I am excited and honored to have recently received a research fellowship from CWRU’s Freedman Center for Digital Scholarship. My project, entitled, “Digital Stories of Cleveland Synagogue Dispersion: Moving Pieces of Congregational Life,” is designed to show the movement of Cleveland’s Jewish congregations over space and time (from when Jewish immigrants first arrived in the area in the mid-19th century until today). In tandem, the project will provide a visual study of trends in preserving and relocating synagogues’ sacred objects (such as stained glass windows, Torah arks, and memorial plaques), as the congregations have moved.

I became interested in this topic as soon as I moved to Cleveland from Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2013. When my family joined Oheb Zedek Cedar Sinai Synagogue, I quickly learned that the congregation was a recent amalgamation from many different predecessors. I noticed the plaques in our building, which had been moved from previous buildings. They are all hanging in the “wrong” places. Inside the stairwell is a plaque to honor the person who dedicated the bima, and another one to honor the person who dedicated the social hall. These had all been brought over from the congregation’s previous incarnations.

This movement is of course part of a broader trend, which I am documenting in the book I am currently writing, tentatively titled Preserving and Disposing of the Sacred: America’s Jewish Congregations (under contract with Pennsylvania State University Press). The book is about the relationship between congregations and their sacred objects, and the decisions they have to make about what to do with these things as they move, merge, or disband. Although the scale of this national study is very broad, the Freedman Fellowship is allowing me to do comprehensive work on a local scale, which will provide me with some quantifiable data.

While I can’t travel in the midst of COVID-19, it’s a great time to settle in and do my research here, close to home! Cleveland offers a great case study of congregational movement across the landscape, from the city, to the outer ring of the city and into the suburbs. And with so many famous, and well-documented buildings, designed by some of America’s greatest architects (Eric Mendelsohn, Percival Goodman, and Charles Greco), it’s a rich playground for this sort of research.
The Four Functions of Matzah Ball Soup
Blanche Spiner
Recognition for Outstanding Achievement

According to folklorist William Bascom, folklore persists only when it functions socially for those who hold it in tradition. He cites four such functions: creating a social event, reinforcing adult values, instructing the young, and as a result, strengthening group identity. Although food may not leap to mind at the first mention of folklore, Bascom’s “Four Functions of Folklore” (1954) can be applied to traditional foodways, as long as we study them as objects in material culture: as things made by hand from natural resources. In this context, studying matzah balls, and other traditional foods, can reveal how these material objects function for those who carry them in tradition.

Matzah balls are round, light, and fluffy creations made by mixing matzah meal, water, eggs, chicken fat, and seasonings. The recipe calls for discreet periods of mixing and chilling, and forming small balls that will gain a light and fluffy texture by expanding greatly in boiling water or chicken soup. Whether added to other soup ingredients, or to plain chicken broth, one or more matzah balls will be served in each bowl, giving the name “matzah ball soup” to a dish that holds an integral place among Jewish family foodways. Although recipes may differ, each recipe is passed down from generation to generation, creating social events, reflecting adult values, instructing the young, and strengthening Jewish identity. But, innovations can highlight and strengthen unique family distinctions within the broader community’s expressions of shared Jewish identity.

Skilled sculptor and art teacher, Judy Lael Goldman, having stumbled at the art of knish-making, notes that making any traditional food requires artistry that can only be learned from a master (1983). I remember arriving at my grandmother’s house for Shabbat dinner as a child, excited for her to let me make the matzah balls. But in all those hours I spent in the kitchen with my mother and grandmother, something was being created beyond traditional Jewish food. The process of gaining skill was also one of bonding, not only as a daughter and granddaughter, but as a designated bearer of family traditions tracing all the way back to Eastern Europe. Jewish recipes, however, like all recipes, are traditions that allow for some variation, providing enough creative freedom to innovate within traditional boundaries.

Recognize my variant as a matzah ball, no one is likely to come upon the giant matzah balls that I loved to make, and which my family endearingly dubbed “monster balls.” Today, my family’s matzah ball soup is not only a symbol of our Judaism, but our “monster ball” idiosyncrasy informs all diners that they are enjoying matzah ball soup from the specifically “Spiner” Shabbat table, highlighting our distinct family identity, but at the same time, creating common clay with guests who join us.

Just as foods can reflect Jewish commonality and fellowship, they can also indicate differences and rifts between Jewish groups. The “gefilte fish line” for example, as delineated by Diane and David Roskies (1979: 37), sits between Poland and Lithuania and denotes regional striving for distinction between two adversarial groups. In the mid-1700s, when the Baal Shem Tov founded the mystical Hasidic movement, it picked up great speed in Poland, but could not gain traction among the staunchly rational Mitnagdim, its Lithuanian “Opponents.” Indications of this rift include different dialects of Yiddish, different attitudes toward formal -vs- folkloric teachings, and something called “the gefilte fish line.”

Like the Spiner monster balls, variation in tradition along the gefilte fish line is a strategic form of maintaining diversity within a cultural group (Peterson Royce 1982: 7). That means creating innovation within a tradition, without damaging the bounded structure that identifies it as Jewish. For example, west of the gefilte fish line, in Hasidic Poland, Jews made their gefilte fish sweet, with sugar, whereas on the east side, in Lithuania, the Mitnagdim made theirs savory, with salt and pepper. Although both traditions remain rooted in Judaism, my Litvish ancestors certainly would not take kindly to the fact that I routinely enjoy a sweet gefilte fish at my campus Chabad’s Shabbat dinner table!

Although it may not always be obvious, traditional foodways are integral to Jewish folklore. They are traditions carried independent of the pulpit, generated, modified and maintained in the pew (Yoder 1971). Like family heirlooms, recipes for matzah ball soup are passed down through each generation, creating social events,
reflecting adult values, and instilling the same values and skills in children that have been instilled in countless generations past. The mighty matzah ball can negotiate relationships, reflect values, aesthetics, distinct geographical roots, and even ideologies. But regardless of where each recipe originated, or how it came about, all are deeply rooted in Jewish history and tradition, and all strengthen Jewish identity by fulfilling Bascom’s four functions.

References Cited


Happy Winter Break

From the JDST eJournal!
For the ninth straight year, CWRU has received the national Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award from INSIGHT Into Diversity magazine. The award recognizes colleges and universities that have demonstrated an outstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion. CWRU received a plaque featured in the November 2020 issue of INSIGHT Into Diversity.

HOME COMING CONGRATULATIONS!

Our own Chloe Mieras (Poli-Sci/RLGN major) was one of ten seniors named to October 2020’s Homecoming Court. Chloe is seen here (back row, second from right) with other Court royalty, and with “Spartie,” the rallying Spartan icon of CWRU’s sporting events and special occasions.

LE T’S HEAR FROM YOU! postit@case.edu
The JDST Program mourns the passing of Maria Pietchotka in Warsaw, at age 100. The Jewish heritage world has lost a pioneer in the study of Polish wooden synagogue architecture. With her husband Kazimierz, she collected the only extant blueprints and photographs of these masterpieces, hiding them from destructive Nazi and Communist regimes, finally publishing what has become the seminal work in the field. Pietchotka was widowed in 2010, but remained active through her 90’s. Her work, that of three earlier scholars, and the 21st century work of Thomas C. Hubka, made possible a reconstruction of the Gwozdziec synagogue, at the POLIN Museum of Jewish History in Warsaw. May her memory be a blessing to us all.
Courses of Interest for Spring 2021

JDST/RLGN/ANTH/ETHS 255  
Global Judaism: Diversity Across the Jewish World  
Alanna Cooper

Using ethnographies as our primary texts, we will think critically and comparatively about Judaism and Jewishness in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia. We will examine how Jews have navigated their experiences as minorities in their many diaspora homelands, and how they have adapted their cultural and religious practices to their various environments. We will also examine questions of exclusion and belonging in recent decades through tourism, mass migration, globalization, and the Internet. How do the world’s varied Jewish groups – who are of different skin colors, who speak different languages, and who carry different historical memories – navigate their diversity? Should we speak of a single Jewish religion and Jewish people at all?

JDST/HSTY/RLGN/ETHS 254  
The Holocaust  
Jay Geller

This class seeks to answer fundamental questions about the Holocaust: the German-led organized mass murder of nearly six million Jews and millions of other ethnic and religious minorities. It will investigate the origins and development of racism in modern European society, the manifestations of that racism, and responses to persecution. An additional focus of the course will be comparisons between different groups, different countries, and different phases during the Nazi era.

JDST/RLGN/WGST 268  
Women in the Bible: Ethnographic Approaches to Rite and Ritual, Story, Song, and Art  
Judith Neulander

From Ishtar to Esther, the Christian Marys to the Muslim Mary, we will examine rabbinic and other interpretations of women in the sacred texts of western religions. We will explore the strategic and creative ways that women in the Bible were influenced by, and came to influence changing values through rite, ritual, story, song and art. Students will come to understand how these traditions have shaped images of, and attitudes toward women in western civilization.

RLGN 312  
The Mythical Trickster  
Judith Neulander

Few literary figures have as wide a distribution, and as long a history, as the mythical Trickster. He is at once sacred and profane, creator and destroyer; an incorrigible duper who is always duped. Free of social and moral restraints he is ruled instead by passions and appetites, yet it is through his unprincipled behavior that morals and values come into being. How are we to interpret this amazing creature? Using folkloristic theories and ethnographic methods, we will come to understand the social functions and symbolic meanings of the cross-cultural Trickster, over time and across space.
A sampling of titles for final research papers in Introduction to Jewish Folklore-JDST/RLGN/ANTH 233 reflects the diversity of interests in a typical RLGN/JDST classroom.

The Rare and Spectacular Image of Powerful Women in Jewish Folktales
Sasha Grinevich

Why the Hallmark of Jewish Humor Isn’t Silly
Soloman Goldstein

Gematria: A Jewish Numbers Game with Words
Michael Judkovich

National Israeli Music: An Imagined Canon
Blanche Spiner

Leviathan: Origins in Judaism and Beyond
Nick Vitello

The Blood Libel Accusation:
Different Perspectives in Christian and Jewish Folklore
Anisha Yarlagadda
The Program in Judaic Studies

By bringing a variety of fields and disciplines to bear on its subject, the Judaic Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University conveys to students the complex interaction of forces that create Jewish ethnic identity. Students completing the program will have a broad knowledge of the field along with the tools necessary for continued academic study of Jewish civilization in all its manifestations.

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Support the Program in Judaic Studies

Please consider supporting the Program in Judaic Studies as we continue building on our achievements. You can contribute to our success by making a gift to the College of Arts and Sciences. Your gift allows us to continue to offer opportunities for our students to excel academically and to conduct important research. You can give online at:

giving.case.edu

In Oct. 2020 students explored the Jewish multiverse of comics and pop culture in a Zoom conversation with acclaimed comic writer, Brian Michael Bendis.