

JEWISH AMERICAN FOODWAYS:  
THE DIETARY CONSTRUCTION  
OF IDENTITY

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my family. Thank you for understanding and appreciating my pursuit of knowledge, supporting my passion for education, and for always believing in me.

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## **ABSTRACT**

A review of the existing social science literature reveals that food plays a major role in the construction and performance of identity. An individual's food choices and behaviors can be influenced by social situations. Following a symbolic interactionist perspective, and using an interpretive interactionist method, I conducted qualitative interviews with Jews living in Texas who keep kosher. These interviews revealed subtle differences in participants' actions and statements to others about food based on the social situation they were in. In particular, meals with coworkers and meals at restaurants were more likely to occasion participants to take a different approach than they would in other social situations. I argue that despite not disclosing their Jewishness in certain situational contexts, the act of keeping kosher itself is still a deeply embedded practice for participants that serves to reinforce their sense of cultural and religious identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have long been aware that food plays a major role in the construction and performance of identity. A person's thoughts, attitudes, values, and choices about food are often shaped by their national, regional, cultural, and religious influences. Dietary practices can serve as a way to reinforce and embody one's conceptions of personal identity, yet they can also convey aspects of a person's identity to others in society. Food is a necessary part of everyday life, and eating is frequently undertaken as a shared, social act. Certain aspects of identity that relate to food consumption may become more visible in these situations. In any given social situation, people take into account the perceived attitudes and expectations of others, and that informs their choices about what to say and how to behave. Thus, people may choose to present or conceal their dietary practices depending upon the characteristics of the social situation.

The Pew Research Center estimates that Jews make up just over two percent of the United States adult population, which means that there are approximately 6,322,000 Jews in America (2013). While Jews are certainly a minority in the United States, they make up an even smaller portion of the population in the American South. Twenty-three percent of American Jews live in the South, with nearly twice that amount living the Northeast. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that Jews make up one-half of one percent of the population of Texas—about 126,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2012:62). From these statistics, one can infer that about two percent of American Jews live in Texas. Twenty-two percent of American Jews say that they keep kosher in their homes (Pew Research Center 2013). Thus, even among those who identify as Jewish,



keeping kosher is not a common practice in the United States.

Keeping kosher refers to the Jewish dietary practice of avoiding certain foods that are considered unfit for consumption. Jewish dietary law, sometimes referred to as *kashrut*, originated in the Torah (the first section of the Hebrew Bible) and was later expanded upon in rabbinical texts: the Mishnah and Talmud (Chabad, 2020). Foods that are edible under Jewish dietary law are referred to as kosher. Foods that are not kosher are often referred to as *treyfah*—a catch-all term for foods that do not meet the requirements of Jewish dietary law.

The Torah provides a basic explanation of which animals are considered clean (and thus acceptable to eat) and those that are considered unclean (Hutt 1994:4-6). Land animals who have split hooves and who chew cud are clean, but land animals who are lacking one of these two identifiers are not. Birds of prey and birds who are scavengers are unclean and not fit for consumption, but other birds are acceptable (e.g., chicken, turkeys, ducks, geese). Fish are acceptable only if they have both fins and scales; all other sea creatures are considered unclean. Consumption of reptiles, rodents, and insects is forbidden (with the exception of a certain type of locust). Consumption of any animal that is diseased or that has died without being slaughtered (due to injury, attack, or natural causes) is forbidden. Even animals that are considered clean still have to be slaughtered in a certain manner to be considered kosher. Their throats must be cut quickly and deeply in order to minimize suffering to the animal while also ensuring that all blood is drained from the meat. The consumption of blood (of mammals or birds) is strictly forbidden. Consumption of the fat that surrounds the intestines and vital organs of an animal is also forbidden.

Another component of Jewish dietary law is the restriction against mixing meat and dairy. There has been some debate regarding the source of this prohibition. Some argue that it comes from a scripture in the Torah: “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother’s milk” (Hutt 1994:7). Others have argued that this scripture does not explicitly state that meat and dairy products must be separated, and that the restriction against mixing meat and dairy came about as a rabbinical interpretation of this scripture. Rabbinical texts have also laid out extensive rules regarding utensils used in food preparation. Utensils used for meat and dairy must also be kept separate, and utensils that have been in contact with *treyfah* are considered to be contaminated by this contact. For Jews in Texas who keep kosher, their minority status may feel especially salient due to the fact that many popular Texas foods involve *treyfah*. This study aims to explore the everyday life experiences of Jews who keep kosher while living in Texas.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Eating as Identity

Food choices and eating behaviors often display certain elements of personal identity. Vester (2008) discusses the “centrality of food to the construction of identity” (1). She explains that our food preferences are strongly informed/influenced by our social and cultural background. As such, various factors may affect our food preferences, including: age, gender, class, culture, religion, the historical period into which we were born, the region/nation in which we were born, and the region/nation in which we currently reside. Williams-Forson (2014) argues that we associate food with identity on a psychological level, and the practice of eating may serve to solidify our self-identification. Parasecoli (2014) asserts that eating provides an embodied experience that can solidify one’s connection to cultural identity.

Parasecoli also explains that food cultures present rules and boundaries, and knowledge of those restrictions can be deemed a kind of “culinary competence” (2014:416). Rozin (2006) proposes that food taboos mark boundaries and create social norms. Yeh (2016) claims that each society constructs its own categories of edible and inedible objects. These categories exist as part of a larger “compartmentalization of reality” that is necessary “to stabilize our mental need for classification” (Yeh 2016:29). These systems of classification are formed on an intersubjective, communal level with others in society. Definitions of what falls within each category varies among different cultures and different societies, and the rules that determine this compartmentalization seem to be somewhat arbitrary. These rules are not consistent among all societies, and objects that are determined to be inedible in one society may be embraced as edible

within other societies. Socially determined systems of compartmentalization help us to maintain our cultural identity and project it- to those both within and outside of our group.

Rosenblum (2010) discusses the embodied nature of food. He explains that the food items we consume become a part of us. Thus, food choices serve as a major symbol of who we are. One displays group membership by eating foods that others within the group eat, and by eating those foods with other group members. Locher, Yoels, Maurer, and Van Ells (2005) argue that “the objects we consume serve as markers for personal and social identities [...] We rely upon objects, particularly food objects, to define who we are as both individuals and as groups” (275). Drawing upon the work of Mead, Blumer, Rozin, and Douglas, Locher et al. (2005) explain the complex relationship that we have with food and the significance of our actions toward specific food items. We attach different meanings to different food items as a result of social interactions that involve food. Typically, the strongest associations are formed as a result of social interactions with family members during childhood. Some emotional responses (e.g., disgust) are primarily learned through social/cultural interactions with certain foods. Consequently, the decisions that we make regarding food in our adult lives are informed by attitudes toward food that we developed during childhood. These attitudes are shaped by various social and cultural factors. As such, our choices about food may identify us to others as members of a certain ethnic, cultural, or religious group.

“Foodscapes [...] intermingle the body with society and culture, nature, and the world at large” (Williams-Forsion 2014:73). Yeh (2016) explains that eating is imbued with symbolism, as it involves the act of consumption- literally taking something from

the external environment into the self. As such, categories of edible and inedible objects carry heavy meaning for individuals, who often find it difficult to violate the boundaries into which they have been socialized. Furthermore, Mintz and DuBois (2002) explain that eating has the capacity to reinforce or deteriorate social relationships with others. Meals are collective experiences that serve to reinforce social relationships between those who share them (Parasecoli 2014). However, violating categorical food boundaries and consuming inedible objects may draw sharp negative reactions from others in society. Eating can “solidify group membership” or isolate an individual from those in the surrounding community (Mintz and DuBois 2002:109). Consuming the food of a marginal culture may mark one as an outsider (Parasecoli 2014). “Food habits are part of our cultural identity, and [...] are symbolic for what they convey about our racial and ethnic identities” (Williams-Forson 2014:71).

Parasecoli (2014) asserts that “food is as exclusive a human behavior as language” (416). Yet Mintz and DuBois (2002) remind us that “ethnicity, like nationhood, is [...] imagined- and associated cuisines may be imagined, too” (109). Raviv (2001) explains that food choices and eating behaviors may be an intentional display of nationalism (or regionalism). Foods items that are grown and/or produced within a certain geographic location may come to symbolize that area. Choosing to cook/consume those food items may be a conscious decision to reflect a connection to or relationship with that area. Furthermore, certain local foods may be promoted by local activists or governments as a way to display national/regional affiliation. By making food choices that embrace suggested items, one can display national/regional pride and loyalty.

## **Eating as Culture**

In the wake of globalization, Rozin (2006) argues that food has become increasingly more “intertwined with our personal, familial, and communal identity” (54). Processes of globalization mean that more people are moving outside of their home countries and cultures. Furthermore, trends toward urbanization mean that more people are living in cities, which tend to “alienate [their] inhabitants” (Parasecoli 2014:429). Food may be a source of comfort and familiarity used to combat this alienation. “Comfort food” seems to consist of those food items which are most familiar to us, that serve to remind us of cherished times spent with loved ones- “The comforting feelings of the relationship can be recreated by consuming the food” (Locher et al. 2005:290). For immigrants, the cultural food of home may certainly be identified as comfort food.

Parasecoli (2014) argues that communal practices of food production and consumption with others who share one’s cultural food habits can strengthen and reinforce one’s sense of ethnic identity. Rabikowska (2010) explains that food can “[create] a sense of inclusion and stability among migrants” (377). Daily rituals, including the consumption of food, can create a sense of connection to a culture that one feels distanced from. Food can help to assuage feelings of longing for a culture from which one is separated (Williams-Forson 2014). Psychological studies have shown that “eating enhances memory in humans” (Feeley-Harnik 1995:578). “Experiences of immigration often force participants to create [an identity] different from the one to which they are accustomed,” so cultural sustainability is a major concern among diasporic communities (Williams-Forson 2014:77). Food can serve as a method of preserving and practicing one’s culture on a daily basis. Rozin (2006) asserts that

immigrants are more likely to give up their language or their customs than their food.

### **Eating as a Jew**

Rosenblum (2010) explains that during the time of ancient Palestine, Greek and Roman texts commonly identify Jews by their abstention from eating pork. Romans conducted various animal sacrifices, many of which involved the pig, and they regularly consumed pork. While there were several groups in the area that abstained from eating pork, this dietary practice came to serve as a “key marker of a practice-based Jewish identity” (Rosenblum 2010:96). Jewish texts from ancient Palestine often use the pig as a symbol for Romans and their rule. The texts describe Roman attempts to force or persuade Jews to eat pork as symbolic of overall attempts to force or persuade Jews to become “acceptable Romans” (Rosenblum 2010:101). As such, “the ultimate moment of Jewish submission to external rule is the ingestion of pork” (Rosenblum 2010:102). While the laws of *kashrut* define many animals as being unclean, the pig, specifically, become symbolic of the struggle against Roman persecution and pressure to assimilate. This interaction between Romans and Jews in ancient times has greatly influenced future interactions between European cultures and Jewish culture. Many Europeans (and subsequently, many Americans) solely identify Jews by their abstention from pork. Additionally, many Jews still feel as though abstaining from pork, specifically, is the most visible way to project their identity as Jews.

Vered (2010) explains that the pig taboo is so strong in Jewish culture that multiple laws have been passed in Israel banning or restricting the sale of pork and the raising of pigs. Even secular Jews (i.e., those who consider themselves culturally Jewish but do not adhere to the Jewish religion) have been raised with the awareness that the pig

and any consumption of it holds a special taboo. It is not unusual for secular Jews to eat shellfish (thus violating the laws of *kashrut*), and yet still avoid eating pork. Many kosher dietary laws are transgressed frequently among secular and Reform Jews, but the pig taboo holds hard and fast. A taboo invokes disgust in any culture, and there is no greater taboo in Jewish culture than that against the pig. The cultural symbolism of the pig had grown over many centuries, and “many Israelis perceive the pig as a symbol of hatred of the Jews” (22).

Cicurel (2012) observed social interactions between Karaite Jews, who believe that religious law is strictly that which was written in the Hebrew Bible, and Rabbanite Jews, who also accept the legitimacy of rabbinical laws and teachings compiled in the Mishnah and Talmud. One of the main differences between these two groups is their interpretations of the laws of *kashrut*. Thus, in their shared society in Israel, food choices and eating behaviors will easily serve to identify one as either Karaite or Rabbanite and mark boundaries between the two groups. Yet sharing food displays social cohesion and becomes symbolic of sharing culture. Karaites often described the similarities between their culture and Rabbanite culture, and they sometimes tried to share their food with the Rabbanites, as a way to seek acceptance and validation of their Jewish identity. They perceived rejection of their food to be rejection of their culture.

Diemling and Ray (2014) also noted a hierarchy of sorts among those within the Jewish community, wherein those who kept stricter adherence to the laws of *kashrut* held themselves to be somewhat above others who were more lax in their dietary practices. Knowledge of *kashrut* itself seemed to be a form of establishing one’s “credentials of membership” within the Jewish community (129). Many different interpretations of



*kashrut* exist; some are institutional while others are merely personal. Reform Judaism places a high value on independent judgement, which allows its adherents to respect the decisions of their peers when it comes to dietary restrictions- even in times of disagreement. Thus, individual judgements and practices may vary among those within the community, but “aversion to trefah [unkosher foods] was often described as deeply embedded in practice” (131). Thus, while some respondents were less strict in their practices of *kashrut*, many had gut-reactions that were opposed to blatantly unkosher foods (e.g., pork).

### **Historical Events and Trends**

Vincze (2011) discusses the Jewish Renaissance in Hungary that began in the 1990’s. After World War II, many Jews who remained in Hungary voluntarily decided to assimilate in order to avoid stigma and persecution in society. Upon having children, many concealed their Jewish heritage, resulting in a second generation that had no connection to its cultural identity. When those in the following (third) generation discovered their Jewish roots, many wanted to learn about their culture and embrace their heritage. As a result, some began to immerse themselves in cultural practices. *Kashrut* is one of the traditional cultural practices that they may adopt in order to embrace and display Jewish identity. However, Vincze (2011) notes that the younger generation does not remain strictly traditional in its reconstruction of Jewish identity, partially because they have incomplete knowledge of traditions and may not have any living relatives who are knowledgeable about such traditions. She notes that another element of this reconstruction of Jewish identity is a rejection of the role of the “traumatized, persecuted, stigmatized [Jew]” (Vincze 2011:268). These Jews are not ashamed of their cultural

practices, nor do they hide them; they are proud of their emerging Jewish identity.

Similar trends could be observed in America. Heilman (1982) explains that in the 1940s and 1950s, many second-generation American Jews tried to reject and rise above their stigmatized minority role. The process involved acculturation and conscious attempts to become more thoroughly American. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, some third generation American Jews began to view their ethnic heritage differently. The war in Israel in 1967 inspired many American Jews to reconnect with their Jewish roots. Rather than accepting marginalization and pressure to assimilate, they started to develop a stronger sense of ethnic consciousness and pride.

Harris-Shapiro (2006) explains that being “a good Jew” thirty years ago involved passing down Judaism to one’s children in some form or fashion (e.g., keeping kosher, attending synagogue, celebrating cultural holidays, etc.), helping other Jews and fighting anti-Semitism, and supporting the state of Israel (67). Yet she argues that in postmodern society, “new configurations of Jewish identification” are emerging in the United States that may not be captured by “conventional measurements” (68). She asserts that “food is certainly a key component in both religious Judaism and ethnic Jewishness, and many scholars have noted that food carries a significant symbolic import in Jewish life” (69). Jews may use food to transgress traditional boundaries and indicate their evolving cultural identity. In modern society, people often hold multiple roles that they may not be able to fulfill simultaneously. Identity work and/or management is a major component of social interaction. “While our subjects’ simple recounting of food activities appears to affirm one type of authenticity, their ways of explaining their food behaviors proffer completely different claims as to why their food behaviors, and their identities as a

whole, are justifiable” (Harris-Shapiro 2006:72).

### **Eating as an American Jew**

Cohen Ferris (2004) has conducted specific research on the Jewish population within the American South. She was raised Jewish in the Arkansas Delta region, and she describes her experiences with food growing up as eating “*between* these two worlds in a complicated culinary negotiation of regional, ethnic, and religious identity” (Cohen Ferris 2004:53). The American South has certainly developed a distinctive regional flavor. Indeed, most Americans can mention at least one dish they would consider to be Southern. Cohen Ferris explains that many Southerners “use food to define the history of their region” (2004:55). As discussed, food and the complex set of rules surrounding its consumption are major elements within Jewish culture. For strictly observant Jews, “*Kashrut* is not simply a set of rules [...] *kashrut* is a way of life” (Cohen Ferris 2004:56). Proscribed foods are not ingested, and they are also routinely avoided. A strict Orthodox Jew would not eat in a kitchen, or use any utensils, that had been contaminated by exposure to unkosher foods. As such, it is possible that those who strictly observe the laws of *kashrut* may never eat outside of their own homes.

Clearly, food is an important aspect of both Southern culture and Jewish culture. Thus, Southern Jews looking to adopt elements of Southern culture might see food as a good place to start. As Cohen Ferris points out, certain Southern foods like “fried chicken, corn bread, and field peas,” are within kosher dietary guidelines and could easily be embraced (2002:32). However, many Southern foods contain ingredients that are unkosher (e.g., bacon, lard, catfish, shrimp). As such, Southern Jews may struggle to balance their desires to maintain their religious dietary practices and their desires to

embrace regional foods. They face pressures from other Jews to keep kosher, yet they also face pressures from other Southerners to be Southern. As a result, various individual negotiations manifest. For instance, Cohen Ferris describes Southern Jews who “enjoy a pork barbecue sandwich at restaurants but avoid serving or eating pork at home” (2004:56).

Her observations also mark an interesting division between public and private behaviors. In the privacy of their own homes, many Southern Jews would maintain stricter adherence to the laws of *kashrut* than they would while dining out. Sammells and Searles (2016) explain that restaurants are “semi-public [...] places that are not quite private but not quite public either” (129-130). As such, we might be inclined to make different food choices than we would in the absolute privacy of our own homes. This speaks to the element of performance that exists while eating in public. We perform our identity for others via our food choices. While discussing the food choices of her Jewish neighbors in the South, Cohen Ferris notes that “at times, the food choices emphasized Jew’s ‘southernness,’ and at other times, the selections emphasized their ‘otherness’” (2004:60). The selections they made would often be determined by where, and with whom, they were eating.

### **Eating in Social Situations**

Feeley-Harnik (1995) argues that those who experience social discrimination often “find ways of revaluing what others devalue” (578). Food may provide one avenue of doing so. “Food-related communities [...] all coalesce around the same desire to defend an often imagined past that is perceived as threatened with extinction, and to claim roots that are constantly antagonized or negated by the surrounding environment”

(Parasecoli 2014:431). Interactions with the dominant culture may lead to varying levels of assimilation or acculturation, and food may serve as one area of cultural preservation and defiance of dominant culture. Eating can become a source of stress for immigrants, as it forces individuals to face the overwhelming sense of “Otherness” that pervades their environment (Parasecoli 2014:418). For immigrants, eating the food of the host nation (and abandoning the traditional foods of home) may feel like cultural transgression, wherein one’s identity is threatened or polluted. “‘Home’ is less a place for them now and more a concept of normalcy which they cherish” (Rabikowska 2010:384). Yet social pressures may be difficult to withstand in public spaces. Thus, cultural rules about food may be strictly followed within the home but relaxed a bit when outside of its walls (Narayan 1995). Such techniques may allow one to escape being labeled as an outsider.

Yeh (2016) points out that as a result of globalization and the subsequent intermingling of cultures, people more frequently come into contact with others who do not share their social conceptions of edible and inedible foods. They also more frequently encounter food items that may or may not easily fall into the categories of edible and inedible food they are accustomed to. Questionable food objects, which are not easily compartmentalized, are typically judged to be unclean and inedible. Additionally, people often require a certain amount of space between edible and inedible foods in order to prevent contamination with unclean objects.

Diemling and Ray (2014) discuss the idea of “passing” as it pertains to *kashrut* (135). Jews who do not wish to be singled out for their dietary practices may opt to eat vegetarian meals, as such meals would not contain any *trefah* (unkosher items). This technique allows them to adhere to their dietary practices without suffering any potential

stigma they might anticipate from others in society. The issue of practicality comes into play here as well; Jews who find themselves without acceptable kosher options may pursue vegetarian options as an available substitute. Hecht and Faulkner (2000) discuss the “closeting of Jewish American identity” in certain social situations (372). Negative social stigma may be associated with Jewish identity, and this requires individuals to determine whether or not to disclose their identity in public or semi-public situations. People develop rules and systems that help them to decide when, where, and how to disclose (or conceal) their Jewish identity. Hecht and Faulkner (2000) found that the strength of one’s self-conceptualization as Jewish, the importance of Jewish identity to social relationships with others who are present, and the perception of potential consequences and their severity were all important factors that helped respondents to determine whether or not to disclose their Jewish identity.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

George Herbert Mead is generally cited as the founder of symbolic interactionism, although Herbert Blumer (who later expanded upon and interpreted Mead's work) actually named the theory. Mead (1925) asserts that "It is just because the individual finds himself taking the attitudes of the others who are involved in his conduct that he becomes an object for himself [...] the self can exist for the individual only if he assumes the role of others" (268). Thus, the self is a social object that can only be constructed via social processes and interactions. Mead defines self-consciousness as the ability to see oneself through the eyes of the "generalized other" (268). Children develop self-consciousness through play and games, wherein they learn to imitate various social roles (i.e., play) and present them according to structured rules and procedures (i.e., games). They learn that others' responses to them will be determined by the roles they assume. It is crucial to realize that socially shared definitions of roles and responses are developed contextually in response to the social environment. Consequently, the rules that structure social interaction and the development of self may vary across time and space.

Blumer asserts that these variances across time and space result in specific situations. "Objects are defined and given meaning within situations, and the situations have influence on what meanings are assigned" (Wiley 2014:303). Time is a crucial element here because situations change over time, and life itself involves the passage of time. Thus, throughout the course of a human life, we find ourselves in different situations. It is important to realize that situations are not strictly locally defined; situations may involve global aspects and elements that affect one's social reality. "The situation, from the standpoint of the actor, is always something which stands outside of

him- something that refers to things he has to take into account in order to carry out his line of action” (Morrione and Farberman 1981:114). Situations are thus objective, in that they exist outside of individuals and others may perceive (for the most part) the situation in which an individual acts. The individual’s perception of how others would act in the same situation has an effect on the line of action he/she chooses.

In other words, people check themselves against social norms and standards. They do not act (or react) solely on the basis of their own personal volition. Rather, consideration of the social is intrinsically involved in the development of personal choice. Individuals reflect upon and refer to the intersubjective social reality of the situation in the process of developing personal decisions. They consider all aspects of the situation, digest that information and assess how it affects their position within the situation, and *then* they act. This is the essence of symbolic interactionism for Blumer.

Blumer insists that symbolic interactionism is not limited to the study of micro-level social phenomena because the micro develops within the macro. Small pockets of existence (i.e., situations) are increasingly affected by ever-widening circles of influence, especially in the wake of globalization and modernization. Failure to act and make decisions according to intersubjective social standards will certainly lead to social tension within a situation. Yet in situations where one is exposed to radical others (or when one has been transplanted into a foreign situation), one may not be able to discern how social others would act, and consequently cannot take that into consideration when formulating a plan of action. Thus, one’s actions may seem inappropriate in ways that cause social conflict. In an increasingly global society, these situations and interactions are becoming more frequent, especially in countries with large immigrant populations (such as the



United States).

Many psychologists have argued that by separating the I and the me, Mead proposed a dualistic model that favored the social over the personal when it comes to the construction of self. Psychologists have struggled to deal with the apparent dichotomy between the social and the personal, and they have largely resisted the notion that the social takes precedence in the formation of self. However, modern-day identity theorists have interpreted Mead's construction of the self in two parts, the I (the acting self) and the me (the observing self), as proof of the deeply embedded nature of the personal and the social when it comes to self-concept (Dodds, Lawrence, and Valsiner 1997). The personal and the social may be two distinct elements within the self but separating the two proves to be impossible. Who can say that their actions are not influenced by their perceptions of social reality? The social and the personal are inextricably connected within the self.

Goffman (1959) developed the theory of dramaturgy, which asserts that all human beings tailor their actions and statements to the social situation at hand in order to achieve their own objectives. Social actors put up a "front," wherein they present themselves in a manner that they believe is appropriate for the situation and will also be most conducive to their meeting their goals (22). While this may sound manipulative and calculating, it is not necessarily malicious, merely practical. Thus, Goffman's theory presents an explanation of how decisions are made within, and influenced by, situations. An individual's personal objectives within a situation are tempered by their knowledge of social reality (i.e., norms and standards), and the end result is a presentation of self that the social actor believes others will respond favorably to.

Zurcher (1973) defines self-concept as “the complex set of attitudes, feelings, perceptions, and evaluations, learned through socialization processes and in interpersonal and institutional settings, that the individual has of himself as a social object” (369-370). If both the self-concept and the social world remain relatively stable, then the person remains comfortable and content. However, destabilization of the social world, made tangible through disruptions in social networks and relationships, can prove to be highly damaging to self-concept. In 1954, Kuhn and McPartland developed the Twenty Statements Test (TST) to measure self-concept. The TST assesses statements about the self and groups them into different categories, including physical attributes, status/role attributes, interactive attributes, and abstract attributes. Zurcher (1973) asserts that interactive attributes, or those which describe “characteristic ways of acting, feeling, or responding in social interaction,” are the most adaptable form of self-concept (371).

When social reality is disrupted, status/role attributes become destabilized and are no longer as helpful in the construction of self-concept and identity. Zurcher (1973) argues that our interactive selves, who we are in social interaction and situations, will come to define how we see ourselves and who we are (i.e., self-concept). He refers to this as “the mutable self,” explaining that it is based “upon the individual’s phenomenological experiences” (372). People may increasingly use this version of self-concept to define themselves and their identity in a globalized, postmodern society, wherein dominant institutions are crumbling and attempts to define oneself via these institutions may no longer be practical or useful. Postmodern society requires us to be more adaptable, and the mutable self allows us to do so in a way that still provides a solid sense of identity and self-concept. Kotarba (2014) argues that the postmodern period of culture within

which we now live creates much more complex social scenarios than discussed by Zurcher. Instead of generating and sustaining a series of selves to be used accordingly in different situations, the individual is encouraged to mold an existential self—a self that can absorb and thrive on contradictions as well as similarities. In this study, I will explore how Jews in Texas creatively avoid the either/or position in diet. This study will investigate the following questions:

- What is the relationship between Jewish identity/self-concept and dietary practices?
- How does one's dietary practices, as a Jew, contribute to one's sense of self?
- How do Jews negotiate everyday dietary experiences with other Jews, family, and non-Jews?
- How do Jews present appropriate identities during dietary activities while maintaining an authentic self-definition of Jew?

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

Jerolmack and Khan (2018) explain that “the situation—how it is defined, understood, and experienced—determines the possibilities for action. Thus, situationists aim to understand how actors define the kind of situation they are in and specify how social action is a response to the [characteristics] of the situation” (xxv). Social scientists cannot gain insight into an actor’s perceptions and motivations through observation; they must engage in communication with the actor to discern these details. Denzin (2001) asserts that by gathering information about personal experiences via storytelling, and then interpreting those stories from a sociological perspective, researchers can “make the problematic lived experiences of ordinary people available to the reader” (xi). He refers to this process as interpretive interactionism. Storytelling provides an intimate, inside perspective of the situation that is often rich with descriptive details. These details reveal information about the person’s thoughts, feelings, motivations, and perceptions within the situation. Observing a person’s demeanor as they tell these stories can also provide information about how the experience affected them. Thus, I chose to rely primarily on individual interviews to obtain qualitative data about participant’s experiences with keeping kosher in various situations.

Participants may be somewhat hesitant to share these types of stories with a perfect stranger. Snowball sampling refers to the practice of recruiting a few research participants and then asking them to recruit others who may meet the participant criteria. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) assert that snowball sampling is appropriate for “research with groups whose members are difficult to locate or unlikely to be willing to take part without referral from others in their own network” (2011:17). I used snowball sampling

to try and reduce any feelings of anxiety that potential participants may experience about the interview process. I started by reaching out to contacts that I already had within the local Jewish community (in the San Marcos and New Braunfels area). My first three interviews were with people that I already knew to some extent. I then asked participants to recruit other people they knew within the community. After discussing these topics with me in-depth, participants came away feeling like it was a positive experience. Consequently, they felt comfortable encouraging others they knew to participate.

My criteria for participation were simple. Participants must identify as Jewish, keep kosher, and live in Texas. Some participants conceptualized their Jewish identity as being more cultural, while others saw it as being more religious. However, all participants indicated that their Jewish identity spanned both of these aspects. I did not strictly define what it meant to keep kosher. There are varying interpretations of what it means to keep kosher, especially at the individual level. If participants asserted that they kept kosher, according to whatever definitions they set for themselves, then they were welcome to participate in the study. It is worth noting that all participants within this study indicated that they kept kosher according to biblical standards, meaning they interpret *kashrut* as being what was written in the Hebrew Bible. While many participants described precautions and preferences that are commonly associated with rabbinical standards of keeping kosher, none of them expressed strict adherence to rabbinical law.

While individual interviews (fifteen in total) were the primary method of data collection, I did have the opportunity to conduct three small focus groups. Focus groups formed naturally and somewhat spontaneously. Previous participants would take me to meet a new respondent, and they would wait nearby while I conducted the individual

interview. Afterwards, participants often wanted to discuss the research topic with each other, which provided the perfect opportunity for me to ask if we could engage in a quick focus group session. Every respondent is unique, as are their reactions to and interpretations of interview questions. Sometimes, stories shared by one participant would spark a memory for another participant. The conversational interaction among participants in the focus groups created a new social dynamic that allowed for new insights.

Individual interviews ranged from twenty to sixty minutes, while focus groups typically lasted twenty to thirty minutes. Participants were initially provided with a consent form detailing the purpose of the study and the procedures for data collection. The consent form was thoroughly reviewed with participants, and they were asked to verbally consent or decline to participate. Consenting participants had the option to decline to answer any question at any point in the interview. Audio recording was used during interviews and focus groups, and the recording device was securely kept in a locked storage box. Data from the interviews and focus groups was first transcribed, then coded by theme in order to assess variances within different types of situations.

McDermott (2018) asserts that “social processes and interactions [...] are often give a temporality and boundedness by virtue of their location within a particular situation. Hence, the way that the situation is understood can form the basis of the analyses of data that follow and can frame the theory that emerges from a series of observations” (185).

Fifteen people participated in the study: eight women and seven men. Participants ranged in age from twenty-two to seventy-three. Eleven participants were married, three were single/dating, and one was divorced. Participants worked in education, construction,

home repair/maintenance, landscape design, technology, media, food, and retail. Three participants were retired. Participants lived in the following cities: San Marcos, New Braunfels, San Antonio, Dallas, and El Paso. Nine participants identified as Conservative, five participants identified as Reform, and one participant identified as Orthodox. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. This study was reviewed and approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at Texas State University.

## V. FINDINGS

### **Work Lunch**

Work lunches can be an interesting situation when it comes to keeping kosher. Some people develop close relationships with their coworkers, while others may never interact with their coworkers outside of a work lunch. Depending upon one's comfort level with one's coworkers, one may or may not choose to disclose one's preference to keep kosher. Another factor that may influence the decision of whether or not to disclose is the position one has in relation to one's coworkers. A person may have a very different conversation with a manager or supervisor than they would have with someone who shares their relative rank within the company hierarchy.

Rebekah is twenty-two years old. She works in the childcare center at a local gym, and she is not very close with her coworkers. They do not engage with each other socially at work, and they never spend any time together outside of work. Since her coworkers do not know much about her or her life, they are not aware that she is Jewish. She says she does not feel comfortable enough with them to discuss her cultural/religious heritage or the reasons behind her dietary preferences. When she eats lunch with them, "They don't know that I'm Jewish, so they don't know that I keep kosher, so I think they just think I'm being picky or something." For example, one time her boss brought pizza for a staff meeting, but all of the pizza had pepperoni on it. When she did not eat, her coworkers thought it was strange. However, she did not feel comfortable explaining her dietary preferences to all of her them. She did tell her boss about her dietary preferences after that work meal, and since then, she says that her boss is, "very accommodating, which is great, because then I just feel like a person." The next time they had pizza at



work, her boss made sure to order a cheese pizza so that she would have a kosher option. This allowed her to eat with her coworkers, which did not draw the same attention as abstaining from food.

Benjamin, a seventy-year-old college professor, says that he does not mention keeping kosher at his job. When he eats with his coworkers, he just finds a food option that will work from what is available. If it is a situation where food has been brought into his place of work, he tells me that he often selects the vegan or vegetarian option- “because there’s always something for the vegetarians.” If he and his coworkers are out at a restaurant, then he just picks something that seems safe. “If I’m on the fence, and it’s something where I might normally ask the waiter or waitress what’s in it, I just don’t order that when I’m with my coworkers. I don’t get into it.” Gabriel, a sixty-one-year-old radio show host, says that his coworkers are all Christian and as a result, “It isn’t usually a point of discussion.” Much like Benjamin, Gabriel chooses not to bring up his dietary preferences or discuss them with his coworkers.

Isaac, a twenty-two-year-old apprenticing electrician, has disclosed his dietary preferences to his coworkers. He did so the first time they ate lunch together, when they ordered barbeque ribs and sausages (neither of which are kosher) for the group to share. He says that ever since that day, they regularly give him a hard time about his decision to keep kosher if he does not order what they eat. “They don’t really care about it because food is food to them. They don’t know where it came from or what’s inside it. So, if I don’t get what they get, then they like, you know, cuss me out and stuff or make fun of me.” He says that he has gotten used to it, but his body language says otherwise. While discussing his coworkers’ treatment of him in these situations, he stares down at the table

and does not make eye contact with me. As an apprentice, he looks up to his coworkers and hopes to learn from them. Being ridiculed and mocked by them makes him worry that they may not take him seriously as an apprentice.

Ruth, a sixty-one-year-old food service supervisor, has disclosed her dietary preferences to her coworkers. However, she says that only one of them remembers and is considerate of her dietary preferences. “He’ll tell me: ‘Oh, you don’t want to eat the alfredo today, they put bacon in it.’ But he’s the only one. Out of a hundred and thirty people. The rest of them couldn’t care less.” She does not assert that they should care. She is more bothered by the fact that after several years of working together, they do not even remember what she does not eat. It is interesting to note that the one coworker who remembers her dietary preferences is a chef, which puts him in a position of authority over her. None of the employees who work under her remember or comment on her dietary preferences. She says it would bother her more, but working in food service, there are usually plenty of options for lunch. Since she supervises everything being made, she usually knows what is safe to eat.

Rachel, a thirty-two-year-old graduate student, works part-time at a tutoring center. She says that her coworkers are very understanding and accommodating of her dietary preferences. She explains, “In a university setting, which is perceived as being so liberal, you would expect people to accommodate and embrace diversity. I’ve been to other schools where that wasn’t always the case, but it’s a good group of people here. They accommodate the vegetarians/vegans, so sometimes that might be the kosher option. But I don’t mind that, I like vegetables. As long as there is something I can eat, I’m happy.”

Deborah, a fifty-nine-year-old construction manager, says that everyone she works with makes an effort to make sure that there is an option for her. “They’re all very thoughtful and considerate about it, which is nice.” Seeing as Deborah is in a position of authority at her job, her coworkers may be more likely to remember and respect her dietary preferences. Daniel, a twenty-four-year-old who works in tech support, says that he does not often share meals with his coworkers since he works remotely from his home. However, they do have conferences that he attends from time to time, and the conferences typically involve a meal. He has disclosed his dietary preferences to his coworkers as a result of attending such conferences, and they are all accepting and supportive. He says that they make sure to include a kosher option for him at these events, even though it may not be strictly labeled as such (e.g., a vegetarian option).

### **Meal at a Restaurant**

Eating a meal at a restaurant can be rather difficult for those who keep kosher. Those who are extremely strict in their adherence to the laws of *kashrut* may not even eat outside of their own homes due to the fact that many restaurants use the same pots, pans, and utensils to cook and prepare both kosher and non-kosher food items. For those who do eat at restaurants, keeping kosher may affect their decisions about which restaurants to go to or which menu items to order. Even when being thoroughly cautious while ordering, there is still a chance that one may be served food that contains some ingredient that is not kosher. At that point, one has to decide how to handle that situation. The type of restaurant it is, the occasion for the meal (if any), the other people one is sharing a meal with, and the attitude of the waitstaff- all of these factors affect the situation. These elements of the situation influence a person’s decision to disclose whether or not they

keep kosher, as well as whether or not to send back food that is not kosher.

Deborah says, “I feel very comfortable when I’m eating out. I may not be eating what I want, but there’s usually something.” She explains that she is very careful to read descriptions of menu items. “Then when I order, I always make sure to ask for things to be served without the *treyfah*. Like if I order a cobb salad, I’ll be sure to tell them with no bacon.” Of course, no matter how carefully she orders, her food does not always come out the way she asked for it. She asserts that she will ask for her food to be remade if it comes out wrong. “Sometimes people don’t understand, and they just try to pick it out. But that’s unacceptable. I will stand firm and insist that they remake it.”

Rebekah explains, “If you do special order, you often have to send it back. Sometimes the waitstaff gets irritated and expects you to just pick it off.” She mentions baked potato soup as an example, explaining that waitstaff have expected her to just scoop out the bacon bits they placed on top of the soup. However, once it is there in the soup, she no longer feels that the soup is kosher. “If you explain that it’s religious, they will do it, but they look at you like it’s weird. But I’m kind of just bold about it. And I think that’s because I’m just really comfortable with it.” She also tells me that she avoids certain restaurants due to prevalence of *treyfah*. “A lot of chain restaurants have premade stuff that you can’t special order, so you just have to ignore those items and pick something else. Sometimes, it’s easier to just not go to those places.”

Daniel explains that he will not eat at certain restaurants if they serve a lot of *treyfah*, but his reasons are different than Rebekah’s. He feels that if the restaurant serves that much *treyfah*, it is likely to come into contact with (and thereby contaminate) everything in the kitchen. He tells me about a time when he went out to dinner with some

people he had met at an event for young Jewish professionals. “When we got to the restaurant, I realized that they clearly did not keep kosher. Some kind of pork was involved in almost every item on the menu. I tried to just order a drink, but they wouldn’t have that.” His peers presumed that if he ordered something on the menu that did not contain *treyfah*, it would be suitable for him to eat. They did not seem to understand his concerns for contamination in the kitchen. After a lot of peer pressure, he eventually ordered an appetizer that did not contain any *treyfah*. However, he did not eat a single bite. “I just cut it up and moved it around the plate so they would feel better.”

Rachel also avoids certain restaurants that primarily serve *treyfah*. “Places like Red Lobster or something. A friend of mine said that they have a chicken dish on the menu, and I thought- yeah, so? Everything in the kitchen is probably covered in shellfish. How could it not be? So, everyone in the kitchen is touching that, and then touching the chicken, and then bringing it to me. No, thank you.” Leah, a sixty-nine-year-old retired housewife, says that most of the restaurants near her home in El Paso serve a lot of pork and other *treyfah*. “There’s octopus and squid in everything, and all the pork: pork rinds, pigs’ feet, stomach. Every Sunday morning, every restaurant in town has menudo. Pork is on every single thing. So, we don’t eat out much.”

Levi is a seventy-three-year old navy veteran and retired firefighter. He really enjoys eating hamburgers, but he says, “A lot of local restaurants do not serve a burger that does not come with bacon on it.” He also laments that baked potatoes tend to come with bacon bits. He tells me, “If I paid for it, I’m going to eat it, but not with bacon on it. So, I’ll make them take it back. Just tell them what you want, and you aren’t going to have a problem.”

When I ask Ruth if she has problems eating out at restaurants, she says, “Yeah, always. Just the other day, we asked for no bacon to be put on our food, and the response was ‘America’s all about the bacon.’ I just looked at the waiter in shock like- I don’t need *your* option about what *I’m* eating.” She told him her reasons for not eating bacon afterwards, but she says that it did not seem to clear up his confusion. Even knowing that it was for religious reasons, he still did not understand why. “It’s just not accepted very easily, wherever you go.” I ask her how she handles situations like that, and what she says about ordering things without bacon. Ruth tells me, “I’ve actually switched from saying I don’t eat pork to I *can’t* eat pork because that’s a little stronger, and I want them to pay more attention. Sometimes people ask why, and I just say for religious reasons. But most people don’t really care why.”

Ruth says she knows that if she said it was an allergy, people would pay more attention. Still, she never says that she is allergic. Working in the food service industry has made her more sensitive to the level of accommodation that would require in the kitchen. While she does not want to be served *treyfah*, she always does not want them to have to “go through all of that.” On the other hand, Isaac says that he often tells the waitstaff at restaurants that he is allergic to food that is not kosher (pork, shellfish, etc.). “It can be really hard to find a restaurant that will give you kosher food. It makes them take it seriously. Then, they can’t just brush it off.” He also appreciates that this technique allows him to avoid having a conversation about keeping kosher.

Hannah, a twenty-three-year-old teacher, also tells waitstaff that she is allergic. “It’s the only way they’ll really do it. Otherwise, you can say it, but they just blow it off or forget about it. Or expect you to just pick it off or something when they bring it out

covered in *treyfah*.” Sarah, a thirty-eight-year-old landscape designer and architect, tells me that a food allergy test revealed she is allergic to shellfish. “It’s crazy because, you know, I never would have known. But now I have no problem telling them I’m allergic, because I am. And I’d never heard of someone being allergic to pork, but then my friend Shannon told me that she’s allergic to pork. So that’s a thing. So, I just say that now, because I know they’ll take it seriously.”

Michael enjoys having conversations with waitstaff about what it means to keep kosher. “They typically have no idea what I’m talking about. So, it’s a good way to start a conversation about what kosher means and why some foods aren’t kosher. Sometimes, that can open up to a conversation about Judaism more generally. I get some interesting questions, and I have some really interesting conversations.” He hopes that by having these conversations, he is increasing visibility and awareness of the local Jewish community. “Most people in Texas assume there are no Jewish people living here. They think we all live in New York or something. Newsflash: we’re here!”

Gabriel tells me that he regularly has conversations with waitstaff about kosher symbols. “For instance, on the ketchup bottles or something like that.” He says that it gives him something to point out that they may be familiar with. If they are not familiar with symbols, at least the object is something common so that they have a frame of reference for what he is talking about when discussing what is and is not kosher. One of the laws of *kashrut* states that blood of land animals should never be consumed. Gabriel recalls the first time he ever saw meat that was served rare as a child. “We were at a buffet and they were serving prime rib. And I grabbed my mom’s hand and I said, ‘Mom, look! There’s blood in that!’ She shushed me, so that I wouldn’t offend anyone. But I was

appalled.” He says he always orders steak fileted and well-done. Sometimes, the waitstaff recommends that a certain cut of meat be served more rare. For Gabriel, this is just another opportunity to discuss the laws of *kashrut*.

When I ask Miriam, a seventy-year-old retired housewife, about eating in restaurants, she sighs. “That is a difficulty. I have to ask about everything. But if someone brings me something and it has pork in it, I do not send it back. I simply do not eat it...because to them, they do not understand. Also, they aren’t interested in that, they’re working.” She does not want to bother them, despite the inconvenience to herself. Benjamin says he tends to just order something that would not come with *treyfah* on it anyway, so it does not become an issue. He does not bring it up to waitstaff or discuss it.

### **Meal with Friends**

A meal shared with friends seems like a relatively safe situation in which to disclose one’s dietary preferences. After all, if one considers a person to be a friend, then one has likely already disclosed one’s cultural heritage. At that point, disclosing a dietary preference that is linked to one’s cultural heritage probably would not come as a shock to anyone. Oftentimes, friends are curious and inquisitive, asking questions in order to better understand practices they are not familiar with. While friends are generally accepting and accommodating, they may occasionally make jokes or comments that feel judgmental or corrective in nature. Typically, these comments are not meant to be hurtful, and participants tend to give the benefit of the doubt to their friends.

Rebekah says that all of her close, trusted friends understand and accept her dietary choices. “Some of my friends have other dietary preferences or restrictions- like gluten-free or vegetarian or stuff like that. So, they totally understand.” However, she



also explains that if her friends do not understand or accept her dietary restrictions, then she may not choose to maintain those friendships. For instance, she and a Christian friend had a falling out as a result of a conversation about keeping kosher. “She told me, ‘That stuff has been done away with.’ And it just became this big conversation. Eventually she came around to trying to tell me that Jewish people aren’t even like, an ethnicity, and I was completely turned off by that. So that relationship was actually severed because of that meal.”

Miriam talks about her experiences with one friend in particular, who is Catholic. “If she brings me food with pork in it, I just say I’m full. If I pushed it with her, she’d probably push back- because she likes to ridicule everything, in a good spirit. She’ll tell me, ‘Just because Jesus was born in Jerusalem doesn’t mean he’s Jewish.’ That’s just how she is. But if someone else, like a waitress or something, hurt my feelings, she would defend my right to not eat bacon.”

Rachel tells me that many of her friends ask her questions about keeping kosher. “A lot of my friends have told me, not long after we meet, that I’m the only Jewish person they’ve ever known. So, I think the curiosity is natural, and I don’t mind explaining. I think it’s cool that they want to know more about why I don’t eat certain things so they can understand.” When she eats a meal at a friend’s house, she says that all of her friends make sure that her food is kosher, even if they might be eating something else that is not. “They understand that kosher and unkosher foods have to be strictly separated, can’t be cooked together, can’t be touching on a plate, can’t use the same utensils to serve both, things like that. If they hadn’t been curious and they’d never asked, they would never know those things. And then, I probably wouldn’t be eating at their

house,” she laughs.

Deborah says that if her friends have invited her over, they will usually make something kosher. If they are making something that is not kosher, then they will make a separate dish for her. When she goes out to eat with friends, she explains “Say I order a club sandwich or something. Normally, I would ask for no bacon. But if I’m out with friends, then I’ll ask the waiter to put the bacon on the side, and then I’ll give it to them.” If her friends invite her to a meal at a restaurant that she has never been to before, she says, “I’ll eat a snack beforehand, just in case.” However, she says that she can usually find a “work-around.”

Ruth has many friends from her synagogue, but she says that all of her other friends are not Jewish and do not keep kosher. She tells me that when she and her husband recently went out to dinner with another couple, their friends ordered a shrimp plate. “I thought- ew, how gross. But you know, most people really are not considerate of the dietary law. I think they’d be more considerate if it was an allergy, because if it’s just a personal choice, well then it’s ‘Oh that’s for you, that’s not for me. More bacon for me.’ And whatever- they can have it!”

Most of Gabriel’s friends do not keep kosher, but that does not bother him. He tells me, “They’re paying for it, they can eat what they want. But I don’t trade bites off of other people’s plates.” He is concerned that even if the bite they offered him was of food that should be kosher, they still used the same utensils to handle foods that were not kosher. As a result, he would consider those utensils to be contaminated, which would make the otherwise kosher food on the utensil also contaminated. He explains that if a friend offers him food or makes a meal for him, and some items in the meal are not

kosher, he will not bring it up or tell them that the food is not kosher. He explains, “I’ll say something like, ‘Can I just have some of that salad?’ or whatever else I can eat.” One time, a neighbor brought him a ham. “I didn’t make an issue of it. I just gave it away to someone else.”

Isaac says, “Sometimes people order for you, and ninety percent of the time, it’s not kosher. So, I just say I’m not very hungry, then take it home and throw it away later, just to be nice.” He says that with his close friends, he does not have to resort to such measures. “It’s nice because they know, and they care.” Benjamin says that his friends are “understanding, at the very least.” They accommodate his preferences, but they are not really curious about it. He tells me, “They don’t initiate conversation about it, they just know, so it doesn’t really come up.”

### **Family Dinner**

Food is a big part of Jewish culture and sharing food with family can be very affirming for Jewish identity. That being said, in modern times, Jewish families are more likely to be blended. People may choose to marry someone outside of the culture, and if they do, then their children may or may not end up identifying as Jewish. Within blended families, it is highly likely that at least some family members will not keep kosher. All of the participants in this study disclosed that they have at least one family member who does not keep kosher. Like friends, family members may also tease each other or make comments that feel judgmental. Participants generally let these comments slide without any discussion, even if their feelings are hurt.

Rebekah grew up in a household where everyone kept kosher. She says that eating with her family is easy and comfortable. She did not realize until adulthood that it was

rare to come from a household where everyone kept kosher. She has a much greater appreciation for that now than she did as a child. Her husband, Isaac, is also Jewish, as are his parents and his five brothers. He and his brothers all kept kosher growing up, but he is the only child who continues to keep kosher in his adult life.

Two of Isaac's brothers are married, and their wives are not Jewish. Rebekah says that her sisters-in-law understand and respect Jewish culture, but they do not choose to convert or keep kosher. As a result, Rebekah explains that eating with her husband's family can be somewhat awkward. "It's hard because it makes it weirdly competitive for them. They say things like, 'Well you do that because you keep the Bible better than me,' or 'You're the Jewish wife, so you're our mother-in-law's favorite.' But I'm just doing what I have done my whole life- keeping kosher. It's not about making them look bad, but for some reason, they seem to take it that way." She says that it comes across as teasing, and she does not think that they mean any real harm by it. That said, it does hurt her feelings a bit. She tells me that she tries to hide that from them because she does not think they mean to be hurtful. "I don't want to make a big deal out of it."

Similarly, Isaac explains that his brothers often taunt or tease him for keeping kosher, calling him "the good son." Isaac is extremely close with his brothers. He loves them very much, and he knows that they love him too. Even still, he says the teasing gets to him sometimes. "It feels like a weird kind of peer pressure. Like they want me to abandon it the way that they have, and if I did, they would like or accept me more." People often take social cues from their peers within situations, and the way that the women tease Rebekah mirrors the way that the brothers tease Isaac. Both of them are somewhat hurt by this teasing, yet neither one of them says anything about it.

Gabriel's daughter, who is a senior in college, does not keep kosher. He says, "She knows the right from wrong, but she doesn't choose to be inhibited by it." It seems like he wishes she did keep kosher, but he does not want that enough to let it be a point of contention in their relationship. Benjamin and Deborah have three children. Some of their children (who are all adults now) keep kosher, but not all of them. They do not seem to be terribly bothered by this development. Benjamin says that all of his children still respect that he and his wife keep kosher. Deborah explains that her children who do not keep kosher are careful not to serve them anything that is not kosher. Furthermore, they will not bring food that is not kosher into her house, out of respect for her dietary practices.

Miriam tells me that her children have all married Christians, so they eventually stopped keeping kosher. As a result, her grandchildren have never kept kosher. She explains, "I get a little bit of haranguing and it's just how families are, you know? My children will say, 'Well I don't have anything *YOU* can eat.' You know? Stuff like that. But it doesn't really bother me." Miriam's husband Levi says, "When we go to my daughter's house, she'll tell me 'Now Dad, this has pork in it, but this doesn't.' But there's always something for me, that I can eat. She makes sure of that."

Ruth converted to Judaism twenty-two years ago when she married her husband, who is Jewish. Shortly after that, she began keeping kosher. However, her family of origin is not Jewish and does not keep kosher. Meals with her parents, or her sister and brother-in-law, can be somewhat awkward because they perpetually "forget" that there are things Ruth no longer eats. "When I remind my mother that I don't eat bacon or something, she always says 'Oh, I forget.' After 25 years, you still can't remember. My

folks...they don't care. Because they think you really don't have to do that, you know, Jesus did away with all that. So, they would never make accommodations.”

Sarah's husband, Sean, is not Jewish. She explains, “He was raised Christian, but they never went to church, so he's not really religious.” She and Sean had been friends for quite some time before they dated, so he already knew that she kept kosher. When she met his parents, she did not know what they would think about her keeping kosher. “They are more chicken and beef people, so luckily, they didn't feel too strongly about it. But I will tell you that Sean still feels strongly about bacon. He has a different pan, just for that, because I don't want it on my other pans. I don't mind it in the fridge, because it's sealed in a package, so it's not touching my food. But I don't touch it. I don't cook it. I don't use that pan for anything else.”

### **Meal with Other Jews**

At synagogue, after the shabbat service has concluded each week, it is common to hold an *oneg*: an informal gathering where people can relax and visit with each other while enjoying food and drink. Additionally, several Jewish holidays involve eating a meal with others. For instance, it is customary to fast for twenty-four hours leading up to Passover. As the sun goes down and Passover begins, a seder is held which involves the retelling of the Passover story followed by a meal to break the fast. On Yom Kippur, it is traditional to fast for twenty-five hours as one engages in intense self-reflection and atonement for the wrongdoings of the past year. Then, at the end of the day, the fast is broken by sharing a meal with family, friends, and loved ones.

When discussing participants' experiences eating with other Jewish people in these settings, a few common themes emerged. First, participants enjoy being able to eat

easily without having to worry about whether or not things are kosher or ask about the ingredients in any given dish. Levi explains, “You don’t have to worry about the food that you’re going to eat, especially if it’s like...a bring your own, potluck thing. If it’s all people that are keeping kosher, it’s just a whole lot easier.” Gabriel tells me, “With Orthodox people, you know they keep kosher, so you don’t have to worry about it. With other Jews, I’ll ask, but if they say they do keep kosher, then I know it’s fine.” Miriam explains, “When I’m eating at synagogue, or a meal for a high holy day, everything there is kosher. Nobody makes a big deal out of it, so it just seems normal.” Several participants commented on the normalcy of keeping kosher in these situations, and how that contrasts with other situations in their daily lives where keeping kosher is regarded as a sort of oddity.

In these settings with other Jewish people, everyone present knows about of the laws of *kashrut*. Even Jewish people who do not choose to keep kosher themselves have a basic awareness of the general principles. Rebekah says, “Eating a meal with other Jewish people is very easy because they know why, they understand.” Isaac remarks, “It’s a lot of fun because we can eat together, and everyone understands.” Benjamin says, “They understand, so it’s easy. There is no discussion of it.” The shared understanding of the laws of *kashrut* also serves to eliminate a common feature of participants daily lives—the need to explain or justify one’s choices about food. Ruth mentions, “It’s great because you don’t have to explain why you don’t eat the bacon. They already know.” Deborah says, “They get it. So, there’s no questions, which is nice.” Participants revel in these rare opportunities to be so easily seen, understood, and accepted without comment or discussion.

## VI. DISCUSSION

The depth of feelings that participants shared made it clear that keeping kosher is a deeply personal practice that is inherently linked to an individual's identity and sense of cultural self. The practice can serve to solidify the bonds between people within a situation and give them a sense of common ground. Yet it can also serve to mark the differences between social actors, which may lead to a sense of social tension. Within any given situation, the individual has to decide how to respond to other actors and how to manage their own social image. Certain decisions may be made to downplay the cultural importance of one's decisions, especially if another reason for those decisions may be perceived as being more socially acceptable within the situation (or even just less socially controversial).

Some participants did not disclose their dietary practices to their coworkers. Rebekah told her boss, but not her other coworkers. She wanted her boss to be aware since her boss is the one who orders food for work events. She often works alone in the childcare center, and as such, she has not developed close relationships with her coworkers. Benjamin does not discuss keeping kosher with his coworkers. Neither does Gabriel. The men did not give a reason for not disclosing with their coworkers. They have both been at their jobs for quite some time, and they seem to have developed good relationships with their coworkers. They gave off the impression that they felt their coworkers would not care to know or discuss it, since they do not keep kosher themselves.

Respondents who shared their dietary preferences with their coworkers received a mixture of responses. The majority of Ruth's coworkers do not seem to remember or care



about her dietary preferences with the exception of one chef. While a chef has a passion for food and an appreciation for what goes into a dish, hourly employees making minimum wage tend to be less invested in the end product. Their lack of commitment to or interest in the job itself may explain why they disregard personal details about their supervisor. She says they are all fairly pleasant in their interactions with her, so she does not believe that their forgetfulness is malicious or ill-intentioned.

Isaac receives particularly strong negative reactions from his coworkers.

Apprenticing to learn the trade of an electrician, Isaac is working in a blue-collar industry where masculinity is prized. His coworkers project the idea that his dietary preferences somehow serve to make him less masculine. By avoiding certain foods that they enjoy, he has unintentionally set himself apart from them in a way that irks them enough to ridicule him for it. Deborah works in construction, which is also a blue-collar industry. However, rather than just starting out as an apprentice, she works as a manager. Consequently, her employees must treat her with a certain amount of respect and deference. Her status and authority at her place of employment likely affects the way that her coworkers respond to her dietary preferences.

Working in a university setting, Rachel is not surprised that her coworkers are accepting and understanding of her dietary practices. She conceptualizes universities as liberal places where diversity is (or should be) celebrated. Her perception of the university environment is what made her feel comfortable disclosing her dietary practices and cultural/religious identity. She shared that she has held other jobs in the past where she did not disclose this personal information. While Daniel does not physically see or interact with his coworkers often, they are accepting and accommodating of his dietary

preferences. He discusses that people who work in technology are often teased by others in society, who may refer to them as “computer nerds” or “techies.” Feeling like outsiders in mainstream society may foster a sense of solidarity or camaraderie amongst each other, which may contribute to their easy acceptance of his dietary practices.

Meals that take place in a restaurant are unique because they occupy a “semi-public” space (Sammells and Searles 2016:129). Furthermore, unless one frequently visits the same restaurant, waitstaff are likely to be total strangers. Disclosing a minority identity in a somewhat public space to a relative stranger can be intimidating. Waitstaff may push back with their own food preferences, as Ruth experienced. Additionally, they may not be familiar with the term kosher or what it means. For Gabriel and Michael, meals in restaurants serve as situations in which they can inform others and increase understanding of Jewish dietary practices and even Judaism in general. However, a few participants indicated that they tell waitstaff they are allergic to certain foods, rather than disclosing their preference to keep kosher. There are two main reasons why they employed this strategy. Isaac, Sarah, and Hannah all mentioned that by referring to it as an allergy rather than a preference, waitstaff were more likely to take their concerns seriously and their food was more likely to come out without *treyfah*. Isaac also appreciated that it allowed him to avoid having a conversation about keeping kosher. His unpleasant experiences with his coworkers likely contribute to his discomfort in discussing his dietary practices with others in society.

Some participants displayed different behaviors in different situations. For instance, Rebekah does not disclose her dietary preferences to her coworkers. However, she readily discloses to waitstaff in restaurants, and even describes herself as being

“bold” in doing so. Similarly, even though Gabriel does not discuss keeping kosher with his coworkers, he seems to enjoy discussing this topic at restaurants. The fact that these people are relative strangers and that restaurants are somewhat public spaces does not deter him whatsoever.

The difference in situations can explain the difference in course of action. Situations with coworkers are likely to recur. Thus, disclosure of aspects of identity involves an element of permanence. Exchanges of personal information in the current situation will inevitably affect future situations, and it may change the social relationship one has with coworkers. In contrast, a situation in a restaurant with strangers is not likely to recur. The ephemeral nature of these situations makes disclosure of personal information relatively low risk.

All of the participants in this study disclosed their dietary preferences to their friends. Friends generally responded warmly, occasionally with curiosity, and almost always with respect. As Rebekah explained, friends who do not respond respectfully may no longer be considered friends. While most friends of participants did not keep kosher themselves, they often tried to accommodate participants’ dietary practices when preparing food for them. Occasionally, friends ordered or offered food that is not kosher to participants. When this occurred, participants typically kept quiet and let the misstep pass by without comment. They know that their friends mean well, and they did not want to upset them.

Blended families can produce interesting situations. Family members who do not keep kosher often teased participants for their dietary practices, but never with malicious intent. Most participants were not bothered by this teasing. Miriam laughed while telling

me about how her children would tease her, and it was easy to see that she was more amused than anything. Sometimes though, teasing can go too far and hurt people's feelings. Rebekah and Isaac felt that the teasing from Isaac's brothers and sisters-in-law set them apart at a family meal, even to the point of being uncomfortable at times. Still, they never said anything about it or asked for the teasing to stop. They did not think it was spiteful, and they did not want to cause their family members any distress by bringing it up.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Social actors base their decisions and actions on the social facts they know about situations. In dramaturgical terms, they present a “front” that they believe will best serve their purposes within the situation (Goffman 1959). Participants in this study were most divided about whether or not to disclose their Jewish identity when it came to situations involving coworkers or restaurants. Both of these situations typically involve social others that one either does not know at all or does not know very well. This element of the unknown makes it more difficult to navigate these situations because actors struggle to anticipate the other’s response.

In situations in restaurants, some participants chose to present themselves as being allergic to *treyfah*. This technique serves two purposes. First, it ensures the result that participants desired, namely that their food would be prepared properly without any addition of *treyfah*. Additionally, it allows participants to circumvent any presentation of Jewish identity. In situations with unknown others, wherein attitudes towards Jews may be unknown, this technique may be preferable. Some participants chose not to use this technique, yet still concealed their Jewish identity in these interactions. These participants expressed a belief that restaurant employees simply would not care to hear about or discuss their Jewish identity for various reasons.

In situations with coworkers, some participants decided to choose a vegetarian or similar option that would be kosher by default (without being specified as such). This technique allowed them to partake in food at work functions without disclosing their Jewish identity. One participant chose to disclose her dietary preferences, and the reasons for them, to her boss but not to her coworkers. This decision was pragmatic, because the

boss ordered the food for the work events, but also discreet in that it allowed her to keep her Jewish identity concealed from the majority of her coworkers. Other participants simply chose not to disclose their Jewish identity at work without providing an explanation or reason why. There are three main social factors to consider in these situations.

First, the social norms of the American workplace do not encourage the disclosure or discussion of personal topics—especially those pertaining to ethnicity. Phillips, Dumas, and Rothbard (2018) assert that “minorities hesitate to share information about themselves at work,” and that ethnicity can be a source of “discomfort with ‘opening up’ at work.” Some Jews may not want to disclose their Jewish identity at work functions. However, seeing as the average American spends about eight hours a day in the workplace, it is only natural that sharing a meal with coworkers is sometimes a part of one’s workday. The fact that cultural and religious aspects of identity may affect the dietary choices of Jews creates a unique point of exposure that other minority identities may not experience. One must decide whether to ask about ingredients in a dish, or to request something specific, knowing that doing so may invite someone else’s curiosity about the one’s reason, which would ultimately lead to disclosure.

Another factor to consider is the recent spike in antisemitic incidents over the past five years in the United States. According to the Anti-Defamation League’s annual Audit, 942 antisemitic events were reported in 2015 (Anti-Defamation League, 2017). In 2019, the number of incidents more than doubled with 2,107 being reported (Anti-Defamation League, 2020). The Pew Research Center found that Americans are aware of this increase in discrimination against Jews (2019). “64% of Americans say Jews face at least some

discrimination – a 20-percentage-point increase from 2016; the share saying Jews face “a lot” of discrimination has nearly doubled, from 13% to 24%” (Pew Research Center 2019). If Americans in general know this, one can be certain that American Jews know this. No one wants to assume that anyone they encounter might be antisemitic, but the incidents occurring across the country do not exist in a vacuum. It may not be something that people think about often or consciously, but the awareness is still there.

Finally, many participants expressed that they felt social others in these situations did not know and/or did not care about their dietary preferences or the reasons for them. Since research has shown that Americans do not know much about Judaism, participants are probably not wrong to assume that most people would not know what keeping kosher means or entails (Pew Research Center 2019). If a person does not seem to care about one’s dietary preferences, it may be indicative of two vastly different attitudes. It could be due to callous disregard for another’s cultural values and practices. However, it could also mean that the other person is not judging or criticizing those cultural values and practices. Hopefully, the latter is more often the case.

There are some limitations that affected the current study. First, the sample size was rather small. I recommend that future studies increase the sample size in order to obtain a more representative data set. Furthermore, snowball sampling may produce a somewhat limited sample that is not always representative of the larger population (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I recommend that future studies try to employ random sampling, which is more likely to produce a representative sample. It would be ideal to have a list of Jewish people living in Texas in order to obtain a random sample. However, the only way to obtain such lists would be to contact local synagogues, who are not likely

to provide this information to unknown researchers. Consequently, researchers should be prepared to make presentations at local synagogues in order to recruit participants. The sample for this study included nine participants aged fifty-five or older, four participants in their twenties, and two participants in their thirties. Future studies should aim for a more even age distribution within the sample. Another issue to consider is that the majority of participants in this study identified as either Reform or Conservative. Only one respondent identified as being Orthodox. While American Jews in general are more likely to identify as Reform (thirty-five percent) or Conservative (eighteen percent), ten percent of American Jews identify as Orthodox (Pew Research Center 2013). I recommend that future studies try to engage with the Orthodox population to a greater extent. Since Orthodox Jews are more likely to maintain strict observance of the laws of *kashrut*, they may not eat outside of their own homes. Consequently, the experiences of Orthodox Jews who keep kosher in Texas are probably quite different than the experiences of Conservative or Reform Jews who keep kosher in Texas.

In summary, here is a list of the various ways that participants—who are all self-defined, knowledgeable, and practicing Jews—project their identities while eating with others:

- Explicitly displaying their Jewish identities verbally;
- Explicitly displaying their Jewish identities by ordering, cooking, serving, and/or eating kosher food;
- Implicitly displaying their Jewish identities by allowing their previous Jewish identities to define their dietary activities in the present situation;



- Concealing their Jewish identities by ordering or eating kosher food without offering explanation; or
- Concealing their Jewish identities by ordering or eating kosher food but offering other explanations for their choices (e.g., vegetarianism, food allergies).

As Goffman would also argue, the choice of the above strategies is primarily determined by the situation at hand and the actor's desire to present a self in a particular way. While Jews in Texas may not decide to disclose their Jewish identity in all situations, keeping kosher is still a deeply embedded practice that serves to reinforce their sense of cultural and religious identity. Keeping kosher provides an individual with a set of requirements for consumption that are ever-present reminders of one's Jewish identity. These requirements are conceptualized and processed on a mental level, resonate on an emotional level, and are embodied at the physical level. Thus, making daily choices to consume foods that meet these requirements serves to reinforce an individual's personal sense of Jewish identity on all of these levels. Keeping kosher in certain social situations (ex. those with other Jews) can also serve to reinforce one's social sense of Jewish identity, as well as others' perceptions of it. By disclosing one's Jewish identity in relation to keeping kosher, one is providing context and meaning to one's choices. By framing one's choices and actions in this manner, the individual performs his/her Jewish identity to social others in the situation.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### Demographics

Age? Gender? Race? Ethnicity? Branch of Judaism? Income? Profession/occupation?  
Marital status? Children?

#### Background – Judaism and Identity

1. How would you describe your religious affiliation?
2. Do members of your family share your religious affiliation? Were you raised within the religion? If not, what made you decide to convert?
3. How does your religious affiliation affect your personal identity and daily life?
4. How do your Jewish dietary values and practices influence your sense of identity?

#### Dietary Values and Practices – Keeping Kosher, Holiday Foods,

1. What does keeping kosher mean to you? What foods are avoided and why?
2. Do you personally keep kosher? If so, at what age did you start keeping kosher? What are some of your first memories regarding the practice? What made you decide to do it? Was it a major adjustment from your previous dietary practices? How did you go about the process of transitioning? What does it feel like to violate kosher laws (unintentionally)? How do you deal with that situation?
3. Do you observe Jewish holidays? Are there certain foods you eat on certain holidays? Is there any symbolic meaning behind eating these foods on these days? Can you explain what that means to you, and to your sense of identity?

#### Availability of Kosher Items/Options and Social Situations/Interactions

1. How easy is it for you to find kosher foods in your local grocery store? Do you find that you need to seek out specialty stores? Do such stores exist within your area?
2. How easy is it for you to find specialty food items for various holidays (e.g., matzo, challah, etc.)?
3. How do grocery store employees react to inquiries about kosher and/or holiday food items? Are they knowledgeable? If not, are they helpful (e.g., willing to ask other employees/supervisors)? Do you experience negative reactions?
4. Do you dine out at restaurants? If so, do your dietary values and practices pose an issue? Do you experience difficulties finding acceptable food options? What about the food items or food preparation would be an issue? (Probe if necessary: contamination of food preparation surfaces or utensils, a lack of separation of kosher and non-kosher foods, not washing hands between handling of kosher and unkosher foods, etc.)
5. If you have to order a menu item without some standard ingredient in order to suit your dietary values and practices (e.g., bacon), do you typically receive your food the

- way you ordered it? If not, how do you handle the situation? Do you point out the error? Do you explain the reasons for your request? How do restaurant employees respond to the situation? Are they accommodating? Do you experience negative reactions? What would be the ideal response?
6. What is it like to eat with other Jewish people? What is it like to eat with non-Jewish people? How is it different? How does identity play a role in these situations? Does role/identity management come into play?
  7. In what social situations is keeping kosher acceptable? Necessary?  
Easy/comfortable? In what social situations is keeping kosher problematic?  
Socially awkward? Uncomfortable?
    - a) How do you deal with these situations? Do you have strategies or techniques to help navigate these social situations? What responses or explanations do you give? How do you make those decisions? What factors come into play?

### **Personal, Professional, and Other Social Interactions**

1. How do the people that you maintain close personal relationships with respond to your dietary values and practices? Are they supportive? Are they curious? Do they understand your reasons?
2. What kind of responses do you get from coworkers or peers? Are they supportive? Curious? Understanding?
3. What kind of responses do you get from other people in society? Is there anyone I should have asked about, but did not?

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