Challah and Its Performance of American Jewish Identity
from the Mid-19th to Early 21st Century

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by
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ABSTRACT

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In the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology among other academic disciplines, culinary history and food studies have caught the attention of scholars (Feinberg 2011). Throughout human history, the consumption of food has been assigned deep symbolic value beyond the human body’s physical biological need. This symbolic meaning is often used to convey cultural identity and to set tribal boundaries, and especially in the Jewish tradition, the role of food in its rituals and religious customs is unmatched (Feinberg 2011). Foodways have also been studied as a critical component of migration and human movement; by studying culinary history, one can trace the travels and influences of a cultural group (Diner 2001, 9-10).
Challah is a food steeped in symbolic significance on many levels—historical, religious, and, arguably, regional. While this thesis will mainly be discussing the Ashkenazi perspective regarding challah and its rituals, the same questions and explorations might be brought to the examination of Sephardic Jewish traditions, and other culturally distinct Jewish groups.

This thesis will provide a biblical background to the religious beginnings of challah; discuss European “challah” and trace its immigration to America and American culture; and then conclude by analyzing the role and meaning of challah among contemporary bloggers, authors, and bakers with a strong online presence. The thesis will consider the role(s) that challah plays in contemporary American Jewish identity, and how that role has shifted over the past century, and how that role has remained more stable. I will argue that among halakhically non-observant Jews, challah can serve as a strong access point to their Jewish identity, and that even halakhically, challah has not been solely about Shabbat for the past few centuries.
“To be a chef today is to center yourself in the traditions of your roots and use them to define your art and speak to any human being about who you are; your plate is your flag. Many of our most pungent memories are carried through food, just as connections to our ancestors are reaffirmed by cooking the dishes handed down to us.”
~Michael Twitty, The Cooking Gene

Preface

Similar to how many scholars choose topics personally meaningful for them, Jewish food and challah have personal significance for me. I am a graduate student in a Jewish Professional Leadership Program, and an aspiring Jewish communal leader, professional, and educator. When, in this program, professors or other students ask me, “What was your Jewish journey? How did you come to be where you are right now?”, many of them expect me to name a Jewish educator who changed my life. They might expect a Jewish lesson at Hebrew School that inspired me to study Torah. For me, this is not the least bit true.

Where I grew up, in Fort Myers, Florida, the Jewish population was rather small, and aside from the vocal Messianic Jew in my elementary school class, I was considered to be the cultural and religious emblem of what a “Jew” is. Here’s the thing—my family was not halakhically observant (not observant of traditional Jewish law). Eating chicken parmesan (mixing meat and dairy), or crab legs (a traditionally forbidden food) was not unusual for us. I ran cross-country races with my public high school team on Shabbat, and I went to the movies with my Catholic best friends on Friday night. However, my mom grew up in Brooklyn and had attended a yeshiva in Crown Heights with her older brother, where she acquired a

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vast amount of Jewish knowledge. Though she never observed kashrut, Shabbat, or other Jewish laws, knowledge of religion and connection to Jewish tradition and community was important to my family.

My maternal grandparents, who currently live on the east coast of Florida (where there is a large population of Floridian Jews), held a strong sense of Jewish identity despite not keeping halakha. When I was young, on Friday night visits, my family and grandparents would light the Shabbat candles and recite the prayer together, and then return to watching Disney Sing-Alongs on the television. My Jewish identity had a sturdy foundation of warm, unifying Jewish memories with my family. Later, when I attended a Union for Reform Judaism camp with other Jews (comparatively similar to or less observant than me) my Jewish identity and sense of community grew stronger. In a course on Jewish education that I took last semester, I described my Jewish journey as one that “snowballed.” With each positive experience, I was led to more and more Jewish explorations—exactly the educational experience that famous educational philosopher, John Dewey, describes as the ideal in his concept of “continuity.” My Jewish identity was never about halakha, Torah, or even G-d. It was about the home, the food, the unity, the love, and the inspiration to keep learning more.

Throughout my entire upbringing, living at home with my parents and two sisters, my mother always had a sliced challah loaf from Publix, the popular Florida supermarket, in the kitchen for sandwich making, a snack, or a delicious challah French toast breakfast. My Reform synagogue gave us each a slice of challah and juice as a snack during our supplementary Hebrew school classes, even though they
were on Sundays and Wednesdays—not Shabbat. Challah bread, in its delicious “Egg Bread” form, even pre-sliced, was one of my connections to my Jewish identity. In casual conversations, many of my similarly observant Jewish peers recall analogous experiences regarding their connections to challah and their Jewish identity. I have never felt alone in that understanding.

In the millennium of globalization, social media, and “foodies,” I began to sense that these conversations and patterns might mean something more significant than a personal reflection on my childhood. With Jewish American food bloggers such as “Jewlish,” “What-Jew-Wanna-Eat,” “The Nosher,” and more, I was starting to see challah baked in new and exciting ways. Pizza challah! Gender-reveal challah! Pesto and goat cheese stuffed challah! This “challah,” often without the mention of Shabbat or rituals at all, was being presented by food bloggers that seemed to identify publicly as Jewish. Posting about “challah” in whatever form or context was reinforcing their internal and external Jewish blogger identity.

Is this public performance of Jewish identity simply a few coincidental examples here and there, or does this phenomenon resemble a broader shift in what “Jewish identity” means to certain sectors of contemporary American Jewry? Of course, this is no simple question. There are also plenty of halakhically observant Jews who also enjoy experimenting with challah, though their baking of challah and consuming of challah usually hold different and additional sets of meanings. In this thesis, I will explore the role of challah role in the performance and expression of American Jewish identity. First, I will highlight Jewish history of challah in Part I: Biblical Beginnings and Setting the Table and Part II: Historical Overview of Europe
to America. Part III will analyze approaches to challah among contemporary bloggers, authors, and bakers who have a strong online presence.
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Introduction

In the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology among other academic disciplines, culinary history and food studies have caught the attention of scholars. (Feinberg 2011). Throughout human history, the consumption of food has been assigned deep symbolic value beyond the human body's physical biological need (Feinberg 2011). This symbolic meaning is often used to convey cultural identity and to set tribal boundaries, and especially in the Jewish tradition, the role of food in its rituals and religious customs is unmatched (Feinberg 2011). Foodways have also been studied as a critical component of migration and human movement; by studying culinary history, one can trace the travels and influences of a cultural group (Diner 2001, 9-10).

Each source about food and its history gives a different account as to why food is important to life and identity. Is it a search to connect with our ancestors (Twitty 2017, 6)? Is it because, as the Bible tells us, food can make us wise (Schwartz 1992, 10)? Does it have to do more with the rituals surrounding food, and their serving as a reassuring constant through time (Marks 2010, 97)? Or is it, as popular Jewish food blogger and cookbook author Shannon Sarna puts it; “a way to merge old and new, and create something that is comforting but also unexpected,” (Sarna 2017)? This is simultaneously a modern question, an American question, and a Jewish question, and just as each source gave a different explanation, one can imagine that different individuals would, as well.
Challah is a food steeped in symbolic significance on many levels—historical, religious, and, arguably, regional. While this thesis will mainly be discussing the Ashkenazi\(^2\) perspective regarding challah and its rituals, the same questions and explorations might be brought to the examination of Sephardic\(^3\) Jewish traditions, and other culturally distinct Jewish groups.

This thesis will provide a biblical background to the religious beginnings of challah; discuss European “challah” and trace its immigration to America and American culture; and then conclude by analyzing the role and meanings of challah among contemporary bloggers, authors, and bakers with a strong online presence. The thesis will consider the role(s) that challah plays in contemporary American Jewish identity, how that role has shifted over the past century, and how that role has remained more stable. I will argue that among halakhically non-observant Jews, challah can serve as a strong access point to their Jewish identity, and that even halakhically, challah has not been solely about Shabbat for the past few centuries.

Biblical Beginnings of Challah

When one thinks of the Bible and food, it is important to remember that food was actually an important player in the world’s very first sin: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that

\(^2\) In her book, 97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement (2010), author Jane Zeigelman defines the term “Ashkenazi” as, “a very elastic label that takes in the Jews of northern France, Germany, Austria, Romania, Poland, all of the Baltic countries, and Russia.” (Zeigelman, 88)

\(^3\) “Sephardic” derives from the Hebrew word Sepharad referring to Spain. Sephardic Jews refer to those whose ancestry traces back to around the Iberian Peninsula.
the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat.” (Genesis 3:6). Food from the beginning was seen as something more than just for eating. It could also make one wise” (Schwartz 1992, 10). Biblically, food maintains its status as an important symbolic and ritual item. In fact, even the word kashruth is derived from the Hebrew root kasher (kosher), which means “ritual lawfulness, especially of food” (Schwartz 1992, 12). Rituals in Jewish food are seen by many as reassuring in the way many rituals are: one learns to expect the presence of the same foods each week and with each holiday, giving each generation a sense of security for who they are, where they came from, where they are going, and the longitudinal communal identity that gives each participant a sense of belonging (Marks 2010, ix). One of the most well-known ritually Jewish foods is challah.

According to the Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, the word “challah” itself (challot plural) is “a much-misunderstood biblical term whose meaning has changed greatly over the centuries. Most contemporary American references describe it as ‘a braided egg loaf’” (Marks 2010, 96). The braided egg loaf that we envision today in thinking of “challah” is actually a more modern conception, especially when thinking back to biblical or Talmudic times (Marks 2010, 96). While many sources will say that challah is “a small portion removed from bread dough to be burned” (Marks

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4 This Biblical citation is pulled directly from the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation. Oded Schwartz’s In Search of Plenty: A History of Jewish Food, which originally referenced this particular verse, uses two different translations of the Bible: the King James Bible and the Good News Bible (Collins, Today’s English Version). (Schwartz 1992, 264)

5 “Talmudic times” implies the 13th century, and biblical, of course, implies far earlier (17th century BCE).
Gil Marks insists that biblically this was not actually the original intent. “Nor, as described in various translations, did it mean ‘round,’ ‘rolled,’ or ‘cake’” (Marks 2010, 96). Instead, Marks writes, the word “challah” comes from “the root chalal (to pierce/to be hollow) indicating something perforated or poked full of holes, similar to chalil (flute), chalon (window), and challal (a hollow space/hole)” (Marks 2010, 96). It seems that the original biblical meaning for challah was more of a physical description than anything else.

Marks supports this claim by also pointing out how the biblical commentator and philosopher, Abraham Ibn Ezra, once mentioned how challah was “thick,” and how another commentator, Rashi, used the word “tourte” in Old French to mean challah, which also held the implication of “thickness” (Marks 2010, 96). These descriptive details about challah were significant at the time because thinness was typical for breads in the ancient world, as “any bread more than about a quarter of an inch or so thick required special baking techniques to allow the center to cook before the exterior burned,” and those thick breads would not cook well over the typically used hot coals or griddles (Marks 2010, 96).

Additional biblical associations with challah include kabbalistic references. Carol Unger, author of Jewish Soul Food, discusses how challah represents Kabbalah’s seven Divine Emanations. Challah has “seven ingredients” and according to Hebrew gematria (the symbolic Hebrew numerical system). The

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7 Kabbalah is the most famous form of Jewish mysticism, starting with the writing of the Zohar in 13th century Spain. See more: [https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/kabbalah-mysticism-101/](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/kabbalah-mysticism-101/)
Hebrew word "challah" adds up to seven (Ungar 2015, 3). Here is what that the word challah looks like in Hebrew:

חַלָּה

Hebrew is read from right to left. The first letter on the right side is called a chet, which in Hebrew gematria represents the number 8. The Hebrew letter in the middle is called a lamed and it represents 30, but in gematria, you continue adding what the numbers are composed of until they are single digits, so 30 becomes 3+0 becomes 3. Lastly, the final letter is hey which represents 5 (Ungar 2015, 3).

\[ 8 + 3 + 5 = 16 \]
\[ 1 + 6 = 7 \]

Lastly, the most well-known Jewish custom having to do with challah is the challah mitzvah, which includes “separating one-ounce piece of dough from a large (5 pound) amount of dough and burning it” (Ungar 2015, 4). This act, according to Ungar, is a “spiritually supercharged” ritual that rectifies Eve’s sin (Ungar 2015, 4). This is because Adam is called “challah of the world” as he was “created from a doughlike lump of clay” (Ungar 2015, 4). In encouraging him to consume the forbidden fruit, it is said that Eve ruined the “challah of the world,” and it follows that reciting a prayer and burning the one-ounce piece of dough with each creation of challah for Shabbat (Jewish Sabbath), “fixes” the sin Eve committed (Ungar 2015, 4).

In fact, for the past two millennia, the word “challah” itself meant the olive-sized portion of dough separated from the rest to be burned (Marks 2010, 97). It
was much later that some Ashkenazim began to use the term “challah” to identify the loaves of bread themselves (Marks 2010, 97). Today, the word “challah” commonly refers to the loaf of bread, and in America, it most commonly refers to the sweet, yellow, braided egg bread (Marks 2010, 96).8

During the Second Temple period (around 530 B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), the ritual of burning a small piece of challah involved separating a portion of dough and giving it to the priests (Schwartz 1992, 81). In fact, the bible specifically refers to challah as a portion of bread given to a Kohain (priest, Kohanim plural): “Of the first of your kneading troughs, you shall set apart a challah as a gift.’ This reference to challah was not as an offering in the Temple, but rather as one of the twenty-four perquisites of the Kohanim.” as challah could be given to Kohanim regardless of whether they were in the Temple or not (Marks 2010, 96). So, after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., “the altar was symbolically replaced by the home dining table, considered a Mikdash Ma’at (a miniature Sanctuary), and the showbread by the Sabbath loaves” (Marks 2010, 97). “Showbread” referred to twelve unleavened wheat loaves chosen specifically to be laid out on a gold table where they would always be seen and switched out every Shabbat (Marks 2010, 97).

As time passed after the Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. and Jews began residing outside of the Land of Israel, the religious obligations regarding challah continued to change:

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8 If one types the word “challah” into Google Images, undoubtedly pictures of the yellow, egg loaf are what surfaces even when scrolling through to the bottom. Searching “challah recipe” in Google also solely displays results of the yellow, egg loaf. Even when searching “challah recipe without eggs,” the yellow loaf still resurfaces with “Vegan” recipes, rather than any acknowledgement of different types of breads as “challah.”
The biblical obligation to give challah to the Kohanim applies only to the land of Israel when the majority of Jews are living there. After the destruction of the Temple, the Sages, in order that ‘the obligation of challah will not be forgotten,’ instituted a substitute for giving a baked loaf of bread to the Kohain. Instead, a one-ounce piece of dough subsequently called challah, is customarily removed and burned in its place. This is called in Hebrew hafrashat challah (removal of challah) or in Yiddish nemn khale. Throughout most of history, and until relatively recently, bread making at home was relegated to women, so beginning in Talmudic times, baking bread for the Sabbath and taking the portion of challah dough became a woman’s religious obligation. (Marks 2010, 96)

Speculatively, since the Temple’s destruction, the burning and recitation of a prayer before the challah is shaped and braided has been said to ward off the evil eye (Schwartz 1992, 81). In fact, challah is not considered kosher unless the ritual separation is completed (Schwartz 1992, 81). This is the ritual of the mitzvah of making challah that halakhically observant Jews continue to practice today.

While the religious ritual of “taking the challah” typically references Shabbat, it is important to note that challah is not always used for the purposes of Shabbat — even in religious frameworks. Additionally, when challah is used for other uses or religious celebrations (as it has for many centuries), shaping the bread differently sometimes occurs. For example, for Shavuot⁹, Sephardi women often bake challah in a shape which they call, siete cielos which means “seven heavens” in Ladino, the language of Spanish and Portuguese Jews influenced by Hebrew and Spanish. “This refers to a teaching that explains the seven celestial spheres burst open when the Ten Commandments came down to the world” (Ungar 2015, 169). This is one

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⁹ Shavuot is a Jewish holiday that commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, though it was historically a harvest festival. This holiday follows the Jewish holiday of Passover by exactly 50 days.
example of a “challah” used for Jewish tradition that is not Shabbat (Koppelman Ross).

Another example comes from eighteenth-century Ukraine, where Jewish women baked a challah into the shape of a bird (feigel) for the Erev Yom Kipper (the night before the holiest high holiday of repentance) dinner (Unger 2015, 68). This bird-shaped bread is symbolic of the biblical reference to Isaiah 31:5 that, “just as a bird can fly loose from its captors, so too will G-d rescue the Jews from their foes” (Ungar 2015, 68). Other non-Shabbat challot traditions include: the classic round challah served for Rosh Hashanah symbolizing the infinite—both G-d and the circle of life (Ungar 2015, 55), a ‘Haman’s Noose’ structured challah for Purim, made by Polish Jews (Ungar 2015, 132) and a ‘fish-shaped’ challah for Purim and the astrological month of Adar where it is customary to “eat fish” which symbolize purity as their immersive relationship with water relates to a mikvah (ritual bath) (Ungar 2015, 129). This thesis will include a deeper discussion of the variety of shapes of challah used for different holidays and circumstances in its section analyzing challah in modernity. Understanding that challah has religious significance in multiple Jewish settings, timeframes, and circumstances that have lasted through the ages is critical to its history.

**Braiding Challah and Setting the Table**

There are several ways to braid and present challot at a Shabbat table. One form of braided challah that Ashkenazi Jews might use is called a “six-braid,” because there are six strands of dough braided together. It is traditional to have two
loaves of bread on the table for Shabbat. The pair of challah loaves is referred to as *lechem mishneh*, meaning “double portion,” in reference to “the double portion of manna that fell on Friday for the Sabbath” (Unger 2015, 9). Another allusion to the double portion of manna is the challah covers. The cloth covering the challah signifies “the dew which covered the manna” (Schwartz 1992, 82). Another reason, however, that covers are used, often personally decorated “on a white background symbolizing purity,” is so that when blessing is said over the wine before the bread, the challah is not offended or shamed (Schwartz 1992, 82).

In addition to the reference to the double portion of manna, the two challah loaves of six strands also represent “the twelve loaves of Temple Showbread which were set in two rows on the golden table in the Tabernacle and later in the holy Temple” (Unger 2015, 9). By braiding the challah with six strands, it serves to represent the twelve loaves of Showbread that would continually be placed and replaced in the Tabernacle each Shabbat (Unger 2015, 9). It is important to note that the number 12 to begin with signifies the twelve Tribes of Israel, encompassing all of Jewish peoplehood (Unger 2015, 9).

However, in his book, *In Search of Plenty: A History of Jewish Food*, Oded Schwartz asserts that the reason may actually be simply culinary: “according to the Roman etiquette of the day it was customary to serve bread with each dish. On special occasions like the Sabbath meal two courses were served instead of a single weekly dish, therefore two loaves displayed” (Schwartz 1992, 81-82). Jewish tradition commonly borrows from the cultures of its neighbors, and the neighbors of Jews borrow traditions from them, as well. Cultures influence one another as they
interface, and we often see that in tradition and food, as will be discussed in the section on expression of Jewish identity through challah in modernity.

Another way that challah is braided is a tradition held by many Hassidic Jews called a Yud Bais challah (yud bet in Hebrew). This challah has 12 parts, which signify “the twelve tribes who descended from Jacob’s twelve sons and also for the twelve angels surrounding the Heavenly Throne” (Ungar 2015, 13). Another tradition that should be noted is that the leftover challot from Shabbat is supposed to be repurposed and not discarded, firstly in order to prevent waste, and secondly, in order to connect the two Shabbats such as the Showbread did from week to week. From this will to repurpose comes the beginning of creative recipes such as “challah kugel” and “challah french toast” (Ungar 2015, 14).

**From European to “American” Challah: A Historical Overview**

While certain foods can be traced back to specific cultures and places, it is crucial to consider that within each culture, ethnicity, and religion, the culinary habits of each individual differed. In *Hungering for America*, Hasia Diner notes that, “People in most communities did not all eat the same foods in the same ways. The distribution and consumption of food has been historically determined by age, gender, and class, and its unequal allocations highlight internal group differences” (Diner 2001, 4). This observation certainly pertains to American Jews and their relationships with “Jewish food.” Different groups of American Jews have always held different approaches to ritual practice, including kashrut. These contrasting approaches of American Jews to the practice of kashrut affect the various
approaches of American Jews to challah. These internal differences within American Jewish society have roots in the different European Jewish immigrants' ideologies and histories.

In this thesis, it is specifically the *Ashkenazi* traditions that will be discussed. Additionally, it is important to define *Ashkenazi*, as there are many nuances within that term.

In the book, *97 Orchard: An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in One New York Tenement*, the author Jane Zeigelman describes ‘Ashkenazi’ as:

“a very elastic label that takes in the Jews of northern France, Germany, Austria, Romania, Poland, all of the Baltic countries, and Russia. Its original meaning, however was more narrowly defined. Sometime in the tenth century, large Jewish families from southern France and Italy began to migrate north, forming settlements along the Rhine River. These were the original Ashkenazim, a term derived from the medieval Hebrew word for Germany.” (Zeigelman 2010, 88)

With this understanding of Ashkenazi Jews, it should be noted that in Ashkenazi American Jewish history, there were unconnected waves of immigration by two separate Ashkenazi populations. The first wave of Ashkenazi immigration was in the mid-19th century, and the immigrants were primarily German and Central European Jews (Zollman 2018). German Jews also came to America in large numbers in the early 20th century before the outbreak of World War I. Eastern European Jews were the other population of Ashkenazi Jewry who came to America in the late 19th century—primarily from Poland, Russian, and Romania—at a time when German Jews had already settled and established their lifestyle and systems in America. These two different populations of Ashkenazi Jewry are crucial to distinguish from each other in the discussion of American Ashkenazi Jewry, as the
differences highlighted in their meeting in America still remain intensely discussed today.

The German Jews were known to have pioneered what became American Reform Judaism. Many Eastern European Jews, generally speaking, were not comfortable with the Reform movement and maintained a more traditional Judaism, giving birth to a more contemporary Orthodox Judaism and the Conservative movement (Zollman 2018). (Other Eastern European Jews pioneered labor movements, socialist movements, and Zionism as expressions of their Judaism in Europe and America.) These differing understandings of and levels of Jewish observance have historically and continue to play a large role in understandings of challah and its use as expressions of modern American Jewish identity. Because levels of observance play a large role, different ideologies from different Ashkenazi Jewish populations in America are important to understand and define.

Understanding the broad differences between these Central and Eastern European Jewry regarding their differing cultural histories and levels of traditional Jewish religious observance helps explain the varieties of approaches of American Jews toward challah, and its meaning for American Jewish identity.

**Tracing Challah from Europe to America**

When tracing back such an ancient food as challah, scholars face the challenge of limited surviving evidence. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* observes that, “Jews did not begin to record their recipes in books until the nineteenth century and, therefore, the exact ingredients and techniques of Talmudic-era and
medieval fare frequently remain unknown” (Marks 2010, xi). Much of the food knowledge and recipes collected by rabbi/scholar Gil Marks in the late 20th and early 21st century came from home cooks, namely mothers and grandmothers, whose family recipes and culinary habits had been passed down from generation to generation (Marks 2010, xi). These special recipes and conversations with home cooks served as primary sources for his 2010 volume, The Encyclopedia of Jewish Food. Therefore, many of the resources about the history of challah come from 19th century recipes and their successors.

Challah can be traced from Europe in two different ways. One way would be to trace “challah” in its religious context, derived from the Temple through the different variations of what challah meant religiously until today. This is where conversations about “taking challah” (removing a small piece from the dough to burn it resembling the sacrifice made in the Temple) come into play. Another way to trace the history of challah, as many historians have done, is to trace how this loaf of yellow bread, which we refer to today as challah, took its shape and recipe.

Jews are “among the world’s most avid culinary borrowers” and different food items that are incorporated into Jewish tradition, ritually/religiously or not, borrow from—and influence—the varieties of “host” among whom Jews have lived. In Jane Zeigelman’s work on five immigrant families in one tenement, she discusses how Jewish food “is the product of a landless people continuously acquiring new

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foods and adapting them as they move from place to place, settling for a time, then moving again” (Zeigelman 2010, 87-88).

Challah is both an agent of religion and of memory. In *Hungering for America*, Hasia Diner writes that the ways individuals remember the foods of their childhood are deeply internalized and affect their approaches to and expectations about food throughout the rest of their lifetimes (Diner 2001, 8). It is because of these strong memories that “the likings formed earliest endure the longest.” In this way, food is seen thoroughly through the lens of “childhood, family, and sensuality” (Diner 2001, 8). Because of the role of food as a mnemonic, migrants tend to recreate the food of their homelands and home-cultures upon moving into their new settings (Diner 2001, 9).

Because these “culinary traditions,” brought from place to place by a specific population, carry associations with both religious life (dietary laws) and domestic life (food as mnemonic), the two associations with food intertwine, and can be difficult to distinguish (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 77). With acknowledgement of this difficulty, tracing challah through the two different Jewish Ashkenazi immigrant communities (German Jews, typically Reform) and Eastern European (typically traditional) helps us understand the nuances between ritually religious and culturally Jewish associations with challah.

**German Jews: Bringing Haskalah Mindset to America**

Perhaps most important to beginning this section is the word *Fressfrommigkeit*, a term well-known among German Jews (and then German Jewish
immigrants to America), which refers to individuals who expressed their religious devotion essentially solely through eating traditional foods (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990, 89). Put perfectly by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in her article in *Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950*: “Food associated with traditional kosher cooking comes to embody Jewishness, even when it is not itself kosher” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1990, 89). This ideology that later transferred to parts of American Jewry with the German Jewish wave of immigration, was born during the Jewish Enlightenment, called the *Haskalah*.

The first sparks of this movement were during the European Enlightenment, which lasted from the 1770s to the 1880s (Schoenberg 2018). The *Haskalah* encouraged Jews to study secular subjects and assimilate to the ruling power—two strong points which would later lead to the formation of the Reform movement and Zionist ideology (Schoenberg 2018).

To understand this transition, one should know that before the *Haskalah*, German Jews lived on the edges of the ruling (and majority) Christian society for centuries (Zeigelman 2010, 95). The Jewish community in Germany was generally sealed off from the rest of society, both choosing and forced to be self-governing and isolated, without regard for what those outside of the Jewish community did (Zeigelman 2010, 96). It was individual leaders such as the eighteenth century German intellectual, Moses Mendelsohn, who spoke out in favor of an educational shift from solely Torah study to the broader world of secular thought (Zeigelman 2010, 95-96). It was then, when his ideologies caught on, that Jewish students began to read and write in German, and open themselves up to non-Jewish society.
This door to a world outside of the Jewish bubble led to even further changes. The new ‘modern-thinking’ Jews kept their stores open on Shabbat and shaved their beards (Zeigelman 2010, 96). Women made similar changes to their headdress and attire (Zeigelman 2010, 96). Synagogue services also changed to parallel their Christian German counterparts, as synagogue congregations began to utilize organs and choirs (Zeigelman 2010, 96). This new style of religious observance—understood by those practicing it to keep their Judaism relevant and viable in their current cultural and political circumstances—was also reflected in the changing culinary habits of German Jews in Germany, as Jane Zeigelman writes:

In the German-Jewish kitchen, a quiet revolution was likewise in progress. For the first time, home cooks felt they could choose among the food laws, holding on to some, dropping others. Of course, the willingness to improvise fell along a sliding scale, with each cook determining her own culinary threshold. Some abandoned the time-consuming practice of salting and soaking their meat, the traditional method for drawing our blood, a substance banned from the Jewish table. Others gave up on kosher meat entirely and started shopping from the gentile butcher. In private recipe collections, you see Jewish cooks experimenting with pork and other forbidden foods. Outside the home, Jews began patronizing Christian-owned establishments, while Jewish owned eateries, like the palatial Restaurant Kempinski in Berlin, served oysters, crayfish, and lobsters. (Zeigelman 2010, 96)

This new level of acceptance and understanding of not practicing the laws of kashrut altered many German-Jews’ perception of its reasonability. The author and poet Yehuda Leib Gordon established himself as a thought-leader of the Haskalah and wrote a story in 1899 specifically about the economic inequality further perpetuated by the laws of kashrut (Diner 2001, 146-147).

The rabbi studied the geese and declared that, alas, a minor imperfection rendered them treyf (forbidden). The law was the law. The ‘set table’ countenanced no deviation. They could not be eaten. No roast bird, no helzel,
no schmaltz, no gribenes, no table changed from bare bones to bounty to mark the sacred time. As the woman wept, the rabbi offered words of consolation: ‘You should not despair, poor woman! Jews are charitable! You can support yourself by begging!" (Diner 2001, 146)

Through compositions like that story, ideological leaders in Europe such as Yehuda Leib Gordon demonstrated the thoughtfulness and intention that went into their decisions regarding the extent to which Jewish law was deemed appropriate for the lifestyles they needed and wanted. These shifts in *halakhic* observance are also commonly defined as the beginning of the Jewish Reform movement.

This cultural shift in the 18th century that lasted through the 19th century led to German Jews becoming known to serve “oyster stew, baked ham, and creamed chicken casserole,” all foods prohibited by *halakhic* law, upon their move to America (Zeigelman 2010, 95). While traditionally women were seen to be the Jewish homemaker who would inherit her mother’s recipes and maintain vast knowledge of *kashrut* and ritual purity of the home, this was not the case with many German Jewish immigrants (Zeigelman 2010, 95). *Aunt Babette’s Cook Book* is highly reflective of these new practices of German Jews in America (Zeigelman 2010, 97). *Aunt Babette’s Cook Book* was published in 1889 as a pseudonym for Bertha Kramer, a German Jewish immigrant (Zeigelman 2010, 97). After successfully building a following for her recipe column in *The American Israelite*, “a weekly Jewish paper with a national readership,” the thirty-six years old Kramer took her talents and cosmopolitan voice to the Bloch Printing Company, the main Jewish publisher in America, and also one strongly associated with the Reform movement (Zeigelman

2010, 97). The Star of David, an intentionally chosen symbol for Bloch Printing Co., stands most noticeably on the title age of *Aunt Babette’s Cook Book*, while simultaneously including “pork, shellfish, wild game, blood, and mixing meat and dairy” in its collection of recipes (Zeigelman 2010, 98). Kramer explicitly states her views on the ancient laws of *kashrut* in simple terms: “Nothing is *trefa* [ritually impure food] that is healthy and clean” (Babette 1889, 492) (Zeigelman 2010, 98). This was a generally accepted position of German Jewish immigrants, as they prioritized classifying food by perception of hygiene over Jewish ritual religious law. Still promoting a strong sense of Jewish identity, Kramer included recipes for *Pesach, Purim*, and other traditional Jewish holidays, such as a “matzoh pudding” (Babette 1889, 476) and “Purim doughnuts,” (Babette 1889, 323) reflecting the diversity of Jewish history, Jewish present, the Old World, and the New World (Zeigelman 2010, 98).

Another popular Jewish cookbook of the times was the *Settlement Cook Book*. This cookbook was originally published in 1901, but since has transitioned through 40 different editions, and has sold 1,500,000 copies (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987). Elizabeth Black Kander, an affluent German Jewish immigrant, was the organizer of this collection (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987). The proceeds from this cookbook went towards the land and building of a new Settlement House in her Milwaukee community. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett astutely points out,

> Though this encyclopedic cookbook appears to be intended for everyone, the institution's sponsors were Jewish and their clients were largely observant Jews. Editions prior to Mrs. Kander’s death reflect the predilections of the wealthy German Jewish women who created the volume. Like other Jewish
cookbooks of the period, The "Settlement" Cook Book (1903) is *treyf* in the characteristic way: there are recipes for broiled live lobster, frog legs a la Newburg, shrimp a la Creole, fried oysters, creamed crab meat, and crawfish butter; there are hindquarter cuts of meat (rump and tenderloin), presumably unporged; and butter and cream appear in meat recipes. But in the early editions, pork per se is absent, pie crusts are made with butter, not lard, and there is a nominal explanation of *kashrut* at the beginning of the meat chapter that is confined to the method of slaughter and draining of blood. There are some Jewish specialties, such as kugel, matzah balls, matzah pancakes, and filled fish. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1987)

Among those who were not moved by the *Haskalah* in Europe, many tended to shift their traditional observance of Jewish law as they became hard-working American immigrants. Because of the dominant Christian religion in America, Sunday became the day of rest, making it hard for Jewish immigrants to resist the economic pressure to work on Shabbat, Saturday (Zeigelman 2010, 104). As economic pressure mounted, non-kosher food was also hard to resist, as some families conceded to eating non-kosher outside of the home even though they kept kosher in the house (Zeigelman 2010, 104). The combination of these alterations to culinary habits at times completely changed the significance of certain foods. Foods typically prepared for Shabbat, such as “chicken soup, brisket, or challah,” began to be served on Sunday nights in America, losing the religious connection to Shabbat (Zeigelman 2010, 105). Once void of their religious significance, these foods were enjoyed in any context (Zeigelman 2010).

Hasia Diner also adds that, “By eating food once reserved for Sabbath or holidays every day, they also reversed their relationship to time” (Diner 2001, 180). While Fridays and Saturdays would previously be made special because of the quantities and quality of particular foods, and holidays were previously notable
through the particular foods consumed, Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to America began to feel more entitled to these luxuries all of the time (Diner 2001, 180). A particularly poignant quote from Marcus Ravage, a Rumanian immigrant joining his relatives in America in 1900, as he wrote, “In New York, every night was Friday night and every day was Saturday, as far as food went... Why, they even had twists instead of plain rye bread, to say nothing of rice-and-raisins (which is properly a Purim dish) and liver paste and black radishes,’ anytime ad every time”12 (Diner 2001, 180). German Jews and German Jewish immigrants to America were not alone in their enjoyment of Jewish food apart from their previously ascribed religious rituals. At the turn of the 20th century, popular Eastern European Jewish author, Sholem Aleichem, wrote a lullaby entitled, “Shlof mayn kind” (Sleep, my child). “The words of the lullaby include the claim that in America, where the child’s father is, everyone is happy and Jews eat challah even on weekdays” (YIVO Encyclopedia). Additionally, in the Soviet Union, where Russian Jews were stifled of their religion, used food as a vehicle to access their cultural heritage and their roots discreetly.

Some foods that had been staples of the religious calendar, like teyglakh for the New Year or challahs and gefilte fish for the Sabbath, were served at family gatherings like birthdays and Soviet political holidays. The enormous effort involved in preparing these foods under Soviet conditions indicates their importance, particularly to the older generation that did the cooking.' Those who partook understood the symbolic meaning (‘this is a Jewish food, a family food, not for outsiders’) and took it either as a sign of intimacy or—particularly among young people—as a pretext for embarrassment. (Nekhimovsky 2006, 68)

The bread we know today as challah, which has been known as the Jewish Sabbath bread, has a disputed history. One can view challah through its religious history, as some academic works trace the bread back to religious beginnings in Second Temple times such as the Shulkhan Aruch by Joseph Caro (Jacobs 2018) and the Encyclopedia Judaica (Milgrom 1971, 1193-1196). Others understand the history of challah, the modern bread type and shape, to be traced through its origins as a non-ritual bread type borrowed from other cultures, such as Germany, in the 15th centuries.

Berches was a type of braided bread made from sourdough that the German Jews adopted for themselves and named (Zeigelman 2010, 90-91). The term berches is said to come from the Hebrew word for ‘blessing’ (Zeigelman 2010, 90). For German Jews, their berches symbolized the offerings of bread in the Temple, and when the bread was torn by hand to dip a piece in salt, it paid homage to the salted meat sacrifices in the tabernacle (Zeigelman 2010, 91). Gil Marks, author of the Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, writes that the beginning of challah for Ashkenazim was a simple white bread void of shape or name, usually called broyt in Yiddish or lechem in Hebrew, translating directly to ‘bread’ (Marks 2010, 97). Marks claims that berchisbrod was the name of the Teutonic loaf that German Jews (and Austrian Jews) adopted as their own in the 15th century (Marks 2010, 97).

In honor of the winter solstice, ancient German tribes prepared special breads, some shaped in the form of animals. After adopting Christianity, many Germans continued the custom, creating new shapes. Berchta or Perchtai was another name of the malevolent demon/witch Holle, an ugly Teutonic crone with long, matted hair. Germans twisted dough to resemble hair and offered the loaves to Holle to escape her punishment. Although European Jews certainly did not worship or even to a large extent know anything about Berchta or Holle, they assimilated the attractive bread.
Medieval German Jews also adopted a baby-naming ceremony called *Hollekreisch*, ‘Holles cry,’ in which the cradle and baby were lifted up before confirming the infant’s German name. (Marks 2010, 97-98)

Marks is not the only Jewish culinary historian who believes that the roots of challah derive from an understanding of the German goddess of fertility and vegetation named “Berchta.” Oded Schwartz also understand challah do be derived from Berchta, saying the word *braches* most likely derives from Berchta. Ironically, Berchta, the German goddess of fertility and vegetation, holds an immensely different interpretation from the translation of *braches* to “prayer” in Hebrew (Schwartz 1992, 82). The *German Jewish Cookbook* includes both of these interpretations as they explain “the ceremonial bread of German Jews,” *berches*, as the authors acknowledge that this Jewish ceremonial bread, that compares to challah in its shape and purpose, may derive from a Jewish or Teutonic source. (Gropman & Gropman 2017, 91). The old Teutonic German bread, *berches*, has a long tradition in Germanic lands as serving as a sacrifice to *Berchta* (Gropman & Gropman 2017, 91). Perhaps, the authors speculatively conclude, “the origins of this Jewish bread custom cannot be isolated” (Gropman & Gropman 2017, 91).

In summary, whether challah’s history is traced through its Jewish origins or its Teutonic origins, in light of the *Haskalah*, many German Jews and German Jewish immigrants to America began to associate with the American Reform movement as their histories concerning the Jewish Enlightenment gave precedent to the possibility of a cultural Jewish identification with challah rather than a solely religious one. In the following discussion we will see how much this differs from the
practices of many of the German Jewish immigrants’ Ashkenazi counterparts who immigrated to America not long after, the Eastern European Jews.

**Eastern European Jewish Practice to America**

Food is used as a vehicle to convey deep, religious, and symbolic lessons in the Jewish religion, especially by Eastern European Jews. Hasia Diner, in her book, *Hungering for America*, cites the common tradition of treating young boys beginning school to the taste of Hebrew letters written in honey (Diner 2001, 154). This introduction is meant to instill early on a link between holiness and delicious tastes, and to convey the sweetness of study (Diner 2001, 154). There are many Eastern European Jewish memoirs, songs, and stories that place food as a high priority and focus in the aspiration for a good life (Diner 2001, 154). Shabbat is one of the pinnacles of these associations. Eastern European Jews connect the day of rest with special, sacralized food (Diner 2001, 155). As Diner eloquently writes, “The Sabbath and its food elevated ordinary time and ordinary lives to transcendence and bore witness to the intimate connection between sanctity and food” (Diner 2009, 157). In Eastern Europe, Shabbat was a sacred experience where food is elevated with strong symbolism. These traditions would transfer to America with them as Eastern European Jews immigrated in massive numbers.

Jane Zeigelman determined through looking at government records that 1,028,588 Jews immigrated to the United States between 1900 and 1910 (Zeigelman 2010, 132), and most scholars agree that between 1880 and 1934, between 2.5 and 3 million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States. Of that
tremendous number, Zeigelman writes that the majority arrived from the ‘Pale of Jewish settlement,’ established by Catherine the Great in the late 18th century. (Zeigelman 2010, 132). This area was created to confine Jews to the western edges of the Russian empire. (Zeigelman 2010, 133). In the Eastern European Jews’ lives in the Old World, these Jews resided in “small market towns” referred to as ‘shtetlach’ (Zeigelman 2010, 133). A strong Jewish folk culture developed within these communities. (Zeigelman 2010, 133). With their highly ritualized culture including their own music and language (Yiddish), the Eastern European Jews practiced a far more traditional piety than most of the German Jews (Zeigelman 2010, 133). Gender roles were separate and specific. Men prayed and studied biblical texts while women were the homemakers and shopkeepers. (Zeigelman 2010, 133). Women took it as their holy obligation to keep a kosher home and to provide the traditional dishes for each holiday (Zeigelman 2010, 133). In the shtetl, two Ashkenazi bread-baking traditions stood out (Schwartz 1992, 82):

The concession for selling yeast in a large number of shtetls was held by the Rabbi as a source of extra income and the duties of the bath attendant’s wife included helping the matrons, for a fee, in kneading the dough. In some communities the bath-house ovens were also used for baking bread. (Schwartz 1992, 82)

While Eastern European Jews held fast to their religious laws, rituals, and traditions, Ellis Island did not make it easy for them, with an extreme lack of kosher food (Zeigelman 2010, 133). As Zeigelman writes, “There was nothing kosher about the immigrants’ dining room, which left devout Jews with a choice: they could either go hungry and possibly starve, or they could break the food commandments and eat” (Zeigelman 2010, 134-135).
What was unique about Jewish immigration to the United States was its equal numbers of men and women, where many other cultures would send only men as they attempted to begin to get settled. Jewish food traditions thus traveled to America with Jewish women and were soon embedded in the families they began to establish on American soil.

Once in America, Jewish immigrants often became connected to other Jews and other immigrants in their neighborhoods and workplaces. Different immigrant groups often shared food with each other, laying down the roots of a new American cuisine that would incorporate minestrone from the Italians, honey cake from the Russians, and everything in between. (Zeigelman 2010, 155). The Jews who could afford to would prepare extra food as Shabbat approached and bring it to neighbors in need, as they had in Europe. (Zeigelman 2010, 155). Extra loaves of challah and an extra pot of stew would be carried across town by the dedicated Jewish homemaker who happily donated the extra food to the less fortunate on Friday nights (Zeigelman 2010, 155). Zeigelman provides a detailed description of an Eastern European Jewish immigrant cooking for Shabbat in America, where localized, more individualized, and isolated baking was a large change that occurred through American food preparation:

Friday mornings at three a.m., she mixed up a batch of dough for the Sabbath challah, using twenty pounds of flour, forty eggs, and five cups of oil. The only vessel large enough to hold it was a freestanding baby’s bathtub. Once mixed and kneaded, the dough was left to rise in its metal tub, covered by a wool blanket, until mid-morning, when it was sectioned off into loaves and left to rise again. By afternoon, Mrs. Cohen had twenty braided loaves cooling by the window. Some she gave to the neighbors, and some to the local rabbi, who always received the two largest loaves, each one the size of a placemat. (Zeigelman 2010, 156)
Issues between the Central European Jewish immigrants of the mid-19th century and the Eastern European Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries often arose in matters of halakha and kashrut. As German Jews ran the Settlement Houses through which new immigrants would use to ‘get settled’ into American life, they hoped—and sometimes attempted—to do away with the Jewish dietary laws, but Eastern European Jews resisted (Zeigelman 2010, 162). Because of this resistance to letting go of Jewish ritual law, the German Jews, often Reform Jews, who ran the settlement houses needed to respect their wishes or else the ‘Americanization’ process for the Eastern European Jews would never have worked at all (Zeigelman 2010, 162). The tensions of these different understandings of the importance of ritual law between different sects of American Jewry remain prominent today, and these differences are conveyed through the baking of challah as will be discussed in the following section.

Conclusion of Historical Overview

In conclusion, challah is a food with a long history, a ritual centrality, and a strong resonance with Jews of many different backgrounds and religious practices. The use of sacred bread can be traced back to Second Temple times. Challah in its current form can be traced at least back to the 11th century. While there was a time that the term challah referred to the part of the Shabbat dough that was taken and burned in reference to the portion of the ritual bread given to the Kohanim in the Temple, the more modern usage most often refers to the finished loaf itself. Challah has historically been crafted in many different shapes (see Part III below), and for
many different Jewish holidays and ritual observances. Its ritual origin can be traced back to the practice of Shabbat. Its various recipes, shapes, and baking methods reflect centuries of Jewish-host communities’ cross-cultural borrowings, including the borrowing of the braided bread called, *berchisbrod*, from German Christians who named it after a pre-Christian German goddess.

This chapter has demonstrated the range of approaches to challah and traditional Jewish food patterns among Jews in early modern Europe, and after their emigration to America. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate the ways in which challah reflects and expresses the range of contemporary American Jewish identity as portrayed by online Jewish-presenting food blogs, the bloggers’ authored cookbooks, and popular restaurants and bakeries with an online presence.
In America: Cultural Influences on Contemporary American Jewry

Introduction

While the previous chapters provide both historical and religious context for the cultural relevance of challah, this chapter will discuss how the environment in America influences contemporary perceptions and expressions of American Jewish life through challah. Since their arrival in America, Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants were exposed to an extraordinary amount of new external influences. Jewish immigrants were absorbed into America’s established culture—food, style, and etiquette—which would affect both Jewish and American cultures alike, as the symbolic “melting pot” analogy came to fruition. While the reciprocal influence can be addressed in a number of ways, this discussion will hone in on the use of challah as a vehicle to express Jewish identity in America, and in that, argue that through American cultural influences and the new pressure to adapt multiple identities, Jewish practice in America transformed from an inward looking phenomenon, to an identity that both penetrates broader American culture and is influenced itself by American perceptions.

Defining Identity and Performance of Identity

As this chapter will be delving into the concept of identity and performance of identity, it is crucial to offer some background and definition for these ideas. In his philosophical and political work entitled Secularism, Identity, and Enchantment, philosopher Akeel Bilgrami seeks to define the concept of identity. While identity is
generally understood as a self-conception, there is more to the concept of identity than simply what one believes oneself to be (Bilgrami 2014, 243). Because of this, Bilgrami distinguishes between two aspects of one’s identity that are constantly in conversation with each other, and he defines these two aspects as the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of identity (Bilgrami 2014, 245).

When a person is said to have a certain identity owing to some characteristics she has and with which she identifies, then identity is being thought of in its subjective aspects. If a person is said to have a certain identity owing to some characteristics she has but with which she does not necessarily identify, then we are speaking of her objective identity. (Bilgrami 2014, 245)

In other words, one’s own internal sense of one’s personal values and qualities can be called “subjective identity,” while characteristics that others attribute to one, with which a person may or may not personally identify, can be termed “objective identity” (Bilgrami 2014, 245). Bilgrami makes a point of using the word “identifies” rather than “chooses” regarding one’s subjective identity in order to acknowledge the lack of complete freedom one has in claiming an identity (Bilgrami 2014, 245).

In discussing one’s subjective identity, the identity of self-conception, Bilgrami understands that a prerequisite for adopting a particular subjective identity (to the extent a particular identity is a matter of choice) is that the individual values that characteristic, and on an even further meta level, values that one values that characteristic (Bilgrami 2014, 246). However, one could argue that one’s subjective identity contains only positive qualities that one values. Regardless, in the context of adopting a Jewish identity as one’s subjective identity, the individual must value being Jewish, and value that one values being Jewish. What
makes the subjective identity truly ingrained is the idea that there is no chance of revision of the values associated with the characteristic without a loss of self (Bilgrami 2014, 252). In this context, that is to say if one were to lose one’s Jewish identity, one would no longer recognize oneself – that this characteristic is so foundational to one’s sense of self that the self cannot exist as it is without it.

The conversation about identity grows more complex when bringing in Bilgrami’s concept of “objective identity.” While one’s subjective identity concerns one’s internal values, convictions, and identifications, the objective identity considers external perceptions of the individual.

Many subjects may identify with some characteristic they possess which is not what is most salient about them to others. And it is thought important by many political philosophers that nevertheless, it is these latter, the ones that others think are more salient, that often define identity in these subjects, no matter what the subjects may conceive themselves to be. (Bilgrami 2014, 255-256)

It is in the conversation between these two ideas of “identity” that the performance of identity comes into play. The consciousness, understanding, and will to create the bridge between inner values, external behavior, and external perceptions about oneself lead to the conversation about what it means to “perform” one’s identity, as I will claim that challah does for modern American Jews.

The self-categorization theory claims that, “when a social identification is salient, group members’ behavior conforms to their cognitive representation of ingroup norms” (Hopkins 2013, 438). There are many reasons for a public performance of one’s social identity, whether that is to encourage other group members to behave a particular way, to reaffirm their own group membership, and/or to communicate their internal values (Hopkins 2013, 438). Communicating
one’s particular subjective identity is surely shaped by its intersection with other identities (Hopkins 2013, 439). Expression of identity being informed by other aspects of one’s identity is seen clearly through the migrant—of one’s relationship with their current country and with their country of origin (Hopkins 2013, 438). This relates to our earlier discussion of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants and their decisions regarding whether they would distinguish themselves from other Americans or adapt to the lifestyle practices of other Americans. In all cases, there were negotiations on both sides of the identity adaptation spectrum. While some Eastern European Jews may not be willing to compromise on their values in their dietary laws, they might relate to America, their new country, by adapting new understandings of etiquette and learning English. These compromises and negotiations of identity are performances communicating to each group of which the individual identifies that they are a part.

My research aligns with that of Nick Hopkins and Ronni Michelle Greenwood, as I adapt the following stance: "Whereas much existing social identity-related research on performance tends to explore the impact of manipulating people’s beliefs about their visibility on their expression of group-related attitudes, we consider group members’ own accounts of their motivations for making an identity visible” (Hopkins 2013, 438). With that, I express the understanding of identity and identity performance that will be discussed in this thesis: the “subjective” identity of Jews is externally acted upon with intention to communicate one’s subjective identity. While varying between the individuals, this external performance of identity serves to communicate a message to the Jewish community (asserting one’s
belief to the internal group about what applies as appropriate behavior as an
American Jew) or to those Americans outside of the Jewish community (expressing
to outsiders how they—the American Jews—enact their understanding of Jewish
values).

**Jews and the American Identity**

“Journeys, in the form of migrations, have facilitated contact with new foods and
made it possible for people to construct new identities.” (Diner 2001, 10)

As Michael Twitty says in his remarkable blog, “afroculinaria,” that inspired
Jewish food bloggers), “people know something beautiful when they see it- and they
make it their own.” This idea is resonates strongly with the contemporary
discussion of challah, as challah has both changed its presentation within the Jewish
community and outside of the Jewish community. Americans have adapted challah
recipes and presentations in their restaurants, grocery stores, and homes. As seen in
the previous section, Jewish immigrants to America often changed in ways so
gradual that the new traditions, etiquette, and styles often appeared to have always
been that way. In their study about the “Closeting of the Jewish American Identity”
(2000), Hecht and Faulkner observed that:

Over time, Jewish identity has been transformed from an all-encompassing
identity to an identity that exists alongside or in combinations with other
identities. While this identity always had both religious and secular elements,
for many Jewish Americans the religious element now has become
subordinate to cultural or secular elements; it is not so much focused on
images of G-d or religious practices as much as it is a social style. (Hecht and
Faulkner 2000, 372)
Hecht and Faulkner identify “modernity” and “individualism” as accomplices-to-change of sorts, as they attribute to those two factors as the reasons for the “assertion of an endless variety of religious interpretations in Judaism” that we see today in the variety of practices of Judaism in American culture (Hecht and Faulkner 2000, 373). In her book, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950*, Jenna Weissman Joselit supports this idea about shifts in Jewish interpretation upon arriving in America. “Well-intentioned, if largely unlettered,” she writes, “American Jews at the grass roots generated an independent sense of what was culturally meaningful and enduring, deriving it as much from American notions of consumerism, gender, privacy, and personal happiness as from Jewish notions of tradition, ritual, memory, and continuity” (Joselit 1994, 4). Joselit describes this shift in Jewish practice not only a result of adapting American ideals to Jewish values, but also describes the change as, “the burden of cultural continuity shifted from the community to the family” (Joselit 1994, 6). No longer would community boundaries, laws, and enforcements make the decisions about what is acceptable behavior as a Jew, but each family would set their own standards individually.

Today, some of the changes and cultural influences that impacted Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to America are obvious, such as more isolated cooking and waning kashrut, and sometimes they are less apparent when looking back from a contemporary lens. Sometimes cultural influences are presented as an innovation, such as a restaurant priding itself on its “fusion” properties of two distinct cultures. Sometimes, however, cultural influences become so deeply embedded in behavior
that they are no longer consciously acknowledged, as if a particular way of doing things seems to have been done a certain way forever.

American Infiltration of the Jewish Table

The arrival in America did not take long to make an impact on the behaviors and identities of Ashkenazi Jewry. At the turn of the 20th century, behavioral guidebooks for Jews and other immigrants "offered an idealized version of actual, day-to-day behavior, often at considerable remove from the realities of a less ordered existence" (Joselit 1990, 38). Jewish immigrants in America also took it upon themselves to inform one another about the appropriate etiquette expected in the United States. Individuals such as Chaim Malitz, with his work entitled, The Home and the Woman, as well as different etiquette columns written in Yiddish and published in Yiddish women's magazines served to help Eastern European Jews adapt to their new host culture (Joselit 1990, 38).

Thanks to their careful tutelage, patterns of behavior changed gradually among immigrant Jews. Although some may have continued to use a knife in lieu of a fork or noisily to slurp their soup, many more adapted. 'Little by little, though, we were changing in our own home,' recalled Elizabeth Stern, the daughter of Russian immigrants. ‘Napkins were served at meals.’ ‘We bought a new soup pot and enough plates and spoons and forks and knives so we could all sit down by the table at the same time and eat like people,’ a character in one of Yezerskia’s novels, a Lower East Side resident, relates. 'It soon became natural, as if we were used from always, to eat with separate knives and forks instead of from the pot to the hand as we once did.' (Joselit 1990, 38-39)

The changes seemed subtle, yet they occurred and were effective and lasting. American influence on Ashkenazi Jewish life was so prominent that the changes made but a century ago do not occur to the contemporary American Jew as a change
that was ever made. I introduced the change in etiquette—a largely uncontroversial
topic—first in order to make way for the introduction to changes that seem close to
home for many individuals, even today: changes in Jewish food.

Already by 1910, American mass-produced food items were marketed
specifically to Jewish immigrants. In some cases they were kosher; in other cases
they were compatible with kosher or “kosher-style” food practices. In every case
American food manufacturers and distributors recognized a new and promising
market for their products. Items available included “Uneeda Biscuit with its Inner-
Seal, Borden’s condensed milk, ... [and] Gulden’s mustard.” and were heavily
advertised in the popular Yiddish papers (Joselit 2990, 38). These American food
infiltrations into the Jewish community were significant as their existence “suggests
that Jewish immigrants were familiar with culinary trends outside of their
neighborhoods.” The product promotions in Yiddish cookbooks explained how
“Jewish housewives were able to wed the preparation of traditional Jewish fare to
the convenience of commercially produced foodstuffs and to enlarge their
repertoire of recipes as well” (Joselit 1990, 39-40). Because these advertisements
and promotions were wittingly placed inside of popular Jewish resources, “by the
1920s, the Yiddish-speaking housewife was no stranger to the likes of the Dutchess
potatoes, banana blancmange, and strawberry shortcake” (Joselit 1990, 40).
Between the gradual changes of etiquette in the dining room and the introduction of
American foods into the diets of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, the “melting pot”
vision of America was well underway for the Jewish community, and it would
continue to affect perceptions of “Jewish food.”
American Jewish Food, and American Jewish Challah

Food is a universal necessity. There are few statements that can be stated as boldly as that. Food fulfills a biological need, and it also tends to have rich cultural significance. In her book, *Hungering for America*, Hasia Diner writes, “consumption of food has always been culturally constructed. What was tasty to one group invoked disgust and loathing in another” (Diner 2001, 3). Differences in food presentation and consumption habits are important cultural phenomena, often drawing lines regarding who is in your community. Diner summarizes, “Put bluntly, the person with whom one cannot eat (and whose food cannot be consumed) is often the same person with whom sexual relations must be avoided” (Diner 2009, 4). In other words, food and dietary laws are vehicles to understand who is in one’s community for purposes of identity and continuity. To differentiate oneself from others—including through food habits—is one method of defining oneself and setting the boundaries of group identity.

However, this method of distinguishing oneself through food boundaries posed a problem for the Jewish communities in America. The article “A Study of Southern Jewish Foodways and Cultural Identity,” raises an ethical, group dilemma: “Gradually these Jews shaped an identity that focused on ethical principles more than Jewish ritual and ceremonial practices. It was important to fit into the larger society and in many homes, Jewish dietary laws were dropped because of the community’s small numbers and the difficulty of obtaining kosher foods” (Ferris 137).
It was not only Southern Jews who faced these challenges and decisions that caused a decline in Jewish families observing kashrut in their homes. Statistics from the time show that “Between 1914 and 1924, the consumption of kosher meat in the greater New York area fell by 25 to 30 percent.” Between recorded numbers in Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Chicago and more, the Literary Digest in the mid-1930s concluded that no more than 15 percent of the nation’s Jews strictly observed kashrut, while 20 percent observed “some of the laws some of the time” and 65 percent ignored virtually “all of the laws most of the time.” While these numbers caused quite the upset among parts of the Jewish community (as different quoted participants denied their participation in interviews, and other authors worked to discount the findings), the numbers also seemed to hit “right on the mark” (Joselit 1994, 176-177). These choices and debates as a community regarding kashrut did not “go down without a fight” so-to-speak, and remain largely discussed to this day.  

So where does that leave challah as a contemporary expression of modern Jewish identity? Symbolically representing the Jewish religious ritual of Shabbat and other Jewish holidays to many, challah is a prominent source of Jewish religious and familial education. Seen by many as a way to connect to their Jewish roots, seen by others as a way to innovate and share cultures, and seen by some as both, in the context of American Jewish life, public expressions of Jewish identity through  

13 Even in the beginning of 2018, the conversations of American Jewry regarding the importance of kashrut are still heated, with strong opinions on both sides of the argument. The Trefa Banquet 2.0 inspired a lot of discussion, as did the non-Kosher Ashkenazi Jewish restaurant in Philadelphia started by Abe Fischer and Yehuda Sichel.
challah represent this particular tension we see throughout American Jewish history among religious law, tradition, acculturation, and innovation.

Popular Jewish food blogger, Shannon Sarna, editor of “The Nosher” and author of the 2017 cookbook, Modern Jewish Baker: Challah, Babka, Bagels & More writes an encapsulating introduction to her cookbook:

A few years ago I was at a Jewish food event when a colleague came up to me and asked, ‘What is it about challah for you? Why do you make so many different kinds?’ It was an interesting question, and one that I hadn’t given much thought to before that moment. She went on to explain that she grew up eating the same traditional challah that her mom made every week, and now she happily makes the same plain challah every week for her own family. Of course there are many Jewish families who savor the taste of and the process of baking challah for the very fact that it is, in its original form, traditional and familiar. For them, challah is sweet in its simplicity. **For me, however, maybe because my own history is not typical, I see challah as a way to merge old and new, and create something that is comforting but also unexpected.**

These recipes are expressions of my not-so-uniquely mixed up American Jewishness; and they are inspired by my own Italian-Jewish upbringing, my many travels to Israel, and the many other ‘mixed’ Jews I have known who mash up their different cultural identities into delicious, meaningful, and unique food. (Sarna 2017, 1) (emphasis mine)

Her sentiments are echoed across vast populations of American Jewry.

Popular challah baker and food blogger, “Mandylicious,” who, in a phone interview, described her Orthodox upbringing as a major player in her decision to make challah, to make a business out of her challah, and to continue posting on the popular social media account, Instagram, about her challah.

I grew up in St. Louis…. I was growing up there decades ago, you could only be one way. It was very judgmental…. If you wore pants, then you know, you couldn’t visit school. If you did not keep completely kosher outside the house, your house wasn’t kosher…. It was all very one-way, and there was only one way that you could be considered Jewish.
When I went to college, [the judgmental atmosphere] was common I guess, because I went to Hillel, and during the first Shabbat there they had a man say Kiddush [blessing] on the wine, and they had a woman say the Motzi [blessing on the bread]. And the people who I knew who grew up Orthodox like me, they literally laughed at the woman doing it. It was not even weird. It was more weird for me to see a woman making a prayer over bread than to see people laughing at her because her religious choices were different than theirs.14

These moments seem to serve as something of a crucible moment in Mandy’s mind as after she met her husband in college who was a Conservative Jew, she decided that she wanted to be around more people she perceived as open-minded. When she started baking challot, her husband encouraged her to make it a business (an event that she humorously attributed to his MBA degree). Soon, she was encouraged to begin a blog on Instagram. She won a “Thanksgiving Contest” with a turkey-shaped pumpkin challah, and that helped her blog gain a lot of traction. Her Instagram, @MandyliciousChallah currently has 12,000 followers.

So many people had written to me that it was so inspiring to see that they could do so many things with challah. That, for me, was so wonderful because I feel like the way I grew up is not the way that everyone grows up, but they see challah as like, this very big... you have to do it exactly the same way every time or if you mess it up it is not going to be good.... And challah is a tradition, people do all different flavors, and all different shapes. They don’t know why it started the way it is, like, it comes from a very small line in the Torah and they’ve taken it and made it something else. But for me, to make it more fun and more approachable, for some people who are scared of it, or overwhelmed by it, or bored by it, that was very cool for me and that was when I started spending more time on Instagram and helping people.... I have this business locally that I sell challahs to regulars here.... But I [also] have this Instagram where I talk to people everyday from all over the world.... But the whole thing for me is, I started my business because someone wouldn’t give away their recipe, so I gladly give away my recipe to make people feel good that they can do something... I want everyone from every background to feel like they can do anything... The hardest thing about making challah is the idea of making challah... It’s just more fun if you have fun with it, right? So

that to me has been so rewarding. Coming from some place that was so ‘everything has to be a certain way,’ now getting an opportunity....

I have a lot of people who are Jewish who make my challah who use my recipe and other things that I make. That’s cool, but it is also cool that I also have people who have nothing to do with Judaism or anything like that say that they’re so happy because they can make their own challah, and they don’t want to make a traditional challah that doesn’t sound fun, but a S’moreo challah because they have a bunch of friends coming over... That’s great, that’s the most fun, that’s the happiest happy you could ever be. When you feel like you’ve helped someone connect to something to their childhood or something around them to make them feel good about a part of themselves that they did not think they could feel good about before.15

In Mandy’s public posting of challah, with visible type that her challah is kosher, she is reclaiming and enacting the Jewish identity that she would like to possess. As different American Jews laughed at each other’s practices and disassociated when someone did not participate “just so” in her Jewish childhood, her understanding of being “judgmental” versus “open-minded” evolved through her college years. Today, she uses challah, a very traditional Jewish food item, to make Judaism (and a wonderful part of Judaism) accessible to all. Mandy saw neither her business nor challah baking as related to her American identity, but rather solely her Jewish identity. In her posts and in helping others bake challah, she is publicly enacting her values, and her Judaism. She is attempting to cut down the walls and boundaries that have been built up through a particular culture of ritual and tradition. By baking “fun” challot and creating different recipes, she is challenging the idea that she feels she experienced that there is only one way to engage with certain aspects of Jewish life.

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15 Mandylicious Challah. Personal Interview. April 9, 2018. (Emphasis hers.)
Author, blogger, and culinary historian, Michael Twitty, spoke at an event on April 9th, 2017, hosted by the Combined Jewish Philanthropies, the Jewish Federation of Boston. He described writing his book *The Cooking Gene* as similar to baking challah, braiding it, and letting it rise. He compared the two in this way because he said they inspire people to have conversations.\(^{16}\) As an individual whose identities include African American, Jewish, and Gay among others, Twitty has been impacted by the boundaries that different communities draw out. He discussed in the public event how in America, different groups and communities share cultures but build arbitrary divisions. One example he gave was of his mother and grandmother, and how they became familiar with challah and Jews as African American, Christian women. Back when his mother and grandmother lived in Cincinnati, after church they would want a snack. The only bakeries that were open on Sundays were the Jewish ones. It was because of this that after church, his mother would get challah from the Jewish bakers, and this small ritual became a part of their routine.\(^{17}\) There were two sentences that Twitty said at the event that I found particularly striking. The first was, “When people tell you that you’re invisible, the best thing you can do is be as visible as humanly possible.”\(^{18}\) That seems to encompass his crucible moments with his different and intersectional identities. Others in his communities will tell him that he is invisible. His response is to write about his experiences and the histories of his communities. In this way, he makes

\(^{16}\) Twitty, M. *Public Interview Event.* April 9, 2018.

\(^{17}\) Twitty, M. *Public Interview Event.* April 9, 2018.

\(^{18}\) Twitty, M. *Public Interview Event.* April 9, 2018.
himself visible through these expressions and performances of identity in order to break down the arbitrary boundaries that have been built.

The second point he made that I found critical to this discussion is: “If you are American but not multicultural, you haven’t tried hard enough to be an American.”

This idea is prominent in the themes we have been seeing through expression of identity through challah. Through challah, many Jewish individuals are trying to cut down the barriers that have been built to draw the lines of who is in the tent. These individuals believe in the multiplicity and intersectionality of identities that certain tight-knit and ritualistic communities have a challenging time welcoming. It is in conversation with these communities that the performance and expression of identity comes across loudly. Those conversations are where baking challah in new ways and sharing them as Jewish, or tracing the history of challah back to its external cultural influences is meant to embrace a new Jewish identity and community that loses the hard lines that these individuals interpret as having been drawn.

In 2011, the book The Sacred Table was published and self-proclaimed as “a historic event for Reform Judaism” (Savage 2011, 19), as it provokes a discussion on food, intention, and rituals. In this book, attitudes towards traditional Jewish law range from the least observant, seeing rituals and laws as irrelevant, to seeing immense value in certain food-focused traditions and vouching that others begin practicing them, as well. Some quotes and stories were in line with what Shannon Sarna, Michael Twitty, and Mandylicious preach such as the following: “As is well-

19 Twitty, M. Public Interview Event. April 9, 2018.
known, except for a minority of traditionalists, Jews slowly left the confines of their kosher kitchens and entered the t'reif (unkosher) domains of their gentile neighbors and local eating establishments. In due time, they would even come to stock their own pantries with nonkosher items as their ties to the traditional Jewish world unraveled and they became more engaged with society around them. To this day, a Jew’s dietary intake may reveal as much about that person’s Jewish identity as his or her relationship to the world at large” (Savage 2011, 61). While Mandy might not go as far as this statement, the idea that there are certain barriers set up by the Jewish tradition that individual Jews need to cut down in order to have a better relationship with other parts of the world is one that threads throughout.

Shannon Sarna drove this point even farther during our phone interview as she distinguishes the Judaism that she identifies with as that of a people rather than a religion. “There are people who are connecting with new ways of challah in a purely Shabbat focused sense. But most Jews don’t keep kosher, don’t keep Shabbat, they might not even know what Shabbat is…. 73% of Jews who got married in the last ten years married a non-Jew. You know? Most people are not connecting with the spirituality of challah, but they know that challah is a Jewish thing like matzoball soup is a Jewish thing and they see it as a cultural expression.” Sarna also has crucible moments of her own, she explains in the interview the repercussions she faced in the Jewish community as the offspring of an intermarried couple, her dad having the Jewish background. By explicitly entitling her book The Modern Jewish Baker (emphasis mine), she is making a statement on how she perceives society and

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the American Jewish community to have progressed away from spirituality. She expresses that through her adventurous challah recipes, and is performing the Jewish identity that she claims as hers, and the one she understands as relevant to today’s evolving and interconnected world.

_The Sacred Table_ introduces the opposite points as many stories speak of a reconnecting with Jewish identity.

‘Three years ago, to deepen my connection to Shabbat, I set out on the “Great Challah Experiment.” I have baked a different recipe every Shabbat—over 150 recipes so far. Yet, the greatest discovery is that by baking challah weekly, I set aside time to nourish my family and my soul. I have come to enjoy measuring the ingredients, mixing, and kneading in silence. It’s my meditation, bubbe-style, and it means more to me with each passing week. I connect to generations of mothers in the past and, God willing, a link to the future, too, as my son and daughters bake their own bread and someday bake with their children.’ –Mindy Knapp, Randolph, NJ. (Savage 2011, 38)

Similarly, other quotes talk about Judaism and food intersecting through challah as one individual began baking challah in accordance to the weekly Torah portion:

‘My passion for Judaism and my enjoyment of food intersect in many ways, but none better than in my baking thematic challah for our Torah study group at Congregation Sherith Israel in San Francisco. I bake a challah that complements each weekly parashah. For example, when Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream, I baked seven attractive miniature challot and seven skinny unattractive challot, symbolizing the seven years of feast and seven years of famine. My fellow students enjoy the anticipation of seeing my interpretations, and I am enriched by the extra Torah study needed to find a challah connection!’ -Stephen H. Olson, San Francisco, CA. (Savage 2011, 46)

Each of these American Jews from around the country is expressing their Judaism and Jewish connection through challah. Challah is used as the explanatory tool, and the physical visible tool for one to perform his/her subjective identity with
regards to Judaism. Each person has an ideal Jewish life, and they strive to emulate it, often through the public use (baking and presenting) of challah.

Even further contrasting Shannon Sarna than these understandings of Jewish religious connection through challah is a different Jewish cookbook entirely about challah from the perspective of Rebbetzin Rochie Pinson, entitled *Rising! The Book of Challah*. Pinson, a Chabad emissary who, with her husband, founded the Chabad Center for Jewish Spirituality, is also a Jewish food blogger turned author, composed recipes for a variety of unique challot (such as Marzipan Challah, Spinach Ricotta Challah, and Peaches & Cream Challah). Yet she comes from a lens not of combining cultures, but a very spiritual and halakhic idea of the divine gift of challah, of “honoring the process,” and of “the power of presence” (Pinson 2017, 28). Pinson views the innovations and new creations of challah as one way to honor the timeless Jewish tradition of Shabbat. She introduces her cookbook with the story of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi who, in response to a question asking for words of wisdom, responds:

“There was a scattering of particles that merged with the source of life, pure water, to create a great circle of being. This great circle of being was then drawn down into individual stands of energy, allowing themselves to be formed and finally to be drawn through a refinement of fire, wherein the particles were finally fit to be absorbed” (Pinson 2017, 34).

The room was shocked at the concise nature of the great Hasidic Rabbi’s response, until someone mentioned that he “has just given us his wife’s challah

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21 A Rebbetzin is the wife of a rabbi.
recipe” (Pinson 2017, 34). Pinson concludes this story by saying, “As the great Chasidic masters understood, the cosmic story of the creation of life is, in fact, just like making a batch of challah” (Pinson 2017, 35). Pinson proceeds from this story by discussing how significant challah baking has become in her life and how she immerses the practice with spirituality and prayer (Pinson 2017, 35).

Comparing and contrasting Rising! The Book of Challah with Modern Jewish Baker: Challah, Babka, Bagels, & More demonstrate how challah has been a vehicle for public performance and expression of a vast variety of Jewish identities in contemporary America. Both cookbooks were published in 2017, just this past year, by two popular Jewish-presenting food bloggers. This is a perfect example of a strong tension of American Jewish identity demonstrated through challah: the value of spirituality and religious tradition and the value of exposure and influence of other peoples that enter the lives of American Jews to create something entirely new.

There are also those who do not accept these adventurous challot or variations of challah. Carol Ungar writes that, “it’s just that challah needs to be, well, challah. These foods—I’m not quite sure what to call them—have an identity crisis. What are they? Challahs, or some other kind of baked goods—muffins, pie, or perhaps cake?” (Ungar 2015, Kveller). To explain her understanding of what challah must be, she refers to a popular fictional character. “Tevyeh, in ‘Fiddler on the Roof,’ said it well—tradition. There is inherent power in doing something the way it’s always been done, especially if it works” (Ungar 2015, Kveller).
Challah & American Jews Celebrating Non-Jewish Holidays and Cultures

What happens when this symbolic Jewish food is used to celebrate a traditionally Christian holiday honoring Saint Valentine? Valentine’s Day has been largely adapted as a secular American holiday celebrating love. Many non-Orthodox Jews have taken to celebrating this coined Hallmark Holiday as they send each other sweets, cards, and love.

Obviously.

The Best Kind of Roses are Challah Roses

Winter is the perfect time for honing your baking skills and getting creative with hot cocoa or perhaps mulled wine. ...
@sarah_kieffer made PINK heart challah inspired by ours!

Show us what you’re up to — tag @hotbreadkitchen with your baking + cooking projects!

WE'RE CELEBRATING VALENTINE'S DAY WITH OUR TRUE LOVE:

Let’s face it, challah never disappoints. Happy Valentine’s day! See More

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Loved ones, take note!

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Roses Are Red, But Almond-Filled Challah Roses Are Edible

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These publicly posted images of challah, both as Jewish and celebrating a non-Jewish holiday seem in line with the “breaking boundaries” ideas that Mandylicious, Shannon Sarna, and Michael Twitty suggested.

Similarly, challah is used in other examples of cultural fusions and presentations, such as the example of Shalom Japan. Shalom Japan is a restaurant founded by one Japanese chef and a Jewish chef who wanted to create a new and exciting cultural fusion restaurant. One example of this fusion is their appetizer of “Sake Kasu Challah” which presents as Jewish from the challah, and Japanese from the seasonings.

Challah is used as a Jewish food item to express the different ways of “being Jewish” and having a Jewish identity in contemporary America. While some individuals prefer to understand challah in its traditional form, others enjoy using challah as a vehicle for new expressions of a Jewish identity that is approachable to outsiders, and sometimes fused with other communal identities as a sign of healthy interaction with those outside the Jewish community.

**Challah Shapes**

As mentioned in Part I, using challah to celebrate different holidays by rolling it into different shapes is not a new concept to Jewish history, and cultural fusions were often prominent among Jews in this regard, as well. Different traditions of Sephardi Jews such as “Ojos de Haman Challah” included a “challah to look like Haman’s face, with hard-boiled eggs filling in for the eyes. At the Purim banquet the custom is to gouge the eyes out—great fun for the children!” (Ungar 2015, 131), or the complex “Siete Cielos Challah” that Sephardi Jews baked to represent the seven celestial spheres that burst open when the Ten Commandments were revealed (Ungar 2015, 169) were shared with their Ashkenazi counterparts as Jewish traditions from around the world meet (and sometimes merge) in contemporary globalization. This is another way that a Jewish community may express their traditions and share them with others.
Conclusion

In conclusion, challah has deep historical, religious, and cultural relevance in Jewish life and practice. From its biblical beginnings and its religious interpretations by rabbis in the Talmud and through the ages, to its birth and rebirth in Europe through different countries, different shapes, and different practices, various understandings of challah have contributed as expressions of Jewish identity. In contemporary America, challah is typically envisioned as yellow, egg bread with far-reaching Jewish roots and implications. The yellow loaf seen today is not the stagnant archetype seen throughout history. The different ways that bloggers, authors, restaurants, bakeries, and organizations use challah to convey a message about their Jewish identities are public acts of claiming/reclaiming, performing, and expressing, one’s subjective identity as it relates to their Jewish life.

Four different trends arose through my research when discussing challah and challah as a way to publicly express and reclaim one’s Jewish identity:

1. Reasoning based within themselves, i.e. *This is my Jewish identity and I want others to see it and recognize it.*

2. Reasoning for the purpose of others, i.e. *I see how individuals have been excluded from the Jewish community, and I want to make challah and Jewish life accessible to all, OR I have found meaning in the Jewish religious ritual of taking, braiding, baking, and eating challah, and I would like to share this experience with others in the hopes that they will find value in it too.*

3. Reasoning for the purpose of the Jewish community, i.e. *I have been excluded and/or I have seen others be excluded from Jewish life, and I want to openly...*
disagree with some sects of the American Jewish community as an attempt to show them how there are multiple ways to be Jewish and express one’s Jewish identity through challah.

4. Reasoning unrelated to Jewish identity, i.e. It tastes good.

Each of these reasons that one individual chooses to publicly express and reclaim their Jewish identity through challah is certainly modern within the context of our multicultural America, though it also has deep historical roots as challah has always been influenced by the surrounding cultures and host countries of Jewish communities. As seen through the discussion of the German Jewish berches, the Jewish ritual Sabbath bread has both religious roots as well as a deep-seated relevance to the German custom of offering braided loaves to the goddess of fertility and vegetation named, “Berchta.”

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that an essentialist definition of challah may not exist. While for some individuals, challah’s historical and cultural appearance and evolution seem to be the most significant identifying factor, for others its identity solely traces back to the Jewish law. Through all of this disagreement, there was one aspect of challah everyone agreed upon: challah is a Jewish food. Because of this, challah will continue to be used as a vehicle to perform one’s Jewish identity, and to share Jewish religion and culture with others in the context of contemporary multicultural America.


