How Is Jewish Identity Manifested through Food?

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Food is often imbued with significance beyond that of its immediate nutritional value; in many instances it serves as a social symbol that communicates both individual and group identity. Barthes (1997) explains, “To eat is a behavior that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signalizing other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (p. 20). The disparate cultures of humankind abound with evidence of this dynamic role of food. Parry (1985) notes of Hindu culture, “A man is what he eats. Not only is his bodily substance created out of food, but so is his moral disposition” (p. 615). Similar are the writings of Braudel (1973) and Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), respectively: “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are,” (p. 66) and “The beauty and purity of *we* are embodied doubly in the body of the people and in the food that represents them” (p. 131). The capacity of food to bespeak identity is exemplified in Judaism, owing to the consistency with which Jewish identity has been built upon food practices throughout history. Rosenblum (2010a) explains, “Jews are understood to eat certain foods and to have a unique foodway that, via ingestion, embodies them as Jews” (p. 11). Although the passage of time has led to considerable changes in the essence of the Jewish identity affirmed within the pages of the Hebrew Bible, it has not affected the role of food as a marker of that identity. In fact, throughout history, food has endured as one of the most powerful symbols through which Jewish people construct their evolving identities (Kalcik, 1984).

The nature of this relationship is substantiated by an abundance of research, of which the overall claim is that food is a fundamental ingredient in the formation of human identity. This concept of identity, which can be broadly defined following Stern (1994) as “the perception and experience of a person’s self in its lived dimensions” (p. xiv), extends from the level of the individual to that of the group. Likewise, the consumption of food concerns both

the individual and the group; it is a multidimensional process that plays a powerful role in the way in which human beings think of themselves and others (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993). Furthermore, the singular power of food in the process of identity formation owes to the complex nature of the human relationship to food. Food is central to individual identity in that any human individual is "constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate" (Fischler, 1988, p. 275). The consumption of food, apart from its role as a biological necessity, has a distinct social component (Douglas, 1997). Not only does food provide nourishment for human beings, it also acts as a signifier due to the fact that "human organisms are conscious and they share representation" (Fischler, 1988, p. 276). In addition to the integral role it plays in the formation of individual identities, food is also central to the idea of a collective identity. Fischler (1988), in his comprehensive elucidation on the nature of the relationship between food and identity, explains, "The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently" (p. 275). Indeed, a people's cuisine has the ability to communicate group association and dissociation (Rosenblum, 2010a). Often times, it is food that marks the boundary between the "collective self" and the "other" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, p. 3). The power of food as a marker of identity can be attributed to the very basic process of eating it, during which the two facets of identity, self and collective, are constructed simultaneously: "First, each member of the social group consumes the food, which becomes part of his or her body. The important food becomes embodied in each individual. Second, the food is consumed by individual members of the social group who eat the food together" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, p. 129-130).

The process of identity formation though food consumption, a phenomenon by means of which social distinctions are created and distinct communities are enacted and maintained, is epitomized in Judaism. In the case of Jewish identity, the tremendously powerful influence of food can be traced back to the profusion of food taboos contained within the Hebrew Bible (Rosenblum, 2010a). Indeed, Kraut (2004) maintains, "No ethnic group has more ritual foodways and taboos than the Jews" (p. 416). Jewish religious injunction requires the ritual consumption of a particular food or beverage on almost every holiday on the Jewish calendar. Notably, at Passover, the Jewish festival that commemorates the biblical story of the Exodus, Jewish people must partake of a ritual meal called the Seder, every part of which is prescribed by religious law. Each part of the meal is meant to symbolize a specific privation and hardship that the Jewish people had to endure during that moment in history. Apart from the Seder, the weeklong festival of Passover consists of the adherence to a rigid set of rules concerning dietary abstention. Specifically, the consumption, keeping, and owning of "chametz," or leavened bread, is strictly forbidden for the duration of the holiday (Kraut, 2004). Furthermore, religious injunction commands the daily observance of the laws of Kashrut, extensive and complex rules that define what is and what is not fit for consumption (Kraut, 2004). Notable examples of the laws of Kashrut, which are much too exhaustive to list in their entirety, include the proscription of pork and of the combination of meat and dairy products into one single meal. These dietary laws exist to help individual Jews identify with the Jewish people (Pollock & Siegal, 1983). In fact, Brumberg-Kraus (2002) contends that one of the primary reasons that God commanded these laws was to distinguish the Jews from all the other nations of the world. Sources dating back to antiquity illustrate the success of this endeavor, not only for Jews themselves but for non-Jews as well. Rosenblum (2010b) notes of

Greek and Roman sources that the absence of pig marks "Jewish cuisine (and thus Judaism)," and of early Jewish and rabbinic sources that the presence of pig marks "non-Jewish cuisine (and thus Non-Judaism)" (p. 95). As such, pork, beginning early on, "becomes a perspectival marker of Self and Other with respect to Judaism" (p. 95). The success of these dietary prescriptions, moreover, in constructing a discrete identity has as much to do with their corporeality as it does their religiosity. In other words, their success, at least in part, rests with the fact that the taking of food is indispensible to human survival (Rosenblum, 2010a). It is precisely for this reason that food practices, even when stripped of their religious significance, remain the most noticeable markers of identity for the Jewish people.

Indeed, food practices wholly retain their power of indication even as they move out of the realm of religious injunction. Kaplan (1991) provides a most eloquent example of this phenomenon: "In a village in Hesse the peasants enjoyed a stew-like bean soup. When questioned about what they were eating, they would laugh and say, "Today, I'm a Jew"" (p. 73). The reference here is not to any food contained in the Hebrew bible, but rather the soup in question is "cholent," a traditional Jewish stew. This anecdote sheds light on the notion that traditional or customary foods are equally powerful in signalizing Jewish identity. One other such food is "kugel," a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish dish. Nadler (2005) cites an abundance of folkloric expressions regarding kugel: "A Shabbes on Kigel iz vee a faigel on a fligel" [The Sabbath without kugel is like a bird with no wings], "Az a yidene ken kayn kugel nisht makhn kunt ihr a get" [A Jewish wife who cannot make kugel deserves to be divorced], and, of a Jew who tries without success to pass as a non-Jew, "Der kugel ligt im af'n ponim" [You can see the kugel on his countenance] (p. 208-209). These folkloric sayings point to the centrality of kugel to the Sabbath diet, but, more importantly, to the very identity of the average Eastern

European Jew (Nadler, 2005). Kraut (2004) alludes to a number of traditional foods that function in a similar manner, citing, for example, the practice of eating latkes, or potato pancakes, at Chanukah and that of eating hamantaschen, or three-cornered pastries, at Purim. These food practices highlight the importance of tradition to Jewish identity, a notion that will take on even greater significance in the American domain, as Judaism becomes decreasingly concerned with religious practice.

The relationship between food and identity moves even farther out of the realm of religiosity in the case of Judaism in America. To understand this evolution, however, it is necessary to note in some detail the unprecedented change, one of extraordinary nature considering the consistency of Jewish history, which befell the character of Judaism upon entrance into American society. Klaff (2006) attributes the change to the gradual augmentation of a phenomenon she calls "normalization." In other words, the ethnic element of Judaism began to take precedence over the religious one. This transformation was a consequence of the assimilation of Jewish immigrants into a culture in which there was little concept of the unification of religion and everyday life. In fact, the American political environment urged a much more subdued version of religion; on the one hand, it "allowed tolerance toward all religions and allowed for a variety of religious coalitions," but, on the other hand, it "discouraged extremist groups on both the left and the right from acquiring power" (p. 416). Moreover, Elias (2012) proposes that the immigrants, in the midst of so much variety, anonymity and frenzy, found it easier and more lucrative to simply forget the rules (Elias, 2012). Wenger (2011) provides another explanation for the singular phenomenon, pointing out that former religious authority figures retained little of their former jurisdiction and "Jews themselves decided whether and to what extent their lives would

revolve around the Jewish community" (p. 3). Therefore, American Jews created religious practices that were in accordance with their own needs and desires (Wenger, 2011). Eating habits and rituals followed suit and were redefined in this changing context of environmental, economic, social and cultural circumstances (Montanari, 2006).

Social customs and habits involving food were important to the immigrants, and food remained the centerpiece of the evolving Jewish identity (Kraut, 2004). In particular, kosher food persisted as a meaningful signifier of identity for American Jews regardless of their adherence to the laws of Kashrut. Kraut (2004) notes that Jews who were barely observant still avoided accompanying their non-kosher steaks with a glass of milk. Weiss (2004) illustrates this idea with an allusion to the well-known film *Fiddler on the Roof*. He explains, "For Tevia, the very essence of Jewish identity is based not simply on the performance of rules governing seemingly banal activities such as eating, but particularly on the awareness of the traditional dimension of those activities" (p. 49). A fitting example of Tevia's philosophical conviction is the existence of "kosher-style" food. Kugelmass (1990) explains, "It looks traditional but veers away from fundamental religious proscriptions concerning the proper slaughter of animals, and is thus emblematic of a stage of acculturation" (p. 59). However, that it is at odds with religious injunction is of no consequence to the purpose it ultimately serves for Jewish Americans. In other words, the consumption of "kosher-style" food and that of kosher food are but alternative means to an invariable end, that is, the evocation of a sense of identity associated with the past. The insignificance of the difference is largely due to the fact that the Jewish American identity is itself an emblem of a stage of acculturation.

Thus, the religious authenticity of food symbols as markers of Jewish identity is relatively unimportant if the symbols succeed in evoking a sense of the past in the consumer. Kugelmass (1990) explains this phenomenon by describing a section of the menu at a Sammy's restaurant, located on the Lower East Side of New York City. The section in question, supposedly a Yiddish-English dictionary, is mostly nonsense, yet no one seems to notice or, if they do notice, no one seems to care. Kugelmass (1990) expounds:

> One can easily veer away from an authentic cultural text because few if any patrons are at all familiar with what that text is. Even when they are slightly familiar with it, they are ready to accept Sammy's as a suitable substitute, a nostalgic reminder of a past from which they are largely disconnected. (p. 70-1)

Whether or not the patron of the restaurant understands Yiddish is extraneous to its function as a marker of identity. The Jewish American need only recognize that Yiddish is a Jewish language of the past to form a connection with it. Kugelmass (1990) attributes this susceptibility to the notion that, over time, the symbolic foundations of ethnicity become frail, "with the ever-decreasing knowledge and ability to participate in its rituals" (p. 71). The presence of restaurants such as Sammy's, in which "retrospectively construed practices, including cuisine, are presented as genuine, authentic traditions when they are simply latter-day inventions," relate to the urgent need of internationalized peoples to "redefine their own identities" (Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, p. 4). On the other hand, a significant number of young men and women make room for genuine traditions, such as Kashrut, in their personal lives, "primarily as a means of identifying themselves with their people" (Dresner, 1982, p. 11). Whether invented or real, the endurance of traditions involving food provide validation for the

claim that food is, in many ways, the central vehicle through which Jewish Americans maintain their identities.

The construction of a singularly Jewish-American identity coincides with the modernization of the food industry in America. In this case, the modern food industry takes advantage of the condition of the post-immigration American Jewish population, in which the individual is susceptible to the evocation of feelings of connection and prone to attach meaning to nonspecific symbols that point to Jewish history or culture. Weiss (2004) explains the practice of many packaged food companies to "construct their product identities using mythological tropes as a means to link their product with a particular idea"(p. 48). Some examples cited by Weiss (2004) of these deceitful marketing ploys include varying uses of the "mother motif" and the employment of Hebraic-style script "to connote tradition and to signal Jewish ethnicity" (p. 57). Traditional customs, beliefs, values, language, and even memories comprise the marketing materials of some kosher products (Weiss, 2004). The commercialization of Kashrut is reciprocally beneficial, for it enables the "prodigals [to] restore some kosher items to their menus without pain and effort…and [to feel] they are once again following tradition" (Gans, 1956). Jewish identity in this case forms the central domain in which food is tied to notions of the past (Holtzman, 2006). Moreover, the distinctive interpretations of such advertisements as they relate to personal experience calls to mind Horowitz's notion of "the way in which American Jews are Jewish" (as cited in Klaff, 2006, p. 417). In other words, in recent years, according to Horowitz, "the concept of Jewish identity has been expanded to include whatever is personally meaningful to each individual" (p. 417). Klaff (2006) goes on to cite further examples of this contention that "Americans in general are increasingly viewing their religious commitment from a unique individualistic

perspective…in addition to looking at Jewish practice and involvements in Jewish life, it is essential to examine the subjective, inner experiences of being Jewish" (p. 417).

Such an abundance of evidence confirms an unmistakable connection between food and identity formation. The ubiquity with which food assumes the role of an identity marker cross-culturally can be most readily attributed to the fact that it is fundamentally indispensible to human survival. The same can be said of the historical continuity of this role of food in certain cultures, like Judaism for example, regardless of their having been transformed with the passage of time. Furthermore, identity is not passive, but rather, like the act of eating, it is an active social practice (Rosenblum, 2010a). In the arena of Judaism, the coupling of food practices and Jewish identity in antiquity can be ascribed to the exalted status bestowed upon food by the Hebrew Bible. Over time, moreover, even as social, cultural, and environmental changes have produced something of a new species of Judaism, food has remained in the vanguard of identity creation.

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