

“Bread from Heaven, Bread from the Earth”: Recent Trends in Jewish Food History Writing

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Over the last thirty years, Jewish studies scholars have turned increasing attention to food and meals in Jewish culture. These studies fall more or less into two different camps: (1) text-centered studies that focus on the authors’ idealized, often prescriptive construction of the meaning of food and Jewish meals, such as biblical and postbiblical dietary rules, the Passover Seder, or food in Jewish mysticism—“bread from heaven”—and (2) studies of the “performance” of Jewish meals, particularly in the modern period, which often focus on regional variations, acculturation, and assimilation—“bread from the earth.”¹ This breakdown represents a more general methodological split that often divides Jewish studies departments into two camps, the text scholars and the sociologists. However, there is a growing effort to bridge that gap, particularly in the most recent studies of Jewish food and meals.² The major insight of all of these studies is the persistent connection between eating and Jewish identity in all its various manifestations. Jews are what they eat.

While recent Jewish food scholarship frequently draws on anthropological, sociological, and cultural historical studies of food,³ Jewish food scholars’ conversations with general food studies have been somewhat one-sided. Several factors account for this. First, a disproportionate number of Jewish food scholars (compared to other food historians) have backgrounds in the modern academic study of religion or rabbinical training, which affects the focus and agenda of Jewish food history. At the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, my background in religious studies makes me an anomaly. There are usually only about two or three of us, and our disciplinary perspective seems foreign to many historians and social scientists of food cultures. While many other food historians, especially those concerned with modern food history, base much of their analyses on quantifiable data such as food prices, consumed quantities, and social policies, Jewish food historians place a lot more weight on earlier food traditions from the Bible and rabbinic literature. We typically distinguish between what classic Jewish literary traditions *want* Jews to do with food and what Jews *actually do* with food, which complicates much of the discussion of identity construction in Jewish food history writing. Since biblical and Talmudic food traditions are propagated by a scholastic elite, class and gender distinctions

between rabbinic Torah scholars and “the Jewish masses,” and between female and male Jews, further complicate the question of identity construction. Our disciplinary training often draws many of us to literary theory in order to communicate more precisely about the relationship between the idealizing, often prescriptive texts of Jewish tradition and the historical reality behind them. We are concerned about the dangers of taking texts at face value when trying to reconstruct Jewish history, whether we are dealing with the Mishnah, the third-century compilation of early rabbinic legal traditions, or late twentieth-century American-Jewish cookbooks.

The blurring of lines between etic and emic descriptions of Jewish foodways is also characteristic in Jewish food history writing. Jewish food studies themselves play a role in the modern construction of Jewish identity, and many scholars of Jewish food history have an implicit agenda regarding “Jewish identity” that is intended for the consumption of the modern Jewish audience. This self-referential function might unintentionally isolate Jewish from other food history writing. The text-centered and performance-centered approaches to Jewish food history that might strike other food historians as odd reflect competing strategic positions on the pressing internal question: “Who is a Jew?” What decisively determines who is a Jew: inherited normative traditions—“Judaism”—or whatever Jews do and feel subjectively—“Jewishness”? As a result of the differences between Jewish food historians and those in other specialties, advances in the history and culture of Jewish meals have not been well represented in recent important general cultural histories of food.⁴ One goal of this chapter is to encourage a more reciprocal dialogue between the subdisciplines of Jewish studies and food history.

“You Are What You Eat” in Jewish Food History

Jewish food histories share with other food studies their frequent appeal to the famous dictum “you are what you eat” to make the point that food and social identity are connected. This saying derives from the much-repeated aphorism in Brillat-Savarin’s *The Physiology of Taste*: “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.”⁵ But interpretations of “you are what you eat” in Jewish food histories take on a particularly Jewish flavor. For my analysis, I have chosen seven of the studies listed in my bibliographical note,⁶ not only because they represent typical approaches to Jewish eating and identity, but also because the authors refer explicitly or implicitly to the saying “you are what you eat” to frame their arguments. First is Diner’s comparative study *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (2001); the second, Kraemer’s *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (2009); two books on medieval Jewish food texts and rituals in Spain and Germany, respectively: Hecker’s *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals* (2005) and Marcus’s *Rituals of Childhood* (1996); Rosenblum’s *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (2010); Roth’s article “Toward a Kashrut Nation in American Jewish Cookbooks, 1990–2000” (2010); and Gil Marks’s *Encyclopedia of Jewish*

Food (2010). The last book, though not organized as a history, nevertheless adopts a historical perspective in most of its entries. It is now, as well, the “go to” resource for Jewish food lore. I do not discuss them in chronological order but rather as examples of typical interpretations of “you are what you eat” in modern Jewish food histories. A comparison of how these works interpret the trope “you are what you eat” provides a good guide to the different ways Jewish food scholars address the relationship between food and Jewish identity construction. Are they text centered or performance centered, or some hybrid of the two basic approaches? Do the studies argue that Jews are “Jews” because they eat what the sacred Jewish texts and authorities say they should or should not eat, or that Jews are “Jews” because of what they actually eat?

Before I start my survey of Jewish food histories’ interpretations of “you are what you eat,” I will sketch out the typical periodization of Jewish history that they all assume. The scheme itself implicitly defines some periods of Jewish history as text centered and others as shaped primarily by historical circumstances, largely uninfluenced by Jewish texts.

Jewish History Is an Expression of Jewish Identity

Jewish food histories, whether broad sweeps from Israelite origins to the present or focused on one period, assume, roughly, five eras: (1) the biblical period, (2) the rabbinic or Talmudic period, (3) the medieval period, (4) the modern period, and (5) the contemporary period.⁷

This periodization oscillates between stressing, on the one hand, external non-Jewish history and cultures on Jews and Judaism (e.g., the medieval and modern periods) and, on the other, internal, autonomous Jewish institutions and cultures (e.g., the biblical and rabbinic periods) as most influential in shaping Jewish history and adapting non-Jewish cultures to ~~its~~ needs.⁸ The different emphases on external and internal influences closely correlate with performance-centered and text-centered approaches. Moreover, this scheme suggests that Jewish sacred texts—the Bible and rabbinic literature—were the formative influences in the early foundational periods. As we move closer to the present, more general social processes (e.g., modernity) and interaction with non-Jewish cultures (e.g., medieval Christian and Muslim societies in northern Europe, Spain, and North Africa; modern secular North America and Eastern and Western Europe) are assumed to be more influential.

The Jewish food histories I have selected tend to focus on two particular formative periods, the rabbinic period and the modern period. In the former, the Jewish food rules and rituals as we know them today were established.⁹ In the latter, moving from the Eastern European to the American Jewish immigrant experience, the stereotypical Jewish foodways of lox and bagels, delicatessens, and the modern kosher industry were established.¹⁰ Food traditions of the biblical and medieval periods have received somewhat less attention in Jewish studies, often used only as “background” for subsequent formative rabbinic and modern interpretations or

rejections of them. Studies of medieval Jewish food traditions frequently focus on their religious dimensions: the myths, rituals, and spiritual experiences associated with eating, as well as interaction with the surrounding Christian and Muslim religious traditions.¹¹ Even fewer studies of food traditions are associated with the most important historical events in modern Jewish consciousness, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.¹² Postrabbinic Jewish food histories tend to be shaped more by a geographic scheme, such as in Cooper's chapters devoted to the "food of the Sephardim"¹³ and the "food of Central and Eastern European Jews."¹⁴ Jewish food histories covering Ashkenazic or Sephardic cuisines often stress the significant cultural contact between Jews and non-Jews that is reflected in shared or similar dishes. They also tend to reflect the culinary nostalgia of the Ashkenazic majority of Jews in North America whose families came from Eastern Europe, and their more recent fascination with the exotic "ethnic" cuisines of Sephardic, Middle Eastern, and other non-Ashkenazic Jews across the globe—their own Jewish "Others." I will come back to this point.

"You Are What You Eat" in and out of Jewish Texts

Since "you are what you eat" is fundamentally a statement of identity, every variation of it deployed in Jewish food histories carries the burden of modern Jewish identity politics characteristic of modern Jewish history writing. What it comes down to in my view is this question: What role, if any, do Jewish texts play in the eating behaviors that Jews actually perform? For text-centered Jewish food historians (as I am), if the eating practices of Jews are significantly informed by Jewish texts, that makes them Jewish. For performance-centered Jewish food historians, what makes foodways Jewish is that Jews perform them, regardless whether Jewish texts inform their behavior.

These differences between Jewish food history writers are apparent in how they ascribe "you are what you eat"—for example, to texts or to their performers—and how metaphorically they take the saying. First, some attribute it to the implicit meaning of the behaviors they observe and describe what Jews are doing when they eat. This is typical of the performance-centered approach. Second, scholars may ascribe it to the point of view of the Jewish texts they are interpreting. In other words, the text is saying Jews are in some way what they eat or should eat. This text-centered approach often calls attention to the prescriptive dimension of the food text. For example, I can argue that the biblical texts of Genesis and Leviticus themselves claim that ancient Israelites were or should be what they ate. Notably, in Genesis 4:22: "And the Lord God said, 'Now that the man *has become like one of us, knowing good and bad*, what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!'" and Leviticus 20:24–26: "I the Lord am your God who *has set you apart* from other peoples. So you *shall set apart* the clean beast

from the unclean, the unclean bird from the clean, . . . You shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and *I have set you apart* from other people to be Mine.” The Bible says that *what* we eat (the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and bad), *might* eat (the fruit of the tree of life), and *ought to* eat set us apart and make us like God. Anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Jean Soler have made much of this but in their Durkheimian way have identified “God” with the Israelite people themselves. Hence, Jewish food historians referring to Douglas and Soler usually assume that “you are what you eat” means that Jews distinguish between fit and unfit foods to distinguish themselves from non-Jews. However, as Douglas and Soler maintain that the biblical texts say that this is the reason for Jewish dietary rules, theirs is a text-centered interpretation. Simply because the Bible prescribes these laws and their rationales does not mean that Jews necessarily follow them, or, if they do, they may not follow them for the reasons the Bible says.

Third, some Jewish food scholars stress the gap between what the texts say that Jews should eat and what their target audience of Jews actually eat. This text-centered approach often calls attention to “Who says?” and “To whom?”—that is, the class and gender of the promulgators of the texts and their audience.

Fourth, most expand the idea that Jews are not only what they eat but also “*how*, *when*, and *with whom* they eat.”¹⁵ Thus, few contemporary Jewish food historians simply identify what Jews eat with the Jewish dietary laws. The Jewish dietary laws—kashrut—prescribe what Jews ought to eat, but not all, or even most, Jews keep kosher. Moreover, Jewish kosher laws are not the only Jewish food prescriptions. There are rules of Jewish food ethics and etiquette, blessings and other rituals that one should perform at the table, and foods and drinks for different holidays on the Jewish calendar that have little to do with the kashrut. There are as well food prescriptions concerned with the biblical sacrifices that no one was expected to perform, at least not literally, after the destruction of the Temple. As a result, the idea emerged that talking about anachronistic biblical food prescriptions was equivalent to performing them and that just speaking about food prescriptions theoretically could be an expression of Jewish identity: “you are what you theoretically should have eaten” or “you are what you ought to imagine yourself eating.”

Finally, the verb “*to eat*” in “you are what you eat” becomes a metaphor for a variety of food-related activities: talking about food, preparing food, remembering meals, visualizing imaginary meals, studying Jewish texts (sometimes but not necessarily about food), and buying Jewish cookbooks. But since most of these metaphors for eating originate from Jewish texts (including the practical rules of kashrut), even performance-centered Jewish food studies necessarily have Jewish texts in the background, not only the Bible and rabbinic literature, but also memoirs, recipe books, fiction, and ritual manuals like the Passover Haggadah. This brings us full circle since what makes these texts “Jewish” in the performance-centered approach is that Jews composed them. Composing texts is just another type of performance, like eating.

Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America* (2001)

Hasia Diner's comparative study of Italian, Irish, and Jewish foodways in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century "age of migration" in America represents a performance-centered approach. She uses "you are what you eat" to describe what it means when Jews (like other ethnic groups) actually perform something: eating with one another. She stresses the cross-cultural way that food typically marks every human group's identity: "Food, like sex, intensifies group identity. . . . 'Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are,' rephrased in common American parlance as 'you are what you eat,' works. . . . The notion of a common table connecting people exists in many cultures as an embodiment of communal trust. We might define a community as a group of people who eat with each other."¹⁶ Diner notes that American Jewish foodways were not that different from other immigrant groups' strategies of acculturation, with the one important exception of their inherited prescriptive traditions of *kashrut*. Consequently, social conflicts, "kosher wars," broke out among American Jewish immigrants because their "cherished American ideas about individual choice, personal preference, and limitless opportunities. . . . clashed with the underlying rationale of *kashrut*," which was to separate Jews from the people around them.¹⁷ In modern America, Jewish identity was not simply prescribed by texts and authorities from the top down; it was more importantly a collective process of social negotiations with a new set of sociohistorical circumstances.

David Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages* (2009)

David Kraemer's interpretation of "you are what you eat" may seem to take a position similar to Diner's; however, his primary interest is how classic Jewish, especially rabbinic texts, prescribe or otherwise determine certain social negotiations as "Jewish." Kraemer writes, "While it is true if you 'tell me what you eat. . . . I will tell you what you are,' food choices are only one of several factors relating to eating that communicate volumes concerning a people's identity. As important as *what* they eat are *how*, *when*, and *with whom* they eat it." When combinations of these choices happen frequently enough to establish a pattern, this "will display the identity of the eater to the discerning eyes of the interpreter who interprets carefully." So it is "always. . . . possible to identify something in the eating practices of Jews in a given place and period that distinguishes them from their neighbors—and from Jews in other places and periods as well. When we. . . . identify such distinctive practices, we will be able to interpret them as signs of current Jewish identity."¹⁸

Where are these distinctive patterns? In "the *literary* record of laws and other kinds of legal discourse," that is to say, in Jewish *texts*.¹⁹ Kraemer acknowledges problems with this approach. For example, prescriptive texts represent the views

only of an elite minority of Jews. And he mentions other sources, such as “archaeology, history, legends, memoirs, polemical literature, material culture and so forth.”²⁰ Nevertheless, most of his arguments are based on biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern Jewish literary legal sources (halakhah).²¹ Faithful to the ideology of conservative Judaism of the Jewish Theological Seminary where he is professor of Talmud and library director, Kraemer stresses that Jewish patterns of eating are not fixed but continue to evolve historically. His criteria for noteworthy historical developments in Jewish eating are that (1) a development was a new and important change in Jewish eating, and (2) it was a practice that persisted for centuries. Fitting these criteria are the biblical laws of permitted and prohibited animals, the “founding and development of the meat-dairy prohibition” from its rabbinic origins through its post-rabbinic evolution, “transgressive” Jewish eating, and contemporary “kashrut wars” representing intra-Jewish controversies, such as inspection for bugs in lettuce and fruits.²² He frames these criteria in discussions of classic Jewish biblical, rabbinic, and post-rabbinic legal sources and prescriptions about what, when, and with whom one can eat.

Most telling is Kraemer’s interpretation of why modern Jews habitually eat *treyf* (nonkosher) food from Chinese restaurants, a prime example of transgressive eating.²³ He claims that many New York Jews consider Chinese food “safe *treyf*” because the prohibited pork and seafood in it are chopped so small that they are no longer discernable. These Jews are really “making a kind of halakhic decision. . . . They are choosing to rebel in Jewish terms, and thus are in significant respects, not rebelling at all.” Kraemer views loopholes in earlier Jewish legal discussions, such as permission to eat prohibited foods to save a life, as precedents for modern Jewish transgressive eating. He concludes paradoxically, “In modest or significant ways, transgressive eating was always a part of Jewish tradition.”²⁴ For Kraemer, “you are what you eat” means that you are how you *interpret* what you eat, *through the lenses of normative prescriptive Jewish literary traditions*, at different times in different historical circumstances.

“You Are the *Texts* That You Eat” in Medieval Jewish Food Studies

Joel Hecker’s and Ivan Marcus’s studies of medieval Jewish food texts and rituals respectively represent text-centered and performance-centered approaches. In another sense both are text centered, for they describe practices that take “what you eat” as a metaphor for sacred Jewish *texts*. Jews, idealized as male rabbinic scholars, are those who “eat Torah.”

In *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (2005), Hecker ascribes “you are what you eat” to Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla’s perspective in *The Gates of Light*, written in the late thirteenth century, and so

represents a text-centered approach but in an unusual way. He says, “Gikatilla . . . reverses the familiar maxim, ‘You are what you eat,’ yielding instead ‘You are that what eats you,’” to explain the mythic construction of identity in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Jewish kabbalistic texts about eating.²⁵ In the kabbalistic myth of reincarnation, animals are “metaphysically transformed” into the identity of those who consume them. Hence only Jewish male scholars well versed in Torah, that is, kabbalah, should be permitted to eat meat.²⁶ Consequently, an ignoramus, one who is not versed in the secrets of Torah, should not eat meat, because, being a beast himself, he cannot raise the soul of the animal he eats.²⁷ Here, Jewish texts suggest that eating by diners qualified with the right “Jewish knowledge”—in this case kabbalistic Torah about reincarnation—has a spiritual function, to elevate the souls of both the diner and his dinner.

While edible texts play a central role in the practices Marcus interprets in *Rituals of Childhood* (1996), his is essentially a performance-centered analysis of the Jewish eating ritual intended to initiate Jewish boys into the study of Torah in medieval Germany (Ashkenaz). As Marcus describes the practice,

The child is seated on the teacher’s lap, [and] the teacher shows him the writing tablet, honey cake, and egg on which the Hebrew alphabet or biblical verses have been written. The two of them recite the texts, and the child licks honey off the tablet and eats the inscribed cakes and eggs.

These gestures are a bold illustration of symbolic inversion. The child enters the Torah (*nikhnas la-torah*) by means of the Torah entering the child in the form of the special foods on which the verses of the Torah have been written.²⁸

Here Marcus, too, suggests Jewish eating rituals “invert” the symbolic meaning of the ingestion of “Jewish” food. The Jewish boy goes into the Torah text that has gone into him. Why would eating the Torah carry this meaning in medieval Germany? In Marcus’s Geertzian “thick description” of the cultural context of this eating rite of passage, contemporary Christian Eucharistic practices, which emphasized ingesting Christ to mark distinctive Christian identities, gave the ingestion of Torah, the quintessential marker of Jewish rabbinic identity, its symbolic power.²⁹ Marcus calls this “pre-modern or inward acculturation” in contrast to “modern or outward acculturation.” The latter “refers to the blurring of individual and communal traditional Jewish identities and of the religious and cultural boundaries between Jews and modern society.”³⁰ But in premodern, inward acculturation, when “Jews who did not assimilate or convert to the majority culture retained an unequivocal Jewish identity . . . the writings of the articulate few or the customs of the ordinary many sometimes expressed elements of their Jewish religious cultural identity by internalizing and transforming various genres, motifs, terms, institutions, or rituals of the majority culture in a polemical, parodic, or neutralized manner.”³¹

The “writings of . . . articulate” and “the customs of . . . ordinary” medieval Jews asserted that they were the people who ate the body of Torah, in contradistinction to the Christian majority, those who ate the body of Christ. The rabbinic cultural ideal for Jewish males was to embody Torah. Hence, when various kabbalistic eating rituals and the Ashkenazic initiation rite use spoken words, gestures, and inscriptions to equate Torah with food, they are “ritualizations” of the metaphor that “Torah is food.” Marcus, following anthropologist James Fernandez, defines “the ritualization of metaphors” as “a cultural mechanism in which individuals take a metaphorical statement about themselves to be fundamentally true.”³² In this sense, medieval Jews are the *metaphors* they eat. Jewish “root metaphors,” which are “ultimately derived from late biblical religion[,] illustrate the tendency . . . to act out textual metaphors ritually.”³³ The imaginative language of the inherited Jewish texts and myths (and their rabbinic interpreters) conveys Jewish cultural identity in premodern medieval Jewish inward acculturation. In this way, both Hecker and Marcus have contributed the important insight that text-based myths and their ritual performances shape how Jews understand that they are what they eat.

Like other proponents of similar text-oriented approaches to Jewish food, Hecker and Marcus were trained and/or taught in seminaries or religious studies programs, and they are conversant with the academic discipline of the comparative study of religions. Their attention to the interplay of idealized textual and mythic constructions of “Jewish eating” and ritual performances of Jewish social identity is quite consistent with those approaches.

Jordan Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (2010)

Likewise, Jordan Rosenblum’s *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* is particularly sensitive to the complex relationship between texts, myths, rituals, and the social construction of identity in Jewish eating practices. Rosenblum uses “you are what you eat” to problematize both eating and identity. He suggests we need a more sophisticated understanding of eating, or, better, of texts prescribing certain ways of eating, and the creation of Jewish social identities. For Rosenblum, identity is “a category of practice.” You are what you perform. But texts, too, perform things, insofar as they have a rhetorical purpose. When early rabbinic “texts prescribe the consumption of or abstention from certain foods . . . the texts themselves do not establish a distinct identity. In contrast, the prescriptions contained in a text are part of a[n] . . . attempt to regulate practices, and those practices contextualize and establish the participant’s identity for those people writing that text.” The *Tanna ’im*, the early rabbinic authorities of the first through third centuries C.E. who composed and preserved the eating traditions Rosenblum discusses, were an elite scholastic class who wanted ordinary nonrabbinic Jews to adopt their practices. For Rosenblum, “the

oft-stated principle ‘you are what you eat’ is . . . a statement about identity insofar as it refers to the practice of eating as constituting an individual’s identity.” He “argue[s] throughout this study that culinary and commensally-constructed tannaitic identity is *always* about practice. Identity is not a passive experience. Like the act of eating, it is an active social practice.”³⁴ Rosenblum does not restrict active social practices to eating per se but extends them to all “culturally significant activities surrounding the preparation and ingestion of food that allows diners to make an identity statement by the manner in which they partake of their dinner.” Even talking (or writing) about food belongs to the performed activities that he subsumes under the rubric “edible identity.”³⁵

Rosenblum means that early rabbinic food texts are like dramatic scripts that tell or imply a certain story and assign people certain roles in that story. Importantly, all roles are not equal. There are clearly stars or leading roles, supporting actors, supporting actresses, and bit parts inscribed in these scripts. The leading roles belong to “Jewish rabbinic males,” and non-Jews, nonrabbis, and females have supporting roles to play in the “preparation and ingestion of food that allows” the stars “to make an identity statement by the manner in which they partake of their dinner.”³⁶ Rosenblum identifies what he calls “the chef/sous-chef principle” as a strategy employed in rabbinic prescriptions about who could prepare their food, still allowing them their privileged “Jewish male rabbinic identity,” but without requiring Jewish male rabbis to be involved in every stage of their food preparation.³⁷ Under the “chef/sous-chef principle,” the wife of a rabbi could be entrusted to prepare foods according to rabbinic standards even if doing so did not identify her as a Jewish rabbinic male. The most important foods of the Mediterranean diet, bread, wine, and olive oil, could be prepared at least in part by Gentiles, provided that at crucial junctures they were under the supervision of Jewish rabbinic males. An *‘am ha-aretz*, a Jew who does not observe the rabbinic rules of purity and tithing (a nonrabbinic Jew by definition), or the wife of an *‘am ha-aretz* may cook for a rabbinic Jew under his supervision (or his wife’s), but not vice versa.³⁸ These food prescriptions also underline the fact that the rabbis were not against social interaction between Jews and Gentiles and rabbinic and nonrabbinic Jews across the boundaries they established. Rather, negotiating social interaction across these boundaries became occasions to perform Jewish rabbinic male identity or for supporting actors to maintain Jewish rabbinic males in their starring roles. In other words, what made food “Jewish” was not so much where it came from but rather whether or not a rabbinic Jew controlled its preparation at a crucial juncture. As Diner and other Jewish food historians of the modern period point out, this power to control was transferred to Jewish women as they increasingly played more significant roles in choosing and preparing food for their households.³⁹

Another important “edible identity” strategy to which Rosenblum calls attention is the Tannaitic texts’ construction of certain foods as “metonymic and embodying” Jewish rabbinic male identity or rival group identities. Quoting anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney,⁴⁰ Rosenblum writes, “‘The beauty and purity of *we* are embodied doubly in the body of the people and the food that represents them, and

conversely, the undesirable quality of the other are embodied in *their* foods and their foodway [sic].’ In short, you are what you eat.”⁴¹ Rosenblum discusses “manna, the Passover, and *kashrut* practices in general” as rabbinic metonyms for Jews and “the abominable pig” for Gentiles.⁴² The Tannaitic sources construct Gentiles as “pig-eaters” and Jews as “manna-eaters,” “Passover-eaters” (or “*matzah*-eaters”), and “pig-avoiders.” Thus, even foods that cannot actually be eaten because they are legendary (manna, the bread from heaven in the biblical exodus story) or no longer available (the original Passover lamb in Egypt or the Passover offering after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.) retain their mythic power as symbols of quintessentially “Jewish” identity. Rabbinic sources talk about manna theoretically “to translate that mythical entity into the reality of one’s cultural milieu. Despite the fact that manna had long since disappeared from the Israelite menu, the Tannaim (at least metaphorically) still drew on the practice of eating it in their construction of Jewish identity.”⁴³ When rabbinic interpreters in their theoretical discussions and prescribed table talk associate the metonymic foods, such as Jewish bread or kosher meat, with Torah, Torah, too, acquires a metonymic quality. Early rabbinic males are “Torah eaters.” As we have already seen, late medieval Spanish kabbalists and Jews of Ashkenaz make quite explicit the idea of Torah as the uniquely Jewish metonymic food in their “ritualized metaphors” of eating Torah.

“Secular Bibles”: Laurence Roth on Jewish Cookbooks and Gil Marks’s *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (2010)

My last two examples of variations on the saying “you are what you eat” come from two recent studies of modern Jewish foodways in which the authority of the Torah of the rabbinic and medieval Jewish sources has become quite attenuated. There is a “new Torah” that many Jews consume to express their Jewish identity: Jewish cookbooks. First, Laurence Roth in “Toward a Kashrut Nation” (2010) calls modern Jewish cookbooks “secular Bibles” and uses “you are what you eat” to summarize the peculiar role *kashrut* plays as a Jewish cultural identifier, even if it is not observed in actual eating practice.⁴⁴ Roth describes *kashrut* as a marketable brand name inscribed in Jewish cookbooks, rather than prescribed practices that the authors intend to be followed.⁴⁵ Roth concludes in his essay that the “*kashrut* nation” brand “reminds us that in America’s current food-obsessed mood the notion that ‘we are what we eat’ is so hackneyed that it too has become unchallenged common sense. Perhaps, then, the most compelling fantasy retailed in American Jewish cookbooks today is not that there is a Jewish cuisine, but that such a profitable idea was ever in doubt.”⁴⁶ In his somewhat cynical take, Roth makes *kashrut* more or less analogous to imaginary or no-longer-eaten Jewish metonymic foods, such as manna or the Passover offering. The rhetorical function of *kashrut*, rather than its actual practice, reflects and speaks to the tensions of modern Jewish identity: “Removed from material practice and placed in a rhetorical practice, *kashrut* is a powerful tool with which to allay anxiety

about biological or cultural continuity and to forge connections between readers with similar interests and tastes, readers who may live at both far and close distances from each other.” In the 1990s, kashrut’s rhetorical function in cookbooks mirrors Jewish “obsessions about history and memory... conflicts about diasporic and homeland identities[;]... Jewish continuity and authenticity; the resurgence in America of a conservative religiosity and of a desire among American Jews to reconnect with “traditional” Jewish practices; and the proliferation of gastronomically diverse as well as international cookery stories within the American cookbook genre.”⁴⁷ The nationalization and internationalization of Jewish cuisine in modern Jewish cookbooks, which now include Jewish dishes from around the world, especially Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish foods (as opposed to Eastern European foods, the default Jewish cuisine for many American Jews), are significant developments analogous to the development and expression of the idea of an Indian national cuisine discussed by Appadurai.⁴⁸ In both modern Indian and Jewish cookbooks, “Jewish” and “Indian” are literary constructs of nationhood, of “social and cultural bonds” necessitated by “conflicts about diasporic and homeland identities.”⁴⁹ In any case, Roth takes “eat” metaphorically in “you are what you eat.” It is synonymous with economic consumption. Buying the kosher-branded Jewish cookbooks is a way to perform contemporary Jewish identity.

In his *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (2010), Gil Marks cites a different quotation from Brillat-Savarin—“The destiny of nations depends upon what and how they eat”—to put a more prescriptive, collective national emphasis on the idea that you are what you eat. Then he exhorts his readers that “by our food, we declare and affirm who we are and who we want to be.”⁵⁰ If contemporary Jewish cookbooks are today’s Jewish “secular Bibles,” then Marks’s *Encyclopedia* is a sort of secular *Shulhan Arukh* in which he has codified and glossed the Jewish canon of recipes contained in them.⁵¹ But, for Marks, accurate historical information about traditional Jewish recipes, not the rhetoric of kashrut, brands his book as “Jewish.” Hence the *Encyclopedia*’s flyleaf evokes Marks’s authority as a “chef, rabbi, writer, historian, and expert on Jewish cooking” to attest to the Jewish authenticity of its contents.⁵² Marks addresses the anxieties about Jewish cultural continuity that Roth discusses when he says in his introduction, “The collection of information and traditional recipes in *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*—the influential and integral parts of ancient and modern Jewish history and culture—tells the story of the past twenty-five years of *Clal Yisrael*. In addition to testifying to the past and present, a community’s food also influences that what it will become.”⁵³ Jewish food tells a story; it is our past, present, and especially our future—our national destiny.

Conclusions

Let me conclude this survey with four observations. First, for those Jewish food historians interested in texts and the *mythic* constructions of Jewish identity (“bread

from heaven”), Torah is a metonymic Jewish food. Especially in rabbinic and medieval Jewish food texts, Jews are explicitly or implicitly constructed as “Torah eaters.” Granted, Torah can mean different things to different Jews at different times, for example, halakhah, namely kashrut, which can be “consumed” literally or as an economic commodity; “the Jewish story,” Haggadah or personal memoirs consumed in “feasts of history”;⁵⁴ or a “secular Bible,” modern Jewish recipe books. By employing demonstrative table talk, language, and gestures, Jews attribute the name, verses, or qualities of Torah to certain foods and make them metonymic in ritualized metaphors.

Second, for Jewish food historians more interested in realistically describing modern American Jewish foodways, kashrut can have a secular function as a consumable marker of identity in the sense that it is marketable.⁵⁵ But as a consumable Jewish identity marker, it is possible to consider kashrut in competition with other Jewish identity markers. A published collection of recipes gathered from Jewish Holocaust survivors is in good company with other Jewish cookbooks mark(et)ed as “Jewish,” not so much by kashrut (indeed, many of the recipes published in the Terezin cookbook are not kosher), but by their association with Jewish victims and survivors of the Holocaust and other traumatic experiences of Jewish history.⁵⁶ Kashrut itself has been reenvisioned recently as “sustainable Jewish eating,” “eco-kashrut,” “ethical kashrut,” or even vegetarianism. Contemporary environmentalism, the sustainable foodie-ism of the Slow Food movement, and outrage about the ethical abuses against workers and animals at one of the largest kosher meat-processing plants in America (Postville, Iowa) have influenced contemporary redefinitions of kashrut.⁵⁷ Members of this “new Jewish food movement” perform their identity by reading and talking about Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006) and other publications,⁵⁸ contributing to and reading Jewish food blogs like *The Jew and the Carrot*, participating in local, sometimes synagogue-sponsored community supported agriculture (CSA) farms, and buying kosher meat from small, sustainable, organic kosher meat distributors like Kol Foods and Grow and Behold, or purchasing nonkosher meat at farmers’ markets, or even avoiding meat altogether.

Third, the rabbinic and medieval texts idealizing Jewish rabbinic male identity as Jewish identity per se have increasingly lost their authority and relevance for many Jews as modern Jewish edible identities have been feminized. “Kitchen Judaism,” considered nostalgically as the domain of our idealized Jewish foremothers, has become a new stage for the performance of Jewish food identity.⁵⁹ As the Jewish rabbinic male chef calling the shots has receded from the stage of history, the sous-chef (often constructed as female) who buys, cooks, serves, and transmits recipes of Jewish food, has become the “star” of the performances of Jewish edible identities. The Jewish food we consume is female. Jewish food is what our grandmothers and mothers cooked. Jewish food is our immigrant grandmother’s negotiations with kashrut—that is, what she chose to adopt and reject from among her abundant new American options, and her choice as to when to cook Jewish or go out for Chinese or Italian. Jewish women and their stories are enshrined in the secular Bibles of Jewish cuisine,

modern Jewish recipe books. So even Jewish males or non-Jewish members of the household play “female roles” when they cook and eat Jewish. So just as Bynum’s Christian women mystics’ characteristic roles of feeding and nourishing others—that is, their socially constructed femininity—became the symbol of Christian humanity, so feminized Jewish food has become a symbol for modern Jewish identity.

Finally, the religious studies approaches of interpreters of Jewish food history have added a distinctive flavor to their interpretations, making them different from all other ethnic and regional food histories. One can sense it especially in the power that many of these studies attribute to the formative role of less or nonmaterial phenomena like texts, myths, symbolic interpretation of rituals, and eating experiences. Granted, I may have given short shrift to the Jewish food historians more concerned with material culture, especially archaeologists.⁶⁰ The main contributions of archaeological studies of food in the biblical and rabbinic periods highlight the distinction between what ancient Jewish texts prescribed and what Jews and their neighbors actually ate. For example, archaeology provides evidence for changes in the cultural significance of Jewish prohibitions of pork. In biblical Israel, the pork prohibition did not really differentiate Israelites from their neighbors, who did not eat that much pork. Only in the Romanized Mediterranean world, when pork consumption was so ubiquitous that “pig was meat,” did Jewish abhorrence of eating pork become a significant cultural marker distinguishing Jews from non-Jews.⁶¹ Archaeological evidence also shows that Jews hardly differed from their neighbors in the technologies of their cultivation, preparation, and consumption of the three principal nonmeat staples of the Mediterranean: bread, olive oil, and wine.⁶² Hence, more weight has to be given to the nuanced details, to the different explicit interpretations of these otherwise similar activities to locate how (if at all) eating differentiated Jews from non-Jews. The religious studies programs where many Jewish food historians were trained tend to promote a “worldview” approach that views human cultures as systems of myths, rituals, experiences, ethics, social institutions, and doctrines.⁶³ We are predisposed to look for the *meaning* of Jewish food practices within such systems and to stress textual analysis as an important way to understand these idealized constructions of Jewish eating and identity. Finally, for some of us personally committed to a Jewish life and Jewish continuity, a religious interest in spirituality for its own sake motivates or otherwise colors our Jewish food studies. There is no real dichotomy, then, between “bread from heaven” and “bread from the earth” in these holistic, systemic, worldview approaches to Jewish food history, if one sees them both as rooted and integrated in the same evolving set of Jewish national myths.

Notes

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other colleagues in the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Seminar on Meals in the Greco-Roman World, my student research assistant Sophie Vener, my lunch companions in the Wheaton College Faculty Dining Room, and conversation partners at the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, without whom the ideas expressed here would never have come to fruition.

1. “Bread from heaven” alludes to the biblical accounts of the miracle of manna, e.g., Exodus 16:4: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you.’” “Bread from the earth” is from the Jewish blessing *Ha-motzi* over bread: “Blessed are You Lord our God . . . who brings forth bread from the earth.”
2. Of the twenty or so recent books or scholars whose contributions to Jewish food history I have found particularly useful, I would roughly categorize them as follows:

TEXT-CENTERED: Bokser, 1984; Tabory, 1996; Hecker, 2005; Kraemer, 2009; Rosenblum, 2010; Vais, 2010; Freidenreich, 2011, and most of Susan Weingarten’s articles on food from the Talmudic period.

PERFORMANCE-CENTERED: J. Cooper, 1993; Joselit, 1994; Gitlitz and Davidson, 1999; Roden, 1996; Diner, 2001; Deutsch, 2008; Fishkoff, 2010; G. Marks, 2010; *Ruth Abusch-Magder’s work on Jewish women and food in Germany and America (e.g., 2002); and Lara Rabinovitch’s forthcoming dissertation on Romanian Jewish delis in New York City and Montreal. They are practice centered* and pay particular attention to material evidence.

ANTHOLOGIES OF JEWISH FOOD STUDIES: *In Brenner and van Henten’s collection of essays “Food and Drink in the Biblical Worlds” (1999), most are text centered. In the “Gender, Food, and Survival” volume of Nashim (Joseph, 2002), most of the articles are performance centered. In Food and Judaism (Greenspoon et al., 2004), there’s an even balance between text-centered and performance-centered contributions. Most of the essays in the Koscher & Co.: über Essen und Religion exhibit book from the Jewish Museum in Berlin focus on material culture (Friedlander and Kugelmann, 2009); likewise, food-related essays by Joselit and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for the Getting Comfortable in New York exhibit book of the Jewish Museum of New York (Joselit et al., 1990). Not surprisingly, studies of biblical, rabbinic, and medieval Jewish food practices are almost all text centered, while those focusing on modern American Jewish immigrant and Jewish women’s food practices are mostly performance and material culture centered.*

INTEGRATED STUDIES: Two books, Marcus, 1996, and Kogman-Appel, 2006, influenced by Bynum, 1991, make a point of integrating documentary sources with material culture, especially medieval art, in their analysis of medieval Jewish eating rituals.

REVIEW ESSAYS: Two recent review essays on topics in Jewish food history—Brumberg-Kraus, 2005, on ancient meals in Jewish studies scholarship,

and Roth, 2010, on contemporary Jewish cookbooks—reflect primarily text-centered approaches.

TRANSLATIONS: English translations of the classic Jewish sources like the Bible and Talmud make them easily accessible. And there are many primary sources for modern Jewish food history in English or other modern European languages. However, now two Hebrew primary sources specifically focused on Jewish eating traditions are available in English, Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher's fourteenth-century mystical manual of eating, *Shulhan Shel Arba* [*Table of Four*] (Bahya ben Asher Hlava, 2010), and the seventeenth-century *Peri Ez Hadar: Fruit of the Tree of Splendor* (Krassen, 1992), the source for modern Tu Bishvat seders. Both prescribe rituals where certain food texts from the Bible and rabbinic literature are to be recited or discussed while eating. They are particularly useful resources for nonhalakhic, aggadic, that is, *mythic* Jewish eating traditions, both because they anthologize less familiar biblical and rabbinic food texts and because they interpret and apply these texts in their own imaginative kabbalistic way. There is more to classic Jewish views about food than the laws of kashrut.

3. Douglas, 1972; Douglas, 1966; Goody, 1982; Geertz, 1973; Geertz, 1983; Bourdieu, 1984; Bynum, 1987; Bynum, 1991; Rozin, 1991; Rozin and Haidt, 1997; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993; Counihan and van Esterik, 1997; Smart, 2000; Appadurai, 1988; Montanari, 1994; Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Seminar on Meals in the Greco-Roman World (Harland, 2010).
4. Flandrin and Montanari, 1999; Montanari, 1994; Freedman, 2007.
5. Brillat-Savarin, 1999, 1.
6. See note 2.
7. This formulation comes from the curriculum of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where I received my ordination, but it's pretty standard, with some variations on modern and contemporary periods.
8. Yitzhak Baer (1968), one of the most important Jewish historians of the twentieth century, argues that this indeed is *the* fundamental issue in modern Jewish historiography.
9. E.g., Bokser, 1984; Kraemer, 2007; Rosenblum, 2010; Tabory, 1995; Vais, 2010; and Weingarten's articles.
10. E.g., Deutsch, 2008; Diner, 2001; Fishkoff, 2010; Joselit, 1994; *Abusch-Magder, 2002; and Rabinovitch's forthcoming dissertation on Romanian delicatensens in North America.*
11. E.g., Brumberg-Kraus, 1999a; Brumberg-Kraus, 1999b; Brumberg-Kraus, 2001; Freidenreich, 2011; Hecker, 2005; Kogman-Appel, 2006; Marcus, 1996.
12. DeSilva, 1996; Ferst, 2011; Raviv, 2003; and Dafna Hirsch's major research project on hummus in Israeli culture and national identity (in progress).
13. Jews who were living in the Iberian Peninsula, or who resettled in the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East, after the expulsions of the 1490s.

14. Cooper, 1993.
15. Kraemer, 2009, 2.
16. Diner, 2001, 4.
17. Diner, 2001, 224, 224–25.
18. Kraemer, 2009, 2, 3.
19. Kraemer, 2009, 6 (my emphasis).
20. Kraemer, 2009, 7–8.
21. Comparing Kraemer’s book to Rosenblum, 2010, Jacob Neusner, a leading scholar of rabbinic literature, contrasts (and prefers) Kraemer’s “documentary”-based study of the evolution of Jewish food laws to Rosenblum’s “anthropological exegesis” of these same sources.
22. Kraemer, 2009, 4–5.
23. Kraemer, 2009, 4, 143–45.
24. Kraemer, 2009, 145.
25. Hecker, 2005, 95–96.
26. Hecker, 2005, 96, referring to Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla’s interpretation in *Sha’arei Orah*, 2:11–12 of the Talmudic passage b. Pesahim 49b: “It is forbidden for an ignoramus (*am ha-aretz*) to eat meat. . . . Anyone who is engaged with the Torah is permitted to eat meat and anyone who is not engaged in Torah is forbidden to eat meat.” For a detailed study of the transformation of this tradition over time, see Brumberg-Kraus, 1999a.
27. Hecker, 2005, 97.
28. Marcus, 1996, 77–78.
29. Geertz’s cultural anthropological studies (1973) and Bynum’s study of medieval Eucharistic and women’s spirituality (1987) feature prominently in his bibliography and arguments throughout the book.
30. Marcus, 1996, 11.
31. Marcus, 1996, 11–12.
32. Marcus, 1996, 6.
33. Marcus, 1996, 6. He sees this as a tendency of medieval Ashkenazic Jewry. I see it also in the kabbalists of Spain and in most traditional Jewish food rituals, like Sabbath meals and Passover and Tu Bishvat seders in general. See Brumberg-Kraus, 2001 and 2010.
34. Rosenblum, 2010, 6.
35. Rosenblum, 2010, 7, 7–8, 186.
36. Rosenblum, 2010, 7.
37. Rosenblum, 2010, 186–87.
38. Rosenblum, 2010, 148. In the Tannaitic sources he cites, the distinction is between a *haber* and an *‘am ha-aretz*. Who exactly the *haberim* are is a controversial subject in Jewish studies, so Rosenblum (2010, 147), citing Jaffee (2006, 160), is appropriately precise in qualifying his use of these Tannaitic traditions. This demonstrates the author’s knowledge of modern critical study of rabbinic texts. He acknowledges the problems with using them to derive history and

argues how to surmount them. In contrast, Cooper (1993) does not seem conversant with the recent historical-critical textual study of biblical and especially Talmudic literature (e.g., Neusner, 1979) and takes too much of what they say at face value. Hence many Jewish studies scholars interested in Jewish food history are rather lukewarm about his book.

39. E.g., Diner, Abusch-Magder, Joselit, Joseph, and Roth.
40. Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, 131.
41. Rosenblum, 2010, 46.
42. Rosenblum, 2010, 47, 48, alluding to a chapter title in M. Harris, 1998, 67–87. For this phenomenon in the medieval European context, see Fabre-Vassas, 1997.
43. Rosenblum, 2010, 59. Contrast this to Cooper, 1993, 15. He treats the imaginary Jewish food manna in a theoretically less sophisticated way, simply classifying it as a “Biblical food.” He offers some analogies to real things, like plant lice secretions or lichens said to be eaten in the Middle East, and then rejects them.
44. Roth, 2010, 88.
45. Except the Lubavitch Hasidic authors and publishers of the first of the five cookbooks he focuses on, Esther Blau et al., 1990. The other four are C. Marks, 1992; G. Marks, 1996; Roden, 1996; Levy, 2000.
46. Roth, 2010, 90–91.
47. Roth, 2010, 87.
48. Appadurai, 1988, to whom Roth (2010, 66, 75) refers.
49. Roth, 2010, 75, 87.
50. G. Marks, 2010, xi.
51. The *Shulhan Arukh* (“The Set Table”), composed by Rabbi Joseph Caro in 1563, is the standard authoritative codification of Jewish law.
52. Roth, 2010, 80–83, on G. Marks’s cookbook (1996), is apropos here, too.
53. G. Marks, 2010, xi. *Clal Yisrael* is a Jewish insider term connoting a unified Jewish people, despite their demographic and ideological diversity.
54. The term is from Raphael, 1993.
55. Roth, 2010; Fishkoff, 2010.
56. Hersh, 2011, as reported in Fabricant, 2011. DeSilva, 1996, is an edition of recipes found in a manuscript hidden by Jewish inmates of the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Jewish women in the camp remembered and transcribed the recipes they used to cook before they were imprisoned, as a form of spiritual resistance against the material deprivation and dehumanization they suffered in the camp. It is not really meant to be used as a cookbook per se. That is not the case with the recipes in a *Drizzle of Honey* (Gitlitz and Davidson, 1999), in part reconstructed from transcripts of testimony forced from victims of the Spanish Inquisition.
57. See Fishkoff, 2010.
58. Pollan, 2007; Pollan, 2008.

59. “Kitchen Judaism” is Joselit’s term (1994, 171).
60. E.g., Meyers, 2002; Joselit et al., 1990; Friedlander and Kugelman, 2009.
61. Kraemer, 2009, 18–19, 32–33, and the sources he cites.
62. Rosenblum, 2010, 17–33, and the sources he cites.
63. E.g., Smart, 2000; Geertz, 1973; Geertz, 1983.