish male friends, who he shared lunch with

once a month, each wrote her a card. She had Jewish parents and they were proud to call her Jewish.

It was in these ways that she adopted Judaism, or in her eyes, Judaism adopted her. She checked all of her own boxes. But she also chose to be Jewish because she knew she would have agency within the religion. Judaism drew her in because she knew she could innovate and be selective about how she acted it out.

And how did she perform Judaism? Almost exclusively through the celebration of holidays and foods associated with them. She realized early on that getting my brother and dad to go to temple with her was too difficult, and, wanting to be able to participate with them, leaned heavily into holidays and celebration of them within her home. The food and the ceremony associated with holidays, to her, tied us to a Jewish history and that in itself was enough to satisfy her Jewish itch. Holidays were how she had learned to be Jewish. She went to people's houses, partook in their ceremonies, and ate their food.

Satlow argues that holidays are particularly fit to adapt. Those traditions that are “underdetermined” are far more likely to survive in the modern world than those that are tied to specific historical events or archaic meanings.¹²³ This is because they can be adapted; “practitioners search for new meanings to make them relevant.”¹²⁴ While aspects of those holidays remain the same, proving that there is a limit--we still call Passover “Passover” and tell the same stories--others can be lost and changed. To Satlow, the looseness of these holidays, those that have wider, broader meanings, are exactly what makes them susceptible to change and in turn, enduring.

¹²³ Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice*, 14.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

Holidays, almost from the start, were filtered through her lens. She told me about one of her first Passovers, where she read from the Haggadah to a table of guests and thought to herself, “man, I’m saying so many things that I don’t really believe in.” She, herself, had issues with the text she read from, but she also felt responsible for the others at the table. To celebrate a holiday meant sharing a slice of her Jewish beliefs with her guests. “Our family table,” then, should only be filled with things we believed in.

So she began to rewrite ceremonies. She always used our Haggadah as a starting point, but she removed and added. In doing so, she told me, she was not only thinking about our guests, but also Gabe and I and our understanding of the holidays. She didn’t want us to grow up as mindless drones, repeating the Haggadah year after year purely out of habit and not finding any of it meaningful. Instead, she wanted to impress upon us the significance of the holidays in a contemporary context. Doing that might mean “pulling back from the religious part,” the insistence upon Jews as people chosen by God, and focusing more on the morals present. It also might mean adding poems or short prayers from other religions.

The food, to her, could reflect the meaning behind the holidays. “The sweet and sour of life” could be present in a brisket braised with citrus, instead of our traditional onion broth. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year which culminates in Yom Kippur, typically entails apples and honey; sweet foods that will manifest a sweet new year. For our Rosh Hashanah we think about other things we want to see in the new year and embody those through food. Spicy devilled eggs this year marked a yearning for excitement. Beets with yogurt would yield love, and a green herb dip eaten with crunchy vegetables proclaimed freshness, something new in the coming year. In this way, we stayed close to the Jewish food theme of relating food to meaning, but moved it in our own direction, changing the foods themselves while keeping the framework.

This was what was significant in my mom's invention; she never strayed too far. She was Jewish now. She had Jewish heritage, albeit a constructed one. She celebrated holidays. She invented. And she, as a Jew, believed in a core to holiday practice. Passover Haggadahs maintained the story and the general structure of the ceremony. The Seder plate would always be there. As would the *afikoman* and the story of the three brothers. For her, "life [was] all about interacting and touching, if the rituals become benign then they're of no help to anyone." But there was a limit. Certain things, always, would have to be there for it to be Jewish.

Dad

When I graduated from high school my dad moved from Brooklyn to a small town, Sebastopol, in the Northern Californian wine country. I flew out to visit him in late February, when the store where I work closed for a week. The trip was quick and I missed class because of it, but the weather was beautiful. The lemon trees in my dad's backyard were producing and every glass of water I drank had a squeeze of acid in it. We drove along the ocean in his rickety Morgan, a car from the early fifties that was essentially a wooden box with wheels and an engine, and he tried to teach me how to drive stick shift in his early 2000s Porsche convertible. The night before I left we ate crab dipped in butter with crusty hunks of sourdough bread. Visits with my dad were always poignant, because I knew I would have to leave eventually, but in this instance, he flew back with me because he had friends and business to attend to in New York.

His house was one story, long and skinny, like all of the houses in California that I had been to. All of the rooms stacked together, like Legos, except for the living room and kitchen, which were connected through an island and half-wall. I interviewed him on the orange, leather couch that had been in our house in Brooklyn. Above him was the artwork that marked my childhood. A watery painting in pastels of a man with dark hair, hands in pockets, slightly slumped. Another, with a heavier paint application, of two men sitting on a bench feeding pigeons. A photograph showed the Brooklyn Bridge from below. Varda, an artist from Sausalito where my dad had grown up, was shown in another photograph commanding a sailboat. A woman laughed in the background and the piece was framed in grey reclaimed wood.

The recording of our conversation was dotted with chewing and swallowing noises because we were eating a pre-dinner snack—cheese and tea. This was a food practice I associated heavily with my dad. When we lived together and he worked in an office he often

indulged in an appetizer before dinner after he got home from work; a single pickle taken from the jar, a plank of cheddar cheese, a stuffed pepperoncini or a few coins of salami. It was a nightly ritual for him, his own form of practice.

He had very little by way of religious practice. He read the print version of the New York Times. He drank tea. He put his keys and wallet in the same place, always. But what of spirituality? My interview revealed that there was almost nothing. He almost conceived of himself as Jewish only ethnically, because of his Jewish parents.

When prodded there were cultural traits he associated with Judaism, mostly through my grandparents: leftist politics, cynical humor, an inclination to question things and anti-Semitic experiences. He relished being a Jew and loved meeting other people who had similar interests and upbringings. My dad's conception of what Judaism looked like was shaped almost entirely by his parents and childhood. I wondered whether he even had a core.

The two authors of *Saving Remnants* posited a framing where my dad's claim to Judaism was flimsy. Examining his understanding of Judaism yielded me almost nothing; he had none. His Judaism was a composite of character traits that came from his parents, that he saw in himself, and that he sought out in other Jewish friends. Did this really make up a "capital-J" Judaism? I felt helpless. The authors were right, my Jewish father hardly knew how he was Jewish at all and neither did I.

What little claim to Judaism he spoke of manifested in a sense of longing, for something more, and in particular, for a community of people like him, also documented in the book. The deli, to him, served as somewhat of a band-aid for this feeling. It was the only place where he knew he could find Jews like himself, those also yearning. In this way, he used Jewish food as a "binky", to steal a phrase from one of my other interviewees.



My dad's childhood was somewhat unusual. Both of my grandparents were members of the Communist Party in California, they had actually met at some kind of left-wing activist party event. He told a story about knowing he was Jewish, and different, when his high school screened the film *Operation Abolition*, a film that the American government made in support of the House Un-American Activities Committee.¹²⁵ His dad was furious and "protested the school," infuriated that they would show anti-communist propaganda.

Lefty politics were a large part of my dad's conception of Judaism. He spoke of an incident a few night's prior, when we were having dinner at my half-sister's house. She was a journalist, and the accusation of the New York Times printing inaccurate coverage came up. My dad and I immediately jumped to defend the paper, while my sister's husband attempted to slander it.

Interestingly enough, the fight came up when I asked him about practice; it really struck a chord for him. To him, the New York Times made up a kind of "cultural identity" between him and his Jewish friends. My brother-in-law questioning the integrity of the paper was an attack on his "community."

He held a lot of things like this strangely close to his Judaism. Cynical humor was another, which he associated largely with his mother. He spoke about a joke that she told, one of many, about "how odd it was for God to choose the Jews", referencing the foundational assertion that God designated the Jewish people as special. Self-deprecating humor was part of her repertoire. I recalled another bit that he remembered a while ago, when there had been a strangler

¹²⁵ "Operation Abolition," UC Berkeley Library, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.lib.berkeley.edu/mrcvault/videographies/operation-abolition>.

terrorizing wherever they lived at the time. My grandmother took an ad out in the paper—“Strangler Wanted”—implying that she *wished* to be strangled to death.

My dad also believed that a penchant for doubt marked Jews. He spoke of a “rabbinical questioning that went on” during his time at Reed that he thought of as distinctly Jewish; he referred to it as a “cultural attitude of doubt, and of being outside the mainstream.” Jews, to him, always felt like they had to stand out, and this was achieved through challenging the established way of thought. This, to me, was an obvious product of his highly politicized childhood.

He talked about antisemitism. His parents often talked about being discriminated against, particularly when my grandmother wanted to attend Stanford but would not be admitted because she was a Jew, so instead she went to nursing school. He spoke of the various towns that they lived in and how they were always the only Jews. To him, other-ness marked his Jewish experience. Much like my grandmother’s joke, Jews were a people set apart, in one way or another.

Finally, he just knew he was Jewish. His parents were Jewish and “told” him and my aunt that they were. They were Jewish by blood.

So what to make of it all? My dad spoke of a Judaism devoid of any scriptures or special food practices. He never took the initiative to celebrate Jewish holidays, nor did his parents. Judaism, to him, existed purely in the cultural realm, and yet it was still Judaism. He acknowledged this, explaining to me that his parents were “unbelievably not religious.” To him, there were the religious Jews, those that go through the observant motions of Judaism, and then there were the Jews who engaged in a cultural form of Judaism that existed outside of the synagogue, even outside of holiday practice. Was he one of these?

More and more, his experience, to me, became framed by longing. He knew he was Jewish in a weird way, not in a religious way, in a highly personal way, related in an almost extreme way to his history and parents, and he reached for those that felt the same way. My dad knew he could find these Jews in delis. He also knew these people were the ones that liked the New York Times and who understood his humor.

Nothing he said during the interview pointed to a moment in his present life that felt religious until the very end of our interview. He had said that delis were like “Prairie Home Companion for Jews” and we went on a tangent about the oddness of the show and its host. There was a long pause. I thumbed through my notes to find another question for him. He sighed, and I looked up as he told me “I don’t feel like I’m at home in a temple. I feel like I’m at home in a deli.”

Was the delicatessen my dad’s temple? It was odd. Delicatessens had only come up once before, when he was describing his great grandparents in Long Beach. And yet, there was so much power in what he said. The juxtaposition, between Jews who felt at home, at peace with their religion, in a temple, and those who felt that way in a Jewish restaurant was striking. To my dad, there were two camps. There were those that were religious and there were the deli Jews, which he was. And there were more of them.

In a way, the deli was a temple. It allowed him a sense of community, something he felt like he didn’t have. He told me that because he lacked a religious community, he had to rely on one made up of friends, which was somewhat “unstable.” I recalled how he instantly befriended the Jewish restaurant owners in our neighborhood. He worked in advertising and eagerly jumped at the chance to help them with their marketing. He ate at both almost weekly, and would hang around, talking to other regulars and employees. I also remembered how affectionately he spoke

about his campaign for the Jewish *Forward*, in his words, a “very leftist, anti-religious paper with a huge Yiddish tradition.”

The idea of longing came up in *Saving Remnants*, the sociological text mentioned in my introduction. The authors spoke of the sentimentality attached to Jewish deli food, and how it served as an “aspect of Jewish connection” outside of “religious faith.”¹²⁶ There was a sense of longing present in the Jews they interviewed, “for a warm tradition home, for the depth that ceremony and ritual give to daily life, for the rootedness that knowledge of and participation in a rich and ancient heritage can bestow.”¹²⁷

The authors of *Saving Remnants* explained why my dad’s Judaism was so hard to pin down for me; he was Jewish, but it was a weak connection. My mom had some form of practice, which excused her lack of Jewish community. But my dad had neither. They wrote that “under closer scrutiny, the yearning and the sense of loss dissolve into insubstantial musing, leading sometimes to a gesture of identification but seldom genuine affiliation.”¹²⁸

Reading this line, in concert with my dad’s interview, struck me. It almost made me sad, I had always thought of my dad as Jewish. So Jewish. Upon, closer examination, though, it did appear that he was just a composite of various Jewish memories, funny remarks, dark stories, and weird politics, thrown together to make something that appeared Jewish, but toppled over at the slightest touch.

My mom, in her interview, had told me that she thought my dad was “insecure” in his Judaism. Perhaps this was a mark of his insecurity, his search for a Jewish community full of people like himself, those that were longing and seeking Judaism in spaces other than the

¹²⁶ Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*, 29.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 37.

synagogue, or the holiday table. The deli was his attempt, his reach for a Judaism that was recognizable. Maybe he thought it would make him Jewish, the fact of there being others.

Peter

Peter's delicatessen, Shelsky's, was in the neighborhood where I had grown up, Cobble Hill. I walked past the space where his restaurant would eventually appear (in 2011) on my way to elementary and middle school five days a week. It was across the street from the bank building, covered in white stone with vaulted ceilings that eventually became a Trader Joes. The Dodge YMCA where I learned to swim was down the block.

I had actually only been inside once before the day I interviewed him. I usually bought my bagels from Bagel World, renamed Court Street Bagels after we left, a few blocks down. But my dad, when I was in high school, regularly procured smoked fish and other deli fare from Peter's deli. He became friendly with Peter and the other delicatessen owner in the neighborhood, Noah, who owned a Montreal-style restaurant closer to our house.

The deli itself was thin and long with seating in the front. Bright white tiles made the store feel like it was glowing, a visual marker I associated with all of the new restaurants that cropped up in Brooklyn. A counter met you on your left and to the right was a refrigerator with drinks. Further back were the deli cases, low with glass fronts. They were filled with, sides of salmon that, sliced, would be taken home as lox, whitefish salad, and whole, smoked sturgeon. Bowls were filled with other cold deli foods, like egg and potato salad. There was lobster salad, a reminder of his business partner's time as a fishmonger a few blocks down.

Shelsky's was not kosher by any standard but they were distinctly Jewish. Their byline "Appetizing and Delicatessen" cemented that fact. They served *treyf* fare alongside traditionally Jewish American foods. They made sandwiches with meat and cheese. They had shellfish, like shrimp, lobster, and crab. But they also had a newly opened bagel venue, a few avenues over,

where they shaped, boiled, and baked their own bagels and bialys. They served tongue sandwiches and made knishes and stuffed cabbage. They pickled herring in house.

Peter was late to our meeting because he had to appeal a violation he had gotten from the fire department during the restaurant's inspection. He strategically brought his Italian business partner to the meeting, knowing that he would be able to cut a deal with the Italian fire inspector. This was how Peter was. Cunning, with the frenetic, intense energy that owning a restaurant required. His voice was loud and authoritative and he spoke quickly, as if he was rushing through one sentence to get to the next.

He brought me down to the basement of the building, past the kitchen where they carried out all their prep, to his office. It was a tiny closet with cement walls, two chairs, a fan, and a table. We sat almost next to each other and I balanced my notebook and phone on my lap while we talked. From time to time employees interrupted to ask Peter questions about daily operations and he was apologetic but insistent about the fact that it was just part of his life. At one point, after one of the cooks came to procure his debit card for an order, he looked at me after the guy had left: "nonstop."



Is there a difference between "Judaism" and "Jewishness"? Peter thought so. His interview revealed a carefully constructed understanding of Judaism that was rooted heavily in a New York City experience. There was the "Judaism," the religious side, and then the "Jewishness," the culture that was so tied up in being a New Yorker that it almost didn't have anything to do with Judaism.

He firmly planted himself on the Jewishness side. These were the Jews who ate pork and shellfish. They may be "high holiday Jews"; those that observe only the high holidays. One

would think that they would be the ones that relished Jewish food, and some of them certainly were.

But Peter was indifferent towards his Jewish identity, particularly when it came to food. He never ate it. He insisted that the restaurant was purely a business venture. But here we were, sitting in the basement of his life's work: his restaurant, a shrine dedicated to Jewish cuisine and its diffusion. Whether he liked it or not, his livelihood *was* Jewish food and he was part of the larger food story. His restaurant represented a secularization of Jewish food, one that served as a cultural mecca for Jews like him.

Peter grew up on the Upper East Side in a Reform Jewish family. He called his family “high holiday Jews.” They went to synagogue on those holidays and when there were bar mitzvahs. Peter went to private school and was bar mitzvahed. When I asked him if he went to a Jewish school he told me he attended a private school in his neighborhood which he acknowledged was “basically 80% Jews.”

He “did not grow up religious” and then as he aged he basically “abandoned any sense of religion.” Although he ate bagels and lox—he “always loved that food”—he hadn’t stepped foot in a synagogue, except for the occasional *bris* or funeral, since his bar mitzvah. He just didn’t “roll with religion.” His conception of religious, clearly, did not include synagogue attendance or the performance of religious ceremonies associated with life events. He knew Jews who weren’t “religious at all” but didn’t eat pork or shellfish “out of tradition.” They also wouldn’t “buy German cars out of tradition.”

He said that being a New Yorker defined him “more than anything else.” But that he would hesitate to consider himself a cultural Jew. I asked him what that meant—“I think it means that you eat Jewish food, you celebrate the holidays for the traditions sort of ignoring the

fact that they are all steeped in religious liturgy.” For the most part he didn’t celebrate the holidays, although he went to Shabbat dinner weekly at his parent’s house—“my mother would have my head if I didn’t.” But Shabbat dinners, to him, were just an “excuse” for his family to get together, for his kids to see their grandparents before they got too old; “quality time where we can yell at each other and argue about shit.” Him and his kids lit all of the Hanukkah candles in one night at his parent’s house. His mother recited the prayers and he told me that he thought that “she knows what they mean” but that she certainly didn’t “believe in any of it.” I asked him if he could recite them from memory—“I know them. Yes. I refuse to.”

But still, he conceded, he was Jewish. “Whether [he] liked it or not” when they “came for the Jews” he would “be on their list.” He didn’t know who “they” was. New York allowed him some “vener of white privilege” but the “minute I leave New York” he told me, “I’m just a fucking Jew, that’s just the bottom line... I’m the other.”

Judaism, to Peter, was something thrust upon him, not exactly a choice. He was marked from birth, a Jew, and his kids were too. He spoke of the inescapable history of the Holocaust, the way that he was raising his two daughters as “godless liberals” but that they would know their history, their family being “forced of Europe” or “murdered.” That wouldn’t be “lost on them.” He could relinquish that identity somewhat, though, and blend in as a New Yorker as long as he didn’t go to synagogue or celebrate holidays.

I assumed he would tell me that Jewish food was meaningful to him, some representation of his identity, that he felt Jewish when he ate Jewish food. But he was hesitant to say that Jewish food was part of his identity. It was at a time. He had plenty of memories of it that he told me about. Even though his “father grew up poor” they didn’t eat belly lox. He was raised on “nova.” His family went to Murray’s Sturgeon Shop, on the Upper West Side, and sometimes

Zabar's. Every other week, he told me, they would pick up "Eastern Gaspé Nova, pickled herring with cream sauce, chubs, and sable... my dad was a big sable fan."¹²⁹ His grandmother always had bialys in her house on the Lower East Side, from Kossar's Bagels and Bialys on Grand Street. Like every New York Jew, he had an affinity for H and H bagels. When H and H changed hands he converted to Bagel Hole, in Brooklyn. He carried some of these traditions into adulthood and would "*schlep* into the city" to go to Russ and Daughters for "Christmas brunch."

This was why he started Shelsky's, in 2011, to make Jewish food accessible. Peter didn't want it to be a *schlep* to get the food of his childhood. To him, Shelsky's was born purely out of necessity—"I saw a void. I wanted this food to be easier to access for me and people like me." Beyond the business, which "consumes your life," that he lived "every day", Jewish food was not "really" his "identity anymore."

Wasn't it, though? I wanted so badly for Peter to tell me that his grandmother's recipes, which he used for the gefilte fish, touched something deep inside of him. He had to decode them because she "had a habit of giving different members of the family different versions of the same recipe, all of them missing something." How could that not be significant to him? That he was forming the same fish cakes his grandmother was, in a storefront that he had dedicated everything to, that was so attached to his childhood, his parents, and the larger culture that I perceived him to be a part of.

He told me that he was "always a tongue guy" and that every time his mom asked him what he wanted as a packed lunch for a school field trip he would ask for a sandwich. "It would

¹²⁹ Peter and Leah Koenig authored a *Jewish Forward* post that described the various types of smoked fish typically found in Jewish delicatessens; Leah Koenig, "A Smoked Fish Primer," *The Jewish Forward* (blog), July 1, 2016, <https://forward.com/food/343694/a-smoked-fish-primer/>.

always be a tongue sandwich with deli mustard and a Cel-Ray—the Dr. Brown celery soda.” That very sandwich was on the Shelsky’s menu.¹³⁰ Didn’t that mean something?

Jewish food, to Peter, was too broad to be just him. It included everyone. Sure, he grew up eating it, but so did his Italian business partner, who was raised in Carroll Gardens, a neighborhood that used to be full of Italian immigrants. And he still ate “bagels and lox” as a child. Part of Nancy’s interview spoke to this phenomenon as well. She talked about going to Russ and Daughters on Christmas morning, when the place was utterly packed. Among the cacophony, a tiny Jewish lady cried out, exasperated, “vat’s going on here! It’s like... why is there so many Christian’s here?!” Nancy referenced it as an example of the “secular” nature of the deli today. Jewish food used to be the food of Ashkenazi immigrants, sure, but now everyone, gentiles included, enjoyed deli food like that of Shelsky’s.¹³¹

Still, I couldn’t get away from the fact that it represented something to other Jews, if not Peter, and he knew that. He spoke of the “people like me” who Shelsky’s was for. They were my dad and his friends and all of the other Jews who liked eating Jewish food because it reminded them fondly of their childhood. Shelsky’s might not remind him of his grandmother, but now, I would think of her every time I went and ate gefilte fish from there. To Peter, Jewish food was not where he found himself, but he acknowledged that others did, and made space for that.

¹³⁰ “Shelsky’s Delicatessen,” Shelsky’s of Brooklyn, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.shelskys.com/deli>.

¹³¹ Deli food as secular is explored at length in Ted Merwin, “The Delicatessen as an Icon of Secular Jewishness,” in *Jewishness: Expression, Identity, and Representation* (UK: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 195–210.

Maizy, Amy, Ben

Maizy went to Bard with me. I had always kind of felt as if we looked alike, with dark curly hair, and short, wide statures. We were both funny in a cynical, almost mean way that I liked. I saw her with her parents, Amy and Ben, early on, during sophomore year, at a Georgian choir concert at the church-like hall on campus and was struck by how similar they all looked, sitting in a row. I knew I had to interview her because she had two “real” Jewish parents (sure, I also had two, but my mom was a convert).

When they sat at my dining room table in my house in Tivoli the likeness was even more remarkable. Maizy had her mom’s hair and nose and her dad’s kind, watery eyes. They all gestured simultaneously as they walked me through their respective stories. Early on, I told them that it was okay to interrupt each other and they capitalized on this heavily, talking about each other’s family histories as if they were their own. At a few different moments, one of them would ask the other about their own past, as if they were both equal authorities on one another.

I made a quiche and a salad for the interview, which we picked at while we talked. We all drank tea and ate Tate’s cookies. It was a cold afternoon and they had insisted on driving in from Great Barrington to talk to me. None of the windows in my house had been opened recently, because of the weather, and I was worried that the air in my house was stale. Inviting my own parents into my home made me nervous, but someone else’s parents were a whole new level of stress and I had spent the entire two days before cleaning, tidying, and baking.

I had no reason to worry, though, because Maizy’s parents were almost exactly like my own. They were funny, easy-going, and felt familial in a way that I felt was attributed to our shared cultural upbringing around Judaism.



Maizy and her parents were my golden children. They represented exactly what I believed cultural Jews to be. They had glowing memories of childhood foods and familial traditions which they considered Jewish and brought into their present lives. They loved Jewish food and listed off the litany of Jewish restaurants that they had frequented during their time in New York before Maizy was born. They had never been members of a synagogue, but were firm, unmovable in their identification as Jews. The idea that anyone would challenge their identification with Judaism was never a possibility for Amy and Ben. In other interviews it was a frequent theme; with Ben, and Amy it didn't come up once. Maizy, however, hinted that she thought somewhat differently.

They defined themselves as cultural Jews early on. For Amy, cultural Judaism meant “upholding traditions which revolve around holidays, and happily revolve around food.” A big part of that “was being with those you love.” Early in Maizy's life this meant her parents. Now it was usually their family and a few other friends. Maizy agreed; she also considered herself a cultural Jew. Ben also felt the same. “What's the opposite of feeling religious?” he asked me.

Both Amy and Ben revered food from their relatives, and memories of those, as powerful. Ben in particular, though, had many more stories that evidenced this. While Amy told me about her mom's brisket with “Lipton onion soup mix” and the Jewish spaghetti she would make (spaghetti with ketchup) he told me about Goldie's chicken soup, which, when he went to college, she “put in a jar with eight rubber bands around it, and then a few dish towels, like you could drop it out of an airplane and it wouldn't break.” To him, “it was the most wonderful thing for me to have that chicken soup, like not in her apartment, but in another part of the world.” The soup was “so specific to one place and one place only” and having the soup somewhere else

brought her to him. Amy teared up when he talked about the “nicest memory” he had of her, when he was eating dinner once at her table and she looked at him “with complete love in her eyes and said ‘when you eat it’s like I have a meal.’”

They carried these food traditions into their lives apart from their parents. The holidays they observed were usually Passover and Rosh Hashanah. Both holidays entailed mostly the same foods: brisket or roast chicken, gefilte fish, chicken noodle or matzo ball soup. Their friends bring other dishes. Robin brings the soup. Amy makes a brisket with red wine, shallots, and sour cherries. Or she’ll make a sweet and sour roast chicken—which, echoing my mom, she also insisted was Jewish. They use the Maxwell House Haggadah but they told me that some of their friends “cobble” one together for their own respective Seders. “It was full of PC shit” Ben remarked, “I’m like, what’s the point? I prefer the original.” Amy butted in, “and then you put your own spin on it.”

Amy, smiling, admitted that she found herself laughing at herself at their most recent Seder; “even though I’ve had many, many Seders, I can never remember the requirements of the Seder plate.” They never once mentioned the significance of the holiday’s meaning. For them, it really seemed that the holidays revolved around food and family.

This kind of practice, that without a religious meaning, was also present when they told me about their wedding and in particular, the rabbi they chose. Amy told me that they met with him and he seemed nice, but things became slightly hairy when she asked, “could you kind of, not like, mention God a lot?” Ben jumped in at this point— “he wasn’t really happy about that.” Amy, thinking back on the moment, wondered “what kind of balls” she had to ask that of a rabbi.

It got worse from there. The wedding was beautiful, they both insisted, but Amy felt like the Rabbi went overboard for her “taste,” when he willed them, in front of all of the wedding

guests “to have a Jewish home” and “Jewish children.” She told me that she remembered “standing there, feeling like, ‘wow, this is my wedding and he’s... saying all this stuff that is really kind of not me, and I found that disturbing.’” She closed out the story; “we did do the Jewish wedding thing.”

It was clear from that they were simply interested in the presence of the Rabbi. No doubt, this would satisfy their relatives, who were eager for them to have a Jewish wedding— “why can’t you get married in a temple on Long Island?” Amy’s mom remarked when she took her to the venue, the Picnic House in Prospect Park, Brooklyn. They could do “the Jewish wedding thing” and check the Jewish wedding box easily; have a rabbi and break a glass under a napkin. The actual meaning behind the ceremonies, the words, the association with Godliness associated with the presence of the Rabbi, meant little to them. They were satisfied with the bare minimum, that which made them feel just Jewish enough.

This sense of agency within Judaism also became clear when they talked about Goldie, Ben’s grandmother and Ruthie, her daughter and Ben’s aunt. Both had funny stories regarding their adherence to *kashrut*, which both of them carried out, albeit in their own ways. Goldie kept kosher until she was around eighty, when, at a Seder she announced “who cares!” and in that moment, completely dropped the practice. She “never looked back” Ben said. Amy jumped in now, telling me that Aunt Ruthie kept kosher. Recently, they were in a Thai restaurant with her and they were talking about eating bacon and Ruth declared that she had “never eaten pork.” “So you’ve never had bacon?” Amy asked. “Bacon’s not pork” Ruthie countered. Amy assured her that it was, it came from a pig. “She probably ate bacon her entire life,” Amy laughed.

When it came to Maizy, the same sense of independence was impressed upon her. It was a careful dance though, according to Amy, between wanting your child to feel Jewish and

wanting them to feel empowered to make their own decisions. “It’s a challenge” she told me “to not inadvertently inflict your belief system on your kid.” If Maizy had come to them and actively wanted to be involved in Jewish study, they would’ve been delighted and said “great, go forth and do.” They admitted that that scenario was extremely unlikely.

Still, they felt bad that Maizy was the only Jewish kid at her Sheffield public school. Ben wanted her to know the Hebrew alphabet and how to read the language. He himself knew how, and thought it was “fun.” “But” for both of them “if it meant going to Hebrew school and learning about the almighty... that was a deal breaker; it’s not going to happen.”

But they had succeeded in impressing some sense of Judaism upon Maizy. She may not know Hebrew, and she may not have been bat mitzvahed, but she knew she was Jewish. When I asked her what that meant to her she replied “it means basically the exact same thing as what both of you were talking about” referring to her parents, “I really value the holidays... I just think they’re so nice, just being around people you love and the food. Those are the two most important things to me.”

She was less secure in her conception than her parents, though. “I know like zip about what Judaism actually is” she told me. Her parents were comfortable calling themselves Jewish. They knew there were others out there who went to synagogue regularly and kept kosher, but they considered them no more or less Jewish than themselves. Maizy, on the other hand, felt that her Judaism was somehow less-than and un-authentic.

Still, she conceived of herself as Jewish. Her reluctance to classify herself as an authentic Jew pointed to her belief in two kinds of Jews, those like her and her parents, who were Jewish in a sense, but somehow not entirely there, and those that were the “real” Jews. Like many of the people I talked to there were two camps. Significant, though, was the fact that she was *in* one of

those camps. Despite her lack of anything that she considered authentically Jewish, she still staked a claim to Judaism in some form.

Jonathan and a Bit of Cat

Cat was another classmate of mine from Great Barrington. I drove out to her house while there was still snow on the ground. Although I only spent time in her kitchen, her house felt like a family home. Cat told me that she had spent her whole life there and I could sense it as if it was in the walls. She moved around her kitchen in a way that only someone who had spent every moment of childhood there would, barefoot and absentmindedly.

I interviewed her and her dad together. He sat at the head of their kitchen table while Cat and I flanked him at either side. My phone lay in the middle of all three of us, recording. Before he came down, Cat and I both ate bagels with scallion cream cheese that she had gotten from a bagel place in town. We talked for a second about how we shared a mutual affection for egg bagels.

Cat's dad spoke like a lawyer, carefully and with certainty, as if every word he said mattered. He never misspoke or went back to correct himself, habits of mine that only became apparent when I talked to him.

Jonathan was raised Conservative Jewish in Brooklyn. He kept kosher inside and outside the home. He went to a Yeshiva for a moment around five and then "*schlepped*" to Hebrew School for the rest of his childhood up to his bar mitzvah. His Jewish schooling was "heavily Zionist and Holocaust driven," which he hated. The housing project where he lived in Coney Island was full of people from the camps and he told me about a particularly striking memory of buying bread every day from the baker. The bread would be handed over to him by "the white jacketed person" and the sleeve would tug up, revealing the inky numbered tattoo.

He spoke of his childhood religion with clear disdain. He considered exposing children to the Holocaust as a "foundational concept" in teaching as "psychiatric torture." Although he sat

Shiva for his mother and father out of “respect” when they died, he had no interest in any form of spiritual practice associated with Judaism.

From the start, Jonathan was resistant to my questions about Jewishness—“what was Jewish food?” he countered when I asked him what he ate. What did it mean to him? I asked. “It really depends on the country of origin.” Satlow was practically sitting right next to me. He refused to nail down any kind of core; Jewishness, to him, completely depended upon the individual’s personal relationship to the religion. He acknowledged the peripheral Jews, the observant ones, and everyone in between. He knew he was Jewish and his kids were too, despite their lack of any observance.

His conception of Judaism was heavily influenced by the strict practice associated with his Conservative Jewish upbringing. Now, he regarded all forms of Judaism as absurd. From the religious fanatics, who kept separate dishes, to those who mindlessly celebrated holidays without any notion of their actual meanings, all Jews, to him, were devoid of any actual substance. Important, though, in his assertions were the fact that he positioned invented Judaism alongside other forms. It was all Jewish to him. It was also all stupid.



He was a great storyteller, with strong opinions that came through in his tone throughout. Sometimes he gestured with his hands while he talked, and although he was combative at times, I could tell that he was gentle. He told me about three separate occasions that pointed to his strong belief in Judaism as absurd.

The first story was that of the white leather tennis shoes. Around 1990, Jonathan attended a Reconstructionist Jewish service with a friend.¹³² There was a woman cantor, which he liked, and the service sounded like a “typical Long Island/Brooklyn conservative service from the 1960s and 70s.” All was good and well, until Jonathan looked around and noticed that almost all of the men were wearing white Adidas sneakers. He started laughing, out loud, and his friend pulled him outside, “what the fuck are you doing?” Jonathan asked him if he noticed the tennis shoes. He had. But did he know why they were all wearing them? No, he had assumed it was some religious thing.

And it was. Kind of. According to Jonathan, in Orthodox synagogues in Brooklyn and possibly Long Island as a “sign of contrition” Jews would abstain from wearing leather.¹³³ They wore woven belts, and instead of wearing flip flops, they wore white tennis shoes that, in the fifties and sixties, were “made of rubber and canvas.” The image was distinct. Jews, in suits, wearing bright, white tennis shoes.

The Reconstructionists, however, had gravely misinterpreted this. They eschewed the abstinence from leather, gleaning only the image of tennis shoes from their memories. They had no clue what the meaning was behind the shoes. In Jonathan’s words, “what Reconstruction meant to these assholes was replicating some nostalgic memory of their childhood.” To him, this maligned the Rabbi’s intention entirely. What the original Reconstructionist had argued for

¹³² Reconstructionism, in Jonathan’s words, was the denominational child of a “Canadian rabbi who believed that every generation of Jews should recreate the faith and observance in their own fashion.” It called for “constant renewal, review, and challenging.”

¹³³ What I found on this indicated that Jews “afflict” themselves on Yom Kippur by denying themselves “certain luxuries, including leather footwear.” Jews sometimes abstain from leather while sitting *Shiva* as well for the same reasons, a deprivation from luxury; Chani Benjaminson, “Why Do We Wear Sneakers on Yom Kippur?,” *Chabad.Org* (blog), accessed May 1, 2020, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/577480/jewish/Why-Sneakers-on-Yom-Kippur.htm.

“wasn’t creating” an iteration of “some idealized childhood.” Instead, “he was saying ‘use your brain, ask yourself “what does Jewish observance mean to you?”’” The sneakers were too much for him and he left and went to a movie. He told me that it was “one of those moments where you’re in a crowd and you’re gonna stand up and scream.” He was infuriated.

The story made Jonathan’s aversion towards tradition for tradition’s sake clear. He hated the existence of habits devoid of meaning. He called those Jews “absurd”; he found the experience “hysterical.” What, to many, would be considered meaningful because of its significance as an important memory in their childhood, was absolutely pointless to Jonathan if it lacked any grounding in actual Jewish text. But did “real” Jewish observance matter to him?

The second tale was the *bris*. It arose when I asked him whether he had any intention of his kids being Jewish when they were young. “You must mean practicing Jews” he quipped. He told me that some would argue that his kids would *never* be Jewish because their mother was Lutheran. “By most Jewish law, they’re not and there’s nothing I could do about that other than encourage them to convert.” But there was another option, one that he had seen in action, the conversion of young children.

Jonathan was asked to help out with his cousin’s son’s *bris* and found himself in a separate room with the *moyle*, who “happened to be a rabbi” while he sorted through papers, making sure everything was alright to proceed with the ceremony (something that Jonathan noted certainly should have been done beforehand). The baby, at this point, was with them in the room. The Rabbi asks him for the name of the parents, he has to make sure their lineage is acceptable, and Jonathan tells him the mother’s last name, which is Italian. She converted to Judaism prior to her marriage. The Rabbi turns to him and states, blankly, that the mother is not Jewish according his standards and his temple.

This represented the first sticking point for Jonathan. The irrationality was plain in his voice; the woman was Jewish because she converted. And yet, in a few words, another Jew could deny that identity. He parodied the Rabbi: “that conversion was not sufficient to make her Jewish in the way I think.” His point was clear. What was Judaism, if they couldn’t agree, according to these two different people?

So, conscious of the house full of people and the food growing cold, he turned to the Rabbi and asked whether he had the authority to convert people, which he did. What went into a conversion? The Rabbi replied years of education. Jonathan interrupted—“no, no, how long would it take—what would be involved in converting this four day old baby?” A few prayers, the Rabbi answered. Jonathan asked for a price, the rabbi quoted him, the man was paid, and with a few gestures and words, the Rabbi declared the baby Jewish and the *bris* continued. Jonathan was unclear about whether he ever told the parents.

Reflecting on the memory, he told me that it was “a long way of saying that” he “could care less about the nomenclature or the provenance of Judaism.” If his kids wanted to be Jewish, “whatever that means,” they could make up their own minds.

The *bris* underscored Jonathan’s distaste for even prescribed religion’s ambiguity. To me, this was a personality trait that also came out in our interview, and was reflected in his profession as a lawyer. The wiggle room present in Judaism bothered him; he, personally, wanted no part in it. He agreed with Satlow. There was no core. But he hated it.

But what of today’s Judaism? The invented? The porch services. I asked Cat if she considered herself Jewish and she hesitated, but said yes. She said that she’d only go as far as saying yes though, that she “wasn’t religious in any capacity or practicing or anything.” But there were the porch services, which she framed as the only times she felt connected to Judaism

in any way. Their neighbor, they told me, “hated” both congregations in town and decided to form his own. So, he somehow got his hands on twenty *machzor*, “the prayer book especially for High Holy Days”, and invited people to his porch, usually fifteen to twenty. They would meet and make their way through a typical Reform service. There were even a few times that Jonathan, himself, led services, but he noted that “it was less Jewish and more sort of spiritual and community” for him.

Sometimes, a local author would come and sit next to a lamp. At some point during the service they would all pause and he would flick on the lamp and ask the group a tricky, “but easily stated question.” They both remembered one year where the question posed was “if we believe in charity why don’t we simply give away everything we have but for the necessities of life?” Other times they would read books and discuss them. Jonathan remembered one in particular, that challenged religion entirely. The question asked that year was whether “there was any rational defense of Judaism.”

Jonathan had issues retrospectively, though, with the presence of a local music teacher who assumed the role of cantor. He would sing the parts of the service that were meant to be sung. Jonathan laughed though, as he told me how he learned later that the “guy spoke no Hebrew” and could also “read no Hebrew.” The entire time, “all those years,” he sang through the services with a book “that had the melodies written and transliterated.” He was doing the entire service “phonetically.”

It came up again later when he was talking about other services that were conducted in Hebrew with people who didn’t understand the language. “How stupid is that?” He was flabbergasted. “If there is a God and he or she is hearing some kind of transliteration... they obviously don’t understand what they’re saying.” Circling back to the porch cantor, he reflected

on the necessity for “Hebrew-sounding words” even if the users didn’t actually understand what they meant. “You might as well have been reading transliterated Russian; it makes no sense whatsoever.”

When I pushed him on this, and said that it was what made those people feel Jewish, he thought for a second. Yes, he said, that’s right. “It’s stroking some memory thing and if this gives people comfort I’m the last person to say no.” And then he paused. “But to me, it’s a religious binky.”

Jonathan’s negative associations with religion clearly came from his childhood. But plenty of people grow up Jewish happily. His sister was an example of this. “The Jewish stuff” he told me “warms her heart in a way” that he just did not feel. Cat recalled her bringing a travel size menorah to their family vacation in Antigua recently. If not for her, the family would have forgone the holiday entirely.

Religion, in its entirety, was the problem for Jonathan. The family celebrated a solstice party yearly, the product of Cat’s mom. This tradition was meaningful for the whole family, even Jonathan, who called it “a fine, pagan ritual” and Cat told me that she intended to carry it on when she had her own children. Jonathan enjoyed the community aspect of it; they invited people from the neighborhood to join in their backyard. This was what most people liked about religion, he said, “sitting in a room with people with whom you share certain beliefs and values.”

The three stories Jonathan told me underscored his antipathy towards any form of Judaism at all. To him, it was all invented and all meaningless. Even the Judaism that most would consider the least invented, the Judaism that required rituals rooted in ancient Jews, to Jonathan, was meaningful.

The solstice party revealed that he had no issue with tradition, but particularly with tradition tied to religion. Although a solstice is obviously a tangible event that happens in nature, the meaning that the family attached to it was entirely invented. But Jonathan was okay with his. So for him, it really was the religious association.

Jonathan served as an interesting piece of my puzzle. He was the opposite of what I wanted and the opposite of my parents: a Jew absolutely disinterested in any of the ooey-gooeyness that led most Jews to food. His childhood memories were not fond. They existed almost entirely separately from his identity today. He felt no sense of longing, like my dad, for a Jewish community. He had known it and he wanted no more of it.

In a way, he proved my point. Invention was, of course, going to be part of Judaism because Judaism was created from the very beginning. He might hate it, but he also acknowledged it as Jewish. He positioned it alongside the observant.

He was Satlow-ian in his assertions about religion; Judaism had many different meanings for different people. But he diverged from Satlow in his repudiation of all traditions at all. He acknowledged that they were meaningful to some, but ultimately disapproved of their choices. His kids were free to do whatever they want, but he openly decried the Jewish practices he had carried out as a child as “simply stupid.” But did it have any “bearing” on what his kids did?

I heard from Cat very little during the actual interview. Her dad was clearly a commanding presence and had much more to say by way of Judaism. Cat had experienced very little with observance and only conceived of herself as Jewish ethnically. Right before the interview ended, though, she stopped me. “One last thing, sorry.” Slowly, she said “if I were to have kids I wouldn’t not offer the idea of Hanukkah or Passover or something, I could imagine myself putting some effort into understanding what the holiday was and maybe doing it.”

Jonathan was quiet and I asked her to tell me more. “I don’t know what that means necessarily... but I wouldn’t want it to be like, erased with me.”

Leo

Leo and I went to high school together. My mom's house was a few blocks from his house and sometimes we commuted together but he was far timelier than me and I usually missed him. We had always had a similar sense of humor and he was unlike any guy-friend I had in high school. He had gone to elementary and middle school with my boyfriend at the time, who told me that Leo was the kid who always cried at school. This made sense to me. He was more grounded and in touch with himself than anyone I knew at the time.

It was winter and we were both on break from school. My mom had left the city and I was house-sitting for a boss that Leo and I had both worked for the summer of our freshman year of college. The break was weird for me. I acutely felt that I had no home in Brooklyn, the very place where I had grown up, because I was staying in a strange apartment in a foreign neighborhood, but being with Leo in his house grounded me in a way I find hard to explain.

My mom had mentioned a family friend in my interview with her, Craig, who was a priest at an Episcopalian church in Brooklyn. She talked about going to Christmas Eve mass at his church and the feeling when he blessed her; "Craig is such a person of God, he's such a seeker, he's such an amazing man." I felt the same way about Leo; he emanated pure good, a helper and lover of all things.

I talked to him at his house, after we had gotten hot chocolate together at a coffee place in our neighborhood. His house was one of the short brownstones that lined the numbered streets of Park Slope. We sat in his front room, on stiff armchairs; it was clear that it was the kind of house where the family congregated around the kitchen island, not the living room. His mom arrived partly through our conversation and we moved to the kitchen. She chimed in occasionally to correct some historical fact, or ask him for help reaching something.



To Leo, Judaism represented a religion with the capacity for personalization and meaningfulness, on the individual and the community level. He took advantage of this, using Jewish practice for himself, a way to get in touch with his own spirituality as well as those around him.

Leo and his parents went to Park Slope Jewish Center, a synagogue near their house that's "Egalitarian Conservative" on High Holy Days. In Leo's words, it "basically just means we have a gay rabbi." Sometimes the family would go to his great-aunt's synagogue in Jersey, which was also Conservative, but more "old-timey Conservative." Men and women were allowed to sit together but everyone "dressed up" much more.

He went to a Jewish summer camp for a few years that was technically Conservative, but a lot of the kids were Reform and most of them were "secular." They would do short services on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. Sometimes they would be outdoors and Leo enjoyed that. Above all, he liked the singing.

His first two years at Wesleyan he would go to Shabbat services, which were student-run, every weekend. These were "Reform-ish vibes" but there was a wide range of denominational associations, from "very secular" to what he called "high Conservative, more traditionalist-Conservative" and "modern Orthodox." The school had a Chabad which the more "religious" students would go to.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Chabad-Lubavitch are a sect of Hasidic Jews. They emphasize "outreach to non-observant Jews.;" Sue Fishkoff, "Chabad Today," myjewishlearning.com, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/chabad-today/>.

Leo's conversation about the various denominations present in the Wesleyan Jewish Community (WJC) underscored his understanding that denominations did not necessarily determine how "religious" a person was. Plenty of students that I would conceive of as more religious, like Leo because he went to a Conservative temple, would go to the looser, less serious WJC services.

Despite being on the board at one point, his attendance, by senior year, began to taper. I asked him why this was. "I don't believe in God" he told me candidly, "so there is some part of it that's like 'well what am I doing here?'" And he stopped going so frequently. Part of it was also that the community aspect was important to him, and as he got older and friends graduated he realized he knew less and less people in the room.

But when he did go, he went for the singing, the friends, and the food. "It's open to anybody" he told me, so a lot of the people that go "aren't even Jewish.... Also like, you're just banging on a book singing, which is just fun times."

It also offered him a space to be spiritual. WJC allowed him to be "meditative and mindful" which was something he'd always wanted to explore. Silent prayers give him time to breathe and be conscious about his surroundings. Sometimes, when they talk about God, he thinks about "karma" instead.

He conceded that it could be considered religious in that he does "these things" where "there's probably some nostalgia involved" but he hesitated to classify himself as religious. "As a student of history" it was hard for him to be pro-religion, given "all of the terrible things that have been done in the name of God." He "was no Christopher Hitchens," he didn't care if people practiced religion. But they should certainly be "cognizant" of their beliefs— "teaching people that the earth is 6,000 years old," he told me didn't have to be "criminal", but it was definitely

“incorrect and ignorant.” For him, the WJC services were a place for community, singing, and sometimes his own spirituality, not indoctrination.

Judaism, to him, represented a space with room for personal meaning. It was all about squaring his practice with what he “actually believes in and what is right.” This was clearly demonstrated in his molding of WJC services to his own needs. To him, the mourner’s *kaddish* didn’t necessarily do anything but it had the potential to make the user feel better, or “feel commemorative,” which made it a legitimate practice.

Closing: Looking Forward

Satlow, in his epilogue, describes writing his book as a humbling experience. I feel more than humbled. This project challenged every facet of my previously held conceptions of Judaism. It shed light on histories I had never heard and practices that I never knew. It introduced me to new cuisines, dishes, and ingredients.

Most of all, it broadened my conception of what it meant to be Jewish and taught me that one hundred pages cannot come close to explaining Judaism's relationship to food. Jewishness is a concept in constant renewal. Jews continually negotiate and expand upon how food manifests their identity. There will never be one, static, belief about what it means to eat as a Jew because it is an increasingly personal experience.

Had I more time and energy, I would have included an exploration into the steady movement away from religion in America. More and more frequently, and exemplified on a small scale in my interviews, Jews choose not to identify as Jews religiously, and instead, culturally or ethnically.¹³⁵ This fact makes many Jews anxious, particularly those interested in a repopulation of Israel.¹³⁶ Judaism, to some, is constantly under attack and American disaffiliation represents one arm of this war.

I believe that Judaism will always be present in one form or another. I do think, however, that the number of inventors, those that believe in a highly personalized form of Judaism often tied to food, will become increasingly prevalent.

I wasn't able to give Leo's mom, Nancy, her own section in my interview chapter due to time constraints, but to not include her beliefs about religion, and emphasize their bearing on the

¹³⁵ "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" (Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013), <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

¹³⁶ Bershtel and Graubard, *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*, 3.

larger story of Judaism, invention, and food, would be a disservice to her and to Judaism itself. Throughout this exploration, I have stressed the importance of hearing Jewish voices themselves in conceiving of what Judaism means. Here is a final one.

Leo and I sat across from Nancy while she cooked dinner, the kitchen island between us. She was making picadillo, a dish borrowed from her Puerto Rican husband typically made with ground pork. She used turkey instead. We talked about her kitchen and I related it to my mom, talking about the weird things that she did that she associated with Judaism. Nancy always spoke in terms of comfort. It was what was comfortable for my mom, she said, “I think people should do religion the way they want to do religion. I don’t think there should be any rules about how someone does a religion because I think it’s ridiculous as it is, you know.” She squinted for a second, thinking. “You’ve gotta do what’s comfortable for you because that’s who the religion is for—who else is it for?”

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