Growing up in an Ashkenazi household parented by two Holocaust survivors, our dinners had a rhythm and routine that defined the week. You knew what day it was by what you ate that night: Thursday was dairy night, though much to the delight of my sister and myself, Mrs. Paul’s Fishsticks would often substitute for the blander fare of cheese blintzes. Sundays, as was the norm in Jewish households in Queens, New York, we either brought in delicatessen or Chinese food. Every other night was meat—a luxury my parents used to celebrate their more prosperous life in postwar American.

The food Jews eat and the powers of the Jewish palate continue to define the American-Jewish experience, simultaneously serving as points of assimilation and self-preservation. Whereas traditional Jewish food used to represent a resistance to assimilation—a safe haven to preserve a “taste” of the old country in a new world—today it has come to mark a hybrid of identities in the constant fluidity of the American cultural landscape. There is a certain comfort in the familiarity of a hamishe matzo ball that the modern assimilated American Jew has come to rely on; or eating in a “kosher-style” deli that represents a safe space in a world that has left traditional Jewish communal existence behind. Even Noah’s Bagels, a once kosher establishment, now offers a ham sandwich served on a challah roll. It is as if no matter how far we have deviated from classical Jewish observance, there are still elements of our collective culinary past that we need to survive, if only to remember who we once were before the Holocaust.

This volume explores the role food has played in Jewish life across the centuries: from the humble bagel of the 1500s to the emotionally fraught twenty-first-century meal-time conversations of the fictional Pfefferman family, subjects of the Amazon original series Transparent, where serious boundary issues unravel at the family dining room table. Our authors also explore the Jewish origin of the chocolate trade in the Americas; the culinary travails of traveling Jewish peddlers; the rise of Jewish vegetarianism; the meaning of the
feast that follows the Yom Kippur fast; and an assessment of how food is inter-
woven into the very fabric of Jewish identity.

I wish to acknowledge the excellent work of our guest editor Dr. Leah
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fers a broad and rich examination of the impact of food has had on the creation
and constant redefinition of Jewish identity in America.

The Casden Institute dedicates this volume to Rob Eshman, author of
the “Foodaism” Blog, who is leaving the Jewish Journal after twenty-three years
of service, many of them as publisher and editor-in-chief.

Steven J. Ross
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