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METHODS AND TEXTS

FIELD TRIP TO THE KOSHER KITCHEN

Religion and Politics in the University Dining Hall

RACHEL GROSS

One Tuesday afternoon during our regularly scheduled class period, my students and I took a class trip to a space that was intimately familiar to them: the dining hall located amidst the freshmen and sophomore dorms. We gathered just outside the serving area, near the tables where a few students lingered over a late lunch or an early afternoon snack. The à-la-carte serving area is clean, shiny, and attractive. Built only four years ago, it offers a diverse selection of options at different stations—including, most importantly for our class, a kosher station. As the class gathered, my students greeted friends who walked by, laughing self-consciously, “I’m here for a class!” Once my fourteen students had arrived, we followed Karen Zeffren, a kosher kitchen supervisor, through the serving area and into a space my students knew less about—the kitchens and storerooms where the food was prepared. We walked past busy food service workers. “Here are the new dishwashers!” joked one chef. We followed Karen through the kitchens, up an elevator, and into the much smaller space of the university’s kosher kitchens.

At Washington University in St. Louis, I taught an upper level, interdisciplinary course on the politics of religion and food among Jews in the United States. Beginning with the colonial period, we examined the cultural, social, historical, political, and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food that have sustained and demarcated American Jewish communities. The course is weighted toward twentieth-century and contemporary concerns, bringing questions about organized religious institutions, individual choices, and structures of power closer to students’ lives. Thus, while I generally encouraged students to bracket their own opinions and religious perspectives in order to minimize preconceptions about our subject matter, students’ backgrounds and experiences were often relevant to our conversations.

Washington University is a private research institution in suburban St. Louis, with a national and international student population. According to Hillel International, a Jewish campus organization, 25 percent of the undergraduate population of Washington University is Jewish, and many Jewish students come from the northeast US, particularly the New York metropolitan area. Of the fourteen students in my class, nearly all had some Jewish background; only one positioned herself as a non-Jew in classroom discussions. The students were a mix of classes and majors, from first-year students in the business school to seniors majoring in Jewish, Near Eastern, and Islamic Studies. All of them could be urged into enthu-

siasm about food and Jews, understanding questions of food and eating as paradigmatically important to the people we studied.

Through visiting the kosher kitchen at the university's dining hall, students and I examined religion and politics in our own institution. The activity highlighted the value of putting students in a kind of place that they have read about, in this case, a commercial kosher kitchen. The on-campus field trip allowed them to observe a specific institutional setting and to hear firsthand the ways people talk about institutional religious practices. The visit modeled an intellectual encounter with the world: How can we actively observe the performance of religious practices? What questions can we ask people about the intricate institutional layers that structure their religious lives and their jobs? The visit made our classroom questions seem more pressing. It also encouraged students to ask questions about religious practices and institutional politics in other aspects of their lives.

I designed the course with the scholarly approach known as "lived religion" in mind. Since the 1990s, the category of lived religion has built upon the older category of "popular religion," which examines the religious practices of laypeople, within and beyond the sanction of official religious precepts. As David D. Hall explains in his introduction to the edited volume *Lived Religion in America*, studies of lived religion break "the distinction between high and low," challenging the analytical hierarchy dividing institutional or normative religious practices from the experiences of practitioners, including both clergy and laity (ix). This attention to the religious experiences of both leaders and laity, which both challenges and is attentive to hierarchy, lends itself to the study of politics, understood as structures of power.

In class, students and I analyzed a wide variety of examples of how American Jews experience their religious and communal relationships through practices and ideas centered on food, from nineteenth-century Jewish cookbooks to contemporary sustainable Jewish delis. These concrete examples challenged students' assumptions that religion is solely limited to following theological and practical precepts laid down by religious leaders. In order to explore this idea, I introduced students to Robert Orsi's understanding of "the people's religion as the totality of their ultimate values, their most deeply held ethical convictions, their efforts to order their reality, their cosmology.... More simply stated, *religion* here means 'what matters'" (xliii). But the concepts of lived religion and politics also arose organically from our material: American Jewish foodways have long provided individuals with a sense of meaning, of transhistorical community and belonging. They also build upon and expand official religious oversight of food. Preparing and eating food situates American Jews in a network of sacred relationships with family members, friends, and coreligionists living and dead, historical and mythical. As in all matters of consumption, it also places them within authoritative relationships of power and control.

Following this understanding of religion as “what matters,” Jewish food proves a useful way to introduce students to questions about the politics of institutional, communal, and personal religious practices. What is Jewish food? What is at stake in delineating a distinction between Judaism (the religion) and Jewishness (the culture)? How have American Jews built upon and reacted to various iterations of *kashrut*, the practice of keeping kosher? Who is seen as an authority in matters of *kashrut*? What role have non-Jewish institutions played in the development of American Jewish food practices? With our trip to the university’s kosher kitchen, we brought these overarching questions about religion and politics into the places where students live and study.

More than halfway through the semester, my students and I read journalist Sue Fishkoff’s popular, thorough account of *kashrut* in the United States, *Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority*. We had been alluding to the complicated politics of *kashrut* certification all semester, but now students learned exactly how American processed or packaged foods and restaurants are certified as adhering to the complicated Jewish dietary laws. At the present time, kosher certification is undeniably a big business in the United States. Nearly one-third to one-half of the food for sale in the typical American supermarket is kosher. Moreover, as more food products carry kosher certification, the companies that make those items require that all of the ingredients—which come from all over the world in our contemporary global food economy—are certified as kosher (54). As Fishkoff identifies, more than \$200 billion of the estimated \$500 billion annual food sales in the US are kosher certified, despite the fact that less than two percent of the population is Jewish and, furthermore, most American Jews do not keep kosher (4). While there are over one thousand separate rabbis and agencies offering kosher supervision, over eight percent of the kosher goods sold in the United States are certified by the four largest kosher certification agencies, all of which are Orthodox Jewish institutions. Companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars to have kosher certification and supervision, ensuring that their factories, kitchens, tanker trucks, slaughterhouses, bakeries, butchers, and supermarkets follow precise standards. Thousands of *mashgichim* (kosher supervisors; singular, *mashgiach*) oversee meal preparation for hotels, cruise ships, prisons, Jewish schools, synagogues, summer camps—and universities (8).

When I designed this class, I thought carefully about how I wanted to bring food into the classroom. At the American Academy of Religion conference in Baltimore in 2013, I attended an inspiring panel on teaching religion and food. Panelists shared their experiences teaching this topic in different contexts, including how they brought real food into the classroom. Some provided small snacks representative of their readings about religious traditions, while others assigned students to make dishes that they studied. While the latter gave students a hands-on experience of the material, some of the stories alarmed me, particularly tales of students offering the class inedible or undercooked dishes, which the instructor felt

she could not publicly refuse. I was concerned about controlling food safety when food would be shared in a classroom setting as part of an academic requirement. Furthermore, I did not feel comfortable bringing my own dietary habits into the classroom. In particular, I did not want students to perceive my own practice of eating only kosher meat as a sign of bias toward the material we approached together. For these reasons, I controlled the food brought into the classroom. On the day we discussed Matthew Goodman's "The Rise and Fall of the Bagel," which documents the history of the Jewish bagel makers' union in New York and the industrialization of the bagel in the United States, I brought in bagels and cream cheese for the class. When we studied kosher certification of packaged goods, I brought in Oreos, which had become kosher in 1996 to great fanfare, as Miryan Rotkowitz discusses. Students seemed to appreciate these efforts, which made our subject matter seem more concrete. Still, these were illustrations of our studies rather than a substantive engagement with a subject. I wanted our class to cook together.

I hoped that the experience of physically exploring our subject matter and cooking and eating together would help our class come together as a community. I had originally thought of having a local Jewish cooking instructor give a cooking lesson to my class and hoped to use the university's cooking demo kitchen for this purpose. This plan did not last long as, in consultation with Bon Appétit Management Company, the university's dining and catering service, I learned that the university would not allow outside chefs to work in its kitchens. Instead, the Director of Marketing and Communications put me in touch with the kosher chef at the university. Perhaps I could work out a cooking demonstration with her?

I met with Lisa Hungler, the university's kosher chef, and Karen Zeffren, a kosher kitchen supervisor, to discuss holding a cooking demo with my class. I knew what I wanted my students to experience during a cooking activity, but I was not sure what could be arranged within the constraints of the university's kosher kitchen. I hoped that my students would have a chance to talk to the employees in the kosher kitchen and hear how the intricate practices of industrial *kashrut* worked at the institution they attended. I wanted my class to physically experience some of the activity of cooking that we discussed and analyzed in class by cooking together. Lisa and Karen were confused about my methodological and disciplinary approach, which did not conform to their expectations of how Jewish history is taught. They repeatedly asked me the name of the class, and telling them that I had named it "Food Fights: The Politics of American Jewish Consumption, 1860–2014," did not clarify matters. Explaining the interdisciplinary affiliation of the class—it is listed under the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics and cross-listed with the Religious Studies Program, the American Culture Studies Program, and the Department of Jewish, Islamic, and Near Eastern Languages and Cultures—did not clarify my scholarly or pedagogical approaches, either. But they did come to realize that I wanted the students

to experience cooking food with a Jewish connection, and to do so within the strictures of a kosher kitchen. I discussed with Karen and Lisa possible dishes that could be made within our time constraints, planning to meet during a class period so all of my students could attend. Karen and Lisa planned to talk about their jobs and answer students' questions. (Lisa was not able to attend our cooking demo in the end.)

Kashrut demands separating the preparation of meat and dairy products, and industrial kitchens, including those at universities, often have two kitchens to ensure separation of the materials. At Washington University, as at many universities, the kosher kitchen has designated "meat days" and "dairy days" when they serve food prepared exclusively in one kitchen or the other, and today was a meat day. When my students and I arrived in the kosher kitchen area, two African American cooks working in the meat kitchen greeted us, immediately challenging preconceived notions students might have held about who prepares kosher food. Students were eager to talk to them, but the cooks, while friendly, were intent on getting back to their work and directed us to the empty dairy kitchen, where students would have the opportunity to bake with Karen.

In the dairy kitchen, Karen had assembled the makings of rugelach, a traditional Eastern European Jewish pastry of rolled dough around a filling. The students and I crowded around her in the small kitchen and spilled out into the hallway between the two kitchens. Karen had previously made the dough and prepared a chocolate filling and raspberry jam filling. Excited for this rare opportunity to teach, she had printed out Wikipedia's definition and history of rugelach and provided students with a recipe so they could make it at home. Students recognized rugelach as an "iconic" Jewish food, the term that food studies scholar Jennifer Berg uses for foods that conjure up larger sites or communal histories. We had spent many of our class periods together discussing the definitions and limits of Jewish food, and rugelach fit perfectly into our discussions. Should food that some American Jews recognize as "Jewish" but which is also eaten widely by other Americans be classified as Jewish food? Rugelach—like egg creams, bagels, deli meat, knishes, and other foods—were popularized in America by Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Can they be understood as Jewish foods in the way that foods associated with holiday rituals, such as challah, matzah, and hamentaschen, can be? We had not come to a conclusion, but the questions about the origins and waves of popularity of knishes, egg creams, and pastrami sandwiches—as well as rugelach—provided a concrete way to explore the porous boundaries of religious communities.

In the kosher kitchen, Karen answered students' questions about her work while she rolled out a ball of her premade dough and demonstrated how to distribute the filling, and cut and roll the rugelach. She explained that, as many students knew already, Washington University used to have a kosher meal plan that students had to sign up for in advance, and only those students could eat the kosher food prepared by the dining staff. Karen thought that the list had been largely composed of students whose

parents signed them up, and students agreed. In the university's current system, put in place when the new kosher kitchen was built along with the new dining hall in 2010, kosher food is part of the dining hall's à-la-carte system, and anyone may buy individual kosher dishes. Karen estimated that there are about eight students who eat exclusively kosher food. A larger group of Jewish students eat only kosher meat and select vegetarian items from other stations. Other students, both Jewish and non-Jewish, choose dishes from the kosher station when they find them appealing.

As students took over and began assembling the rugelach themselves in shifts, they asked about the economics of the kosher kitchen: Did Bon Appétit make the same profit on the kosher station as other food stations in the dining hall? The kosher kitchen "is not a profit-making operation," Karen answered decisively. Kosher meat costs more, as students knew, and the kitchen required a *mashgiach* in order to be certified as kosher by a local Jewish organization. "The cost is absorbed by the university. The university wants to attract more Jewish students and more observant Jewish students. And it is also part of their program of inclusion. They want to make an environment that is friendly to people of all faiths and people of all origins. That's a very important part of our program here as well. So, yeah, it's a loss." Karen said, providing her interpretation of the university's motives. Students were fascinated by her answer, and, on their initiative, we spent some time analyzing it in a subsequent class. Why did the university want to attract religiously observant Jewish students so much that it was willing to lose money in the attempt, at least in the short term? What was the significance of attracting observant Jews in the service of multiculturalism, particularly when Washington University already has a strong—but not necessarily religiously observant—undergraduate Jewish community? Was kosher food primarily an attraction to potential students, or to their parents? Putting their own experiences in context, my Jewish students were particularly attentive to the relationships formed between parents, students, and university administrators as students and authority figures negotiated students' religious practices. As one student reflected, "It's such a common thing for parents to care more [about their child's Jewish practices] and it's interesting that that's a selling point for the university." Another student reflected on the perhaps ambiguous attitude of the university:

I just thought it was really cool that Wash U ... took the time to make a [kosher] kitchen, yet that kitchen was very small.... I took a tour through the [main] kitchen and it's massive, it's huge. And all the space they could allocate [to the kosher kitchen] was very little. I'm not sure what was behind the scenes, but it's just fascinating [that] while it's such a big [Jewish] population, the kitchen was so small.

These comments about parental concerns and the size of the kosher kitchen suggest students' real concerns: Was the kosher kitchen primarily for show? Did it satisfy both the university and parents to have a kosher kitchen, even as most Jewish students do not utilize it? These lines of

inquiry about the representation of religious practices in the service of university politics brought complicated questions about religion and politics close to students' lives, perhaps even uncomfortably close, making them feel objectified by university administrators.

Karen had previously told me that she had worked as an independent kosher caterer in St. Louis before she joined the kosher team at Washington University a few years ago. I asked her to speak to the class about the differences between working on her own and working at the university kitchen. "I'm not the boss anymore," she told us. "I have to follow a lot of rules.... And there's a nice thing about that. I don't get to make decisions and that's fine, too. And I get a paycheck at the end of the week whether or not seventy-five people have walked in." But there were differences that were specific to working in a kosher environment, too. When Karen was a caterer, her food service had a kosher certification on a *yotzei v'nichnas* (literally, "go and come") basis: the authorized *mashgiach* would do spot checks of her food preparation only occasionally. The *mashgiach* allowed this arrangement because she and her business partner were both observant Jews who could be trusted to correctly follow the rules of *kashrut*. The university's kosher kitchen, in contrast, has a *hashgacha temedi* (kosher certification dependent on constant supervision), requiring a *mashgiach* on the premises at all times, who must perform certain duties in the food preparation process. The non-Jewish institutions of Bon Appétit and the university, not Karen, hold the kosher certification from the Vaad Hoeir (rabbinical council of the city) of St. Louis. "It has been made very clear to me—I am not allowed to perform any of the duties of a *mashgiach*, even though *halachicly*, according to Jewish law, there is no problem with me doing that," Karen said. The *mashgiach*'s duties include turning on the oven and the stove, and this produced an amusing situation when Karen's husband, Michael Zeffren, acts as the *mashgiach* for the Bon Appétit kosher kitchen: "So my husband, for whom I have been cooking for thirty-two years—when I need the oven turned on, I have to get him and he has to turn on the oven, he has to turn on the stove. But it's part of the rules, and I'm fine with that." The political structures of institutional and religious power are apparent in the differences between Karen's roles as cook at the university and as a home cook and a caterer. They are also apparent in the institutional relationships between the Vaad, Bon Appétit, Washington University, and their employees, which delineate the religious practices of students who keep kosher. Gender politics were at work, too, as women are rarely employed as *mashgichim*, though they are permitted to be by Jewish law (Fishkoff 84).

Students were fascinated by the role of the *mashgiach*, and a few students eagerly asked Michael about his work checking bugs. We had recently discussed Orthodox *kashrut* organizations' increasing concern with miniscule bugs in vegetables and how much of a *mashgiach*'s job may be spent inspecting leafy greens for signs of tiny insects; *mashgichim* are now often equipped with a light box to help them spot bugs (Fishkoff 166–185). Yes, Michael said, he had spent much of that day checking cab-

bage leaves using a light box, which students were excited to see. In this ritual context, a relatively ordinary tool became a fascinating object of study. Unfortunately, after this encounter, Michael busied himself with paperwork, which discouraged students from asking him further questions. Students and I encountered the challenges of interrupting people at their routine work and engaging those who are not accustomed to teaching. If I take a similar trip to a university's kosher kitchen in a future iteration of this course, I will try to ensure that the *mashgiach* is prepared to talk to students at greater length and has an idea of the types of questions to expect and demonstrations to be requested.

Finally, after reading Fishkoff's account of the co-development of kosher and halal kitchens at several universities, students were interested in the relationship between Washington University's kosher food station and the halal food served at the "WUrd Fusion" [*sic*] station in the same dining facility. Karen at first firmly declared that there was no interaction between the university's kosher food and halal food, which, unlike kosher food, can be prepared on the same cookware as other food, though care must be taken to avoid contact with non-halal food. But she continued:

We have a meeting of chefs every morning, and I've spoken on behalf of the halal [station] a few times, because they have to keep their food separate, and sometimes things get—. We have a walk-in refrigerator downstairs that's the size of twice this area and things get misplaced. I said, "You can't misplace things with halal. If it says halal, don't use it unless you're the halal station and if you are, don't mislabel anything because people who are observant of those laws really trust us."

As Karen's remarks suggest, Jewish and Muslim food practices are provided for in different ways by the university. Ultimately, Bon Appétit and the university become the gatekeepers of religious practice, structuring how Jewish and Muslim students acquire food in accordance with religious dietary restrictions.

Karen continued, "That is what *kashrus*¹ is about. That is what halal is about. That is what hashgacha is—trust. You have to trust the person who's supervising it. You have to trust the agency. If you don't, then all bets are off." As Karen told my students, religiously observant students (and their parents) place their trust in the university to uphold certain standards. Karen's remarks about the differences between halal and kosher foods caused students to reexamine their understanding of the restrictions of *kashrut*. Her description caused one student to reflect that seemingly burdensome restrictions of *kashrut*, which requires separate cooking utensils from the rest of the university's food service, might be more useful than he had thought. In contrast, Muslims keeping halal do not have these restrictions, "and so they run into issues like she was talking about with the refrigerator and people using their things and them accidentally using someone else's things." The story made him think about "just how useful those boundaries are in *kashrut* when juxtaposed with halal."

¹ *Kashrus* is the Yiddish or Ashkenazic (Eastern European) Hebrew pronunciation of *kashrut*.

Through their field trip to their university's kosher kitchen, the students encountered Jewish religious authorities and practitioners in figures expected and unexpected: the authorized *mashgiach*, the kosher kitchen supervisor, university administrators, and the non-Jewish cooks. Cooking together in the university's kosher kitchen provided a comfortable situation for the students to converse with each other and with Karen: the setting was less formal than a classroom, and students were physically engaged in an activity, rather than staring at a speaker. For her part, Karen, who is not a professional instructor, was in her element in a way she might not have been if I had asked her to speak about her work in my classroom. Outside of the classroom setting, students were less inhibited by the constant recognition that they are graded on participation and were more open to observing their surroundings. Both Karen and my students could see Karen as the expert in this situation, and students learned how she sees her position as one arbiter of the modern industrial *kashrut* complex in an intricate political and religious system.

After the visit, students and I reflected on our experiences, both immediately after the kitchen demonstration, and in the next class period. Some students wanted more time to talk with the *mashgiach* and the cooks, and they wanted to know why university administrators had made certain decisions about the kosher kitchen. Students wanted to know more about what other students at the university, beyond our class, thought about the kosher and halal foods. Their reflections made me want to design a future course in which students could conduct ethnographic research in their dining hall and to interview university employees who prepare and serve kosher and halal food.

The visit left my students wanting to know more about who made religious and political decisions around them. By engaging in the actual practice of cooking in a kosher environment, the students developed a desire to learn more about the structures and boundaries of religion and politics where they live and study. They began to think differently about how religious leaders and lay people create their religious practices in coordination with other institutions and individuals. Not least, the acts of cooking, eating, and exploring a new space together helped the class come together as a community, focused on questions about religious practice, identity, authority, and authenticity.

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