The Feast at the End of the Fast:
The Evolution of an American Jewish Ritual

*by Nora L. Rubel*

There is a famous scene in Woody Allen’s 1977 film *Annie Hall*, where the Jewish protagonist Alvie Singer visits his girlfriend’s family for Easter Dinner. In a split screen imagined exchange between Annie’s mother and Allen’s family at their respective dinner tables, the matriarch asks how the Jewish family will be spending “the holidays.” Mrs. Singer immediately replies, “We fast.” Mr. Singer chimes in, “Yeah, no food. You know, we have to atone for our sins.” Mrs. Hall responds, “What sins? I don’t understand.” And Mr. Singer, still shoveling food in his mouth replies, “Tell you the truth, neither do we.”

Most attention to Jewish foodways involves examining the act of eating rather than that of not eating. Whether it be the ritualized foods of the Passover Seder or the conspicuous consumption at life-cycle celebrations such as bar and bat mitzvahs and weddings, scholars of foodways have an embarrassment of riches handed to them on a quasi-kosher plate. As Jenna Weissman Joselit has observed in her work on American Jews in the mid-twentieth century, “In lieu of going to *shul* or attending temple, the overwhelming majority of American Jews honed their sense of ritual not in the sanctuary but in the dining room, where they believed . . . that ‘the array of traditional foods . . . is the flour that nourishes Judaism’” (*Wonders of America* 219). But the Jewish ritual year calls for abstention from food on at least six occasions, the most well known and observed fast being that of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. According to the 2000–01 National Jewish Population Survey, 60 percent of American Jews fast on Yom Kippur, a number that is significantly higher than the percentage
belonging to synagogues (47 percent) (United Jewish Communities). The percentage of fasters rises to 79 percent if one looks only at those synagogue-affiliated Jews; this percentage comes close to the 83 percent who light Chanukah candles and dwarfs the weekly lighting of Shabbat candles (48 percent). This practice of fasting is most common in communities with large Jewish populations, amusingly noted by a city study in the 1980s which concluded that “the non-Jewish spouse of a Jew in Baltimore was more likely to fast on Yom Kippur than a born Jew in San Francisco” (Fishman 129).

But this essay is not about not eating. In many religious cultures, feasting follows a fast. The traditional Catholic fast days of Christmas Eve and the Lenten season’s Ash Wednesday are followed by the feasts of Christmas Day and Easter. The month-long daily fasts of Ramadan are followed by joyous iftars after sundown. It is, in fact, surprising that the twenty-five hour fast of Yom Kippur would not be directly followed by an elaborate feast. But traditionally—for a variety of economic and cultural factors—immediate post-fast feasting has not been the practice of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews. Feasting did traditionally occur in the form of delayed gratification during the holiday of Sukkot, four days later. However, no longer content to anticlimactically sip a sweet glass of tea and nosh on a dry piece of honey cake left over from Rosh Hashanah, American Jews invented a break fast of their own.

In We Are What We Celebrate, Amitai Etzioni refers to both lightly edited and wholly engineered holidays, remarking that such “modifications . . . both reflect changes in values and power relations and help to formulate and ensconce changes in values and power” (30). The creation of the new American break fast likewise reflects the changing values and priorities of contemporary Jewish American culture alongside changes in American Jewish identity and practice. This essay will address the historical and cultural evolution of the break fast among American Jews in the latter decades of the twentieth century as well as explore its significance as an indicator of changing views of religious authority.

THE HIGHEST OF THE HIGH HOLY DAYS
As Orthodox rabbi Irving Greenberg has noted:

Many American Jews who have allowed their observance of tradition to diminish still observe Yom Kippur. This is a day of deprivation and denial, of guilt and self-flagellation. If Yom Kippur is their only
contact with Judaism, one can only say: “O Lord, who is like your people, Israel?” What kind of devotion keeps people coming back year after year to a service that is long, exhausting, and solemn? (118)

The majority of American Jews do not attend religious services more than a few times a year, so why do so many continue to fast on Yom Kippur (Pew Forum)? This question is not new among spectators of American Jewish life. In a 1959 study of suburban Jews, Albert Gordon suggested several motives for this observance: “Nostalgia; the feeling that parents, near or far, would approve; the conventions of society . . . ; [and] the urging of one’s children.” Almost as an afterthought he writes, “There are those, too, who worship and pray in all sincerity and truth to a God in Whom they believe without equivocation or uncertainty” (136). It does seem however, at least to Gordon, that these latter Jews are a distinct minority and it is clear that the infrequent worship patterns of American Jews are not a recent occurrence.

In their 1967 study on Jewish identity and practice, sociologists Marshall Sklare and Joseph Greenblum examined the reasons why some rituals were retained by American Jews and why others were abandoned. Their findings determined that rituals were most likely to be retained when the ritual is, among other things: “capable of effective redefinition in modern terms, does not demand social isolation or the adoption of a unique lifestyle, [and] accords with the religious culture of the larger community and provides a ‘Jewish’ alternative which is felt to be needed” (50–55). Selective observance is nothing new, particularly when the rituals that are retained can be imbued with contemporary meaning.¹ This fast can be broken down according to Sklare and Greenblum’s findings. First, fasting on Yom Kippur can be redefined as a physical purification akin to a contemporary “cleanse” detoxification diet or can be seen as spiritually purifying on a variety of other levels. While many people fast as a repentant effort to have God hear their prayers, others may take advantage of this day’s hunger pains to think of those who have no food.² Second, fasting on Yom Kippur—unlike adopting a strictly kosher lifestyle—is a twenty-five hour annual experiment; once over, there is no need to look back. And finally, and possibly most powerfully, other Jews are doing it all over the world at the same time. Fasters may feel linked to their ancestors and their community through this annual shared experience. As Martha Finch notes in her work on Puritan feasts and fasts, “suffering with others the discomforts of food deprivation . . . produced intense feelings of social bonding” (38). Likewise, the cessation of fasting with others in a shared celebration of bounty is also a bonding ritual.
BREAKING THE FAST

Historically, scant attention has been paid to the cuisine or etiquette surrounding the meal following the Yom Kippur fast in America. We can turn for evidence of this omission to Jewish cookbooks. As Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett has noted, “Cookbooks, though not direct indications of what people ate, nevertheless represent Jewish cuisine and social life,” and twentieth century cookbooks, with a few noted exceptions, do not make mention of this meal with any detail until the last decades of the century (77). The 1954 Jewish Festival Cookbook explains the evening following fasting thus: “All now return home to a meal as simple or elaborate as the family desires, and they while away the time before dinner is ready drinking coffee and nibbling on apples dipped in honey, and on honey lekach or coffee cake” (Engle and Blair 54). The authors offer a “Dinner to Break the Fast” menu, but it is a soup-to-nuts meal that includes “Chicken Soup” and “Roast Duck or Chicken,” certainly not a ready-made buffet in waiting. A 1957 Ohio congregational cookbook merely comments that on “Yom Kippur night sweet and sour fish or herring is used to break the fast” (Anshe Chesed Congregation and Rousuck 7). Jennie Grossinger’s The Art of Jewish Cooking, a standard midcentury Jewish cookbook, gives absolutely no mention of this meal and her book’s foreword briefly describes the meal that precedes the fast, only to suggest that it be hearty but relatively bland—in order “to prevent undue thirst” (xii). Under “Suggested Menus for the Principal Holidays,” Yom Kippur does not appear. This is representative of most American Jewish cookbooks up to this point.

Elaborating a bit on the domestic practice of this festival, the popular 1964 Guide for the Jewish Homemaker suggests, “At home a light meal is eaten, a ‘break the fast’ meal.” Under “Basic Holy Days Menus” the authors write: “To Break the Fast (Often this is a very light meal, almost like a breakfast): (Suggestion) Orange Juice, Eggs, Cheeses, Cold Fish, Salad, Cake, Coffee” (Levi and Kaplan 90). While these few cookbooks make brief mention of the ritual of breaking the fast, they offer no recipes and certainly don’t indicate a large gathering. More common in the late sixties was the appearance of extensive menus for the prefast dinner, complete with information on how to most healthily prepare for the fast. The 1972 A Taste of Tradition offers such a menu for the pre-fast dinner and remarks briefly on the break fast: “Now, light refreshments are taken; perhaps a cup of tea and a delicate sweet. A little later, dinner that suits the personal preferences of each family is enjoyed. Some like salty foods, such as herring, to compensate for the loss of body salts; others prefer dairy
dishes” (Sirkis 17). Again, this does not suggest more than some familial snacking to soothe the day’s hunger pains.

While midcentury advice like the above describes a light family supper, later evidence from the 1980s and 1990s suggests a modern tradition of feasting, more reminiscent of those the high priests enjoyed after the Yom Kippur sacrifices at the Temple, a meal that is not “complete without a towering display of bagels, heaps of whitefish salad, ample platters of smoked salmon—and a houseful of hungry guests” (Joselit, “Breaking Down”). The 1990s and first decade of the 2000s have seen magazines, cookbooks, and even supermarkets (with their enticing catering menus) give rise to new ideas regarding this feast—generally referred to as the break fast. The Internet, with blogs available on all elements of religious practice—as well as dietary interests—is no exception. Conservative practitioners still tend to urge a tradition of moderation in breaking the fast, but contemporary publications frequently suggest a more satisfying—and filling—gastronomical conclusion to the day’s supplications.

In the 1999 Jewish Holiday Style, the authors write: “This buffet is fun. Everyone is feeling wonderful, and everyone is starved, the perfect combination for a successful meal. At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, the havdalah prayer is recited over a cup of wine, and a festive meal is served” (Brownstein and Koplowitz 24). They claim that it is customary to invite people over and offer an extensive menu with large numbers of servings per recipe. In 2008’s Jewish Holiday Cooking, the author offers a story about break fasts before providing menus and recipes. She writes of a friend dying of pancreatic cancer who threw a break fast in her last year:

Phyllis had not intended her guest list to be Jewish, but this being Manhattan, as it turned out everyone who wasn’t Jewish had a Jewish connection: a spouse or a parent, a loved one who was. And though only some of us had fasted, the delicious festive meal—catered smoked fish and salads from Russ and Daughters on the Lower East Side and home-baked desserts—tasted sacred to us all. (Cohen 186)

Of course, through the contemporary availability of Jewish cookbooks that highlight the exotic cultures of Jews outside of Eastern Europe, one is no longer restricted to the traditional blintzes and bagels of Ashkenazi cuisine (Goldstein, Sephardic Flavors; Goldstein, Saffron Shores). One could break her fast with almond milk as the Iraqi or Indian Jews do, or with a spiced anise bread as Algerian Jews do, or with the delicious hearty bean soup known as harira that the Moroccan Jews adopted from their Ramadan-observant Muslim
neighbors. The popular culinary Website Epicurious.com has even offered a “Mix-and-match Yom Kippur menu-maker for the Break Fast” (“Break the Fast”). The menu suggestions found in these contemporary cookbooks, magazines and Websites for this meal again reflect the shift from a traditionally modest break fast to a far more lavish brunch-style event. Despite what appears to be a rather high-class problem of deciding what to serve, the significance of participation in this new ritual should not be underappreciated.

Cookbooks are not the only evidence of the growing popularity of this ritualized gathering. A 2003 essay in the Jewish weekly Forward found an author declaring:

[W]hen a dish is not only delicious but also happens to be among those traditionally eaten at the close of Yom Kippur—when you join yourself with other Jews not just in the fasting, but in the eating as well—it becomes greater still, by satisfying more than one kind of hunger. (Food Maven)

What are these foods that are “traditionally eaten”? The assumption is that it is “Jewish” food—a subject too broad for the scope of this paper, as this category can include both bagels and lo mein. Given a survey of Jewish cookbooks—both commercial and communal—that describe this meal, the most popular foods are dairy foods that can be served cold, essentially a brunch-style meal. This eating of agreed-upon Jewish food at the close of Yom Kippur reflects what Herbert Gans described in his 1979 essay on “symbolic ethnicity” which he defined as “a nostalgic allegiance . . . a love for and pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” (9). However, the Forward writer suggests that by eating foods one identifies as Jewish, and by eating with other Jews, this ritualized Jewish experience can be more than just symbolic; it can be transformative.

In an essay in the Jewish journal, ZEEK, Marilyn Sneideman, executive director of AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps, describes her annual break fast practice:

Every year, . . . my family hosts a Yom Kippur Breakfast for 200 or so of our Jewish and non-Jewish friends. It is a time we reflect on what is going on in the world, ask ourselves what role we’ve played in challenging injustice, and recommit ourselves as a group to work for justice. I will never forget when we gathered after 9/11. Three of us led prayers, mine in Hebrew, a Christian friend in English, and a Muslim friend in Arabic. At a moment of such despair, it was incredibly
powerful for our community, made up of people of different races and faiths, to join together on Yom Kippur to rededicate ourselves to rising above hate.

Unlike Jewish holidays like Passover, Chanukah, or even Tu B’Shvat, which can be celebrated for their universalist themes and home-based practice, Yom Kippur is a different holiday entirely—one that speaks specifically to the relationship between Jews and their God, and takes place primarily in the synagogue. But in the way that Sneiderman has crafted her break fast, she has been able to redefine Yom Kippur as potentially universal—a holiday that can be shared with non-Jews. Notably, she also redefines her community.

The solemnity of Yom Kippur traditionally is set apart from the more familiar food-centered Jewish calendar year, but with this increased popularity of the break fast party, the holiday becomes a bit more palatable to those Jews who enjoy the time with family and friends but may be less likely to spend the day in organized prayer. Cookbook author Joan Nathan, in her comprehensive *Jewish Cooking in America*, makes note of a “famous break-the-fast with every notable in Cincinnati attending. [According to one of the attendees] ‘Fifty percent of the people were gentiles who came and half of the Jews who came had not been to synagogue. This break-the-fast kept them within the periphery of Jewry’ ” (147). According to another observer of Jewish cultural trends, “Many Jews—from articulate atheists to those for whom God ‘isn’t really an issue’—can now attend religious ceremonies tailored to appeal to their secularized tastes and values” (Bershtel and Graubard 158).

Most of the comments about the break fast praised the emphasis on inclusivity, which extended to both the guest list as well as the observance level of the guests who attended. This might be partially due to the inevitable presence of those who are prohibited from fasting due to age or medical necessity. According to a Virginia woman interviewed for a 2011 *New York Times* story on the break fast, “It’s a big break-fast, . . . but it’s very inclusive, in that they make an effort to invite people like us, who are new in town. And nobody ever asks whether I have fasted or not. Sometimes I bring it up, like, ‘You should eat first, I didn’t fast.’” When she chose to host a break fast of her own, she made a point of inviting her Muslim neighbors who were ending their Ramadan fast for the day. In the same article, Alana Newhouse, editor of the online magazine *Tablet*, admits a longstanding antipathy toward Yom Kippur. But, she claims that “ever since deciding to make a big deal out of the break-fast, the fast itself has become much more meaningful to me. There is something to look forward to, in the interaction with other Jews, and non-Jews” (Oppenheimer).
Anthropologist Carole Counihan remarks that “sharing food ensures the survival of the group both socially and materially” and this Break Fast—which as we have seen can be defined in a myriad of ways—therefore serves as a recommitment ritual for the family and the community (Counihan and Van Esterik 13). And unlike other such recommitment rituals, the break fast is more about the “good parts” of religion, without the convention and hierarchy many American Jews eschew. Parallels can be seen here to the observance of Shabbat dinners by Jews who have no intention of observing the restrictions of Shabbat or attending services on the following morning.

Amitai Etzioni’s work on the modification of holidays explores the difference between edited holidays, those that are altered “on a relatively small scale,” and engineered holidays, ones which are newly created (Etzioni and Bloom 30). An example of an edited Jewish holiday would be that of Chanukah, a relatively minor holiday in the Jewish calendar year that has come to be one of the more widely celebrated holidays by American Jews—mainly for reasons that have to do with the American consumer calendar. The twentieth-century creation of the bat mitzvah celebration can be seen either as a new life-cycle event or as an egalitarian editing of the bar mitzvah (Pleck 173).

But what of the break fast? The fasting itself is not edited—even though its meaning may be redefined, but the subsequent feasting is newly engineered. Joselit has suggested that the break fast might be called a “Judaized Thanksgiving,” one that “seems to have grown steadily in popularity over the years, eclipsing even the fast itself” (“Breaking Down the Break Fast”). But this Judaized Thanksgiving may have come at a cost, and that cost may have been the observance of the eight-day-long Thanksgiving feast of Sukkot.

JEWSH THANKSGIVINGS
Sukkot, also known as the Festival of Booths, is celebrated as both an agricultural harvest holiday and a reminder of the Exodus. It is observed by the constructing of temporary shelters, and the commandment of “dwelling in booths” is primarily satisfied by eating in these booths. In the Jewish ritual year, the fast on Yom Kippur serves to purify the Jewish community before the subsequent “Thanksgiving” feasting of Sukkot which occurs several days later. Celebration of Sukkot by Jewish immigrants was well-documented at the turn of the twentieth century in America (Heinze 69). However, the observance of Sukkot has
decreased (only 28 percent of American Jews claim to observe it in some way),
and it appears that the break fast has stepped in to take its place (Cohen and
Eisen 90).

There are several reasons why the holiday of Sukkot did not find reso-
nance among twentieth-century Jewry. It is in some ways more helpful to first
see what holidays have succeeded. Chanukah, as mentioned before, becomes
widely celebrated as a Jewish alternative during the Christmas season. It was
adapted for children as a result of an active campaign in the mid-twentieth cen-
tury. One can “build Jewish memory through latkes” declared one Chanukah
activist (Joselit, “Merry Chanuka” 315). Through food, gifts, and games,
Chanukah becomes a holiday that can be celebrated with various meanings,
including secular ones. Likewise, Passover (which was always a major holiday)
is constantly being redefined through the publication of countless themed hag-
gadot (some calling for the freedom for various oppressed peoples, or even
promoting veganism as the Haggadah for the Liberated Lamb does). Passover
also, not unlike Christmas, becomes a commercial success due to the promo-
tion of packaged food created specifically for that holiday. Twentieth-century
Jewish leaders attempted to combat Jewish assimilation by any means neces-
sary. One stealth weapon in the arsenal was Jewish Home Beautiful, a publica-
tion that attempted to increase religious ritual through aesthetic domesticity.
Similarly, synagogue gift shops encouraged the purchase of Judaica items in
order to beautify the commandments performed in the home. Ritual items
such as Chanukah candelabras and Passover seder plates made perfect wed-
ding gifts, and in addition to beautifying the home, could also be used during
the associated holiday.

In contrast, while the etrog and lulav (a citron and a bundle of branches
from three stipulated trees) are traditional ritual objects for Sukkot, they are
both expensive and perishable. In urban Jewish neighborhoods in the early
twentieth century, it was not uncommon for congregations to share these items
(M. Frommer and H. Frommer 174). However, like Sabbath observance, this
tradition has faded with suburbanization (Fishman 131). Additionally, the suk-
kah—the booth—involves some willingness to annually construct a tempo-
rary structure in your yard or on a balcony (for all to see). While Reform and
Conservative synagogues continued to build them onsite for their congrega-
tions, congregants themselves became less likely to build individual sukkot at
home. Restriction of immigration in the first half of the century also did away
with the odder rituals in favor of those which are more in keeping with Gentile
America. As Philip Roth writes of this precariously amicable relationship in
his fictional midcentury town of Woodenton in “Eli the Fanatic”: “For this adjustment to be made, both Jews and Gentiles alike have had to give up some of their more extreme practices in order not to threaten or offend the other” (262). Samuel G. Freedman, more than forty years later, writes of a neighborhood dispute where one Jewish couple was incensed by the erection of a **sukkah** in their next-door neighbors’ front yard. “‘Flaunting it’ [and] ‘In your face,’” complained the neighbors (15).

Nostalgia, particularly in the form of foodways, plays a big part in the retention of holidays. Unlike Passover and Chanukah, Sukkot has no notable symbolic foods. It is the *where* one eats, not the *what* that matters. Unlike Thanksgiving, a holiday menu carefully designed to reflect New England harvest traditions (even when observed in sunny California or the deserts of Utah), the best one can say is that it is good to eat “stuffed” foods on Sukkot in order to symbolize abundance. Chanukah and Passover, while filled with religious symbols, can be celebrated in a secular way that embraces American ideals of freedom. Sukkot remains purely religious. And what of its celebration of the harvest? Couldn’t that be a secular entrance into this observance? In fact, Americans have a secular thanksgiving already, one which began as a religious holiday and now is happily embraced by most Americans regardless of creed.

And finally, Sukkot suffers—intentionally—from bad chronological placement. If it is too close on one end to Thanksgiving for American Jews, it is also too close on the other end to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Even in his 1959 *Jews in Suburbia*, Albert Gordon noted that “people have grown ‘weary’ of the Holy Day season” and many of the moderately affiliated Jews surveyed by sociologists Steven Cohen and Arnold Eisen in the 1990s complained of a High Holiday overload by the time Sukkot arrived (Gordon 138; Cohen and Eisen). So, sadly, the holiday of Sukkot, one of the three biblical pilgrimage holidays—a holiday so important it was known in the Talmudic period as **HaChag, The Holiday**—has been reduced to the butt of a sitcom joke. In a contract negotiation on the television sitcom *30 Rock*, an employee requests time off for every Jewish holiday, “no matter how ridiculous.” In response, his employer says that he can only have one: “What’s the one where they go into the little huts?” (“Hardball”). In the context of the scene, this barb suggests that Sukkot is the most ridiculous holiday of all, and not a valued holiday worthy of time off from work. With the decrease in the observance of Sukkot, the feasting season that follows the self-denial of Yom Kippur, came the dramatically edited—if not wholly invented—break fast ritual among American Jews.
RITUAL INNOVATION AND ITS DETRACTORS

This new American break fast is certainly not without its more conservative critics, particularly the Orthodox. While Joselit suggested in a Forward column a few years ago that we might see the break fast “as a testament to the creative power of the grass roots and its appetite for new forms of ritual engagement. Or better yet, as an exercise in fellowship and community,” an online commenter responded to her column, “My wife and I ended the Taanit on Kippur with a modest meal and juice. I’ve found that most of the participants in the elaborate “Break-fasts” the author described, don’t even fast on Yom Ha-Kippurim to begin with!” (Joselit, “Breaking Down the Break Fast”; comment by Sephardiman). The derision shown by this disgruntled commenter is not an unusual response to new ritual—particularly in the case of those who fancy themselves the keepers of tradition. Ritually observant Jews are less likely to observe an elaborate Break Fast than their more acculturated coreligionists. In an article on the High Holidays, Steven Katz of Boston University, described the break fast as follows: “There are no special customs for breaking the fast. Rituals for this meal are a new thing. You can eat whatever you want, and usually it’s only the nonreligious people who make a big deal about it. The religious Jews finish their meal, go back out, and start building the sukkah, the temporary hut used during the weeklong autumn festival of Sukkoth” (Seligson). This attitude is true on the whole for the Orthodox community—and somewhat understandable given the subsequent feasting that occurs only a few days later during Sukkot.

It is rare to find a mention of the break fast in Jewish cookbooks published under Orthodox commercial or community auspices. In what is arguably the most popular kosher cookbook in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the 2003 Kosher By Design, Susie Fishbein (the Orthodox Martha Stewart) writes: “Yom Kippur is not about food. However, eating before the fasting begins is as much of a mitzvah as the fast itself. It should be a full holiday meal” (70). There is no reference to a break fast at all. In the afore-mentioned New York Times article, she was asked about this omission and responded that she “felt it inappropriate to set up a Yom Kippur break-fast ‘party.‘ It doesn’t fit the mood of what we’ve done all day.” Fishbein is right that Yom Kippur is not about food. Additionally, the fast that is called for requires more than just abstention from food. Other prohibited activities include bathing, sexual relations, and the wearing of leather shoes. But the emphasis on eating at the end of the day demonstrated by the break fast appears to suggest that the day is about food. After all, nobody’s in a rush to hop in the shower or put their...
shoes back on. Fishbein does admit—albeit reluctantly—that, “It’s definitely somewhat of a happy occasion. When the fast is over, the hope is that your prayers were answered, and you were written in the Book of Life and it will be a good year. So in those emotions you want to be surrounded by friends and family” (Oppenheimer).

Yet the Orthodox, despite their reputation as the standard bearers of Judaism, are a true minority among American Jews. And this new break fast ritual may very well have legs, as it is already showing signs of moving from a purely domestic celebration to one with institutional sponsorship. The *bat mitzvah*, which seemed nonsensical to many traditionalists eighty years ago, is now observed by even the strictest of Torah observers. And it is rather unlikely that Chanukah will ever again be a minor holiday in the United States. Some of these edited or engineered holidays have become so familiar that many are unaware of their novelty. In Vanessa Ochs’ *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, she writes of a “*minhag America.*” *Minhag* refers to a religious custom which has become so ingrained as to have the power of law. “The [Jewish] authenticity of a ritual was a feeling cultivated over time, through repeated practice, and sustained by enough cherished memories to guarantee predictability and when necessary, flexibility” (28–29, 34).

Yom Kippur is in many ways a recommitment holiday, one which employs “narratives, drama and ceremonies to directly enforce commitment to shared beliefs” (Etzioni and Bloom 11). The rituals that enforce this commitment are no longer limited to the fast and traditional liturgy. The new American break fast feast as it is now observed fills a need not just for those that are hungry after twenty-five hours of self-denial, but also for those American Jews who have been able to engage with the Jewish ritual calendar mainly through the embrace of secular symbols such as dreidels, potato pancakes, and even Chinese food. The break fast therefore embraces a symbolic ethnicity of bagels and lox in order to offer a sincerely Jewish thanksgiving (in lieu of or in addition to Sukkot) for the ability to share food with loved ones and community.
Notes

1. See the discussion of “Sheilaism” in Bellah (221).
2. For more on fasting: Bynum; Griffith.
3. *Havdalah* is the brief ceremony marking the end of the holiday.
4. The restriction of immigration in the first half of the twentieth century leads to an ignorance of break fast rituals from the international community.
5. For a discussion of Jewish affinity for Chinese food in early twentieth-century New York, please see G. and H. L. Tuchman.
6. In August of 2011, I spent a week at the Radcliffe Institute’s Culinary Collection in the Schlesinger Library. I examined ninety-eight English-language Jewish cookbooks published over the last century.
7. Jews are not obligated to fast until they have come of age (boys at age thirteen and girls at age twelve and a half). Also, pregnant women, nursing mothers, and those with medical concerns are urged to refrain from fasting.
8. *Haggadot*: plural for *haggadah*, the book that forms the basis of the Passover Seder ritual.
Works Cited


“Hardball.” *30 Rock,* created by Tina Fey, season 1, episode 15, NBC, 2007.


