

Introduction

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Why Food and Religion

What are the advantages of attempting to understand a religion through the apparent detour of food? One reason is that food's location at the intersection of nature and culture invites us to think about religion from the perspective of multiple disciplines and in a more integrated way. Food is most obviously a necessity fixed by both biological requirements and cravings, but it is simply wrong to imagine that food is *only* a vehicle to provide nutrients to the body and satisfy appetites. If I enjoy a potato latke with a festive Hanukkah meal, it is not as if I first experience a certain caloric need being met and a certain sensual satisfaction, and then, after those needs and desires are fulfilled, I additionally experience a second-order sense of connection to Jewish traditions and community. We can analytically separate the nutritional and communal benefits of a potato latke, but in my experience of eating one—or serving one to my niece or nephew, for that matter—the satisfaction of biological needs and cultural connections are impossible to disentangle. “Food is culture, habit, and identity,” as Jonathan Safran Foer put it,¹ or as Hasia Diner explains, “Talking about food is a way of talking about family, childhood, community,” and more.²

Whatever material impacts food may have on the world—by providing nutrients, influencing immune systems, effecting longevity, shaping the lived-in environment, setting up particular human-animal interactions, and more—are invariably altered, slowed, amplified, or even obfuscated to generate diverse systems that construct identity and meaning. Food also provides a wieldy symbolic field that is called upon to construct sex and gender, social status, racialized identities, and even the line that distinguishes humans from other animals.³

This book explores food in Jewish communities and texts while also attending to these more universal features of food as a vehicle for human

meaning making—that is, food as a vehicle for *religion*. Food is not important in only some cultures; food is important in all cultures. The kind of creature we humans are simply requires that food be a vehicle for meaning making. From the perspective of food studies and religious studies, humans eat the way they do for complex reasons that are never simply the result of nutritional drives or taste preferences. Despite the fact that some individuals or religions explicitly embrace food as part of their identity and others claim that their food habits are essentially pragmatic, scientific, “healthy,” or simply unimportant, from this scholarly perspective, food is a constitutive part of the hardware of human meaning making. The person who says “I’ll eat anything” is making a statement of meaning as much as the person who follows a highly restrictive food regime (and likely the person who says “I’ll eat anything” doesn’t mean that literally in any case). Religion and food are always intermixed, and examining this intermixture in any one tradition, Judaism in the case of this book, can provide some insights into a more or less universal human process of making meaning *via culinaria*.

Bread Is More Than Bread Alone

The way in which human foodways both create and reflect different forms of human society, religious and otherwise, can be brought into sharp relief by considering the possibly immense impacts of very basic, fundamental features of human diets generally taken for granted—like the fact that humans now function as apex predators (i.e., at the top of the food chain). In his one-volume history of *Homo sapiens*, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari speculates that much of what we consider uniquely human in comparison to other now extinct members of the genus *Homo* boils down to a change in our eating (and being eaten) patterns. Harari argues that a key to understanding humanity lies in understanding *Homo sapiens*’ ecologically unusual leap to the top of the food chain about one hundred thousand years ago. According to Harari, data suggest that no previous hominid species had risen beyond the middle of the food chain despite two million years in which hominids had “large brain[s], the use of tools, superior learning abilities and complex social structures.”⁴ Harari ultimately suggests that if we thought

big brains made humans unique, they might not be as important as our location in the food chain. The leap from the middle to the top of the food chain, argues Harari, “is a key to understanding our history and psychology. . . . Other animals at the top of the pyramid . . . evolved into that position very gradually, over millions of years. . . . In contrast, humankind ascended to the top so quickly that the ecosystem was not given time to adjust. Most top predators of the planet are majestic creatures. Millions of years of dominion have filled them with self-confidence. *Sapiens* by contrast is more like a banana republic dictator.”⁵

Harari goes on to suggest that this prehistoric shift in food patterns was the first of several key changes around food that have continued to shape our species. He even goes so far as to suggest that the leap to the top of the food chain that is roughly concurrent with the rise of *Homo sapiens* as a distinct species can account for some wars and ecological problems visible today. “Having so recently been one of the underdogs of the savannah,” Harari theorizes, “we are full of fears and anxieties over our position, which makes us doubly cruel and dangerous. Many historical calamities, from deadly wars to ecological catastrophes, have resulted from this over-hasty jump.”⁶

A perhaps unlikely ally of Harari in his case that being at the top of the food chain had profound repercussions for humanity is the Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, generally considered a founding figure of religious studies as a contemporary discipline. Eliade speculates in his most mature work of scholarship that one of the fundamental roots of religion was that “man is the final product of a decision to kill in order to live. In short, the hominians succeeded in outstripping their ancestors by becoming flesh-eaters.”⁷ This decision to kill, Eliade theorizes, ultimately leads to the production of gender differentiation and the structure of sacrifice and helps constitute religion itself.⁸ We need not further unfold let alone agree with the details of the ultimately unprovable speculation Eliade makes—he takes more than one thousand pages to make his case—to agree with the more basic assumption that features of *Homo sapiens*’ diet have shaped humanity at a fundamental level. Even assuming that food practices are not important in the *precise* ways that Eliade or Harari speculate, it seems improbable that such enormous changes as *Homo sapiens* moving from being

a prey species to an apex predator would not ripple through the generations in some way, shaping human religions while also being shaped by them.

Perhaps even more intriguingly, it turns out that nonhuman primates, at least some other social mammals, and some bird and fish species also organize their societies in part around the shared procurement and distribution of food and often do so in regionally distinctive ways that are passed generationally from parents to their offspring rather than simply being encoded in genes.⁹ And if food is already this complex outside the human species, it becomes clearer why it is a safe assumption that bread is always more than bread alone.

Food and Being Human

As a way of arguing for the importance of giving foodways serious scholarly attention, an earlier generation of food studies scholars confidently asserted a (still often unchallenged) break that absolutely separates animal “feeding” from human “eating.” This volume, while concurring with the general conclusion that food is important, will, for reasons that will become clear, avoid such grand attempts to separate human and animal. “All animals feed but humans alone eat,” reads the opening line of Farb and Armelagos’s seminal book *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating*, which has shaped food studies since its publication in 1980.¹⁰ “A dog wolfs down every meal in the same way,” Farb and Armelagos continue, “but humans behave in a variety of ways while eating.”¹¹ In the details of their arguments, which include meaningful engagement with the scientific literature on animal behavior, even Farb and Armelagos do not try to defend the absurd assertion that animals consume “every meal in the same way,” but they do try to defend an absolute line between human and animals even while acknowledging considerable complexity in animal “feeding.” At stake in all the scholarly effort they expend to defend the human/animal binary in relation to food is less the actual data about ways that various animal species, including humans, actually eat and more their attempt to overcome a cultural bias that suggests that the consumption of food cannot possibly be interesting enough to merit study and reflection if it has anything in common with animal behavior. That is, in separating animal feeding

and human eating and announcing that they are studying the latter and not the former, Farb and Armelagos are saying, in one manner of speaking, that human eating is filled with meaning.

Farb and Armelagos have to go out of their way to make a compelling case that food is important in part because the dubious cultural logic of their opening line and its absolute demarcation between animal feeding and human eating suggest that careful observation of most forms of animal eating can be totally explained by simple, predictable mechanisms, which would indeed tend to make the study of food rather pedestrian. This way of thinking about food as basically mechanical and unimportant is one of the major biases that often leads people to think that food would not be a rich lens into a topic like religion. *If* eating in animals—especially those closest to humans, like other primates—was all but mechanistic, scholars would have good reason to think that much of human food behavior could be explained as a simple fulfillment of biological drives, and there would be good reason to be skeptical of a book like this that wants to connect a religious tradition intimately with the culinary traditions of its practitioners.

As it turns out, far earlier than the appearance of humans on the evolutionary tree, food procurement and consumption became a more interesting and complicated affair than Farb and Armelagos's opening line implies. And when we realize this long evolutionary imbrication of food, social formation, communication, and even culture making, it becomes clearer why it makes all the sense in the world to examine a religious tradition in connection with food. For example, the primatologist Craig Stanford points out that “as far back as the 1960s, the American primatologist Geza Teleki proposed that the predatory behavior of the Gombe chimpanzees [who hunt particular monkey species] had a strong social basis. The Dutch primatologist Adrian Kortlandt suggested that hunting was a form of social display, in which male chimpanzees revealed their prowess to other members of the community. . . . [And] Richard Wrangham . . . noticed that certain aspects of their hunting behavior could not be accounted for by nutritional needs alone.”¹² It is now a matter of consensus among primatologists that the only way to explain chimpanzee behavior in relation to hunting and some other food-related practices is to assume that they, like us, have cultures (in the sense of extrabiological information transmitted generationally). And as

Stanford goes on to reflect, if this is true, then we can also conclude that “the role of hunting in the lives of the earliest hominids [the evolutionary ancestors of *Homo sapiens*] was probably as complex and politically charged as it is in modern chimpanzees. . . . When [for example] we ask the question, ‘when did meat become an important part of the human diet?’ we should look well before the evolutionary split between apes and human beings in our own family tree.”¹³ If Stanford is right, food, perhaps meat especially, as discussed in this volume in the chapter I author, does not come to humans as simply a blank slate serving a pure animal-biological mandate but is already shot through with layers of socially constructed meanings, some perhaps forged before humans were humans. Even Farb and Armelagos are ready to admit on the force of evidence like this that “the human tendency to switch to animal foods whenever these become available is apparently a legacy from primate ancestors.”¹⁴

From the perspective of this volume, it is simply not important to distinguish between features of human foodways that are “a legacy from primate ancestors” and ones that are products of cultural “refinement.” Ironically, instead of helping us understand universal features of human behavior, the entire project of producing knowledge about humanity by dividing the human—or dividing human foodways—into allegedly unimportant animal parts that can be explained by neuroscientists and primatologists and allegedly more refined uniquely human parts that require the special tools of the social scientist and scholar of the humanities to explain is itself hopelessly wed to a culturally specific way of understanding that belongs to the Western intellectual tradition. This way of thinking is, for example, foreign to the worldview found in the Hebrew Bible and parts of other Jewish texts that simply lack anything like the kind of human/animal binary familiar to many later Jewish texts and to contemporary ears. For purposes of this volume, foodways are interesting as such; we do not need, like Farb and Armelagos, to first prove that a food practice is uniquely human—untainted by “primitive,” “biological,” “animal” forces—to find its study intellectually enriching.

The human construction of foodways perhaps may be best understood by ceasing to subdivide this process into cultural bits and non-cultural bits (human-cultural aspects versus biological-animal aspects of foodways) in the manner Farb and Armelagos encourage. Like the

process of critically understanding the workings of race and gender in contemporary society, the critical understanding of foodways today is at its best when it looks skeptically at our commonsense division of the world into us and them, male and female, culture and nature, human and animal, Jewish and non-Jewish, or, for that matter, features of foodways that are “uniquely human” and those that are part of our “primate legacy,” a division that usually ends up imagining the “human” on the model of a white, masculine, Eurocentric ideal.¹⁵

Fortunately, there are more intellectually fruitful paths into food studies. Consider, instead, attending to the numerous intertwinements among the construction of foodways, the construction of gender, and the construction of communal and often racialized borderlines. Eating certain foods may be encoded as particularly masculine or feminine—contrast the different gender associations with barbecue and salad in contemporary America. Decades of studies have explored what the American feminist scholar and animal advocate Carol Adams has called the “sexual politics of meat”¹⁶—the way in which eating meat can be encoded to reinforce structures that oppress women. Religious food laws can amplify such gender distinctions or be a source of relative egalitarianism. Who prepares food and who makes economic decisions over a family’s food purchases is also gendered; consider in this volume Rachel Gross’s discussion of Procter & Gamble’s targeted marketing of Crisco to Jewish women as part of a campaign to convince Americans that they wanted to buy hydrogenated vegetable oil.

Especially relevant for a consideration of Jewish traditions, food may be claimed by often competing ethnic, national, or religious communities. Consider debates about whether hummus is Israeli, Lebanese, or pan-Arab¹⁷ or the use of falafel to help construct “the power struggles and moral dilemmas, the negotiation of religious and ideological affiliations” in modern Israel.¹⁸ In this volume, Katalin Rac’s discussion of cholent charts its transformation from a specialty dish served on the Jewish Sabbath to a secular Hungarian favorite. Particular foodways may be embraced as a part of cultural identity or forcibly associated with a particular group in a process of racialization, such as colonial depictions of Indians as weak because they ate lots of rice and little meat,¹⁹ racist American stereotypes portraying black people as obsessed with chicken,²⁰ or in this volume, the often anti-Jewish association of Jews

and garlic discussed by Jordan Rosenblum. In a variation on this process discussed in this volume by David Freidenreich, some foods that rabbinic tradition had deliberately associated with Jewish ritual, like the use of unleavened bread (matzah) on Passover, were avoided by some medieval Christians out of fear they might acquire the negative characteristics they associated with Jews by contagion. Examples could be almost endlessly proliferated. In sum, food is a central node in the nexus of influences that shape the kind of creatures humans are today: gendered, stratified, divided into different groups on the basis of concepts like race and ethnicity, committed to different values, and attached to particular religious identities.

Food and Jewish Traditions

So what does it mean to be a book about these important aspects of food *and Judaism*? On the one hand, this book is about Jewish traditions, and food functions as the focal point for examining different forms of Judaism, different “Judaisms.”²¹ As its chapters progress, the book considers the history of Jewish foodways; studies in food and culture exploring how Jewish communities have been imagined alongside garlic, schmaltz (rendered chicken fat), and other foods; and finally how Jewish communities and texts engage the ethical questions raised by food. In this sense, this is a book about how the making of different Judaisms and the making of Jewish meals have been intertwined throughout history and in contemporary Jewish practices.

On the other hand, this book is also a study of what we might call the *religious dimensions of food*, and the case of Judaism serves as an exemplum in a wide-ranging scholarly discussion of how we might best think about the intersection of food and religion. This book deals with not only Jewish studies but also both religious studies and food studies—interdisciplinary fields that deal respectively with the nature of religion and food. As its chapters progress, the book examines how particular human communities, in this case Jewish communities, move through history, construct identity, negotiate modernity, define authenticity, draw social boundaries, and enact their ethical lives—that is, how they make meaning—through food. In this sense, this is also a

book about how human beings make meaning and thus organize society through food, activities that are often best described as religious.

This book does not presume a single definition of religion or Judaism, but it does challenge certain commonsense ideas that can weaken our ability to accurately perceive the phenomena of religion generally and Jewish traditions in particular. Against the view that food is a secondary concern for understanding a religious tradition, this volume suggests that no major historical development in Jewish life can be fully understood without reference to food. Against the view that religion is primarily about beliefs, this volume uncovers a robust intertwinement of the culinary and the processes of meaning making in the Jewish case. And against the view that food is an apolitical, personal matter, this volume shows that in the Jewish context, questions about food—and, as we will see, especially about animal food—are sites of both important ethical consensus and disagreement.

The book's three parts respectively include four chronologically arranged historical overviews by period specialists²² (first part), six studies in food and culture built around particular foods and theoretical questions (second part), and seven chapters addressing ethical issues (third and final part). The first part, edited by Jody Myers, provides the historical and textual overview that is necessary to ground any discussion of food and Jewish traditions. The first chapter by Elaine Goodfriend covers foodways during the thousand or so years before the Common Era as indicated by the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and historical sources. The second chapter by David Kraemer describes the crucial changes in foodways during the first nine centuries of the Common Era as expressed through classical rabbinic literature such as the Mishnah and Talmud. The third chapter by Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus focuses on developments in the ninth to the fifteenth century as they appear in medieval Jewish legal (halakhic), liturgical, and mystical (kabbalistic) writings. Taking us up to the present moment, the fourth chapter by Jody Myers surveys the effects on Jewish foodways wrought by the sweeping changes during the last five centuries associated with migrations and modernization. Myers's chapter in particular provides a counterweight to presently popular versions of Jewish food history that often function simply as "a celebration of kosher food's increasing

acceptance among food manufactures and appeal to a largely non-Jewish population”—a narrative that historian Roger Horowitz demonstrates has been “relentlessly promoted” by business interests and taken at face value by a range of popular books and articles.²³

The second part, edited by Jordan D. Rosenblum, provides case studies of the religious dimension of foods in different Jewish contexts, including garlic (Rosenblum), wine (Freidenreich and Susan Marks), Crisco and schmaltz (R. Gross), peanut oil (Zev Eleff), and cholent (Rac). This part deals with a range of time periods, and each chapter addresses not only a particular food but also a theoretical issue of broader interest in the study of religion, including chapters that explore food as a metonym for religious identity (Rosenblum), food and industrialization (R. Gross), and food and authenticity (Eleff). If the first part documents how food has been essential to Israelite and Jewish cultures historically, the second part demonstrates this at a closer range while also providing additional examples for reflection.

Three chapters in the second part give special weight to the processes by which food creates and erases cultural borders (Freidenreich, Marks, and Rac). David Freidenreich provides a wide-ranging study demonstrating how ideas about Jewishness play important roles in the construction of Christian and Islamic identity, especially in relation to wine. Susan Marks also focuses on wine to reconsider received wisdom about just how strict ancient Jewish communities were in separating themselves through drinking practices, finding more common ground than previously thought. While Freidenreich’s and Marks’s chapters provide grounding on how a highly regulated food, wine, was used to construct Jewishness (and by extension Christian and Islamic identity), Katalin Rac explores how a dish once associated with Judaism became secularized into a contemporary Hungarian favorite.

The final part, which I edited, focuses on moral and ethical questions generated by and answered through Jewish engagements with food. This part includes two chapters dealing with gardening, farming, and Jewish ethics (Jennifer Thompson and Adrienne Krone); three chapters dealing with ethical issues as they appear in connection with kosher food both in the Bible (Daniel Weiss) and today (Elliot Ratzman and Moses Pava); and two chapters that provide additional novel approaches to everyday eating and Jewish ethics in the contemporary period, including the

ethics of consumption amid plenty (Jonathan Crane) and the ethical treatment of farmed animals (myself).

Overcoming Resistance to Studying Food and Religion

To take food seriously in this way is relatively new in the Western academy. The influential American scholar of food studies Warren Belasco argues that the field of food studies is “inherently subversive” and that “to study food often requires us to cross disciplinary boundaries and to ask inconvenient questions.”²⁴ Belasco and other founders of food studies like American scholars Sidney Mintz and Marion Nestle—all three of whom are, perhaps not incidentally, Jewish—swam against the tide to establish the study of food as a major area of both academic research and serious discussion in the public square. In his groundbreaking studies of sugar’s massive sociopolitical influence, Mintz builds on the work of anthropology pioneers like Claude Lévi-Strauss to argue that sugar and the commodity market that arose with it was “one of the massive demographic forces in world history,” shaping the slave trade, colonialism, and global capitalism.²⁵ In his now classic book *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz defended the study of foods, arguing that “just such homely, everyday substances [as sugar] may help us to clarify both how the world changes from what it was to what it may become, and how it manages at the same time to stay in certain regards very much the same.”²⁶ Following the lead of these scholars but focusing specifically on religion and Jewish traditions, this book resists powerful currents in contemporary Western thought that suggest that the kind of meaning that counts as religious is found in the contents of holy books but not the contents of soup.

Influential voices within Western culture have created a set of associations in which religion—or at least the “right” kind of religion—is associated more with belief than with ritual, more with ideas than practices, and more with the often male-dominated world of politics than the often female-dominated world of cooking. All this functions to make it difficult to see the way that producing and consuming of food intersects with the processes that many of us would want to associate with religion: creating human identity, building communal boundaries, structuring the human relationship with life, and discerning ethical ideals.

If food is as central to understanding religion as this book argues, why is it that both common sense and scholarship have suggested to us that food and religion have little to do with one another? It turns out that neglect of food in the study of religion has a particular relationship to the way Christian communities who have shaped the Western academic study of religion have imagined Jewish traditions. Following a bias especially strong within some streams of Protestant Christianity and early Reform Judaism that have tended to diminish the importance of dietary practice, scholars of religion, including many scholars of Jewish studies, have historically gravitated toward sacred texts, narratives, social history, law, belief, and philosophical systems as the most profound vehicles through which to explore religion. Food was inevitably mentioned in the course of addressing these allegedly more important matters but was not itself seen as an important locus of meaning. As the New Testament books of Mark (7:15) and Matthew (15:11) had suggested, what went into people's mouths seemed far less interesting than what came out. However true it may be from a certain theological vantage that food is of little importance to ultimate matters like salvation, this volume disagrees with Mark and Matthew insofar as it insists that food and dietary practices are a major location for meaning making. Indeed, this book suggests that it is perhaps only in recognizing the descriptive fact of how profoundly food does shape religious phenomena that one might come to recognize the full significance of theological claims like those of Mark and Matthew.

Jewish Foodways and Academic Scholarship

At the risk of oversimplifying a long and often violent history, certain streams of Christian polemic against Judaism and, later, Christian polemics against Islam cast food practices as a lower-order form of religion. In this often overtly hostile narrative, rabbinic traditions were viewed as so preoccupied with food rules—and with rules and law more generally—that Jews were blind to the true spiritual truth realized in Christianity. In this reading, Jews related to food akin to the way that Farb and Armelagos imagined animals relating to food: Jews slavishly followed the dictates of outdated laws in the same way animals were condemned to slavishly follow the dictates of their biology. This basic

form of critique was voiced in some streams of early Christianity against Jews and was repeated in the medieval era by Protestant Christianity against not only Jews and Muslims but also Catholic and Eastern Orthodox forms of Christianity, and as documented by Myers, in the modern period, it has even been repeated by Reform Judaism against more traditional forms of Jewish observance.

These polemics did not totally disavow the religious importance of food but set the importance of food inside supersessionist narratives in which Judaism (or Islam, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, or more traditional Judaism) and its food laws represented a lower-order revelation superseded by a later and allegedly more mature religious insight. Thus Jews were racialized through food in a manner parallel to the way that European Christian colonial powers racialized defeated populations by attributing the success of their conquest to the allegedly superiority of their meat-heavy diets. As one nineteenth-century doctor put it, “The rice-eating Hindoo and Chinese and the potato-eating Irish peasant are kept in subjection by the well-fed English. Of the various causes that contributed to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, one of the chief was that for the first time he was brought face to face with the nation of beef-eaters, who stood still until they were killed.”²⁷ Within this large frame that often denigrated non-European, non-Anglo-Saxon, or non-Christian food practices, diverse forms of anti-Judaism imagined Jewish food practices as decadent. For example, Claudine Fabre-Vassas shows how French Christians articulated anti-Jewish ideologies by, ironically, associating Jews themselves with the animal their dietary prohibitions forbade them from eating: the pig. Not only were Jews associated with a slew of negative characteristics associated with pigs, but, Fabre-Vassas explains, “and this is the great contradiction of their [Jewish] destiny—since they deprived themselves of this meat, they were constantly seeking the closest substitute, the flesh and blood of Christian children.”²⁸ That is, Fabre-Vassas concludes that one of the most influential of all anti-Jewish ideas, the “blood libel”—the hateful accusation that Jews used and consumed Christian blood for ritual purposes—was perpetuated in part as a peculiar Christian interpretation of the dangerous effects of Jewish adherence to religious dietary law. Again, a parallel is found in the attitudes of European colonial powers toward conquered populations, who were often and inaccurately described as cannibals.²⁹

The legacy of this theological suspicion about the religious relevance of dietary practices has today been secularized into a broad attitude that food and religion are distant domains. Religion might be viewed as appearing in, say, a blessing that is *added onto* an act of food production or consumption like a blessing made over wine, but only to the extent that the blessing moves beyond the physicality of the meal itself into the realm of beliefs. Food, meals, and the embodied intra- and intercommunal social contexts that are woven together with them are, on this view, just not that important to understanding a religion. Instead, this volume will also move in the other direction, as, for example, in Marks's chapter on rabbinic libation practices, which uses the study of blessings to help reflect on the complex, lived social reality of Jewish participation in "a common banquet tradition" in which Greeks, Romans, and Christians also participated. In ways like this, the present volume resists a long scholarly and "commonsense" tradition that has ignored and hidden the importance of food.

Although there are academic scholars who have been interested in food, many of them manifest a related bias that this volume also hopes to overcome. For example, anthropologists and other scholars interested in religion who studied nonwhite cultures have historically paid considerable attention to food practices, but at least some of the time, this was precisely because they considered these human communities inferior to European societies (again, more like Farb and Armelagos's picture of animals). The racist bias went like this: if you are studying sublime religions like Christianity, food is relatively unimportant, but if you are studying "primitive" peoples, then food will be important since their culture has not yet gone beyond (superseded) a preoccupation with materiality. In this way, anti-Judaism and racism were part of a broader worldview in which meaning making through food was derided.

A focus on food was seen as a focus on the "animal" aspects of humanity, and scholars of religion have virtually without exception placed—arguably incorrectly—religion in precisely those aspects of humanity that distinguish humans from animals.³⁰ That is why it was seen as more legitimate to analyze the blessing over wine than, as this book will also do, reflect upon the lived reality of drinking wine in community. How could, the logic went, studying human physical ingestion of various species possibly add to our understanding of the most

uniquely human of activities, religion? Studying food practices was what one did to study primates and primitives—and Jews, Hindus, and other racialized religious communities—not the great world religions.

It turns out that the religious phenomenon itself was divided in two—world religions versus ethnic or national religions—in part on the basis of food. Still to this day, it is common to categorize religions in a twofold manner: on the one hand, we have the invented category of “world religions,” traditions in which food practices are allegedly not that significant.³¹ The second category consists of all the rest of the world’s religions, which are in this problematic way of thinking lumped together and called “ethnic” or “primitive” religions, what we today might call the religions of traditional peoples.³² In primitive religions, so the logic went, food practices were still crucial, owing to their generally closer approximation of an animal state. Judaism (and Hinduism) were, notably, not originally considered world religions and were only later added to the list.³³ Instead, they were seen as “ethnic” or “national” religions, tied to particular places and bound up in arcane laws—like the anachronistic practice of biblical food laws (or rules against eating cows)—that were evidence of their inferior state.³⁴ This othering of non-Christian religion also had a temporal dimension. The communities that were labeled “primitive” were, of course, the living contemporaries of the scholars who studied them, but early scholars viewed them as arrested at an early stage of development as if they were caught in some distant past while only Europeans had moved on to modernity. That is, the study of religion was once imagined in evolutionary terms, an idea now discredited. The notion was that what we now call religions of traditional peoples were representative of early religions that evolved to look like what we still call the world religions. This implied, again erroneously, that the further back one went in human history, the more important food would be in the life of any given community. This kind of thinking is part of the legacy this volume seeks to overcome.

Biblical Dietary Laws and Judaism

All these attitudes converge in explaining why the only truly massive exception to the rule that scholars of religion have neglected food is the study of biblical food law. “More thought has been given to the origins

of the ancient Hebrew dietary law than any other religion-related food topic,” writes food studies scholar Jeffrey Pilcher in a review of food and religion scholarship.³⁵ And this interest is not strictly academic; the editors’ experiences have been that if we share with a friend or colleague that our scholarship focuses on “food and Judaism,” common responses go like this: “You mean the biblical separation of milk and meat?” or “You mean sacrifices in the Bible?” as if no other intersection of religion and food of consequence had occurred in the Jewish fold since biblical times. It is important to clarify here that the Hebrew Bible does not depict or represent Jewish traditions any more than it does Christian traditions. Both traditions, of course, have a special relationship with the Hebrew Bible, but only the biblical text interpreted through the lens of Jewish or Christian interpretation makes it a Jewish or Christian book. On its own, the Hebrew Bible describes a religious tradition distinct from both Judaism and Christianity that we could (somewhat confusingly) call “ancient Judaism,” but that might be better thought about simply as “ancient Israelite religion.”³⁶

Returning to the enormous amount of scholarship and popular imagination that has been given to biblically rooted food practices, we can see that multiple biases have converged in making visible the significance of food practices in the biblical period. Judaism generally was understood as a religion of law, especially nonrational laws like food laws; thus, the association of Judaism and the Bible made it feel natural to see food practices as important in it. Moreover, from some, though by no means all, Christian theological perspectives, the biblical food laws were prior to Jesus’s revelation and thus belong to an earlier period of religion in which God was still actively commanding obedience to the food laws for his followers; this too made it feel natural to see biblical food practices as important.³⁷ After all, a Christian scholar might reason, there was some explanation why God commanded them. This theological bias had a counterpart in the allegedly nontheological study of religion where some scholars argued for the developmental view of religion discussed earlier. This bias made it feel natural to see food practices as important when studying an ancient text while still diminishing the ongoing importance of food to religion. Again, this is a way of thinking that this volume seeks to overcome.

“Jewish food” in modernity or the contemporary period is equally saturated with meaning as it was in the days when meat was obtained from the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem. The meanings are different, but food did not become a site of meaning or cease being one. To eat is to become involved in a social world and a symbolic world. Just as eating shapes the world materially whether we will it to or not or pay attention to it or not, eating also proliferates religious meanings whether the eater wills them or not and whether scholars pay attention to them or not.

Defining Jewish Food

Viewing food as a general site through which humans make meaning has a correlate: it is not obvious what food should count as specifically Jewish. If we accept the notion that food plays an important role in the processes by which all humans make meaning, it suggests we need to work hard to determine which aspects of food’s interplay with meaning deserved to be called “Jewish.” Is a bagel Jewish because it is associated with Jews in the popular imagination even if there is nothing in Jewish law that makes a bagel particularly Jewish?³⁸ Is food Jewish only when it is produced in concert with rabbinically recognized norms like the laws of *kashrut*? Is a food Jewish if it is also eaten by non-Jews? Just what is Jewish food?

For the editors of this volume, the most palatable understanding of “Jewish food” would identify it with what food studies scholars would call “Jewish cuisine.” In everyday speech, “cuisine” may refer to elite and fancy foods, but in food studies, it is widely viewed that all human communities have cuisine in the sense that all human communities make meaning through food. Following Farb and Armelagos, Belasco understands cuisine as “a shared set of ‘protocols,’ usages, communications, behaviors, etc.” that is akin to language.³⁹ Cuisine provides “a system of communication that is inculcated from birth, if not before, and is hard to change or learn once you are grown.”⁴⁰ Cuisine, in this understanding, prioritizes certain food as basic staples, dictates ways of eating or “manners,” preferences certain modes of preparation and seasoning, and much else.⁴¹ So whatever we call it, how do we define Jewish food?

The first thing we can note is that “Jewish food” is not a category indigenous to traditional Judaism like the category of kosher food. Classical Jewish law does indeed include robust laws dealing with food—most famously the kosher laws that define what foods are fit to eat—but defining a food as “kosher” does not make it “Jewish.” Indeed, a food may meet kosher requirements but be eschewed by Jews for a whole range of other halakhic, moral, or aesthetic reasons. And of course, beyond kosher law—which only a minority of Jews in America and a slight majority of Jews in Israel today claim to observe—a whole range of cultural factors shape what most Jews eat today far more profoundly than traditional law. As is the case with most cuisines, Jewish cuisine is shaped by the same three factors that food studies scholars see operative in virtually all human contexts: personal identity, convenience, and to a lesser extent, concerns with questions of responsibility—questions about supporting local businesses, sustainability, animal welfare, public health, and so forth.⁴²

Jewish Food as Kosher

These limitations notwithstanding, there are still several important distinctions in Jewish dietary practice that are frequently applicable across many Jewish populations. First, we can note the enduring influence of the prohibitions associated with kosher law. In a limited but important sense, “Jewish food” can sometimes be fruitfully defined as food shaped by kosher regulations. During much of the premodern era and still today, many Jewish communities have been out of principle or because of social habit more or less observant of these laws as interpreted by rabbinic tradition in textual compilations like the Talmud and subsequent law codes. These religious dietary laws forbid the consumption of certain animals, require Jews to slaughter animals in a specific manner, and prohibit mixing meat and dairy in foods. The “distinctly Jewish” aspects of the diets of Jews would be most discernable, then, in lands where foods eaten by non-Jews were shunned by Jewish law. For example, pork, prohibited for Jews to consume by kosher law, was the meat of choice among Eastern European Christians but forbidden to Muslims, so Jewish dietary distinctiveness was more obvious when they lived in, say, Catholic Poland compared to Islamic Morocco. Among the poor

everywhere, for whom eating meat was a luxury, differences between Jews and gentiles would not appear as great.

Jewish Food as Holiday Food

Second, “Jewish food” might also be fruitfully used to refer to food-stuffs associated with Sabbath and holiday foods. If not entirely different from everyday fare, such foods might appear different because they were shaped by symbolic meanings or prepared according to the unique requirements of Jewish law or custom. *Haroset*, for example, a Passover Seder fruit relish consisting of chopped apples, wines, and nuts (a European Jewish recipe) or chopped dates, raisins, almonds, and sesame (a recipe of the Jews of Yemen) has multiple symbolic meanings connected to the biblical Egyptian slavery narrative. Another example is the warm, hearty stew, typically made with meat, known as *hamin* or *cholent*, discussed in the chapter by Katalin Rac. It is to be eaten mid-day (Saturday) in order to enhance the joy of the Sabbath, and while its ingredients may be similar to the stews eaten by non-Jews, the Sabbath stew must be prepared before the Sabbath, kept warm until the next day without violating religious prohibitions on kindling a flame on the Sabbath, and contain ingredients that would still remain tasty after so many hours of heat.⁴³

Jewish Food as Ethnic Food

There are also factors totally unrelated to kosher law or holiday practices that have shaped understandings of “Jewish food.” There have been foods with no ostensible religious meaning that Jewish immigrants brought to their new lands, which became signs of Jewishness because they were unknown to the native non-Jewish population. Similarly, “Jewish food” might be distinctive independent of kosher and holiday practices for including nonlocal or uncommon ingredients. Jews have tended to have had a more cosmopolitan diet than their non-Jewish peers due to their exposure to foreign foods through their occupations in trade or urban settings, from their connection to the network of Jews worldwide, and from their immigrant and refugee origins. For example, in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, only Jews may have known about

the Dutch food *wafers*—in their later, American context, these were called waffles—because of the Jewish immigrants in their midst who had previously lived in the Netherlands.⁴⁴ Another example is the secular American Jewish enthusiasm for Chinese food, dating to the beginning of the twentieth century and arising from Jews' exploration of ethnic immigrant enclaves in their cities.⁴⁵

Finally, another source for distinctive Jewish eating outside of kosher and holiday practices is the communal and family-centeredness of Jewish culture that finds expression in serving distinctive foods passed down from previous generations. One might be able to discern in this practice and in these specific foods some hints of Jewish geographical origins, religious traditions and values, and nonreligious ethnic practices. Thus a discussion of Jewish food must be wide ranging, encompassing behaviors connected to Jewish religious practice as well as those indicative of Jewish cultural identity, sentimental toward the Jewish past, or that are transgressive, such as consuming bacon wrapped around a matzo ball.⁴⁶

This volume will not assume any single normative definition about what constitutes Jewish food just as it will not assume any single normative definition about what constitutes Judaism. Instead, to the extent that a given Jewish population can be clearly discerned at all, the scholars in this volume ask about its distinctive cuisines and, working from such population-level analyses, sometimes try to make more general observations that are valid across multiple Jewish populations.⁴⁷

Food and Jewish Culture in America Today

While this book provides a comprehensive consideration of food and Jewish traditions, it is the editors' hope that it also will better equip contemporary Jews who wish to engage their Jewish values or Jewish community through food to do so with greater understanding. As such, readers will notice we have given extra attention to the contemporary North American context. Jews in the contemporary Americas continue to make meaning through food in the traditional ways noted earlier, but today they are also metareflecting on food and Judaism as a source of meaning in ways that are more novel. For around a decade, American Jews have been talking about a "Jewish food movement"—a phenomenon that is only beginning to receive focused scholarly examination but

that is evident to anyone looking at recent rosters of events at mainline Jewish institutions. The chapters by Thompson and Krone touch upon this movement, which now includes explicitly food-themed events, festivals, and even an annual multiday conference that gathers Jews explicitly in the name of Jewish food to do everything from arts-and-crafts-style workshops on pickling techniques to social justice workshops that call for Jewish institutions to buy their food according to ethical guidelines that consider Jewish approaches to issues like animal welfare, environmental impact, and the treatment of workers.

This attention to food coincides with the related rise of working farms that are simultaneously nodes of Jewish community life—what are called Jewish community farms—an important phenomenon documented in this book in the chapter by Krone. Whether on Jewish community farms or in conventional Jewish spaces like synagogues, community centers, and summer camps, much of this new attention to food and farming takes place alongside a focus on being outdoors, experiential education, and concern for the environment. Giving attention to the outdoors, food, and the environment in tandem is common enough in institutional American Jewish life today that Jewish funders and nonprofits have given it a name, JOFEE (Jewish Outdoor Food and Environmental Education), and issued a substantial report evaluating the success of this genre of Jewish education.⁴⁸

The first part of the book helps provide a historical context for these contemporary North American engagements with food visible today; two chapters in the second part build upon this history to frame key issues especially relevant in the North American context. R. Gross considers how the larger phenomenon of industrialization changed the very substance of Jewish food, exploring how remaking foods—specifically changing the cooking fat of choice from traditional schmaltz to Crisco—remade aspects of American Judaism. While R. Gross shows how larger historical processes from without impact the meaning of Jewish food, Eleff provides us a case study of the special food laws that surround Judaism's most widely observed holiday, Passover, to consider how these internal and external forces converge to determine questions about what food practices will be considered authentically Jewish and valid according to Jewish legal authorities. Finally, the third part on ethics includes both descriptive and prescriptive (normative) chapters to

provide a robust platform from which to engage contemporary food issues from the perspective of Jewish values. All but the thirteenth chapter focused on the biblical text include a greater or lesser focus on ethical issues widely discussed in North America today.

Conclusion

Altogether, these chapters provide a rich opportunity to reflect on the universal process of humans making meaning through food in the specific context of Jewish traditions. The first historical part provides a uniquely comprehensive grounding that allows one to understand how Judaism and Jewish foodways have changed together over time. The second part adds to this broad historical understanding by sharpening our understanding of food and culture, including theoretical issues like how food functions as a metonym for Jewish identity and by providing case studies of specific foods. The final part invites readers to reflect on how past and contemporary Jewish communities have brought Jewish ethics together with Jewish eating and provides resources allowing contemporary Jews to better engage ethical questions surrounding food from a Jewish perspective. Throughout, the volume seeks to keep open the question “What is Jewish food?” just as it keeps open the question of what constitutes Judaism itself. Finally, the volume provides enough examples speaking out of or to the contemporary North American context to make it of special value to American Jews as they seek to understand their heritage and as they participate in the processes that constantly and inevitably remake diverse Judaisms. Taken collectively, it is the editors’ hope that this book heightens our appreciation about how the most familiar act of eating is also one of the most profound acts of meaning making.

NOTES

1. Foer, *Eating Animals*, 259.
2. Diner, *Hungering for America*, xv.
3. On racialization, see Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*; HoSang, LaBennett, and Pulido, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*.
4. Harari, *Sapiens*, 11.
5. Harari, 11–12.
6. Harari, 12.

7. Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, 4.
8. Eliade, 5. For discussion, see Gross, *Question of the Animal and Religion*, chap. 3.
9. Evidence of this complexity in social mammals is extremely widespread. For a more general discussion with further citations to scientific literature on fish, see Brown, "Fish Intelligence, Sentience, and Ethics"; for birds, see Ackerman, *Genius of Birds*.
10. Farb and Armelagos, *Consuming Passions*, 3.
11. Farb and Armelagos, 3.
12. Standford, "Chimpanzee Hunting Behavior and Human Evolution," 256.
13. Standford, 261.
14. Farb and Armelagos, *Consuming Passions*, 44.
15. Jacques Derrida has named this tendency to understand the human subject in this manner "carnophallogocentrism" to emphasize the intertwined creation of a subject that idealizes meat eating ("carno"), maleness ("phal" for phallus), and Western-European Christian identity ("logos"); for discussion, see Gross, *Question of the Animal and Religion*, 141–44. Also see Aph and Syl Ko, *Aphro-ism*.
16. For discussion, see Adams, "Very Rare and Difficult Thing"; Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*.
17. Ariel, "Hummus Wars"; Gvion, *Beyond Hummus and Falafel*.
18. Raviv, *Falafel Nation*.
19. For discussion, see Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 52–55.
20. For discussion, see Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*.
21. Hahn Tapper, *Judaisms*, 1–11.
22. These four chapters constitute the first attempt to produce a comprehensive history of Judaism and food written by specialists in their respective time periods.
23. Horowitz, *Kosher USA*, 3.
24. Belasco, *Food*, 6.
25. Mintz, "Plantation as a Sociocultural Type," 49.
26. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, xxv.
27. As quoted in and discussed by Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 54.
28. Fabre-Vassas, *Singular Beast*, 7.
29. For discussion, see Adams, *Sexual Politics of Meat*, 54–55.
30. For discussion, see Gross, *Question of the Animal and Religion*, chap. 3.
31. For discussion, see Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*.
32. For discussion, see Smith, Green, and Buckley, "Religions of Traditional Peoples."
33. For discussion, see Smith, "Matter of Class."
34. Smith.
35. Pilcher, *Oxford Handbook of Food History*, 417.
36. For discussion, see Rosenblum, *Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World*, chap. 1.
37. For discussion, see Rosenblum, chap. 1.
38. For discussion, see Balinska, *Bagel*.
39. Belasco, *Food*, 15. Belasco draws especially on Farb and Armelagos, *Consuming Passions*.

40. Belasco, *Food*, 16.
41. Belasco, 16–18.
42. For discussion of the triad “identity, convenience, and responsibility,” see Belasco, chap. 1.
43. For discussion, see Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied*, 66–68.
44. For discussion, see Cooper, 88, 140.
45. Tuchman and Levine, “New York Jews and Chinese Food.”
46. Kaminer, “Gorbals’ Ilan Hall Talks Treyf.”
47. I am especially indebted to my coeditor, Jody Myers, for the taxonomy and example used in the “Defining Jewish Food” section, which draws in part on Claudia Roden, who defines “Jewish food” as food marked by the rules of *kashrut*, holiday foods, foods associated with Jewish immigrants, and foods transmitted through Jewish families as emblems of family culture. See Roden, *Book of Jewish Food*, 10–11.
48. Informing Change, “Seeds of Opportunity.”

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