

Shalom, Y'all!

Teaching Mississippi's Jewish History



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I am a southerner, born and raised in a small cotton-growing town in northeast Arkansas, where eating pork barbecue is evidence of one's regional upbringing and loyalty. Being southern, but also Jewish complicated this act of solidarity for my family, but not enough to keep any of us away from the Dixie Pig, the most popular barbecue institution in my hometown. The barbecue they serve in northeast Arkansas—hickory-smoked chopped pork shoulder covered with a spicy vinegar-based sauce—is one of the great dishes of the South. As I encountered "forbidden foods" like barbecue as a child, I discovered the cultural boundaries that defined my southern Jewish family. There were southern foods and there were Jewish foods, and eating both shaped who we were. Whether we ate chopped barbecue with sauce "on the side" at the Dixie Pig or barbecued beef brisket prepared by the sisterhood at Blytheville's Temple Israel, the occasion was memorable. Those moments reminded me that my family straddled two worlds—the American South and American Judaism. Throughout their history in the South, these worlds came together for Jews at the dinner table, at times effortlessly and at other times with a struggle.

Jews have encountered southern worlds of "sacred and profane" food for more than three centuries. Since the seventeenth century, Jews in the American South have been tempted by regional foods that are among the most delectable in the area but that are also forbidden by Jewish law. Members of each generation balanced their southern and Jewish identities as they considered the plate set before them. These encounters of region, religion, and food unveil a unique chapter in American Judaism. Dining with the Deep South diaspora, we discover both rural and urban worlds in the region, diverse Jewish populations who came to the South from central and eastern Europe, Greece, and Turkey, and Reform, Orthodox, and Conservative Jewish communities. Southern Jews adapted their culinary traditions within predominantly Christian worlds, where they were

strongly influenced by the region's traditions of race, class, and gender.¹ "Southern Jewish" cooking is defined by the following: traditional Jewish recipes passed down from one generation to the next; the influence of regional ingredients, flavors, and cooking methods; a deeply ingrained sense of hospitality and sociability; the importance of family and regional Jewish connections; and the presence and influence of African American cooks and caterers.

Food is key to understanding southern Jews. For more than four centuries, they have both eaten and rejected foods that are indigenous to the places where they live. Food then becomes a barometer, a measuring device that determines how southern Jews acculturate, while also retaining their own heritage. As they introduced new food, recipes, and cooking methods, Jews quickly defined boundaries between older residents and newcomers. Southern Jews also adapted their eating habits to match those of their neighbors. Their cuisine revealed both how they merged with the cultures they encountered in the region and how they separated themselves from these cultures.

Southern Jews faced a familiar predicament. How can Jews be Jewish in a world where catfish is easier to find than kishka? (Kishka is a kosher version of sausage.) Jewish dietary laws known as *kashrut* specify which foods Jews cannot eat, how foods should be prepared, and the manner in which animals should be slaughtered.² "Keeping kosher" in the South is particularly challenging because so many regional dishes feature pork, shrimp, oysters, and crab, all of which are forbidden by *kashrut*.

Foodways traditions pass from generation to generation through stories. Although written records exist in the form of recipes, diaries, cookbooks, and prescriptive literature, the primary source of foodways knowledge is oral. Simply put, cooks teach others to cook in the kitchen. This communication is the heart of the subject. From a simple meal at home to an elaborate public celebration, food allows us to communicate and share.

Observant Jews believe that eating is an act of divine law that is dictated in the Bible and expanded in the Talmud. Blu Greenberg, an Orthodox *rebbe*zin (wife of a rabbi) and an authority on the precepts of traditional Jewish life explains, "*kashrut* is not simply a set of rules about permitted and forbidden foods; *kashrut* is a way of life."³ This way of life determines which foods Jews cannot eat, how certain foods should be prepared, and how animals should be slaughtered. Observant Jews must only eat meat from animals that chew their cud and have cloven hooves. They may also eat fish that have both fins and scales, but they must never combine dairy and meat dishes.

Jewish response to *kashrut* in the South ranges from complete avoidance to strict adherence, a pattern that dates from the first Jewish settlers in the colo-



Shohet knife with sharpening stone and cloth used by Jake Kalinsky in Holly Hill, South Carolina, ca. 1920. Metal, bone, stone, and cotton. Knife: $8 \times 1 \times \frac{1}{2}$ inches. Stone: $1\frac{3}{4} \times 7 \times \frac{3}{4}$ inches. Cloth: $15 \times 21\frac{1}{4}$ inches. Kalinsky used these items to provide kosher chickens for his family. In 1912, at age fourteen, he left Trestina, Poland, with his mother, Ida, and his sisters Libby and Lena. His father, Meyer, had come ahead and opened a little store in Holly Hill. Jake stayed long enough in Charleston to learn to slaughter chickens in the ritually prescribed manner, then joined his family in the countryside. Private collection. Photo courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston Library.

nial South to the present. During the colonial era, the eating patterns of Jewish settlers defined their religious identities—"they were what they ate."³⁴ Today, many Orthodox and Conservative Jews in the South keep kosher, a difficult task in rural areas where kosher food must be purchased by mail, telephone, or the Internet. Some observant Jews in the region adjust dietary laws when they cannot follow the letter of the law and are "quietly kosher."

At the other end of the spectrum, some Reform Jews eat pork, barbecue, shrimp, and crab. Others enjoy these dishes more discreetly, and they also eat "kosher-style" foods when they find them in delicatessens, restaurants, and supermarkets in the South. "Kosher-style" is an American term that allows Jews to ignore the rigor of Jewish dietary laws by distinguishing between rules of kashrut that they observe and others they choose to ignore.⁵ Reform Jews in the region enjoy a "southernized kashrut" that allows them to enjoy forbidden foods with a minimal sense of guilt. They avoid eating pork barbecue or ham at home, but they enjoy it at local restaurants. My mother never served a ham roast or a Virginia ham at home. Instead, she served prepackaged sliced ham that could

pass for sliced turkey or chicken. One family in the Mississippi Delta had a special set of glass plates for forbidden foods like shrimp and barbecue, while another family never ate bacon on the Sabbath.

Southern Jewish jokes about keeping kosher reflect the dilemma of Jews as they approach the dining table.⁶ A Jewish man with five sets of gold teeth is going through customs. The customs agent asks him why he needs so many. "Well," he explains, "I'm an Orthodox Jew. I've got one set for meat and one set for milk." "What about the other three?" the agent asks. "Well, I need one for milk and one for meat for Passover." "And the last set?" asks the agent. "Barbecue," he replies.⁷

While observant Jews in cities like Atlanta and Memphis strictly define their ethnicity at the table, their lifestyle is rarely possible for Jews in the rural South. Given the limited Jewish support services, its small Jewish population, and the strong influence of Protestant fundamentalism, expressions of Jewish life in the South are understandably diverse, and Jewish southerners respect this diversity. Food ledgers, cookbooks, recipes, synagogue banquet menus, sisterhood minutes, and Jewish social club invitations all reveal the fascinating mix of cultures within southern Jewish life. These documents reflect Old World memories, the blending of ethnic and regional identities, and the influence of race and class. When southern Jewish women write their recipes in diaries and publish them in cookbooks, they codify the food customs and social mores of their time. For centuries women described their housekeeping chores, wrote recipes for friends and family, and spoke of their domestic duties in their personal journals and diaries.⁸ As cookbooks were published in the nineteenth century through both commercial and community-sponsored efforts, women's domestic culture became a permanent resource for women's history.⁹

Daisy Hutzler Heller's cookbook journal offers a glimpse into the Richmond, Virginia, Jewish community in the early 1900s. Heller was a member of the city's first Reform congregation, Beth Ahabah. She includes both Jewish foods and regional specialties, including *trejf* (nonkosher) dishes made with shrimp and ham. Recipes for *lebkuchen*, "mother's matza cake," matzoh ball soup, brood torte, and sponge cake coexist alongside southern favorites such as watermelon preserves, lemon ice box pie, angel food, ginger cakes, mayonnaise, caramel icing, Mrs. Bradley's Sally Lunn (a rich cakelike bread), and the forbidden boiled shrimp and ham.¹⁰ By including "outside foods" like shrimp and ham in her family meals, Daisy Heller affirmed her southern allegiance.¹¹ After the Civil War, southern Jews faced growing antisemitism. By eating like their Gentile neighbors, they affirmed both their solidarity with white society and their loyalty to the segregated South.

ISJL Immigration Traveling Trunk

Lesson One: Leaving Europe

Appendix A: Artifact Identification Worksheet



Object number: _____ Object name: _____

Draw the object. Think about its dimensions, shape, texture, and color.

Describe the materials from which the artifact was made. Check all that apply.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bone or horn | <input type="checkbox"/> Stone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Plastic | <input type="checkbox"/> Pottery |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leather | <input type="checkbox"/> Metal |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cardboard | <input type="checkbox"/> Glass |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Paper | <input type="checkbox"/> Wood |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

What is the function of this object? What led you to that conclusion?

What does this artifact tell you about Judaism? Justify your response.

What do you think this artifact is?

What questions do you have about this object?

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Educational Opportunities from the Institute of Southern Jewish Life



The **Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL)** supports, connects, and celebrates Jewish life in the South. The Heritage and Interpretation Department of the ISJL interprets and shares the rich tradition of Jewish life in the American South through public programs, trips and tours, shared experiences, historic preservation, and more.

Immigration Traveling Trunk

The ISJL Immigration Traveling Trunk is designed for students to actively explore and engage in a classic American narrative: the story of the southern Jewish immigrant. This program provides a hands-on educational opportunity containing artifacts, photographs, maps, and lesson plans to teach students about 19th century immigration to the American South and how Jewish immigrants made an impact on their communities.

How does this fit into our current curriculum? Using the three 90-minute lesson plans provided, students will explore the southern Jewish experience through multiple disciplines including history, language arts, geography, and math. The content is also related to the Civil Rights strand in the Mississippi College- and Career-Readiness Standards for the Social Studies. Lessons in this program cover the following Mississippi curriculum standards:

4th Grade	English Language Arts	RL.4.1; RL.4.2; RL.4.3; RI.4.4; RI.4.5; RI.4.6; RI.4.7; RI.4.9; W.4.7
	Mathematics	CCSS.Math.Content.4.OA.3; CCSS.Math.Content.4.MD.A; CCSS.Math.Content.4.MD.2;
	Social Studies	3. a. (DOK 2); 4. a. (DOK 2), c. (DOK 2); 6. c. (DOK 3)
5th Grade	English Language Arts	RI.5.3; RI.5.4; RI.5.5; RI.5.6; RI.5.7
	Mathematics	CCSS.Math.Content.5.MD.1; CCSS.Math.Content.5.MD.A
	Social Studies	3. a. (DOK 2); 5. c. (DOK 3)
6th Grade	English Language Arts	RI.6.3; RI.6.6; RI.6.7; RI.6.9; RL.6.9
	Mathematics	CCSS.Math.Content.6.RP.A; CCSS.Math.Content.6.RP.3; CCSS.Math.Content.6.EE.A
	Social Studies	2. a. (DOK 1), b. (DOK 1); 4. a. (DOK 3), b. (DOK 3); 6. a. (DOK 2); d. (DOK 3)

Who should take advantage of this program? The trunk and lesson plans were developed for fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes but can be modified for older students by request. The program has also been successful in gifted and library enrichment classes.

The rental fee for the traveling trunk is \$150.
For more information, visit www.isjl.org/traveling-trunk.

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Tours and Exhibits at Temple B'nai Israel

Temple B'nai Israel is home to the oldest Jewish congregation in Mississippi. The temple is open to the public by appointment with the support of local docents from the congregation. Visits include a guided tour of the historic building; Of Passover and Pilgrimage, an exhibit documenting the history and everyday life of Natchez's Jewish families; and *The Natchez Jewish Experience*, an award-winning documentary film. Group tours of the Jewish cemetery and Jewish homes are available by special arrangement. Learn more at www.natcheztemple.org. To arrange a visit, please contact Nora Katz.



Southern Jewish Heritage Tours and Alternative Break Trips

The ISJL can help plan your group's trip through the South! The ISJL works as a trip consultant, allowing you to play an active role in planning your own experience. Based on initial conversations about the focus and interests of your group, we will use our network in the region to create a custom southern Jewish heritage itinerary. Visit historic congregations and let members of the Jewish community welcome you with true southern hospitality. Taste authentic local cuisines, meet scholars and activists, and take in the unique landscape of this part of the country. Learn more at www.isjl.org/jewish-heritage-tours.



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Teaching Southern Jewish History

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A more comprehensive bibliography is available on the website of the **Southern Jewish Historical Society** at www.jewishsouth.org.

The ISJL's **Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities** is a free online resource with articles about every southern community that has ever had a Jewish presence: www.isjl.org/encyclopedia-of-southern-jewish-communities.



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Resources for Teaching Immigration and Jewish History

The **Jewish Women's Archive** has a number of lesson plans and teaching resources to engage students with American Jewish history through the lens of women's experiences: www.jwa.org.

Teaching Tolerance has many excellent guides for talking to kids about immigration, racism, and more. For a starting point, see "Immigrant and Refugee Children: A Guide for Educators and School Support Staff." <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2017/immigrant-and-refugee-children-a-guide-for-educators-and-school-support-staff>.

If students have specific anxieties about current immigration policy, Teaching Tolerance also answers the question of "What Do I Say to Students about Immigration Orders?" <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-do-i-say-to-students-about-immigration-orders>.

To expand this content throughout the year, check out **Facing History and Ourselves**, an organization that has a lot of powerful lesson plans and educator resources about race, immigration, and teaching traumatic history: <https://www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources>.

The **Zinn Education Project** has excellent resources for teaching about immigration, as well as other important issues in American history: www.zinnedproject.org.

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