

T'beet: Situating Iraqi Jewish Identity through Food

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Food figures significantly in identity formation. It is a pliable vehicle for expressing one's distinctiveness, being quickly adaptable to changed lifestyles and circumstances. Culinary and commensal patterns affect religious devotion while sustaining everyday existence. They also link individuals to communities, while nourishing connections to a past heritage or to a sacred concept of "home." In the nineteenth century, French gastronome Jean Anthelm Brillat-Savarin famously stated, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are."¹ Applying this appreciation of the place of food to one small group of Jews in Quebec highlights a diversity of ethnic accommodations and adaptations, and underlines the potential of food research in the fields of religion and ethnic studies.

All humans must eat; this is a biological fact. The ways in which we attempt to satisfy that requirement are implicated in the social construction of all aspects of our lives. Foodways are cultural highways. Food patterns communicate symbolic meanings and contain cultural codes, functioning to maintain ethnic and national identities. From communal celebrations to personal preferences, our dietary habits reveal much about who we are and how we live. Judaism has a rich and complex position related to food and its sacred potential.² With dietary restrictions and rituals of feasting, Jewish life is surrounded by foodways, but few look at this phenomenon for its inner diversity and distinctiveness.³ Most significantly in this study, food differences *within* the Jewish world reveal religious configurations and distinctions of identity that are rarely discussed. An examination of one iconic food discloses many attributes of the new Iraqi Jewish

identity in Montreal. It is a significantly different identity from other local Sephardic Jewish communities.⁴ It is even more noticeably different from the majority Ashkenazic community of Quebec, yet it is also vibrant and nurtures a strong attachment to being Iraqi, Jewish, and Canadian.⁵

Jewish Food

Food clearly has a special status in Jewish religious and cultural patterns. Although this is true for many groups, it is particularly central to Jewish self-identification. Beginning with the basic, often routine, yet not infrequently convoluted laws of kashrut (i.e. food considered fit for human consumption), foodways in Judaism mark a path of daily, ritual and festival use that is a reflection and indicator of communal patterns and standards. When those patterns change, tracking changes in food configurations can isolate shifts in identities and in social patterns of integration and relationship. Since Jews have migrated frequently and food is highly transparent and adaptable, research into Jewish food is constructive. Looking for consistencies, congruities and dissimilarities in Jewish food patterns offers social scientists a laboratory for analyses.⁶

What is Jewish food? While there may be many answers to this query, there is one classification of food that is unique to Jews and is of consequence to this study. Every Jewish community has created a special dish to fulfill the ritual requirements of the Sabbath. Since cooking is forbidden, Jewish cooks world over developed some sort of stew that could be placed in the oven overnight. Prepared on Friday afternoon, the stew was eaten Saturday at lunch, enabling the family to have a hot meal without necessitating the forbidden lighting of a fire. Every known Jewish community had a recipe for this unique dish. Each one used different

ingredients and called it by a different name: *cholent*, *dafina*, *hamim*, *t'beet*. Filled with beans, barley, potatoes, beef bones, chicken, rice, eggs or wheat kernels, the dish was a basic stew designed to be slow-cooked, filling and hot. It was definitely not gourmet cooking. Rather a low-end item on the scale of a cook's repertoire, it soon became a memorable icon of all things good and homemade.⁷ Instead of memorials to mother and apple pie, Jewish writers wrote poems to mother's cholent. In 1850 Heinrich Heine wrote of *schalet* (cholent) "Schalet is the food of heaven...Schalet is the kosher ambrosia."⁸

As Jewish communities moved from place to place, they took their recipes for this Sabbath stew with them, transposing and translating them as they went. In each new location the dish took on new ingredients and styles, yet it always remained the ritual stew of the Sabbath, its consumption reserved to that day. Iraqi Jews, forced to leave Iraq by the harsh regimes of their one time friendly neighbours, generated an exception to this model in at least one of their communities. A new pattern emerged: the Sabbath t'beet of Baghdad became the iconic Iraqi Jewish dish of Montreal. No longer specific to Saturday, it became an indispensable element of Iraqi Jewish identity. This phenomenon of rupture, transference and reconstruction is the topic of this chapter.

Situating Iraqi Jewish Identity⁹

Jews from Baghdad began arriving in Montreal, Canada in the early 1950s. Some were elders of the community; most were young adults with or without children. Their exodus from Iraq was not easy, nor was it a long sought after dream. They were well educated, sophisticated and involved in the world of trade and social gatherings. The memories they recounted to me are

filled with the good times of fun, family, friends, and travel.¹⁰ They did not want to leave their precious home, the land between two rivers, as it was lovingly called. Nevertheless, they perceived danger and felt they had no choice, they had to go: their once privileged status no longer protected them, and even their deep sense of belonging could not hold them. The caesura happened at a definite historical moment. Life for Jews in Iraq had become increasingly intolerable starting in the early 1940s. There were periods of calm and even luxury, but inevitably, the peace was punctuated by dreadful hangings and sudden pogroms (i.e., the Farhoud of 1941).¹¹ Faced with persecutions and arbitrary restrictions, escape became vital.

In Canada, the majority of families, having no planned destination, ended up in Montreal. They lost much in their transplantation. Their heritage in Iraq was over 2,500 years old; they were the generations of the Babylonian exile and the people of the Babylonian Talmud. They missed that sense of establishment, confidence, and historic continuity. Their pride as Jews was challenged in Montreal and their concept of their community was equally tested as it underwent serious shifts. Yet they somehow retained their sense of themselves as Iraqi or Babylonian Jews and, holding on to that identity, they remained singularly unified.¹² Their immigration pattern differed from other Canadian and Jewish cohorts.¹³ Although they arrived following the style of a chain migration, this group severed its ties completely with the place of origin. They spoke lovingly of Baghdad, but had no intention of ever returning there. Additionally, the group that came to Montreal were a well-educated unit; many came from the upper class of Iraqi Jewish society.

Upon establishing their presence in Montreal, they continued to remain in close contact for at least three generations. Remarkably, this close knit community of Iraqi Jews is an example

of communal cohesion that defies sociological predictions of religious decline and assimilation. Although the community is not a ritually practicing one, according to classical Orthodox Jewish tenets, it has neither disintegrated nor assimilated. Many of the third generation still live in Montreal and are still integrated into the context of the structured community. Few intermarried and even those that did were still considered part of the Iraqi community. They are still proud Iraqi Jews.¹⁴ Thus theirs is not a narrowly defined “religious” identity but an ethnic/cultural one with critical and varying shades of difference between Israel and the North American diaspora. What has kept them so identified and identifiable?

This is an especially engaging question given some notable features of their interaction with the host cultures. In many ways they accommodated easily to the secular business and political structures of modern Quebec. On the other hand, being neither of European extraction (Ashkenazi) nor from the large North African (primarily Moroccan) Sephardic population, they have continuously felt themselves different from and marginalized within the prevailing Jewish communities of Montreal. In this context of modernization and of alienation from the Jewish community, they managed to maintain a very strong and coherent communal definition as Iraqi Jews, which is otherwise remarkable given their comparatively small population.

The Iraq-to-Montreal émigrés of the 1950s comprised just over three hundred Jewish families. They were, as noted, educated and mostly prosperous. Almost all were trilingual Arabic, English and French speakers, but due to the peculiarities of Christian denominational divisions in the Quebec education system, they were required to attend the Protestant anglophone stream. In numerous interviews many Iraqis told me that they wanted to go to school in French. Today they laugh at the out-dated system that classified them as Anglophone Protestants. They

see the benefits of that historic regulation since as English speakers, they managed to enter quite smoothly into the anglophone centric economic life of Quebec at the time. Their cultural integration requires a more nuanced perspective. They had clearly already been exposed to and had appreciated modernity in Iraq. Many men and women had university educations. Many were well traveled. The philosophical and political ideas of the West permeated their lives. Most were capitalists, some were Marxists, but they were all cosmopolitan. So, their escape to the West did not embrace as great an intellectual shift or cultural disengagement as was experienced by others. Nonetheless, since their understanding was rooted in Western Europe, the culture clash they experienced upon arrival in Quebec, while not paralyzing, was substantial, and was only gradually overcome. In more concrete arenas, the Iraqi community made its way rather quickly. Many had come with some wealth while others used their established skills to climb the socio-economic ladder.¹⁵ They became Canadians, fully integrated into local and even national society. Politically and linguistically they moved easily into the sphere of anglophone Montreal.

Within the Jewish world of Montreal, they remained separate. In their homeland, their Iraqi Jewish identity was singular, enmeshed. However much they embraced secular Western ideas they remained Jews, by definition, for the simple reason that Arab nations were not secular. To be Jewish was an identity that was public and had political, social, economic and legal ramifications. It was not a private matter, or a matter of choice, or a question of degree, or simply a matter of religion. The Western construct of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or Reconstruction Jewry was strange to them. If forced to label themselves, they would say they were traditional Jews. Their own self-identity was of being members of the elite community of Babylonian Jews. In Montreal, they were not only largely invisible to the overwhelmingly

Ashkenazi Jewish population, they were alien. Whereas their Jewish practice was, again by definition, unassailable and self-evident in Iraq, it was contested in Montreal. They did not fit, but they had to find a home. They formed the Community of Sephardi Jews and, after a search, in the late 1960s they joined, *en masse*, the Spanish and Portuguese Corporation, Canada's oldest synagogue. Although they were not observant Jews, not uniformly ritually practicing, the synagogue's Orthodox conservatism and formal British-style etiquette formed a bridge for their nostalgia and a location for their sense of tradition. The transition was complete. They were now Canadian Iraqi Jews with a separate association, which recently (2009) renamed itself the Association of Babylonian Jews.¹⁶ This alteration marks the transition to a uniquely Canadian situation. In Baghdad they had social clubs and synagogues. But synagogue membership was not a defining criterion. The already established Montreal Jewish community's infrastructure was based in part on synagogue membership. An immigrant group with an organization that joined a synagogue confirmed Jewish presence and ensured continuity in Canada.

But what remained of their Iraqi heritage? Many life cycle events exhibit old Iraqi practices. For instance, during *shiva* (the seven days of mourning after a death) the traditional ring-like biscuit, *kahqa*,¹⁷ is still served with a little glass of tea after services every night, and appropriate foods are prepared for the end of the month of mourning. In Ashkenazi custom, non-relatives bring food for the mourners during the week of *shiva*. But the Iraqi custom is to serve the guests every evening after services. Many other customs have not fared so well. Some birth rituals have changed or disappeared, such as *shesha* (the distribution of pouches of candied almonds and such, to welcome a new-born). Weddings are mostly westernized, though some still hold traditional *henna* ceremonies (a pre-marital celebration of the bride – sometimes including

the groom – during which henna paste is applied to the hands). Ritual celebrations of life cycle events are abbreviated and westernized. Holiday celebrations and rituals have also been transformed. The old ways no longer resonated. And, in any case, it is not clear that their Iraqi praxis had been based in knowledge of Jewish law. The practice of Judaism before 1950 in Iraq is not well documented but some scholars noted that there was a decrease in synagogue presence and an increase in public secular participation.¹⁸ Many of the younger men who arrived in Montreal did not know Jewish prayers and had not been taught how to pray. In Iraq, they were unassuming even untrained “traditional” Jews and, in the transference to the new world, many of those traditions were modified, lost, or initially abandoned. Differences abound in the ways in which their ethnic and or religious identities are now practiced. One clear marker of these shifts is found in the foods served and enjoyed. Their foodways changed, and the continuities and adaptations reveal a great deal about communal integration, memory preservation, identity maintenance, and religious transformations.

Distinctiveness

Before embarking on a description of the community and its foodways, it seems appropriate to discuss the absence of research on this small sector of the Jewish world. Initially, the simple factor of size explains much. The cohort under consideration here is demographically minute. In a population of approximately 100,000 Jews in Montreal (when Iraqis arrived in the 1950s), their numbers were inconsequential. Additionally, the overwhelming East European Ashkenazi presence in all of Canada, even in all of North America, coloured all cultural and religious descriptions of Jewishness. This Ashkenazi dominance was a problem in Israel also

where the supposed ethnic ingathering of exiles proved elusive as all were expected to assume a European mode of existence. As much as the Zionist ideal was to create a “new Jew” distinct from the European stereotype, the actual model of culture was based on a preference for all things Ashkenazi. The Israeli Iraqis complained to me that they were given only one cup of rice for a month in the transition camps. Ashkenazis ate bread and potatoes and did not easily accommodate the rice requirements of the middle easterners.¹⁹ Thus, studies of Jews were coloured by this cultural and historic preference. Furthermore, there was a desire to present a uniform Jewishness to the world. All Jews were the same weren't they?

There were even problems of nomenclature. Were Middle Eastern Jews to be called Sephardim? That term would be the binary opposite of Ashkenazim. But that is a cultural or religious category that does not necessarily fit the disparate groups and their very separate histories. Today there are many arguments about the application of these distinct categories.²⁰ In Montreal the presence of a very large Moroccan immigrant community overshadowed all the smaller Middle Eastern groups of Jews. The Moroccans became collectively known as *the* Sephardim.²¹ None other existed in the general community's understanding. Further, when the Iraqis first arrived they understood themselves as Arab Jews but that terminology proved unacceptable in the contested space of Middle East politics.

Overall, there has been a preference on the part of both communal leaders and scholars for the presentation of a Jewish ethnic homogeneity. Diversity, even given Canada's so called multiculturalism, posed problems within the Jewish community. Diversity from one obvious ethnic group to another was acceptable, but less so within the relatively small Jewish world of Montreal. Eventually some within both the scholarly and lay community did accept the

Ashkenazi/Sephardi divide. But it was applied to Europeans – all one group—and Moroccans. The presence of yet another ethnic/national/religious group within this minority was either too difficult to contemplate or deemed irrelevant since it was such a small demographic. However as studies of ethnicity and immigration advances, the complexity of small groups within larger ones clearly adds substantially to academic understanding and analyses.

Considering Géraldine Mossière's chapter on Pentecostal immigrant churches we find interesting parallels. The Christian congregations she describes are multiethnic but seek some form of unity in the name of harmony or intercultural ingathering of newcomers.²² One can hear a similar debate in Montreal's Jewish community as in the Pentecostal one, as Mossiere describes it. For the sake of "maintaining social cohesion and a common sense of belonging," the community seeks commonalities. Looking at the various ways these interconnections within groups play out shows how ethnicity is negotiated, to quote Mossière, "using an interculturalist rhetoric that is specific to Quebecois' views on *vivre ensemble* (living together)."

For these reasons, the examination of this one small group of Iraqi Jews proves ideal in the context of a volume on religion in Quebec. It provides a different view of the process of ethnic identification and ritual revitalization of an immigrant community. Due to the demographic size and homogeneity of the group, certain tendencies are more apparent and consistent. Individual choices and practices turn out to be more discernible and telling as their reactions and reframing of identity become observable and even amplified. It is also significant to note that the Iraqi community challenges the usual depictions of Jewish patterns of adaptation and integration. Most social scientists assumed that modernity and secularism would bring the demise of religious practice, which would perforce establish a weakened sense of Jewish

identity.²³ In this case, the community maintained a very strong “Jewish” identity and a vibrant social cohesion despite the absence of or lessening of ritual praxis. Or to be more precise, secularism coincided with a continued traditionalism. Assimilation into Quebec culture did not correlate with a loss of ethnic confidence and identity.

As with other chapters in this volume that explore the richly varied situation in Quebec detailing religious change, in highlighting this small group we can see the process by which they managed the shift from traditional ritual practice to a selected praxis that performed an identity politic.²⁴ Significantly, it offers a nuanced view of context. In Iraq, they lived in a Muslim world where the dietary patterns were similar. The shift to Quebec with its Christian cultural environment challenged their commensality but not their identity. Rather, as we shall see, in cooking and eating t’beet they expressed themselves unambiguously, thereby enabling and embodying their complex somewhat secular religious/ethnic identity.

Montreal Iraqi Jews and Food

My first concern in observing the community of Iraqi Jews was the role of gender. I wanted to know how women managed their families’ integration in Quebec. In due course, investigating the lives of Iraqi Jewish women in Montreal led me to food, as it appeared to offer a uniquely suitable access to their experiences in Baghdad, as well as in Canada. The women were most willing to talk about food and recipes, about past meals and present table culture. Talking about religion and/or ritual did not, at that time, engage their interest. Thus, probing the ways in which Iraqi Jews speak of their past and celebrate their existence underscored the

importance of food. It is a central mode of discourse and a symbol of all that is good and much that is lost.

The frequent and familiar refrain of many immigrant populations focuses on remembered dishes and meals. “Remember the *sambousak* we used to eat!” exclaim the Iraqis. Food studies have shown that the foodways of a people fashion paths into memory and shape identity, forming a rich cultural heritage that calls for description and analysis.²⁵ In locating the role of culinary and commensal traditions in early Judaism, historian Jordan Rosenblum notes that, “the food on one’s plate serves as a social symbol (or sign) that communicates group association or disassociation.”²⁶ After a number of years of research in the Iraqi community, including numerous interviews, group discussions, and participation in ceremonial feasts, it became apparent that men and women relate to each other, to their environment, and to their traditions via specific metonymic foods. I found that while women are the primary food givers, men are now also involved in food preparation.²⁷ Significantly, the second generation of men interviewed was interested in taking up food preparation and participating in the preservation of recipes. Some of the men explicitly indicated that they did not want their traditions to be lost as their matriarchs passed away. This fear of loss signified a complex commitment to a cultural identity and pride in a unique heritage for both men and women.

In terms of the issue of gender presence or absence in communal praxis, my chapter presents a contrast with that of Frederic Parent and H el ene Charron. Their investigation of religious practice in a rural parish observed a certain level of feminization taking place especially with the new ritual of ADACE. The increased presence of female practitioners in religious praxis is an observed and studied phenomenon in contemporary North America. Add to that the impact

of current theories on domestication of religion, we might expect to find in my study related to food and identity, a clear manifestation of feminization. But as I faced the t'beet project, I realized that there was no "feminization" of the Iraqi identity even though the focus was food and identity. The men were involved in and concerned with the need to conserve their heritage. Men and women were "in the kitchen" together. The men still retain dominance in synagogue ritual, but both men and women value and use food conventions to construct their Iraqi Jewish identity.

Food defines and reflects much of a community's self-understanding and experience. Founder of the slow food movement Carlo Petrini once said, "Taste is like an umbilical cord," it takes you back home.²⁸ When I quoted this to a focus group of Iraqi Jews, they all smiled in recognition of the truth of the statement. They all felt the nostalgic tie that bound them, through food, to some wonderful sense of "home." The men and women equally appreciated the claim food exerted on their ties to their mothers and to the homes of their memories, which they so longed for. This is very much in keeping with the findings of anthropologist Claude Fischler:

Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently. Food is also central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the foods he/she chooses to incorporate.²⁹

It follows, then, that studying the culinary and commensal aspects of food situations enhances an understanding of both individual and communal process of memory and identity formation. The patterns that emerge form the basis of identity practices and yields a clearer understanding of ethnic and religious cultural adaptations (sometimes called accommodations).

Food is, quite literally, a form of communication. It can, as Fischler says, proclaim “otherness.” For example, Ashkenazis declared that one had to eat gefilte fish if one were a *real* Jew; Iraqi Jews knew they were Jewish, but they were “other”: they did not like or eat gefilte fish.³⁰ It can also signal “oneness.” Eating special Iraqi dishes, eating them together – in private family gatherings and larger social meetings – meant that they were still Iraqi, still living their heritage, passing it on to their children. Ingesting was visceral and real, the embodying and hence embedding of a valued tradition. Eating this food was symbolic of holding on to their past and transferring it to the present, even to the future. There were changes made, but they were transformations that were necessitated by immigration, and all hoped that they would take root in the new country and survive somehow. The food still tasted good. Even though they concurred that some things could never taste the same – “The water here is not as good as there,” or the flour, or the oil – it was good to eat, and even important to eat, Iraqi.

Many immigrant communities quickly lose their language of origin, but food patterns, though often transformed, retain distinctively ethnic configurations. Food offers us more than mere nostalgia: food contains the language of memory – it is fully embodied. Foodstuff provides us with a sensory presence so that memory stimulation is not of the mind alone. Eating and then remembering “mama’s food” bridges the past and the present, providing a link to the past and the future. As specific foods are ingested, the eater partakes of diverse symbolism instantly and

without effort. In an early article, anthropologist Joelle Bahloul articulated the various ways that food produced links for Algerian Jews with their Muslim neighbours, sometimes extricating their ritual eating from Islamic patterns and at other times connecting them.³¹ The practice of eating evocative foods is therefore perceived to have social and ontological ramifications for both individual and group identity.³² Renowned food historian Sidney Mintz noted that “on many occasions, people define themselves with food; at the same time, food consistently redefines *them*.”³³ Thus focusing on food enables a dual perspective, examining how food aids in maintaining past forms of identity and promoting new adaptations of that very same identity.

While looking at food preparation as marks of familial and ritual centrality, I found indications of rupture and reconciliation within the Iraqi community. I caught a glimpse of the connection of generations, as food recipes were lost and reclaimed, discussed and altered. Mostly, I saw the ways in which a community of men and women reinvented themselves while maintaining their sense of themselves individually and communally as Iraqi Jews. In order to highlight the shifts and alterations taking place in the course of their adaptation to the environment of an Ashkenazi/Sephardi Jewish Montreal within a secular Quebec³⁴, I offer a vignette portraying a radical rupture and a short description of a process of retention or reconstruction. In practical terms, this chapter fits within the parameters of a short ethnographic description of lived religion although the community itself is not practising religion in the classical sense of halakhic Judaism, as will become evident in the example below. Nonetheless they do exhibit and proclaim a strong attachment to a Jewish identity within Quebec society. The following description reveals the diversity found even within a small community while arguing against any homogeneous designation of Judaism.

Ruptures

There are many stories of the sweeping rift that befell the Jews of the Middle East when they were forced to leave. Life was disoriented and destabilized in the most basic of ways. Many women told (complained to) me: “I didn’t learn anything from my mother. I learned the most from my father” – yet, much of their lives in Canada revolved around their management of food, which they had not learned from their fathers. This contention addresses their own sense of loss, of inadequacy and of deprivation arising out of their dispossession. They came to Montreal newly married or with young families; they had husbands and children to feed and no idea how to go about it. They had not learned to cook at Mama’s knees. No one had prepared them for cooking rice! To this day, many seem to regret not learning from Mama.

Significantly, these women who blamed their mothers did not even fully appreciate their loss. They had suffered a triple rupture: a disruption in the transmission of traditions, a loss of their privileged social status, and a dislocation of memory. They presupposed a world – a life of mother-daughter kitchen interactions – that never was. In Baghdad, mothers did not necessarily teach their daughters. Firstly, most women from this upper class of society did not cook themselves. They had cooks, poor Jews or Arabs that they trained and directed. Most of the older generation of women only began to do hands-on cooking when they eventually joined their children in Canada. Moreover, it appears that, most frequently, mothers-in-law taught daughters-in-law, in order to guarantee that their sons/husbands had good food! The mother-daughter interaction so belaboured did not focus on food. And cooking did not necessarily take place in an indoor kitchen. Thus, place and memory were totally transposed and reinvented.

The rupture in the transmission of traditions I mentioned is especially salient, as it relates to Iraqi Jewish practice in Iraq. They were traditional Jews, that is, at least in the home, correct Jewish practice was received practice: it was not book-learning; it was a way of life. “And,” as Hayim Soloveitchick comments in his masterful study of Jewish traditional communities facing modernity, “a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school.”³⁵ The younger women especially had not been trained as ritual experts by their mothers. They had left home quickly, without due preparation. Theirs was not a sense of culinary confidence or ritual expertise, but of ignorance and of impossibly difficult family demands.

Not only were they unprepared, they were immediately confronted with situations beyond their experience. First, they found themselves in a rich secular society in which food choices abounded. Second, the traditions of the local Ashkenazis had developed on different lines than theirs. In fact, according to Soloveitchik, in the Ashkenazi world the “dual tradition of the intellectual and the mimetic, law as taught and law as practiced, which stretched back for centuries,” had already broken down and “[e]stablished practice [could] no longer hold its own against the demands of the written word.”³⁶ Even if these young women had had a firmer grasp of their traditions, that would not have granted them legitimacy in the Jewish world of Montreal. In that world, they were ritually illiterate. Their absorption of the tradition had been blocked.

Part of this matrix of rupture is captured in a unique story I participated in about kashrut, the Jewish dietary laws. For many Iraqi Jews keeping kosher was a pattern of eating and shopping in the right location, something you did without full understanding of ritual specifics or

religious commitment. Their shopping and eating patterns were self-evident: the way things were.³⁷ When they arrived in Montreal there was a lack of knowledge and information. The local food store chain – Steinberg’s – was known to be Jewish, so shopping there seemed natural. But the food was unfamiliar and not necessarily kosher. The young women did not fully appreciate these subtle foodways. They were not entirely sure about kashrut, remembering it as food bought from a Jewish butcher. Bread on the other hand came from the Arab bakers. The separation of meat and milk was not an issue since dairy was not a staple of their diet. People variously remembered a single set of dishes for both categories of food, not everyone recalled that, of that one set, some dishes were put aside for dairy. In Iraq, eating kosher was simple, and their Moslem neighbours’ eating habits followed many similar patterns. What “kosher” was here, what its definition was, remained an enigma. So they bought what was available in Montreal in a Jewish store. The loss of kashrut was not felt as a catastrophe.³⁸ Some, of course, did keep a kosher kitchen, but not the majority. Daughters had had no guidance and only later did some of them seek out and re-establish that pattern.

The following story is an admittedly extreme example of rupture, as most Iraqi women knew some elements of kashrut. Yet the profile is familiar and applies to a systemic problem for a community traumatized by exile. In the mid 1980’s, a respected Iraqi family, one whose parents might well have hosted the rabbis of Baghdad, wanted to invite their non-Iraqi Montreal rabbi for a meal. It was very important to them to show their gratitude to him, behave properly, and be proper hosts. For this Orthodox rabbi, eating in their home was problematic since they admittedly were not kosher. Yet, he agreed on condition that they buy everything from a specific kosher store. He would eat only the food prepared there and served cold on paper plates. His

ritual requirements were alien to them, but they wished to honour him properly. In fact, they were grateful that he was so willing to allow them the role of grand hosts, as their parents had performed in the old days. The table was beautifully laid out with all the dishes from this kosher store – sliced beef, salads, and sliced cheeses! They had followed his instructions to the letter and bought every item only in that one store. Inconceivable to him, they did not know that meat and milk could not be served or eaten together. Faced with a disaster, they were embarrassed, but also explained that they were *never* taught anything about Judaism.

Interestingly, this rupture had already begun in Iraq. They had left before their Jewish education was complete; or their education was truncated as public performances of Judaism became difficult and Jewish life became more restricted. Many were educated, but some were never fully educated, nor had they participated in, the rituals of the community. Some women stopped going to synagogue for the High Holidays. Some males did not have a bar mitzvah. Some men complained their fathers never taught them how to lead a Passover Seder. These lapses are related to some aspects of modernity, but most specifically relate to the particular political history of the region. The influence of Nazism and the local fear of Zionism combined to make expressions of Jewish life dangerous.

Let me be clear: most women today do use food in the proper ritual framework.³⁹ Although many women no longer keep kosher kitchens, the *kahqa* are still served after funerals. In other words, their ritual knowledge has reasserted itself in specific arenas and many have learned the necessary kitchen skills. Still, coming to a new country entailed a loss of tradition, a religious and ritual praxis abandoned. The rupture was not complete. But it was significant and widespread.

Recapture

However, the transformative process is complex, never a one-way street. Some alterations emerge as people try to preserve a lost heritage. The new contours of these rituals of identity often resemble the old configurations but a detailed examination reveals shifts and new locations of the form. After they had settled into Canada and achieved financial security, some turned to their Iraqi heritage in an effort to recapture old customs and re-establish them in Montreal. There was a conscious effort to keep the heritage alive. Some extended families were reunited while others were not. By the 1970s, trips to London and vacations together in Florida helped reinforce the sense of kinship and community. Ritual praxis was re-instated. In this context, Iraqi food became the easy vehicle for nostalgia and retention. The food culture of North America might have been the staple diet of all the families, but Iraqi foods were served both daily and on special occasions, public and private. Most frequently, if Iraqi food was served the event was considered significant.

In a study of the centrality of rice to the formulation of Japanese identity, anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney made the following statement:

The power of food as a symbol of self-identity derives from the particular nature of the symbolic process involved. An important food as a metaphor of a social group involves two interlocking dimensions. First, each member of the social group consumes the food, which becomes part of his or her body. The important food becomes *embodied* in each

individual. It operates as a *metonym* for being part of the self. Second, the food is consumed by individual members of the social group who eat the food together.⁴⁰

While, for Iraqi Montrealers, this might be applied to the whole of Iraqi food, Ohnuki-Tierny is speaking of “an important food.” Over time, a particular food did emerge as an exceptionally potent transmitter of identity for this immigrant community.

T’beet⁴¹

One specific class of food had its place and meaning reassigned and became important as a symbol of Iraqi identity, so much so that we can see it as an iconic food without which one could not claim Iraqi Jewish status today. That food, known as *t’beet*, was the quintessential Sabbath food of the Jews of Iraq.

As noted above, all known Jewish cultures developed a special Sabbath food, a stew of sorts that could be put in an oven on Friday and eaten on Saturday after services. While there are many words used to describe this item, it is known mostly as *cholent*.⁴² This term reflects the Ashkenazi culture in which the stew consisted of beans, potatoes, bones, and sometimes meat. The original designation from Spain is *hamin*.⁴³ That word recalls the warmth of the item for a feast on a day when it was forbidden to cook. It is considered the Jewish dish *par excellence*, so much so that “[d]uring the Spanish Inquisition, the most incriminating dish connoting a retention of Judaism was *hamin/adafina*.”⁴⁴ T’beet, the Iraqi version, does not contain beans or potatoes or even beef. Rather, as befitting a Middle Eastern dish, the main ingredients are rice and chicken.

The manner of preparation and even of eating differs from the European model. It is also quite distinct from the *dafina* of Moroccan or Algerian Jews.⁴⁵

In Iraq, preparation was quite intensive, requiring skill and dexterity. It was not a lowly dish; it was a *tour de force*. Either the chicken was deboned and stuffed, or the skin was removed whole and then stuffed. When interviewed, many Montreal Iraqis recalled the wonders of this Sabbath dish. They did not dwell on the Sabbath itself, on the day's change of pace, peaceful ways, or familial attention. Rather, t'beet was the item of discussion. Almost all the talk focused on this dish as the quintessential Sabbath noon meal. In some households, t'beet was not just reserved for the Saturday noon meal; it formed the basis of two other meals as well. In a private discussion, a friend described the pattern of eating for the whole cycle:

We ate the liquid part as soup for Friday night's meal. Then the eggs were eaten for breakfast. And finally we had the chicken stuffed with rice, the main part of the t'beet that had been baking in the special pot all night, that we had for lunch after the men came home from synagogue.

This was not a universal practice, but later others did confirm this detailed description.⁴⁶

When the Iraqi Jews first came to Montreal, the women did not have the skills to make t'beet. The recipes were vague and they could not find the correct spices. They could not phone home. Letters were exchanged, but the mail was slow and haphazard. Yet, even in the early stages of integration into Quebec, they longed for the t'beet of home. Their memories of a house

filled with the smell of t'beet cooking propelled some women to persist and learn how to make the dish; others then learned from them. But the environment dictated some important shifts.

In Montreal many Iraqi Jews became less ritually observant. These Iraqi Jews did not become less Jewish, nor did they abandon treasured traditions; but they did accept a life pattern that either eliminated many Jewish rituals or shifted their application, focus and location. Remarkably, the community as a whole joined one Orthodox synagogue. They became more secular, but not atheistic. Conscious of their unique Jewish and ethnic background, they maintained strong group cohesion and focused on only certain elements of praxis. They considered themselves proud traditional but not "religious" Jews. In this environment, the Sabbath was not necessarily a day of rest and synagogue attendance for the men. Women did not spend all of Friday preparing t'beet. Families did not sit down to a large noon meal on Saturday. Life had changed.

Changes in t'beet patterns occurred side by side with communal integration. Initially, t'beet moved to Friday night as the Sabbath food. Thus, while its original purpose had been to accommodate Sabbath rules and serve as the hot meal for Saturday, in Montreal it became the special food of Friday family night. Following the patterns of their neighbours, they looked upon Saturday as a day for secular activities, for the most part. But Friday night was to remain a special Jewish night, not so much as a Sabbath with all its rules and regulations, but as a dedicated family time. Most Montreal Jews reserved this Friday night part of the Sabbath to gather the family together for a family meal. For the Iraqis, t'beet became the celebrated epicenter of this domestic arrangement. Preparation began Friday morning and there was no overnight process. The whole community did not keep Friday night dinner, but it did become the

pattern for many. Families liked it and so the tradition was born. Some of the first generation Iraqi women made fun of those who served t'beet on Friday night: "Look at them. They don't even know when to serve it."⁴⁷ Yet, they too acknowledged the usefulness of the Friday night ritual. They even ardently participated in this transformed practice.

One woman stated that she initially began serving t'beet Friday nights when her daughter reached marriageable age. She invited single men to dinner Friday night to meet and socialize. In fact, that is how her daughter met her husband. This meal of special Iraqi food became the family tradition. Years later I videotaped them at their Friday night family meal. The number of teenage grandchildren, all of whom seemed to be enjoying themselves, impressed me. I asked them why they were not out in the city partying with their friends. They replied quickly and unanimously: "Nana is cooking. Are you kidding?" "When she cooks Friday night dinner, why would I go elsewhere?"; "My friends will be there another night. Tonight we eat t'beet!" One went on to tell me that his mother could not really cook, she did not know how to make Iraqi dishes like t'beet —"that was real food."⁴⁸

The sense of family togetherness was omnipresent, and so was their special pride in being Iraqi Jews. In the interview with all the members, it was clear that love of the food embraces them within their family and culture. Discussions with other members of the community revealed the same sense of intergenerational links that this food embodies and fosters. Significantly, while our attention is still on the food itself, it remains in this setting as a Sabbath food. At this point, t'beet has shifted in its preparation and commensal setting, but it has not lost its specialized Sabbath context.

With the passage of time, two new factors affected t'beet's presence and usage. The first

was that the next generation decided to learn how to cook the dish and so its popularity increased, as did certain time saving shortcuts. No longer cooked overnight, the meal was prepared in one pot quickly. There are currently various popular ways of cooking t'beet: different spices, recipes and even YouTube presentations with diverse guidelines and instructions.

The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, where the Montreal Iraqi community comprises one of five diverse ethnic groups, held a Friday night dinner that was prepared by the fourth generation. It was hailed as a great success – an Iraqi night. The young men cooked; they made t'beet. People could not stop talking about it: its taste, spices, recipe and, of course, that the “boys” made it. For this generation, cooking and eating the t'beet revitalized their love of Iraqi food; it regenerated their strong sense of themselves as Iraqi Jews and re-wove their ties to each other. It established new experiences upon which to build the memory base of a rich heritage in Canada. Most importantly, it gave them two new qualities. The cooks were now known as chefs, knowledgeable as Iraqi cooks, interested in preserving and serving recipes not just in eating. And, significantly, it introduced a new gender characteristic to this old community. Men could now enter the kitchen. Men could cook and be involved with women in ways not experienced before. The old Iraqi ways were worth saving, but in new ways and by new people. And it still tasted good.

That Friday night no one mocked, even though it was Friday night and not the noon meal. It was ‘Shabbath’⁴⁹ and they were all ‘being Iraqi’, showing the other groups how good it is to be Iraqi. Their pride was palpable, aided by the tasty food. Seeing these young people embracing t'beet confirmed for them that their traditions and identity would survive. The next generation was palpably invested.

The second factor in t'beet's reframing is related to the desire of the Iraqi Jewish community to publicly exhibit and express their identity. This aspiration only recently permeated the Iraqi community.⁵⁰ It is noteworthy that previously the members had been committed to privacy and quiet diplomacy. They did not choose public demonstrations or open showcases in any manner. But the tides and generations had changed. The world was at war with Iraq, yet they were still proud Iraqi Jews and they needed some way to acknowledge their rich heritage.

As Iraqis continued to hold public meetings and events for the whole synagogue community, the question of what food to serve arose. T'beet easily became the food most desirable for an Iraqi Jewish public event, no matter that the Sabbath was nowhere in sight. People seemed to feel: "If we meet on a Wednesday [Monday, Tuesday...] night as the community of Iraqi Jews, then we must eat t'beet."⁵¹ Some of the elders still smile at the silly people who serve t'beet in the middle of the week. Some ridicule the current practice, but most love eating it and speak of that unique sense of Iraqi pride engulfed in the layers of rice and chicken.

T'beet was not reserved for synagogue get-togethers; it was the meal of choice for any special family gathering or social event. Its meaning had shifted and it had become secularized. Even within the synagogue setting, eating t'beet was not overburdened with religious significance. Certainly, it was religiously inflected – they *were* gathered in a synagogue, after all, and the cooking did have to be kosher. The meaning of "synagogue," however, had also shifted. In Iraq, the synagogue was almost exclusively a place for religion, ritual and Jewish learning, not one for secular activities. In Montreal, the synagogue had taken on some of the functions of the social clubs that the immigrant generation had formed in Baghdad. Certainly, they still

congregated in the synagogue to celebrate life cycle events and holy days; they also came to play cards, attend lectures and book clubs, listen to concerts, and organize museum tours. It wasn't the only, or even the most important, venue for their secular lives, but it was as much a community center as a religious institution. When Iraqis gathered to eat and serve t'beet in the synagogue, it was not a religious act, it was a communal social ritual.

Thus, t'beet shifted from the iconic Sabbath food to the iconic Iraqi food. No longer necessary for a warm meal on Sabbath,⁵² it could now be served on Sunday, or any day when these immigrant Jews felt the need to feel Iraqi. Iraqi Jewish identity had shifted from being the immutable consequence of being traditional Jews living in a non-secular Moslem country, to a matter of cultural choice. And they chose, and they expressed that choice in the foods they ate. In a sense the food traditions became the defining feature of the Iraqi Jewish community, particularly t'beet. In Iraq the dish signified Sabbath as well as symbolizing Jewishness; in Montreal, in this secular diaspora, eating this unique dish distinguished the community and marked the person as an Iraqi Jew. Consequently, whenever they gather as a community, or whenever they wish to indicate the importance of a family event, they need to eat the dish. It gives them a special identity. The reasoning seems quite clear if unstated: T'beet is unique and ingesting it makes one equally unique.

This identity practice functions for those who grew up in Baghdad as well as for those who never lived there. Eating special Iraqi Jewish dishes keeps alive a connection to a remembered paradise – not to the real Baghdad, to which no one in this community has any desire to return. They do not even wish to visit it. But recalling Baghdad maintains a tangible connection to a dream and a heritage. Intriguingly, for those who were not born there eating the

food establishes a link to the imagined life of an Iraqi Jew. Somehow eating the right food concretizes the lived experience of Baghdad, thereby establishing one's legitimate credentials as an Iraqi Jew.

Anthropological studies of culinary and commensal practices show that specific foods and foodways act to preserve important traditions of specific communities. While not necessarily in the realm of religious ritual, these traditions become suffused with the nostalgia of memory and of taste. In some cultures the foods are remembrances through which ritual is preserved. A recent study traced how the Moroccan ritual of *mimouna* transferred to Montreal.⁵³ Unlike the shifts of t'beet, the special ceremony retained its place in the holiday as the concluding ritual of Passover. It is probable that this practice was established in Morocco as a way to thank one's non-Jewish neighbours who were returning the flour and foods they had stored for the Jews during Passover. With the move to Montreal, the ritual remained but its meaning shifted. Offering the special crepes known as *moufleta*, became a way of introducing non-Moroccan Jews to (the sweet and tasty) Moroccan Jewish traditions. In Montreal, one was not surrounded by Moslems; one was floating in a sea of cultural and religious identities. One did not need to thank and keep friendly lines of communication open. One needed to differentiate oneself and educate the Ashkenazi Jewish community about the unique rituals of the Moroccan community. The intended recipients changed, but the ritual remained as a way of preserving, proclaiming and sharing a heritage.

In our case, t'beet was divorced from the actual ritual of the Sabbath tradition. Foodways, however, are pliable and reciprocal movements are possible. In a fascinating twist of events, t'beet has come back to the synagogue, with controversy. As noted previously, the community

qua community joined one synagogue, the Spanish and Portuguese congregation of Montreal. In the last decade, a light meal has been served every Saturday after services. (It must be noted that this meal is intended to be minor, a time for the population to socialize. People stand and eat, walking and talking. This synagogue practice is known all over the Jewish world and is called the Kiddush.) At first the only hot dish was dafina, the Moroccan “cholent.” People complained. T’beet was added to the menu. Eventually, due to cost concerns t’beet was dropped from the menu. After serious accusations of prejudice and exclusion were uttered, the dish was again included. While still a dish of rice and chicken, its resemblance to the t’beet of Baghdad is distant. But it is being served at the old traditional time, related to Shabbath, and supposedly cooked all night. It is now a more conveniently made rice dish with some pieces of chicken. But it is named t’beet. And the Iraqi members of the synagogue feel their tradition and identity is preserved in the context of the other diverse Jewish groups and their cholents. They again are experiencing this culinary item as a mark of Iraqi-ness within a non-Iraqi Jewish world. Thus the experience was one of culinary identity wherein the food, in this case t’beet, enabled a very specific identity to be differentiated from a broadly Jewish, Hasidic, Moroccan Jewish or Ashkenazi identity. T’beet was Iraqi Jewish, uniquely their own.

What more does t’beet signify or symbolize? For many in the community it represents home, good food, good taste, tastefulness, and plenty. It especially denotes their sense of hospitality, encompassing a way of life filled with sociability, cordiality, and friendship. For so many of the people with whom I spoke, family – extended family – is at the center of their social life, and eating t’beet together cements that relationship. They wish to continue with this pattern of eating and sharing that signifies a life of ease, good living and wealth. In a very real sense

t'beet extends their sense of community. It takes them back, not to Iraq, but to the paradisiacal "land between the two rivers." And it enhances their modern secular lives, giving them a way of being Iraqi Jews without pious ritual and religion, without Shabbath. Yet they are keenly aware that without Shabbath there would be no t'beet. They are, moreover, keenly aware that their Jewishness is intricately linked to the religion of their ancestors. And while they will not keep all the rituals, they are proud of being Jewish, Iraqi Jewish.

Eating together, this iconic food not only revitalizes a love of Iraqi food, it re-establishes a strong sense of the Iraqi Jewish community. Eating together, this particular dish weaves a fabric of communal and familial cohesion. It also creates new networks and opportunities upon which to build the memory base of a rich heritage in Canada. The old Iraqi ways were worth saving, but in new ways and by new people. And it all tastes so good.

Conclusion

In the process of emigration and reintegration, many aspects of life in Baghdad were appropriated, absorbed, shifted, remembered and reinvented. In an attempt to maintain an Iraqi Jewish identity, the Iraqi Jewish community of Montreal created distinct patterns of identification and integration. It is increasingly evident that while modernization began for this community in Iraq, the North American adaptation required a reworking of their system. As they fully adapted to life in Montreal, shifts in identity and practice indicate a complexity of ethnic distinctions and religious affiliations. Eating one particular iconic food enabled both the embodying of a heritage and the embracing of a new social reality.

Given the rupture of their traditional family patterns, comparing styles of food

preparation and feast location yielded interesting insights into the immigrant experience. Many complained that they were totally unprepared for life in a new country. Arrival in Montreal created problems of isolation and assimilation. In their attempts to sustain and reconstruct their family patterns in a new country, Iraqi food became a central element of their interaction, expertise and control. Food constantly distinguished this community from other Jewish communities. Food is one of the best vehicles for that nostalgic walk down memory lane. It enables a taste of home for those seeking a backward glance at a bygone era. Indeed, it has created a secure home for the memories, aspirations and pride of the multiple generations of Iraqis that share in its preparation and consumption. Its full-bodied presence shifts one to a longed for past while retaining a modern presence in a vibrant social setting. By cooking and ingesting t'beet, this group of immigrants expresses themselves as ethnically distinct, Jewishly identified and communally committed.

I want to acknowledge the invaluable help of Rose Ftaya both in the research and editing of this paper.

¹ Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*, 15.

² See the work of David Kraemer 2007 *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages*, and John Cooper 1993 *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food*.

³ Note the diversity of articles in Greenspoon, Simkins and Shapiro, *Food and Judaism*.

⁴ See Joseph Lévy and Yolande Cohen. 1995. "Moroccan Jews and Their Adaptation to Montreal Life." *Renewing Our Days: Montreal Jews in the Twentieth Century*.

⁵ This study is based on many years of research, observation, interviews and group discussions. I first met this community when my husband became their rabbi in 1970. I began serious study of the community in the 1990s using both ethnographic and oral history methodologies. Looking into their foodways as indicative of gender and identity patterns introduced me to the growing field of food studies and I edited a volume of *Nashim* on Food, Gender and Survival (#5) in 2003.

⁶ See the comparative representation of Jews, Italian and Irish immigrants to New York in Hsia Diner, *Hungering for America*.

⁷ The process of making Sabbath food was so significant that accusations against women formed the basis of many inquisitorial trials. See Melammed, *Heretics or Daughters of Israel*.

⁸ Quoted in Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 129.

⁹ The migration of the Iraqi Jews is an interesting case study from many perspectives. This story has been researched and told in Israel where the majority of Iraqis live, but the diasporic passage has remained largely uncharted. There is a growing collection of memoirs from the diaspora; see, Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*; Cohen, “Historical Memory and History”; For an Israeli perspective see Meir-Glitzstein “Longing for the Aromas of Baghdad.”

¹⁰ These nostalgic images were relayed to me consistently whether in the form of structured interviews or friendly chatting.

¹¹ The use of the word pogrom is debated amongst scholars of the Middle East. The category of crimes is easily recognizable with this usage. However, it locates the event within a European context, which is not always appropriate for understanding of the Middle Eastern reality.

“Farhoud” is the Arabic term Iraqi Jews use for the riots that took place on the holiday of Shavuot, during which they were mercilessly attacked.

¹² There were differences of class and status. But the only major grouping was the ethnic difference between the Babylonian community and the Kurdish Jews.

¹³ See Goldscheider. 2009. "Immigration and the Transformation of American Jews." 202.

¹⁴ They used to call themselves Arab Jews.

¹⁵ This class level marks the Iraqis of Montreal as distinctly different from the mass that immigrated to Israel.

¹⁶ The use of the word "Babylonian" is instructive: at the time, Iraq was an evil country at war; "Babylon" bespeaks a rich long heritage; additionally, the name unites the community with others, most notably that of Israel.

¹⁷ In Arabic, "kahqa" or "ka'ak" is a generic for "cake" and is used throughout the Arabic-speaking world for many different baked goods. Amongst Iraqi Jews, used alone, the term refers almost exclusively to a lightly flavoured small ring of dough, usually crunchier, that is not only served at shivas.

¹⁸ Reeva Spector Simon notes "By the 1930s observers noted a laxity in Jewish religious practice." *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*. 358.

¹⁹ Many informants told me this; those who had gone through the internment camps themselves and those whose parents had related these experiences.

²⁰ See for example Goldberg. 1996. *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries*.

²¹ See the absence of any mention of the Iraqis in James Torczyner in 2001. *Immigration and Integration*. 242. And Goldscheider in 2010, "Boundary Maintenance and Jewish Identity."

²² Germain, Gagnon and Polo, *L'aménagement des lieux de culte des minorités ethniques*.

²³ See Kaell in Introduction to this book wherein she explores the presumption that with modernity people would "...naturally come to discard religious doctrine and societal rituals..." Goldscheider and Zuckerman. 1985 did focus their study of the transformation of the Jews on factors of demography and social cohesion and not ritual practice.

²⁴ This is not to say that there are not intellectuals in this group. Naim Kattan, who is acclaimed as a francophone Quebec writer, is part of this Iraqi community.

²⁵ See Counihan and Estrik, *Food and Culture*

²⁶ Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 2.

²⁷ The gendering of food studies combined with the scholarly disinterest in this field other than in anthropology is worthy of a separate study. See Belasco, "Food Matters," 2002. Inness, 2001.

²⁸ Petrini, 2005. *The Meaning of Food* chap. 5, min. 16.

²⁹ Fischler, "Food Self and Identity," 275.

³⁰ Food rejections or abstentions are as important in communal identity as food preferences. For example, pig avoidance fills a much larger profile than mere acceptance of Jewish dietary laws.

See Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 48-58.

³¹ Bahloul. 1989. "From a Muslim Banquet to a Jewish Seder," in *Jews Among Arabs*.

³² See Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism*, 47.

³³ Mintz, "Food and Eating" 26.

³⁴ Quebec can be considered secular in that it is a civil society and all can become citizens. It is democratic, operating on the rule of law and no one religious system is supposed to be prioritized. Yet, it is also a Christian society wherein Christian symbols, morality and holidays are still the norm. There is an ongoing debate full of tension and doubt. I use the term in this paper in the sense that the Iraqi Jews approach Quebec society. Quebec is not like Iraq where Islamic Law was the law of the land. In that sense Quebec and Canada are secular.

³⁵ Soloveitchick, “Rupture and Reconstruction,” 66.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 67 and 69.

³⁷ This concept is developed by Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, 276-318 in a chapter entitled “Self-Evidence.”

³⁸ We do not hear any of the agony Pauline Wengeroff, *Rememberings*, expresses in her memoir, regarding when her husband forced the abandonment of kashrut.

³⁹ When I gave an earlier version of this paper, an elderly Iraqi woman was incensed. She refused to accept the veracity of my report. She claimed that all Iraqi Jews knew the rules of kashrut and all were religious.

⁴⁰ Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self*, 129-30.

⁴¹ See the appendix for a detailed description and recipe.

⁴² Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 127.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 250-2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ In this I would disagree with Bahloul’s (1989) point vis the use of beef to differentiate Jewish food from Muslim food for Middle Easterners. Iraqi’s use chicken in this very Jewish dish does not differentiate their food from Muslim food.

⁴⁶ Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food*, 573 also notes the use of the egg.

⁴⁷ This is a familiar refrain heard from women in North America and Israel. Any changes in the t’beet pattern are often gently mocked.

⁴⁸ In her prime, their Nana made this Friday night dinner every Friday night. When she got older her married children tried taking over the family celebration. It did not work. They all reverted back to grandma's house. Her food and her ways were the real way! This is not just about knowledge of a recipe as her daughters are very good cooks. She herself confided in me that she does not like to cook but does it for the family.

⁴⁹ While Ashkenazis say "Shabbat," Iraqis use "Shabbath" when referring to the Sabbath .

⁵⁰ The reasons for this are complex and discussed in my as yet unpublished paper "The Silencing of the Iraqi Jewish Community."

⁵¹ Private and public discussions.

⁵² Standard English is Sabbath. Hebrew transliteration is Shabbat. But Iraqi pronunciation is Shabbath.

⁵³ See Romanow, "Mufleta, Zaban and Sushi."