Fit For Food:
“Eating Jewishly” and the “Islamic Paradigm” as Emergent Religious Foodways in Toronto

by

Aldea Mulhern

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This project is about Jews and Muslims who participate in the food movement in Toronto, about how and why they do, and about what challenges and opportunities this presents to contemporary understandings of kashrut and halal as religious dietary laws. In early twenty-first century Canada, food is a site where consumer ethics and religious diversity intersect. The two groups I focus on are Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs, a charitable organization running Jewish environmental practices at multiple satellite sites, and Noor Islamic Cultural Centre, a mosque where community members gather regularly for religious ritual and political and cultural events. Both are intentionally non-sectarian religious communities that invite pan-Jewish or pan-Muslim participation, have norms viewed as progressive by the wider religious community, and run considerable food-related programming that actively connects religion with alternative foodways. Both advocate for more “conscious” food practices, including local, organic, sustainable, humane, and social-justice-oriented food choices. They develop religious foodways that are, on the one hand, fundamentally connected to traditional religious food law, and on the other hand, significant departures from typical understandings of kashrut and halal. The
foodways that emerge in this milieu are “eating Jewishly,” in relation to kashrut, and an “Islamic paradigm” for eating, in relation to halal.

The aim of this comparative project is to show how religious communities do the work of constructing religion through material practices at once economic and symbolic. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork conducted with Noor and Shoresh from 2012 to 2015, I show how both organizations develop their religious foodways: as ethical interventions, as means of invigorating community, and as means for resisting industrialized orthodoxies. People at Noor and Shoresh bring religious life to bear on public lives, tying together social justice, environmentalism, and eating in a practice for recalibrating market values. Constructing religion as a domain of practical ethics, participants at Noor and Shoresh draw on religion for resources to develop emergent religious foodways that cut across and re-inscribe boundaries between insider and outsider, moral value and market value, and even Muslim and Jew.
Dedication

This work is for the people I met through Noor and Shoresh. Many people shared with me their time, their space, their thoughts, and their food; in so doing turned questions in my head into relationships in the world,

For Risa, Sabrina, and Andrea, and for Khadijah, Azeezah, and Samira, without whom this particular story would not exist, and for those who do not appear by name in these pages because I have not found the way to tell that story yet,

And for my mother Phyllis and sister Zenia, for the years of love shared, miles of road travelled, and commitment to discovering, in each of us, our best selves.
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‡ October 11, 1982 - January 24, 2012.
Most of all, I thank my dissertation committee. Pamela Klassen’s anthropological sensibility has been a trustworthy guide as I sought my own ethnographic voice. Thank you for guiding me back to my data again and again, and for helping me see the value of a short sentence. Amira Mittermaier shared with me her critical questions and her extraordinary perceptive skill. Her discursive grace quickly untangled some of my more cramped thoughts and intractable clauses. Thank you for your insight, your incisiveness, and your encouragement. Anna Shternshis always knows what needs fixing so that stories will be heard, and has taught me to keep my intellectual centre. Thank you for your expertise, your practicality, and your vision. Andrea Most supported me with intellectual honesty in many ways: as teacher, advisor, co-author, interlocutor, and food-sharer. Thank you for your example, your commitment, and your authenticity, from the classroom to the farm and at the many tables in between. Examiners Vanessa Ochs and Simon Coleman generously gave their time and critical attention to my project, and to the next stages of its life. Thank you both, so much, for your engagement and insight.

From first to last, this dissertation was conceived, researched, and written in Toronto. I would like to acknowledge the sacred land on which the University of Toronto and the Council of Ontario Universities operates.
Land Acknowledgement

This land has been a site of human activity for 15,000 years. This land is the territory of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and Confederacy of the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. Today, the meeting place of Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to work in the community, on this territory.

Many nations were invited in friendship to share the territory and protect the land: Mississauga (Anishinaabeg), Haudenosaunee, Huron-Wendat, and other nations, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As settlers and newcomers to this land we have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship and respect. The “Dish,” sometimes called the “Bowl,” represents what is now southern Ontario, from the Great Lake to Quebec and from Lake Simcoe into the U.S. We all eat out of the Dish—all of us unique peoples—but it only has one spoon. That means we must share, and that we have responsibilities to make sure the dish is never empty: to take care of the land and the creatures we share it with. Importantly, there are no knives at the table: we must keep the peace.

As many of us are settlers on this land, it is our collective responsibility to pay respect and recognize that this land is the traditional territory of the Mississauga of the New Credit First Nations and we are here because this land was occupied. In recognizing that this space occupies colonized First Nations territories, and out of respect for the rights of Indigenous people, it is our collective responsibility to recognize our colonial histories and their present-day implications, and to honour, protect and sustain this land. As settlers and newcomers, we are bound by the treaty of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum in friendship and solidarity.

–adapted from an Acknowledgement by the Elders Circle (Council of Aboriginal Initiatives) November 6, 2014, from the Bunz Network of Toronto, and from CUPE3903 at York University. Like the dissertation it marks, it is also a trace of my own searching and learning in this place. Aldea Mulhern, spring 2017.
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On Transliteration, Translation, and Terms

I do not use Hebrew or Arabic script in this work. All fieldwork and interviews included in this project took place in English, although my interlocutors and I often used common words, phrases, and liturgical excerpts in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic. These are transliterated according to the following conventions: I italicize the first instance of Hebrew, Yiddish, or Arabic terms, and I include translations or explanations as necessary.¹ I omit diacritics, with one exception: I include ’ for both glottal stops and vowel elongation, as in modifying an Arabic alif maddah, ayn, or hamza, and in place of Hebrew patach diacritical on an ayin, (thus Qur’an, not Quran, Reh’ma not Rehma, and tza’ar ba’alei chayim, not tzaar baalei chayim). I do not italicize text collections (thus Torah, Oral Torah, Tanakh, Hebrew Bible, Qur’an; Mishnah, Sunnah, Sahih Sitta or Kutub al-Sitta) but I do italicize individual units in collections (thus Leviticus/Vayikra, Surat al-ma’idah; Hullin, Sunnah Qawliyyah, Sahih al-Bukhari). I capitalize religious texts in the noun form, but not in the adjectival form (thus Torah, Qur’an; biblical, qur’anic). When the words I transliterate have multiple common variants (Shabbat, Shabbos, or sabbath; kashrut, kashruth, or kashrus; heksher or hekhsher, Qur’an or Koran; zabiha or dhabh) I use simplified Romanizations as they appeared in my fieldwork and literature (e.g. Reh’ma, not Rah’ma, treyfa not t’reifah, mashbooh not masbuh), explaining these where relevant. Across the

different transliteration conventions, scholars familiar with the relevant languages will easily recognize the words to which I refer.

Participants in my research have varying degrees of familiarity with Arabic, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Whether or not they know the languages, people in both communities sometimes use words in other languages when they speak and write, often in performative or ritualized ways. Because of my focus on lived religion, I preserve this complexity as I encountered it. For example, a Jewish interlocutor, shaped by both Ashkenazi- and Israeli-inflected uses of Hebrew and Yiddish that bespeak migration patterns, socioeconomic class flows, and travel and internet influences, used colloquial Ashkenazi Yiddish and called the Jewish sabbath “Shabbos.” Meanwhile, the day of rest was spelled and pronounced in Modern Hebrew as “Shabbat” by organizers of the event we were attending. Similarly, using the Roman alphabet to render halal ritual slaughter either as “zabiha” or “dhabh” gives clues about the identity of a speaker, relative to the company that packaged the meat they bought. I have tried to balance intelligibility, on the one hand, with the multi-voicedness of my data, on the other.

Three calendrical systems appear in this work. I use the Gregorian civil calendar and Common Era dating system common in my research milieu, in which the solar year begins in January and ends in December, and a day begins at 12:01am and ends at midnight. People with whom I worked also made use of the Hebrew or Islamic calendars, because Muslim and Jewish ritual years do not correspond to the Gregorian civil calendar.

The Hebrew calendar is lunisolar, with lunar months and solar years. With adjustments, it corresponds to an agricultural cycle. It dates from the traditional date of the creation of the world given by Maimonides as roughly 3761 BCE, and takes the abbreviation AM, *anno mundi*. The
year begins in September, on the High Holiday *Rosh HaShanna*, literally the “head of the year.” Each day begins at nightfall, and ends at the following nightfall.

The Islamic calendar is lunar, and is therefore subject to seasonal drift; the lunar months shift earlier every solar year, making it difficult to link to an agricultural cycle. The Islamic calendar dates from 622 CE, the traditional date of the *hijra*, Muhammad’s journey from Mecca to Medina, and takes the abbreviation AH, *anno hegridae*. The year begins on the first day of the first lunar month, *Muharram*, which fell in the autumn during the years of my fieldwork, 2012-2015 CE or 1434-1437 AH. In the years of my fieldwork, the fast-month of Ramadan moved from the end of summer toward the beginning of summer, with increased hours of daylight making the daily fasting more arduous; when Ramadan falls in the winter, the daylight hours are fewer and the fast is shorter and easier. As with the Hebrew calendar, each day in the Islamic calendar begins at nightfall, and ends at the following nightfall.
Introduction

I had my first glimpse of Noor and Shoresh in 2009, though I didn’t realize it at the time. It was at a conference called “Ontario’s Test Kitchens: Cooking up a sustainable food system for the 21st century.” The conference was hosted by the University of Toronto’s School of Public Policy and Governance, and sponsored by the Religion in the Public Sphere initiative at the University of Toronto, the national grocery chain Loblaws, and Intergovernmental Process IAAKSTD (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development), among other organizations. Panelists included academics, directors and executives from a number of community food initiatives, as well as food writers, and farm and farm-group representatives. The conference aimed to bring together academics, businesspeople, policy makers, and community members, in order to discuss a variety of locally-developed grassroots initiatives that offered new models of food production and consumption. An excerpt from the conference announcement reads:

We have heard much about environmental degradation, health crises, and inhumane animal-raising practices. The silver lining to this cloud of crisis-reporting has been a groundswell of local, independent initiatives which have begun to address these problems in a multitude of creative ways. Ontario’s Test Kitchens will highlight some of the most impressive innovations in the way food is grown, distributed, processed, cooked, eaten, and disposed of in Ontario by bringing together practitioners, scholars, and policy-makers in a dynamic conversation about how to turn

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this productive energy into a more sustainable, just and humane food system for our community.\(^3\)

As an idea-circulating event, the conference functioned as a chance to build relationships among community stakeholders, and gave participants an opportunity to hear about varied local efforts to construct food-related initiatives that could be cultivated alongside, or integrated into, Ontario’s food system. The $60 pre-order for the conference dinner suggested that it was a networking event for professionals, but in principle the conference was open to all.

The last session of the conference, titled “Do Mennonite Sheep Go To Church? Emerging conversations on food and religion in Ontario,” exemplified the conference’s connection of food justice and religion. Speakers included farmer Val Steinmann and scholars Timothy Gianotti and Andrea Most. Gianotti was at the time the York-Noor Fellow in Islamic Studies at York University, and had previously held the York-Noor Chair, both endowed by Noor Cultural Centre’s founding family. Andrea Most is a faculty member in English and Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto, whose work has increasingly turned from Jews in the theatre to the Jewish food movement and Jewish environmentalism. She is a member of the Shoresh Board of Directors, and a local advocate in the Jewish farming movement in which Shoresh would become a major player.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Email communication containing conference announcement, 2009.

\(^4\) Throughout, I treat publicized speakers at public events as public personae. Similarly, I treat the directors of both Shoresh and Noor as public, and identify them by their names. In interviews and fieldwork, I asked research participants whether they preferred to be identified by their usual names, to be identified with a pseudonym, or to participate anonymously. In cases of pseudonyms, participants sometimes selected their own; when I was invited to select names, I aimed for names in keeping with the ethnocultural identity implied by the real name. Like many people including myself, many of my interlocutors have names that do not “match” the ethnocultural identity of the person named: rather, names form part of the larger performativity of identity (see chapter 3). It is this performative
Gianotti, in an impassioned moment in his talk, asked whether a chicken, whose breast had been artificially enlarged to such a degree that it could not mate and reproduce by natural means, and who lived in a cage packed with her fellows, their beaks and claws severed so that they could not kill one another in their need for space, could ever be considered halal food. In so doing, he raised questions about the moral content of religious purity, about the implications of the factory farm system, and about the limits and obligations of humane and human participation in the food economy.

Andrea Most spoke from her experience setting up the first local Jewish CSA, or community supported agriculture initiative, in the community.\textsuperscript{5} Identifying the CSA as Jewish, Most situated this food practice in the context of the Jewish ecological movement, which, she argued, connects Jewish law with Jewish ethics. She also problematized industrial agriculture, and argued for a return to local and sustainable eating. In the question period, an audience member, who identified himself as an economist and a “confirmed atheist,” spoke about the “deep spirituality” of food, and assented to what he perceived in the panel as a “unity” of a way of “thinking and rethinking” a “language of value” that could work against the “cheap food system” from a perspective that “respect[s] and value[s] nature.”
Although two more years would pass before the relationships I began that day would become a formal research program with Noor and Shoresh, the events of my fieldwork display the same linking of religious belonging and ethical subjectivity. My interlocutors use the word ethics to indicate an orientation toward the good; I take ethics to be something like a practice made up of acts relative to values, where the latter are ideas about meaning. Noor and Shoresh run considerable food-related programming that actively connects religion with alternative foodways. They hold food conferences, dinners, lectures, and farm retreats, and they engage in social and environmental justice work. Noor birthed Rehma Community Services, which runs a culinary certification course training newcomer women in commercial food preparation and delivering the food they produce to vulnerable local seniors via their Halal Meals on Wheels program. Shoresh now runs the largest Jewish farm in North America, practicing sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry while advocating for water protection against exploitation by major corporation Nestlé. Noor and Shoresh both advocate for more “conscious” food practices, including local, organic, sustainable, humane, and justice-oriented food choices. Their food activities are most often ethical interventions, as means of invigorating community, and as means for resisting industrialized orthodoxies.

Irrespective of whether halal and kashrut, or Muslim and Jewish food practices more generally, actually originate as ethical interventions, people at Noor and Shoresh often think of the history of their religious traditions in these terms. They draw on their religious traditions as powerful resources for ethical intervention in the contemporary food system. People at Noor and

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6 Ethics and religion is the topic of chapter four; “values” is at issue in chapter five.
Shoresh bring religious life to bear on their public lives, tying together social justice, environmentalism, and eating in a set of practices for recalibrating market values.

The initial *Ontario's Test Kitchens* forum partook in public concern over problems affecting humans, nonhuman animals, and the environment that amount to a “crisis” in the food system, and displayed the role of religious communities in “local, independent initiatives” and “impressive innovations” that “address these problems.” Local religious communities, including the two I present here, have experienced this crisis as compelling, and as an occasion to manifest a religious response. But response is not only reactive. The “crisis” is also (re)framed in discourse. What does it mean to interpret the food system as in crisis? Put differently, have religious adherents, and even non-religious subjects, had a “crisis of faith” in the food system?

As critiques of the harms of the conventional food system have become popular, people from diverse backgrounds have manifested horror and surprise at its harms, and have responded with what some have called “fetishization” of the food systems of the past. Why and how, though, does *religion* become a relevant category in this response?

People at Noor and Shoresh develop these religious responses in significant part as “ethical,” over against an implicitly unethical food system. They use both the term Jewish/Muslim and the broader term, religion, to invoke pasts and localized cultures, futures that are sustainable and wholesome, and an authentic core understood as an obvious source for good. At the same time, current religious dimensions of the conventional food system, i.e. industrio-

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religioulsly-regulated halal- and kosher-marked products, are sometimes positioned as aspirationallv valid, but less authentic. The ethical harms associated with industrial religious certification, e.g. animal suffering during slaughter, are positioned as evidence of this lessened authenticity. Most of my participants frame industrial kashrut, and to a lesser extent industrial halal, as having, as one person put it, “stray[ed]” from the “original intention” of religious food laws.8

Though many participants at Noor and Shoresh problematize injustice in industrial food, on the one hand, and defend their own local, organic, or vegetarian food ethics against charges of elitism on the other, my argument is not about either capitalist iniquities or alternative inequities. Instead, I am interested in the operations of embodied judgment inside fields of social forces. My attention to the religious food movement is not to validate its contributions or to vilify its contradictions. The goal of this research program, following my first encounter with the two (in some ways parallel, in some ways not) organizations I speak about, was to see what role food plays in their communities of participation. This is a step toward a more complex understanding of how religion mediates food choices, and how food, in turn, mediates religion.

My analysis also contributes, by means of comparison, to our understanding of the shape and impacts of religious food discourse in a pluralist context. In brief, the particular form of comparison I have undertaken is an act of juxtaposing examples that are related in space and time, and which I researched simultaneously. Noor and Shoresh are aware of each other and

8 From interview with Mike Schecter, quoted in chapter four.
occasionally intersect, as they did at the events where I first encountered them. As will be seen, Muslims and Jews are often already well aware of each other as religious groups who have regulations about food, and about meat in particular. Jewishness and Muslimness in North America are already inflected by a sense of difference from majority consumers of conventional food, and by a sense of similarity with fellow consumers of religiously-marked food. This is so even when particular Jews or Muslims are not very familiar with the other’s food laws, or their own, and irrespective of whether they put such food regulations into practice. To a greater extent at Noor, but interestingly also at Shoresh, Jewishness and Muslimness are negotiated with reference to one another. This fact is part of a larger North American migration history that has had material impacts on kosher, halal, and conventional food systems, which I elaborate in the literature review below.

**Methods and Theories**

After encountering Noor and Shoresh members at religion-and-food-focused events in 2009, 2010, and 2011, I began formal fieldwork with both groups in the autumn of 2012. I continued to think with the groups and track their programming into the spring of 2015, and I maintain relationships with both organizations at the time of this writing. Members of Shoresh at the time I was there mainly hail from Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, parts of the Eastern U.S., or Israel. They generally have Ashkenazi backgrounds, though a few come from places like Morocco. Members of Noor Cultural Centre are quite diverse, and more of them have emigrated to Canada within their own lifetimes, and often after 1980. They come via the United Kingdom and Ireland, from the U.S., and from countries that were British colonies in South and East Africa, the Indian Subcontinent, the Americas and Caribbean Islands, and the Middle East, including Iran, Turkey, and Syria.
Part of the reason that I spoke with more first-generation Canadians at Noor than at Shoresh is geopolitical history. Immigration flows brought much of the Canadian Jewish community to Toronto and Montreal following the two World Wars, and brought Muslim communities thereafter. Another part of the reason is that Noor is a mosque and cultural centre, whereas Shoresh is an environmental not-for-profit: therefore a considerable amount of my time at Noor was spent at religious services, community dinners, and public lectures, where I encountered families, or parents with grown children, or even grandchildren, who were elsewhere. At Shoresh I encountered these people as well, but fewer of them: there I encountered more unmarried 20- and 30-somethings who would spend a two-day retreat digging and planting on the farm, and middle-aged or younger parents who brought their school-aged children to garden and make crafts and listen to stories about celebrating holidays.

The core field research on which this dissertation is based was conducted over slightly more than one year, from autumn 2012 into winter 2013. This research consisted of a combination of field techniques, mainly participant-observation, supplemented by semi-structured, open-ended interviewing. The formal interviews I conducted were loosely structured around a set of questions that began with life history and religious practice in the childhood family, and then moved into participants’ more recent personal food history, and to views and experiences surrounding halal or kosher food. I used the same set of questions for all interviews with both groups, while emphasizing that the question list was only a guide. Depending on the interview I interchanged certain key words, e.g. “Do you identify as Muslim/Jewish?; do you keep kosher/ eat halal?; Do you think Muslims/ Jews in general care about food, or is this a Noor/ Shoresh thing?; What, if anything, does Islam/Judaism have to say about food?” Other questions remained roughly the same, e.g. “What do you think of the dietary laws?; Do you
avoid certain foods or types of foods? How? Why?; Do you prefer certain foods or types of foods?; What foods, if any, are more religious to you?”

During these individual open-ended interviews, my conversation partners reflected on the relationship between food and religion in their own lives, including religious festivities, memories from family life, and purchasing food. I conducted these individual interviews with twenty-eight participants from Noor and Shoresh, including program directors, regular participants, and occasional participants at each organization. Each interview lasted between one-and-a-half and five hours, and the longer ones often included preparing and sharing food.

Participant observation, ranging from prayers, rituals, and text studies to planting gardens, and from home visits to out-of-town retreats, gave me access to the primacy of activity rather than that of narrative. It also helped me come to see the differences and similarities in my sites, over the rising and falling action of a little more than one ritual year. For example, I participated in weekly jumah prayers at the mosque and in the food-sharing that, except during the fast-month of Ramadan, always occurred after prayers. Shoresh is not a synagogue or independent minyan and therefore does not hold weekly religious services, but I participated in text study and prayer at various Shoresh events, retreats, and workshops, and joined Shoresh members for sabbath meals and other observances. Similarly, I attended and worked as a volunteer at Shoresh’s Food Conferences and at their garden and farm. Noor does not run a yearly conference or have a garden or farm, but it does run a number of lecture series about food. I also attended dinners and other food events at Noor, and volunteered in food preparation at both Noor and at Reh’ma, a charitable organization which is connected with Noor and which
runs cooking classes for immigrant women and has a “Halal Meals on Wheels” program for local seniors.

I was in the first place guided by the programming of both organizations, and my desire to take advantage of every invitation and opportunity for participation that came my way. In the second place, I kept records of my participation to help texture my awareness of how I spent my time in the field. Sometimes, religious observances for Noor and Shoresh would overlap: for example, during Ramadan, on a Friday I would eat before sunrise, fast for Ramadan and attend jumah prayers, eat at home after sundown, have breakfast before sunrise on Saturday and fast all day before attending a Ramadan lecture and iftar at Noor, and then on Sunday morning eat breakfast after sunrise and spend the day sharing potluck meals and working in the sun on Shoresh’s Bela farm. As a participant-observer, my approach was to participate as fully as possible with the people I was with, on any given day, a body shaped by each previous experience.

The physical challenges of participating in two different religious communities reinforced my attention to the embodied qualities of practice. Without universalizing experience, participant observation helped me stay aware of how different it can feel to do religion among people who are also doing alongside you, as compared with doing religion alone, or among people who are not doing what you are doing. I did not come to know every person who was present at each fieldsite, and even if I had, the stories and experiences to which I had access would always be partial and contingent. Still, together, participant observation and open-ended interviewing built relationship between me and the people with whom I worked, making an anthropological space
that is neither “inside” nor “outside.” The language of interlocution, speaking between one another, is the best way I have found to describe this relationship.\textsuperscript{9}

I know my interlocutors, and they know me. They know I am neither Jewish nor Muslim, that I was a researcher and PhD student. Some found me quite curious; some were interested by my interest; some were sure I would eventually convert; one interlocutor confided in me that, initially and for many months after my arrival at Noor, he had thought I was a government spy. My experience was further particularized, both hindered and helped, because I was in my late twenties, white, and female, and because I come from dispersed working-class families in rural Canada, and have Jewish and Muslim relatives: these particularities give rise to some of the encounters that I analyze as taste-identity as performative practice in chapter three.

Contemporary ethnographers face the same human problem of otherness in interpersonal relationships as every other person, although we situate this challenge in our particular disciplinary horizon. My experience is that coming to know something about people involves allowing them to come to know something about me. Augmenting this ethnographic reality is the fact that I conducted my fieldwork in a city in which I lived full-time for nearly ten years. Before my fieldwork ended, many interlocutors had visited my home, knew my then domestic partner, or met and hugged my mother when she visited and joined in during a time of religious festivity for both communities. While this orientation to relationship is no guarantee of getting anything

“right,” it is my *sine qua non* of understanding people ethnographically. Relationships arose in my fieldwork through shared time and space, and through the willingness to engage.

As will become even clearer in the following pages, the members of Noor and Shoresh are quite diverse. Both communities are composed of first-, second-, and third-or-more-generation Canadians. Some come from predominantly English-speaking countries like the U.S. and Britain, and others from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, the African continent, and elsewhere. In both places there were participants who were more religiously conservative, those who were more religiously emphatic, and those who were more casual; sporadic attendees and regular attendees; families and single people. At both places, I met at least one convert. I present the participants at Shoresh as equally Jewish and those at Noor as equally Muslim, but resist understanding the participants as homogenous. I present myself as neither Jewish nor Muslim, but resist understanding myself as entirely other to all of them in any single way. Shared time, shared space, shared activity, and shared stories made us all familiar to one another. Some participants knew each other already over years. Others were visitors, or arrived as newcomers and left again; next to them, I was among the “regulars.” Transformation from “otherness” to “each other” and “one another” is messy and ongoing. This aspect of boundary-making, -marking, and -crossing is a necessary part of anthropological research into food in religion, because food and research are both social.

I focus my analysis on the social valences of the food practices and ideas I encountered, in order to better understand the uses to which food is put. Food is a fitting case for this inquiry because of what it is, and because of how it interacts with bodies. Food, in the first place, is a social category, rather than a natural object. Food sits at the intersection of our interpretive
problematics in religious studies and in anthropology: the construction “food” posits an eater and an eaten, already making bodies and meaning. Completely material and completely social, food engages people’s senses, crosses cultural and physical boundaries, and constructs social bodies and cultural difference, or, differently put, produces material selves and bodied lives.

**On Comparison: Whither, why, and comparing what?**

I deliberately undertook this project as a comparative one. My approach differs from a single-group- or single-tradition-focused study, on one hand, and from interfaith studies or comparative theology, on the other. I aimed for attention to the operations of the category of religion throughout the project, from conceptualization and selection of fieldsites, to the day-to-day research process, engagement of primary and secondary literature, the sifting and sorting of data, and the terms and tack of the analysis.

Standing simultaneously inside and outside two distinct areas of scholarship means not standing at the centre of either. From such a conditional vantage point, it is clear that every choice to pursue one line of thinking entails a choice not to follow another, encouraging the researcher to be aware of the reasons for her choices. I take from the New Comparativism the point that comparative inquiry makes a comparer beholden to three terms of knowledge: two comparands, and the third, comparative term that mutually construes them.\(^\text{10}\) Good comparison, in such terms, entails a responsibility to keep two of those knowledges relatively equal, and mutually in relation to the third. This ongoing balancing act is performed even while the two data

sets are not the same, and have no necessary correspondence with one another outside the terms of the project. Such an approach provides a way for me to consider what I think the study of religion is and does. It constructs me as a researcher always un-comfortable, always accountable to cultural worlds other than the one I am in. Comparative study has offered me a way to create an analytical space that is at least doubly, and sometimes recursively, etic, while making translatability and reliability a precondition of the work. This tension is productive, and what it produces, I contend, is analysis.

In one view, the study of religion was a comparative endeavour in its early years. According to this narrative, comparison served a colonial and theological agenda, and consequently fell out of favour with modernists, social scientists, critical theorists. According to the most strident interpretation of the postmodern critique, knowledge is untranslatable and scholarship in religion must be performed in area studies, if at all.

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strident positivist interpretation, it must be reimagined as only an element of an otherwise properly empirical project.\textsuperscript{14} Since the 1980s, scholars have revisited the issue of comparison in the study of religion, largely for interrogating the role of comparison in critical thinking and for examining possible parameters for a comparative method, variously referred to as comparison or comparativism.\textsuperscript{15}

**Eating halal and keeping kosher**

This project is about Jews and Muslims who participate in the food movement in Toronto, about how and why they do, and about what challenges and opportunities this presents to contemporary understandings of *kashrut* and *halal* as religious dietary laws. Perhaps the most significant similarity between my two groups is that they both develop religious foodways that are, on the one hand, fundamentally connected to traditional religious food law, and on the other


hand, significant departures from typical understandings of kashrut and halal. To reveal this move, it is necessary to provide some explanation and historicization of Muslim and Jewish food law. I approach these as discursive achievements, not because they are fixed, but because they are projects. It is generally believed that halal and kashrut are monolithic religious or theological facts that roughly correspond to the food practices of Muslims and Jews, or at least religious Muslims and religious Jews. But this is not precisely the case. Halal and kosher should be approached as discursive achievements, historicized, and treated as enmeshed in particular instances of what I call Jewish and Muslim food practices.

On one hand, when people speak of kashrut and halal, they are speaking about religious food laws. In this view, kashrut is a set of food law pertaining to Jews that permits the eating of cud-chewing land animals that have cleft hooves, like cows and sheep, but not non-cud-chewing-non-cloven-hoofed animals. Thus, since pigs and rabbits are excluded by the dietary law in identical ways by early writers who suggest pigs have cleft hooves but do not chew cud, and rabbits chew cud but do not have cleft hooves, Mary Douglas was positioned to argue that the particular emphasis on the pork prohibition is social. In any case, biblical and rabbinic law dictates that permissible animals must be killed in a particular way, and there are further rules with regard to the preparation of the carcass into meat. Carrion is prohibited, as are predatory birds. Shellfish is also prohibited, but fish having both fins and scales are appropriate. Most


insects are prohibited, with exceptions including a particular kind of grasshopper. Alcohol is appropriate and sometimes required, but wine that has been offered to another deity is prohibited. Similarly, blood may not be eaten. The acts of eating a kind of fat which was commonly offered in sacrifice, eating a particular part of the thigh now thought to be the sciatic nerve, and boiling a baby goat or cow in its mother’s milk, are all prohibited by this law.

According to a similarly textual view, halal is a set of food laws pertaining to Muslims, which permits the eating of all food that is good and wholesome (tayyib), and prohibits the eating of carrion, blood, and pig meat. Permissible animals must be killed in a particular way with an invocation of God. Foods which have been dedicated to another deity are prohibited. The food of the People of the Book (Ahl-al-Kitab, i.e. monotheists who also received textual revelation) is generally acceptable. Wine and intoxicants are generally not accepted. Hunting is not specifically provided for in the biblical law, but it is specifically permitted in the qur’anic treatment. Both sets of dietary law include the provision that they may be transgressed in circumstances of duress, in order to preserve health and life.

On the other hand, when people speak of kashrut and halal, they are also referring to (and participating in) discursive formations of religious food law. These formations have similarities and differences that arise in part because Judaism and Islam are often understood to have a

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18 I take discursive formation to refer to an aggregate of doctrine and practice, including “sensibilities, attitudes, assumptions, and behaviours.” Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 17. On discursive formation see Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (London: Tavistock, 1972); Foucault, “Chapter 2: Discursive Formations.”
genealogical relationship. In one view this is a matter of contestation: the Qur’anic narrative presents patriarch Ibrahim/Abraham as a Muslim, whereas the Jewish tradition does not. However, for my purpose it is sufficient to claim that the cultural formation generally understood as the Jewish food law antedates the cultural formation generally understood as the Islamic food law, and the food laws in the Qur’an are marked by an awareness of Jews and Jewish law, while the food laws of the Torah are not reciprocally marked.

In brief, before one can understand my interlocutors’ development of “eating Jewishly” and the “Islamic paradigm” for eating as Muslim and Jewish foodways in comparative perspective, one must grasp the discursive achievements of halal and kashrut that they are working with, against, and through. Halal and kashrut are grounded in texts, but not reducible to them. They are analogous to one another in some aspects of form, content, and social role, but not in others. Also, they have a genealogical relationship. The precise dating of the texts is much contested by experts, both at the level of the component texts, and for the compilation and codification of codices. However there are fairly clear historical parameters for the scope of the relationship: scholars generally locate the date for the codification of the biblical text to between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE, and approximate roughly 1,500 years between the biblical and

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Though the dates for the biblical text are approximated within a span of two centuries, the Qur’an is less ambiguously dated to the 7\textsuperscript{th} century C.E., as received by, through, or at the dictation of the prophet Muhammad during his lifetime. While there is no academic consensus on its codification, a majority of scholars date a Qur’an in codified textual form to within approximately quarter- to a half-century of Muhammad’s time, by the reign of the third Caliph, Uthman, c.644-656 CE: Uthman is credited with the compilation of a single codex from several competing codices.\(^{21}\) However approximate the estimation of origins, the biblical dietary law precedes the Qur’anic iteration of dietary law by a minimum of about eleven centuries.

\section*{I. Kashrut’s social histories: Toward Jewish food practice}

A genealogy of kashrut begins in pre-biblical roots, whether by a history that roughly treats the Torah as a historical record, or by an agricultural-geographical history.\(^{22}\) While kashrut is clearly grounded in the biblical dietary law, the two are markedly different achievements. “Biblical dietary law” denotes a portion of the contents of the Torah which a) concern food and b) are laws. Specifically, “biblical dietary law” refers to a section of \textit{Vayikra/Leviticus} 11, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Dissenting opinions attribute the codification among the first four Caliphs, and the latest dates to the 8th Century. A. J. Droge, trans., \textit{The Qur’an: A New Annotated Translation} (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2013), n.b. xxvi-xxxii and f. Droge’s translation is of the standard “Cairo edition.”
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Marvin Harris’ analysis of the biblical pig taboo combines both methods. Marvin Harris, \textit{Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture} (Long Grove, Il.: Waveland Press, 1998), 67–87; Harris, \textit{Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches}, 35–60.
\end{itemize}
the corresponding but dissimilar section of Devarim/Deuteronomy 12 and 14.\(^{23}\) Laws about eating found in the Torah but excluded from biblical dietary law include, for example, the law that one may not eat the limb of a live animal, and the laws that forbid eating leaven during Pesach, Passover. Though clearly dietary, the former law is classified as a Noachide law, and the latter as a Pesach law.

The laws of shechitah or kosher slaughter, furthermore, are not found in the Torah. However, the Torah alludes to already-existing slaughter laws, in connection with the laws of sacrificial ritual. Details of the laws of shechitah, and of much of the other dietary law, are generally understood to be a part of the Oral Torah rather than the Written Torah, meaning that they are also ascribed to Moses. The Oral Torah is codified by rabbis centuries after the biblical text, in the form of Mishnah (c. third century CE) and Talmud (c. fifth century CE\(^{24}\)), still two centuries before the Qur’an would appear. The composite elaboration of biblical dietary law is further developed by rabbis over centuries of interpretive tradition, most notably by Maimonides in the Mishneh Torah (“Second Law” or “Repetition of the Law,” intended as a statement of Oral Torah) in the twelfth century CE and by Joseph Karo in the Shulchan Aruch or Ordered Table (c. sixteenth century CE).\(^{25}\)

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\(^{23}\) Particularly Vayikra 11:3-47 and Devarim 12:1-24; 14:4-10.

\(^{24}\) Experts will note that, for simplicity’s sake, I’m referring to the Balvi or Babylonian Talmud.

The word kashrut, when used in connection with Jewish dietary law, pertains approximately to the rabbinical interpretation of and legislation of the biblical dietary law and Oral Torah together. The colloquial phrase “building fences around the Torah” is a reference to the practice of the rabbis to err on the side of caution in their jurisprudence, in order to protect a Jew from unintentionally transgressing a law. Scholars and religious adherents alike generally agree that the goal of this rabbinic interpretation and legislation of food is twofold: to offer Jews a way of eating which does not transgress God’s biblical dietary rules, and to separate Jews from gentiles.26

Scholars have noted that the word kasher, from the Hebrew root k-sh-r which is Anglicized as kosher, does not in fact appear in the biblical text in reference to the food laws.27 For the discussion in chapters one and three in particular, I want to establish here that the now-traditional opposite of kosher, treyf, from the Hebrew treyfa or torn, is biblical, coming from the Levitical prohibition against eating an animal who has been mortally wounded (torn) by another animal.28 As Kraemer writes of kashrut,
The Hebrew root ‘k-sh-r,’ a postexilic term, is never used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to Jewish dietary laws. It was first used by the rabbis of Late Antiquity in this connection (among others; it means simply fitting or proper), so it is more accurate to use the term ‘kashruth’ in reference to the dietary laws of the rabbis, which were not, however, the dietary laws of all Jews.29

The key piece of information here is that “kashrut” in the conventional sense is neither identical to biblical dietary law pertaining to the ancient Israelites, nor accepted by all Jews as a dietary standard in the rabbinic period. Quite apart from the question of whether to follow an authoritative ruling, historically, not all Jews have recognized rabbinic kashrut as authoritative in the first place. Famously, Karite Jews cleave to a more biblical dietary law and reject rabbinic 
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halacha_, or Jewish law, on this point.30

Within the rabbinic tradition, there is variation in halacha pertaining to kashrut. Rabbinic Jewish law is univocal in ruling that the combination of milk and meat is not kosher, because it risks violating the biblical injunction to not boil a kid (i.e. baby goat; calf is another variant) in its mother’s milk. However, different rabbinical traditions come to different conclusions about the parameters for separating milk and meat: Ashkenazi (Franco-German) and Sephardic (Iberian) rabbinic traditions differ on how many hours to wait between eating milk and meat, and

29 Kraemer, “Jewish Studies: Dietary Laws”“Introduction.” Rosenblum makes this argument in Rosenblum, _Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism._

30 Kraemer, _Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages_; Freidenreich, _Foreigners and Their Food_; Roger Horowitz, _Kosher USA: How Coke Became Kosher and Other Tales of Modern Food_, Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives in Culinary History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
between eating meat and milk. Ashkenazim have had a large influence on contemporary kashrut, and many of my interlocutors evince Ashkenazi backgrounds and/or interpretive assumptions.\(^{31}\)

A trajectory of increasing strictures, and of gendered knowledge transmission, characterizes the evolution of Jewish food practice that produces the sharp separation practices of modernity that my interlocutors inherit: these include, for example, the practice of keeping separate dishes for milk and meat, or even having separate dishwashers.\(^{32}\) Yet while some practice is sharp, not all practice is: Some Jews, for example, find that for kashrut it is sufficient to avoid cooking or consuming milk and meat together. It is immediately apparent that class and access are a factor in determining the development of such practices as the separation of dishwashers, i.e. dishwashing machines located in the home. It is also apparent that different histories of text-based practices become visible when scholars attend to women’s perspectives.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{33}\) Susan Starr Sered’s groundbreaking research into elderly Jewish women’s religious food work in Israel is one of the earliest ethnographic investigations of Jewish women’s religious food lives, and it remains a touchstone in the field. Susan Starr. Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem*.
Drawing attention to women’s practical management of information about kashrut in the home, scholars including Susan Sered and David Kraemer show how inherited kitchen conventions and minhagim, or traditional community practices (sing. minhag), operate in the space of the kitchen around and alongside rabbinic knowledges. It seems likely that much of rabbinic practice of “building fences around the Torah,” and indeed the construction of Torah, is likely to have arisen under similar conditions of the complexity of practice, including gendered practices of food preparation. As will be seen in chapter one, the question of women’s authoritative knowledge in tension with rabbinic authoritative knowledge is a topic of conversation at Shores.


II. Halal’s social histories: Toward Muslim food practice

Before moving further away from treatments of authorized religious text, I will offer a parallel treatment of the textual background of social halal regulation. Just as kashrut is generally understood to be rooted in the Torah and Oral Torah, and subsequent rabbinical commentary, halal is generally understood to be rooted in the Qur’an and Sunnah, (“habitual practice,” based on the prophet Muhammad’s example), particularly the *ahadith* (sing. *hadith*, oral tradition of the sayings of Muhammad), and subsequent Islamic jurisprudence. As kashrut is a part of halacha, so halal is a part of *shari’a* (roughly “way, path;” Islamic law) and *fiqh* (“deep understanding;” jurisprudence). The relationship I draw here is analogous: as mentioned above, the legal structures I compare are not identical. For example, while the laws of kashrut are food laws, “halal” does not only designate a system of food law. Indeed, the *ahkam* (rulings, sing. *hukm*) in *fiqh* use a pentacategorical designation: any given behaviour may be *fard* (obligatory; also *wajib*), *mustahabb* (recommended), *halal* (permissible; also *mubah*, neutral; also *sunnah*, optional), *makruh* (discouraged, abominable), or *haram* (forbidden, unlawful). *Mashbooh* (doubtful), on the other hand, is a specific food designation that makes clear that it is unclear whether a food is halal or haram.36

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The halal food laws are drawn predominantly from three surahs of the Qur’an: *Surat al-Baqurah* (lit. Surah of the Cow), *Surat al-Ma’ idah* (lit. Surah of the Banquet), and *Surat Al-An’am* (lit. Surah of the Cattle). The significant passages are 2:172-3; 5:3-5; 6:118-9, and 6:145-6, although food is discussed in many other places in the text, including in recapitulations of these verses (*ayat*, sing. *ayah*). Ahadith, including those that make reference to food, are now compiled into varying collections. The most broadly accepted compilations are together called the Kutub al-Sitta or Sahih Sitta, “six books” or “authentic six” compendia of ahadith. Different communities place varying levels of emphasis on different textual sources, but together, these materials are the primary sources of Islamic food law.

It is important to note that between these cultural compendia and through their history, food has been socially conceptualized in messy and overlapping rather than systematic ways. This continues to be true today, both in general (consider food-as-medicine in naturopathy) and among participants in the Toronto food movement in specific. In Islamic fiqh, the Muslim dietary law is discussed in the hygiene-focused jurisprudential literature. Further food practices, including etiquette (*adab*), the laws of *sawm* (fasting) and of sacrifice and commensality during *Eid ul-Adha* (Feast of Sacrifice) and on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), are discussed in other, separate parts of the fiqh literature. Food as a medicine, similarly, is handled separately from the dietary law, although alcohol and other intoxicating substances like tobacco and marijuana are discuss the migration of classification priorities across different kinds of authoritative discourse at the end of the literature review.
governed with reference to it. Like shechitah and the Torah, the regulations for zabiha (which also literally means slaughter) are referred to, but not delineated, in the Qur’an. Instead, slaughter procedures are a matter of fiqh. While Maimonides is a touchstone of Jewish jurisprudential literature, and writing in roughly the same period, al-Ghazali is a roughly parallel classical authority of the Shafi’i (Sunni) school whose eleventh- and twelfth-century ethico-jurisprudential work is widely known. On The Manners Related to Eating, the eleventh book in al-Ghazali’s Revival of the Religious Sciences and the most iconic of its three sections dealing with food, is a touchstone for food in Islamic ethics. Although my interlocutors never brought him up with me directly, a number of the practices outlined by Ghazali in the Manners echo in the culture of food hospitality practiced by persons I met at Noor, and I anticipate that at least some of them know Ghazali’s ideas at least in passing. Similarly, Maimonides came up rarely at Shoresh, but his ideas are in circulation. A few people mentioned Maimonides to me directly.

There is considerable variation in fiqh on food. Sunni and Shi’i madhahib or schools of jurisprudential thought (sing. madhhab, lit. doctrine) take different approaches to making determinations of law when it comes to food, and there is further difference among Ibadi, Sufi, Ahmadyyia, Quranist, and Black Muslim groups. Such divergences have led at least one group

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of anthropologists to describe halal as a “global assemblage.” As with the social history of kashrut, the important thing to note here is that the textual record, unified though it may appear, has had a varied historical life in multiple communities. Though this history is unknown to most of my research participants, its traces appear in many of the practices I describe below.

As parts of the Hebrew Bible are clearly aware of other nations and deities, so too much of the Qur’an shows awareness of non-Muslim peoples, and particularly of biblical law and of Jewish food practices. Scholars have investigated the Qur’an’s views of Jews, and traced ways in which the Qur’an and Sunnah and later Islamic jurisprudence differentiate themselves from the Jewish tradition. Much as the early Christians differentiated themselves from Jews, the Muslim writers distinguished themselves as Muslims, in large part, through food laws. This is enabled in particular ways by the fact that, as discussed above, the Qur’an is explicitly conscious of Jewish text and discusses Jewish food law in some detail; history positions the Qur’anic food laws to relate to the Biblical and rabbinic food laws, but not the other way around. In practice,


many Muslims, including several of my interlocutors at Noor, understand meat in Christian
countries to count as the permissible meat of the People of the Book. It is historically common to
use kosher meat in particular as a proxy for halal meat when the latter is unavailable.\(^42\) While it
is practically and theologically possible for Jews to use halal meat in a similar fashion, this tends
not to occur, and when I asked Jewish interlocutors about whether they would eat halal meat, I
received a range of responses from probably no to probably yes. The practice is clearly a matter
of insider-outsider boundary work even when it is an object of theological debate, and it is still
emically contested.\(^43\)

Inescapably, text-objects live in the networks of power. In whole or in part, they are used
and not used, read and not read, reproduced and not reproduced, in ways that are specific to
times and places, making them better understood as texts-as-practices. Such texts-as-practices as
I have briefly reviewed here coalesce in particular formations of kashrut, halal, and Jewish and
Muslim food practice in Canada and the U.S. since the 17th and 18th Centuries, but especially
over the last hundred years as food industrialization has become the major force impacting eating
in North America. These histories give rise to the specific formations of kashrut, halal, and


Jewish and Muslim food practice that my interlocutors bump against and draw upon, criticize and advocate, in the chapters that follow.

III. Jews, Muslims, and food in Canada and the United States

The history of halal and kashrut, and of Muslim and Jewish food practice, follows the migration patterns of Muslims and Jews. The North American portions of these histories are inflected by two things: population diversity and industrialization. The history of kashrut observance in Canada and North America, and the relevant immigration history generally, has received scholarly attention in Jewish studies and history, whereas the Muslim case has received much less. Most notably, Diner and Joselit have written the history of kashrut in North America in conjunction with immigration history. A key point in this literature is that lived kashrut in North America, much like other points in the history of Jewish food, has been more

46 Diner, Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration; Diner, The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000; Sarna, American Judaism: A History.
about separation from the foods of the non-Jewish majority other, than it has been about ease of
access to appropriate food.\textsuperscript{47} Kashrut popularized in the United States of America at a historical
moment when the dual forces of \textit{cuisine} and convenience food held sway over the cultural
marketplace.\textsuperscript{48} Easy modern food and valorized fancy food both conferred social status, and
together, the French tradition and convenience food were two powerful tokens of
Americanness.\textsuperscript{49} However, both presented particular problems to Jewish observance of the
dietary laws. \textit{Cuisine}, which at the time meant French cuisine, used meats like pork, rabbit, and
frog, which are treyf, and mingled meat with milk products like butter, cream, and cheese.\textsuperscript{50}
French cuisine therefore stood simultaneously as a mark of status, and as an icon of treyf.

Convenience food, initially, was produced using industrial practices that were
inhospitable to the complexities of kashrut. Industrial kashrut thus developed in part as a
response to the rise, importance, and attractiveness of convenience food.\textsuperscript{51} Meanwhile, cuisine
pluralized beyond French to include Italian, Chinese, and other “ethnic” genres of food, the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibidem.
\item This meaning, associating France with the culinary definition of fine food, is retained in the longer and less-Anglicized idiom haute cuisine. Joselit et al., \textit{Getting Comfortable in New York: The American Jewish Home, 1880-1950}; Joselit, “Food Fight: The Americanization of Kashrut in Twentieth Century America”; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Kitchen Judaism.”
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
dubious suggestion that some foods are “ethnic” while others are not notwithstanding. These atmospheric changes helped ease the movement of kosher or kosher-style eating into mainstream American dietary practice. This historical environment made social integration through food a point of innovation, but also of tension, a kind of battle-ground for identity-marking and assimilation that is still visible today. This is especially relevant to the discussion of taste-identity in chapter three, below.

Recent scholarship has discussed Reform Judaism’s historic rejection of kashrut as a ritualistic survival from the old world in the first Pittsburgh platform in 1885, the return of kashrut in the second Pittsburgh platform in 1999, and of changing attitudes about dietary law over this period, particularly as enshrined in the story of the famous “treyfa banquet.” The second Pittsburgh platform clearly evinces a re-understanding of the laws of kashrut as ethical. This history helps trace the emergence of ethics as a term used by North American Jews to explain why kashrut might be important and relevant to their lives.

I revisit the intersection of industrialization and the ethical turn throughout, but one point should be made about it now: Scholars are beginning to write about the noticeable trend of ethical discourse in contemporary Muslim and Jewish (and other) foodways, but often in a way that valorizes religion-as-ethics or essentializes religion as ethical, in the specific sense of being


54 Gross, “Continuity and Change in Reform Views of Kashrut 1883-2002: From the T’reifah Banquet to Eco-Kashrut.”
ethically good. Alongside experts in religious traditions contributing emic analyses of religious food acts from a more essentialist perspective, etic scholarship from the study of religion can offer a different view to the academic analysis of religious foodways: one that is more interested in the construction of practical ethics and lived religion in the first place. Scholars of religion have made significant contributions to theorizing religion as a second-order category. Numerous theorists of religion have carefully and persuasively called for more studies that attend to “religion,” as a concept incommensurate with individual “religions,” critically, etically, and/or as a lived phenomenon. Thus I historicize the terms of my comparison here in order to offer an etic analysis of Jewish and Muslim foodways in a particular time and place as instances of lived religion that participants elaborate both in terms of identity and in terms of ethics.


If food ethics has been a topic of interest both for Jews and for scholars of Judaism, the issue of ethical content in Muslim religious food law is beginning to gather similar attention. If food ethics has been a topic of interest both for Jews and for scholars of Judaism, the issue of ethical content in Muslim religious food law is beginning to gather similar attention. However, in the face of the diverse and complex literature touching on food and Jews, it becomes more obvious that there is considerably less parallel scholarship investigating the history of halal food from a historical-cultural perspective. It is striking that histories of Islam and food in North America do not yet exist. The attention to the role of Islam in the alternative food movement, I hope, prefigures the emergence of sustained scholarly interest in Muslim food history. Current literature makes passing mention of food in connection with other topics such as charity or Ramadan observance, but do not consider it in detail; food appears as an element in


58 Ethnographic work on particular American communities and food practices shed valuable light on food in/and contemporary Islam in the U.S., and Rouse and Hoskin’s article on purity and soul food in Sunni Islam and the Nation of Islam is an exciting example of this, and an indication that serious and fruitful analyses of religious foodways should be undertaken. Rouse and Hoskins, “Purity, Soul Food, and Sunni Islam.”

categories like holidays, rituals, or rules, rather than as a category in and of itself. Histories of Islam in the U.S. have been focused elsewhere, for example on integration, on women, or on Black Islam. Similarly, case studies of Muslim immigrants to Canada investigate topics other than food, such as women, cultural politics, and identity formation. In the inverse case, a recent study of Canadian food history discusses Judaism, several Christianities, and Sikhism, but not Islam.

Canada’s food industry has a long relationship with kashrut, and its relationship with halal is much more recent. As recently as 2016, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) issued its current regulation on halal labeling in Canada, but this regulation is pro forma. Rather than taking a position on religious regulation, the decision simply states that any halal


certification appearing on food labels must correspond to a set of criteria that are verifiable. As such, the main force of this amendment is the protection of the consumer from fraud. However, the policy itself is more interesting as a part of the larger process of codification and mediation of state, industrial, and global discourse about halal. Industry is playing a role in the solidification of a particular halal, much as it did a particular kosher. Since at least 2010, Canada’s agribusiness sector has identified the worldwide halal industry as a major area of economic growth, and has aimed to position itself as an important industrial player in that market. In 2011, the halal food market was estimated to be worth over $600 billion annually.

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There is much more to be said about the contemporary state of halal and kosher certification, in Canada and the U.S. and in the global market, and about the constitutive links between the academy and the market, between the market and the state, and between all of these and the lives of religious people. Major certifiers, with varying relationships to states and international bodies, collate food regulations that are then cited as data for religion by scholars of Judaism and Islam. For example, Hecker and Bergeaud-Blackler et al. both take the category mashbooh from Riaz and Chaudry’s *Halal Food Production*, which is a work of industry: Riaz is a food technology research scientist heading research in food extrusion technology in the Agriculture and Food Sciences department at Texas A&M University, and Chaudry is the head of IFANCA, the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America (headquartered in Illinois), which is a major halal certifier in the global market.68

Classification structures are relevant for disparate purposes, yet the value hierarchies that constitute them slip across registers. A classificatory value may be traced through a health and safety branch of government; a private regulator; a butcher; to a parent purchasing groceries, before it makes its way into an ostensibly religious space.69 These slippages occur because people are in contact with one another, and because people have multiple identities. Scholars are also religious adherents, and have skill sets for which they are employed by industry; private regulators work alongside and within states, and also consume products they regulate. Above all,

68 Riaz and Chaudry, *Halal Food Production*.

69 Lytton in fact makes a similar point, but toward different ends: his aim is to valorize regulation. Lytton, “Jewish Foodways and Religious Self-Governance in America: The Failure of Communal Kashrut Regulation and the Rise of Private Kosher Certification.”
people care about food, and many people who work on halal and kosher food care about religion and regulation. This landscape of competing and overlapping frames is the space into which contemporary eaters, including my interlocutors, venture. Whether or not we are aware of it, this is in the background every time we approached a table, or a supermarket or pantry shelf, watched films and videos and read print media about food, attend events and talks, made old family recipes, and plant seeds in the ground of backyard gardens or Bela farm.

Outline of Chapters

The central question of this dissertation is how and why food currently emerges as a major object of attention for religious communities, and how to study such a thing. The interest of this question lies in how to understand religion as a project that is lived in particular social conditions. This question connects with a number of concepts used in scholarship on human religion: religion, body, tradition, identity, value, and ethics.

This survey has treated the principal literatures forming the background against which my project was built. I have explained halal and kashrut, contextualizing these as discursive achievements that inflect, in complicated historical ways, the larger story of Jewish and Muslim foodways. I have traced the recent interest in halal, kosher, Jewish, and Muslim food, and called attention to the particular need for a systematic history of Muslim food in North America, and for more analyses engaging food and Islam from non-theological perspectives.

The next section of the dissertation, comprised of chapters one and two, present Shoresh and then Noor in turn, focusing on each organization’s core food programming. The following section, comprised of chapters three, four, and five, treats both organizations together within each individual chapter, with respect to a comparative theme: these themes are identity as
performing (chapter three), and ethics as religion- and value-making (chapters four and five).

Chapters one and two treat each group at length and in depth, without weaving the other group in explicitly. Still, they are not insulated from one another. Noor is not a mini-Islam, or a Muslim Shoresh; Shoresh is not a mini-Judaism, or a Jewish Noor. Rather, chapters one and two show organizations that are similar to and different from one another in ways relevant to my study. The chapters are organized to explore and understand these similarities and differences.

Descriptively, chapters one and two introduce each organization as an idea made of people and their activities. I identify key characters, survey events at which key ideas are developed, and conclude with the perspectives of members and participants. Analytically, the first two chapters treat religious tradition as a category of human activity, and therefore attend to examples of lived religion as projects of discursive achievement. The discursive achievement I analyze in chapter one is eating Jewishly, and the discursive achievement I analyze in chapter two is eating in an Islamic paradigm. I draw on Talal Asad in order to show eating Jewishly as an authorizing discourse, and I draw on Katherine Bullock to show eating in an Islamic paradigm as political engagement: by juxtaposing these interventions in separate chapters with parallel structures, I show that intra-community and extra-community power struggles over truth and meaning are quotidian.

In the final section, I further complicate the religious food practices I characterized. After the survey I have made in the present chapter, it is clear that certain conditions matter to the development of foodways in contemporary Canada and the U.S. These conditions are a context of diversity, and an industrialized market. In chapter three, I draw on Judith Butler to reflect on the construction of identity in the world of my research, with respect to food access and culinary
In chapter four, I address the construction of religious food practice as ethical. Nearly everyone I met at Noor and Shoresh assumed that halal and kosher food are ethical in the sense of being ethically good. This sense, strikingly, also appears in much of the academic and popular literature I discuss in the dissertation’s introduction. I explore the ways my interlocutors present religious food practice as ethical, linking with anthropology’s ethical turn. Building on that discussion, in chapter five I draw on scholars including David Graeber to show how such ethical, feeling subjects slide between three senses of value as they make their critiques of the market and of authoritative religion.

In the conclusion, I review my arguments about studying lived religious foodways: historicizing halal and kashrut as discursive achievements, I argue for the expansion of scholarly analyses toward foodways more generally; I show how kashrut and halal are (re)interpreted and deployed, in particular contexts and alongside ostensibly non-religious sources, in the authorization of configurations of eating Jewishly and eating in an Islamic paradigm; modeling my claim that comparative attention ought to be paid to food behaviours beyond halal and kosher, I show how food acts and food stories in contexts of religious fasts, feasts, services, and retreats are “about” being Jewish or Muslim; investigating configurations of values caught up in the formation of religious food as ethically good, I argue that lived religious practice is mobilized by this turn toward religion-as-ethics.

I then reflect on how comparative analysis of religious foodways can precipitate a non-teleological analysis, helping to reveal the relationship between gaps in literature and the field-
based assumptions that encourage scholars to keep analyzing around these gaps, rather than across them. In a scholarly moment marked by interdisciplinarity on the one hand and by academic silos on the other, the fundamental problem of idea translatability is urgently relevant. Comparative studies, performed with erudition and oriented consistently by a particular disciplinary goal, are a viable, and in a sense fundamental, means of critical analysis. By providing a critical rubric, the “third term” of a comparison may prevent the displacement of a “first term” or “second term” judgment structure into the analysis. Finally, I sketch the under-theorized role of the embodied experience of feeling in the religious foodways I have analyzed. I offer some thoughts toward the theorization of sensing and feeling as a ground for deepening the study of lived religion within and beyond the study of foodways.

Voices, Stories, Data

Somewhere I heard a joke that the singular form of data is anecdote. To me, the joke reveals that one story is not enough, that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts, and that people think in stories. This dissertation is a story about the stories that some people tell in the genre of religion. Ultimately, in lived religion and the academic study of it, persuasiveness counts. Below, persuasive stories make facts and ideas into truths, make edible objects (grasses like wheat and corn) and indigestible substances (stevia, aspartame) into food, and make other edible objects (wild or ornamental grasses) and indigestible substances (chitin, aspartame again) not-food. Persuasive stories make some activities religious (fasting, feasting, following God’s law), and some not-religious (reasoning, faith in science). The stories people tell matter a great deal. Thus, by necessity, by intention, and by circumstance, I begin the next chapter with a story.
Chapter 1
“Eating Jewishly” at Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs

On a cold day in late January, 2013, the second annual Shoresh Food Conference was taking place in the Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre, at the corner of Spadina Avenue and Bloor Street, in Toronto, Ontario. Inside, speakers and attendees gathered to learn about how food and Judaism connect. There are diverse session topics to choose from: shmita (a sabbatical year) as an agricultural principle; how to get hekshers (symbols of kosher certification) for food labels for your local food business; biblical meat-eating; “divine slaughter”; the Jewish food history of Toronto’s Kensington market neighborhood. Between sessions, people milled about the snack tables on the second floor, or bid on items in the silent auction. During these breaks people chatted loudly between bites of highly sweetened, foil-wrapped, hekshered kosher chocolate, or gluten-free brownies and nut-free cookies from the local company Sweets From The Earth, and sampled two-ounce shots of green smoothie prepared by Mo and Lo Organics.

Between sips of tea or coffee augmented by organic milk, brown sugar crystals, honey, or stevia-based sweetener, people smiled as they caught sight of a collection of pages that were taped to the glass wall separating them from the large combined dining and conference room. Each page featured a blown-up photographic image of a different delicious-looking traditional dish. Two more pages, with text rather than images, buttressed the display. They read “So, nu? Which is the quintessential Jewish food?” and “Share your thoughts with us by leaving your comments on the following images. –The Shoresh Crew.” Pens hung from the wall by soft twine, and there were blank spaces under the photographs where people could write.

The colourful images depicted classic and varied examples of Jewish fare, at least some of which had been suggested by members of the community on the Shoresh Facebook page. A
few months before the conference, Shoresh had posted the question to its Facebook group:

“What is the quintessential Jewish food that [appeals] to both Ashkenazi and Sephardic
apalates]?70 The foods they chose, represented in these photos on the day of the event, were of
many kinds, and generally count as “Jewish food” to those who have knowledge of the category.
Ritually-meaningful foods like dry, unleavened Passover matzah, and iconic egg-bread challah
for the Friday evening sabbath meal, appeared alongside holiday dishes like fried potato latkas
and macaroons, and holiday- or ritual-adjacent dishes like the slow-cooked Saturday stew called
cholent, and comforting matzaball soup. Foods associated with Ashkenazi Jewry, like pickled
herring, kugel, brisket, and bagels with cream cheese and lox, were posted beside foods that are
decidedly more Middle Eastern and identified as Sephardic or Mizrahi, such as hummus, falafel,
bourekas, and shakshouka. There was even a pastrami sandwich, evoking especially American
deli Judaism.71


71 Many dishes are named in languages other than English and have variant spellings. I use the spellings that were
printed on the pages at the event.
Jewish food is constructed in moments like this one. Many of the people I spoke with at Shoresh explore their own diets at the intersection of traditional foods, acceptable foods, and ethical and mindful eating, as they develop and popularize their orientation toward “eating Jewishly.” Here, I investigate a term that seeks to re-draw the boundaries of what it means to be a Jew and to eat: the phenomenon of “eating Jewishly” as it is explored at Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs in Toronto, Ontario.

Moments like the “quintessential Jewish food” exercise show the complexity at the intersection of food and Jewishness. All the foods pictured are in some way associated with Jewish food culture. None of the food was photographed with visible packaging showing whether the foods were hekshered. There was no evidence of treyf or unkosher status, such as a combination of milk and meat food in a dish, but beyond such visible transgressions, there is no way to see whether food is kosher. Instead, ritual food, traditional holiday dishes, and regional ethnic cuisines represent “quintessential” Jewishness, and sometimes bring kosher along for the ride.

Kosher status may be indexed by labels and packaging, but kosherness is in many ways invisible, and subsumed by other, more discursive forms of knowing. This is the entry point into the problem of eating: food makes and marks boundaries in ways both visible and invisible. Transformations occur that change plant, animal, and other substances into food to be enjoyed, or food to be avoided. Many of these transformations cannot be seen. Eating food therefore always involves trust. Kashrut is a term of reference for understanding food and trust in lived Judaism, but in complicated ways, ways that invite a closer look at the navigation of food choices, and in particular, at the relationship among kosher food, Jewish foods, and “eating Jewishly.”
A growing literature investigates foods that are constructed as traditional Jewish foods. Jewish food historians and cookbook authors like Gil Marks and Joan Nathan investigate key Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi dishes like some of those described above, as well as ritually prescribed and celebratory holiday meals, and American kosher and kosher-style deli foods. Alongside these delineations of kinds of Jewish food, some of which are geographical and some of which are religious, there is at least one further category of food that is emerging, ethical kashrut, which must be taken account of in order to understand Jewish food in contemporary North America. Furthermore, at the same time that ethical kashrut is an emergent term in the Jewish food landscape that warrants documentation and analysis, the contradictions and conflicts that occasion the emergence of ethical kashrut in the first place shed light on a broader problematic: the interplay among cultures of flavour and tastes of tradition, identity, and locality; structures of rule, logic, and law; and “intentional,” “mindful,” or “conscious” processes of selection, preparation, and consumption. These terms all belong analytically to the rubric of “foodways,” or all the ideas, materials, and practices related to edible objects. They are also the background for understanding “eating Jewishly,” as it is developed at Shoresh to draw Jews together across divisions created by ethical, legalistic, ethnic, and health-based dietary divides.

“Canadian Soil, Jewish Roots:” Introducing Shoresh

Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs is a Canadian registered charity and Jewish organization based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Shoresh is a local organization that seeks to reinvigorate Toronto’s Jewish community by applying “Jewish values,” gleaned from religious texts and major Jewish thinkers, to the challenges of contemporary Canadian life. Shoresh first came to life in 2002 under a different name: Torat HaTeva, the Jewish Nature Centre of Canada (Heb. “Torah of earth/nature”).
Torat HaTeva was the brainchild of Alexandra Kuperman, who developed the idea as a class project when she was a student in an environmental studies co-op program at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, after her experience teaching at the Teva Learning Centre, a Jewish environmental learning organization in the United States. Teva and other American organizations including *Adamah* (Heb. ‘Earth’), the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Centre, and *Hazon* (Heb. ‘Vision’), are the predecessors of Shoresh in the North American Jewish Food Movement. As of 2014, these organizations have come under the institutional umbrella of Hazon, and now function as its subsidiaries.\(^{72}\) A number of the women with whom I spoke during my research at Shoresh have trained with or worked for Hazon or the other American organizations, or similar projects in Israel.

Alexandra and fellow community member Tuvia Aronson ran Torat HaTeva, until Tuvia made aliyah to Israel.\(^{73}\) After a brief fallow period, Shoresh began to be consolidated anew under the leadership of Risa Alyson Cooper. Risa had also worked at the Teva Learning Centre, and had begun to “vision” (envision, cf. Heb. hazon) bringing Jewish farming to Toronto while at Isabella Freedman in 2006 with Adamah fellow Sabrina Malach, her friend and vocational companion in Jewish farming and education. In 2008 Risa started the first major project of what would become Shoresh, by initiating the educational outdoor planting space that would later become the Kavanah Garden.\(^{74}\) Shoresh was officially launched in its current form in 2011, with

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\(^{72}\) A history of the ‘enlarged organization’ can be found on Hazon’s website: [http://hazon.org/about/history/](http://hazon.org/about/history/).

\(^{73}\) Literally ‘ascent,’’ *aliyah* denotes a specifically Jewish and Zionist immigration to Israel

\(^{74}\) From the Hebrew *kavanah*, intention.
Risa at the helm as the executive director of the organization, Sabrina as Director of Community Outreach, and Alexandra returning to serve as a board member.

Shoresh’s intentionally non-sectarian approach has become increasingly food- and agriculture-centric in recent years, as food and agriculture have proved to be powerful ways to consolidate interest in Jewish environmentalism. Shoresh’s particular food and agriculture approach has been productive: In 2007, Risa helped launch a Jewish CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) network in Toronto alongside Michael Schecter and Andrea Most, both of whom work personally and professionally in food-related areas and both of whom would later join Shoresh’s Board of Directors. Risa had spent three years learning Jewish farming practices—which can include observing the agricultural sabbatical shmita, reciting blessings for planting and harvesting, raising and slaughtering animals, and learning sustainable farming specifically as an expression of Jewish values—in the U.S. at Teva and Adamah, and she returned to Toronto with the goal of building ways of living deeply-engaged Jewishness at home in Canada. The goal is visible in Shoresh’s slogan, “Canadian soil, Jewish roots:” shoresh, in Hebrew, means root.

Fig. 3. “Shoresh Jewish Environmental Programs - Photos | Facebook,” accessed September 14, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/Shoresh-Jewish-Environmental-Programs-190853777624781/photos?ref=page_internal. Fieldwork archive.
In 2009 Shoresh formally opened the Kavanah Garden, which now hosts over 1400 program participants and produces over 500 pounds of vegetables in a growing season. Risa sometimes refers to the Kavanah Garden as the “Covenant” garden, a translation for mixed audiences that evokes religious and ethnic themes and is loyal to the sound of the name, but makes a semantic shift from the more literal understanding of the Hebrew *kavanah*, intention. Risa translates Kavanah more literally as intention when she is speaking to an all-Jewish audience, whether or not the audience knows much Hebrew. Her choice shifts according to her orientation as she weaves a lesson.

This artful and tradition-inflected approach to translation is typical of Shoresh and other Jewish organizations, and differs from forms of translation that seek to match semantic content between language worlds. Everyday practices of lived Judaism at Shoresh frequently juxtapose vernacular and Hebrew words. Speakers explore, out loud, the meaning that can be carried in a word, by drawing on semantic content in both Hebrew and the vernacular in three ways: using the context of the word in sacred and non-sacred text; connecting related words with the same or similar tri-consonantal Hebrew root; and drawing on more visceral or sonorous linkages like the aural similarity of certain words. This kind of lived religious hermeneutics often came up in my field research with Shoresh. As will become clear, it is a part of the field of authorization that constructs the relationship between kashrut and “eating Jewishly.”

In 2012, one year after its formal incorporation as a charitable organization, Shoresh launched an annual Food Conference, to explore the relationship between Jews and food. The conference involved local Jewish academics, rabbis, and community members, and sought to include Jewish Torontonians across the sectarian spectrum. So far Shoresh has succeeded in achieving this goal: participants at three consecutive conferences included a small number of
Orthodox Jews, more Conservative and Reform Jews, Reconstructionists, independent minyanim members, and secular Jews.

The conference welcomes non-Jewish participants also, including some Christians involved in the ecological food movement, and Muslims from local food- and ecologically-minded organizations. Samira Kanji, president of Noor Cultural Centre, the mosque introduced in chapter two, was an invited panelist on a conference session on religious slaughter in Canada in 2012, and Fahim Alwan, the owner of a halal organic butchery and grocery store in Toronto who is featured in chapter four, attended and collaborated on discussions of religious and ethical meat in 2013. Most of the conference sessions, though, were not inter-religiously comparative. Rather, they focused on resources in the Jewish tradition for thinking about food, cooking, agriculture, and ecology.

Some conference sessions involved the development of practical skills, like pickling vegetables. Others aimed at deep discussions of biblical text. Some took up stories of Jewish forebears; some cultivated practices like “Jewish mindfulness” in eating, and some were centred on Shoresh’s other activities, including their current major farm project. Bela Farm is now a 114-acre tract of land leased to Shoresh, forming their centre for “land-based Judaism” in Hillsburgh, Ontario. I attended pilot programs in Jewish agriculture and food that Shoresh held at Bela Farm between 2012 and 2015, and the farm was officially launched as a programming and food-producing site in 2016.  

75 An article based on an earlier version of this chapter appeared in Scripta in 2014, reflecting a time before the farm launched.
In order to understand Shoresh’s development of “eating Jewishly,” both as it is explicitly discussed in programs, and as it is exemplified in experiences like the kollels and other events I describe below, Shoresh should be understood in its particular North American context. In brief, Shoresh is a significant group in the landscape of the Jewish food movement, which arises as a part of a larger food movement that coalesces largely in response to increased popular concern with animal, labourer, and environmental abuses in industrial food.

**Industrial kashrut and the (Jewish) food movement**

As problems in factory farming, agribusiness, and the industrial food system have come more and more urgently into public view, there has been an attendant crisis of faith in the industrial systems which govern kashrut in contemporary North America. The Jewish food movement intersects with a wider food movement at a number of locations, and in complex ways. As Sue Fishkoff shows in a thorough journalistic exploration of the kosher market, many Jewish and non-Jewish Americans have understood kashrut as an alternative to the conventional food system. Fishkoff refers to the iconic Hebrew National ad campaign which states that their kosher food products “answer to a[...] higher authority.”\(^76\) She explains that Americans believe that kosher food is “better … cleaner [and] worth the money” when compared with conventional food.\(^77\) She finds that “86 percent of the nation’s 11.2 million kosher consumers are not religious Jews,” and argues that this fact is due to a “perception … that kosher food is cleaner, safer, better


\(^{77}\) Ibid., 4. See also 275-6.
… of higher quality … more healthy.” Increasingly, that perception is beginning to shift: many of the criticisms leveled at the conventional food system generally in terms of treatment of animals, treatment of workers, environmental impact, and healthfulness, are now also leveled at the kashrut industry.

Jewish faith in kashrut has been shaken by several controversies over the history of kashrut in North America. Some of these controversies have functioned to reinforce the authority of kashrut, as with the history of kosher meat fraud in the U.S. in the twentieth century. Controversies of this kind resulted in various forms of tightening: the inflation to glatt kosher as the standard for kosher meat among certification agencies; an increase in oversight; the privatization of kashrut through kosher certification bodies; and industrial kashrut. In this case, the tightening of restrictions into their recent industrial form offered important protections against abuses like meat fraud, for Jews who purchase kosher food as well as for those embedded in the production and oversight processes, relative to the self-governance system.

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79 Fishkoff, Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority passim and inf.


81 Glatt, smooth, refers to the smoothness of an animal’s lungs, which must be examined and found to be lesion-free in order to meet this higher standard.

Other controversies have thrown light on abuses that appear to have occurred within the bounds of standards of *kashrut*, or at least, were deemed by certain authorities not to contravene them. The most notable of these is the controversy at AgriProcessors’ *glatt kosher* slaughterhouse in Postville, Iowa. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) released a video in 2004 depicting what has been construed as inhumane slaughter at AgriProcessors, before the plant itself was the object of U.S. government immigration raids over human rights abuses in 2008. AgriProcessors ultimately went bankrupt, but the shockwaves of the scandal continued to be felt in the Jewish community.  

These two sorts of controversy have been framed as separate, but they are perhaps more related than not. Proponents of industrial kashrut argue that Postville is erroneously marshaled as evidence against industrial kashrut because violations were of a non-kashrut nature. However, other reports on Postville indicate that Orthodox authorities did indeed question whether slaughter captured on film at AgriProcessors violated kashrut. This latter work suggests that there is reason to admit Postville as evidence of failure of industrial kashrut to meet its own

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84 Timothy Lytton, who has written in defense of industrial kashrut, writes:  
The Postville scandal […] arose out of allegations related to labor, environmental, and financial crimes, not—notably—problems with the operation’s kosher standards. Thus, while the Postville scandal offers insights into the failures of industrial meat production generally, it does not support an indictment of kosher meat certification. Of course, retail scandals involving local butchers fraudulently selling treyf beef and poultry as kosher continue to occur, although there is no evidence to suggest that these incidents reflect a fraud rate comparable to the 40 to 65 percent estimated fraud rates in New York City in the early twentieth century.


standard; more importantly for the present analysis, however, is the live question of what kashrut rules in or out, on which challenges to particular kosher certifications rest. While some hold that labour justice and environmental abuse have as obvious a link to kashrut as the proximity of meat and milk, the question of animal suffering is nearer to the discursive heart of the debate. 86

Irrespective of whether conditions are characterized as worse or better under either traditional communal regulation or industrial regulation (and for whom), these latter controversies have in the current moment served to bolster a larger questioning of kashrut, in both its orthodox interpretation and its industrial form, in relation to Jewish life. Such questioning has in some cases contributed to calls to abandon kashrut; in other cases, it has motivated calls for a revised, expanded, or renewed understanding of kashrut.

**Jewish Food Ethics**

The Jewish food movement, in its basic form, is concerned with finding Jewish answers to problems in the conventional food system. Insofar as it is primarily about making food choices that ultimately result in a more ethical food system, the Jewish food movement is political. 87 The Jewish food movement claims key authors of the wider food movement, including Michael Pollan and Jonathan Safran Foer, who both allow their relationship with Judaism to emerge in

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86 The issue of animal suffering is also clearly related to debates about whether kosher slaughter is an acceptable form of slaughter in the eyes of the nation state. This problem is further explored in my postdoctoral research on “Slaughter, the Somatic, and the State.”

their writing. It also draws on Jewish theological texts, particularly those dealing with the environment, to develop its own literature.

One key authorizing text of the Jewish food movement is an edited volume from CCAR Press, *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic.* SACRED TABLE was prefigured by Hazon’s sourcebook outlining the basics of the movement, descriptively subtitled “Hazon’s curriculum on Jews, food and contemporary life.” NIGEL SAVAGE, founder and president of Hazon and one of the authors of the sourcebook, also wrote the preface to *Sacred Table.* Sacred Table, coming out of the Reform movement, typifies the new Reform approach to food, cultivating personal spiritual experience while also deriving ethical principles from Jewish sources.

As we will see, *Sacred Table* is instructive because it dwells on the key concepts the Jewish food movement pulls from American Jewish history and biblical Jewish tradition, and because these concepts also resonate with the wider food movement.

Like Hazon, Shoresh takes both an intellectual and a practical approach to its work. Shoresh staff members have strong Jewish educational backgrounds, as well as practical farming experience from the contemporary Jewish Food Movement and the new stream of Jewish ecological learning initiatives that are now collated as ‘Jewish Outdoor, Food and Environmental Education (JOFEE) experiences.’ Hazon coined the term JOFEE, publicizing it with their report,

88 Zamore, *The Sacred Table.*


90 On the Reform movement’s particular approach to kashrut and Jewish food, begin with Gross, “Continuity and Change in Reform Views of Kashrut 1883–2002: From the T’reifah Banquet to Eco-Kashrut.”
‘Seeds of Opportunity: A national study of Immersive Jewish Outdoor, Food and Environmental Education (JOFEE).’ Shoresh is embracing the acronym, which fits well with the programming Risa wanted to bring to Canada in 2008. Shoresh staff members all have Jewish educational backgrounds and practical farming experience, often from previous participation in the Modern Jewish Food Movement and in JOFEE experiences. In Shoresh’s programs, Jewish food is engaged in various ways: by growing and harvesting it, preparing it, reading about it, talking about it, and eating it.

The food movement has critiqued the conventional food system for animal mistreatment, environmental degradation, and social injustice; its Reform iteration has moved from a historical ambivalence about kashrut, to a desire to excavate a multivalent kashrut that addresses contemporary concerns. The Jewish food movement in general looks to Jewish sources for a Jewish food ethic that confronts ethical problems. The Zamore text draws on biblical and rabbinic literature in order to explore and develop the key principles of a Jewish ethical tradition related to food. The key principles are bal tashchit (do not destroy), tza’ar ba’alei chayim (the suffering of living beings- to be avoided), oshek ([financial] oppression [of a worker]- to be avoided), tzedek (justice), sh’mirat haguf (guarding one’s health), and tikkun olam (the repair of

91 Informing Change, 2014.

92 For more information on the Modern Jewish Food Movement, see Andrea Most and Aldea Mulhern, “Contemporary Jewish Food Movement” in “Jews and Food” Oxford Bibliographies Online: Jewish Studies (2014).

Many of the articles in the volume take up one or more of these terms in order to excavate its appearance in biblical and rabbinic literature, and then apply it to contemporary cases from the food system, from cruel animal farming practices to abusive conditions for farm workers.

The nature of the relationship between the dietary laws as they have been conventionally understood, and Jewish ethical principles from the rest of halacha and Jewish tradition, is open to debate, and in the process of being debated. Questions, about whether kashrut should include ethical principles; whether it is these principles, and not kashrut, that are relevant to contemporary Jewish life; or whether kashrut is necessary but not sufficient for Jews who are concerned about food, all animate Shoresh’s conversations around ‘eating Jewishly.’ This work is done in part by constructing the discursive object ‘food,’ and then bringing ‘Jewish tradition’ to bear on it.

**Authoring and Authorizing “Eating Jewishly”**

I first noticed the phrase ‘eating Jewishly’ in the context of Shoresh’s food conferences. “Eating Jewishly,” a discursive formation in development, arises within Shoresh’s mandate to bring Toronto Jews together to deepen community and practice, while recognizing a diversity of Jewish perspectives. In order to meet this goal, ‘eating Jewishly’ must be capacious enough to accommodate all of the members of the Shoresh community, not just those who keep kosher. Simultaneously, it has to be specific enough to address the needs of the organization and

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community, by fostering relationships and advancing principles of social and ecological justice. It also has to be unassailably Jewish.

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad makes a set of interlocking points around a notion of authorizing discourse that is useful for understanding activities at Shoresh. Asad interrogates “the authorizing process by which ‘religion’ is created,” and how “authorizing processes represent practices, utterances, or dispositions so that they can be discursively related to general (cosmic) ideas of order.” Asad further observes that “religion requires authorized practice and authorizing doctrine [and] there is always a tension between them […] which underlies the creative role of institutional power.” Rather than a definition of religion, this is a reflection on how power works discursively. Such a focus on power allows us to pay attention to social processes of knowing. Social processes of knowing construct knowledge as their object. Authoritative discourse, taking this view, produces a map of possibilities for knowing, and an implicit framework for evaluating those possibilities. The function of this framework is discerning good from bad, true from false, legitimate from illegitimate.

Shoresh as an organization is attempting to get it right in two ways: by fulfilling a sense of right orientation, and by being authentically Jewish. The persistent (though not totally unequivocal) conviction that this is reasonable and correct, or at least possible, animates the organization. Understanding Shoresh’s cultivation of “eating Jewishly” as the development of a

95 Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*.
96 Ibid., 37.
97 Ibid., 39.
lived religious foodway involves attending to what is said and done around food: it also involves attending to the means by which things are said and done, and the conditions under which such sayings and doings are made possible and legible. Put another way, noting the authorizing practices according to which Shoresh’s interventions are realized helps show how their intervention works, both in terms of what it means for them, and what it means for scholars of food and religion.

**The Shoresh Food Conference 2013**

*On that chilly January morning in 2013,* the main-floor auditorium at the Jewish Community Centre, at the corner of Bloor and Spadina in the buzzing Annex neighborhood of downtown Toronto, is filling up with people. The people are community members of varying age and occupation: some in their 20s, as I was, or in their 30s; many a bit older, married, with their own families; some young professionals who work in technology; a smattering of professors from a local university; at least a few rabbis; people who work in the not-for-profit sector, avid gardeners, and many people I do not (yet) know. The crowd feels energized, excited, demanding.

It is 10 A.M. and full Canadian winter, and perhaps one hundred people have arrived on time for the beginning of the conference. More will arrive later in the day. Today it’s been snowing, and everyone here braved the Sunday morning commute, whether through slushy car-, bus-, and cab-filled city streets, or under them, taking the first morning run of the subway train. Parking, for those who drove from surrounding areas, is hard to find in the downtown core. At $115 per ticket, the buy-in to attend the conference is a commitment to finance the organic and kosher food, the workshop materials, and the work it takes to put a large event together. In the spirit of access, there is an option to donate to a scholarship fund at the time of ticket purchase, which finances $36 student-or-senior tickets, and community members and organizations
including the Hillel of Greater Toronto donated money to subsidize these. The event sold out well before conference day, and Shoresh introduced sliding-scale priced session-only tickets, good for entry but not including the communal lunch, so that more people could come and listen. These are identified as “standing room only” tickets, although there are extra seats available for every session and event except the lunch, and in some of the more practical sessions, everyone stands anyway. The idea of “standing room only” adds a feeling of desirability and excitement to the event, playing off of the sold-out status and suggesting that tickets are in high demand. There are work-trades available also, and I was able to attend in exchange for working on prep and setup days, and at the conference itself.

The event we are all here for was advertised online and around town with a white, letter-sized poster featuring the tag-line “Kosher? Local? Organic? Oy Vey!” above an image of a big, unlabeled, seemingly homemade jarful of pickles. The description on the poster invites the viewer to “Join rabbis, farmers, foodies, and activists to explore the intersection of Jewish tradition and contemporary food issues.” This construction (“join x, y, and z to explore the intersection of a and b”) displays the academic idiom that marks some of the members of the Shoresh team and board of directors. The sentence foregrounds the interface of kinds of activity engaged in, and types of person who care. Farmers and foodies who produce and consume food are invited to engage with rabbis and activists who think about religion and politics: together, they will all think about how to live.

98 “Oy vey!” is a Yiddish exclamation, expressing frustration or dismay. It is associated with Jewishness in popular culture. For another example of the use of “Oy vey” to index Jewishness, see chapter three.
The poster makes a notably broad invitation. The image of an unmarked pickle jar evokes Ashkenazi Jewry, to people who know to read it that way. More broadly, an unlabeled pickle jar is evocative of the technical skills of canning and related domestic food production and preservation which are increasingly valorized in the food movement generally: The food movement is characterized by nostalgia for a naturalistic past marked by local food, slow food, artisanality, and “connection,” as associated with domestic knowledge and labour.

Jewishness is visible here in a particular way. The advertised lunch is kosher, and the event location is a Miles Nadal JCC, a big and visible Jewish Community Centre at one of the best-known intersections in the city. It is also a Jewishness that is completely at home in English and Downtown. The word “Jewish” appears only once in regular-sized print in the descriptive phrase “Jewish tradition,” and twice in tiny print in two of the sponsors’ logos. There’s at least one non-Jewish sponsor listed: United Way, a longstanding international charitable organization
with Christian religious roots. We are assured that lunch is included in the ticket price, which is not mentioned: the lunch is central to the conference experience. The poster, and the event it advertises, aims to be accessible to all who might attend, including Orthodox Jews; at the same time, the event and the poster appear to be hip, and fairly unorthodox.

“Food,” the largest word on the poster, appears three times, and rendered in capital letters in the centre as if by a handmade ink-stamp. Everyone can relate to food. The second biggest word is Shoresh, the name of the organization, and recognizable as Hebrew for “root” to those who know. There are no Hebrew characters on the poster: all the Hebrew, and Yiddish in the case of the stereotypically Jewish exclamation “Oy Vey!,” is transliterated into English. “Kosher” appears twice, and interestingly: the first time, in the context of qualifiers of food “Kosher? Local? Organic?,” showing how hard it is to figure out what to eat, among variously marked food products: “Oy Vey!” indeed. The second time, it qualifies the lunch—yes, the food is kosher, it assures—but it occurs in the middle of a fascinating string of description: a “delicious, vegetarian, kosher, sustainable, and culturally-inspired” lunch. This string is a map of the field of terms that are important enough to note in the advertisement, and they index aesthetics, ethics, religiously Jewish ritual or legalistic correctness, environmental consciousness, and cultural Jewishness.

**A Performative Plenary**

We attendees greet our friends and take our seats in the auditorium, and prepare to hear the conference’s plenary address from Risa Alyson Cooper, Shoresh’s executive director. She

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begins, characteristically, with the words “Bruchim haba’im. Welcome.” These three words take a mere moment to articulate, but their work is much bigger than that. Even to an onlooker unfamiliar with Risa’s propensity, a Jewish educator’s propensity, to invoke Hebrew and immediately translate it in the process of teaching-talking, her rhythm and vocal tone suggest that the second part of the sentence explains the first part, that bruchim haba’im means “welcome.” To those who can read the social cues, Risa herself forms the content of the moment, a healthful, large-eyed 30-something woman with uncovered, unprocessed hair, dressed in earth-toned cisgendered clothes that are both presentation-appropriate and legibly ‘granola,’ she holds authority signaled by her presence at the podium beside the projector screen showing the Shoresh slide. Her Hebrew flows easily, and her voice is clear, that of a native English-speaker but inflected with dialect traits typical of Ashkenazi Jewry and Northeast American Jewishness. Risa weaves together a mood of frankness, intimacy, and wisdom when she speaks to people about things that are Jewish.

In her plenary address to the inaugural Shoresh Food Conference the year before, in 2012, Risa had welcomed a diverse group of participants and oriented them toward a common field of vision. Risa situated that first food conference within what she described as a “5000 year old conversation of what and how and when we eat.” Risa’s narrative explicitly placed the “conversation” in a version of biblical history, by invoking the five-thousand-year dating scheme of the Hebrew Calendar. In this history, the five-thousand-year figure refers roughly to the

100 I take these quotations from Risa’s plenaries at the Shoresh food conferences I attended during my fieldwork. Transcripts of the plenaries are available on the Shoresh blog, http://shoreshprograms.blogspot.ca/.
creation of the world or of the biblical figure Adam. This calendar is agricultural, and the planting, growing, and harvesting cycle is keyed to the climate of biblical Israel, which is not the same agricultural cycle that obtains in other lands. Here, that calendar cannot be a tool of agriculture, but is rather a tool of identification, one that emplaces this conference and Shoresh’s work in a particularly Jewish narrative history. It frames the “conversation of what and how and when we eat” as utterly Jewish.

The notion of “eating Jewishly” was already on the table in 2012; in 2013, that language became central. The 2013 plenary was explicit in its desire to simultaneously create and use the concept “eating Jewishly.” In the 2013 plenary, the language echoed and developed the move Risa made the previous year: “[A] great questioning [is] happening today within our community… a questioning that is not new… a questioning that has been happening for the last 5000 years… what does it mean to eat Jewishly?”

With this phrasing, Risa and the organization she directs place the phrase “eating Jewishly” at the heart of food and Judaism, using it to capture aspects of tradition and history which are left out by narrower categories of Jewish observance. Risa uses Hebrew terminology, mentions Shoresh’s relationships with local and umbrella Jewish organizations, and speaks of “Jewish traditions,” “Jewish values,” and “Jewish practices” that underpin Shoresh sites and activities. Shoresh events are presented as fundamentally Jewish and (yet) in principle open to all who wish to come. This presentation combines careful precision and careful generality. It is motivated by a principle of inclusion arising from Shoresh’s mandate to deepen Jewish

101 Hebrew and Islamic calendars are introduced in “On Transliteration, Translation, and Terms,” p. xiii
engagement across the various divides that fragment Jewish community. Developing “eating Jewishly” is thus an exercise in developing “Jewish.”

Risa speaks at length about Shoresh, in terms of “we:” “who we are, where we come from and where we’re headed.” She reports on a number of exciting projects both actualized and in development, and the audience seems engaged, by the content, by the pictures, by the ideas, accomplishments, and plans. Risa describes some interfaith collaboration and considerable community-development work, and introduces a wealth of Jewish concepts Shoresh uses to organize the work. These organizing concepts are grounded in and authorized by more pithy Hebrew words. At this time Risa also reveals the existence of, and exciting plans for, Bela Farm.

What captivates me, captivated me at the inaugural conference in 2012, and will captivate me at the next conference in 2014 and probably long after, is the thread of “eating Jewishly,” spoken about as a contemporary fact, an ancient practice, and a hatchling goal, in direct and indirect ways in plenaries (current, past, future) and throughout the activities of Shoresh and the people who encounter Shoresh and enliven it. The idea of “eating Jewishly” is both definitive and plastic, and highly performative in its descriptive characterization. Risa calls upon us in the audience:

Stand up if you work with food professionally. Stand up if you consider yourself to keep a kosher home. Stand up if you say a blessing before eating. Stand up if you transited from outside the Toronto area to be here today. Stand up if you think latkas beat hamentashen. Stand up if you, in the last few years, have tried being gluten free. Stand up if you donated something to the Shoresh silent auction or to today’s lunch. Stand up if you have ever witnessed or participated in an animal being killed and prepared for food. Stand up if you grow your own vegetables. Stand up if you have ever tried kale chips.

The standing and sitting made participants smile, and can be read as good presentation tactics that encourage people to attend and feel included. Another way to describe it is to say that it
performed, revealed, and enacted the relevance of the gathering. The verbal and physical conjunction, initiated by the speaker, turned an audience, that is a group of listeners, into a group of participants of a different kind, a group of moving, embodied performing subjects. Audience members performed themselves, to themselves and to one another, in a series of identificatory acts that smooth over differences to unite people. Sitting and standing enacted link-tying between otherwise disparate acts of eating and not-eating that the sitting and standing were made to represent. Risa’s speech act produced willing embodied identifications in the participants in the room. In this view, the physical performance itself argued in favor of bringing the ideas, and thus the people, together.

“Eating Jewishly, here”

In the inaugural conference the previous year, Risa mentioned eating Jewishly only once in her plenary. But the precise context in which she mentioned it was an important one. She said,

All of the sessions today seek to collectively answer not just the greater question of “what does it mean to eat Jewishly,” but more specifically, “what does it mean to eat Jewishly here?” Today is about exploring how we as a community can work together and [e]ffect real change in our local food system.

Risa’s emphasis on “here,” on a sense of place and of the present moment, is a statement that is like the slogan “Canadian soil, Jewish roots:” it is a claim that the experience of Jewishness can be rooted in the local, in contemporary Canada. In contrast to the notion of the rootless or wandering Jew of the diaspora, this is the sense of being planted, drawing nourishment, and thriving in the Canadian context. It could also be seen as an approach that gathers people together across varying community orientations toward a territorial Israel, whether figured as the land of a biblical nation, as a Zion outside of time, or as the post-1948 State. Shoresh’s programming constantly draws on texts relevant to the land of Israel, for
example, for agricultural laws relating to field-tending, crops, and the practice of *shmita*, the agricultural sabbatical mentioned in the introduction. At Shoresh, such texts are drawn on in a process of imagining how to live them here.

While I was with them, Shoresh did not directly address Israel as it pertains to either Judaism or Jewish life. Like many other Jewish groups, Shoresh is explicitly interested in Jewish revival. Shoresh’s approach is fundamentally land-oriented, but the land in question is Canadian land or a notion of “land” at large, rather than a geopolitical idea. Many of the active members of Shoresh, directors and participants alike, have ties to Israel, but this is not a requirement for participation. There are several kinds of land that figure in Shoresh’s ecology: all the lands on which Jews have lived and which they have cultivated; the land of Israel accessed through scripture or in imagination; the land of the State of Israel; North American farms cultivated in the history of Jewish migration in North America; current participation in the land-based-Judaism movement. In 2016, at the official opening ceremony for Bela Farm, I heard Risa speak to the history of the land on which we stood, once and still territory of First Nations peoples, later used by Irish and Scottish immigrants. Shoresh puts Jewish practices, Jewish food, and Jewish ecology at the centre of North American Jewish life. They are intentionally diverse, making space for being Jewish across Judaisms: their central orientation is toward living according to Jewish values. A lot, of course, consequently rests on the question of what counts as Jewish values.

Unlike an approach that wishes to preserve radical Jewish otherness, this framing speaks of a Jewry that, though it contains its own history, is also firmly rooted in a *here* rather than an elsewhere. Shoresh lays claim to the possibility and fullness of a local Jewishness, and links eating Jewishly inextricably to eating locally, without demanding overt precision about what
eating locally must mean. One sense of the term means eating locally-grown and seasonal food, but in another sense it refers simply to eating here, in this place, in Toronto, as a contribution to Jewish history. Everyone must eat where they are, and Jewish diaspora and globalized society both entail acts of eating that reference place and porous boundaries of heres and elsewheres. Thus eating Jewishly cannot mean only eating Israeli Jewish tabouleh or Ashkenazi brisket or Sephardic hamin, though it may encompass all those things. Rather, the implication of this particular sense of place is that a Jew living in Toronto can eat Jewishly, here, and in so doing can be at home here, rooted here.

Risa continues to speak, suggesting that being authentically Jewish in Toronto involves working together as a community to change the food system. For, and this seems to be an opinion shared by everyone who showed up that day, something is wrong with it. The target of the change is not only industrial kashrut, but the food system at large: the idea is that Jewish people have a reason to want the food system to work better and to be better, and that this better is better for everyone. In this sense, the desired good is understood to be universally relevant.

**Four Questions**

In the plenary, Risa asked a series of rhetorical questions that help elucidate the contours of “eating Jewishly” and correspond to many of the concerns of the participants in the Jewish food movement and the larger food movement generally. As will be seen here and in the narratives and interviews below, this portion of the plenary sheds light on the concerns many Shoresh participants have with conventional understandings of Jewish food practice, and industrial food practice. The questions occur in four clusters: eating Jewishly as eating Jewish food, eating Jewishly as keeping kosher, eating Jewishly as a practice of Jewish ethics, and eating Jewishly as
engagement with the divine. Further, Risa’s plenary shows the network of ideas that are involved in contextualizing food concerns as Jewish concerns.

I. Jewish foods

Posing the first question, “does eating Jewishly mean eating foods that are culturally Jewish?,” Risa tells a brief story about United Bakers in Toronto, and how her Ashkenazi grandmother “swears by” their bagels. But, she asks, “What if I am a vegan, gluten[-]intolerant, Ashkenazi Jew …can I still eat Jewishly if challah, matza ball soup, mandel broit, brisket, bagels with lox and cream cheese […] are not a part of my diet?”

The juxtaposition is familiar to this audience. For a long time Ashkenazi Jewry made up the bulk of North American Jewish culinary culture. Heavy with wheat and animal products (eggs, milk, meat) these dishes are both vividly Jewish, and vividly at odds with common ethical or health-related dietary restrictions like being vegan or gluten-free. Risa is pressing on an important division occurring in the community. Not only do people who wish to eat their cultural foods find their choices radically restricted by their other dietary needs: they also may find that their ethics or physical concerns create a separation between them and their own families at table. This is the very kind of separation which Jewish dietary law elsewhere erected between Jew and gentile.  

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102 Feeley-Harnik, The Lord’s Table: Eucharist and Passover in Early Christianity; Cooper, Eat and Be Satisfied; Kraemer, Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages; Fishkoff, Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority; Freidenreich, Foreigners and Their Food.
II. Keeping kosher

The second cluster of questions is more complex even than the first, and is approximately twice as long. It begins, “Does eating Jewishly mean eating foods prepared according to the traditional laws of kashrut? Who decides if something is kosher?” Risa here troubles reliance on *hekshers*, the industrial symbols of kosher oversight that appear on food labels. She does this by invoking a past of Jewish food before industrial kashrut, and by invoking the traditional authority of women.

100 years ago, the women in our family, the keepers of the kitchen, they decided if something was kosher. They knew the butcher, the cheese monger, the baker […] As our food system developed into a global food system, a system where our food is often grown/raised, packaged and prepared, out of sight, certifying agencies became important in helping consumer make informed food choices.

After briefly noting the benefits of access to industrial kosher certification, Risa turns to some of the drawbacks that concern the people gathered at the conference: “So what happens now that we are seeing a move back to smaller, locally-based food systems? For many, certified kosher has become the new standard of kosher. Can something be kosher without a heksher?”

The discussion here is of the changing history of kashrut, from community-based decision-making to an industrialized globalized system that is costly and pervasive enough to shut out small local businesses. Risa voices the concerns of food movement participants who wish to eat local sustainable foods and support small local businesses; she is also giving voice to a struggle faced at Bela Farm. The farm, where many of us will dig, plant, and study texts in programs over the next few years, will produce fresh foods that need to be prepared and preserved, like the cucumbers that will be pickled there. It may be prohibitively expensive for them to attain and maintain kosher certification.
There is a gendered dimension of this mutually-constructing juxtaposition of an industrial kashrut over against another kind of kashrut. Industrial kashrut, like much of formal food business, is dominated by men. In Risa’s destabilization of this hegemonic discourse, she draws on women’s history as “keepers of the kitchen.” When I raised the question of gender in interviews with Shoresh organizers, the question was often met with surprise and resistance. People frequently told me that men and women both participate in Shoresh; several male participants told me about how much they cook; many female participants gave examples of men sharing food labour, writing food books, and so on, as examples that gender does not matter in the food movement; one gender-nonbinary participant offered carefully developed ideas about gender but not in connection to food practice, and one trans participant did not engage the question. Gender comes up, but it isn’t at the centre, and it is handled with a light touch.

It is also clear in the literature on food and Judaism that the institution of kashrut been dominated by male rabbinical authority, whereas the practice of kashrut has often been the purview of women. 103 What kashrut actually is looks different if one attends to the institution of kashrut primarily as mediated by rabbinic authority, versus looking at kashrut as a historical practice. 104 While not a central focus of the work at Shoresh, gender is clearly an important aspect of the narrative Risa draws on to open space for challenging industrial kashrut. It is furthermore noteworthy that Shoresh features participation by diverse community members, has male and female representation on its board of directors, and is markedly female-led. The organization’s original founder, the executive director of the current organization, her supporting

103 See introduction, p.25-6.
104 Ibid.
directors of programs, the chair of the advisory board of directors for the organization, and the owner of the farmland charitably leased to Shoresh, are all Jewish women. The reconfiguration of the authority I describe in the discursive formation “kashrut” should therefore be understood to be significantly connected with the authorization of women.

III. Jewish ethics and values

The third cluster of questions is the longest, nearly four times the size of the fourth and final cluster, about God. It is the most explicit location of the central thread in the logic of “eating Jewishly.” The question that Risa historicizes is a flashpoint of debate in the Jewish food movement: “Does eating Jewishly mean eating in a way that reflects Jewish ethics and values beyond kashrut?”

Our food system has changed radically in the last 60-70 years. Food today is more complicated than ever. [...] Some are arguing that we need to expand the definition of kosher – can we call something kosher, which literally means “fit” to eat, if it has been grown in soil sprayed with known carcinogenic chemicals? [...] If we are packaging or serving it in Styrofoam? [...] If we know that those who helped grow or prepare our food were not paid fairly or given a safe working environment? [...] If the animals were raised in conditions resulting in incredible suffering?

Here the “fitness” implied by kashrut is rhetorically juxtaposed with recent changes in the food system that incorporates animal abuse, poisonous chemicals, and environmental degradation. This questioning of the kosher-ness of carcinogens, Styrofoam, and abusive labor and animal husbandry practices, is based on a fundamental inference about the relationship between kashrut and Jewish human, animal, and environmental ethics.

The idea that food in particular ties together different dimensions of Jewish ethics, and different kinds of Jewishness, is the heart and blood of the present Jewish food intervention. Because of hekshers, which are industrial marks of kashrut certification on packaged food
overseen by inspection agencies in economies of scale, the most religiously orthodox Jewish diet today may be among the most processed, the least healthy, the most heavily packaged, and the most wasteful. This fact is an intolerable contradiction for some of the people in the audience, including some of the conference panelists. It is a persuasive piece of evidence of the need for change, for many of the others. Risa continues:

There are those who say kosher is kosher (we don’t need to redefine kosher), AND that does not give us permission to willing[ly] overlook our traditions ethical teachings when it comes to the food choices we make. Tzedek, tzedek tir dof… justice, justice you shall pursue. Justice for those by whose hands we are fed. Justice for the earth. Justice for the non-human animals in our food system. Justice for our own bodies. Justice for those who are hungry in our community.

Risa asks whether kashrut should be re-understood, or whether what is needed is kashrut and food that reflects Jewish principles like tzedek (justice): “The Torah commands us to pursue justice. Eating has become a political act. So maybe eating Jewishly means embodying the fullness of Judaism’s ethical principles as they apply to our current food system.” Linking justice and politics this way, Risa puts food ethics at the heart of Judaism and citizenship, or at the heart of being Jewish and being a person.

This orientation to justice suffuses Shoresh programming and constitutes one of the main “Jewish values” held by the organization. Justice is not a self-explanatory category, but it is one example of the deployment of ethical categories in the religious food movement this dissertation describes. The point is that, while it is possible to explore the negotiation of particular notions of
the good at work in discursive formations of ethics, it is crucial to note that a major force
energizing the different examples I analyze is the very construction of the discourse as ethical.\(^\text{105}\)

Risa, who keeps a kosher home and strives to eat ethically, voices the desire to hold
kashrut alongside Jewish ethics. Relying on the biblical notion of tzedek, justice, she lists
examples of justice that knit together environmentalism, animal issues, and social justice issues
in the shape of food. Risa rhetorically reveals food to be the material of politics and of ethics
when she states “The Torah commands us to pursue justice. Eating has become a political act.”

IV. The Divine

The fourth and last line of questioning is the briefest, and it is about God. God is spoken
of obliquely, with language like “ultimate Creator” and “divine” alongside “energy” and “life.”

Does eating Jewishly mean creating space for the divine at our tables?
Does it mean acknowledging the role of an ultimate Creator, an unifying
energy or breath of life? Does it mean saying a blessing, expressions of
gratitude? According to the Talmud, it is forbidden for a person to
enjoying anything of this world without a blessing, and if anyone [does]
s/he commits sacrilege […] Does eating Jewishly mean eating with
intention?

Here there are hints of one kind of individualist model for religion. God is not invoked as
an inscrutable lawmaker, but as the God with whom Jews are in relationship. Awareness of God
allows ordinary experiences of food (or other enjoyment) to be elevated, or to be revealed as
already elevated, rather than becoming debased by lack of the proper orientation. “Eating
Jewishly” is connected with intention, and intention to eat Jewishly is a cultivated orientation
toward a naturalized idea of sacredness.

\(^{105}\) This phenomenon is the subject of chapter four.
Here also is a possible location for an exclusivist defense of “eating Jewishly.” If it is merely a question of eating according to ethics, non-Jews might hit upon the correct ethics. The addition of “intention” to “eating Jewishly” contributes another line of authorization according to which particular food acts, or particular eaters, can be included and excluded: a person may be admissible into “eating Jewishly” if they are conversant in an appropriate narrative field. A discussion of gratitude to something like a creator links directly to this idea of intention, a concept which often appears in discussions of “eating Jewishly” encountered in relation to Shoresh. The final sentence of the final cluster is another rhetorical question: “Does eating Jewishly mean eating with intention?”

These rhetorical questions soften the powerful challenge that lies within the plenary: not only a challenge to the authority of kashrut, arising from its historicization and critique, but also a challenge to Jews to eat Jewishly and to become politically involved in the food system in which they are implicated as consumers, as subjects. Health, tradition, ethics, politics, and God are all invoked here, in that order. They are all placed on our plates, manifested as a function of our food choices. Risa has also offered a way into the movement for people who are otherwise marginalized by other discourses of Jewish food as accessible only through kosher brisket or mandelbroit. Ethics and politics have been placed alongside health, tradition, and orthodox religiosity. Importantly, the questions Risa asks thus function to create space for a multiplicity of participation and a range of responses to the call to eat Jewishly.

Risa has used questions to open up the rhetorical landscape, and bring diverse participants to the same field of vision. Next, Risa integrates the possibilities by grounding them in firm orienting statements, planting seeds where she has tilled:
Jewish texts and teachings are clear—there are rules and traditions that govern our relationship with food—how we grow it, how we prepare it, how we eat it, how we share it with others. Our community has been exploring the nature of our relationship with food for over 5000 years and today is about moving that conversation forward. Which is why we have brought you all together—foodies, chefs, rabbis, farmers, students, teachers—we need everyone’s voice at the table, we need to think holistically about what it means to eat Jewishly here, today.

By speaking about “5000 years” of “rules and traditions that govern our relationship with food,” Risa discursively makes food an object of Jewish tradition. In this way kashrut is positioned beside a swath of other, relatively less thought about, Jewish texts and traditions related to food, and these texts and traditions of the distant and recent past are constructed as related to food, and as “clear.” This move has appeal for those in the audience, and for many others I interviewed and participated in programs with who are introduced below. Contemporary problems and the legacies of human food history come together at Shoresh events under the rubric of “food.” In Shoresh-curated activities, and even in people’s conversations, these are joined with texts including dietary laws, ritual instructions, agricultural and municipal planning texts, charity and justice-related texts, and scriptural market models: the extremely varied complement of Jewish texts from which food laws and foodways are derived. Seen in this way, Shoresh’s work in the area of “eating Jewishly” is a complex of discourses, linguistic and behavioral together, which seek and thereby construct an authentically Jewish matrix from which to derive answers to the particularly contemporary problems of eating.

**Authoring Orthodoxies and Orthopraxies**

“It is too often forgotten,” Asad writes,

106 From Risa’s plenary at the Shoresh Food Conference 2013. A transcript of the entire plenary is available on the Shoresh blog, http://shoreshprograms.blogspot.ca/.
that the process of determining orthodoxy in conditions of change and contest includes attempts at achieving discursive coherence, at representing the present within an authoritative narrative that includes positive evaluations of past events and persons. Because such authority is a collaborative achievement between narrator and audience, the former cannot speak in total freedom; there are conceptual and institutional conditions that must be attended to if discourses are to be persuasive.\footnote{Asad, Genealogies of Religion, 210.}

Part of the power of authorizing discourse is that it is constructed “on the ground of” orthodoxy. That is to say that for the religious subjects in question, coming out on top is necessarily a matter of being \textit{right}. This helps us see that one who enters into such discourse with the goal of being right is constrained by a set of possibilities for rightness. Part of being right is “achieving discursive coherence” where the object of coherence is the relevant portions of “past events and persons”; another way to say this is to say \textit{tradition}.

This notion of discursive coherence with authoritative narrative throws light onto a part of tradition that is important to acknowledge: to claim coherence with tradition is perhaps to situate oneself \textit{within} that tradition. Thus tradition itself is, whatever else it is, a constant re-negotiation of the past in terms of the present and of the present in terms of the past. Tradition, as it exists at Shoresh and elsewhere, is a collaborative achievement of the kind Asad describes.

This claim resonates, in an explanatory register, with the patterns of authorization at Shoresh and in the Jewish food movement generally. Intensive industrial farming and animal husbandry as it appears today in North America is recent, and is a radical departure from the reality of food production over most of the history of Jewish food law and tradition. Some of the changes, such as increased access for consumers or decreased cost of production, are seen as
improvements upon the earlier system; others are more troubling. The change and troubles have been, perhaps separately but certainly when taken together, sufficient to prompt the redescription Asad describes:

[Religious] classification forces specific questions onto people who belong to that tradition: Into which category does a given behavior fall? Is it really new, or is it an analogue of something whose classification is not in dispute? The application of these categories to behavior […] often involves an elaborate work of reconceptualizing the context itself in ways that aim to be plausible to [an audience of one’s co-religionists].

In particular, people at Shoresh question the relation between kashrut and other parts of halacha. This question of the role of ethics in Jewish law and practice presents a problem for classification on both descriptive and prescriptive levels. Tracing authority, here, is a matter of following which discursive threads achieve sufficient coherence across domains that they are considered plausible, tenable, and, I would add, hopeful. After all, religion here is being looked to, to bear the weight of truth or rightness about what a food system ought to look like. The critique of industrial kashrut as failing to meet expected standards, where such standards are figured in terms of religious ethics, has implications which transcend the bounds of Jewish consumption and sit squarely in the realms of the public and the political.

This authorization process, like any other, is a matter of navigating the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion: using some parts of tradition, but not others; marking certain kinds of innovation as authentic adjustments and others as anathema; balancing the value of openness with enough structure to remain recognizable and legitimate. The concepts “eating” and

108 Ibid., 212.
109 See chapter four.
“Jewish” are narrativized so that they are not separate concepts juxtaposed, but are instead terms that find fulfillment in one another: one can be particularly Jewish when one eats Jewishly; one can really eat when one eats Jewishly; one who does not eat Jewishly is missing out on both.

**On the ground, in the earth**

Shoresh programmers use the phrase “eating Jewishly” in order to capture and organize diverse food practices which might otherwise be seen as lines of fracture among Jews. They also use this phrase to cultivate an orientation toward mindful and meaningful engagement with food. But “eating Jewishly” is not only a topic discussed at conferences. It is alive in the practices of Shoresh participants, who give resonance and traction to ideas like “eating Jewishly” by their own participation and interpretation, involvement and resistance.

For many of the people I write about here, food and Judaism are relevant to one another in ways beyond the limits of familiar flavours or religious law and convention. Shoresh’s programs are practical and theoretical ways to explore the contours of the relationship between Judaism and food, by moving among religious text, Jewish history, modern political and ethical concerns, practical considerations like access and hunger and money, and interfaith connections ranging from Canadian identity to environmental stewardship. They only succeed, however, to the extent that they are taken up in the community; the community, in turn, has a lot to do with how the concepts originate, and how they are animated and refigured.

At Shoresh events people network, hear about local initiatives, share knowledge, build community, cultivate orientations to food, and make plans to continue to be involved. Or, as in the case of one person I interviewed, they listen, agree that the goals are worthy, but determine that “eating Jewishly” is unnecessary and not really authentically Jewish, and decide they are too
busy to come back. The people who do come back are not all the same, and they participate to varying degrees and take varying things with them from the experiences they have.

**Bela Farm: The first Bela kollel**

On May 19th and 20th, 2013, Shoresh held the first *kollel*, or study group, in a series of kollels planned for that summer. It was also the first group overnight stay at the new property, Bela Farm, which was in the process of being “visioned” and developed before its official opening in 2016. Between twenty and thirty people participated in that first kollel, ranging in age, culture, and gender expression and including a mother and her school-age daughters, an adult brother-and-sister pair, at least two couples, and, as a majority, a number of single adults in their twenties and thirties, more than half of whom were women. We came prepared to work the land, learn some skills, study Jewish text, cook kosher vegetarian communal meals, and sleep in the field. And use Bela Farm’s fancy new composting toilet.

People came and went as suited their schedules and preferences: as one woman told me, not everyone is young and wants to dig holes and sleep in a tent at night. It was the core group of twenty- and thirty-somethings who stayed for the duration of the kollel, people of varying kinds of Jewishness and levels of experience with farm work. Many participants came from the city of Toronto or its suburbs, and went up to Hillsburgh in rideshares we organized via the “Bela Farm Kollel #1” Facebook group. We brought our tents and gear, those of us who had them, or shared with others. The organizers stipulated on the e-invitation that no one would be turned away because of financial hardship, but most people bought tickets for $40 to spend two days exploring “land-based Judaism.”
After getting oriented, carrying water, and setting up our tents, we worked up our appetites by building frames for the new Shoresh beehives. In these hives, “Bela’s bees” would construct their combs, and honey would later be harvested in time for the sweet honey-and-apple ritual of Rosh Hashanah, in the fall of the same year. I sat on the soft ground in the shade of a tree, hammering bee-box frames assembly-line style with a hip Ashkenazi schoolteacher who has been my friend ever since; then took a break to set up tents in the sun with a heartfelt naturopath, with whom I am still in touch years after. These events do seem to build relationships.

Those of us with energy and strength spent the later part of the afternoon in the field called “the Meadow,” on the far side of the barn. In the Meadow, we dug holes and prepared the twelve plots in which, the next day, we would be burying the roots of young trees, lithe green stems not more than three feet high, with leaves few but lush and full of promise. These trees mark the “guilds” representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, understood to be descendants of Jacob’s sons as chronicled in Genesis/Bereshit. In the middle of the wide circle of guilds, each with its themed tree and small plants representing a son, there is an area which has been cleared of the tall grasses that, otherwise, surround everything. Perhaps twenty or thirty feet across, this space is the place where the structure already named “Dinah’s Tent” will be erected. Called after the only daughter of Jacob who is named in the Torah, Dinah’s Tent overlooks the fields, and serves as a meeting-place in the middle of the meadow. The structure will be composed of four strong, tall beams with a frame at the top. Around it, medicinal herbs, especially those associated with women, will be planted.

Some women quietly expressed anxieties about the visibility of a feminine symbolic in the Jewish food movement. One woman, for example, privately and back in the city, gave voice to the fear that too much environmentalism constitutes pagan earth-mother worship. She, like
many people I met through Shoresh, understands her vision of ethical life as grounded specifically in Jewish values, but at the same time I see her hedging against a deep anxiety that the values of Judaism are actually regressive and patriarchal, and that the core of traditional or textual Judaism is fundamentally monotheist and male rather than sustainable and female. Beneath the savvy of some people in both the Muslim and the Jewish iterations of the religious food movement, there is a fundamental tension between a hopeful belief that religion is authentically good and supports pluralism and sustainability, and a fearful belief that religion is always patriarchal and domination-seeking, positioned at odds with, rather than in connection with, the natural world.

This fear, confided in me rarely, but by serious environmentalists, lifelong religious people, and young alternative community members alike, is nowhere in sight among the participants in this first kollel, who have done a little or a lot of work on the different projects laid out for us. By the end of the afternoon, heat, work, and time had made people hungry, even with the pieces of oat bars we had snacked on. Around 5:30 or 6 P.M., those of us who volunteered for dinner duty retired to “the Studio” to prepare garlic and vegetables for stew. The owner of the farmland, who leases it to Shoresh, is a visual artist, and the back half of this building has an art studio space for her and her partner to work. The front half houses a lofted area, a broad and wide working island on wheels, and an L-shaped kitchenette with electricity, counter space, basic supplies, and running water.

For the three-to-six women who circulate through the kitchen duties, cooking together bonds some of us closely. At times, it also raises hackles when it is not clear who is in charge. More than one woman has ideas about what was best to do, and about what size the garlic and vegetables should be chopped to. There are not enough cutting boards and knives, frustrating
each person’s desire to control her own space and feel like she is contributing. In a way characteristic of the larger group of participants, everyone had something to say, an insight to impart, and the talking often takes precedence over the actual cooking. Still, most of the women already know each other reasonably well, and all make allies with tasks and with physical space. Gradually, the group slips into a pleasant, if not efficient, working ease: ingredients are prepared by our hands, almost as if independent of our opinions.

As the food we prepared in the studio’s kitchenette is cooking, in a deep pot on the camping stove on the porch, other kollel participants clean up around us, circulate, drink water, carry containers, dump compost, and work on the bee boxes. Intermittently, participants sidle off to the tents, to add a layer of clothing against the cooling air of the approaching evening, to check our phones in case of spontaneous reception—there isn’t any—and to take out or put away this or that necessity before the daylight is gone and evening has come down around the farm.

After we have eaten our fill of stew, the “delicious, kosher, vegetarian nourishment” mentioned in the event ad, we will gather together in the studio, up in the loft, to study text and have havurah, fellowship; the word is related to chaverim, friends, which is how Risa and the other organizers sometimes address us. We fold up our cooling, stiffening limbs and sit on the hard wooden platform of the studio loft. What we do now is physically different from the day’s labor: we are studying texts. Our bodies slow as we sit and orient ourselves to words on paper. In small groups, we read and discuss the Shoresh-curated excerpts of biblical text; they are all on the topic of schmita, the Jewish sabbatical year. I am in a group of four, with a sensitive, boisterous, fast-talking blonde woman from a rather wealthy Toronto neighborhood, a gentle and soft-spoken Russian social worker who has developed a religion-accommodating counseling practice, and an insistent, humourous, curly-headed ex-yeshiva student who is rightly confident
in his Hebrew and also quite confident in his deep understanding of Jewish text relative to his group members.

The depth of our engagement with the text study, as with the farm labor, is an effect both of the skills and facilities we bring to the task, and of our disposition to engage. Furthermore, the discourse of organizers and participants, and the very existence of the event in the first place, frame both the farm labor and the text study as mutually-constitutive acts of participation in Jewishness, Jewish tradition, and Jewish history. The farm work is of a different order than the text study, and the juxtaposition of the two contextualizes one in the other. The text suggests meanings for the labor, and the labor grounds the texts.

We share our discoveries and debate our interpretations, before bringing the text study to a close by coming back together in a circle to share our thoughts with the wider group. Then, because the sky is darkening now, we move from the studio to the three-sided rock-and-mortar foundation that remains inset in a soft incline of the earth between the studio and the lake. Sabrina, at that time the Director of Community Outreach for Shoresh who is also the resident bee-mother and artful photographer, calls this leftover stone foundation “the Shul.” Shul, a Yiddish word, derives from the German for school. It is usually used to designate a synagogue or temple, that is, a place of learning and community gathering which is implicitly also a ritual space, and a Jewish space. We come together in the Shul again, or in a way for the first time, as chaverim. This time there’s a fire lit in the fire pit, and a guitar, and kosher marshmallows for toasting: the gelatin in marshmallows makes it matter that they are kosher, but nobody asks. Trust is already in place. Or perhaps those who care can recognize the brand of the bag in the firelight.
Graham wafers and dark chocolate are on-hand for s’mores. Like summer camps themselves, s’mores are a treat that was symbolically inaccessible to Jews before they became at-home in America. The industrialization of kashrut brought kosher marshmallows into existence, forming a part of the food history that made a place for Jews in the American middle-class culture that industrialized food represented. The chocolate for the s’mores is already unwrapped. I wonder, is it organic? Fair-trade? A box of cookies and a bag of some kind of chip are both going around. While it matters that the food is kosher, and it is, the most salient thing is that this is fun food, camp food, youthful and sweet and informal and intimate food symbolic of late nights and “roughing it” and the cultural ritual of the campfire. S’mores, an iconic campfire treat, would be as out-of-place at a business dinner as salmon and fettuccini alfredo would be at this nighttime gathering of “granola”-type chaverim.

Someone finds green sticks, and we take turns using them to hold marshmallows over the new coals or near the flames, comparing the slowly-browned and perfect ones with the blackened results of over-eagerness. We sing (some Hebrew songs, some Beatles songs) and talk and spend time, and later, slowly and carefully make way over the bumpy ground in the dark to our tents. Avodat Lev or “service of the heart,” is at 7 A.M. for those who wish to participate in it: this morning ritual, merging contemplative practice and song or chanting of liturgical text, is


ubiquitous in the Jewish farming movement. Others will prefer to stay in their sleeping bags for that extra hour, till breakfast at eight. We will be planting trees in the guilds by nine.

If “eating Jewishly” is what was discussed at the Shoresh food conference, it is also what takes place at Bela Farm, although these things are different. “Eating Jewishly” is talked about at the conference in ways that are based on people’s experiences; it is also put into practice in programs and by people, at the farm and in other spaces. To the extent that it is successful as an idea, eating Jewishly is therefore many things, at Shoresh and beyond. It is eating traditional Jewish foods, like those in the pictures at the conference and in the plenary; it is sharing “delicious, kosher, vegetarian nourishment” between collective labour and text study at a Jewish farm retreat; it is making s’mores around a campfire and singing Hebrew and Beatles songs into the night. It is also the industrial, foil-wrapped, and oversweet hekshered chocolate bars at the conference, and the annoyance about how and where to chop garlic and vegetables. It is the conference’s food waste, the woman whose varied and medically complicated food intolerances meant she still couldn’t eat the conference lunch, and the feeling of having the food one makes or eats judged good enough, or not. Eating Jewishly rapidly exceeds and alters its own boundaries, as foodways and other forms of practice always do.

Kashrut has its place in this process. At another Bela Farm kollel that same summer, some of us on meal duty are making rice and a thick lentil stew. We’re unsure how to prepare the rice, which is in a container with no directions. We go immediately to our phones, but there is no signal out here. Luckily one of the participants is a chef, and he confirms the proportion of rice to water that we will need.
It takes a long time to heat a large pot of water on the two-burner camping stove on the porch. While we wait for the proverbial pot, along with a bit of oil, to boil, we decide to fry the onions and garlic in oil in the bottom of the other pot, for the lentil stew. We immediately discover that the two pots won’t fit side-by-side on the small camping stove. After some discussion, someone decides to take one of the wind-shielding wings off of the side in order to make a bit more room. We balance the second pot’s overhang as best we can with a rock from the long driveway. We measure lentils, chop tomatoes and other vegetables that are on hand. I suggest that we use rosemary from the planter on the porch: rosemary, like most cooking herbs, only gets bushier when it is pinched back.

When I move to strip the rosemary into the lentil pot, I am stopped, by a smiling woman in a long-sleeve jersey top and full-length skirt and sneakers, with a kerchief over her long, thick walnut hair. She says, gently, that I must wash the rosemary. I misunderstand, in the moment. I say it’s fine, there have been no pesticides sprayed here, and there are no insects or dirt on the plant. I am thinking to myself that if I used soap on the rosemary, it would make the plant less clean than it is. She smiles, and says I have to wash it. I say, but why? She says “for kashrut.”

Later, I find myself sitting on the porch with her, all the uncooked rice measured out before us on a large tray, watching the long-awaited water boiling away as I carefully push fingerfulls of rice grains from one side of the tray to the other, looking for traces of any insects or problematic material that might violate kashrut. After that first flash of annoyance, I felt embarrassed, and then, reflective about the way I’d assumed that my food awareness had covered all the right variables, even as I was in the middle of a research program about these very issues. I inspect the rice carefully, picking out and disposing of any offending bits I find. Of course it’s not enough to have vegetarian-kosher ingredients, and of course I need to remember who I am
cooking with, and for. A pesticide-free sprig of rosemary I just picked with my own eyes and hands is clean to me, but I’d forgotten the rabbis and what they were trying to do (some of them; they are not all of one voice), and how important that rabbinic tradition is to some of the people I am with. In this time and place, eating Jewishly means doing this, whether I’m sorting rice to have clean rice, to honour rabbinic tradition, or to honour the woman beside me as we prepare this food. “For kashrut.”

**Conclusion: Authorizing Eating**

In her living room one day in 2013, Risa told me that she and her husband Mati talk about shalom bayit, or peace in the home. When speaking about shalom bayit, Risa does not present it as a state-of-being, but rather as a principle that becomes crucial to the decision-making process that she and Mati undertake when deciding what sort of kitchen to keep. Risa’s story makes specific reference to food, and to the pain of religion making divisions at table, making families who cannot eat together. She tells me that, as she became more religious in her 20s and started incorporating more Jewish practice into her life, her mother said to her: “Do whatever you want, but I never want you to not be able to eat off my dishes.” Risa explains to me that her mother’s sister had become ultra orthodox, and that this has made it a lot harder for them to share food:

> When my aunt, uncle, and cousins come over it means ordering in kosher takeout and eating on plastic dishes, and I think that there’s an element of feeling judged in that. Even if it’s not, it’s still something that my mom feels in her heart, and I think that she’s carried the fear since her sister made that move that I would do something similar and that we couldn’t eat together as a family, that she couldn’t feed me and my family…

Shoresh, too, is bound by networks of judgment. The organization cannot simultaneously include everyone, and still be ‘about’ something. At the margins of the movement are
contradictions: development runs a risk of appearing to be illegitimate change; inclusiveness can threaten to look like non-Jewishness; grassroots community organization can begin to look insular or ethnocentric; successful artisanal endeavours can become just another profit-driven business. Too, as Risa’s mother feared and as many others will speak about below, differences in observance between generations can jeopardize the peace and closeness of home and family. Shoresh directors, at the edges, also negotiate a careful balance between openness and closedness, between claiming legitimacy, and constituting another fragmenting orthodoxy.

Before initiating the standing-and-sitting exercise at the 2013 plenary, Risa assured her audience that this exercise was sincerely meant to be judgment-free. This caveat is both entirely believable, and also an important flag about the high-stakes nature of some of the simple factual and playful identifications being invited. It can be fun to stand and be a joiner and self-declare, but peeking through the cracks of the play and game is the hint of real radical difference and danger. Food is at once a matter of pleasure and preference and commensality, and always already also a matter of exclusion.¹¹²

The move to respect diversity by being “judgment-free” is underpinned by the fact that participants are caught by the possibility of eating wrongly. Of the people I interviewed, fewer felt caught between eating kosher meat or eating local or organic meat; most had made clear decisions one way or the other. Many of them, however, seemed to feel caught between the idea of kashrut, which they expected to be a higher standard for meat but that manifestly wasn’t, and

the idea of local or organic meat, wherein animals might be treated with decency. The disjuncture is between what is expected of a religious regulation and what actually happens in current practice.

The 2013 Shoresh Food Conference took the concept of “eating Jewishly” from the inaugural conference, and made it the central point of reference of the event. It positioned “eating Jewishly” as one possible, hopeful answer to a set of problems that plague the subjects of the contemporary food system, whether or not they are aware of it. The conference held the very concept of eating Jewishly in tension, in the photographs about the quintessential Jewish food, in conference session topics, in the terms on the Food Conference poster, and in the series of rhetorical questions from Risa’s plenary. By employing rhetorical questions about eating Jewishly rather than committing to one definition of it, Shoresh simultaneously takes it for granted, and brings it into being by exploring its possible contours. The texts, contexts, and logics that ground it also authorize it, revealing its legitimacy, its Jewishness, its power as a source of reinvigoration and change.

Bela Farm, too, is a particularly powerful site for developing eating Jewishly. There participants build relationships of community and develop tastes, practices, and aptitudes that connect them with Shoresh and with the Jewish environmental and food movements. These formative experiences of growing, cooking, and eating together may allow for doubts about the Jewishness of environmentalism, even as they foster mindful food practice, or hipster or Israeli-style salad-making skills, or a new appreciation for careful observance of kashrut. The farm is curated to offer spaces for contemplation, practical activity, learning, and encounter: people at the farm navigate the different commitments they bring to the experience, and their experiences form the collective narrativization of eating Jewishly.
By Orthodox account, kashrut is a matter of religious law, and not a matter of ethics. Yet, from the AgriProcessors kosher meat packers scandal in Postville to the abuses made manifest in industrial food practice more generally, it is clear that many people are surprised, and even rocked in a fundamental way, by the failure of kashrut to preserve an ethical standard of food treatment. A popular imagining of religion as “ethical” has created the conditions wherein a non-ethical kashrut could be assailable on its own terms. If religion is persuasively formed as an ethical category, its ethics can be disputed. Within a Judaism assumed to be ethical and also ethically good, if kashrut is discursively formed as an ethical category, it is available to reform from within its own discourse; if it is an extra-ethical category, a space opens in which it might be reformed, revolutionized, calcified, or dispensed with. This is a distinction with major significance: it is the difference between Jewish people rejecting the authority of kashrut as religious food law, and Jewish people rejecting kashrut as authoritatively the religious food law that it purports to be.

Shoresh discursively links particular food ideas and activities to Judaism or Jewishness. Religious texts and ‘Jewish thought’ buttress ecological practices, and authorize them as ‘Jewish tradition,’ a category that envelops sacred texts and their contradictions by its unifying emphasis on things done by Jews. ‘Eating Jewishly’ can mean many things for those who are engaged in and by it, but it essentially designates a broadening of the field for thinking about what it means to be a Jew and to eat. It evinces a growing concern that kashrut may not designate the diet of a

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‘good’ or ‘observant’ Jew.\textsuperscript{114} If food practice is important to identity, then it becomes of pressing concern to have food practices that enact Jewish identity. If kashrut now excludes not only most gentiles but also most Jews, then kashrut faces a problem. Shoresh’s solution to such a problem must involve grounding their approach to food in narratives of the history of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jews.

Chapter 2
Food and ‘Islamic Paradigm’ at Noor Cultural Centre

At eight o’clock on a summer morning in 2013, people are already beginning to gather at Noor Cultural Center, on the northeast outskirts of Toronto, just past the boundary formed by the Don Valley Parkway. Their coming marks the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, and begins the celebration of Eid ul-Fitr, the festival of fast-breaking; Eid ul-Fitr always falls on the first day of Shawwal, the month following Ramadan. Just as fasting is theologically enjoined on able Muslims during Ramadan, the obligation not to fast is in full force on Eid ul-Fitr.

Sawm, fasting, is one of the five “pillars of Islam.” The five pillars are broadly understood as the basic structure of Muslim religious practice, although as with any form of lived religion, practice varies. In the daily fast of Ramadan, sawm means that a Muslim person on whom the fast is incumbent is enjoined to refrain from food, drink, and sexual activity during the daylight hours, from just before sunrise until just after sunset, each day of the holy month. People at Noor also spoke to me about fasting from bad thoughts, speech, and behaviors during this time, as is a common Islamic practice. Several khutbahs given at Noor during and around

115 The other four are the shahadah, a declaration of God’s oneness and Muhammad’s prophethood; salat, the ritual cycle of daily prayer; zakat, a charitable tax on excess income; and the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. The pillars are discussed diffusely in the Qur’an, and their tighter, codified form comes from the hadith Jibril. The five-pillar codification is normally considered Sunni: Shi’i Muslims may observe six pillars, and Ismailis, seven, and Sufi Muslims may interpret the pillars more broadly and metaphorically.
this month mention avoiding corrupt(ing) thoughts, words, and acts as a central part of the fast practice, including the Eid khutbah I dwell on below.\footnote{Khutbah was often translated “sermon” for visitors at Noor. A formal ritual procedure distinguishes khutbahs from other speaking at the minbar (“pulpit”; “lectern”) like announcements or a pre-khutbah by a guest speaker.}

The Eid celebration itself, along with food-related activities like abstention, discussion, preparation, and commensality that precede and follow it, inculcates particular dispositions familiar to scholars of religion: submission to God, charitable orientation, and community identification through practices of bodily austerity, almsgiving, and commensality.\footnote{Eg. Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 50. Mahmood argues that the Ramadan fast cultivates virtue.} At Noor, such familiar themes are grounded in their sense of justice. This idea of justice is Islamic, and developed in the context of the Eid service and in numerous other contexts throughout the year. Noor president Samira Kanji, and her two daughters Azeezah and Khadijah, use the adjectival phrase “Islamic paradigm” to characterize a set of tools for rethinking social problems and current events. This paradigm is developed in khutbahs, workshops, and presentations at Noor: programs which are centrally about food. These programs seek, and in fact instantiate, an “Islamic” approach to food and eating.

\textbf{Light: Introducing Noor}

Noor Cultural Centre is a non-sectarian Islamic place of worship, education, cultural life, and community advocacy. Noor is named for Noorbanu Lakhani, matriarch of the Lakhani family, and wife of the late Dr. Hassanali Lakhani who founded the Centre in 2003. The word
nūr, appearing in stylized Arabic script on the large windows of the building and on the backs of chairs at the Centre, means “light.”

Fig. 5. “Noor Cultural Centre (Logo)” with stylization of Arabic nūr (light). Posted to Noor’s Facebook page February 1, 2012. Fieldwork archive.

The Lakhanis, an ethnically Indian Muslim-Gujerati family, moved from Kenya to England before coming to Canada in 1988 and settling just north of Toronto. Beginning in Africa, Hassanali’s philanthropy was encouraged by the present Aga Khan, Prince Shah Karim Al Hussaini, who inherited that title when he was twenty; Lakhani was in his mid-thirties. Noor Cultural Centre is tied to York University, through the York-Noor Fellowship in Islamic Studies, a fellowship established by donation in 2003, and the York-Noor Chair in Islamic Studies, founded in 2006 with a $1 million endowment from the Lakhani family.118 York University conferred an honorary Doctor of Laws on Lakhani in 2005 in recognition of his philanthropic work.119

Despite Lakhani’s closeness with the Aga Khan, Noor is not a jamat khanna or Ismaili centre: rather, Noor is a non-denominational Islamic masjid, or mosque. While a few attendees may identify themselves as Ismaili or Sufi, the majority of participants at Noor tell me that they

118 Past holders of the fellowship are Amila Buturovic (2003-6) and Timothy Gianotti (08-10); past holders of the Chair are George Sawa (06-07), Timothy Gianotti (07-08), Ruba Kana’an (08-11), and Ramin Jahanbegloo (12-15).
are “just Muslim.” When I ask people why they come to this mosque in particular, some mention that they live nearby, but nearly everyone cites the same two reasons: the high caliber of intellectual programming, and the community practice of eating together after Jumah prayers. Most also mention a third thing they think Noor gets right: their gender egalitarianism.

Dr. Hassanali Lakhani passed away in 2010, at the age of 89. His daughter Samira, Noor’s current president, and her two daughters Azeezah and Khadijah who also work at the Centre, describe him to me not as especially religious, but as devout, studied, and deeply motivated by Islam. They retain his extensive library of books on Islam and other of the world’s religions. Samira explains to me that her father wanted to create a space for the practice of “purer” Islam, and that he had “religious values that are very [gender] egalitarian” specifically in mind when he envisioned a masjid free from what he saw as imported [perhaps Arab] cultural habits of male domination. Samira told me that her father had always “recognized that women are spiritually the equal of men, and have as much right to participation in all areas of sacred activity, as well as secular activity, as men.”

When we talk more about her father, Samira characterizes him as quite traditional, and simultaneously very liberal, in the sense that he strongly believed in equal opportunity and respect for the agency of women. She tells me he was a “stickler for modesty in dress” and disapproved of immodesty as compromising to morality: he would not have wanted his daughter to become, for example, a dancer, because this would mean she would be identified with her body and not with her mind. She remembers that he wanted her to be educated and independent. After growing up in Kenya, Samira trained in England as a chartered accountant. Now, as President and CEO of Noor, Samira sees herself as executing her father’s project, one that was “very, very close to his heart.”
In and around Toronto, I sometimes heard Noor referred to as a “progressive” masjid, primarily because of the high profile of its policy of gender egalitarianism. Noor’s practice still enacts gender division according to a dual-gender model: men pray on one side of the prayer space, and women on the other, with an empty aisle in the middle. If Noor’s gender egalitarianism is different from the inclusiveness, for example, at Masjid El-Tawhid or “Unity Mosque,” Toronto’s gender- and sexuality-inclusive mosque where mixed seating is the convention, it is at the same time also different from what many of Toronto’s Muslims are comfortable with. When I discussed Noor with other Muslim women around Toronto, some shook their heads against the idea of hearing a woman give the adhan (call to prayer), or seeing a female khatib before an audience composed of anyone other than women and children.

Some participants at Noor, both male and female, told me detailed stories of coworkers or friends asking them, sometimes with trepidation, exactly how women’s presence at Noor worked. One man in particular, a friendly and outgoing Noor regular, told me of a time that a work colleague, who knew that he prayed at Noor, once mustered the courage to ask an ill-advised question: was it true that Noor’s prayer space was some kind of bawdy free-for-all? “How could you think this? You know me!” was my interlocutor’s reply. He told me this story with a laugh, but also with a palpable sense of hurt. While it was easy for him to believe that his own understanding of Islam (as enlightened, egalitarian, pluralistic, and philosophical) is true and authoritative, in contrast to the implicitly regressive or ignorant perspective of his colleague, it was quite hurtful for him to discover that someone who knows him would believe him capable of getting religion so (in his eyes) explicitly wrong. My interlocutor suggested that his colleague come to prayers and see for himself. I see Jewish, Christian, and other visitors coming Noor, but I do not think this particular man ever accepted the invitation.
Samira describes Noor’s prayer space this way: “We minimize gender segregation, or virtually eliminate it.” She says “virtually” because men and women do not mix in the prayer space, but pray on opposite sides of a central aisle, and then may sit where they wish at round tables during the potluck after prayers. When I ask her whether some other Muslims in Toronto find this strange, she tells me some people hesitate because they haven’t seen it elsewhere, and so they’re immediately suspicious as to its legitimacy. […] people would say “but it’s not done, you know, so this is not Islamic” and we have to point out that just because you haven’t seen it done, or, even if it hasn’t been done, it doesn’t mean it’s unIslamic. Because unIslamic is something that is specifically going against the grain of Islamic precepts, and there is nothing in Islamic teachings that is predicated on an ontological superiority of male over female. […] in fact there’s a verse in the Qur’an [33:35…] which speaks so, so beautifully and clearly, and incontrovertibly, about the spiritual equality of men and women.\footnote{The ayah is given the following translation by Mohammad Asad, which Samira shared with me: Verily, for all men and women who have surrendered themselves unto God, and all believing men and believing women, and all truly devout men and truly devout women, and all men and women who are true to their word, and all men and women who are patient in adversity, and all men and women who humble themselves [before God], and all men and women who give in charity, and all self-denying men and self-denying women, and all men and women who are mindful of their chastity, and all men and women who remember God unceasingly: for [all of] them has God readied forgiveness of sins and a mighty reward. [33:35]}

At the level of practice, attendance was usually near gender parity at Noor, which is unusual in mosques in Canada and elsewhere. In fact, women generally hold a small majority at Noor, making the gender representation quite atypical. I regularly saw both men and women give khutbahs at the minbar in front of the parallel—but still segregated—prayer space, and have heard both men and women perform the adhan, the call to prayer.

Azeezah, Samira’s oldest child, tells me that her grandfather did not think of Noor as “progressive” at all, but rather, legitimate: the word she most remembers him using is “pristine.”
In many ways similar to her grandfather, Azeezah is studied in both religious and academic idioms. As we talk, she signals to me that she can discursively deconstruct the idea that anything is “pristine,” and we both smile and laugh. At the same time she understands what he meant, and agrees, although her view is as inflected by her time and place just as much as her grandfather’s view was inflected by his. Azeezah, who unlike her mother and sister often wears hijab, styling it voluminously with complicated drapes and pairing it with large earrings and sly and jovial critiques about orientalism, assures me that Noor has a fatwa from Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq for their seating arrangement.

Making a Place in Canada: Politics in Islamophobic times

Azeezah’s enviable headscarf style is an aesthetic statement conditioned by several aspects of her identity, including her Canadianness, her Muslimness, her feminism, her lifelong aptitude for legal thought (in religion, science, and politics), and her sense of beauty. This is not to say that it is universally appreciated. Muslims are policed in Canada, and Muslim women in particular often face overt discrimination especially in ways connected with their bodies and clothing.

On a warm Friday afternoon in early August, the Kanjis and I were leaving Noor, and Samira remarked to me, “you aren’t going to wear that home, are you?” She was referring to the black abaya, a light floor-length garment with long loose sleeves and an overlapping front closure, that she and Azeezah had given me a few weeks earlier during Ramadan. I had said I liked the look of abayas, but that I was about a foot too tall for the few I’d tried on at the vintage clothing shops in Kensington Market. The long, lovely abaya they appeared with the following day is still one of my favourite posessions, suiting my fondness for comfort and drama in dress, as well as my sentimentality about gifts.
On that particular day, I had worn the abaya on the bus from my apartment across town. I had left it open over my blue jeans and brown linen t-shirt in a bid to look more “normal,” and tucked my scarf into my bag for covering my long braid once I arrived at Noor. I was a bit more self-conscious than usual, a little uneasy about looking Muslim, being so white inside someone else’s cultural clothing, or just wearing something I don’t usually, and possibly looking weird.

A middle-aged woman on the midtown bus kept giving me looks. She wore a bright pink buttoned blouse, and had dark hair and sunglasses. I couldn’t be sure what she was thinking, but she seemed simultaneously angry and fearful, to a degree that made me uncomfortably aware of myself and my vicinity near the front of the bus. Twice, when we made eye contact, I gave her the most benign smile I could muster, to no effect. And when Samira asked, as we walked out the door and into the parking lot half the day later, whether I wasn’t worried about getting comments on the clothing, I dug in my heels. “But it’s Toronto” I said, as though everyone here ought to be unfazed by diversity just because they lived in it. “Who cares what people wear?”

Azeezah commented that she gets “hatecrimed” a lot for looking the way she does. Recently a man had yelled at her “Fuck you go home!” as though her home were somewhere other than here. She jokes that anything that happens to her while she’s wearing hijab is a hate crime. It’s a funny sentiment. It threatens the possibility of an empowerment that could come from inside processes of everyday victimization: Azeezah illocutes a magical ability to inhabit the otherness ascribed to her, and thereby to deploy the social name “hate crime” in a way that gives her power, making her the dangerous one.

That fall, the Angus Reid Institute released the results of their Canadian public opinion poll on religion, which followed upon the study they conducted four years earlier, in 2009.
According to the 2013 poll, 54% of Canadians outside Quebec took an unfavourable view of Islam, up from 46% in the 2009 poll. By comparison, 22% of those Canadians reported an unfavourable view of Judaism in 2013, up from 21% in 2009, and 18% of those Canadians held an unfavourable view of Christianity in both poll years. The data for Quebec were presented separately, and their approvals are lower in every category, and more dramatically polarized against Islam in particular. That fall and winter, a number of Noor’s programs made mention of the poll’s notable findings. Over a year later, in winter, I saw a news story about an actor who was physically and verbally assaulted in the middle of Toronto’s downtown, near a subway station I frequent: Kayla Gerber was walking home late at night, after rehearsal, and had a scarf wrapped around her head against the cold. Dressed the same way Canadian people often do when it snows, her assailant mistook her for a Muslim. Gerber names the verbal violence the assailant yelled at her while he held her against a wall: “He told me to take off my fucking hijab and get the fuck out of his country […].”

Islamophobia is an unfortunate reality affecting Noor while it, like any other religious space, navigates a vision of true or pure practice between tradition-as-regressive and tradition-as-

121 Angus Reid Institute, “Canadians View Non-Christian Religions with Uncertainty,” Public Opinion Poll, Religion (Canada: Angus Reid Institute, October 2013), http://angusreid.org/canadians-view-non-christian-religions-with-uncertainty-dislike/. The poll data for favourable and unfavourable views are not intended to add up to 100%.

122 In Quebec, views of Christianity were 67% favourable 21% unfavourable in 2009 and 67% and 23% in 2013; of Islam, views were staggering negative: 17% favourable and 68% unfavourable, and 16% and 69% in 2013. Views of Judaism were in the middle: 36 and 35% favourable and 44 and 41% unfavourable in 2009 and 2013. Ibid.


124 Ibid.
authoritative: Their particularity, a particularity that they share with Shoresh, is that they make the further suggestion of tradition-as-progressive, using this framing as a way to enter discourse about society in ways that draw power from their particular identities. And yet, although both groups similarly lay claim to authoritative tradition in characterizing activities that might otherwise be interpreted as progressive, there is an important difference in how they can characterize progress. For example, while Risa often uses the word “radical” at Shoresh events, for example to describe the spirit of “radical gratitude” in eating Jewishly, that rhetorical act is not within the same horizon of possibility for the Kanjis.

It is socially unthinkable for a community like Noor to frame its activities in such terms, because of the historical moment in which both groups find themselves. “Radical,” in a Jewish context, can read socially as a hippie term; in a Muslim organization, the word is far more likely to be read as a term of violence. Just as semantic reductionism severs the ties between “fundamentalist,” and its previous life as a term of Christian self-description, designating a Protestant commitment to what they understood as fundamental to their faith, so too the contemporary uses of “radical” enact a forgetting of the word’s other religious, ethnic, national, and social meanings. “Radical” is conceptually impoverished as it calcifies into a term for use on Muslims but not by them, as a descriptor of others rather than of oneself.

While antisemitism certainly exists in Canada, it is outstripped in the current moment by a virulent Islamophobia.125 That Islamophobia inflects Noor’s existence. This is not, however, to

say that Noor is a print-negative of Canadian Islamophobia. The Noor community, like any, both is shaped and shapes itself, and its priorities around gender and food are both places where Canadianness is directly engaged. Both sites of engagement involve a ground-up negotiation, in which actors draw strategically on discourses of sameness and difference, framing interventions as more traditional or more progressive, in a pragmatics of the moment.

In the 1990s, Hassanali Lakhani had begun to look for a property on which to found a centre for Islamic learning. After five years of looking, he found the building at 123 Wynford Drive, a storied Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC) designed and built in 1963 by the venerated Japanese-Canadian architect Raymond Moriyama. Moriyama designed the JCCC to reflect on the time he and others spent in Canadian internment camps during World War II, and to constructively re-establish a home and identity as a part of mainstream Canada. After two decades of use, and a difficult decision by the growing Japanese community to sell the building and purchase a much larger space just up the road, the historic Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre was both vacant, and in need of repair.  

N.b. Increasing Islamophobia often correlates with increasing antisemitism. As I make final revisions to this dissertation in March, 2017, in a building next to the Miles Nadal JCC featured in chapter one, I am confined to this room by police officers who are investigating a bomb threat against the JCC.

Journalist Deirdre Hanna highlights the coincidence of vision and experience between Lakhani and Moriyama. She captures the need they shared for a future-oriented and pluralistic vision for life in Canada, when she quotes Lakhani on his first impression of the place:

“Here was a stunningly powerful building on a beautiful ravine lot, created with love and sacrifice by its original occupants for the purpose of laying the community’s roots in the country,” Hassanali Lakhani states. “The architecture embodies the fine hopes and aspirations of a people and tells a story of struggle culminating, by God’s will, in success. This building is instantly compelling. There is a spiritual quality.”

She also quotes Lakhani connecting the Japanese- and Muslim-Canadian communities:

“After 9/11 Muslims are in a very bad space in terms of public perception. The problems we are facing are political, as were those the Japanese Canadians were facing in World War II. This is the building that is going to show people what is true Islam.”

The Lakhanis purchased the building in 2001, and Moriyama redesigned the building with Islamic motifs in 2003. By 2004 the Lakhanis had realized an Islamic community centre with the object of creating a space “where Muslims could practice Islam as it was practiced at the time of the Prophet Mohammed: with a stress on justice and gender equality.” Noor’s guiding verse, surah 49 ayah 13 of the Qur’an, reads “We have created you male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, in order that you might come to know one another.” Since that time, Noor has become known for their stance in favour of women’s presence and

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
130 http://noorculturalcentre.ca
leadership, interfaith dialogue, and cultural awareness. Samira Kanji and her daughters have been instrumental in this process, and for the last several years have taken leading roles in the direction of Noor and its programming. Their work regularly brings food to the fore.

The Greening of Islam

Many Noor programs participate in the larger “greening of Islam” which is increasingly visible in North America. The phrase “greening of” is a now-common reference to environmentalism, and the “greening of Islam” indicates an environmentally-friendly interpretation or practice of Islam.\(^{131}\) It also often positions Islam as local, grounding Islamic practice in a “here” and thus destabilizing Islamophobic discourses of radical otherness. Noor is active in multifaith initiatives such as the Canadian *Greening Sacred Spaces*, and partners with groups like *Khaleafah*, whose name merges the Arabic *khilafa*, stewardship, with the English word “leaf.” Noor’s participation in the greening of Islam is simultaneously specifically Islamic, and a site for ecumenism.\(^{132}\) It is also a site for the production of a “good” Islam.\(^{133}\)

As with Shoresh in the previous chapter, Noor is characterized dialogically by its food-related programming, and by its interpretive and diversity-based approach to community building in a multicultural context. Both kinds of programming play on sameness and difference along both ethnic and ethical lines. Alongside programs about Islam and “the veil,” on the

\(^{131}\) This “green” Islam is unrelated to the Iranian political party, or other uses of the colour green to represent Islam, for example on flags.

\(^{132}\) For similar Islamic initiatives in the US, see Robinson, “Refreshing the Concept of Halal Meat: Resistance and Religiosity in Chicago’s Taqwa Eco-Food Cooperative”; Robinson, “Refreshing Religions with Edible Ethics.”

\(^{133}\) Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 766–75.
relationship between law and religion in Canada, or addressing the fear of “clash” between Islam and Canadian multiculturalism, it is in food programs that Noor’s Islam finds careful articulation. Working as program coordinators at Noor, Samira’s daughters Azeezah and Khadijah foster and even originate a significant portion of the centre’s intellectual life. In doing so, they draw on their respective areas of expertise: Azeezah on her Bachelor’s degree in Health Science and Juris Doctorate, and her Masters of Laws with a focus on gender and Islamic law; and Khadijah on her Bachelor’s degree in Commerce and certificate in Food Justice.

Khadijah, who teases me almost as much as she teases her brother Husein, pursued food studies at Ryerson University in Toronto. She is responsible for a series of food-related programs at Noor including a volunteer trip to The Cutting Veg organic farm, the attempted vegetarian-locavoric community cookbook, and presentations by a number of speakers including Professor Reg Noble of the Food Security program at Toronto’s Ryerson University. The local-food lectures are generally well-attended at Noor, but do not necessarily result in sustained locavorism on the part of the community. The attempt at creating a Noor cookbook of local and seasonal recipes has yet to catch on.

When I asked Khadijah about why she thought the project did not elicit more participation, she gave me a very direct answer. She said that, while it was nice that other groups are in a position to push forward with local food, Muslims have “other things to worry about.” Her point, and a point that others at Noor also made about the scope of commitment to food activism, is that food activism is not going to be a top priority as long as racism and Islamophobia are imminent problems.
This defensive posture is a reasonable one, and one that points to fault lines within the movement itself. A common criticism made of the food movement is that it is elitist, and this critique is addressed in chapter five. Here, the defense “we have more important things to worry about” also covers over a real and important challenge for the localization of food in a globalized world, that is, the connection between taste and identity. Whereas religious community cookbooks are so often successful initiatives, the lack of momentum behind this local-cookbook initiative hints that the communally mobilizing power of shared recipes is in some ways at odds with localization, and with the operations of cost, access, and taste-inculcation that often come with local, organic, sustainable, or “happy” food. Even without class and economics, ethnic difference, as crystalized in tastes of home, cannot always translate easily through the locavore’s food politics.

Despite this limit, several of Noor’s most well-attended programs emphasize the connection between Islam and local and ethical food in particular. Dr. Timothy Gianotti who held both the York-Noor Fellowship and later the York-Noor Chair at York University, with which Noor is closely connected, gave presentations on the topic of animal treatment in particular, as did Fahim Alwan, a Syrian-Canadian Muslim and owner of Blossom Pure Organics, a halal organic butchery and grocery business in Toronto. Sarah Elton, a non-Muslim journalist and author of Consumed: Food for a Finite Planet, also present at Noor. They and other speakers position food as a central means of just and caring living.

Farah, who works at Noor, sheds light on why people at Noor care about these programs:

[A] lot of the people here [have] come from [other countries], where food is viewed differently, simply because access to it is different. I think they have a different relationship with the food. They’re not used to just, or they’re conscious of an alternative way of getting your food rather than
off the supermarket shelf where you don’t know what’s gone into it: it’s in a container which says “ingredients;” they’re not necessarily the whole truth… They’re much more used to buying from a vendor who comes round to the house with produce that they’ve grown in their backyard. So I think people are conscious of it, and now of course it’s become more widespread, it’s a general topic of discussion, right, the quality of food.

Farah’s point is an important accompaniment to Khadijah’s, and also an important counterpoint to the narrative that ostensibly elitist food issues are not relevant to everyday citizens or marginalized communities. Rather than naturalize a triumphalist West-versus-The-Rest view, Farah draws attention to transnationally intersecting knowledges and modes of being in the world. People who have come from other countries can see problems with the North American food system which are normalized for many unilocal North Americans, because they have lived an “alternative way of getting [their] food.” They are suspicious of the machinations of industry too. Of the people at Noor who emigrated to Canada after having lived elsewhere, most people mentioned being struck by two things in particular about Canada’s food system: obtrusive, misleading, and unnecessary packaging; and the normalization of waste.

Except during Ramadan, Noor offers a post-jumah meal, a relatively uncommon and noteworthy community practice wherein attendees all share food and conversation after jumah prayers. The food was sometimes provided by Noor, and sometimes potluck. After salat every week, while some were completing their supererogatory prayers, others of us would fetch the shoes we had removed before gathering on the rugs and chairs in the prayer space, and proceed to the social area along the southwest side of the building. There, on the near side of a well-equipped and somewhat off-limits kitchen in the charge of the Noor staff, stacks of cups had been laid out for us. The commercial coffee and hot water urns had already percolated, and a tea box was at the ready. Sugar and milk, cream, and coffee whitener were always on the sweets table on the adjacent wall. Between the kitchen/tea-and-coffee table and the social area full of
round tables, was the main attraction: the rectangular table, covered by a white cloth and with a stack of tea plates, napkins, and forks, always held a selection of savories for us to eat together.

Men and women of different ages smilingly line up to take plates, or set bags, sweaters, or scarves at chairs around the round tables. Some tables are generally occupied by men, some by women, and some by mixtures of people and families; people also mill about and say hello to one another, or end up standing in clumps, chatting, one hand holding a plate or cup and the other hand gesturing between bites. There is always a salad of some kind, and a salty snack like samosas or corn chips and salsa; generally there is a rice dish too, and wild-card dishes. I always thrill to see Poppy’s delicious biryani, long grains of basmati rice yellowed with saffron and flavoured with spices and shredded chicken. The presence of the biryani usually means Poppy’s daughter, who loves it, is home for a visit, and Poppy always makes extra to bring to Noor.

While I was there, Noor transitioned to an alternating “brothers’ potluck” and “sisters’ potluck” for this meal, placing the responsibility for food-based care along explicitly gendered lines. Both the burden and the joy of food labour, in this model, should be shared across the community. Ozlem, the smiling, efficient, and well-manicured Turkish administrator, facilitated the transition to brothers’ and sisters’ potluck by going around with a clipboard each week during the meal, asking for volunteers to bring food for the next week. At first people were slow to volunteer—the expression *inshallah*, as God wills, served as a polite non-committal with the tacit implication that what is being asked for might not happen. The small, quiet, and very sharp Rabeya once observed to me that people use *inshallah* as an excuse. They are wrong to do so, she points out: “it is God who wills it, but *us* who must *do it*.” Eventually, people will volunteer without having to be herded much: transition takes time.
Rabeya is one of the people at Noor who brings me newspaper clippings of coverage of the Arab world. She is kind, quiet, pious, and an avid secularist. She tells me that back in Bangladesh everything they ate was halal, and nobody really thought about it. When she first came to Canada there was no marked “halal” food around, and when people came over to her home for a meal, they did not ask after the halal status of the food offered. Now, over the last 10-15 years, there is halal food everywhere in Toronto, and it is much more a topic of discussion.

People of Rabeya’s adult daughter’s generation, she tells me, care more about healthy food than they do about “halal,” and it is Rabeya’s generation that has become more strict:

in my circles, in my social life, some people are getting quite rigid about halal food. They won’t eat… if I invite them over for dinner or something, they make sure it is halal. But when I came here [to Canada] first, it wasn’t like that. Nobody asked me about halal food, because there was no halal food. In Toronto it’s ok now, there are so many stores and supermarkets that have halal food. But now they are becoming very much aware of the halal food. And for me, I don’t bother. To me, if somebody asks me whether I’m serving the halal food, it’s kind of rude. Anything I offer should be good, right?

Rabeya knows that “some people care about bread,” but she does not identify with this level of stringency. She would never have pork or alcohol, but she does not worry over zabiha meat: meat “just should be slaughtered and prayed over.” I see her mouth the blessing before she eats.

The vicissitudes of the potluck food offerings map a variety of factors, including attendance and social pressure to contribute, food access, culinary skill, taste, and time. Most of the time, there is plenty of food for everyone to snack on something they like. Twice, though, the food offerings were sparse, and on one of those occasions, beneath politesse, there was a tinge of disappointment among us. The feeling was perhaps ameliorated, perhaps accentuated, by the presence, near the tea and coffee, of a plate with a few cookies cut into quarters. Grayson, a Texan-Canadian Muslim who lives with his spouse and small children well across town and
makes a remarkable commute to be a part of Noor, tells me during an interview that sharing food is thoroughly Islamic, assuring me that I will find food-based care showing up in many different forms of Islam because “food is the most fundamental language of love.” He once told me a story of Sufi saints dividing every portion of food left on a plate, no matter how small, in order to share every morsel. I think of this story on the day I see the quartered cookies.

**The pragmatics of the personal-political**

Between practices of immanent love and care and ideas about social justice, including gender and food justice in global society, lies the vast territory of the political. As a number of scholars have observed, much research on the ‘political,’ and political participation in the West in particular, tends to leave aside women’s, non-white, and non-Christian-religious activities. Feminist and de-colonial scholarship has sought to understand minority and/or women’s participation. ¹³⁴ Katherine Bullock, writing about Canadian Muslim women, cites a study of Canadian ethnic minorities concluding that Canadian ethnic minorities are (1) underrepresented in voting, but are (2) as likely as other Canadians to participate in women’s and environmental organizations, and (3) more likely than other Canadians to participate in “religious” and “ethnic” organizations. ¹³⁵

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In order to contribute to an improved understanding of women’s and minority political participation, Bullock begins to develop a partial framework “for investigating Muslim’s political engagement with Canadian society.”\textsuperscript{136} Following the well-known feminist claim that “the personal is the political,” Bullock rejects two key binaries in academic studies of political engagement, the formal-informal sector binary, and the public-private binary, on the grounds that they do not fit Canadian Muslim women: “[t]he public (including the economic), private, formal, and informal sectors are all arenas in which Canadian Muslims engage politically.” Bullock observes that “ethnic” and “religious” organizations have been particularly important locations of women’s sociopolitical engagement.\textsuperscript{137}

Following Edward Said, Bullock notes that Islamic identity itself is politicized, and that “given the prevalent negative stereotypes of Islam, racism, and the practical, day-to-day indignities of being a Muslim in Canada, political engagement with Canadian society must be connected to every attempt to resist them.”\textsuperscript{138} Bullock does not explicitly define political engagement, but since she claims that actions which “[a]im to alter relations of power [count] as political action” it is plausible that she would view any attempt to impact another’s view as political.\textsuperscript{139} A narrow interpretation of her intentions simply counts anything that aims to impact

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\item\textsuperscript{136} Katherine Bullock, “Toward a Framework for Investigating Muslim Women and Political Engagement in Canada.” 93.
\item\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 97. Others make this point, but Bullock is interested in Canadian Muslim women in particular.
\item\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 98.
\end{enumerate}
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(and ameliorate, for that is the substance of all of her examples) non-Muslim people’s view of Islam as Muslim politics: however, the idea of Muslim politics can go further than this.

My use of the term politics includes ways that individual Muslims may draw on Islam as a discursive field in order to impact their own community’s views and practices. While certain “Muslim politics” are centrally concerned to, as Bullock puts it, “undermine negative Western cultural stereotypes,” Muslim politics exist beyond a perceived need to comment on or reply to the West. If politics is concerned with impacting views (that is, a politics as a form of power-negotiation), a Muslim politics is any politics that is constructed or authorized with recourse to an Islam.  

Noor’s activities are political when they frame Islam in Canada to other Canadians, Muslims included. Noor programs are often designed to do such political work, through a doors-open policy and attitude, through numerous interfaith programs such as the “Twinning” program which pairs Noor with a local synagogue, and through programs and talks on topics including peace, forgiveness, the veil in Canada, and the perceived threat of Islam to Canadian multiculturalism. But Noor also exists for itself, and contains diversity and even dissent. More of Noor’s Muslim politics is visible in the “Islamic paradigm” developed there, which I explore below.

Ibid., 101. Attentive readers may object that this quotation comes under the heading “activism,” and not “political engagement,” in the text. However, Bullock’s stated aim is to broaden the phrase “Islamic activism” and connect it with “Muslim politics.” Furthermore, under the “political engagement” heading Bullock writes, “I consider anyone who seeks to challenge, resist, combat, or change the negative stereotypes of Islam or Muslims to be politically engaged” (97). All of her examples of political engagement, including those that are “informal” and “private,” fit this framing. Activism, which Bullock seeks to redeem, seems more overtly and obviously political, and thus to fit with her expansive definition of “political engagement.”
I emphasize this dimension of “Muslim politics” because Islam is not monolithic, and because Canadian society, the milieu that both Bullock and I are engaged with when we speak of Muslim politics, also includes other Muslims. On the one hand, it is difficult to imagine a Canadian Islam which does not in some way engage the Islamophobia that characterizes the contemporary Western political moment. Still, Muslim politics cannot only be a matter of power relations between Muslims and nonMuslims, when it engages Muslims intraspecifically as well. The politics Saba Mahmood describes in the piety movement in Cairo, for example, is importantly intraspecific. “Muslim politics,” therefore, describes those politics which fashion Muslims and/or Islam in the eyes of the nonMuslim Other, but also those politics which fashion Muslims and/or Islam in the eyes of other Muslims. One instance of this fashioning of Muslims, and possibly also nonMuslims, is what Noor is developing as an “Islamic paradigm.”

By framing Noor’s food politics in an Islamic paradigm, the Kanjis and others who participate in Noor’s food programs raise the possibility that Islam as a tradition has something to say about contemporary food practices, specifically by opening up the interpretive field beyond the conventional understanding of halal. Ethics and politics necessarily converge where an ethics, as an orientation to a conception of the good, becomes prescriptive, that is, where there is an attempt to authorize an ethic into a should that indicates what people ought to do. Put differently, when an ethics becomes personal, it becomes political.

The idea that an Islamic paradigm can or should influence (prescriptively, politically) people’s food choices is underpinned by the idea that people’s food choices are in some

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141 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety.*
important way a matter of ethics. In the consumership model of a public food market, desire and capital are the most salient terms according to which food choice is determined; by contrast, in the religious food discourses I discuss, consumers are refigured as ethical subjects, diverse members, with membership rights and membership obligations, in a single collective, created world.¹⁴²

At Noor, political and religious concerns are not separate, and are mutually the location for ethical work, such as in their programs around food justice. Such work, whatever else it is, is highly relational. If, as Mamdani has observed, notions of good and bad Muslims and moderate and extreme Islam are largely a matter of statecraft, then Muslim politics is a potentially useful framework, to the extent that it can help shed some of the polemical freight of “political Islam.”¹⁴³ Various Muslim politics, like a vision for food justice practiced by eating in an Islamic paradigm, might then emerge as everyday locations for the construction of citizens, the cultivation of selves, and the collaborative fashioning of society, and the visioning of communities of the future. A vision for communities of ethical consumption is one of the key connections speakers at Noor make between food and Islam.

¹⁴² I dwell on the ethical content of a shift from consumer to person (the ethical consumer as a religious subject) in chapter four.
¹⁴³ Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism”; Mahmood Mamdani, Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).
Politics and Food: Constructing an “Islamic Paradigm”

Eid ul-Fitr 2013: The Eid khutbah

The day before Eid, registrants of Noor’s email listserv received a last-minute email update that the khatib for Eid had changed. The previously-announced khatib, Dr. Nader Hashemi of the University of Denver, who had recently given a Ramadan lecture at Noor on Fazlur Rahman’s approach to the Qur’an, was suddenly unable to give the Eid khutbah due to a family emergency. Instead, Samira Kanji, president of Noor and daughter of its founder, would give the khutbah after the morning’s Eid prayers.

Many mosques in Toronto serve thousands of Muslims for each of the Eids, and some mosques hold consecutive services in order to accommodate the influx of attendees. Noor’s Eid attendance, like the Eid attendance at other mosques, far exceeds the scope of its own weekly services. Today there are approximately seven hundred people here. Jumah attendance at Noor is usually about seventy people, though I have seen it as high as eighty and as low as fifty, on a rainy day. For the Eids, people come to Noor from Toronto and the surrounding cities: Kitchener-Waterloo, Hamilton, and as far as Montreal and, I am told, even farther away.

There are security guards outside when I arrive, which surprises me- I have never seen them at Noor before. When I ask what Eids have been like in the past, a Noor regular tells me that when Timothy Gianotti gave the Eid khutbah in 2012 the auditorium was “filled to the rafters,” describing the attendance of approximately one thousand people. Today we gather in the

144 A khatib is a person who gives a khutbah. In the khatib guidelines given on the Noor website, a khatib is characterized as a “religious teacher and leader” (Noor Cultural Centre, “Khutbah Guidelines,” Religious Organization, Noor Cultural Centre, accessed July 30, 2014, http://www.noorculturalcentre.ca/?page_id=340.).
upper-level auditorium, which accommodates more people than the usual prayer space. The men outnumber the women slightly, by about a sixth.

Inside, facing east, on rugs in the front, or on chairs behind for those who are less mobile, people gather: men are on the far side of the aisle and women, some with children, are on the side nearest the entrance. I sit on the rugs, among perfumed women I do not recognize, but with whom I share close quarters. We gesture greetings, mouthing salam and Eid mubarak, which are respectively the standard daily greeting, and the festive greeting for this occasion: salam literally means peace, and mubarak means blessed, a wish for a blessed Eid. With small rustlings of fabric, we shift ourselves and our purses, revealing space that wasn’t there a moment ago, so that each newcomer can join us on the rugs. I stop scanning the crowd to squeeze hands with friends who pass by on their way to find a spot, and then resume my rough headcount. My eyes scan the sea of colour and pattern in the morning light that comes in from the wall of windows on the east side of the room: we are facing qibla, toward the kaaba in Mecca. I’ve been here nearly an hour, and the prayers are about to begin.

After Eid salat, Samira takes the podium. She is dressed in a black abaya, which covers her from neck to wrists to ankles. Underneath she wears the dress-pants and shirt that are the habitual professional garb of her slight, vital frame. Her head is covered, by a pink scarf that reveals only her face. She speaks with a grace that I suspect is studied: a notable quiet clarity that carries weight because of its precision, and which is both soft, and without diffidence. Her voice is slightly inflected with an accent that enacts, in the present moment, traces of her multinational trajectory: she is ethnically South Asian, and also African-British-Canadian.
The microphone gives distracting feedback as Samira begins to speak, but she does not stop or change pace, and the electronic interference cedes instead. Her khutbah, celebrating the end of the blessed month of Ramadan, begins by noting Eid’s coincidence with the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and, the following day, Nagasaki. This juxtaposition forms for Samira, and thus for her listeners, an occasion for a “meditation on, and rethinking of, the natures of strength and weakness, security and insecurity – what does it mean to be strong and secure, what does it mean to be weak? How do we understand strength and weakness within an Islamic paradigm?”

Her desire to materialize an Islamic paradigm through which to understand political problems of modern history is predicated on a belief that issues that may appear unrelated to Islam are in fact of deep relevance and concern to Muslims as Muslims. In Samira’s reading of Islam, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not out-of-place in an Eid khutbah in Toronto, but rather take their place in this year’s Eid celebrations because of temporal occurrence and ethical significance, in this year’s Ramadan and in our shared human history.

Samira’s khutbah deploys an Islamic understanding of creation and the nature of being human. From that beginning place, she seeks to rethink vulnerability and security in light of human interdependence. In this context she mentions food many times, and in particular ways. At the beginning of the khutbah, food is simply one material example, alongside water, weapons, shelter, and sanitation, of the problem of security: some people have enough food to be secure,

145 This quotation is taken from Samira’s own notes for her Eid ul-Fitr khutbah, Samira Kanji, “Eid Ul-Fitr Khutbah -- August 8, 2013,” n.d. My ethnographic rendering draws from multiple sources: her notes, which I requested after the fact, my own field notes, and photographs I saw or received after the events I describe.
and some do not have enough. I remember thinking as she spoke that this was a talk about world politics, and I wondered, without knowing what I had been expecting, what the authorizing “religious content” would be, that the situation seemed to call for. Then, she spoke about our human desire for security taking shape in the impulse to acquire and to consume, and about an increasingly visible problem of insecurity that emerges directly from this impulse. I begin to see and understand the picture, as she tells her audience that “[o]ur ability to purchase and enjoy cheap and plentiful food, clothing, [et cetera] is situated on exploitation and deprivation of others here and far away,”

… labourers who toil for incommensurate wages for the intensity and hours they work, and environmental safeguards that are degraded because expediency of output is paramount and environmental safeguards are luxuries that can’t be afforded in those poor economies desperately underbidding each other for the pennies[-apiece] contracts.146

As Samira continues, she speaks increasingly about food as a key example of the empowerment of some, at the cost of the disempowerment of others. Samira’s examples of violence, poverty, and unequal relationships intersect at the insight that humans are mutually interdependent. Our status and contingency as creatures in need of food and water, shelter and security, shows us to be by nature fundamentally vulnerable, precarious, and insecure.147 The second half of the khutbah follows up on Samira’s iteration of the fundamental problem of human insecurity, precarity, and interdependence, by situating that problem in what she explicitly terms an “Islamic paradigm.” In her words, “Our horizontal, between-human

146 Samira’s notes from her Eid ul-Fitr khutbah. Ibid.
147 I address the implicit critique of capitalism in chapter four. This critique appears at both Shoresh and Noor.
relationships of dependency [are] situated within vertical relationship[s] of dependency on Allah.”

Samira draws on a story of a Ugandan coffee farmer from Raj Patel’s popular *Stuffed and Starved*, to argue that those of us who experience plenty are able to access it mostly at the cost of the abuse of other human beings and animals. She quotes him at length:

“Today, when we produce more food than ever before, more than one in ten people on Earth are hungry […] Global hunger and obesity are linked through the chains of production that bring food from fields to our plate […] ‘Convenience’ immunizes us as consumers. We are dissuaded from asking hard questions, not only about how our individual tastes and preferences are manipulated, but about how our choices at the checkout take away the choices of those who grow our food. […] Consider the case of Lawrence Seguya, a coffee-grower in Uganda. He puts it like this: ‘I’d like to tell people in your place that the drink they are now drinking is the cause of all our problems.’ His assessment is widely shared. Salome Kafuluzi lives on a coffee-farm with her thirteen children, and she has this to say: ‘We’re broke. We’re not happy. We’re failing in everything. We can’t buy essentials. We can’t have meat, fish, rice, just sweet potatoes, beans and matoke. We can’t send the children to school.’ Salome’s husband, Peter, links their situation quite directly to the price of coffee: ‘I remember when the kiboko [sundried coffee cherry] sold for 69 cents/kg. We slept without worries. We could support our families. For me, I’d need to see a price of at least 34 cents/kg. Even at 29 cents/kg we can’t look after the land.’”

She reminds us of recent natural disasters in Pakistan, Canada, Haiti, and New Orleans, and cites Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* to show that “precariousness is an inescapable feature


149 Ibid.
of the human condition.” She tells us that the response to “our shared precariousness and mutual dependence” must be not “militarism” but “stronger ties of global community.”

Samira then turns to the Qur’an. Drawing on Surat 28 and 102, al-Qasas, “The Stories,” and al-Takathur, “Acquisitiveness,” she argues that humans exist as vulnerable creatures at the mercy of God. She also tells the story of Sufi saint Rabia al-Adawiyya, who undergoes a waking, praying fast for a week, and then receives both food and water, but is thwarted in her attempts to ingest them in order to slake her hunger and thirst. Cautioned by God, she ultimately accepts “her lack of ultimate control over her […] material well-being.” The logical foundation for the Islamic paradigm invoked here is the whole of creation’s dependence on Allah.

**Embodied Identification: Feeling Fasting**

Having problematized any wealth that is gotten at the expense of others, Samira invokes a figure of fasting (female) submission, in a story that explicitly evokes the embodied fasting state that was experienced by, or incumbent upon, most of the people in the room, every day for the last lunar month. This performative rhetorical move is keyed to the physical bodies of the audience. It can be related to, in a feeling register, by people who actually fasted and by people who did not but who have a frame of reference for what a fast feels like.

Here, the common somatic experience of fasting, which ordinarily functions to discipline bodies in religiously ritualized appetite control, is extended, to connect to global political

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151 I cannot know who fasted and who did not, or whose fast was perfect and whose imperfect. I myself fasted for a fraction of the days of the month, and no one explicitly asked me whether I fasted or not.
problems of food security and non-militarized peace. A few weeks earlier, another khutbah at Noor on the topic of poverty, given by Samira’s daughter Azeezah, had questioned the common assertion that the Ramadan fast gives a fasting person empathetic access to the experience of the hungry poor, when the Ramadan fast is taken on willingly and the hunger of poverty is not. Without asking whether two people’s fasts are ever the same, Samira’s story can strike a chord for listeners who fasted and for those that did not, for those who experienced the enjoined hunger and those who may simply imagine it.

Affective and somatic experiences are rich with potential for meaning-making, and Samira draws on that potential when she says to her audience: “Ramadan forces us to rethink our received, material-centered notions of strength and weakness, by decoupling physical consumption from strength.” She uses the connection she has drawn between individual physical “weakness” from hunger, and a shared human experience of contingent and precarious life, to achieve a juxtaposition with “strength,” characterized as spiritual and as connected to goodness, indexed in this moment by kindness, justice, and patience:

Even as our bodies become physically weak over the course of the month of Ramadan, from deprivations of food, water, and sleep, we strive to increase in spiritual strength: the strength of speaking kind words with a parched throat, the strength of doing kind and just deeds with a hungry body, the strength of exercising patience with a tired mind.

She arrives thus at the crux of her argument. Fear of vulnerability leads people to try to protect themselves in ways that harm others, but acceptance of precarity as the human condition carries with it an attendant ability to empathize with one’s fellow creatures, and refrain from paradoxically destructive attempts to shore up security.

By freeing ourselves from our fear of physical vulnerability, and our attachment to the illusion of material strength and security, we liberate ourselves to pursue true mental and spiritual strength, while remembering
that Allah alone is al-Qawi, the Most Strong, and al-Ghani, the Self-Sufficient.\(^{152}\)

Samira thus contextualizes a contemporary critique of the harms of wealth-based economy in a traditional discourse about Ramadan that contains classic themes of asceticism. The fast is a liberating force. For Samira, the fast is a means by which “[we] free[…] ourselves from our fear of physical vulnerability.” Once freed, we can exercise true strength, which is goodness, coming from intentional deployment of mind and spirit. Ramadan is presented as a collective Islamic opportunity to overcome physical weakness in order to cultivate spiritual strength. Here, her audience is offered a means and a goal. The means is distancing oneself from materiality and controlling the consumptive appetites, and the goal is freedom from (or quieting of) the fear of vulnerability, rather than vulnerability itself.

After a month spent practicing subversion of the appetite for food, we are enjoined by the Eid khutbah to cultivate an appetite for justice. The examples of injustice Samira names include the abuse of migrant labourers in the food system and the development of weapons of mass destruction and their deployment in acts of domination. The khutbah discursively reveals dehumanization and destruction as indelibly connected with the very materialism that religious tradition enjoins the fasting subject to moderate. In this framing, religion is not a realm distinct from politics. Instead, religion opens an ethical path to activism. Such a path, flowing from a Qur’anic view of Allah and Allah’s creation, invites the application of an Islamic paradigm to worldly conditions in a way that is simultaneously ethically obvious and religiously traditional.

\(^{152}\) Kanji, “Eid Ul-Fitr Khutbah -- August 8, 2013.”
As an Eid khutbah, Samira’s words occur after the Ramadan fast is over. Thus, her words are not a simple prescription for behavior, but a reflection on what has come before. The words do prescribe, but rather than prescribing an immediately subsequent behavior, they prescribe a way of understanding the ritual life of the community. Samira’s khutbah reflects, characterizes, and narrativizes. It makes meaning with what was done, said, heard, and felt in the foregoing, ritually demarcated time.

For many listeners, this khutbah weaves itself together with khutbahs and talks and iftars that occurred that Ramadan, and with other fast experiences from years previous. It also provides a potential lens for thinking through Ramadan, and what might be the implications of being Muslim and living in a created world throughout the year. Taking place at the Eid celebration, Samira’s khutbah reflects on Ramadan not primarily to persuade her audience of what to do with one’s fast, but to persuade us of how to understand what was done. The words motivate a general future orientation, more than an immediate future action. Samira’s Islamic paradigm fosters an ethic that is less concerned with prescribing a set of actions, and more concerned with cultivating a way of living.

Paradigm and Principle

The “Islamic paradigm” is sought and constructed by guest speakers and throughout Noor’s programming, not only the Eid khutbah. It appears in other khutbahs, lectures, discussions, and film screenings, during major festivals and ordinary days throughout the ritual year. Samira, Azeezah and Khadijah, and other speakers at Noor, all invoke Islamic “principles,” which they also describe with the words “worldview,” “concept,” “perspective,” and “model,” specifically in order to use them to understand contemporary issues.
In so doing, they are simultaneously drawing on Islamic tradition, and also constructing it, by deploying particular ideas and combinations of ideas, rather than others. The key concepts they draw on are zakat/sadaqa (charity), khilafa (stewardship), rahma (mercy), halal and tayyab ([that which is] lawful and wholesome), mizan (balance), fitrah ([a creature’s] nature or essence), and ‘adl ([principles of] justice). All these elements play important roles, but justice in particular comes to stand as a principle behind the others, and the particular notion of justice at work is predicated on an understanding of the world as God’s creation. The Islamic paradigm, then, provides a window onto what counts as justice at Noor. This justice, among other things, is clearly social.

I. “What’s legal doesn’t exhaust what’s moral”

Azeezah, Samira’s eldest child, produced one of the most complete articulations of the Islamic paradigm for food being developed at Noor. Like her mother and younger sister, Azeezah is regularly and actively involved in writing and speaking about the intersection of Muslims and Canadian society. Her articles, sometimes co-written with her mother and sister, often appear in Toronto’s National Post newspaper and on politically-minded blogs like Rabble.ca. Many of the qualities that led Azeezah to pursue law were already part of her personality when she was a little girl, and two of these qualities are intelligence and stubbornness.

The Kanjis’ Gujarati culinary traditions mean that the three generations of women who cook in the home, Noorbanu, Samira, and Azeezah and Khadijah, usually prepare vegetarian

153 Azeezah and Khadijah’s younger brother is often present, but is much less a rabble-rouser than his sisters.
food. But while there is large overlap in food ethics and food habits, there are also key differences. Husein, the youngest sibling and the one who is constrained by food allergies, eats the most meat. Khadijah is the most flexible in her diet; she will eat just about anything, so long as she can provide a running commentary. Azeezah is the militant vegetarian of the house. Even before she became vegetarian, Azeezah was disposed to be adamant about the relationship between principle and practice.

During one of our interviews, as Azeezah and I talk about the relationship between food ethics and food habits, Samira passes through the room. Azeezah has been telling me about her lifelong picky eating, and Samira begins to interject a story from Azeezah’s childhood, and they both tell the story to me together, laughing: once, the whole family was taking a long car trip, as they sometimes did, and Khadijah wanted to stop for McDonald’s. Azeezah, refusing to participate, stubbornly remained in the car while everyone else went inside. When the family returned, she had devoured their entire cache of bananas. They found her sitting, resolute and defiant, amid a pile of banana peels. Azeezah is full of laughter over the story, but in another way, food for her has always been no laughing matter.

While others casually translate halal for me as good or permitted food for a Muslim to eat, Azeezah consistently and only translates the word as “lawful” when we speak about food, correcting me if I suggest otherwise. Her characteristic precision, and the importance she places on a black-and-white category of halal when we speak of food and Islam, does not translate to a narrowly legalistic understanding of the relationship between Muslims and food. Rather, it opens onto a world of theorization in which she brings readings of the Qur’an and of historical Muslim scholars together with contemporary scholarship on environmental issues. For Azeezah, the
Islamic concept of halal may be a cornerstone of the Islamic approach to food, but there are yet more stones that make up the foundation of such an approach. Halal is merely the beginning.

I put the question to Azeezah, long after I had heard Timothy Gianotti ask it in the talk that opens this dissertation: Is halal chicken really halal when the birds are treated so horribly in factory farms? There is the fraction of a pause. “I mean legally it’s halal. It depends on whether you’re talking about descriptively or normatively. Also, halal isn’t the only concept that we have to deal with food in Islam, right? In the Qur’an, it talks about eating food that’s halal and tayyab. Halal being lawful and tayyab being wholesome.”

Even if we’re saying that the concept of halal is fixed, we still have to ask, “what does it mean to eat food that’s wholesome?” What’s legal doesn’t exhaust what’s moral.  

In this brief moment, Azeezah has summed up a set of ideas negotiated at Noor over years of the quotidian work of doing religion. Azeezah deftly navigates and participates in authoritative discourse, establishing the parameters of the question of religious ethics, law, and practice. First, she takes a conservative position: legally, halal is halal. Then, she establishes tradition: Islam says food must be halal and tayyab. Then, she places interpretive responsibility on the community: “we still have to ask” what counts as wholesome. Finally, she relativizes law to morality, placing law in the service of the responsibility to cultivate oneself as an ethical subject and correcting the orientation of my question: “What’s legal doesn’t exhaust what’s moral.”

Interview with Azeezah Kanji, September 7, 2013.

II. The Imperative to Know

Azeezah continues this re-orientation by discursively connecting the contemporary context, in this case the mistrust of factory farming practices, with the life of the Prophet.

Going back to differences between the Prophet’s context and our context, I think it’s not just that there wasn’t factory farming and these mass process of food production then, but also people now are so much more disconnected from the processes of food production, so we really don’t know how the food that we eat has been produced, what the life of the animal was like, or what processes were used to produce the plants, the vegetables and fruits that we eat, so then it again creates an imperative to be knowledgeable about what we are eating so we can ensure that it’s ethical. Which is a challenge that wasn’t salient to the same extent at the time of the Prophet, when there wasn’t this big gap between production and consumption. [Emphasis added]

Again, the juxtaposition of a religiously-traditional moment with a contemporary situation suggests that the former has something to contribute to the latter. Particular differences between the food system at the Prophet’s time and at our time are framed as important, relevant. Factory farming, mass scale, and disconnectedness are the notable differences. In this moment other differences (geographical location; the intertwined development of state health and safety regulations and state-regulated religious food certification) are less visible.

The precise differences Azeezah names, and which so many others name, are the ones that create the ethical imperative she and others articulate: Factory farming, mass scale, and “disconnectedness” writ as a lack of first or secondhand knowledge of the production of one’s own food, are things that seem to call for responsibility on the part of individual consumers, or rather, religious subjects. Did people of the past have a special form of knowledge of, or connectedness with, the food they ate? Regardless of the answer, participants in the food movement routinely speak to me of a sense of lost intimacy in foodways, a sense that harms to people, animals, and the environment in the foodmaking process is shocking and out-of-place.
This is closely followed by a sense that people are in a relationship of responsibility with the world that requires them to care about this circumstance and to make attempts at mitigating it. Religious people in particular, in this narrative, have an apparatus for knowing-caring-acting.

III. “Islam [as] Food Ethics”

A presentation Azeezah made at Noor during Ramadan 2013, which she titled “Islam and Food Ethics,” is a study in the key ideas that appear across Noor’s food programming. In it, Azeezah “situate[s] the imperative of food ethics within the framework of Islamic thought.” Azeezah frames food ethics as an imperative, as a requirement of participating in food. The implicit argument if her presentation is that the conventional food system is ethically unacceptable.

After a brief review of the basics of halal and its interpretation in classical Islamic thought, naming several of the haram or forbidden substances (carrion, pork, blood, and meat consecrated to other deities), Azeezah quotes from Surat Al-Baqarah, wherein humankind is commanded to eat what is halal and tayyab, or lawful and wholesome (2:168). As in our conversation, she does not question halal directly, for example by asking whether the practice of halal certification is adequate to the history of Islamic interpretation, or whether Islamic interpretation has been adequate. What the presentation does question is the second category, tayyab, wholesome. Azeezah’s argument is precise, and theologically mainstream: she does not allege that wholesomeness should impact on lawfulness, or challenge the sufficiency of the

157 Ibid.
category of halal in itself, but rather positions her critique of conventional food on the ground of whether conventional food is tayyab.

The implication remains open that for something to be really halal in the expansive sense of being acceptable for a Muslim to eat, it needs to tayyab. This juncture is a location of potential dissent and resistance: It is the opening point for the accusation that food activists seek to make haram what God has made halal. This critique is leveled against, for example, Muslim ethical vegetarians, in order to counter the position that a vegetarian diet is more Islamically valid because it is more merciful. It rests on a citation of a Qur’anic passage that lauds moderation rather than over-stringent or punitive interpretation and practice. Azeezah is familiar with this criticism because it is quite common, and also because she is herself a vegetarian. Her circumvention of it is a choice informed by her life experience.

Tayyab is the guiding principle of Azeezah’s presentation. Azeezah notes that the initial development of the Islamic approach to food happened in a context far removed from the current one, “before the advent of [an] industrialized, globalized system of food production which threatens the lives, health, safety, and dignity of people and animals, and imperils the integrity and sustainability of [the] natural environment.” The significant implication of this indicting assessment of the global food system is that, if such conditions had existed when Islam was being initially developed, the detrimental effects of such a food system would have incurred

158 Discussed in the introduction
159 Kanji, “Presentation Notes- ‘Islam and Food Ethics.’”
religious sanction. Azeezah reads aloud a quote of Sarah Joseph, from an article in *Emel* magazine:

“Due to the explosion of junk food in Muslim societies, traditional diets are being replaced by ‘halal’ McDonalds, KFCs, and Burger Kings […] despite the animal’s being slaughtered appropriately] it is difficult to see how they are wholesome. […] The problem is not confined to processed food […] [My local halal butcher] explains that when the abattoir mass-slaughters several thousand birds, the chickens flap around when they are unstunned. This leads to the broken wings and legs and bruising. He assures me that this is not a problem, and that I should be grateful that the slaughter process is “fully halal” given that it follows “the sunnah of being unstunned.” The sunnah however was not to slaughter thousands of birds in a brutal mechanized process [in which birds are hurt, feel their fellow birds’ deaths, and release stress hormones in their body-meat]. Do we really want to ingest the flesh of an animal that died in fear and pain?”

In this article excerpt Azeezah is quoting, “traditional” Muslim diets are constructed as a single category of food, and opposed to the contemporary food system. This construction is senescent, a rosy retrospection that valorizes the past and overwrites histories of diversity with an implicitly downward trajectory toward the present. Just as it is at Shoresh, the idea that food practices have gotten worse is based in part on commonsense health claims, e.g. that “traditional” diets are healthier than contemporary diets and do not feature “junk food.” Together with the invocation of junk food, processed food, and stress hormones, the excerpt foregrounds pain and suffering of animals, aiming to elicit a mixture of pathos and revulsion in the reader.

The question “do we really want to ingest the flesh of an animal that died in fear and pain?” invokes a sense that fear and pain materially affect the body of a slaughtered chicken and, if that is insufficiently repulsive, that fear and pain are also likely to affect the physical body of

160 Ibid. Quoting Joseph in *Emel* magazine.
the consumer of the animal, via hormones or otherwise. There is also an oblique sense that abuse itself can be transmitted, albeit through a less quantifiable, but more visceral, mechanism, and that this can affect the consumer’s physical, or perhaps moral, body. The point here is to expose the current food system as flawed in several major ways, and by means of this exposure, to ignite a sense in the presumed Muslim audience that the condition of the food system, because it is wrong, is in a deep way out-of-line with Islam, both “traditional” and ideal.

Having presented this quotation as a part of her larger argument, Azeezah does not expand on this powerful invocation of pollution in the way I have, but instead grounds her listeners in the Islamic paradigm. She does this by noting (and reassuring her listeners) that “the challenge of any living religious and legal tradition [is to] adapt rules and precepts to the current context, while maintaining continuity with the past.”\textsuperscript{161} This key rhetorical move frames Islam not as a mechanical checklist of yes-or-no permissibility, but as an alive thing, a source for finding the right path going forward while also staying connected with tradition going backward. Azeezah then offers “resources in the Islamic tradition for thinking about modern challenges of food ethics” which, as with Samira’s khutbah, follow from the single key Islamic concept of God’s creation.\textsuperscript{162}

\textbf{IV. Creation and Justice}

The rest of Azeezah’s presentation invokes key Qur’anic passages, and a sprinkling of Muslim scholarship, to present Nature as God’s creation. She describes God’s creation as created, in a state of balance, mizan, with each creature living “in constant praise of its

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
Humans have the responsibility of stewardship, khilafa, of this created world, and are charged specifically with enjoying, but not destroying, its resources. It is from this condition of createdness and responsibility that the principle of justice is derived: “Principles of environmental, animal, and human justice [flow] from [the] intrinsic value of nature as creation of Allah, the imperative of maintaining the state of balance in which the world was created.”

Azeezah characterizes these three kinds of justice, environmental, animal, and human, using Qur’anic surahs, hadith, and Muslim scholarship. The shape of the justice that emerges from her characterization is care-oriented: environmental justice is about conservation, animal justice is about preserving the rights of created creatures, and human justice means actively ensuring that all humans live in dignity. The particular form of justice that is being developed here is a vision of the integrity of creation as made up of discrete kinds of things that belong to God. As such, non-human reality is ascribed a value beyond its use-value to humans.

Furthermore, this framing, beginning at the level of creation and moving in decreasing order from the environment through animals to humans, is intentionally non-anthropocentric. It amounts to a critique of a perceived post-industrialized capitalist model of valuation, derived from a religious worldview. Speaking of justice to humans, Azeezah specifies that, like animals, “fellow humans [are] not to be treated as cogs in the machine of food production” but

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163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
165 This is not to say that capitalist models and religious worldviews are necessarily opposed. Max Weber has famously argued that capitalism flourishes in a religious (Protestant, especially Calvinist) worldview, and there is an increasing literature on Islam and neoliberalism/capitalism. Attitudes about religion and economy are the subject of chapter four.
that food and other resources must be shared among humans. She does not claim that distribution should be equal, but mandates that it must be “just:” she rhetorically connects justice with, for example, charitable giving to the poor.\footnote{Kanji, “Presentation Notes- ‘Islam and Food Ethics.’”}

A certain historical moment has enabled a speaker, a Canadian Muslim woman, to make an Islamically-grounded critique of western industrial capitalism by drawing on a religious worldview presented as non-anthropocentric and fundamentally ethical. This discourse is not fully normalized: In fact, after one jumah at Noor during which Azeezah made similar points about animal justice in a khutbah, I watched an older male participant admonish her for squandering her khutbah on such unimportant matters when there are urgent problems of justice in the world. He meant political upheaval like the war in Syria, and its human suffering.

### Whose Justice?

Justice is patently a prescriptive concept, and its content is by no means self-evident, however commonsense the concept may seem. But it is significant that justice is the frame in terms of which importance is contested. Wholesome food, according to Azeezah’s work, is \textit{just} food. Wholesome (just) food may also be healthy food, but her presentation gives little indication of that, beyond a general implication that food, in its natural created condition, is healthy. Azeezah presents wholesome food fundamentally as \textit{just} food: all else flows from that.

It is noteworthy that Azeezah’s presentation participates in the idea that food in the conventional system is both bad for justice and bad for health. This idea is pervasive in the wider food movement. The food movement critique characterizes sets of human-industrial behaviours

\footnote{Kanji, “Presentation Notes- ‘Islam and Food Ethics.’”}
as abuse rather than as simply industrial procedures for “harvesting,” the preferred term for industrial production of meat from animal bodies. Certainly, it characterizes the suffering of animals as a problem in the first place. Additionally, it characterizes food that results from abusive industrial practices as bad for humans. Western biomedical discourse, which underpins state regulation of industrial food, offers little evidence that eating abused animals has a negative effect on individual human health. The food movement critique speaks around this authoritative discourse, and offers another, asserting that eating abused animals is bad for people. “Bad [for]” is constructed by standards construed as more real, in ways which are ethical or ethico-physical: The mistreatment of human and animal others is transmittable, and can infect persons individually and socially, making abusive food industry practices bad for the individual moral body, and bad for the panhuman social-moral body.

The Islamic Paradigm On The Ground

In 2013, Ramadan began on July 9th and ended with Eid ul-Fitr on August 8. Eid and Ramadan both intimately connect food and Islam. During Sha‘ban, the preparatory month preceding Ramadan, two jumah prayer services included khutbahs on the topic of food. One discussed fasting in preparation for Ramadan, and the other discussed the limits of charity as a solution to poverty. During Ramadan, khutbahs again engaged food in detail: one addressed correct and virtuous orientation for a good fast, and the other questioned whether fasting during
Ramadan could really help one draw near to the hunger and thirst of the poor, which differs from a religious fast because it is unchosen and unritualized.¹⁶⁷

In some ways these conversations matter to people; in other ways, food culture and convention, or simply *cooking* and *eating*, matters more. During the fasting month, Noor’s special Ramadan programs included three lectures on Saturday evenings. These lectures were free of charge and open to the public. Each lasted about an hour, and was followed by a thirty-minute question-and-answer session that ended just before sunset. At sunset, we would break our fasts in a ritualization of a tradition ascribed to the prophet Muhammad, by eating a small number of dried dates and drinking a glass of water or fruit juice, before performing the evening *maghrib* prayer. Those of us, mostly women and youths, who were preparing the food brought in for the catered meal, would not pray. Instead, we hurried back downstairs to the kitchen, or to the serving or dining areas adjacent to it, to be ready for the imminent influx of people.


¹⁶⁷ The question of experience here is whether and how it can be universalized, and if, when, and how affective and bodied experiences can be marshaled in building the self and/or the community. This connection, rather than being explored here, has come to form the groundwork of my postdoctoral project, “Slaughter, the Somatic, and the State.”
Each iftar-preceding lecture was a deep engagement by an intellectual not otherwise affiliated with Noor, and two of the three speakers gave lectures that explicitly connected food, social justice, and Islam. The two food-focused Ramadan lectures were given by authors of award-winning monographs, whose talks centrally addressed the topic of food: Sarah Elton, journalist and author of Locavore, who spoke on the topic of her book, Consumed: Food for a Finite Planet, and Dr. Amira Mittermaier, anthropologist and associate professor of Islam at the University of Toronto, who drew on her recent work on Islamic charity in Egypt to speak about practices of food-giving that complicate the binary of alms-giving and social justice. Both speakers spoke from an intellectual form of authority, and focused on cultural and religious
practices around food distribution that were “Islamic” because of their links to tradition, nation, history, and theology.

Some people who attended the lecture did not stay for the iftar; others arrived for the iftar without attending the lecture; some stayed for both. Of those who attended the lectures, some asked presenters tough questions about the effects of charitable work; others, perhaps tired and hungry from the fast, found it difficult to focus on the speaker’s point in the first place. It is easy to lose focus on philosophical matters, and even ordinary conversation, and instead find that one’s mind has drifted to the food being prepared downstairs.

Each iftar featured a different cuisine: First Ethiopian and Indian; then Afghani; the third was initially billed as Malaysian and later changed to Middle Eastern. I heard that there was some quiet squabbling about which foods would be included, and wondered whether this was the reason for the change from Malaysian to Middle Eastern cuisine. There was some initial resistance to the Ethiopian food, perhaps simply from lack of exposure to it: when we were preparing the catered food to be set out for the fast-breaking meal, our Turkish administrator was unfamiliar with injeera. But Noor has a small number of Ethiopian attendees, and since another member of the community, Ruby, runs a catering business serving Indian food, the combination of Indian and Ethiopian cuisine was a solution that pleased everyone.

The variety of flavours represented by these dual cuisines also helped gloss over any dissent about whether an iftar should or shouldn’t be vegetarian. Whereas arguments like Elton’s, and others that take place at Noor, clearly argue for a reduction in meat consumption, and although many people at Noor are semi- or fully vegetarian, it is still difficult for many to imagine a celebratory meal without meat. The association of Ramadan iftars with plentiful, even
excessive, celebratory meat dishes is particularly trenchant. One interlocutor at Noor mentioned hearing of iftars in the Muslim world where feasters had to be hospitalized for over-eating. She understood this to be rather a misunderstanding of what Ramadan is for: not only an accident of excess, but an irony in the face of the moderation of appetite through self-control that she sees as the theological purpose of the ritual.

Noor participants come to the lecture-and-iftar for many reasons: Because they are interested in the lecture topic; in order to pray; to be together with fellow fasters; to have something to pass the time, and take their minds off the hunger in the last hours before sunset. Ramadan may be a time for moderating appetites, inculcating charity, and considering the plight of others: it is also about being together, about doing the fast because fasting is what we do, about eating together, and about tasting the festive familiar.

Conclusion

If people at Noor are interested in eating familiar foods at iftars, or breaking the fast with traditional dates, or bringing tasty family dishes to the post-jumah potluck, they are also interested in attending events about food justice, animals’ fitrahs, and the drawbacks of factory farming. If they speak up against environmental degradation, grow flowers and vegetables in their own gardens, and remember vendors selling produce door-to-door, they also have varying understandings of what halal really means and whether new halal certifications are helpful protections, or mere stricture and nonsense. While only some are persuaded by locavore politics, all are attentive to concerns with the North American food system, and with the quality of food. And though some have little interest in non-human animals while human beings suffer, all seem willing to engage the Islamic paradigm in the language of justice.
Samira’s Eid khutbah was centrally concerned with the question of how to use an Islamic paradigm to understand the challenges of the human condition. The khutbah ended with an invocation of zakat, the charitable and obligatory religious tax, as an “instrument of the Islamic paradigm.” A debt owed rather than a gift given, zakat is “not an act of generosity to the recipient, but discharge of an obligation to Allah.”

Honest reflection tells us that if we are privileged and have excess to our needs, we have not necessarily earned it; likewise, people who live with deficiency have not necessarily brought it upon themselves. 168

The call is universalist, contextualizing wealth in the context of a global economy in which the wealthy are responsible to, and for, the suffering of the poor “here and far away.” 169

The Islamic paradigm being invoked suggests that God allots wealth unevenly, and that wealth is not necessarily “earned” in the sense of being deserved, or of belonging to the wealthy individual: in fact, it belongs to God. The wealthy person is not responsible for their own wealth: rather they are responsible to God and their fellow creatures, human in this example, but also in other examples, non-human animals and the environment. The poor, similarly, have not “earned” or “deserved” their poverty, and are not responsible for it. However, the enjoyment of excess is described as almost necessarily at the expense of others, and thus the enjoyers of privilege are responsible for the extent to which they take advantage, and they are responsible for seeking a just system.

168 Kanji, “Eid Ul-Fitr Khutbah -- August 8, 2013.”
169 Ibid.
This Islamic paradigm approaches the world as created, and places food, creatures, and the environment at the centre of that world, linking its various parts together in mutual interdependence. The Islamic paradigm is constructed by a twofold process: the invocation of recognizable religious texts and traditions, and a hermeneutics which places those sources alongside parallel information, showing how they all point in the same direction. The wisdom of tradition lends religious importance to contemporary facts, which in turn shore up the traditional content. Both are marshalled in service of a point about a contemporary political problem.

The problem is the inequality and injustice attributed to the global economy, including the conventional food system. Situated after discussion of the nuclear arms race, the human costs of material consumption, and the God-given vulnerability of the human condition, the Islamic paradigm is offered as a paradigm in a literal sense: a perspective from or through which to perceive a condition. The Islamic perspective does not so much solve the problem of instability, as offer a reframing of the problem. If instability is a fact of (created) life, the real problem is aggravating that instability beyond the point of balance, by means of religiously-disconnected overconsumption on a finite planet.
Chapter 3
Taste-Identity as Performative Practice

“I’d just like to call attention to the whitest thing on Earth.” Khadijah Kanji is walking up to me with sparkling eyes, laughing. She is making fun of me, and the food on my plate.

We are in the social space behind the ordinary prayer room, on the lower floor of Noor Cultural Centre. It’s Eid ul-Fitr, after Samira’s khutbah, and the whole downstairs is swarming with people. Instead of the usual setup of circular tables surrounded by chairs, today the room is centred around one long strip of rectangular tables placed end-to-end, and covered in food. Several of us have been zipping back and forth from the kitchen to this central table, replenishing platters of cookies, crackers, cakes, samosas, and fruits, fetching more napkins, and cleaning up paper plates, empty cups, stir sticks, and other detritus from the festivity.

It had been hard to keep up, with so many people here, food disappearing almost as fast as it is brought. Children, most of them wearing colourful South Asian style tunics, run around playing in moments when they aren’t corralled by their parents. The adults, also finely dressed, warmly extend or accept invitations to stop by this or that home, any time from one o’clock p.m. until the evening, for the “open house,” an event which always involves festive dress, abundant food, and socializing.

As food is consumed and greetings and invitations are given and received, the crowd begins to dissipate, and people return home to prepare for the rest of the day’s visitations. There is less running around to do, and I feel myself coming down from the fun and frantic pace of smiling greetings while rushing dishes and bowls to the long central table to which they were
destined. I am hungry. I pick up a plate and begin my own harvest from what is left. All the
samosas are gone, but I find plenty of digestive cookies, some crackers, a sprig of leftover
grapes, and some tea. I munch down the grapes first, and then start in on a digestive cookie.

That is when Khadijah spots me, and begins to laugh at me, standing by myself, a beige
scarf framing my beige face, eating beige food from a beige paper plate and sipping milky tea. I
stumble out a protest that someone had already eaten all the samosas, but the rebuttal comes too
slow and halting, and my attempt at sassback completely fails to abate her amusement. Even
though Khadijah and I got our food from the same table, somehow my plate and my hands, this
food and my mouth, constitute each other in a narrative I am helpless to inflect. You are what
you eat; what you eat is also you. Some foods, and some versions of you, are more legible than
others.

Judith Butler has famously pointed out that identity is iterative. Specifically investigating
gender identity, Butler’s performative theory of gender makes a clear break with the idea of that
identity as essential, and derivative of physical fact. Instead, for Butler gender identity becomes
visible as an effect of power, and as the physical re-inscription of idea frameworks that effect,
rather than reflect, materiality.170 Words and language are a central form of performative
discourse for Butler, who writes speech as performative act.171

170 Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”; Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the
Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 2011); Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits

171 For some readers it will be worth noticing that Butler is not theorizing acts as a form of discourse. Here Butler is
precisely thinking about speech as an act. Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (New
York: Routledge, 1997).
Although Butler uses performativity to think gender differently, her intervention has been taken up and applied to other configurations of identity, most notably the construction of race via racialization. Here I take a related but different tack, to suggest that Butler’s theoretical intervention is relevant to food acts specifically, particularly (though perhaps not only) where they intersect the problem of identity. While other scholars have found reason to distinguish Butler’s performativity from a more materialist orientation to the body, I stop short of this distinction. I take from Butler the central constructivist insight that, when and to the extent that something matters, its significance is found in the performativity of things, rather than in the essence of things. In thinking about what foods are, we ought to think of what they do socially: in other words, we ought to think in terms of the performative in order to trace, but not hypostasize, the mutuality of materiality and meaning in the relationships between food and bodies.

From this vantage point, it is easier to understand why and how cookies and tea can be Eid food in one moment and icons of whiteness in the next. Moreover, it is easier to understand why food boundaries that seem to separate Jew from non-Jew and Muslim from non-Muslim might actually separate Jew from Jew and Muslim from Muslim instead. Food performances, when they are identificatory, are discursive moments coalescing along lines of authorization. Chapters one and two showed the dynamic operations of narrativization by which versions of Jewishness and Muslimness become authorized at the institutional level. Here again, I show where intersecting significations bloom into meaning instead of passing away invisibly. But this

time the analysis runs from the bottom up, and I suspend the division between Shoresh and Noor in order to foreground the comparison between the groups that was implicit in earlier chapters.

In what follows, I present a cross-section of parallel stories of people around Noor and Shoresh. Some, like Khadijah and Mike, are quite close to the organizational centre of Noor and Shoresh. Others, like Noam and Mamoom, are engaged participants. Reh’ma and Free Times are both organizations that I encountered through participating at Shoresh and Noor events. All these locations come together in this chapter in a series of acts of identification with food. In each case and at each level, people leverage stereotypes or stock cultural ideas while connecting particular foods with ethnic or religious identity. Interestingly, while this move sometimes works to preserve the boundary between self and other, it also often functions to construct relationships of intimacy across that boundary, or to erect boundaries within groups. This is where my argumentative tack differs from those of Feely-Harnik, Freidenreich, and Ulrich, who emphasize the role of food regulation as a divider between in-group and out-group. Instead, my analysis adds further weight to the approaches represented in Jay and Rosenblum, who focus on the ways food constructs layered relations within as well as among groups. What matters most in the identificatory function of foodways is what becomes legible and when, in the Butlerian idiom. Or, put differently, what matters is when you are what you eat, and when you eat what you are.

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You are what you (don’t) eat

… It would be a very rare circumstance… to have me eat a lobster. I can’t imagine myself eating a lobster.

Noam and I are talking about food and Jewishness. Noam, a frequent participant at Shoresh events, is the eldest son of well-known rabbi Elyse Goldstein and Jewish educator Baruch Browns-Sienna; the family name Sienna was chosen to represent a merging of their previous surnames. I had met his family through mutual friends, and knew their engagement with Jewishness as a central source of meaning-making: I saw Noam in person for the first time on a day when he visited Noor. Soon after, he was enrolled in the master’s program in the same department where I was pursuing my doctorate.

After we had become friends, Noam consented to do an interview with me from his perspective as a Shoresh participant. He had no prior or unusual access to my questions or to the shape my project would take. A number of Jewish people with whom I spoke during my fieldwork told me that they would not eat lobster, but here, Noam presents a clear and affectively rich exposition of the performative function of lobster as an identity-marker. When Noam thinks of a lobster, he sees in his mind’s eye an icon of the other.

It’s really, I mean emotionally, to me it’s like, lobster, like of allllll food, like, a looobster you have to eat. You know? Like, its, like, the symbol, […] it’s the symbol of treyf, but for me, like lobster is, specifically is also the symbol of, of, whatamIgonacallit, goyishness. Like non-Jewishness.

Goyish is a Yiddish term from the Hebrew “goy” (like the Latin-derived “gentile”) meaning “nation [other than Israel].”\(^\text{176}\) It has explicitly ethnic overtones, and is moderately derogatory: it means, as Noam says, non-Jewish. He, reaching for communicative meaning, illustrates this point about goyishness in a quotidian and conversational way: not by explication, but by enactment. Noam puts on a voice, which is easy to recognize as the comic stereotype of a stiffly-enthusiastic White American Male accent. Noam flexes his pharynx and hits his rs hard:

Like “A lobster dinner!” Right?

Resuming his usual voice and manner, he continues to illustrate:

Like butt-, the little thing of butter, and the, like the white people, and white bread, and the, roasted lobster, and it’s just like, so emblematic of like, everything my life is not about.

Noam’s casual performance of goyishness takes about two seconds to enact. But the brief moment is dense with signification. It performs, in primarily racialized terms, the otherness of the non-Jew to the Jew. In so doing, it simultaneously enacts a racialization of Jewish otherness, as non-white. The single act is also a repetition, a re-performing of a socially legible image that solidifies the facticity of what it calls up.\(^\text{177}\) White butter, white bread, white lobster flesh, and white people coalesce in a richly descriptive image in which white bodies consume and reproduce whiteness.

Lobster is clearly special in this example, and its specialness is historically specific. This specialness does not appear in the biblical law: in fact, lobster is quite un-special in its exclusion

\(^\text{176}\) See also *ger*.

\(^\text{177}\) In Butler’s terms, “the anticipation conjures the object.” Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.
from the biblical roster of kosher foods. A brief reference to the introduction is instructive here: recall that Mary Douglas points out that pigs and rabbits are equally outside the scope of biblical kashrut, but one is socially abhorred while the other is merely avoided.\textsuperscript{178} Instances of Jewish social rejection of pork thus cannot be explained by the food law, but rather must be understood in socio-historical circumstances. Similarly, for reasons that have much more to do with foodways in North America over the last two centuries than they have to do with God and the patriarchs or Talmudic or medieval rabbis, lobster is now widely considered an icon of non-Jewishness.\textsuperscript{179} Much more than simply being non-kosher, lobster is now like pig, and the also-recent cheeseburger. It socially hypostasizes treyf. In hypostasizing treyf, it also solidifies the version of treyf whose meaning is most centrally tied to kashrut as separation from The Nations, goyim.

There was a time when Noam could have eaten lobster, and the story of that occasion makes some of these meanings more clear. In addition to being a Jewish educator and grad student, Noam is a henna artist specializing in Jewish henna traditions. He is often hired to apply these celebratory dye-based skin decorations for weddings, holidays, and community events. He tells me of one particular occasion when he was hired by a very wealthy Jewish family to do henna at a sweet-sixteen birthday party:

\begin{itemize}

\item\textsuperscript{179} On the change in the social value of lobster over two centuries, see Elisabeth. Townsend, \textit{Lobster: A Global History} (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).
\end{itemize}
it was a Jewish family that had invited me. So I thought, oh, it’s gonna be a Jewish henna ceremony. I do that all the time. No. It was in fact a clam bake. For a very wealthy, very wealthy New England Jewish family, who had married into another very wealthy family, and they were on the Cape, on Cape Cod. […] They had a beautiful, phenomenal, oceanside mansion on Cape Cod. And I was like “is this your… is this a cottage?” Like, no. This is their, like, second home, like, they have a mansion, in [a major city] and they have another home, right, on Cape Cod. And they were on the Cape, and they had lobster!

Class is a major identity-marking field here. Noam juxtaposes Jewishness with a distant American upper class. Food, in the form of the clam bake as a cultural event, and in the form of lobster in particular, is the vector for the transmission of class-identity. Mansions with property, a desirable city location and a desirable oceanside location, signify wealth, as does a well-matched marriage which Noam presents as a merging of families more than persons. This stereotypical narrative of American Protestant wealth operates even as one of the families standing in for wealth and whiteness are themselves also Jewish. Noam, hired by a Jewish family to do henna, anticipates a Jewish henna ceremony, and instead finds a clam bake, which he experiences as very not-Jewish: The clam bake as an event, and the lobster as the iconic food prepared and eaten there, represent assimilation. The story is about the erasure of Jewishness, against which the narrator is alienated.

The naming of one family as “Jewish,” over against the unmarked Protestant family, underscores anxiety around food and identity and intermarriage when a New England (Jewish) family puts on a clam bake. Clam bakes are rooted in non-Jewish and non-affluent costal society, wherein a group of people cook an inexpensively foraged communal meal. In the same way that lobster’s valence has changed, from worthless food eaten only by the poor to costly delicacy,
clam bakes have changed from a site of commonness to a site of affluence.\textsuperscript{180} Clams, it should be noted, are treyf too. But are not a symbol of treyf for Noam: Lobster is.

And it was just like, it was so… like, just, it was like all, part of this scene to me, with this ginormous house, and like the lobster, and the clam bake, and the ostentatious decorations, and like, I think they gave me, like, a hundred dollar tip. It was like absolutely extraordinary. It was just so symbolic to me, like, of course they’re eating lobster, because they’re, like, it’s like, assimilationist, it’s like they are so moving themselves into the upper class of New England society with this lobster, clam bake. That’s what it was to me.

Noam performed a caricature of whiteness, and that caricature was called up in the face of another performance: the performance of assimilation that inscribes a self as more like others, by means of an erasure. At stake in the problem of assimilation is whether \textit{change in Jewishness} is the same as \textit{loss of Jewishness}. The birth of Reform Judaism in the U.S. in the late nineteenth century happened in part through a rejection of kashrut and lowly “kitchen Judaism” as “orientalist,” in the sense of being Old-World and backward.\textsuperscript{181} New-World reformers reoriented their Judaism around an “occidental,” enlightenment-rationalist, and ethical interpretation of Judaism.\textsuperscript{182}

The famous “Treyfah Banquet” of 1883, which followed the commencement ceremony for America’s first graduating class of Reform rabbis, and whose French cuisine-valorizing menu included clams and lobster bisque, though no pork, caused discomfort in the room, and

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{181} Zamore, \textit{The Sacred Table}; Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration}; Joselit, “Food Fight: The Americanization of Kashrut in Twentieth Century America.”

\textsuperscript{182} Zamore, \textit{The Sacred Table}; Diner, \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration}; Joselit, “Food Fight: The Americanization of Kashrut in Twentieth Century America.”
considerable controversy afterward.\textsuperscript{183} The meal, later mythologized and dubbed the “Treyfah Banquet,” became the icon of a moment. Participation in what was, in that time and place, a high-class meal, for some attendees represented a break with old-world culture in favour of a purified and enlightened Judaism; for others, it represented the flouting of tradition and identity for the sake of assimilation.\textsuperscript{184}

Well over a century later, the family Noam is talking about may not understand itself in such terms. Nevertheless, the performative content of the clam bake and of the lobster is part of a web of food performances which are the ground of a specifically dietary struggle over Jewishness and Americanness in the New World.\textsuperscript{185} Lobster, for Noam and others, is a food that contains the ability to effect inscription and erasure, and not just indicate it: this is a performative power.

Lobster and pork are related in this performativity. I ask Noam whether he would eat pork, and he tells me:

\begin{quote}
It would take a lot to make me eat a pig. When you think of like, when we have stories, you know of like, \textit{literally, martyrs}. Right? Like, Jews who, who \textit{die} rather than eat pig. It goes all the way back I think even to the book of Maccabees. Like there are like \textit{canonical}, well, Maccabees, well, ok, there are \textit{almost} canonical, \textit{scriptural} texts, from then all the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{183} Joselit, “Food Fight: The Americanization of Kashrut in Twentieth Century America”; Gross, “Continuity and Change in Reform Views of Kashrut 1883–2002: From the T’reifah Banquet to Eco-Kashrut”; Zamore, \textit{The Sacred Table}.

\textsuperscript{184} Joselit, “Food Fight: The Americanization of Kashrut in Twentieth Century America.”

way through rabbinic literature, all the way up to the present day, of like, *Jews who die rather than eat pig.*

The linking of food with identity is again explicit, and again rooted in the affective power of story. This affective power is in turn rooted in the idea that Jews who host clam bakes and eat lobster are assimilationist, because their food act is an erasure of a part of themselves, allowing them to become more like others. By contrast, Maccabean Jews who die rather than eat pig are martyrs, from the Greek word for witness: they sacrifice their lives against the Selucids rather than betray the Law. 186 It is worth noting that the Law is the object of the battle with the Selucids because of its connection with Jewish identity. The specific law observances for which Jewish children and mothers were martyred were “practices that were perceived, by both author and audience [of 2 Maccabees], as separating Jews from the dominant culture.” 187

For me then, and I mean this with no judgment towards Jewish people who choose to eat pig. That is, a hundred percent, their process and their decision. But for me, carrying all of that emotional resonance? I would find it very difficult to eat a pig. To eat a piece of pig. You know versus an octopus, like, well, yeah, who knows from octopus?

As it does when Risa says it in chapter one, and every time anyone says it, Noam’s statement “I mean this with no judgment” indexes the fraught and constant problem of difference represented by the existence of others. Judgments made for oneself throw into relief the tenuous and heavily policed boundary between self and other. The notion that what is right for me might be different that what is right for you is radically individualistic. It entails a recognition of the


187 Haber, “Living and Dying for the Law.”
fact of difference, and the threat of conflict difference presents. Noam personalizes his decision not to eat pig, respecting the ownership of other Jews over their choices. At the same time, it is clear that he sees at least some food choices made by some Jews, such as the clam bake above, as deeply problematic. The problem they represent makes no sense without reference to community, to identity as a performative negotiation of sameness and difference.

That Noam takes care to clarify that he “mean[s] this with no judgement” is important, and will be seen to echo with the struggles of others especially in chapters four and five. Noam knows that food matters. He is aware of how judgmental everyone is about food, and how difficult it is to make the myriad of necessary judgements about food in such a horizon. On the one hand, Noam is consciously trying to make space for other ways of being. He is cognizant of approaches that are different than his, and a need to treat others with dignity. But he is also deeply disturbed by the symbolic content he locates and inscribes in the fleshy bodies of lobsters and pigs, and the content of a Jew’s act of eating either.

The fact that this is an identity-based difference, rather than a law-based difference, is made clear in his contradistinctions with octopus. Octopus is as contrary to the letter of the law as pork is, but he handles it quite differently. First, Noam speaks about octopus/octopi in food terms, and about pork/pigs in animal terms. Resisting the food term “pork,” Noam phrases his refusal to eat “a pig […] a piece of pig” in distant words. He speaks differently when speculating about the more thinkable act of eating “octopus” (not “an octopus”), which is treyf but not
symbolically treyf. As Noam says, code-switching into another stereotypical idiom, but this time a Jewish one, “octopus, like, well, yeah, who knows from octopus”\(^{188}\)

Many people I spent time with and interviewed, Jewish and Muslim, made casual mention of a set of reasons for not eating pigs: because God said so, because they are spiritually harmful, because they make you sick. Some of those people have eaten pig, do eat pig, or may eat pig. But those casual mentions, even emphatic ones, as when people explain to me that God or Allah was right to forbid pork and science later came to the same conclusion with the discovery of trichonosis, carried with them a feeling of post-hoc explanation, an explanation that explains away. Initially, asking Jews and Muslims why Jews and Muslims don’t eat pork often elicits the post-hoc sort of explanation. But sitting with people who really don’t eat pork or lobster, and even those who will eat pork or lobster in particular circumstances, reveals that quite often, when they are not eating the food, they are not eating it with commitment, and their not-eating is inflected with meaning. The meaning comes from ideas about a community, a we, and that we is the ground of resistance against what not not-eating would mean.

If lobster repulses Noam, it is not in the first place because of its taste or smell. Neither is his repulsion caused by a ‘natural’ reaction to the appearance of bug-like marine life, nor by an omnivore’s self-protection from shellfish allergy. His repulsion is also not about food-killing or social class, although these elements are much nearer to the process of understanding what lobster is for Noam. The repulsion lies in the idea that certain foods have a performative ability

to erase parts of what is identified with you, and rewrite you in identification with others. This sense that the unitary body is in fact porous, contingent, and materially remade by the food that enters or invades it, is a fundamental danger of the proposition that you are what you eat.

**You eat what you are**

Mamoom is a Noor regular, a reliable presence at the table where I usually sit during the potluck after jumah prayers. She was born in South America, in what was at the time British Guiana (1814-1966). It would become the Commonwealth realm of Guyana (1966-1970), and then the Co-operative republic of Guyana (1970), as she grew up, married, and had children of her own. Mamoom’s own mother passed away when she was six years old, but her father lived into his nineties, and Mamoom and her six sisters and one brother grew up together. The close-knit family was not extremely religious, but, as Mamoom puts it, “we knew that we were Muslim.” In a common and decidedly alimentary illustration of the point, she notes that they always prayed, and fasted during Ramadan.

From a young age, Mamoom worked in the family store selling goods imported from England, particularly hats, clothes, and good fabrics. She married when she was 17, and birthed a son and two daughters. After her husband passed away in their eleventh year of marriage, she would open a garment factory. Her son and older daughter went to school in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and as the Guyanese political situation deteriorated under a dictatorial government and the country faced worsening socio-economic conditions and food shortage, her older daughter, who was by then married, sponsored Mamoom and her younger daughter to come to Toronto. They came in 1982 and settled just east of the city, in the town of Pickering.
Mamoom continued her work in clothing, in Toronto’s fashionable shopping district, Yorkville. But her back problems, which had been with her all her life, were worsening. She underwent her first back surgery in Toronto. Her three consecutive surgeries were successful, but while she was in recovery immediately after the third, one of the stabilizing bars near her spine snapped. After a fourth, emergency surgery to attempt to address the damage, she was told she would not walk again. At the time of our interview, Mamoom was struggling with medical practitioners who, she felt, did not really believe she could recover.

She has since found a physical therapist, who works as hard with Mamoom as Mamoom does with herself. A year after our first interview, Mamoom had strengthened so much that she could sometimes come out of her chair and cross a room with a walker. Now she can wear her proper nice shoes for Eid, whereas before, the swelling in her feet left her only able to wear orthopedic shoes. Such medical footwear, designed for comfort and optimal blood circulation rather than for style, are an affront to the aesthetic sensibility Mamoom developed in her childhood at her parents’ store, and through her own career as a seamstress with an eye for colour, texture, pattern, and shape.

I know all this now, but on the day of our interview, we are still only getting to know one another. When I arrive at Mamoom’s home, an apartment in a tall building in an area well East of Toronto, she has put out a bowl of fresh cherries, and set water to boil in an electric kettle. I help get out the plates, and she heats up two samosas, which she tells me her neighbor brought for her, along with some bits of fried dough which she has kept in the fridge. She has brought out some crackers and cheese also, noting that the crackers are very good: they are an imported brand, rich and tasty.
I help make tea with round teabags she keeps in a tin: I guess from their shape that they are Tetley, or perhaps Typhoo, another British brand, though less widely used in Canada. We make the tea directly in two large china cups, white, with pretty flowers on them. We put Carnation canned milk, which she keeps in the fridge, in the tea. Fresh milk is readily available here, and Mamoom had plenty of fresh cow’s milk in Guyana, growing up. The taste for creamy, sweet evaporated milk that comes in a can is another artifact of British tea culture in the colonies, including South and Southeast Asian and even Hong Kong; I recognize the practice from my own mother’s maternal homeland, Newfoundland. Mamoom eats with delicate manners and unobtrusive, small bites. When she drinks her tea I see a lipstick mark on her cup, though I couldn’t tell that she was wearing lipstick—another sign of the precision of her aesthetic sense.

I compliment the lovely cups, and she tells me she got them from The Bay. The higher-end department store is a subsidiary of the Hudson’s Bay Company. It is in some ways like the small store run by Mamoom’s family in Guyana. Both are understood to trade in quality merchandise, and both are connected to colonial histories that, by trading in material objects like blankets, furs, and tea, shaped the worlds of taste and value that Mamoom and I both inhabit. Three enormous trade forces, the Hudson’s Bay Company, the British East India Company, and


the Dutch East India Company, form a colonial triangle that plays a role in the history that brings us both to this moment. The three trading companies undertook the mapping of territory and the founding of states on land already lived in by others, moving tea, sugar, rice, and persons in ways that form our culinary and ethnic identities, generations later.\textsuperscript{191}

The moment we are participating in is “teatime.” Tea, specifically the sort of tea that occurs at teatime, is a performatively British drink, and one we both think of as culturally “ours.” The hot, beige liquid is also the distillate of movement, connecting the native tea plant of India and China to the opium trade, the ritualization of afternoon tea, the popularization of sugar from the tropics, and the eight-hour work day for white bodies and slavery and indentured labour for brown bodies.\textsuperscript{192} We sit together, a more-observant Guyanese Muslim Canadian who looks and sounds Anglo-Indo-Afro-Carib, and an East-Coast post-Catholic Irish-French Canadian who looks and sounds Anglo, drinking tea as we were both raised to do, served in bone china as we both know tea ought to be. We are from the colonies, and we both know this act as “proper,” and specifically, as a basic form of proper hospitality.

**Halal, health, and hospitality**

In a manner consistent with her careful discernment and rule-mindedness, Mamoom makes it clear that as far as she knows, Islam has two things to say about food: Eat halal food, and eat healthily: “You eat halal food according to Islam, and you eat healthy food. Those are the


\textsuperscript{192} Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. 
two things I know that are connected to Islam.” Ramadan does not come immediately to her mind when I ask about eating, but when I ask about fasting, she tells me she observes the fast.

“You believe in Allah. Those are the five pillars of Islam. You live your life according to the five pillars of Islam.” She tells me that much of what the Prophet said about was a matter of health, and when I ask what healthy eating is, she says that, for example, it is important not to overeat. When I ask why, and whether this has anything to do with charity, she says no. Charity, zakat, is a separate issue: you give when you see someone in need, and at the end of Ramadan. You know it is not good for your health to overeat, Mamoom tells me, because it makes you uncomfortable.

For the most part she describes her own diet not as Islamic, but as healthy, although when I ask if the two are related, she responds “I think so,” and refers to the time we had spoken about Qur’anic passages about moderation in eating: “…because the Qur’an told you, that you read, do not overeat. And you know that if you overeat, you’re stuffed, then you’re uncomfortable. So the right thing to do is to go by the Qur’an and don’t overeat!” In Mamoom’s words there is a sharp distinction between Islam, on the one hand, and people’s discrete ethnocultural backgrounds on the other. The latter have to do with conventions and the former has to do with rules. Mamoom, who now aims to pray five times a day in a more careful approach to Islam than was her childhood wont in Guyana, emphasizes that there is a right thing to do with regard to food, and that right thing is health-related.

The right thing to do here is discernable in two ways: it is stated in the Qur’an, and it is also revealed in the body and senses. If you do the wrong thing and overeat, you can tell you’ve done something you ought not to do, because of your physical discomfort. In contradistinction to the view that religion stands between persons and their problematic desires, this is a picture of religious tradition as in line with truths that can be grasped through somatic experience.
In one view this is a contrast with Ramadan, when one’s body tells one to eat, but one must not: Yet in another way it is also one’s body that offers desires to be disciplined, to act in solidarity with one’s community, to undergo difficult but valuable experiences. Mamoom’s point, though, is that to eat as a Muslim is easy, simple: she observes that the “West Indian stores” and “even the Chinese stores have halal [food],” and from there “[y]ou don’t overeat, and once you eat the right food, [you eat] food that you like.”

When I ask why she goes to Noor, of all the mosques in Toronto, Mamoom says it is relatively near, her friends go there, and “it’s more sociable, because of the food.” She sees Noor as sociable, modern, and liberated, noting that at other mosques you will not hear women give the khutbah or the adhan. At Noor you will have coffee or tea and a snack after prayers. Other mosques might sell fruits, vegetables, and prepared foods outside, to raise money, but this food is taken home, not shared and eaten together. While she made no claim that Noor’s sociable snack is more Islamic, she has made Noor her mosque, and along with the prayers, she always participates in the snack that everyone has together, made of the sort of food they make at home: the food they like.

“You eat the food you are accustomed to eating”

Mamoom politely tries to conceal that she finds my questions a bit odd. For her the food rules are clear: once one has selected halal and healthy foods, everything else is a question of preference, and preference is an effect of what each person is accustomed to. Mamoom

193 This is the subject of chapter five.
elaborates on the relationship between the necessity of eating and the cultural framework within which one is situated and makes food choices:

You eat the food you are accustomed to eating. Everybody cares about food. You have to eat. And everyone, I’m sure, likes to have good food. And the food that you’re accustomed to, you like to eat the same food. You can try other things sometimes, but you’re accustomed to your own kind of food, and everybody does that.

When I ask, Mamoom tells me that every day she eats six small meals, beginning with breakfast, and then an apple or banana around 11-11:30 AM.

around 1 o’clock I will have my lunch, which is veggies, a piece of salmon, or roast beef or roast chicken. At teatime, you see what we had for tea, yes, but I would mostly eat some walnuts, almond nuts, and fruit. I wouldn’t eat samosa. This was only special because of you.

A creature of structure, plans, and lists, dinner is always at 6 PM for Mamoom. For dinner she will eat rice or roti (South-Asian flatbread) “with whatever stew you make.” Her last food of the day is yogurt, around 9 PM.

Mamoom’s “own kind of food” is in some ways straightforwardly Guyanese Carib and Canadian: “I prefer the foods that I am accustomed to eating. It doesn’t have to be Guyanese food, it can be Canadian food too.” On the other hand, cuisine is always a performative unification of the contingencies of history: rice is Guyanese cuisine as much as tea is British and tomato sauce is Italian, although none of these foods are “native” to these places. Food customs are thoroughly performative in their ability to make, remake, and unmake identity: they work on senses and in flesh in ways that, contingently, enact experiences of belonging.

If Mamoom’s food customs, “Canadian” and “Guyanese,” have Carib, South-American, Indian (West Indian and Subcontinental), African, and British histories, they also communicate values Mamoom learned growing up in her particular nuclear family context. The way Mamoom
treats me is connected with the way her father treated strangers. Mamoom tells me that whenever her father saw a stranger on the road, he would offer that person a meal. She explains that this is an everyday occurrence in Guyana, much more normal in a tropical country, where work and life have rhythms that are different than in North America. “We share food a lot. Yes. I am used to that. [...] He always called the poor people, people if they’re begging, people are on the road, and always feeding somebody. So we always give food out to people.” Mamoom explains that her grandfather would never offer people a glass of water: “he always offer them a glass of milk.” This is at least in part because milk is both water and food, that is, both hydrating and nourishing: the precious fluid is often fed to babies and ill people for this reason. Also, they always had milk to give, because they had cows.

Here in Canada, Mamoom’s hospitality to me, in different ways an interloper, a friend, and almost a stranger, seems quite related to this history, materialized in delicate china cups, delicious and calorie-rich treats, fruits, hot tea, and later, even dinner. Religiously-Islamic dietary rules intertwine with health, hospitality, and history, inflecting food performances that make up one’s “own” food life. Fried samosas, with spiced vegetable filling, self-contained form, and high fat content, are a frequent celebratory and snack food in South and East Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, the African continent, and elsewhere. These ones had been given to Mamoom, and she saved them for when I came. This is part of what food hospitality is for her. If Mamoom was born to her cultural food preferences and practices of hospitality, she came by Islam the same way.

Although healthfulness is an important part of Mamoom’s understanding of eating the “right” way, it is also clear that another part of eating the “right” way is sharing food that is delicious, and feeding with generosity. Thus Mamoom eats the food she is accustomed to eating,
including food that she is accustomed to not-eating unless it is a “special” occasion. I, in her home, am invited to eat with her: sharing her food is an opportunity, spoken or unspoken, for us to come to know one another.

After the interview she invites me to stay for dinner, and I assent. Even as I say yes, I begin to realize it might be because of the warm tradition in her family of food generosity, and my claims to having a big appetite, that she has invited me. I don’t actually know if she wants my continued company, or if she would prefer to be alone. Interviews are often tiring. But Mamoom always has supper at six o’clock, and it is six o’clock now. We go to get dinner in the kitchen: rice and beans and meat, cooked spinach with garlic, salty codfish in a red sauce left over from Noor, and the heavy, fatty flesh of an avocado. Mamoom avoided the refrigerated cherries earlier, and lays out the avocados first now, so they will warm up. This is consistent with the presence of the water pitcher on her counter: she doesn’t like to eat cold things. She lets them “defrost,” or come to room temperature, before she eats them.

She encourages me to finish everything she has put out. I had brought cookies, which I had picked up on my way to the GO Train, but when I brought them out, she said I shouldn’t have. We’d left them on the counter, and when I leave in the evening, she has me take them with me, to bring to the library and eat later when I am hungry again. The gift of food between us was commensal, shared, but it was Mamoom who took the place of her father and grandfather as one who offers hospitality to visitors. My role was to receive, and possibly one day to reciprocate, but not to exchange.

The construction of food identity is multivalent, because of the many ways eating or abstaining from eating performs selves. The final two stories of this chapter build from my
reading of individual performative food identifications. First, women at Reh’ma Community Services encourage access to halal and “culturally appropriate food,” and next, Judy Perly’s Free Times Cafe draws on family memories to offer kosher-style food as a site of cultural encounter.

Food for Us: Reh’ma Community Services and “culturally appropriate food”

The organization now known as Reh’ma Community Services began its current incarnation in a downstairs room at Noor Cultural Centre. Reh’ma is a not-for-profit organization that locally supports seniors and women who are newcomers to Canada. Reh’ma, named for the Arabic word for mercy, rahma, is not a religious organization. When I speak with administrators, they tell me that Reh’ma is a charitable organization, that it does not teach religion, and that it is open during Eid and conducts no salat. In another way, religion is an important part of what Reh’ma is: the food they cook and deliver is halal, the majority of the clients in the organization’s catchment area are Muslim, the board of directors for the organization is overwhelmingly Muslim, major funding sources include the IDRF (International Development and Relief Foundation) and Muslim Welfare Centre, and the organization is named for one of God’s best-known attributes. Many Reh’ma employees express their commitment to developmental work through a refrain of need and dignity, a framing which they elaborate in relation to stories about God, the prophet Muhammad, and others.

When organization members distinguish themselves from the idea “religious organization,” two things are happening. On the one hand, they are emphasizing a particular kind of secularity, non-exclusiveness, and non-orthodoxy. I also encountered Sikh people, for example, working at Reh’ma, and many people whose religious affiliation I did not inquire after or have occasion to speak about. On the other hand, they are perhaps simply letting me know that
they are not self-consciously considering their activities in terms of “religiousness.” As Courtney Bender demonstrates in her work at “God’s Love We Deliver,” nonreligious organizations and activities are locations where people pursue activities that are meaningfully connected with their religious values and spiritual selves.194

A further point: it is not necessarily the case that invocations of God or religious identity are especially “religious.” Utterances like “Bless you” when someone sneezes or “Oh my God!” when surprised so naturalized that they often go unassociated with the “religiousness” of the speaker, or of the cultural milieu in which one speaks. Similar social codes, like “Inshallah” among Arabic speakers, are more readily identified by their difference in an Anglo-normative language culture, and more readily explained by something other than their usual social meaning. This noticing of difference lacks awareness of the “third term” of comparison, in this case the codification of God-talk in social mores.

The performative work of difference thus locates particularity in what is othered (their God-talk), and occludes what is naturalized (our God-talk). Difference is essentialized, and reified as an attribute of the other (their “difference”) rather than perceived as relational (“difference-from[-us]”).195 This is a means by which minority identity becomes visible as a performative vector for distinction. The dynamic plays out below, for example, through the vicissitudes of the formation “culturally appropriate food.”


195 The “third term” as a feature of comparison is addressed in the introduction.
The Reh’ma website gives pride of place to the late Mr. Muin Muinuddin, who in the 1990s originated the idea for an organization to address the need for service to seniors, particularly via delivering food staples. However, a founding member of the board spoke to me about a time of near-failure in the organization. A private conversation among women, meeting downstairs at Noor while it was still being renovated before opening, culminated in the realization that Reh’ma needed to go beyond the direct-charity model of delivering food staples to individuals. These women developed the organization’s current approach, which supports women, seniors, and families by offering material assistance and also facilitating access to education and services. This strategy aims to facilitate community integration and decrease violence including elder abuse.

The president of the organization, Mrs. Talat Muinuddin, is also a founding member of the Canadian Council for Muslim Women and has worked for decades in women’s advocacy and diversity-related issues. Mrs. Shirin Mandani, the executive director, holds two masters degrees and uses her considerable not-for-profit experience to lead programming and run the organization on a day-to-day basis. In my time at Reh’ma, nearly every person I encountered in the space of the organization was a woman, with the exception of the chefs, Reh’ma’s videographer, and some of the drivers for food deliveries.

Since 2013, Reh’ma has run a two-pronged food program as its flagship initiative. On Mondays and Tuesdays, cooking classes are held in the Reh’ma industrial kitchen. These classes are targeted exclusively at newcomer women, and are part of a yearlong certificate program in

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culinary arts. Women, who at the time I was there ranged in age from thirties to sixties and who had migrated mainly from South Asia and the Middle East, enroll in “Reh’ma Food Enterprises,” a course wherein a chef teaches a Canadian form of basic industrial culinary and food-safety skills. Classes are supplemented with health-related workshops conducted by government employees, delivering the discourse of the nation-state on topics such as nutrition and dental hygiene. There are also sometimes offerings of dry goods for the attendees, including sleeves of cookies, sacs of pasta, and bags of unopened breakfast cereal without their original boxes.

Reh’ma provides services in languages including English, Dari, Urdu, Gujerati, Farsi, and Arabic, and the cooking classes are led by a multilingual male chef. Ashkan, the chef during the majority of my time at Reh’ma, functioned as a bridge between a nonwhite cultural milieu, on the one hand, and westernized and industrialized cuisine, on the other. For a short time Ashkan was replaced by another chef, who was Afghani and was able to work in languages including English, German, and Farsi. The chefs lead cooking classes that cover economic, organizational, and technical knowledges, especially kitchen comportment, alongside more diffuse formations of knowledge involving taste. The women enrolled in the program are called “ladies” at Reh’ma, and the most advanced ladies are addressed as “cooks.” The women, under the chef’s supervision, cook from industrially-scaled recipes and use commercial preparation techniques, working assembly-line-style and wearing hair-covering plastic caps, or their own scarves. The food that the women make and package in rectangular plastic containers is labeled and assembled with plastic cutlery, a juice box, and accompaniments (a piece of fruit, for example) before it is bagged for loading into two vehicles which make up the “Halal Meals On Wheels” program. Halal Meals on Wheels then goes out to deliver approximately sixty still-hot meals to needy seniors in the local community.
Members of the organization often emphasize the need to provide “culturally-appropriate food” to the seniors they serve. They frequently said that food banks are problematic and insufficient as a service for poor and vulnerable seniors locally. In Reh’má’s materials it is often noted that local seniors are not always mobile enough to get to a food bank, and may not be in a position to prepare the food they might procure there. In conversation at Reh’má, people suggested that newcomers may not recognize the food in Canadian grocery stores, or know how to prepare it. I also heard stories about seniors rejecting hot food that was previously brought, on the grounds that it was too spicy, or too bland.

Seniors sometimes drop out of the program because they do not feel comfortable receiving food if they do not perceive their own need to be sufficiently great. However, seniors also drop out, or threaten to drop out, with the complaint that they do not like the food. Caroline Walker Bynum showed in her study of Medieval women’s food abstention, not-eating is a site of bodily control that is accessible to people who may have few other means of asserting themselves. Food refusal is a particular power of the disempowered. At Reh’má, senior

participants used the language of spice to communicate that food was of the “wrong” cuisine or was too bland, that is, not spicy enough. bell hooks has made clear that “spice” is a powerful conceptual location for white culture to both consume and also marginalize racialized others; engaging marginalized identities in a superficial way allows white consumers to feel good about themselves while preserving the dominant and dominating structure. Here, spice is used in an attempt to push in another direction: at Reh’ma it is combined with the power of food refusal as a potentially productive location for leverage in the politics of recognition.

The phrase “culturally appropriate food” derives from human rights and right-to-food discourses, particularly the more recent formation of “food sovereignty.” The discourse does considerable work in this context. As an organization, Reh’ma is heavily inflected by particular Islamic ideas about giving, dignity, and need. One employee, Majidi, told me one day that before meeting me she hadn’t realized how much Islam and food were intertwined, and how food was not only a matter of individual culture, separate from the domain of real religion. She explains how food is tied up with dignity.

It is October 2013, near Eid-ul-Adha, which is also called Eid Kurbani because of the sacrifice, *kurban*, that takes place during the pilgrimage to Mecca. We are talking about donating and sharing the meat of the sacrificial animal. “You see? You’re right” Majidi says to

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me, “This is so funny. How food is related to religion. I never really noticed how you feeding others is part of wiping off your sins.” I ask whether she thinks her work with Reh’ma is related to this. “Yes, very much. I think. Feeding poor people is really big in our religion. Paying not so much, feeding yes.” I reflect on the women who blessed us today when we brought their meals in, and that many of them say they will make *du’as*, prayers, for us. She immediately replies:

Yes they bless you, you see that? You see how funny this is? Because they don’t have to do that, right? But they know that we do that in the name of God. God constantly mentions… “you give them food, you be kind to them, and you will not take away their dignity with that.” You understand? “Because you are doing this good deed for me, not for them, not even for yourself.”

“If you give food, don’t take their dignity away with that.” That means that you’re not going to make them feel little. That’s what I mean. Don’t do anything to harm their dignity, I guess, right? To make them sad. Right?

Conflicts, annoyances, and power struggles happen in this charitable context, as much as they do elsewhere. What is particular here is the sense that Reh’ma’s “clients,” also variously addressed as “needy seniors,” “ladies” (in the cooking classes), and “newcomers” (a conscious resistance to the term “immigrant”) are entitled to service, rather than lucky to receive whatever they might happen to get. That particular form of structural prejudice is consciously marginalized at Reh’ma, providing spaces where the needs and desires of clients can exist and bump more visibly against the priorities of the comparatively empowered service providers.

Of course, existence and visibility are not the same, and the orientation toward “culturally appropriate food” is much more easily pronounced than practiced. The phrase encodes a variety of needs. Halal is the obvious marker that all the food at Reh’ma shares. But beyond halal, the desirous phrase “culturally appropriate food” indicates an orientation, more than stable condition. The object of that orientation is actually a gap, one that is constantly filled by other
priorities and circumstances. What foods count as “culturally appropriate food,” and for whom? While many of the needy seniors and newcomer ladies are Muslim, both groups are ethnically and racially diverse. Even if they were not, they would not all necessarily like the same food. There is no single dish that is “culturally appropriate” for all of these people, and even if there were, it would not be appropriate to serve them the same dish week after week.

In fact, what we have is a practical bricolage of priorities and circumstances in food and cooking. One example of the practical bricolage took place early on, during one of my first days at Reh’m’a. On that day, Ashkan prepared a recipe for steak with a mushroom sauce. The recipe, written on the whiteboard in the classroom area separated from the industrial training kitchen by a sliding track wall, is a classic from the annals of French cuisine. Anyone who has learned cooking, according to that historically specific model of what cooking is, will recognize this recipe and the architectures of texture and flavour it depicts. That is, until they arrive at the architecturally impossible piece. Grape juice, a dark blue-purple and extremely sweet-flavoured fruit drink, sits ludicrously on the list of ingredients, in the place where red wine should be.

This substitution was made in advance of the class, as a concession to Islam. Wine is a traditional ingredient in this kind of dish, but wine is not halal. Ashkan still tried to tell the ladies that the (alcohol in the) wine “cooks off” and therefore does not have to be seen as a problem in the recipe. This argument is a reasonable one that is acceptable to some. It was not acceptable

here. Ashkan’s protests were halfhearted and largely pro forma, because the details had been worked out with Reh’ma beforehand: there was grape juice on hand for the recipe, and there’d never been any wine brought in with the other ingredients in the first place. Still, the chef wanted to speak to how the recipe should have been.

Those who were visible or audible in his audience, unlike Ashkan, had no wish to find a reason for wine to be acceptable, or desire to replicate its taste. One woman I spoke to at the organization said she’d tried wine, and found its taste unpleasant, and much preferred fruit juices and other drinks. I heard the same sentiment many times when speaking about alcohol with Muslim women in particular. Ashkan’s performance of authoritative taste, a learned palate of flavours from the cultural legacy of cuisine, was in large part invisible to the clients he was training, many of whom might not have had a reason to taste a wine reduction before. Yet the recipe remained, in oddly modified form. After the women prepared steaks and sauce, and the time came to taste the result, the food was strange to all our tongues, albeit for different reasons. Intensified by simmering, the sauce also stained our mouths purple.

A number of the dishes that were made in this kitchen in that first year were less odd than this one. This one is exemplary in exposing the tension inside the mandate of cultural appropriateness, and in navigating exigencies and concessions to “needy” recipients, newcomer women, and the food industry those women (and in a different way, the seniors) are being trained to inhabit. Halal, again, is only a part of “culturally appropriate food,” and not the only location of culinary difference on this day. We are cooking steaks in a room full of women who, in large part, are more accustomed to eating curry or kufta or kitfo: meat in these contexts is a food that
exists in small pieces, not in large sections. But in Canada, a popular approach to food is eating “cuts” of meat. Training newcomer women to work in industrial kitchens also involves training their tastes.

As part of the steak lesson, Ashkan uses his hand to demonstrate the authoritative quick-and-dirty method for discerning a steak’s doneness without cutting into it. Touch the tip of your thumb to the tip of your little finger on the same hand. With your other hand, press the flesh where that thumb meets your palm: this is the firmness of a steak that is “well done.” Thumb and ring finger corresponds to the firmness of “medium;” Thumb and middle finger, “medium-rare;” thumb and index finger, a “rare” steak. He explains that the meat should be cooked to “medium-rare,” so that when one cuts into it to eat it, the flesh will be moist and pink inside, and red at the centre. But he says he knows that these women will not like that idea, and so today they will cook it to medium. He explains that a “well done” steak has no juices left, and begs them never to do that to the meat: “It’s like killing the meat twice.”

Ashkan explains to his class that steaks require particular and attentive treatment, and that this method of preparation produces something both healthy and delicious. He describes the meat as “beautiful” and “quality.” He is at pains to explain that it is not desirable to cook meat all the way through, which in this school of thought harms its texture and flavour. This argument, a form of authoritative knowledge about the proper preparation of a dish, is more persuasive in this room on this day than the argument of the same kind that he made earlier, about wine.

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Alcohol avoidance and thoroughly-cooked meat are mutually culturally-specific food conventions, but one convention could be subverted by a chef’s authority much more than the other. In practice in the kitchen, the meat is cooked perhaps a bit more than he suggests, but not much or purposefully. The women are happy to taste the final product. He asks them to promise him to try “good meat” cooked to less than medium in the future.

Over the year the ladies prepare many kinds of dishes. On Mondays the classes are primarily informational: on Tuesdays, which are “Halal Meals on Wheels” days, the food is being prepared to go out for delivery, and needs to go out hot and on-time. Rice, vegetables, meats, and sauces go out, oily but never very oily, spicy but never very spicy. Since 2013, the foods have shifted somewhat, and a new catering arm of the organization has been founded. It remains that Reh’ma’s kitchen holds layers of food cultures, visible and invisible, and smellable and tasteable, where different forms of sensory, culinary knowledge move past one another, bump against each other, and intersect. “Culturally appropriate food” has no singular referent. It is a sign of an orientation toward the dignity of the receiver of food. Its material expression is an effect of both available materials, on one hand, and the constraints of what concepts can be dialogically authorizable as knowledge, on the other. As we saw in chapter one, authoritative knowledge is not merely given from top down: organizations and members co-construct and co-operationalize concepts like culturally appropriate, acceptable food.

Food For You: Performing Jewish Hospitality

“Jewish people are very neurotic about food. I can’t have this, I can’t eat that, I’m vegetarian, da da-da da-da. Shoresh is addressing this, and they’ll eventually find their way, but Shoresh came out of this neurotic over-interest in food, and they’re making it a good thing.”
Judy Perly owns The Free Times Café, a bar, restaurant, and music venue in downtown Toronto. The Free Times is located just on the northern border of the bustling, lively Kensington Market, one of Toronto’s oldest and most well-loved neighborhoods. Before Toronto’s Jewish population moved north to midtown, and the more residential enclave Bathurst and Lawrence, the Kensington Market area in the downtown core was known as the “Jewish Market.”

I connected with Judy at the Shores food conference in 2013, where she gave a presentation on the history of Toronto’s Jewish downtown. I asked her if I could visit her at the Free Times to interview her about her connection to Shores, and about Jewish food in her life and business. It becomes clear when talking to Judy about Jewish food that the big Sunday brunch at Free Times is a key site where Judy’s Jewishness is exercised, woven into the material and form of the event. The Sunday brunch at Free Times is called “Bella! Did Ya Eat?” after the time when Judy’s grandmother mistook a tape recorder playing a tape of her daughter Bella, Judy’s mother, for a live telephone. Judy’s grandmother picked up the tape recorder, put it to her ear, and said into it “Bella, did ya eat?” wanting to know if she’d had supper yet. The wry, self-deprecating humor and emotional draw of this story run throughout the brunch and its themes of family and flavor, of the importance of Jewishness and tradition, and the importance of not making either too sacrosanct. The brunch draws on Judy’s own Ashkenazi family recipes, including tender blintzes that Judy improved by adding just a hint of lemon in the fresh, unripened cheese filling.

Her breakfast buffet is kosher-style, which is to say, not kosher, primarily in the sense that her establishment cannot be certified kosher. To start with, it is open during the sabbath; also, while none of the “Jewish” or “Middle-Eastern” foods on the menu involve bacon, some of the “Canadian” dishes do. Still, she tells me, “I wanna have Jewish food, and I know what
Jewish people are like as customers. If you’re gonna do it, it has to be over the top and it has to be consistent and you have to have groups and reservations, and you have to have people talk about it. [It’s a] cultural thing.”

The brunch is conspicuously Jewish. Billed on signage, on flyers, and on the Free Times website as an “Authentic Jewish Sunday Buffet,” “Bella! Did Ya Eat?” features the essential Ashkenazi dishes of a classic dairy (and fish) meal: Judy’s blintzes appear alongside fried potato latkes, with attendant thick sour cream and sweet apple sauce in ample quantity; there are scrambled eggs, and scrambled eggs with lox (thin slices of cured salmon), French toast made with quartered challah, and small fried fish cakes with a fine, almost pâté-like texture; there is a basket of breads, and a basket of sliced bagels, with a few kinds of whipped cream cheese, and more lox on a platter; a cheese plate, and a wide variety of salads, including cold beet, and a tabouleh-inspired salad made with chickpeas, chopped tomatoes, and lots and lots of parsley.

There is sweet gefilte fish and horseradish, and strong, astringent, oily pickled herring; sundry baked goods, including the rolled, cookie-like rugelach with cinnamon and nuts, and two kinds (chocolate, and poppyseed) of tender, yeasty babke, an Eastern European yeast-dough-based sweet loaf, which does the cultural work of coffee cake. There is lemon meringue pie, and sections of halva, a sesame-based sweet likely of Middle-Eastern extraction, flavoured with ingredients such as pistachios, formed into a large loaf and then served in slices. Some also claim halva originated in the Asian subcontinent or the Mediterranean. Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

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203 As opposed to a meat meal or neutral meal. The three main categories of kosher meal, according to the contemporary kashrut industry, are fleish (or fleishig), milch (or milchig), and pareve, from the Yiddish words for meat, milk, and neutral (meaning neither meat nor milk).

204 Some also claim halva originated in the Asian subcontinent or the Mediterranean. Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).
pastry cream-puffs, giving a touch of classic pâtisserie, and individually-wrapped chocolates (Lindt, a Swiss chocolatier), alongside a plated pile of fresh berries, melon, and sectioned fruits.

Orange juice, coffee, and tea are all included in the twenty-dollar pre-tax buffet charge. On special for six dollars during the brunch are two breakfast cocktails which are often seen in Canada: Mimosas, combining orange juice and sparkling wine, and Caesars, the iconically Canadian cocktail, traditionally made with a combination of tomato juice and clam juice (not kosher), vodka, Tabasco, and Worcestershire sauce, and garnished with celery, salt and pepper, and sometimes a lime wedge.

Performing Hospitality at “Bella! Did Ya Eat?”

A brunch, and more than a brunch, “Bella! Did Ya Eat?” is already a location for the intersection of cultural memory in food. The brunch also features entertainment, and real hospitality. Klezmer and Yiddish musicians perform on the stage that has made the place known as a music venue since it opened in 1980, and Judy herself emcees, telling us stories, and encouraging all her guests, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, to shout the Yiddish exclamations “Oy!,” “Oy Vey!,” and “Oy Yoy Yoy Yoy Yoy!.” Judy performs, both playfully and sincerely, a Yiddish caricature of herself for us, gregarious, brusque, and matriarchal.

Judy tells me that except for those times when she has been physically away from the city, she has not missed a single Sunday brunch in the seventeen years that “Bella! Did Ya Eat?” had existed.205 “There’s no Sunday in the last seventeen years that I’ve been in Toronto, that I have not been here. Not even one. I’ve never been sick. I was injured once, I came in a

205 As of the time of our interview, in 2013.
wheelchair.” Judy tells me that the woman she channels when she hosts brunch isn’t really her, that it’s a Yiddish imitation, a shtick, a version that backgrounds sophistication and displays the very Jewish combination of unconditional love expressed through excessive feeding that Judy (like many) connects with the postwar Jewish mother. It could just as easily be a grandmother, or aunt, but the overbearing-loving-feeding character is virtually always identified with an older female family member.

Another iteration of the matriarchal image, in fact, is re-performed on the menu flyer and website for the brunch. In both places, a cartoon portrays a bespectacled, bright-eyed old woman with a kind, bemused expression. Her prominent nose emerges between rounded cheeks and chin, and her hair is centre-parted and wound back in a traditional-looking bun. She holds, in one cartoon hand, a pot, overfilled with a chicken whose legs are still sticking out the top. In her other hand she holds what looks like a recipe. She wears a floral apron over her modest dress, her sleeves covering her rounded shoulders and half her chubby upper arms. The ruffled bottom of her dress approaches, but does not cover, her generous ankles, which spill outside the bounds of her low-heeled shoes.

Fig. 11. Detail from Free Times Cafe “Bella! Did ya eat?” brunch flyer. Field archive.
The archetypal Jewish mother suffuses the brunch in many ways: in the cartoon on the flyers and menu, in the name of the event and the women it recalls, in the recipes for the food Judy serves, and in the sense and memory of the clientele for whom Judy imagines the brunch. That’s why Judy puts on the shtick when she welcomes her customers to eat and entertains them during the buffet. Certainly Judy’s performance in these moments, gregarious, intimate, and doting, is a caricature that differs from Judy’s no-nonsense, sophisticated city self.

Simultaneously, Judy tells me that this character she performs for us is her. She tells me it is only a part of her, but that it is a real part. “I put myself out at the brunch… The brunch is me. And it is very healing for me too. I didn't have my own children, and I was very secular Jewish. And now I have this, and it’s a riot.” Healing, in many ways: after exiting her first marriage and her time as an art teacher, Judy drew on the well of her creativity, and what she calls her God-given gift of food (“I was given a gift from God to cook.”), in order to do the hard work of building a successful business. She credits a friend who works in real estate with encouraging her to forget her plan to flip houses and instead to purchase the then-recently-listed Free Times. It is also immediately clear from talking to the brash, to-the-point, tell-it-like-it-is and bottom-line-aware Judy that alongside the artist and the storyteller in her, she has a good head for business.

This brunch too grew out of significant loss, including a failed business partnership and the floundering of the cafe, and the time the venue caught fire and partly burned. Most directly, the brunch grew out of the loss of her mother Bella. Judy says her dream would be to have a Bella Did Ya Eat Restaurant, a retro food venue and cooking school. A restaurant like this, honouring matriarchs both familial and conceptual, is something that Judy connects with spirituality and healing and community. At the same time, she grounds these in material and critical awareness of the multifaceted role that food plays in the Jewish community:
You have to understand that it’s so personal. So when you put in a latke order they’re telling you their whole family story. You’re spending 20 minutes on the phone. Plus the nature of Jewishness is to examine every little thing. We’re perfectionists […] Plus, you must never run out of food. And you never do. Jewish people eat way too much food. It’s gross. A Jewish mother’s ideal is a full fridge in the morning and an empty fridge at night.

In much the same way as Jewish writers like Safran Foer who are mentioned in chapter one, Judy shows the connection between unconditional love and food overabundance, and further connects both with “the old country,” immigration, and the Shoah (Heb. calamity; refers to the Holocaust), which becomes the location of both light, self-deprecating humor, and an ambivalent nostalgia. Within the horizon of such a cultural history, food does enormous social, cultural, and emotional work for immigrants in particular. Its importance continues long after people arrive in a new country, and irrespective of whether their own biological mothers did such loving-feeding work: the experience of family expands to accommodate ethno-cultural identity and a shared experience of transnationalism.

Judy considers her brunch to be a practice of giving of herself, a service to the community, and a savvy business decision. By most definitions, including her own, Judy is not a religious woman. But she finds and makes meaning by connecting with her memories of the women of her family, by ritualizing culinary histories that are overwhelmingly women’s work, and by using them to grow in personal fulfillment, healing, and in service to a community. Judy successfully inhabits a niche in the market, filling what she identifies as a “need:”

I’m just saying the need is there. Most Jewish people want to stay Jewish, but they don’t want to be involved with alllll of the ongoing

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206 Foer, Eating Animals. See also Shternshis, Soviet and Kosher.
commitments, because it’s a total lifestyle. So they want it to be around the holidays. And that’s how they celebrate around the holidays. And that’s fair enough. Christians do too. Muslims too. They’re very big on their holidays. 10% of Jewish people are kosher orthodox. 10%. […] My brunch now is maybe 50% Jewish. It’s not all Jewish, at all. The Jewish customers I get, a lot … well at the brunch, we have a lot of people who are celebrating occasions, birthdays, anniversaries, bringing out of town guests, but then we get a lot of Jewish people who are immigrants to Toronto from other places. As I said Winnipeg, Montreal, South Africans, a lot of Russians, Israelis, all kinds of people from around the world.

Here, religious identity is identified most of all with culture, with ethnicity, with place of origin and taste of tradition. Those who do not taste their traditions, even on holidays, are those who are “struggling” with their identity, and in some sense losing it:

The hardest group for me to get to come to my brunch are downtown Jewish people. [Why?] Well, a lot of them have food issues, they think it’s a lot of food, and they don’t want to eat it, and it’s fattening, it’s this and that, you know, it’s like, when it’s right in front of your nose they don’t bother with it. Right? But the ones in Thornhill, they make a trip down. And they’re more Jewish. The ones in downtown, they’re not all that Jewish. They struggle with their Jewishness. You know?

The ways of being Jewish catalogued here—immigrant, Canadian, African, Eastern European, Israeli, downtown, uptown, orthodox, secular, very, not very—are conceptual boundaries, discontinuous and overlapping. They come into and go out of being as they are needed, and as such are revealed as ideas, contingent and slippery, rather than constants. Just as Judy moves discursively among various ways of being Jewish, she moves among languages of spirituality and care and moneymaking, which work together in her gift of herself to the community:

A buffet is actually, spiritually, a practice in generosity. Because you’re putting food out on a table and saying “go take it.” You’re not measuring it out. You’re not saying you can only have this much, or you can only have that much. People like that. They really like it. It’s not only about eating a lot of food. It’s about having it if I want it. It being there. If I want more of this I can just go take it. It doesn’t have to be a hassle. […]
And changing all the orders around: there’s another reason why I wanted to have a buffet. Cause they wanna change [the composition of an order by making substitutions].

Spirituality and business coincide here, because they coincide in real life. Food is a medium for showing giving and caring, and also for drawing lines. Not restricting over-feeding is an act of Jewish familial love, but this act also appears in a context that in fact has been controlled: after all, as a responsible business owner, Judy appointed a fair price for the brunch. Some food differences can be accommodated, and these are in the hands of her customers: people are free to make their own substitutions, and refrain from what they cannot eat or do not wish to eat. But some food differences cannot be accommodated at all. While the laws of kashrut may permit cold vegetable food on a cold plate to an Orthodox Jew, in practice many Orthodox Jews will not patronize an establishment that is not sabbath-observant, or one that serves pork. Similarly, some strictly observant Muslims will not enter the establishment because it serves alcohol (and pork). For these people it will not matter that most dishes do not include either, that the establishment is owned by a member of Ahl al-Kitab (the “people of the book,” also glossed with the term “Abrahamic religions”), or that Judy’s chef is Muslim.

Judy explicitly understands her brunch as an opportunity for Jews to engage Jewishness, for others to engage Jewishness, and for people to come to know one another. She understands herself to be, at the local level, unique in this. “[W]hat’s really interesting about me and my brunch is that I’m the only person who is putting Jewish food and Jewish culture out to non-Jewish people. Nobody else is.” She is pointing out a way that she sees her brunch as different from local venues where Jewish, kosher, or kosher-style food is sold or served to either predominantly Jewish or to diverse customers: Judy’s brunch, particularly in the stage room and the buffet area if less so on the patio, is more like a brunch hosted in someone’s large home than
like a public-private meal in a restaurant. It is intended to be a kind of collective and immersive experience. When I ask her why this matters to her, she tells me,

Because it’s very important in a multicultural society that people know about other cultures. There’s a lot of misconceptions around Jewish people because people don’t know them. Now how about you looking at Muslims, how about that there’s [a] Muslim dinner that everybody went to. How interesting would that be? Right? And that would really help diffuse issues around Muslim people. Right?

Judy specifically thinks that eating together at a Muslim dinner event would help address the Islamophobic atmosphere in Canada. Many people seem to agree with her: years later, I continue to see advertisements for iftars during Ramadan that specifically welcome non-Muslims, encouraging them to come and eat and learn more about Islam. But conversely, Judy does not understand her brunch at all as a response to any kind of antisemitism.

Religious people, older Jewish people, are paranoid around antisemitism. And they truly believe antisemitism is much bigger than it is. It maybe used to be, but it’s not, to tell you the truth I have never encountered any antisemitism. As a matter of fact it’s the total opposite. Everybody tells me either they wanna be Jewish, or they believe that they truly are Jewish. [Laughter]

I would say half of non-Jewish people either wanna be Jewish or believe that they truly are, ‘cause somewhere down the [genealogical] line there was somebody who was Jewish and they got it from them. And what does that mean, being Jewish that way? You know? Does it mean being smart, being successful, being crazy, having this passion around food… it has to be that connection […]

It may be objected here that philosemitism and antisemitism are of a piece. Still, what Judy is suggesting is that there is, for her, a something that is Jewishness. That thing is precious, elusive but knowable, and accessible through characterizations like neuroticism, through food traditions, and through voluntary participation in practices of Jewish identity. Food is a way of doing Jewishness and being Jewish, and rather than being an exclusivistic practice, it is desirable to
engage in food Jewishness with others, as a helpful practice of dispelling misconceptions and getting to know each other. Judy is sure that this is true for Muslimness, too.

Judy may or may not be the only person to be putting Jewish food and Jewish culture out to non-Jewish people in this particular way. She is also part of a moment of encounter, of a sense that religious people can achieve something desirable by bringing religion and sharing it with others in the community, but outside the boundaries of a particular religion. In *After Pluralism*, Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen point out how the pluralist moment figures persons in terms of their religious identities, making a religious self-identification a near-compulsory ground upon which persons come to encounter one another. Here, religious identity has tastes and smells more than beliefs and rituals, and it is called into being by food practices that, in a bricolage of law, caricature, diasporic nostalgia, and globalized taste, provide an opportunity for people to come to know each other, and come to know themselves.

**Conclusion: Us and Them**

Mike Schecter of Shoresh once told me a story about his first day of dental school. It is a story about ethno-national identity in Canada, about difference, and about a deep and unexpected friendship across difference. He tells me, with a certain amazement, that he was seated alphabetically by last name next to a man named Shaddy Shahid.

I came from literally out West, I drove the car from Vancouver to the dental school. […]. So I showed up, dirty, with a bandanna on my head, and a huge beard, and a suntan except for where little squinty sunglasses were, you know? And I pulled up and walked in, and like, sitting beside

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me was Shaddy Shahdid. Like, Michael Schecter, Shaddy Shahdid. And he looks at me and I look at him, and he’s like “you’re weird, dude.” And I was like “Yeah, I dunno man. I don’t even know what I’m doing here.” I didn’t know what… what was I doing there?

And he looked at me, he’s like “you wanna go smoke a joint?” and I’m like “do I ever!” So we left, we went to get stoned, and, he is one of my closest friends. I love the guy. He’s Lebanese. He grew up here, but his parents are Lebanese and they’re, like, firmly attached to their country. He grew up in a very closed Lebanese community. I was one of the first non-Lebanese people that he was friends with, nevermind a Jew. He came to Toronto [for school and] we’re not, we were kids, but we were 22, we weren’t 14. And his mommy like, stacked him as if he was 14, like he had a deep freezer plus his fridge and it was full of like, it was awesome! Like labaneh, like all, like the good stuff. Like the meat pies, I don’t eat that stuff, but like the meat pies, you know?

And um… so we obviously had many conversations about [political] things, and I’m more passive, he’s more aggressive, so it was interesting, but like, always, as a friendship. Anyways, so he went to his brother’s wedding in Lebanon in 2006 […] when the Lebanese war broke out, the second Lebanese war [between Hezbollah and the Israel Defense Forces]. So, I’m here, I’m very concerned as to what’s going on. On like a real level, whenever there’s a war yes I’m sad about both sides, yes I’m sad that people are dying. But you…it’s natural, for me at least, to identify more with people that I know, the community I know. And so, there’s a different feeling, when you hear, bombs going off in Israel than when you hear bombs going off in Lebanon. I can lie to you and tell you that it’s the same, but in reality it’s not the same, because I’ve been [in Israel], I know the streets, so when a bomb is, I’m like, I was there, I know people, I think about my cousins and my friends and all that shit. But then all of a sudden, Shaddy Shahdid was in Beirut. Right? So it totally changes the way that you identify with the war. And I was so anxious, because I can’t reach him, I don’t know what’s going on with him, I’m sure he’s fine, but like, still.

So our friend, it was Meytal Salman, Michael Schecter, Shaddy Shahdid. That was the order. Mey is Israeli, she made alyiah right after school to work in Israel, and she’s like a typical aggressive Israeli, so Mey and Shaddy were hilarious, but like, the best of friends. So Mey [from Tel Aviv] called Shaddy in Beirut to make sure he was ok, they’re talking on the phone, and then she goes “oh shit I’d better get off the phone because the, Mossad [Israel’s Intelligence agency] is gonna come knocking on my door.” You don’t call Lebanon during the war, right? They’re gonna come knocking! They monitor that sorta stuff.

But what it really did and like I say this, is like it really, changed the way I think about that sort of interaction now. And now if there is any sort of
interaction between Lebanon and Israel I think about it totally differently, because now I have a brother, like blood, on that side. And so, on one level it’s just like well maybe we should just have summer camps where everybody makes friends.

Although there is no intrinsic connection between food and identity, they obviously matter a great deal to one another. Mike and Shaddy never share one of Shaddy’s mother’s meat pies, but do share a joint on their first day of dental school, in recognition of their otherness to one another and of the surreal situation of the careerist higher education classroom. The commensal experience of a shared joint, licit and illicit religiously and socially, laid the groundwork for a friendship that changed them both, and changed their experience of nation, religion, and war. Labaneh, the Lebanese fresh cheese that Mike remembers easily and vividly from Shaddy’s fridge, is now part of Mike’s story of what exists and has meaning in the world, because Shaddy is. Mike will only eat kosher food, but this does not stand in the way of a commensality of smoke and the shared experience of strangeness. It doesn’t matter that he never tasted the pies. Strangeness, and relationship built on shared smoke and unshared meat pies, impacts Mikes experience of nation, of war, and of geopolitics.

Similarly, it doesn’t matter that samosas, wrapped in fried dough, are actually beige on the outside just like digestive cookies are. I “am” white and Khadijah “is” brown. But our otherness to one another is mere otherness until it is narrativized. Ethnocultural difference and dietary distance are made real in stories, and resolved either into obstacle, or into intimacy. Khadijah is always teasing me about my whiteness, my non-Muslimness, my difference from her difference. She calls me “sister,” encourages me to “freak [people] out” by saying the greeting assalaamu alaikum, and calls me pious when my hair is covered at prayers. This playfulness is loving, and its humor is that it loves across a gap. This is the politics of recognition and of
identity: the jokes about food and identity apprehend us, for who we are, and into who we are, trading on the ways that we are other to one another.

In her early work on gender performance, Butler pointed out that if gender is not fixed, we move away from

a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.

In my reading, Butler’s interest in the mode of belief gives way, by the time of Gender Trouble, to the processual aggregation of acts into meanings that either do or do not have hegemonic effects. In either case, it is possible to say that instrumentalizations of stereotypes and stock characters and dishes meant to evoke ethnicity or culture are acts of identification that have a variety of effects in the arena of recognition. Lobster, tea, culturally-appropriate cuisine and kosher-style brunch are all written as foods of us or of them, and they can erase and re-write us, as a clam bake, or help you feel and be who you are while giving others a taste of you, at brunch or in a home—appropriate foods can also help one demand to be seen and acknowledged for who one is, even as they require one to perform a particular religious or cultural self in order to be recognized at the pluralist table.

Performativity helps nuance and complicate the important but incomplete insight that food joins and separates. Food joins and separates, but not necessarily the same way across

208 Butler, Gender Trouble. See also Butler, Excitable Speech.
places and times. What we need to be looking at is the social life of food things, in terms of their performativity. Food in particular is a thing that performs identity in us and on us. Food acts operate as sites of identification in everyday life, joining across difference, or erecting difference as meaningful, and naturalizing historical contingencies into racializations, which in turn act as a shuttle to help knit the boundaries between religious and ethnic identifications. So we come to know ourselves and one another. Foodways broadly, including but clearly not limited to food laws specifically, articulate Jewishness and Muslimness in the world.

Next, I will dwell on a notable ethical dimension of food work, and dwell on some of its implications, exploring what ethics is and does for people who enter the food conversation, in some way, as religious actors. Part of this story is about tastes of home and tastes of the other. But what remains is another part, having to do with taste-identities as intercultural, contextual, and perhaps even universalizing. The particularity shared by Noor and Shoresh, as they intersect the food movement, is that they enter the conversation about food as Muslims and Jews. In so doing, they deploy a kind of culturalism, pressing for space for the recognition of their foodways. The dominant trend of this particular culturalism is a consistent connecting of Jewish and Muslim foodways with ethics.

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Chapter 4
Religion-Making: Ethics and Trust

Back in 2010-11, the Religion in the Public Sphere initiative (RPS) at the University of Toronto took up the theme “Food and Religion.” Over two days in April of 2011, they held a Food and Religion Workshop, and a Public Forum. Participants included five panelists from the 2009 “Ontario’s Test Kitchens” event detailed in the introduction, in addition to wider participation from academics and organizations from Toronto and as far away as New York, Virginia, and California.211

During the workshop on April 14th and at the public forum on April 15th, a particular idea of religion appeared all around: the idea that religion could be usefully connected with “higher” standards and “pure[r],” non-abusive food. Indeed, the idea that there was a natural fit between religion and better food was apparent. Some participants resisted the notion: At the private workshop on the 14th, certain attendees, particularly health professionals, were suspicious of God-talk, and suggested that health, environmentalism, and “choices” were the best connections to make in order to achieve change in the food landscape. However, as it was in the 2009 event, a majority of participants in the workshop spoke of religion or spirituality as the point of departure for a food intervention that could help heal a broken food system.

Muslim workshop participant Fahim Alwan recounted that his business, a halal meat and grocery store called Blossom Pure Organics, which is explored below, was built on partnerships with Mennonite farmers. These Mennonite farmers, Fahim explained, were trustworthy people

211 “Ontario’s Test Kitchens” is first discussed in the introduction to this dissertation.
who cared about food farming, and were happy to work with a religious man like himself, who could be relied on to adhere to a “higher standard” of comportment in his food business. Fahim claimed that halal slaughtered meat was desirable because it was more “pure” than conventionally slaughtered meat, and that collaboration with religious people makes sense because religious people share values in common, which results in good business practices and good food.

Risa Alyson Cooper, the executive director of Shoresh who appears in chapter one, spoke similarly of the “Covenant Garden,” which was how she translated Shoresh’s Kavanah Garden for this audience. She discussed how Shoresh’s approach to growing, harvesting, and distributing the food grown in the garden is based on the Torah and Jewish tradition. As an example of this, she explained how Shoresh enacts the biblical principle of charitable giving from “the corners of [the] field.” Andrea Most, Shoresh board member and University of Toronto faculty who also spoke at the 2009 “Ontario’s Test Kitchens” event, told her listeners about feeling resistance when she began to pursue food activism at her synagogue, and of being told that people don’t like to be told what to eat. Her reply: “But Jewish law tells everybody what to eat!”

Muslims and Jews were not the only participants actively connecting religion and food at the RPS workshop. Bill Woodworth, a Mohawk architect, offered us a traditional teaching. First he acknowledged that “in this soil are the remains of my ancestors.” He then went on to say that industry had corrupted agriculture, and that the way back from this corruption is to remember

\[212\] This act of translation is discussed in chapter one.
ancestral teachings. This idea shares in the rosy retrospection that characterizes the religious food movement. Another University of Toronto professor, Harriet Friedman, offered the concept of “the sacred” in food “blessings, rituals, and values” to reconnect food with “the social.” Writer and policy-maker Wayne Roberts suggested that the next step for food policy was to move beyond utilitarian reasoning and to remember, through “spirituality,” what food is “really about.” As these examples illustrate, the idea that food is “really” about spirituality, sacredness, and values (albeit unspecified values) exists in concert with the idea that the past was better, simpler, and more pure.

Some people voiced concerns that religion could be potentially divisive. A boisterous chef told us she was “chuffed” to be able to “out herself” here as a Hindu, outside of a more masculinist kitchen context where religion-talk is out of place. She raised the problem of talking about God, noting how many people will immediately say “no” to that connection. In response, participants queried how to facilitate “political value discussions in the public sphere,” framing the problem as “how to find a language” to talk about the “deeper purpose in life” “without appearing denominational.” Clearly, there was an awareness in the room of the complication and potential divisive power of religion, and clearly some participants had limited interest in it. Nevertheless, the dominant, more ubiquitously vocalized sense of religion among the participants was that it afforded a common ground of values, and that food was, in one participant’s words, a “perfect courier [of] values” discourse.

213 Because this participant was not a panelist, her name is not a matter of public record.
This chapter and the next investigate the twin discourses of ethical meaning-making that are alive at the religion-and-food nexus. Chapter five addresses value-making at Noor and Shoresh; the present chapter sets the stage for this discussion, by considering religion-making. To provide a window onto quotidian public contestations of values, I trace the shape of the recurring theme that the intersection of religion and the food movement is basically ethical. What is enabled and disabled, brought in and left out, by this ubiquitous assumption? What does the ubiquity reveal, suggest, point to? In order to answer these questions, this chapter investigates how ethics arises in participants’ ideas about what religion and food have to do with one another.

In Canada, the policy of multiculturalism reinforces a public understanding of religion as a location of identity. Rather than only atomizing popular discourse about values, the fact of pluralism also furnishes minority groups with particular tools which they use for both internal development and external recognition. Some anthropologists approach this problem in a way that emphasizes how states and markets can and do capitalize on religio-moral discourse to shore up neoliberalisms. This work, though revelatory, should not be misread as sufficient reason to take our attention off the ways that religious actors continue to leverage tradition and identity in order to work on themselves, their communities, their states, and the world of which they understand themselves to be a part. If scholars too quickly cede argumentative ground to the


215 Bender and Klassen, After Pluralism.

“totalizing system” of capitalism, we risk missing the ways that persons and institutions leverage pasts, presents, and futures to create the “culture[s that are] mystified in the capitalism.”

Those “culture[s]” are what I investigate in the present chapter.

This chapter opened with a vignette of a self-selecting group of persons interested in the intersection of food and religion. Even in such a group, there is a degree of ambivalence about the extent to which religion, spirituality, or the sacred can be used as an instrument of positive change for the food system. On one hand, resistant voices in that conversation suggested that religion is divisive, and that talk of healthiness or food desirability could motivate people more effectively across those divides. On the other hand, many people felt comfortable speaking in that context about using religious tradition to animate particular foodways, using religion or spirituality to persuade others to make particular food choices, and finding allies with regard to food practice in people of other religious identities and backgrounds. Some who I quote above even spoke of this link between food and religion as “natural,” “perfect,” “true” in essence, or “really” real, in ways that fit popular discourses about the nature of life and reflect essentialist ideas about religion.

Ambivalence happens within these two groupings, not just between them. The religiously or spiritually enthusiastic participants used hedging language, sometimes preferring seemingly universalizing terms like “spirituality” or “the sacred” to the more polarizing “religion,” or sliding between “using” religion for a purpose, on one hand, and invoking what is “natural” to

217 Sahlins, “Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of ‘the World System.’”

218 These popular discourses seem to draw on historically significant essentialist ideas such as Mircea Eliade’s “the sacred”; Durkheim’s notion of the sacred social; Platonic Natural Law; Geertz’s sense or feeling of the “really real.”
religion, on the other. Among the more religiously-cautious or positivist participants at the event, these ambivalences are harder to detect, but they may be indicated, perhaps, by the willingness to attend the workshop in the first place. More evidence of the multivalent, and thus risky, signifying power of treating food as religious was evident as my fieldwork unfolded.

**A Brief Note on “Ethics”**

Below, I discuss ethical struggles with food. People I spent time with foregrounded ethics in their decisions about what food to sell, buy, eat, give, and accept. I include under the rubric “ethical” stories about how people should treat other people, animals, and the environment. Versions of the imperative “should” generally track with the ethical in these stories. I take ethics to be practically aspirational, because it involves seeking a right or best way to act so that the act is aligned with some notion of the good. Whereas my interlocutors used the word ethics in a way that roughly corresponds with “orientation toward the good,” I take ethics broadly to entail acts and practices together with values, which are essentially ideas about meaning.219

My broad definition of ethics brackets the adjudication of competing values (i.e. which values are better or worse) and therefore cannot by itself distinguish theoretically which ethics is better. Insofar as one acts with respect to “values,” one acts “ethically,” in the stipulative adjectival form for descriptive “ethics.” Such a definition allows me to focus on behaviour and the ideas that sometimes direct behaviour, in order to train my analysis on the social valences of the food practices and ideas I encountered. Much of the social valence of food I found was

219 I address value further in chapter five, drawing on David Graeber.
connected with ethics in this way, and practice-based analysis is the way to better understand the uses to which food is put.

In this I follow a general current of anthropological interest in ethics, particularly as pursued by Michael Lambek, Saba Mahmood, and Amira Mittermaier, all of whom make use of Alisdair MacIntyre’s notion of ethics as the practice of reconciling the exigencies of circumstance with a telos which is values-based. The dispositional constructivism of Pierre Bourdieu and of Michel de Certeau are apparent in the background of my frame, and it may be objected that although de Certeau focuses on the art of practice, he does not describe it as ethical. However, if the body is a site of Bourdieusian habitus/ de Certeausian arts de faire and simultaneously a location of an ethics-as-bodily-morality, one ends up reading an ethical de Certeau. The usefulness of reading ideas and affect together, moreover, is evident among other anthropologists including Andrea Muehlebach, whom I follow here in retaining some semantic slippage between “ethics” as orientation between practice and principle, and “morality”


as a framework of principles. People at Noor and Shoresh occasionally refer to morality. But they much more commonly use the language of ethics. It is this talk of ethics to which I now turn.

“Religion and Ethics go hand-in-hand”

In his office, in the back of his specialty halal grocery store Blossom Pure Organics, a stocky Syrian husband and father of five with bright eyes and a neatly trimmed dark beard tells me that the motto of his business is “eat less, but eat quality.” His understanding of “quality,” like his customer base, is multivalent. Fahim estimates that 60-70% of his customers at Blossom Pure are non-Muslim. He thinks, though, that these non-Muslim customers see value in the products he sources as a practicing Muslim.

In certain places and moments, in Canada and elsewhere, there has recently been uproar over the perceived harm of a non-Muslim public unwittingly ingesting halal food. This uproar

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seems to suggest that fear, too, is a materialization of the ubiquitous sentiment mentioned above, that food is a “perfect courier of values”; if society is indeed marked by a sense of social contagion, it seems apparent that xenophobia is part if its dreadful, rather than its hopeful, Janus face. At Blossom Pure, the hopeful face is more evident: food that is clearly religiously marked is purchased, even though it is more expensive, by people of various religions, and by those who are non-religious. While the reasons that people actually shop at Fahim’s store are likely to be plural, Fahim’s conversations with customers, his impressions of them, and own beliefs and concerns, all lead him to say that the majority of his customers purchase his food because of religious dispositions or an implicit “spirit” of respect for creation, and because they trust him as an honest and observant religious person.

Fahim categorizes his customers in three types: customers who have little money and tight budgets, but who “need clean, organic” food for health reasons, “a necessity, it is not luxury”; “those who are educated, and well aware of what is happening in the food system. And they are completely against it […] they do not want to be a part of [it…] they want to support the


225 On religiously-marked food sought after by a wide range of people, see Fishkoff, Kosher Nation: Why More and More of America’s Food Answers to a Higher Authority.
right movement and the just movement in the society”; and finally “those who believe religion and ethics go hand-in-hand,” Muslims, Jews, and Christians who believe “if you are really truly close to God, you should never allow any practice that it abuse what God had given you.” Fahim understands himself to be part of that third kind. He adds that, from his perspective, even his non-religious customers come because they have a “spirit” in them of instinctual respect for creation. But the educated and religious kinds are both thinking “beyond” themselves:

They’re thinking about the future, this planet, that God created for us, to live in, supposedly in peace, and to maintain it, without any damage or any destruction. […] If you allow that to happen now, how are future generations going to deal with that? Cause things, when it gets bad, it takes so long before it gets better. Why should we even allow it to happen? So few, for the few to benefit from it, and the rest of us suffer.

That Blossom Pure has Christian and Jewish customers is interesting enough. However, the key information here is that these in some way go together with educated, ethical eaters, and people who “need clean, organic” food for health reasons. This narrative obviously dovetails with Fishkoff’s findings, discussed in chapter one, that more than 80% of people who purchase hekshered food do it for reasons other than religious kashrut observance. The notion that religion is linked to better and more desirable food is clear. What remains is to decide how to interpret it.

Religion, Contagion, Truth

Fahim left Homs amid the turmoil in Syria in the early 1980s. After first working in Saudi Arabia in the medical supply industry, he arrived in Canada on a cold day in January of

\[226\] Between the secular Syrian Ba’ath party government, under President Hafez al-Assad, and Sunni Islamist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, who revolted. Now known as the Islamist Uprising in Syria, the uprising lasted from 1979 until 1982 and ended with the Syrian government retaking control and outlawing the Muslim Brotherhood. Syria is currently embroiled in civil war, largely between Sunni-dominated rebel groups and Shi’i-allied government forces. The Ba’ath party itself came to power in an agrarian revolution in 1963.
1988. He found work in the garment, computer sales, and nutritional supplement industries, before finding himself in food sales. He had started visiting farmer’s markets and farms in Southern Ontario in search of rennet- and pepsin-free yogurt and cheese for his family, in line with the interpretation that these animal-derived enzymes are problematic for halal observance. The parts of yogurt that might matter to some Muslims with regard to halal are rennet and pepsin for curdling, gelatin for texture, and possibly alcohol either produced in fermentation or used to extract flavourings like vanilla.

Not everyone accepts this kind of stringency, or is even aware of it. One Noor regular, Ahmad, thinks halal labels on yogurt are just a ploy by halal marketers to get Muslim business. “It’s just like, my son said, ‘What the hell is going on with you guys,’ you know? ‘Now, halal yogurt? What’s going on there? You guys are really taking over!’”

What is halal [or not halal, about plain yogurt]? I have no idea. And of course [my son] asks me. ‘What is going on here? Is this a conspiracy, you know, to take over the world? Now, yogurt, halal yogurt, I am looking,’ he said, ‘over the counter and all I see is halal, halal! Yogurt, that’s what I want, yogurt!’

Fig. 12. A container of Astro Halal yogurt. Prominently displays “halal” in English and Arabic. Package design displays Islamic motifs. Sought and purchased by the author after conversation with Ahmad. Fieldwork archive.

All these ads, for the [brands] and things, you know, how much purer it is than the others, and better for you, and less trans fats, and less this, and
less the other. Halal yogurt, you know, the guy who never goes to church, doesn't give to charity, but if he eats halal yogurt, he’s got a ticket to heaven.

Ahmad is unimpressed by the marketing he sees around him. For him, yogurt is yogurt, and yogurt is halal. Fahim, however, considers rennet and pepsin in particular to be a matter of some importance, and took it upon himself to find yogurt that was without them. He tells me “I went to St. Jacobs Market in Waterloo, ‘cause I heard that’s where all the Mennonite and Amish [farmers were], and the healthy food should be there,” describing the link between religious people and wholesome food as self-evident. It may be objected that since Fahim does not cite Catholic farmers or Hindu farmers, that he may be working only with a common social belief that Amish and Mennonite farmers do not use pesticides or other modern industrial farming interventions, and not really using the prism of “religion” here. However, this chapter presents evidence against this objection. If you ask Fahim why the farmers farm this way, he will attribute it to their Amish-ness or Mennonite-ness, and represent this as parallel to his Muslim-ness; he engages in the same discursive webs with Jewish communities, as at the Shoresh Food Conference mentioned in chapter one; he explicitly uses the concept “religion” to explain the deep connection he perceives between himself and these farmers.

After a series of episodes involving Fahim’s travels from market to farms, wherein he connects with a network of farmers and other characters, Fahim begins selling these farmers’ eggs, yogurt, and cheese to his friends. Within a few years Fahim has moved into meat production with a halal slaughterer, and has established a storefront. Whenever I hear the story of Blossom Pure’s inception, I can’t help but think of other stories of Fahim’s boyhood in Syria, when he, full of his father’s industriousness, would ride his brand-new bike to the farmer’s market in a nearby town, and buy vegetables to sell to his neighbors.
Significantly though, Fahim himself credits his experience in the garment industry with “opening his eyes” to the relationship between price and quality that would later mark his approach to food. Certain of his customers at Harry Rosen, a men’s clothiers, made an impression on him: they were not wealthy at all, he told me, but “a quality garment meant a lot for them.” About this experience, Fahim told me “I would say that probably opened my eyes more about how quality can sometimes be less expensive than quantity.”

Now, Fahim is a believer in organic halal food, and his discourse of quality is more obviously inflected by ideas about ethics. While a link between consumerism and abuse can be made about the garment industry as well as about the food industry, it is the problems in the food industry on which Fahim focuses his attention. A series of experiences led him to believe this was God’s plan for him. Fahim understands Islam’s food laws to be fundamentally concerned with ethics: “God yes, want you to do it kosher or halal […] but you have to do it right.”

You can’t just bring an animal, been fed other animals, abused, tied with a rope to a pole the whole time, just eating and wasting, abusing them the whole time, and then slaughter it in the name of God, just make it wonderful animal? God never wanted that to happen.

Fahim’s understanding of the law is ethical, and not only procedural. The particular ethics is one of a created world, rather than a utilitarian one, with the implication that unethical action has material effects that are transmutable. Here, forbidden food is not a desirable object held out of reach for the sake of self-discipline, but rather a lesser substance, which through

227 The implications of this ethical relation to God are explored in chapter five.
mistreatment has lost its naturally healthy and nourishing attributes. It is not “quality” any longer; it is “junk.”

Maybe if you slaughter it halal, somebody say you can eat it, but how can you even justify an abused animal? Because their meat is no longer healthy for you, no longer nourishing. Like, the whole idea of food is really not to fill your stomach. It’s to nourish your body, which has your spirit and your heart and your mind, right? So if you are putting junk, how can you expect you are going to excel spiritually, and even mentally? It won’t!

If unhappiness and harm are in some sense contagious, such food can function as a “curse” on people’s bodies and lives, even if they did not intend or know about the harm that was done.

if you think about it, why do we have so much depression? So much health issues and mental issues? Because of the consumption of an animal or consumption of food that’s been grown or raised either wrongly or by some people who had been abused. So maybe the curse of those people who raise this food or grow it for us, they are cursing this particular buyer or company. And anybody who eats that food, because they did not get their rights, from that food. And if you believe in those spiritual states, it makes sense.

In opposition to a “what you don’t know won’t hurt you” argument, the story of social contagion here is that what one doesn’t know can hurt oneself and others, and that one has a specific responsibility to be honest with oneself about what one should know.

When you are buying something so cheap, you know somebody wasn’t paid, or wasn’t paid well. Or, you know somebody’s been abused. You know [...] the product was produced under [...] conditions that undermined the health of the employees, the welfare of the people who produced.
Here, value is not an effect of the market.228 Things instead seem to have essential value, and the burden is on each individual to discern what that value is, and to honour that value in the act of buying and selling.

Fahim won’t sell pork, alcoholic products, or non-halal meat in his store, even to non-Muslims. Alcohol, like yogurt, is a complicated point. Alcoholic beverages like beer, wine, and spirits are regulated by the Canadian state in a bureaucratic legacy of the Christian temperance movement.229 However, a number of food products that escape the categorical focus of this system do contain alcohol in ways that are relevant to halal categorization frameworks: examples include kefir, kombucha, and vanilla extract. There is considerable variation in opinion among Muslims about whether such items contain alcohol, how much alcohol they contain, and whether or not it matters.230 But what matters here is Fahim’s approach in his store. Rather than thinking he might alienate diverse customers with an imposition or his beliefs or judgment, he believes he gives customers confidence in his judgment, as integrity. Rather than emphasizing his or their radical otherness vis-à-vis each other, Fahim sees this as demonstrating his trustworthiness to others. “I think this gives a strong confidence from any customer that Blossom Pure is selling what they really believe in, what they consume, what they stand behind, not just anything.”

229 This system varies by province, and is notably different in Quebec.
230 If industrial kashrut gives any indication, it can be expected that the current global push to codify industrial halal will contribute to a flattening of this lived diversity. I address this point in the introduction and conclusion.
Fahim takes a hard line here, against people (“businesses”) who sell pork and alcohol even if they do not use those products themselves.

Well listen, then, you are not being honest. If you believe there is something wrong with anything, you shouldn’t even sell it or pursue it, you know what I mean? So, not to say, you know, some of the slaughtering is done conventionally, for many it’s ok, for me maybe I have a different opinion, I don’t want to be a part of it. I don't want even to promote it. Because when you are promoting something wrong, you are part of this. You are agreeing. So.

It is as though acts are exhaustively, and exhaustingly, inseparable from others. It begins to seem as though Fahim’s satisfaction with working with religious people is, in part, a kind of relief from some of the burden of constant ethical discernment. Fahim does not say my German farmers who are friendly, or my Canadian farmers who have a great sense of humour; he speaks always of “my Mennonite and Amish” farmers who are “genuine,” “straightforward,” and “honest.” He speaks of his idyllic visits to the farms with a sense of peacefulness, relief: “I was enjoying it. It was soothing for me to leave the city once, twice, three times a week. Go to the farm, to the open space. Deal with genuine people, with honest, straightforward people.”

A second look at xenophobia

Irrespective of whether religion should be traded on as an index of commitment to any particular ethical frame, we have to ask what it means that it can be so traded on, and that it is. It appears that perceiving a religious group’s ethical frame as essentially virtuous in the first place (the hopeful, rather than dreadful, perception) may be enough to establish a ground of trust, in the same way that reputation or “good name” might have done in another place and time.

If this vision of religious ethics lies at the centre of Fahim’s trust, what lies nearer to its periphery? Fahim characterizes religious people as honest, straightforward, and genuine. Do non-
religious people lack these virtues, and can a religious person fail to inhabit them? Fahim spoke of his non-religious customers as having a “spirit” or “instinct” of respect for creation in them, and he speaks of his fellow Muslims who eat halal in spite of problems with the food system as though they do not “know” yet what the harms are, or perhaps are not yet fully “honest” with themselves about how their food can be so cheap.

I belabour the point because Fahim is not specifically looking for fellow Muslims with whom to do business. He has sought fellow religious people, and people in whom he recognizes spiritual or instinctual attributes of respect for creation. Surely part of the reason for this is practical, having to do with who is doing the farming in Southern Ontario. But alongside conditions, there are also narratives, and these come to be important for how people live. Fahim sees businesses, including halal businesses, “caught” or “stuck” by systematic pressures, corruption, and ethical failures:

Whether it’s done within Canadian soil or abroad, mostly abroad. You go to South America, you go to Africa, to Asia, you produce a product that the employees are paid probably a dollar every two weeks, or a month, they live in [...] terrible conditions, and some [may] die on the job, no compensation. So basically they come and they flourish on the misery of their own employees or those who are really, were able to help them to generate this profit.

Fahim speaks of geographical distance, of harms that happen somewhere else. But it is easy to imagine other forms of distance might make others easier to mistreat: sociopolitical, economic, cultural, even species differences. As Nancy Jay has pointed out, every act of joining entails an act of separation: here, too, the reconstructed “us” of ethical religious people entails a

231 Fahim also mentions Jews as having parallel religious dietary needs, and he has attended Shoresh events.
xenos, an “other” imagined as in some way ethically blind.\textsuperscript{232} Fahim, himself a businessperson, is participating in a more general unease which some people, including scholars, public commentators, and people in general, describe as a public disenchantment with the moral content of neoliberalism. But whereas some thinkers identify religious moralization and neoliberal capitalism, and explore them as interdependent, people like Fahim position themselves differently: Fahim suggests that “truly” religious people can be trusted not to “cut corners” for profit’s sake, because they are motivated by something more than “the bottom line.”\textsuperscript{233} Businesses are also populated, we might imagine, with religious people and people who have a spirit of respect in them. Yet the discourse invokes people’s religious selves in order to presence those specific selves in market practices. We will see more of this below.

\textbf{Trust and Others}

Of course, though close relationships sometimes encourage respect and care, they often also foster the reverse. Closeness also stimulates conflict and abuse among human animals, as among birds who peck one another to death inside battery cages. The industrialization of kashrut was in large part an attempt to mitigate corruption in meat markets at the local level. And although both industrial kashrut and the emergent industrial halal are clearly driven by market interests, the current race toward systematization of halal oversight at the global level is often

\textsuperscript{232} Jay, \textit{Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity}.

expressed in similarly protectionist terms.\textsuperscript{234} Eating locally does not only radically decrease one’s options: it also removes the amiable simplicity of market-abstracted distance, instead enmeshing people more deeply in social relationships. Still, people who find that they can’t trust “businesses” are turning to businesses like Fahim’s. In doing so those people, like Fahim, find space in market contexts to cultivate their religious subjectivities.

Fahim makes real for himself a job that takes account of relationships and of the future, and works with his religious self. There are reasons that Fahim feels motivated to point out that caring about the future and caring about your neighbors are tied up together, whereas the short-term self-interested view can lead to bigger problems in the long run. In calling for people to spend more and eat better quality food, he says that he also sometimes spends more than he stands to earn, to care for or take care of “[his] farmers” in order that they will be there, too, when he needs them. This relation, as he says, is not “only” a business relation, but involves mutual support

[for] those ethical local farmers who in reality, that’s what is going to be supporting us when we are in a difficult situation where we cannot import, when there is a problem, your local farmer are the one who’s going to be there for you. […] so that they can stay there for us and grow with us. So people, when they are looking for something local, truly local, it is available. And it is available, relatively, when we need it.

Fahim is referring to the growing seasons in Ontario, Canada, and the necessity of storing root vegetables and preserved foods carefully over long, cold winters. But there are clear concerns about the political climate as well. Fahim was working with Canadian beef when Mad

\textsuperscript{234} As discussed especially in the introduction and first chapter.
Cow Disease became a problem and the U.S. closed their border to beef trade with Canada.\textsuperscript{235}

Beyond this moment there are yet deeper connections affecting Fahim’s view. His Syrian-Canadianness is a history of the entwinement of agrarian reform, political strife, border crossings, and the reality of hunger. Leaving Syria as an adult in the 1980s places Fahim after the Ba’ath party’s agrarian revolution in 1963, which was energized by popular frustration with feudal farm labour supporting the landed class.

Amid the agrarian reforms that followed this revolution and its sociopolitical consequences, there was mass movement off farmland and into urban areas, and then back out when the government again shifted its dictates for land use. Syrians felt the effects of turmoil on agriculture-based economy as it became potently clear that the welfare of the population was tied to its agricultural production.\textsuperscript{236} In light of this history, Fahim’s longing to work together with his farmers to build a stable and healthy way of life, and prepare for the future, takes on richer and more urgent meanings. Flourishing in place with a community is both simple and quotidian, and also a delicate and even precarious achievement. The attempt to organize community around principled consumption, whatever the economic or political orientation, is a negotiation of the boundaries between “us” and the “other.” It is an attempt at world-building.

In a droll semi-inversion, Islamophobic and antisemitic commentators share this bit of common ground with the religious actors with whom I worked. Although in a way quite dissimilar to tragic myths like creeping sharia or blood libel, religiously-marked food is a real

\textsuperscript{235} Field notes 2013.

\textsuperscript{236} Hinnebusch, Raymond A. et al., \textit{Agriculture and Reform in Syria}. (Fife, Scotland: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies., 2011).
means of affecting the actual world. Markets, because they are full of objects and people, are full of the social contagion that is culture. Religiously-marked food is an instrument of living religion, articulating and even materializing one’s values in the public square. Such food is not only private, and it does have the power to impact social discourse and physical bodies, potentially changing hearts and minds.

**Expanding “us,” Contracting “us”**

So far I have used Fahim’s story to show some key contours of the construction of the intersection of food and religion as ethical. I have reflected on the relationship between the idea of one’s own religion as ethical, and the idea of “religion” as ethical. I have indicated some of the resultant ambiguity surrounding who is *really* religious, here in Fahim’s ideas of religious others and non-religious people who show spiritual or instinctual dispositions (irrespective of whether they would agree with this description), over against people who call themselves religious but who aren’t “do[ing] it right.” Staying on the ground with notions of trust, I started tracing the relevance of ethics, to show the textures of experience that undergird trade on the second-order category “religion.” I have also called some attention to the irony of the struggle: food businesses that are in business because their proprietors and patrons can’t trust food business; butchers you can trust because you can’t trust butchers; people making new religious food rules you can trust because you can’t trust the current religious food rules.

Now I deepen my explanation of these points with further examples from both Jewish and Muslim participants. The sentiments Fahim expresses above are connected with wider trends and attitudes. Below, similar tensions arise through Mike, a Jewish dentist, husband and father of two who serves on Shoresh’s board of directors; Samira and Risa, executives of Noor and Shoresh respectively; and people who attended Noor and Shoresh events including Hassan,
Michelle, Farah, and Lauren. Lastly, Samira, Avi, and Ahmad give voice to what is left out by these discourses, offering a counterpoint on the ways that “religion” expands and contracts “us.”

“It’s so much easier to connect with someone who’s observant of something”

Mike Schecter evinces much the same concerns as Fahim with regard to the contemporary food system and with the religious authorities who operate within it. Mike is a Shoresh board member, husband, and father of two, and works as a biological dentist. Together with his wife Laurenn, Mike also runs Mo and Lo Organics, the small kosher business that has catered some of Shoresh’s food conferences. I interviewed him during Sukkot in 2013.

Mike has many of the same concerns as do Fahim and other participants in the religious food movement: That the contemporary food system presents serious problems; that contemporary religious certification permits things that it does not make sense for such religious certification to permit; that since neither can be trusted to do valuing correctly, they need to be fixed; and that religion offers tools for that fixing. Mike is vegan, and characterizes himself as using sechel (Heb. reasoning) to determine what is really halachic and not halachic.

We sat in Mike’s sukkah in his backyard, as morning turned into afternoon. He declined to sign my consent form because of the chag (Heb. festival) during which observant Jews

237 Biological dentistry merges conventional dentistry with a holistic orientation to health. From the website of Shecter Dental: “Biological dentistry is the practice of the best elements of conventional dentistry with a focus on the implications oral health has on the entire body. Biological dentistry recognizes the link between oral health and general health.” Shecter Dental, “Biological Dentistry | Biological Dentist | Affordable Dental Care,” Schecter Dental, accessed August 6, 2016, http://schecterdental.com/biological-dentistry/.

238 Halacha is the body of Jewish law that includes kashrut; kashrut spans different sets within halacha.
understand it inappropriate to do work. As a guest and a non-Jew, however, Mike welcomed me to act according to my own judgment. I turned on my digital recorder and placed it on the table between us, jotting notes while we talked. Mike’s individualistic and legally-informed approach to Judaism, and do-what-you-will approach to others, is simultaneously hospitably permissive and strictly boundary-reinforcing. The warmth of Mike’s boundary-reinforcement reveals how swift can be the breakdown of traditional explanations for the boundaries (i.e. to separate Jew from Gentile, as explained in the introduction) and how dietary divides can bring people together as much as keep them apart: Mike eats differently from both his dear friend Shaddy, above, and his beloved wife Laurenn who he credits with bringing him to a deeper practice of Judaism in the first place. This dynamic characterizes my experience of Mike generally, and how I see him as maintaining borders and privileging reasoning as a declaredly left-leaning, declaredly observant Jew.

Mike, like many others, sees contemporary kashrut certification as problematic. On this occasion he tells me a story about a kosher restaurant in Toronto that was open late, had a patio, and “became a bit of a cool hangout for high school observant kids.” As with many other kosher restaurants, the establishment was certified by the major kosher certification organization in North America: COR, the Council of Rabbis. It happened that local observant high school students, male and female, “would go [there], and they would order a slice of pizza and have a pop, and that was considered inappropriate by the rabbinical council that governs kashrut, COR, and so the establishment was asked to shorten their hours and change their patio setting so it was no longer a hangout.” Mike spells out his frustration with this exercise of power by a kosher certification body that goes well beyond the boundaries of kashrut:
In order to get your COR [certification] for a restaurant establishment in Toronto, you don’t only have to meet kosher criteria, you also have to meet other criteria, such as *tsnius* [Heb. modesty] […] you have to have a certain decorum in the place, you can’t be open too late […]. You can’t be open on Shabbat, because a Jewish person can’t make money on Shabbat. Nothing to do with kosher food. It has nothing to do with *food*. You can call a place kosher whether it’s open on Shabbat or not. It’s just not *halachic*.

Mike’s frustration is not just about the imprecision of withholding kashrut certification for reasons that are unrelated to kashrut, or using the power to withhold certification in order to press a business into changing its hours or layout. Many scandals have arisen around kosher certification bodies abusing their authority in more egregious ways.²³⁹ His concern is about how a kosher certification body can refuse to certify a restaurant as kosher when it actually does sell kosher food but does not meet other requirements of halacha, *while at the same time* certifying other food as kosher which is clearly so ethically problematic that it presents equal or greater transgressions of the standards of halacha. Mike’s problem with contemporary kashrut is not that it would ever appeal to the rest of halacha, but that its inconsistency in doing so reveals a troubling refusal on the part of certifiers to take issue with egregious harms, harms on which certifiers actually rely in order to stay in business. More than flawed logic, Mike is troubled by corruption: his criticism, and his orientation, is ethical.

At bottom, Mike’s view is that it is necessary to situate the question of how to eat within the question of how to live. He judges the food system, including the prevailing system of kashrut certification, to be parceled into a corrupt market. His mistrust of authority is equally a function of his independently-minded upbringing, his character and disposition, and the regular failure of authorities to be trustworthy. If kosher authorities cannot be trusted to find the right way to live, the “us” that kashrut is often understood to describe is thrown into question. However, a new “us” emerges in communities of people who care to interrogate the issue of the right way to live. That “us” is generally composed of one’s co-religionists, but it also can be the ground of other kinds of encounter. As Mike puts it,

On so many levels I feel like it’s so much easier to connect with someone who’s observant of something, more so than to connect to a secular person. I have a lot more in common with an observant Muslim or an observant Sikh than I do with a secular Jew. Beside the fact that I probably know the same people that they know, and we probably both like the Blue Jays, and all that sorta junk.

But in terms of actual, what’s interesting and meaningful to talk to, there’s such a stronger connection because we both have a similar framework to our lives, like we both probably are subservient to a greater set of laws, and respect that and enjoy that and probably view secular living as, something’s missing there, not that that’s right or wrong, it’s just different, right? [Emphasis added]

Religion is here the common ground of encounter, making someone interesting and suggesting that, across difference, people share lifeways. The notions of respect and value and “something more” require further investigation, but may be partly apprehended in Mike’s talk of “care.” These qualities, and the familiarity of their presence and anxiety of their absence for so many participants in the religious food movement, become visible in a particular story Mike told me about his secular Jewish friends, his more religious friends, and a particular form of care and connection, or lack thereof.
I had spent time with Mike and his family during Sukkot that year, and joined them and their friends for dinner one night of the festival. Later, Mike told me about another dinner they’d had in the sukkah. They had invited a bunch of their friends, and while all but two of them were Jewish, none were observant Jews. Mike tells me, casually and with amused resignation, “no one’s observant, everyone drove here [in spite of the holiday], no one cared” about the aspect of the holiday that is sacred. He tells me about a brief frustration when he made the blessing over the wine that night. The blessing over wine is part of the ritual that initiates a ritual meal, and in this case the person responsible for that bracha is Mike:

So we’re trying to do the bracha for the yain, and everyone’s just talking, and I’m standing there, and I’m holding my cup, and I’m waiting, you know, and I’m like “okay!” and I’m not, I hate public things, so I hated having to get up there in the first place and do that in front of everyone, and no one cares. Two people weren’t Jewish, everyone else was Jewish, but they just didn’t care, they didn’t stop talking. And they could have! They’re in my sukkah!

Mike is not outraged: he’s bemused, a little put-upon, and a little disappointed. We laugh together over the story, because it is a good one: mundane, low-stakes, with good juxtaposition, and somewhat vulnerable, being about rudeness and sore feelings.

So whatever, we did our thing, we washed our hands quickly under the table, and we did hamotzi [the next ritual part, the blessing over bread], and no one cared, and then everyone ate and it was great, but like if my friend Mike was here, who wears a turban and has all the things, he would have been sitting like this [posing eagerly, attentively], and he would have been waiting for me to finish, and then he would have asked like a million questions about sukkot. And we would have talked about sukkot all night long, which would have enhanced my sukkah experience, whereas you know, we were, whatever. And it’s great, I love that they came, I don’t have them here to throw sukkot in their face, I have them here because they’re friends and this is a party and that’s what it’s about. But, it is… there’s a different sort of connection, you know? Which is why…
In the next breath, Mike and I are at the crux of the moment, which is about something other than
politeness or awkward social performances or the different kinds of friendships one has:

I understand why, obviously, but it blows me away, how communities…
there’s so much aggression and mistrust, and trust me, I’m not naïve, I
know why, I get it, especially… the situation that’s important to me is the
Israeli-Palestine situation, as someone who supports Israel and goes to
Israel I feel that I am a part of that problem-slash-solution-slash-issue. So
I’m relatively informed on that stuff, so I get why it’s happening, but it’s
just crazy, you know?

It’s crazy that there is radical conflict, that communities of people are generations deep in the
blood of one another, and at the same time they have important things in common, some unique
things in common over against everyone else in the world, and many more things in common
with all religious people over against those who are only interested in secular living.

Of course there is much to be parsed here. But for the moment, Mike is trying to answer a
hard question, an ethical question, hanging in the air, about who is “us” and who is “other” and
how a person is supposed to live:

for me if you consider yourself Jewish and you’re trying to live Jewishly,
then it’s Jewish. So what is Judaism? What is being Jewish? Being
Jewish is living the right way. It’s living with the appropriate
consciousness. One can do something Jewish without knowing that it’s
Jewish or being Jewish. Being Jewish and being Muslim in a lot of ways
maybe is the same thing ‘cause it’s living that right way, it’s respecting
something in the same way.

I have claimed that an important part of the social formation of religion on the part of the people
I worked with (and, I think, in contemporary North America at large) is the sense that it is
ethical, that it connects to “should” in a significant way. That “should” looms in this moment, a
sense of incongruity about wrongs and, also in this moment, of the inability to fix things.
Whereas in some moments (like the food conference, when talking about religious traditions for
sustainable farming) the toolkit that religion seems to offer for addressing food problems seems
close at hand, in other moments and for other problems (like Israel-Palestine), that confidence is lower, and the toolkit, further away.

**Do Religions Sanction Pain and Suffering?**

Muslim and Jewish voices have related concerns about the harms of the conventional industrial food system, and about how to engage food as Muslims and as Jews. Farah is another example of the Muslim case. Farah worked at Noor while I was there, and when we spoke about Noor’s approach to food she told me that the goal was to oblige people to think more deeply about what halal really means. I asked whether Muslims had a particular interest in food ethics or food justice, and she told me “I don’t think there’s anything particularly Muslim about it” in the sense that Muslims are not especially predisposed to thinking about current food problems, compared with others.

Interestingly, the first “others” Farah makes a comparison with are Jews. She does not, as she might have, say that Muslims are like Buddhists or Christians or atheists or all Canadians when (or if) they think about food ethics. She speaks first of halal and kashruth, and religiously-marked meat in particular. “[W]e’re supposed to have this concept of halal, right? […] like the Jewish, the kosher, a lot of Muslims are very strict about halal […] but most of the time, they consider the duty done by purchasing from a halal butcher.” Noor’s programs, she explains, suggest that if halal means ethical, then if there’s been cruelty imposed on the animals, and that seems almost unavoidable now if you’re thinking of agribusiness and mass-produced meat, then is it still halal. […]f your produce […] has been picked by farm labour that’s been exploited, […] poor Mexican workers who come here and live in inhumane conditions, don’t have proper healthcare, some of them die, get sick, […] and the reason they have to come here and be on these farms during picking
season is because of world trade globalization and [...] they can no longer grow their corn at a sustainable price, [...] does it make your food halal. Right? So we’re obliging people to think of this question.

Farah poses two intertwined questions: whether halal tracks with ethics, and whether halal, a jurisprudential term that applies beyond the domain of food, should be applied to food and sustainability as processes. Farah thinks everyone is obliged to think about ethics, using the tools available to them, but most people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, do not go far enough. She thinks that butchers cannot provide ethical meat if the animals were mistreated before slaughter. She explicitly uses an ethical argument to question halal as an ordinary butcher or consumer uses it. She wants to encourage her community to really think deeply about what “halal” actually means. The axiom is that halal, as a religious category, is ethical.

Farah’s view is much like Fahim’s, even though they exist in different social circles. Fahim is Middle-Eastern and his family and his store are both situated in the westerly Mississauga and Etobicoke regions of the Greater Toronto Area. Farah is South Asian and commutes from the North-East to get to Noor, itself already East of the city: Blossom Pure is quite far from where she lives. After hearing of Fahim’s business, perhaps during one of his visits to Noor, Farah has bought meat from Fahim a few times. I have seen her recommend Blossom Pure to others. But she usually shops for food near her home, and like many single South-Asian women I talk to, eats vegetarian curries most of the time. The similarity in their concerns is evidence of the increased currency of discussion about these precise problems of the conventional food system in the public sphere. The concerns are increasingly visible in the Jewish and Muslim communities and in North American popular culture more generally.

Similarly, Hassan, an Iranian Muslim who has lived in Canada since the 1980s and who occasionally appeared at Noor while I was there, who struggles mightily to be vegetarian and
who had not heard of Blossom Pure, often tells the younger generation that “there is no halal meat in this city.” He tells me “you can buy from halal store, and you can go to up to this scholar who will tell you yes, this is halal, but in Islam there is no scholar, there is no church, there is no pope: It’s your responsibility to decide. You will be held responsible, if this is halal or not halal.” And he is sure that “if you put this, this kind of meat, industrially produced meat, in front of the Prophet, and explain where this come from, how, you know… then, I’m sure he would, he would have a problem eating it:”

what is forbidden is not just how it is slaughtered, but was tortured. The animal suffered. This is specific in Islam. You cannot, you cannot torture the animal. The animal, for example, that you slaughter, cannot see the blade. You cannot show the blade to the animal. That’s right. And was the animal taken away, was the land that animal was raised on, was the land taken from natives of Australia? You know? So, who was disadvantaged for me to get, you know, chicken tikka for $2.99 a pound. That would make a difference in what is halal and not halal. So what I’m trying to say is Islam has these, it has these mechanisms built in it, to um, to live an ethical life in terms of what you intake, what you intake of the food.

Hassan and Farah, like Mike and Michelle and Fahim, all assume that a religious disposition arises from the fact that the world is created and that God exists. Farah finds it unsurprising that different religious groups would arrive at similar conclusions:

It’s the same message, right? So anybody who was to hear it, these are universal truths. It’s using the signs, it’s using the knowledge of how things are. I mean, everybody understands, halal, I don’t have to explain much, I mean, we know that if you’re talking [about religion], any religious system would be promoting ethical, right? I can’t imagine there’s any religious system that would be promoting or would be sanctioning pain and suffering on others, needless pain and suffering. We know that this is part of the circle of life and that we’re allowed to kill in order to eat, that level of suffering is allowable, but anything over and above what it absolutely necessary, I don’t think there is any system that would sanction it.” [Emphasis added]
Feeling emerges, through Farah’s brief explanation, as a major component of knowing and understanding, and particularly, knowing and understanding that pain and suffering occur and are bad. The world is populated with religious people because God exists, as far as Farah is concerned. In the created world, even nonreligious people are sensing subjects who can discern that good things are better and bad things are worse. Farah’s words suggest that empathy is the basis for reasoning in an ethical subject. She reasons from embodied knowing what Peter Singer argued in a philosophical context: that pain and suffering of other persons or creatures self-evidently requires something of ethical subjects. In Farah’s sensory-religious frame, however, a “religious system,” insofar as it is one, must promote ethics and require harm reduction. How it would do this or how far it would go, however, is less clear.

More than any other capacity, feeling is presented again and again as a universal faculty for sensing toward truth. This idea is recurrent in my fieldwork. It is as sophisticated as it is plastic. The idea of “needless” pain and suffering makes Farah’s assertion (that it is intolerable) basically unassailable, smoothly stretching over one of the places where people negotiate differing ethical discernments about particular pains and particular sufferings. Other people I spoke with make similar allowances for the grey areas of practical ethics. This plasticity is one of the definitional features “eating Jewishly” or eating according to an “Islamic paradigm” as I have perceived and rendered them in this work.

Farah used “sanction” in one sense only, but it is an ambivalent word. Just as religion can be framed as a thing responsible for good in the world, it can also be framed as responsible for

harm. At the same time as it is figured as a domain of care and kindness, it is also replete with ritualizations of pain and suffering. Indeed, pain and suffering are often closely linked to care and kindness. So it matters that consistently in these examples, religious subjects who are well aware of these facts still trade on the idea that religion orients, can orient, should orient one toward the good.

Often the same people who spoke to me critically, from a position of savvy, about the uses to which religion may be put, would also inhabit a more theological and axiomatic voice. Neither of these positions, I think, is less genuine than the other. The capacity for critical reflection does not necessarily undo sincerity. In both cases, an idea appears about the power of religious tradition to offer a corrective to market economics. As a function of this idea, two things happen: religion is positioned as a technology for reforming the broken food system, and religious traditions are refigured and brought in line with the ethical content they are understood to instrumentalize.

The Limits of Pluralism

In one example of savvy, critical self-representation at Noor, Samira speaks to me about the importance of being able to use both theology and scientific forms of evidence for persuading people to arrive at the right place. “For those for whom the religious ethic is the starting point, and the be-all and end-all, you can make a very compelling argument that way. And for those for

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whom that isn’t the case, [we use science.]” As we talk about other faith-based groups with whom she has worked on issues of food, justice, and sustainability, she tells me how she constantly finds herself saying “let’s not just always make it about what religion says.”

Because the fact is, whether you’re religious or not, we’re living in this planet together. And we need to convince everybody, because we need everybody to buy, to understand what needs to be done, and there is the scientific proof, so even if you are religious, there’s your proof, there’s the observation. So let’s always make it first and foremost scientific and you can then link it to the wisdom that comes from the religious teaching, to show, yes, see, it says there that this is how it is. But first and foremost you must do it from the scientific basis, so that you have as wide an audience as possible, because you need as wide a participation as possible. You shouldn’t just make it about religious ethics. Too much of it is.

Samira’s call to persuade with science is an artifact of her educational background in science and accounting, and of her low tolerance for the uses to which Islam is put, when it is co-opted into the projects of others. For over a year I watched Samira repeatedly invited to play the role of Leading Muslim Woman to represent religious diversity at this or that event. (The notion that diversity is an attribute of a person, and not a function of a group, is no less preposterous for being common.) It is tiring to talk, though, if nothing changes through the talk. Samira is kind and reasonably patient, but not excessively tolerant, and she is quite motivated to keep an eye trained on what is important. As our chat about these frustrations calls them up again, I recognize the light touch of her impatience as a sign of an imminent sharp reorientation to the point:

honestly, there’s so much of this just talking about what the scriptures say, ok ok we get it, you know, I can hear that when I go to my service, I can teach it at Noor during Jumah prayers, but I don’t want to make it all about that, because I’m going to exclude all the others. I want the larger community to come and to be compelled. Even I’m not just going to buy it on a religious basis. Honestly, because if I don’t see the proof of it, why should I believe the scriptural? [Emphasis added]
Interfaith dialogue about scriptural overlap is not an end in itself for Samira. I remember the time she told me that Islam is both din and dunya, which she translated to me then as religion and worldly life. Whether she is doing religion or doing worldly life, she is doing living. Samira’s not being disingenuous about scripture. She’s completely persuaded that the applicability of Islamic ethics to contemporary crises is obvious. For her, the point is not to sit and talk about ethics in scriptural form. The point is to live them.

She tells me “I can see” how mizan (which she translates for me in this moment as equilibrium), “sustainability, equality of all things, creation, respect, abundance” are already relevant beyond the bounds of a particular religious community’s weekly religious practice. She tells me, “God has provided for everybody and everything into eternity or as long as life is supposed to continue,” and so if we have problems globally, it is a perceivable indication that we are collectively messing things up. We ought not to mess things up. In “the empirical lab of living, you can see it and it makes sense.” Samira is particularly good at acts of translation, and she has no problem linking science to Islam, or to religion in general, as powerful discourses. Her invocation of “Islamic ethics” is in a way a matter of deploying ethical language in a Muslim idiom, but Islamic ethics is just ethics when Islam is understood to exist in a shared created world.

Khadijah leverages Muslim identity more than her mother does, while still making the ethical argument. She sees Islam as particularly useful for problematizing contemporary inventions like factory farming:

Halal just means permitted. That’s the actual definition. We generally as Muslims have just meant it to be the way an animal is killed and a certain prayer and a stamp that tells us it’s halal. But back in the time when the Qur’an was written, the prophet’s time, food didn’t travel long distances.
There weren’t these factory farms […]. People ate more vegetables, and things were more organic. […] those things weren’t at that time pertinent to our definition of halal, but if we actually look at our Qur’anic guidance, essentially, we are obliged to expand our idea of what halal is. There’s so much about environmental stewardship. As Muslims we are taught that we are khalifas, stewards of the planet, and we have an obligation to enjoy of the planet but to be the ones who take care of it, that’s our obligation. And we have an obligation towards other people, to treat them with fairness and respect, all people.

In this last thought, Khadijah is referring non-Muslims in general, but also migrant farm labourers in particular. The precarity of undocumented and vulnerable farm labour has been a topic of some discussion in the Kanji household and at Noor more generally around this time, evident in a factory farm documentary screening at Noor, in Sarah Elton’s talk from her book *Consumed* during Ramadan, and in Raj Patel’s *Stuffed and Starved* which Samira cites in her Eid khutbah in chapter two. Khadijah further explains that Muslims owe “fairness and respect” to all:

In the Qur’an it says there’s no compulsion in religion, and basically you’re all still sisters and brothers. Actually the Qur’anic verse that is part of our mission statement is “We have made you male and female into nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. And the best amongst you is the person who is most conscious of God.” [Q 49.13] So we don’t necessarily differentiate between people based on whether or not they’re Muslims.

Here she pauses, for an infinitesimal span that only in terms of Khadijah’s general speaking pace could be called a pause.

…Or we’re not supposed to. Certainly Muslims do, as everyone does, we are tribal by nature, but our mandate as Muslims is to treat everyone equally and to be aware that it’s not our titles that make us good. It’s the person who is conscious of God. And conscious of God means being a good person.

In contrast to this idea of a “tribal nature” that Khadijah and others sometimes casually invoke, there is a generalized confidence in pan-human goodness, and in the interchangeability
of goodness and religiosity, which is diffuse across Noor and Shoresh. A few examples will further illustrate this confidence in goodness and its interchangeability with religiosity. Expressed in varying degrees in different moments, this confidence is nevertheless a pervasive everyday social fact that does massive ordinary work: It is axiomatic, it is resilient, and it is fragile.

One day, a frequent Shoresh participant named Michelle and I are talking after a Shoresh event, and the topic turns to religion. She tells me enthusiastically about how, after she started to think more deeply about sustainability and her own Jewish identity, she became increasingly conscious of an agreement amongst religions about “basic values” about how to treat the world:

I really think, what […] fascinated me, […] is how much crossover there is amongst all the religions in terms of the basic values around food and land. There’s really no disagreement. You know, there’s, you know, […] will you eat pork or won’t you eat pork, but that’s not what I’m talking about.

Michelle is telling me that there’s something important behind the food and agricultural regulations of the various religions: “basic values” that reveal what we as people ought to be doing in the world. The question of the pig as a kind of insurmountable religious difference becomes trivial, as it becomes clear that it is the values that are important. “There’s really no disagreement,” she tells me. But there’s immediately some doubt. After a pause, longer than Khadijah’s was in our similar private conversation in another time and place, Michelle thinks again:

Um… Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe Protestantism does have a very different approach. I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t think so. I mean, […] stewardship is [an important concept] in Protestantism.
A deeper doubt follows immediately on these words, revealed in her voice and on her face as much as in what she says next. After a moment, she begins to verbalize a process of wrestling with doubts about whether God is basically a patriarch, and women and the environment are in their basic nature stuck outside:

like, if we are made in God, if God is disembodied and we are made in the image of the disembodied God, then anything [...] to do with our bodies, and the earth from which our bodies emerge and go back to [when we die] is [a problem, especially for women]. I know this has been said by people who do, like, goddess religions and stuff, but I started to think about it, and to think like, is Jewish environmentalism actually possible.

These moments of deep doubt are a major part of social life, and their negotiation deserves attention. If living is a matter of negotiating multiple, incommensurate, even competing forms of value, then the moments in which we patch and cover over the spaces in our value structures, or leave them gaping, must be attended to. They may be left raw, as Michelle leaves hers raw in this moment, or quickly smoothed over, as Khadijah does. They may be kept open, as Mike does using the language of hypocrisy, next, or worked on until they are smooth and integrated as Lauren does below. Such moments show how incommensurate ethical forms are commensurated, how facts like creativity and social change are possible, and necessary.243

People already know that life is complicated and that living is a style of sensing and doing. Mike’s fixation on hypocrisy is a tender spot, and a wisdom about the dysfunctions of everyday functionality. “I don’t live without hypocrisy” Mike tells me, perhaps more often than he realizes. “I would eat a bag of chips. [...] I don’t think they’re really halachic [because they’re

243 Lambek, “Value and Virtue”; Lambek, “Toward an Ethics of the Act.”
junk food but they’re kosher and I’ll eat them].” His struggle with right and wrong isn’t just what impels him not to trust hekshers: it is how he makes decisions about which boundaries he will cross and which he won’t. “I don’t pretend to not live with hypocrisy. There are things that I do do because I am Jewish, that don’t flow with my general approach,” and there are some laws that you just have to follow.

[There are] laws that you understand why you’re doing them, and others that it’s just ‘cause God said so. Wear red pants. Don’t eat pig. But there are hints that are infused into text and learning that give suggestions as to why those unexplained laws are valuable. For example, hints that pork is unclean, pork has parasites, milk and meat leads to indigestion, whatever.

I think part of that is a safeguard, from assimilation and all that stuff. Listen, if you can’t eat at somebody’s house, that really stops you from… it’s a very difficult thing. […] I told you, I don’t live without hypocrisy. It’s difficult.

Michelle’s position is at once very similar, and very different. I remember when she told me how she struggled with the way kashrut functioned to divide the Jewish community from itself, as well as to divide Jews from non-Jews. “That’s not the world I live in,” she told me. “I live in a diverse world, and I need a way to live in that world.” Some forms of Jewish law as conventionally practiced, particularly in kashrut-related conflicts, stood between community members, and even members of the same family, which constitutes a deep violation of her Jewish ethics. Being a part of Shoresh was so important because it gave her another way to live and eat Jewishly.

If these speakers struggle with capitalist consumption-based models, and the problems of factory farming for the food system, they also struggle with their own circumstances, standards, impulses, needs, and desires, as well as the degree to which they can manifest their values, or bring them to bear on others. Discernment is a difficult practice, and the burden of judgment
imposed by practical ethics can be a heavy one to bear. Some of the burden is borne by sensing and feeling.

“I like the idea of sanctity”

When I asked Lauren Stein, a frequent participant in Shoresh events, what Judaism has to say about food, she replied “A lot! A LOT! […] What doesn’t Judaism say about food?” Lauren is a single young Jewish expressive arts therapist. At the time I knew her, she taught and studied improvisation as a learning technique, and has since earned her MA in arts therapy using improvisation as a healing practice for displaced persons experiencing post-trauma stress. Lauren and I had seen each other at a number of Jewish food-related text studies and events, which in those earlier days were more closely related to animal slaughter. She expressed interest in my work and was willing to talk about food. On the day of our formal interview, our conversation is replete with explorative questions from both sides.

Lauren tells me she was born into a Conservative-secular home which was not kosher-observant but was kosher-informed: if they were going to eat shrimp, they would eat it right in the house, and they kept separate dishes for milk and meat, but it “wasn’t the end of the world if cheese touched the meat plate or vice versa.” She tells me how this encouraged her to think with kashrut, rather than live it strictly: “to me a lot of the traditions then became more an intellectual, pursuit, the idea of separating milk and meat, as opposed to the kabbalistic, mystical, spiritual aspects of, waiting six hours between.”

Lauren explored Orthodoxy in her undergraduate years and, for a while, became convinced it was the right way to do Judaism. But her seeking, and particularly her studies in Jewish ethics, presented problems for her attempt at orthodox food practice in particular. Initially
she was a bit put off by “weird awkwardnesses” when her Orthodox then-boyfriend, who was vegetarian “because of tza’ar ba’alei chai[m],” the Jewish injunction against the suffering of living beings, couldn’t eat in her parents home. He once deeply offended her Bubbie, grandmother, by bringing his own plate of food to eat separately from them:

> It was very insulting to my Bubbie for whom food, food and heart are very much connected. And when it got to the point where I was like, if I were to be Orthodox, I would have to then alienate myself from my family. And that opposed my very idea of what Judaism was.

This tension continued to mark Lauren’s seekership in an ongoing way, but she began to resolve it, as she generally does, by looking within. She explains how conflicted she was in that era of her life:

> this conflict, that I’m now getting over, which was like, Orthodox is the right way to be Jewish and everything else is wrong, so, and then it was only a matter of, like, am I living the right way, or am I just too weak, or like, my lifestyle is too entrenched in other stuff… because of that I can’t actually keep kosher and all these other things. So then it was, am I not living up to the ethical ideal of who I really should be and what I truly believe.

Lauren frames her struggle in explicitly ethical terms. She is looking for the right way to live, and the extent to which Orthodox Judaism is that is the extent to which it will merge with the “ethical ideal” of what she truly believes, and who she “really should be.” The resolution comes as she finds ways to reconcile the incommensurate pieces of her ethical puzzle, and she reframes the whole mess: “I am now actually coming to see another point of this which is, that it’s not quite so black and white.”

Um… I think I’m not the only… person who’s explored this path who’s [initially] come to the conclusion that there are people who just, are strict and follow everything, and then there are the lazy ones who follow nothing, but, I, I actually’ve come to the conclusion that it’s not the case, and it’s not that Orthodox Jews have the right, you know, idea of what is right and wrong, and the rest of us don’t care.
In this moment, Lauren stands at the heart of “eating Jewishly.” Over against a historical narrative that pits forms of Judaism against one another often in terms of their intensity, Lauren and many others are looking for ways to explain that their choice is not kashrut-or-nothing, but kashrut-or-something-else, possibly something more. That it plays out this way for so many shows how successful orthodoxies are at being orthodoxies, i.e. achieving monopoly on authoritative discourse. And yet, unorthodox individuals and groups inhabit this same discursive universe. To the extent that these individuals and groups marshal authorizing narratives alongside affects like sincerity and “care,” they too use this power. Lauren uses this power when she decentres the centre, asserting: “It’s actually in fact one theory of many. [...] there are actually different ways to access God, and I think that theirs is one way, and I actually think that… other forms of Jewish… diet things, are also another way.”

I dunno, maybe those, that few and, disconnected collection of Jews throughout the world who believe in vegetarianism and actually find [Jewish textual] justification for that, maybe that’s, actually a legitimate thing. And that’s just as legitimate for the sources that they research. And in fact, if you’re vegetarian you’re usually gonna be, kosher anyway. Maybe that’s just as legitimate. So there’s no reason to say like, Orthodox people have it right. Anymore than saying vegetarian Jews have it right. That’s another My Opinion.

Chapter five will explore more of the way Lauren deploys herself in her opinions as a technique of ethics. First, though, it is worth sitting with what Lauren presents as the real point of kashrut. For her, the point is ethical, and like many others, she sees this in animal slaughter in particular. She also sees the ethics of animal killing as a point of contact with other traditions.

244 Asad, Genealogies of Religion. Discussed in chapter one.

245 Ibid. Discussed in chapter one.
“…if you are going to eat meat, *do something.*”

When I ask Lauren what she thinks about kosher slaughter, she asks me back, “What do I think of it? I think it’s a good thing. As long as it’s done right.” How do we know if it’s done right? What is it for? “Um, it’s to think about how we kill the animal, and that it suffers as little pain as possible. Which is *meant* to think about how we treat the animal while it’s alive. I don’t know how that got through the cracks. [But it has.]” Lauren refers to Shoresh’s recent events that looked at biblical slaughter laws, and relates these, in a stream of consciousness way, to her personal food choices. Like others do, Lauren explains how animals should be treated by making a comparison with other *traditions.* In this case, the tradition is that of North America’s Indigenous peoples:

I like the idea that if you are going to eat meat, *do something.* Native, Natives, have a tradition of thanking the animal, like before and after slaughtering it and like, giving a gift to the earth or whatever, like, there’s a tradition around it. That’s why I was willing to eat, I was at a pow-wow and I thought, I actually, like, if this buffalo was killed the Native way, I would eat it.

Here Native and Jewish foodways are related, in religiously-inflected terms: gift, thanks, tradition.

But unfortunately I think it wasn’t [killed that way], necessarily. Like they, Native people in Toronto also just eat food, like everyone else. But like, if it were done in a traditional way, I think Jewishly I would be ok with that, if it were organic and if it were like, if they just killed the buffalo…

She stops herself, rethinking at the juncture where hunting diverges from animal husbandry. “but then they would have shot it, and that wouldn’t be cool [for kashrut]... I dunno.” Kashrut’s emphasis on shechting essentially requires slaughter, i.e. of a captive animal, rather than a hunted one: if rabbits were a kosher animal, which they are not, they would still have to be raised in
captivity and schected, much like chickens, in order to be consumed without transgressing the law.

But, anyway, um… I like the idea of sanctity. I think that whether you eat it, or whether you kill it, like, both, of all processes, treating it as something holy. Making a big deal of it, and eating it less often I think.

In this telling, the common ground between Jews and Indigenous people is the idea of sanctity, the act of killing for food as a form of gift, and the process by which making meat can be treated as something holy. Wherever this idea is understood to originate, it is here, now. The language of religion and tradition is consistently marshaled in this way, by people who presence their ethico-religious selves in an implicitly pluralistic sphere.

**Pluralism’s Periphery**

Even if we accept that religion entails ethics, it is not so clear what that ethics would be. There is an easy social cynicism about religious difference that takes for granted that ostensibly distinct “religions” have impossibly different values. However, this attitude toward difference glosses the fact that there is little reason to be secure in finding a singular ethics within any particular religious tradition, either.

If ethics differ within traditions, as well as between them, that is not to say that only the reformers are trying to do the right thing. Avi, for example, is the most Orthodox Jew I interviewed. He came to the Shoresh food conference because he was interested, but at the end of the day, he is quite clear that he sees no Jewish imperative, legal or otherwise, to do what they are doing. For him, Shoresh’s work is interesting and good, but he won’t mistake it for an authoritative interpretation of the law, and he is unlikely to reform his Jewishness around it. He
already has an orientation to the right thing, and eating Jewishly is peripheral to it, while kashrut is at the centre of it.

“It’s a minefield to try to do the right thing and not look like an idiot,” Avi tells me, when he doesn’t want to eat food at someone’s home, because it does not conform to a strict Orthodox interpretation of halacha. “I feel guilty for doing something socially awkward, but I’m devout.” Avi told me that in the context of a food-based confrontation he once asked a rabbi for a ruling, knowing the whole time what the rabbi would say, just to be able to take the pressure off. Avi knows what he wants to do and not do, eat and not eat, and the question for him is simply “how do I navigate not making people feel bad.”

In many ways, the challenges and rewards that Avi faces by keeping kosher look just like the ones faced by active participants in the food movement: “Keeping stringently kosher makes me feel like a jerk, but I also feel like I can raise my head high that I don’t eat at McDonalds.” Unlike Noam, who found lobster symbolic of otherness but octopus relatively innocuous, seafood and pork are both just gross for Avi. A McDonald’s cheeseburger is disgusting to smell. Normal, i.e. non-kosher, food isn’t gross, he said, but “I just don’t want it.” To an observant Jewish person like himself, that food is “not yours.”

“It’s for sure peripheral”

When I ask Avi, who is in his twenties, about food ethics, he responds with the same slight confusion that Mamoom and some others near her age did when I asked her the same question. Like them, Avi told me about health and nutrition. He said it was important to eat nutritious food like whole grains, multigrain foods, dark leafy greens, and purple things, and to avoid deep fried foods. Organic food is not really on his radar.
When I specifically ask about animal welfare and social justice, he tells me these things don’t come up. “There aren’t options on the [grocery store] shelf,” he tells me, that say “‘these animals were treated nicely.’ We don’t talk about it. ‘This restaurant treats their people nicely.’ We don’t hear about it.” He’s not ignorant of it, but it’s not really part of his awareness as things stand at this time, and that’s what he wants to help me understand: “It’s for sure peripheral to kashrut, but you’d feel badly eating that food” if you knew animals or workers were not treated well. I ask whether that feeling has anything to do with religion, or whether it is a secular ethic, and he supposes both, because “our secular society is based on a Judaeo-Christian ethical structure.” Avi has ethics, and cares very much about what is right for him to do. But his ethical framework and the one he met at Shoresh talk past one another.

Shoresh’s current vision for eating Jewishly is that it accommodates keeping kosher. Avi, at this time, does not recognize “eating Jewishly” or have a place for it in his self-understanding. But the term, like “religion,” cuts both ways. While it is currently straightforward for Avi to say that traditional Jewish foods are nice but don’t matter, it may become less easy for him to say that animal ethics, worker’s rights, and the environment are aspects of a problem that “doesn’t come up,” if the food movement’s project succeeds. Kashrut certification bodies are increasingly confronting this concern, and the troubling of the heksher is not showing signs of letting up.

Shoresh, too, will continue to bump up against hekshering, and all the waste and social division and processed food culture it entails, if it wants to keep kashrut under the umbrella of eating Jewishly. Orthodox interpretation of kashrut is sincere, and just like Shoresh, Orthodoxies make complicated and real claims on those centuries of legal thought, as well as the histories of joy, love, loss, and trauma that form the flesh and bones of so much collective cultural work in Jewish history. The cultural formation of Orthodox kashrut will continue to lay claim to the
centre of authoritative Jewishness, its premises threatening the relevance and the reality of eating Jewishly; Once born, eating Jewishly, like any other concept, belongs to no one, even as it depends on everyone for its sense, which is to say, its value.

Similarly, the Islamic paradigm, expressed principally in ethical terms, is in the hands of the community: it must accommodate Fahim, Farah, and Hassan, who see harm-mitigation and justice as central to Islam and to proper religion, but it is perhaps equally applicable to Ahmad, who thinks yogurt is yogurt and yogurt is halal, or to the unnamed man in chapter three who, after jumah prayers, admonished Azeezah not to squander her khutbah on unimportant things. What, indeed, are the important things? This amounts to a contestation of value.

**Conclusion**

The idea that religious foodways are ethical in nature is a key articulation of the religious presence in the food movement. There is a recurrent construction within people’s explanations, namely that religious concerns ought to stand in opposition to harms in conventional food systems, that religion can of course be drawn upon in order to manifest better and more holistic models for refiguring consumption as a basic mode of living in relation to others. Religion is thus figured as a technique of ethics, both a method for orienting as well as an object to be oriented by our already-ethical senses, our already-relational affects. Religion-as-ethics emerges as a relational means to respond to what are mistakenly figured as market-based, economics-driven, basically selfish consumption practices.

This framing is somewhat circular in its reliance on the idea of the truly religious, which allows Fahim, Farah, Samira, Mike, Michelle, Lauren, and many others to speak of people who are not in their own, or even any, religious group as having an internal disposition that is
religious. Fahim perceives an instinctual respect for creation; Farah is certain that no religion would sanction unnecessary or egregious harm. Samira, Michelle, Khadijah and others intimate some doubts, some places where religions don’t seem to agree or where religion isn’t all that ethical. And each speaker, from the skeptical to the literal to the sincere, speaks back to certain orthodoxies of religious tradition at the same time as the religious food movement speaks back at conventional practices, using essentially the same critical tack of what’s right.

The contemporary doctrine of pluralism sets the stage for people to articulate a religious subjectivity according to which they may powerfully enter the spaces where value is negotiated. Importantly, following the ethnic and cultural identifications in chapter three, this chapter shows that many of the most compelling reasons that people connect religion and the food movement are ethical. Thus I offer an account of why and how “ethics,” however construed, is a key term in so many of these participants’ food lives. In a market that is increasingly criticized in ethical terms, people are making their own ethical toolkits to help them navigate a fraught consumer landscape. “Religion,” too, is used for this task.

Without exception, every person I interviewed had a story about the right thing to do with regard to food; however, the framework for what is the right thing to do, and why, varies a great deal. The concept of appropriateness was common at the leadership level at both Noor and Shoresh: at the participant level, appropriateness was a touchstone more often among Shoresh participants than Noor participants, who more often spoke about pure, clean, and healthy food. At both sites, people made connections between how foods make them feel and what the right thing to do is. Next, in chapter five, I shed light on value by examining my interlocutors constructions of what foods are really “appropriate” and what persons can truly “afford.” What is
the real cost? What is the real content? What is the real good? These questions push toward a sense of value, getting from “should” to “should want to,” to get from discernment to desire.
Chapter 5
Value-Making: Discernment and Desire

To make a last argument about the construction of foodways as religious, I turn again to the RPS “Food and Religion” event that introduced me to Noor and Shoresh. The second day of that event was a public forum, involving a panel of guest speakers from the previous day’s workshop: medical anthropologist Nancy Chen, president and CEO of Hazon Nigel Savage, agricultural journalist, policymaker, and Christian reform leader Elbert van Donkersgoed, and founder of Green Zabiha, Yasir Syeed. The public forum was followed by a question-and-answer period, which became a catalytic moment, wherein a member of the audience stood up and resisted the idea of religion as source for revising the food system, in a particularly powerful way.

The final presenter on the panel was Yasir Syeed, and he had described Green Zabiha as a response to the religious precedent and spiritual call to return to organic, natural, and humane animal husbandry. He used the idea of mercy, drawing on the Qur’anic concept rahma (much like Reh’ma did in chapter three), as a way of restoring or not-violating the “sacredness” of creation. In this respect, his talk was simply one of the three out of four on the panel that drew on religious tradition to reframe food in the sacredness of a created world.

When the question period began, however, Syeed’s particular presentation was challenged. A brown Muslimah identified herself, and made her critique through her identity as Syeed’s co-religionist. She addressed him directly, told him that she was not economically privileged, and said that she simply could not afford to purchase expensive organic and free-range food for herself and her children. She challenged the implication that her food was not
perfectly halal, and the related implication that she was a comparatively worse Muslim because of her consumption patterns, which she herself connected directly with her economic situation.

**Class Critique and Capitalism**

There at least two distinct reasons for why this woman’s critique is powerful. First, both the challenger and the challenged are likely aware of two widely-known Islamic theological injunctions: the first, against casting aspersions on the religiosity of a fellow Muslim, and the second, against making haram what God has made halal. By speaking from the position of a co-religionist in this way, this woman was able to turn the table that had been set by the speaker, speaking back to his authoritative discourse on halal and Islam, and to his implicit ethical universalism.

Secondly, and more generally, this moment throws into sharp relief some of the difficult questions facing those who connect religious identity with the food movement’s alternative practices. These questions centre on access and class. The food movement is often criticized for elitism, and for failing to offer an actual alternative to capitalist consumption. The first critique, elitism, focuses on financialized and intersectionally, gendered and racialized elitism.246 The food movement is criticized because it devalues processed foods and frequent meat consumption, and advocates for fresh foods which tend to be more costly, lower calorie, more labour-intensive

to prepare, and less accessible in poorer areas. The industrial capitalist market model is more
democratic and feminist in this way, at least in principle: it makes higher-calorie food more
readily available to more people than any other food system in history, allowing more people,
especially women, to spend more time on things other than keeping themselves and their families
from going hungry.

The second, related critique is that the food movement does not present a meaningful
alternative to capitalist consumption. According to this view, the food movement, however
well-intentioned, amounts to an advertising campaign for different products within the same old
problematic market: all talk and no actual change. The food movement aspires to justice of
distribution through its alternative sustainability model, although it is roundly criticized for
elitism, paternalism, and superficiality. If the food movement is advocating change, its claim is
that such change is for the better. That better, implicitly a comparative better than, becomes a
key site of contestation: For whom, where, would things be better, and at what cost?

Though the virtues of the capitalist food market ideal are often borne out in practice, it is
widely understood that the conventional food system is also rife with corruption: it is shockingly
vulnerable to monopoly; it has managed to produce enough food to feed the world’s human
population, but that population is, as yet, not fed; it has facilitated dietary illness, starvation, and
food waste on a global scale. The pressing concern, pointed to by food subsidization, dietary

illnesses, suffering, and resource destruction, is that markets are not neutral spaces for trading on objective value.

Food activists suggest, directly and indirectly, that people should eat differently, and should want to eat differently. Their call to change the food system, or food behaviours within a system, is fundamentally ethical insofar as it makes claims about what is teleologically right for one to do. Whether the object of justice is the environment, non-human animals, or humans, the discourse is still one of ethics. But what right to food activists have to tell people what to eat?

Muslim and Jewish law, though uniquely related, are by no means alone in prescribing appropriate and inappropriate food to people. Such prescriptions are everywhere, not least in the form of highly invasive food system advertising. What, then, are we to make of passionate advocations for and resistances to the very question of whether to read religious food laws ethically? Who is imposing idiosyncratic food restrictions on whom? What naturalized ethics and impositions become visible here, as an aspect of food systems generally?

The critique of the failure to oppose capitalism and the critique of elitism both talk past the lived practices of my interlocutors, missing both the diversity of participants’ economic realities, and the aims they are trying to achieve. The critiques, although they helpfully bring power to the table as a central object of analysis, also fail to adequately explain or understand the disgust and desire that organize the valuations made by participants. First, as Daniel Miller points out, the claim that consumption is fundamentally materialistic and capitalist may function

\[248\] In the descriptive sense used by Lambek et al., discussed in chapter four. The normative question of which ethics to take up is a separate problem.
more to perpetuate the academic Americanization of consumption as a topic, than to help scholars understand how people consume and what that means.²⁴⁹ Miller’s theoretical-methodological critique is that researchers on the topic of consumption err if they only leave space for capitalism’s others to respond to capitalism by either “accept[ing]” or “resist[ing]” it.²⁵⁰ In this respect, Miller’s thesis is well in line with Sahlins’ call to anthropologists to discover the culture mystified in the capitalism.²⁵¹ To this end, I offer an account of people’s on-the-ground acts of meaning-making that takes seriously their capacity to engage in valuing.

The elitism critique tends to occlude the uneven ground on which the current market already stands, and at the same time assumes that participants are elites, and function to support elites. But the more strongly the word “elite” indexes individuals and families who are substantially wealthy, the more weakly it appears to track with actual participation; the more literally precise I am in looking for correlation here, the less I find it.²⁵² Just as the wealthy do not have a monopoly on conspicuous consumption, they do not have a monopoly on ethical consumption.

At my research sites, I only rarely encountered either the severely rich or the radically poor. The bulk of my research was among people of varying levels of wealth and stability, who


²⁵⁰ I am, however, wary of Miller’s moral argument, where he moves beyond the call for empathetic anthropology to suggest that academic work should aim at human welfare. Ibid.

²⁵¹ Miller cites Sahlins’ early work, but not his most relevant argument. Although Sahlins’ 1988 argument does not appear in Miller’s bibliography, the latter has a great deal of overlap with the former.

²⁵² I do not conflate a weak relationship with an inverse relationship, which entails that most participants in the food movement are poor. That premise is specious in the same way.
all struggled, albeit differently, to make everyday choices that were in line with their “values.” They used their own experiences of desire and disgust in varying ways in order to make these choices. It is therefore to the question of value and values, and the quotidian human activity of valuing, that I now turn.

**Affordability and Appropriateness**

At Noor and Shoresh, some people respond to the objection that people cannot afford to eat the way they propose, by rethinking “affordability” in terms of a religiously- and affectively-inflected notion of collective responsibility and obligation. Similarly, they tended to emphasize the “appropriateness” of food, rethinking appropriateness in inclusive and flexible situational terms. To think this through, I draw on David Graeber’s idea of value. He identifies three interrelated “senses” for the word: Linguistic value, economic value, and sociological value.  

Briefly, Graeber’s linguistic value is what he describes as “meaningful difference,” following the Saussurean notion that the content of a thing is its difference from all other things. Economic value is glossed as the “degree to which objects are desired” as roughly indexed by how much people will pay for them, and sociological values are “conceptions of the good,” proper, and desirable. This latter, if joined to the significant dimension of practice, intersects most obviously with what I have gestured to as ethics. However, I want to follow Graeber in emphasizing all three aspects of value: I want to use this idea to show how people at Noor and Shoresh slide across the three registers even as they speak in the language of the ethical. All

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254 Ibid., 1–2.
three senses of value are visible in their grappling with the (perhaps not so) unitary logic of the market.

This attention to value helps me further tease out the “culture mystified in the capitalism” introduced in chapter four, that is, the meaning-making taking place through and around acts of consumption around Noor and Shoresh. Others have shown that ostensibly alternative consumption practices can involve largely independent actors, disparate actions, and trivial or idiomatic market choices that reproduce market logics. In contrast to that approach, I emphasize the ways that people around Noor and Shoresh draw on their religious identities to handle the challenges they face, when the exigencies of the market present problems for how they want to live. Instead of understanding their consumption in terms of market behaviour, I see the people I spoke with as making meaning in their foodways by enacting and negotiating value and values. They do this partly in concert with the market, but not solely as a function of the market, nor solely on the market’s terms.

“This is so effing difficult.”

My interview with Lauren Stein, the expressive arts therapist who appeared in chapter four, took place in one of the common rooms in a colorful glass-walled apartment building she was then subletting in the east part of Toronto’s downtown, not far from St. Lawrence Market. At the time, before her MA, Lauren was single and made very little money. She participated in informal economic activity, bartering, trading, and engaging with or living in alternative

255 For example, Binkley, “Liquid Consumption: Anti-Consumerism and the Fetishized de-Fetishization of Commodities.”
communities of various types. Interviewing Lauren is intense. Food is deeply important to her, and there is a palpable sense of the struggle she experiences around food choice.

Lauren tells me how she came to stop eating meat. She was reading a work of Jewish ethics by Joseph Telushkin, and got to a chapter about tzaar baalei chayim. She tells me, “I read that chapter, even before I read his conclusion in the book I was like, yeah. You know what, for me to call myself, like for me to say I only eat kosher meat is a contradiction with what I now believe.”

So therefore I stopped eating meat, and then I had health problems, not because, not because it’s not possible to eat enough protein, but because, with, um, the amount of money I’m willing to spend, and the laziness factor, and not having seen a nutritionist yet, and not getting all the proper supplements, I had medical problems [...] She was advised that she had to eat red meat in order to return to good health, at which point she could resume her vegetarianism with a better diet and basic supplements. Lauren, told she had to go back to eating meat at least for a time, was now faced with a choice: what meat?

this question that I was kind of debating, but putting in the back of my head for a long time, suddenly became like you have to decide right now. And that question was, if I had the choice between kosher or organic ethical, free of hormones, and everything... what would I do?

There is no kosher organic meat available in Toronto, so Lauren’s choice was between conventional kosher and local organic meat. In the end, she chose to buy organic meat. She purchases the meat with a Jewish friend, and they attempt to kasher it themselves, which is a process of salting, resting, and rinsing the meat in order to remove the “blood” that is forbidden

256 The suffering of living beings, introduced in chapter one.
by kashrut. Notably this does not address the absence of shechitah, kosher slaughtering. But it does show how Lauren works to fulfill kashrut in a way that feels most right to her, Jewishly. From a market perspective, Lauren has selected organic over kosher. That perspective is factually correct, and completely misses the point of her lived religious foodways, which is that Lauren made what she saw as the best Jewish choice.

Lauren sometimes wrings herself out trying to do the best she can. She also derives joy from sharing food with others, and relaxes into minimizing harm to the extent that she is able. She is palpably angry at two things: the way the system is stacked against her, and the way people refuse even to try to minimize harm with their food choices. Meanwhile, Lauren tells me, “As a vegetarian I feel discriminated against” in the food system:

I spend more money eating no meat, than [omnivores] and that actually doesn’t make sense, because the animal takes up entire fields, of what my grains is only one fraction of, and the amount of work that goes into the grains and the animal […] The amount one cow eats over the course of its lifetime […] And then the amount of work that you put into raising, and slaughtering, and transport, and all the stuff associated with that cow is significantly more than all I ate […] So why does [meat] cost less?

Lauren feels backed into a corner by a food system whose valuations make no sense. She can’t fix it by herself, but she is certain that what’s going on must be wrong:

if it costs less, there’s something seriously wrong with the way we produce that meat, and there’s something seriously wrong with the way we consume that meat, because we don’t value it, cause there’s no sanctity around it. Because it’s assumed we’re going to do it all the time.

Lauren phrases her criticism here specifically in terms of value. It is thinkable for Lauren that the cost of meat can be too low. It is low enough to indicate that there is something wrong with how “we” are doing valuing: “because we don’t value it.” Sanctity is opposed to taken-for-
granted constant consumption, here. Recall Graber’s first sense of value, in which semantic value is the definitional is-ness of a thing, its meaning as its difference from everything else: here, meat taken-for-grantedness is a misapprehension of what meat is, which is food (qua life) for us, and life (qua food) of an animal.

Sanctity is an important concept in Lauren’s food practice, and she sees a lot in common among Jewish ethics, Jewish ritual life, and the various other things she knows about the world and health and the way things ought to be. When she received the medical advice that she had to eat meat at least once a week in order to return to good health, she quickly connected a weekly meat meal with the sacredness of Shabbat observance. “[O]n Shabbat as a holy day you celebrate by eating meat, to say that like in the medieval times, people couldn’t afford meat at every meal. Poor people couldn’t afford it at all, and it was a big deal to eat it once a week!” Now, it strikes Lauren, people have wrong expectations about how easy it should be to eat meat: “For us to eat meat at every single meal, and for us to eat more than the size of the palm of your hand? YES! You’re gonna whine and bitch and moan, that it costs five dollars per hunk.”

She is visibly upset when she tells me about a conflict she had with one of her friends: “for my birthday I wanted to go to a vegetarian restaurant, and my friend said to me ‘you can’t force us to eat vegetarian food.’ I am so angry about that statement […] that is one meal. Like you cannot for one meal, not eat meat? This is our psyche. This is how people feel.” She doesn’t want to talk about it, because it still upsets her, but she recognizes the negative effect her food ethics could have on her moral self. She tells me about the downside of caring and struggling over the right thing to do around food: “I was becoming so self-righteous that I was judgmental to everyone around me. Not everyone around me, but my friends. And part of my judgmentalness might have been coming from a bitterness, of like, this is so effing difficult.”
The social stigma Lauren experienced for trying to live according to her values is very like what she was trying to avoid by not keeping Orthodox standards of kashrut. What she goes through in this story is quite like what Avi goes through in his Orthodoxy in chapter four. It is challenging enough, even without the strain of social judgment, just to try and avoid excessive packaging or waste when buying groceries. In the end, Lauren tells me, “It’s too much. I cannot be as ethical, I would use that religious term ‘not yet.’ Like, I cannot be as ethical as I want to be. […] So this is the condition… I can’t live under all my ideals… I just choose.”

Lauren is sympathetic to the challenges of not having much money, and to the challenges of feeding one’s children in particular. But she is confident that people could also struggle more, could also choose to do more than they are doing. She is not convinced when people complain about the cost, because she knows how much it costs:

People who say but “oh, what, organic kosher, that’s gonna be so expensive!” […] I’ve done this with [a friend…] I think we paid 20 dollars for like, several meals worth of meat, beef, that we put in a stew [enough for 6 meals]. For 20 bucks? That’s not a big deal. And then everyone who’s like “oh, but, people with 6 children…” […] yeah, that is expensive, you’ve got little kids. [Holds up hands to show a small size, frustratedly] THIS is how much food you need. The size of a deck of cards, you need the meat that would be the size of your palm. A 16 ounce, 32 ounce steak? [You don’t need that.]

The problem, in Lauren’s eyes, is unreasonable expectations, out-of-touch standards, and a general misuse of food resources to the detriment of the world and our bodies. In a nutshell, she says, “we should be eating meat less often, and we should be paying more for it, and it will work out the same. And it will work out better for the planet, and for our bodies, probably.”

Hassan is not especially persuaded by the economic argument either, in a different time and place, when I am having a different conversation with him about a different religious
tradition. He appreciates that choice is a privilege, but he believes that the privilege of choice is actually quite widespread, and comes with some obligation. In his view, the problem is simply that people are addicted to meat. Being vegetarian, he tells me, “does not make you necessarily a better person, it’s really, is about privilege. In our day and age, we are privileged because we can go without meat.”

Anthropologists tell us that there was a time in our evolutionary history when we needed meat in order to grow, as a species. That’s right. Yes. So, but we have already passed that. Now we have privilege, we can live without meat. Or at least, not without meat, that is too much to ask. But just ask Muslims, because for some reason their faith and identity is so much tied to meat-eating. So, they don’t have to just go vegetarian. They just go Meatless Monday. If they, one day of the week you don’t eat meat, apparently is more effective than taking all the SUVs off the road. All the SUVs off the road! Just one day of the… and my father for example, he eats kebab for breakfast! And nasty kebab, not like good kebab, you know?

Hassan conveys that the cost of such an act would not be high, and might in fact be less than what one would normally spend. And the payoff for the environment, he expects, would be substantial. But Hassan knows his own appetites and desires, and knows how compelling they can be, in the face of whatever evidence or truth about what is harmful or beneficial to the world.

I… that’s a very nice way of putting it, “that you’re not aware of it, let’s raise consciousness”… No. People are addicted to meat. Yeah, I am… I am talking about myself. I am, that’s what I was saying, I’m not really vegetarian, you know? I crave meat really bad. Chicken tikka? [laughs under his breath]

Chicken tikka is the same dish that he mentioned when we spoke about the human harm of the food system. It is an object of strong desire for Hassan. This is why he believes he is not a real

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257 Quoted in chapter four.
vegetarian: for him, avoiding meat is a struggle. He seems to presume that true vegetarians find meat repulsive. He tells me about the best place to get chicken tikka in Toronto. He gives me directions. He tells me I should go, and what to ask for, and then he stops himself,

Lahore Tikka House on Gerard Street? I don’t know if you have been there, have you been there? You should go. Oh. Lahore Tikka House. So, Lahore Tikka House, ask for tandoori chicken tikka. Well, don’t! I mean, I don’t wanna have you… but I’m saying, if you put that in front of me, I don’t know how long I’ll be vegetarian! So I am addicted myself. I know that I was addicted, you know, I knew that I could not live one day without meat. Because I was addicted. And Muslims, too. They are addicted to meat. They cannot go without meat, it’s an addiction, it’s not “raising consciousness, oh if they know,” no. It’s just addiction, simple as that.

Hassan is persuaded that proper zabiha slaughter cannot be performed on an industrial scale, but that is not why he is vegetarian. He begins with Islam, and has a lot to say about how Islam requires justice. What he gives is, in a sense, an exposition of the intrinsic value of life.

Social justice, environmental justice, you know, justice to animals, justice to ourselves, justice to environment. So. That’s just overriding concern in the Qur’an, left and right, everywhere. So, and then, you know, you cannot be just to animals, if you… I would eat, I am not a vegetarian, I am really a compassionate eater. So I would eat, if I am, like, stranded somewhere or if I have to, I would eat meat. But really, in our, and that’s the whole point, […] life is sacred, everybody knows that. Qur’an says it, Bible says it, life is sacred, life is sacred. But you’re talking about, you know, human life. Really, you’re talking about privileged life. Either you’re white, or you’re Muslim, non-Muslim, you know? Ok. Human life is sacred. But then, that’s not what Qur’an says. Life is sacred means life is sacred. Any life is sacred.

Underneath theological explanation of the value of life, it becomes clear that what really made Hassan become vegetarian was feminism. He says so: “What made me really to go vegetarian, was feminism. [I make a sound of surprised interest.] Yes.” Hassan, an Iranian Muslim in his 50s, draws on the performance of identity to make is point about how people value themselves
and others: “Arabs think they are better than everybody else. Persians think they are better than everybody else. Men think they are better than everybody else.” He explains further that,

for me to eat, um, to not eat meat, I’m considered, you know, somehow less of a man. You know, because… generally. Yeah. You know. It is. So you know, how is your masculinity dependent on the killing of an animal? You know? And brutal killing of an animal. […] Somehow your identity as a man depends on this. And ok, maybe there was a time when we were hunters, and gatherers, and maybe that’s where it comes from, but then, it doesn’t stop there, that’s the thing. If I, if my masculinity is defined by, you know, killing of an animal, it’s the same control and domination dynamics that I will use to control and dominate women.

The whole narrative mess of masculinity and domination and violence is what troubles him. He sees problems with how men, women, and non-human animals are socially valued. I can’t help but think that he would have been a young man during wartime in Iran, before he came to Canada in the late eighties. But he is telling me something else:

Animals praise God in the Qur’an. They praise their Lord, the Qur’an says it very specifically. So how can you torture them and eat them at the same time? Or how can you talk about justice for Palestine, or Syria, and eat kebab at the same time? There is a dissonance there.

Hassan became vegetarian in 2007-8, and vegan a few years thereafter. “So no fish. Fish are friends, not food” he tells me, with a charming smile. I ask him whether he eats shellfish. “For me? No! Anything, any animal, anything [laughs] any animal that, that lives and wants to live, you know, as much as I want to live.” He does not eat those.

Michelle spoke in chapter four about her sense that the various major religions were in agreement about food values, but also about her doubts that Jewish tradition might be irreparably patriarchal and environmentally destructive. She is more financially secure than either Lauren or Hassan, but she shares their overall sense of pressure and frustration about the question of affordability. She voices the same rejection of the valuing work of those who refuse to respond
to the ethical call, and who are complicit in the obvious misvaluing going on in the market. She, like Lauren and others, tells me about the social backlash she experienced when she became more and more serious about the necessity of taking values into account with her food choices, and talking about them in her community: “a lot of people were really angry with me. It was emotionally really challenging. Because they thought I was being elitist, they thought I was being dictatorial, trying to dictate what they should and shouldn’t eat…” Michelle tells me a story I have heard over and over: food restrictions of any kind are socially divisive, but food needs that are in any way connected to values, rather than phrased as a matter of identity or medical need (I am vegetarian; I have a peanut allergy), are particularly likely to make even one’s friends irate.

Michelle’s experience also suggests why values-based food decisions might be experienced as particularly socially threatening. Unlike medical restrictions (I have a peanut allergy) and more so than identity-based restrictions (I am vegetarian), values-based food decisions seem to exceed the narrow boundaries of the personal. Values-based food decisions seem to aim beyond oneself, projecting themselves into shared space and making claims about what we owe one another and how we should live. This perceived imposition is often met, in these stories, with a particularly defensive posture.

Privately, Michelle evinces a certain bitterness about the way people in her life responded to her suggestion that it might be incumbent upon them to spend more by purchasing fair trade food in particular: “they didn’t wanna pay for fair trade stuff. They didn’t wanna pay the fair wages. That’s the reality. They didn’t… ‘we can get it cheaper here.’” When I put the elitism question to her, she tells me that she doesn’t buy it. “That’s an argument that’s been thrown
around about the food movement ever since it began. ‘That’s fine for you, rich Manhattanite, but what about poor people?’” Actually, she tells me,

it’s people in the local food movement who actually are doing the work [of] caring about hunger and poor people much more than those who are saying this is elitist, I can’t afford it… I can afford like 3 cell phones and 4 computers and 2 tvs at my house but I cannot afford to pay a living wage to the farmers who are growing my food. I can’t afford to pay for the Earth to stay whole, I can’t afford that.

Michelle articulates the same critique as does Fahim of Blossom Pure Organics, when he tells me “some people, they say, oh, it’s expensive. But the same people say it’s expensive, guess what? They live in a million-dollar house. And they drive maybe SUV. But when it comes to food, it’s expensive. Priority. It’s not their priority.” Fahim and Michelle do not deny the existence of people like the Muslimah who responded to Yassir Seyed’s presentation. Rather, they are targeting a much larger group. They think that most people can “afford” to pay a fair price for food and eat a reasonable amount of it, but that their priorities and desires are in the wrong place.

This is a judgment, and everyone knows it. Fahim tells me that people’s expectations of the cost (monetary value) of food are incorrect, although he is persistently gentle and forgiving about it: “they think [food] should cost less this good way, but it costs more. But they don’t understand yet.” He, in contradistinction to Hassan, thinks that knowledge about the harms that make food cheap will have an impact on how people value food and what they are willing to pay for it: “People do what they believe is right, what they believe is reasonable, and if they don’t feel there is a big issue with them doing certain things, they don’t bother, right?”; “I know price is always an issue. But if you know, you might make a different decision.” When Fahim spoke to
one halal certifying agency about his food, he tells me that the man at the agency “said, brother, you can’t make it so difficult. People need to eat.” Fahim replied,

> there is so much food, we throw away probably as much as we eat, I don’t say more than what we eat. Besides, who said we have to eat meat every day? Our motto [is] eat less, but eat quality. It’s not eat more. Because if you want quality and to consume a lot of it, yes, not everybody can afford it. But eat less, eat once or twice a week organic meat, or even sometimes three times a week, and you can afford it.

**What can we really afford?**

The question that is frequently asked by the most avid participants at my fieldsites is some version of the question “what can the world afford?” If vegetarian food costs more than meat instead of the other way around, or if heavily-packaged food costs less than whole foods, or if animal abuse and stolen land results in chicken tikka for $2.99 per pound, then the costs that accrue through harm are piling up somewhere else, only for now unseen. These are costs that people are increasingly worried about. Hence their talk about what one can really afford can be read as expressing to two intertwined critiques of their own: first, they are cognizant of the ways that the concept of affordability is plastic, in the pliable sense: that the consumer market is a space for trading on desire. Second, they are cognizant of the ways affordability is plastic in the brittle sense: there are material limits to the pliability of life, and if it is pushed and pulled too far it can break.

What “we” really cannot afford is to break each other, fellow creatures, the land, water, and air, the world at large. We cannot afford not to, in Michelle’s words, “keep the world whole.” The elitism critique misses the point of what people are up to in the food movement: for them, the rich and the poor are equally caught up in the same broken system of valuing, and
equally in need of a corrected system of valuing that will be geared to providing ongoing access to clean air, land, water, and food.

The question of whether the food movement offers a meaningful alternative to capitalist consumption remains to be answered. In brief, I contend that to the degree that it is theoretically possible to have a capitalism that articulates conservative and protectionist values, the issue of whether the food movement offers an alternative to capitalism is tangential. I remain more interested in the values articulated in consumption practices, and so return to the negotiations people make, across registers of value, in negotiating affordability and appropriateness in foodways.

What to want

Diseases of overconsumption always disproportionally afflicted the non-affluent. What is particular is that the polarity of the disproportion has recently flipped. For the first time in human history, there is what the World Health Organization has called the “double burden of malnutrition,” which the WHO defines as “the coexistence of undernutrition along with overweight, obesity, or diet-related noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).” Alongside the continuation of famine, hunger, and malnutrition, this is a particular and recent phenomenon. Low-income segments of the industrialized world specifically have unprecedented access to overabundant refined foods. This specific group, who might be described as industrialized poor,

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are plagued by dietary illnesses that previously affected a small number of people in a given society: the rich.

Talk about paying more for food and eating less of it must be read in this context. In particular, the construction “affordable” glosses a horizon of desire, in which people of diverse socioeconomic statuses adjudicate among competing appetites in their negotiations of exchange value, content value, and values. It also glosses the way that choice is not free or individual, but embedded in larger social formations that make possible and meaningful our desiring.

“Muslims can’t break away from the food system,” Farah tells me. “They’re subjected to it just as everybody is, where do you go. Unless you have an awareness, and then, on top of that you have the means to make alternative choices, really there’s nothing you can do about it.” Which is not to say that she thinks the initiative is hopeless: far from it. Rather, she is both pragmatic and sympathetic. She knows that food decisions are mostly a practical affair for many people, who already have enough on their proverbial plates:

You have to eat, and you will eat in a way that you can afford to eat. Whether it’s financial affordability or even just expediency, the supermarket closest to me, where I can get my food, where I can pick up my burger in a hurry because I have a lifestyle that’s too hectic, you don’t know. All these things.

Farah says of conventional food that “most people who consume it are too busy, just, I mean food is something you have to do, you have to eat it in order to survive. Work is what you do in order to be able to afford it, and somehow the two don’t mix.” But Farah is grateful to food activists for helping people to find out what they otherwise would not have the time and energy to discover themselves: that the food system is predicated on hidden harms. Farah sees that because of this work, people are gaining a “greater awareness of the harm that is being done
through all the processes that give us our food and give us our environment […] and I’m glad
that we have this idea of halal that we can attach, from an Islamic point of view.”

It is as if, for Farah, there is some benefit to be found in knowledge, and in being aware
of the harms of the food system, even if one is not especially financially empowered to make
substantially different choices or “break away from the food system.” Farah’s words hint that the
total value of knowing might exceed the visible market value of a consumer’s purchasing power.
Her words hint at the possibility that it might matter what food is and what food ought to be,
irrespective of an individual’s ability to pay. In a Graeberesque formulation, this would be
articulated as food’s content value and sociological value, apart from its monetary value. Among
the people with whom I spoke, these questions were often explored in languages of affordability
and appropriateness.

**Discerning Appropriateness**

“**I would tell you,**” says Noam, who is sitting at right angles to me across a table in a
study room at the department where we were both graduate students, “that since giving up fish,
I’ve only ever eaten fish once.” Noam was raised in a vegetarian home and identifies as “VFB”
or “vegetarian from birth.” I never hear him use words like vegan or pescetarian to describe
himself, although fish is important in the story of food in his family home. Food is deeply
important to the Sienna family generally, and to Noam personally. His choice to stop eating fish,
seven or eight years before our conversation this day, grew from a sustained “ongoing
conversation” in the Sienna household about what food is appropriate for them to eat.

Noam’s stories about when he stopped eating fish, and about the time he chose to eat fish
once, on a sabbath Saturday afternoon in Morocco, situate his decisions in an interpretive
horizon in which appropriateness is sensed in a process of feeling-knowing the right thing to do. Noam had been travelling, and on this particular weekend was in Marakesh. He had gone to synagogue that morning, and had been invited to join the rabbi and his wife at their home afterward. Noam is distanced from the event by time and memory, his body seated in relative repose for our interview thousands of miles away from where he ate this meal. Yet an enthusiastic desperation, a mixture of dismay, joy, and pride, emerges from him as he tells me:

[the rabbi’s] wife had cooked this entire meal for Shabbat lunch, the food, and he [the rabbi] brought out the main course: chicken, or fish. And I really felt, like culturally, I couldn’t say “neither.” I, there was just, not, it was like, he wanted to know whether I would eat the chicken, and I said, “I actually don't eat chicken” and he said well, will you eat our fish. And I just, I felt, at that moment, like, the answer was yes. So I said yes! So he brought it, and he gave me the head, which is a big honour, you know, in Moroccan Jewish culture.

Almost as if to prove something, to both of us, Noam runs through a long list of reasons why fish is meaningful in Judaism. He tells me that the head of a fish, which is cooked and served whole in the spicy, saucy Moroccan Jewish hraime Noam is describing, is a particular honour for a guest to receive. He invokes the many meanings of fish in Jewish tradition, from fish-eating and symbolism, to Midrashic interpretations and scriptural passages, to the meaning of fish in gematria, Jewish numerology. Then, with widening eyes and emphatic gestures, Noam re-presences for both of us the excitement and reluctance, the hesitation and certainty, that collapse into the moment of ethical and social intimacy:

To make a long story short, you know, fish is a, a thing, eating fish heads especially. So I was like, you know what? I’m here, in Morocco, at this guy’s house, this guy’s giving me this fish… I’m gonna eat it! Like, it just, there’s no, there’s like, no… [inhales] Like, in terms of ethics, right, what’s the ethical choice in this moment… is to eat this fish. So I ate it!

I ask him how it was. Like people often do, when they tell me about these deeply meaningful and somewhat transgressive food experiences and their most disgusting or
pleasureable aspects, Noam gives me an account of that is full of breath, gesture, and sounds that are not words. “Yeah, it was… it was delicious. [Exhales.] It was really very delicious, spicy tomato sauce… uch, it was so good.” Did you eat the eyes? I ask. “I think I did, actually. I think I did eat the eyes. And the cheeks, you eat the cheeks. They’re very good, very fatty. […] visually what I remember is a long oval plate, [gestures] like this, it was baked in […]. A whole fish, or maybe half a fish [lengthwise], but with the head.” He tells me about the flesh of the fish body, and that the dish is “actually a traditional Jewish North African […] especially Libyan, dish, to cook a fish in a spicy tomato sauce […] called hraime […].”

Noam’s decision to eat the fish is framed as a choice, and simultaneously, as no choice at all. He points up the symbolic value of the fish, situating it as a “traditional Jewish North African” dish and contextualizing it as a gift and an honour from a venerable rabbi and rabbanit or rabbi’s wife, the hosts to whom he is a guest. Noam identifies a sense of deep propriety when he says that he “really felt, like culturally” he could not deny his host’s offer of protein-based hospitality. Although he declines the offer of chicken, he stops short of the identification I am vegetarian, instead stating his answer in terms of what he does: “I don’t eat chicken.” In the words Noam uses to tell the story, the rabbi asks in reply, not do you eat fish, but “will you eat our fish.” This is commensality talk. Eating together is sharing food, not just eating in the same place. Like Noam’s repeated use of “this fish” rather than “a fish,” this language emphasizes the feeling of immediacy, intimacy, and particularity that characterizes his experience and explains his act.  

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Noam tells me that the dish was outstandingly delicious. The deliciosity is neither fearful nor irresistible: he tells me about other occasions when he desired fish, such as when he worked at a crepe restaurant in which smoked salmon crepes were prepared. He tells me how delicious they were, and how much he wanted to eat them. But he refrained from doing so. A sense of Jewish values is what made fish-eating appropriate in one context, but not another: rather than obliging Noam to undergo an ordeal or to endure unpleasantness for ethical reasons, the Jewish values compelled him to share in a pleasurable experience to which he would not otherwise have access.

Deliciousness and disgust are important for understanding how people understand the food valuing they engage in. When particular foods are affordable or appropriate is often in some kind of relationship to, and sometimes even depends on, the manifestation of that food as delicious or disgusting. Noam’s example can offer few more instances of this negotiation. For example, Noam explains his sense that kosher has gone a bit awry, thus:

The word “kasher” means appropriate or fit, i.e. to eat. So you say ok, this asparagus, which was flown in from Argentina in the middle of February, is that really appropriate for me to eat? Are these tomatoes, which were picked by migrant workers who have their passports withheld and are not paid fair wages, on a huge factory farm breathing in pesticides that are now also on my food, is that really appropriate for me to be eating?

He mixes senses in which the food is inappropriate, invoking seasonality, geography, ethnonationalism, human rights and well-being, industrialization, and the sense of disgust and threat of harm from pesticides resting invisibly on one’s own food. Building from this juxtaposition that suggests that these terms are relevant to kashrut in appropriateness, Noam makes the next move in his logical progression:
Versus this delicious loaf of bread, which was hand-kneaded from organic flour and baked by this artisanal baker at the farmer’s market, without a kashrut certification, you say “oh, that’s not kosher, that is not appropriate for you to be eating”…? But this tomato, oh, that’s really approp… you know?

Whereas in other cases asparagus and tomatoes might be valorized as delicious, here their aesthetic content has nothing whatever to do with Noam’s description of them. If anything, they are rendered nebulously icky by association with injustice and the whiff of pesticide. Artisanal bread, however, is explicitly described as delicious, and personal, without “kashrut certification” but implicitly good and kosher in essence. Having made a persuasive argument about what kosher really means, and why he sees conventional understandings of conventional kashrut as having missed the point, he pushes on into desire and disgust in a way that is even more evidently somatic.

There’s a certain, alienation from the origin of kashrut as a system, to what it means today, when you say, like, this cellophane-wrapped, we say in Yiddish, “khaloshes.” I don’t know what it actually literally means, it just means what it sounds like, like “uuch!” This khaloshes, cellophane-wrapped, pie [flexes the corners of his mouth downward], with chemicals and corn starch and corn syrup and all of this, that’s kosher. And this, really nice [bread]… that’s non-kosher? There’s some, really, there’s some alienated, there’s some divorce, distance that has happened between what the term [kosher] is supposed to mean and what it actually means.

Noam, pronouncing khaloshes with the guttural first syllable and emphasizing the “ew-” sounding second syllable, uses a Jewish expression of disgust to characterize an ostensibly kosher alternative to “really nice” bread. Corn syrup, corn starch, cellophane, and “chemicals”

261 Nauseating, disgusting.
are presented not as triumphs of industry or the materials from which real food is made, or from which all matter is made, but rather as things that are gross and un-natural.

It is worth remaining close to this point, because it is a particular example of what is a constant feature of human food regulation, and possibly of the food regulation of all omnivores. That feature is the construction of disgust. Disgust is one of the techniques by which omnivores can prevent the eating of something particular. Noam, like everyone, has a superficially reasonable narrative for what he thinks is nice food and gross food.

look, I may not be able to bake this amazing piece of bread, but I can look at a loaf of bread, and I can think, ok, I understand the flour, and there’s yeast, and water, and maybe some eggs, and you knead it, and you let it rise, and you bake it, I understand how it works. I understand. Most foods, that I consider to be foods, I could make them if I wanted to or if I had some training or specialized equipment, or… but I don't need, you know, chemicals and, drops and things and, formula and things that I don't know what’s in them.

Here, the whole food story is supplanted by a story of knowing. It is not necessary to instantly apprehend a food, like a tomato, as food; elaborate mixtures like bread can be explained and understood, and one can make them oneself if one wanted to. The suggestion is that chemicals and drops are different from ingredients, and formulae are different from recipes.

When I challenge this understanding, Noam offers an improvement on popular food writer Michael Pollan’s canon for food, that one shouldn’t eat something one’s grandmother would not recognize:

262 Farb and Armelagos, Consuming Passions.

I mean, my philosophy is if somebody’s grandmother wouldn’t recognize it. There’s a lot of food that my grandmother wouldn’t recognize, that I would consider to be food. But if a hundred years ago you couldn’t explain to somebody what it was made of? Right? Like, look, there were a lot of things they didn’t get a hundred years ago. But I could explain, this part is made of cheese, and this part is made out of bread, and this part… Explain a gummi bear to somebody a hundred years ago. You’d say, “Well, it’s, it’s, sweet… it’s, I think it’s made out of sugar, but it’s not… but it’s like melted, the sugar’s melt… I don’t even know! It’s gummy, it’s sort of chewy, but it’s, sort of gluey, it’s sort of like a glue that’s holding [it together].” It starts to become ridiculous. You’re like, well what is this made out of? Like… is that really kasher, is that really appropriate for you to be eating? Probably not.

It doesn’t matter that a hundred years ago was merely 1913, that gummi candies were invented in 1920, that boiling sugar makes it gluey, and that sugar cane was domesticated by humans long before the Torah was codified. It doesn’t matter that following this rule means that the next generation’s grandparents will quite readily recognize Jell-O and Spam, or that the following generation’s grandparents will recognize caffeine inhalers. The sense is that some foods are known, and others are not, and some foods are knowable and others are not. The story of food desire and food disgust, here and throughout this study, is in large part a story about trust. Grandmothers, it is often suggested, are less sophisticated and more trustworthy than food scientists (scientific grandmothers, un-benevolent matriarchs, and meticulous pastry chefs notwithstanding). The point is that the fear of strangeness and the pleasure of familiarity are as easy to narrate as the fear of familiarity and the pleasure of strangeness.

But what good is knowability, and what has it to do with discerning appropriateness? For Noam, kashrut and many other Jewish food rules are fundamentally linked to knowing what and when one eats. He reminds me of the rules for berachot, blessings, and how “[t]he whole system of blessings [over food is] tied up with where and what the food came from and what it is. Tree
vegetable, ground vegetable. […] If you don’t know what it’s made of, you can’t eat it, because you don’t know what blessing to say over it.” He adds, “There’s a miscellaneous blessing, and you can say it over gummi bears, but frankly, I think you shouldn’t.”

This is not to say that Noam builds his narrativizations on pre-existing senses of disgust or desire. He and others knowingly cultivate their somatic orientations, even as they also use them as guides for right behaviour. For example, Noam tells me about his purchasing practices that “I don’t keep with organic. Organic didn’t feel different to me. Farmer’s markers feel different to me. The experience is more what meant something.” Noam leverages his own valuing apparatus, encouraging himself to make consumption decisions that differ from the ones he would otherwise make, according to the value structure of the conventional food system.

Noam admits to being “price-conscious” in stores, and less so at farmer’s markets. Therefore he makes choices about where he buys what, to achieve particular effects. For example, he tells me “I love cheese enough that I’ll love it from supermarket or market. Butternut squash, I want to love that by getting it at farmer’s market” and thereby valuing it, desiring it, and making it more meaningful, while using his money to support farmers who grow food here. He describes himself as “mixing and matching” in order to have food that “is really good and delicious. Financially and emotionally.”

**Pleasures and Pains**

This working on one’s own apparatus of desire is common. Everywhere when people perceive and trade in value, they are doing the cultural work of valuing. Grayson and Nawal, a Texan-Ethiopian couple who frequent Noor with their two small children, also use food to work on their apparatus of desire. In addition to their warm hospitality and propensity for showing
love and affection through sharing food, one particular food-related decision of theirs is especially relevant to the role of bodily experience as mediator of ethical food choice. That decision was summed up to me this way by Grayson, over tea one afternoon: “Fine, we’ll eat meat, but we’re going to buy the expensive, organic meat, or we’re gonna buy the zabiha meat. We’re going to make it hurt to buy meat, if we’re going to do that.”

Grayson is of the view that halal slaughter, properly performed, is the most compassionate and least painful way to kill an animal. When Grayson says “we’re going to make it hurt to buy meat,” he is using somatic language to talk about value. Grayson and Nawal have a dependable family income and are not in poverty. They choose to make themselves pay (more than is necessary) in order to eat meat. This expenditure is likened to physical pain. Whereas the food system they inhabit offers ways for meat-eating to be easy and painless, and even to occlude the death and even suffering of the animal from which meat is made, Grayson suggests that he and Nawal find ethical value in using monetary value to make meat hurt them.

A few things are important here. Grayson does not speak here of ensuring that the extra money they pay goes to the right place. He doesn’t speak of the joy of paying extra money as a way to alleviate worker suffering. There is a suggestion that zabiha meat and organic meat are both less harmful, to animals and to the world at large. But the sentiment he expresses most directly is that he and Nawal ideally would not eat meat, and if they do, that they mitigate this act by buying “expensive” meat. Somatic language helps him speak about participating in value, paying an appropriate price for participating in the pleasure, joy, and nourishment of meat-eating. They deploy the discomfort of paying to work on themselves, to buy meat less frequently or casually than they otherwise might, and to value it more highly. The language is sacrificial, suggesting some kind of shared accounting of life, death, pain, pleasure, and consumption.
Fahim speaks similarly when I ask him about his own home and family. While Grayson, Nawal, and their young son and daughter are all slender, Fahim is a robust and barrel-built man. He tells me that he does not eat as much meat as he used to: now, he and his wife and five children eat meat perhaps three or four times per week. He tells me that they used to prepare two chickens for a meal, but now they cook only one halal organic chicken, and often do not finish it. Fahim “testifies” that clean organic food makes one “feel fuller faster,” and he also observes that he and his wife prepare more vegetables than they used to, and cook those vegetables less, and they generally also have rice. Fahim explains that with this new approach to the value of food, they do not waste “even one [grain of] rice.” He tells me that “you make sure you eat all the pieces, you don’t leave, like, on the drumsticks, half of the drumstick [and] just throw it out. Cause you don’t care, you have so many of them.” He connects the problem of overabundant cheap food with food waste, with the act of throwing out a half-eaten drumstick. His point is that when there are “so many” drumsticks, people eat too much and then treat what is left as waste. He thinks that when chicken is properly valued, which for him means treated well when alive, killed appropriately, and sold after slaughter to be available but not overabundant and affordable but not cheap, people will be less likely to view leftover portions as disposable and will be more careful about food waste.

Fahim describes this way of eating as one he learned in Canada, and distinguishes it from the approach to food and cooking in Syria. He says this way leaves him feeling more “satisfied:” “Certain cultures including mine, when we cook things, we cook until there is nothing left! […] since I came to Canada, I learned how to eat more, maybe stir-[fried] vegetables, raw vegetables.” He tells me with surprising poetry and enthusiasm about the joyful pleasures of eating crunchy green beans:
Like beans, I never imagined in my life eating green beans. I love it. When I start eating it, I cannot stop. *So tasty.* But they way we cooked it back home, you cook it until when we eat it, it’s mushy. You don’t even feel any crunch. Then, there is no more nutrient left. No enzymes. Just like, you’re filling your stomach. And that’s what I keep repeating to people. You need to think…

Like Noam, Fahim connects certain forms of pleasure with right action, and right valuing. For him, certain worldly signs indicate what is appropriate to do, and those signs are available for people to discern, by knowing and thinking and feeling.

Mike feels appropriateness in a similar way. He too speaks lustily about eating fish, but refuses to do it, grounding his refusal in the experience of pain and sorrow at resource abuse and animal suffering. “If you ever go to a dairy farm, it would just break your heart, because it’s insane. The way that their udders and teats looks, and the infections.” Mike tells me about his friend, a “milk delivery truck guy in Manitoba.”

He basically goes around to the farms and picks up their milk and […] because he has such a large truck to fill up, all the milk just gets mixed in. And […] milk from an infected farm, […] has a bit of a pink colour [but nobody cares because it all gets mixed together so you can’t tell.] And his awareness kinda grew and he started turning down farms where the milk was clearly pink with blood and puss […] I’m not talking about a quart of milk, I’m talking about vats of milk that are *coloured*, because there’s blood in them. Well he started refusing it, and if you start refusing it, you know what happens? Someone else comes to pick it up.

This kind of knowledge has a big impact on Mike and Laurenn, “our view of what we would bring into our house, what we would consider to be appropriate” in food. This kind of awareness-building is what connects Mike to Shoresh, and why he’s working along with them to get organic kosher meat in Toronto, even though he himself is vegan.

I won’t eat it. It could be made in my back yard and I won’t eat it. […] to be honest with you… I would eat animals if everyone ate animals the way I did. But because there’s overconsumption of animal products, I
don’t think it’s fair to the world, or to the animals, to do it. And so I just have to draw that line. But I would love to. I love, fish is fantastic. But whatever.

He knows where to get wild fish from a reasonably clean nearby lake. The problem is not how to lay hands on ethically acceptable fish:

I think that our water systems are [mouths the word “fucked”] … screwed. They’ve been demolished. Like 90% of international fisheries have collapsed. So it’s just not the right time. It would be like if God forbid I’m sick and dying, I’m not going to go for a run. It’s not the right time.

It can be “not the right time” to do a thing which would otherwise be right, and while eating fish would be wonderful for Mike, eating fish right now feels wrong. For Noam, eating fish in a different moment felt right. For Hassan, who desires chicken tikka, eating chicken tikka feels good, but refusing that appetite in favour of compassion feels better. Michelle will say she is vegetarian rather than eat factory-farmed meat, and will add a ham-bone to enrich a homemade pea soup, or enjoy the occasional nice bit of prosciutto, which she pronounces perfectly. For Bea, eating with integrity means that organic non-kosher meat can be a real treat.

“It was a real treat. I didn’t feel great afterwards.”

The night before our interview, Bea, a long-time member of Shoresh and an important voice there, had gone out with a friend who identifies as kosher. They hadn’t planned to eat while they were out, but they passed a place that was not Jewish, and ended up eating non-kosher burgers together. Bea tells me “we just wanted these burgers. We didn’t get cheese on them, but still.” When she reflects on this episode, she explains that this was an Italian place, where the chef-owner was using his father’s burger recipe to feed his customers, and that he used only “good quality Ontario meat” to make the burgers. Bea tells me of the experience “I wouldn’t eat
a burger like that every day. It was a real treat. [...] I didn’t feel great afterwards, though. I felt more tired this morning, and it’s really heavy. It was very satisfying, but it was very heavy.”

Cheeseburgers are a visibly unkosher combination of meat and milk, whereas non-kosher beef burgers are visually indistinguishable from kosher beef burgers. Bea, however, does not appeal to either the rabbinic or the biblical law. Instead, she explains her choice in the context of her flexitarianism: “I’m pretty flexitarian. I have a food ideal, which is vegetarian, organic, local, and like, eating meat on Shabbat, that’s organic and kosher, but I’m definitely not there.” Instead, Bea is at a point where she prioritizes a sense of “integrity” in her flexitarian food choices.

Bea’s flexitarian integrity practice involves a mixture of beauty and affordability. Bea normally makes her own sauerkraut, but on this day purchased some at Honest Ed’s instead. She explained to me that the jar was beautiful, that it and the sauerkraut were both from Poland, and that the price for the item was low. For her, appreciating these elements and feeling kinship with the jar and its contents, as well as the Toronto landmark store made famous by Ed Mirvish, all formed her experience of her decision, to buy the sauerkraut this time, as one that had integrity.

When I ask Bea whether her flexitarianism is Jewish, she describes it as having both “secular” and “Jewish” reasons. Her secular reasons are the sense that she is “voting with my dollar” and connecting with her father, who raised her with the values she uses to make her food choices. Finally, she says her food choices are an artifact of “not wanting to poison the planet or myself,” and of a desire to “support local agriculture.” The elements she considers to be explicitly “Jewish” are “a commitment to repairing the world” and “some form of kosher.”
When I ask for more, she tells me she is reaching for “some form of conscious eating, that’s aligned with ethics and responsibility.” Is that what kosher is? I ask. “Broadly, yeah. Kosher can mean clean or fit, right? So clean food is like, usually not like, conventional grapes or [whatever].” I ask her about what she would choose, among organic, kosher, halal, and conventional, and she picks organic first. She wishes she knew more about halal regulation, and tells me that she would probably pick kosher over halal, but not by much, and she voices discomfort about it:

[for me] It’s probably not very far below kosher at all. In fact, it might be like, almost on par, like just underneath, and that’s just out of like, loyalties. I don’t even know where, like, I don’t know why I’m having this, like, uncomfortable, like I feel bad that I’m even saying that. ‘Cause I don’t know why. I don’t know what the difference really is to me. I just think it’s about maybe loyalty. I think it’s a great question because I’ve never thought about it, and I don’t know why it really matters, because really both of them have intention behind, behind them. So. It’s like a little bit of consciousness, that like, we’re killing an animal here. It’s kinda gross, any way you look at it.

On the other side of discomfort, there is some practical hope: Bea knows Muslims will often eat kosher meat, and she’s interested and curious about whether, since the Jewish community keeps hitting “brick walls” and can’t get organic kosher meat, there’s any way the two communities can work together to find a way forward. She thinks that food is “a point of, not reconciliation but, a point of connection that isn’t politically charged,” between Islam and Judaism. After having worked in a soup kitchen serving lunches in a collaborative food justice initiative between the Narayever Synagogue and Muslims Against Hunger, Bea continues to be interested in “talking about our similarities or our differences but just about the shared value of feeding people who are in need.” She thinks food can offer a “simple practice of doing a little bit of healing. I think there’s huge value in that. I think it’s also about, like, coming to the table with
your cousins. Even if there’s some family politics, it’s like, *let’s talk*. We actually have some stuff in common.”

**Conclusion: Discerning and desiring affordable, appropriate food**

Many participants problematized excessively capitalistic and individualistic interpretations of “affordability” and excessively religious or legalistic interpretations of “appropriateness.” At Noor and Shoresh, a number of voices suggested that affordability needed to be rethought in terms of a religiously- and affectively-inflected notion of collective responsibility and obligation. Similarly, for them appropriateness needed to be rethought in inclusive and flexible terms.

Lauren tells me “it sucks” to have to struggle to eat well, that she can’t live according to all her values but she “ha[s] to go on living.” Grayson and Nawal decide that the right thing to do is to “make it hurt” to eat meat. Michelle angrily tells me she’s been so “turned off” by untrustworthy food practices that she has “lost faith” in the kashrut certification system, as has Mike. Michelle “need[s] a way to live” in a pluralist world. Hassan wants to eat animals, but sees that they want to live as much as he wants to live. Fahim is sure God never wanted harm to happen, and that abuse acts as a curse or contagion that can poison. The disgust and desire that they show is a deeply ethical re-reading of consumptive appetite. Disgust and desire work in acts of discernment by which people negotiate between their concerns and the facts of their lives.

The pleasures and struggles they articulate are, I argue, a part of their own process of discovering and inculcating ethical dispositions, as they work on their own apparatus of desire and their own determinations of valuing. People I worked with ride a slippage between value and values, as a technique of making choices. Most of the people I spoke with described their
frustrations and desires about appropriate and affordable food. What I have called discernment is their art of figuring out value when the authorities, be they market or religious authorities, seemingly can’t be trusted. By discernment here I mean something distinct from its other meanings, for example, in a Protestant context of discerning God’s will. The discernment I identify involves both working from and working on one’s experiences of disgust and desire, turning the negotiation of value(s) into a practical ethics of valuing.

The debate about whether organic and low-tech farming practices can “feed the world” is ongoing. Still, the fundamental claim of the food movement is and has been that food should cost more and people should eat less of it. This claim is threatening to a capitalist consumer perspective in which the goal is to drive prices as low as markets will bear, and which relies on the plasticity of the human appetite in order to succeed. Consumption-based models value desire, where desire is figured as a hunger that drives its subjects to consume. Attending to the “culture mystified in the capitalism,” rather than naturalizing the latter’s logic, has allowed me to theorize desire differently, as a means of cultivating ones dispositions.

In his work on value, Graeber aspired to help make sense of “how meaning […] turns into desire.” Perhaps, though, discernment and desire are not discrete activities: the activity of apprehending meaning also manufactures it, and desire both results from this act of meaning-making and also informs it. People at Noor and Shoresh cultivate and use disgust and desire in their process of valuing. In their longing for a different food system, it is possible to discern the complex of values at work in diffuse acts of valuing. Resisting a market worldview that imagines

people into consumers, people cultivate a desire to eat differently and live differently, by seeking or even creating food systems in which they want to take part, and by evading or resisting other food systems in which they want not to take part. Irrespective of whether such seeking is figured as an act of resistance against capitalist valuation, or as situated within it, people at Shoresh and Noor manage to enact valuing in their everyday lives, and religious foodways are where this work happens.
Conclusions

In Toronto, Canada, in the early twenty-first century, Jews and Muslims at and around Shoresh and Noor began to develop “eating Jewishly” and eating in an “Islamic paradigm” as ways of speaking back to harms they perceive in the conventional food system, and in the industrialized and industrializing religious food certification systems that seemed separate from that conventional food system, but in many ways are very much a part of it.

The issues they seek to address are wide-ranging: animal, and workers’ rights, environmental and human justice; commercialization, resource depletion, and health crises; familial and relational table fellowship, culinary trends and cultural tradition; cleanness, purity, and protection from contamination; a sense of sacredness, connectedness, and real value. This tangle of ideas and concerns has proved increasingly common in the Canadian public sphere, and the voices speaking to them increasingly diverse, across gender and sexual orientation, age and ethnicity, and religious identity. It is of crucial import, then, to understand the ways that religion, food, economy, and morality intersect in stories like these.

The community at Shoresh cultivates “eating Jewishly” in order to bring together a set of diverse eating practices under a singular rubric. As a means of authenticating eating practices as Jewish, it must operate within particular constraints. In enlarging the scope of Jewish eating practices from kashrut observance to “eating Jewishly,” Shoresh must describe plausible boundaries of what is Jewish. By claiming the very struggle of determining what is fit to eat as a Jewish struggle, Shoresh makes space for a diversity of practices to be authorized into the body of Jewish tradition and practice.
In ways similar and in other ways different, the “Islamic paradigm” is constructed along the lines of a sense of justice based in the perception of a created world. The locavore’s politics sometimes stand at odds with tastes of home and with tastes of the other. My Muslim interlocutors face a different struggle than their Jewish counterparts in particular ways, with a less-codified history of food regulation that is rapidly changing, and with the current climate of radical Islamophobia. Beneath the popular slogan “think globally, act locally,” do we find only globalized markets and localized ethics, the same old story of human xenophobic tendencies, and the institutionalization of orthodoxy following upon another and another orthodoxy?

One way to understand these configurations is to attend to the anthropological weight of meaning-making in relation to the cultivation of dispositions. My interlocutors are bound up in tense and flexible networks of judgment because so much of religious practice is food-based, and so much of food is cultural. Leaving meat behind in favour of vegetarianism or veganism may be an ethical practice for some, and leaving gluten behind may be a health choice for others, but both acts may also entail leaving behind commensal tables where families come together over ritual or traditional dishes, losing touch with the taste of one’s family or of one’s understanding of home. The assertion that tradition is produced by people doing things is at once a pleonasm, and a dramatic claim. This tension suffuses the problem of authorization in religion: religious traditions, insofar as they can be said to exist, must be made and remade, in opposition and alignment with both known and unknown trajectories of what came before, or in this case made and remade in opposition and alignment with traditional foods, rules and laws, and practices and experiences about eating.

It is in no sense finally established that Muslim and Jewish food laws are ethical in origin. How and why, then, are they investigated as a point of contact with ethics and the food
movement in the current moment? Whereas some scholars have argued that religious ethics prop up politicoeconomic orders, revealing religiosity or fellow-feeling as internal to markets rather than external to them, the object of my interest here has been lower and broader. Human acts of valuing often bump against each other, and people reach around for alternative value systems through which to see different meanings. It is possible to ask whether particular people oppose or comply with capitalist or consumptive forces at given moments, or whether Shoresh, Noor, or “religions” can furnish subjects with tools with which to enact large-scale political resistance. I think, however, that these questions are best approached first through an account of on-the-ground acts of meaning-making.

In early twenty-first century Canada, food is a site where consumer ethics and religious diversity intersect. Noor and Shoresh are intentionally non-sectarian religious communities that invite pan-Jewish or pan-Muslim participation, have norms viewed as progressive by the wider religious community, and run considerable food-related programming that actively connects religion with alternative foodways. Both advocate for more “conscious” food practices, including local, organic, sustainable, humane, and social-justice-oriented food choices. They develop religious foodways that are, on the one hand, fundamentally connected to traditional religious food law, and on the other hand, significant departures from typical understandings of kashrut and halal.

The aim of this comparative project was to show how religious communities do the work of constructing religion through material practices at once economic and symbolic. Drawing on

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anthropological fieldwork conducted with Noor and Shoresh from 2012 to 2015, I showed how both organizations develop their religious foodways: as ethical interventions, as means of invigorating community, and as means for resisting industrialized orthodoxies. People at Noor and Shoresh bring religious life to bear on public lives, tying together social justice, environmentalism, and eating in a practice for recalibrating market values. Constructing religion as a domain of practical ethics, participants at Noor and Shoresh draw on religion for resources to develop emergent religious foodways that cut across and re-inscribe boundaries between insider and outsider, moral value and market value, and even Muslim and Jew.

Noor and Shoresh both tend to overlook the benefits of the industrial food system, i.e. pervasive access to relatively inexpensive high-calorie and nutrient-rich food and particularly meat. They focus on its harms, and manifest a desire to reanimate or reimagine past and tradition as a technique for addressing these harms. In effect, they use religion-as-tradition to imagine a religion-as-ethical correction to the food system.

According to this framing, industrial religious food regulation can appear to be a less-authentic innovation of recent history, instead of an authoritative and authorizing discourse: in some cases this has led to people questioning the orthodoxy of orthodoxy. At the same time, eco-kashrut, eco-halal, eating Jewishly, and eating in an Islamic paradigm appear as the authentic and from-the-ground-up application of tradition to contemporary challenges. Economic and environmental concerns are key for participants in the religious food movement in Toronto; in another and perhaps bigger way, this movement, in this place and time, is fundamentally about the troubling of contemporary industrial orthodoxies in North America, and predicated on an emergent, persuasive possibility of mediating food-system harms, using a specifically ethically-valenced interpretation of Jewishness and Muslimness. Furthermore, it also evinces an ethically-
valenced use of the category “religion,” a term which many at Noor and Shoresh deploy when they explain with whom they share values.

Noor and Shoresh programmers and participants use food as a mode of religious engagement within their respective organizations specifically, and in connection with the larger community. The foodways that emerge in this milieu are “eating Jewishly,” in relation to kashrut, and an “Islamic paradigm” for eating, in relation to halal. I show what these interventions entail, how they are they alike, and how are they constituted over against traditional understandings of kashrut and halal, and over against the conventional food system in Canada and North America.

Further, I point out that the critique of the food movement as elitist risks misconstruing food movement participants, occluding the way that the conventional food system is elitist, and further mystifying the relationship between the price of an object and the means by which its various costs and values are made real. I gave examples of what a more nuanced picture of these negotiations could look like, by tracing participants’ own approaches to both “appropriate” and “affordable” food. “Affordability,” in particular, was revealed to be fairly deeply plastic. It is a discourse of fixity that overlays the complex social work of desire.

A Local Pairing

The central question of this dissertation is how and why food currently emerges as a major object of attention for religious communities, and how to understand the project of religious foodways in the contemporary context. The mode of the study is comparative, with the aim that an anthropological treatment of two roughly parallel organizations would yield insight into the cultural work of foodways and of religion, as well as into the groups themselves.
After surveying halal and kashrut in religious law and then historicizing them as discursive formations, I introduced Noor and Shoresh as organizations that navigate halal and kashrut alongside other forces in a religious and marketized milieu. I offered institutional histories and foregrounded main institutional figures including Samira, Khadijah, and Azeezah, and Risa, Andrea, and Alexandra and Sabrina. Other participants emerged, including Rabeya, Poppy, Grayson and Nawal, Mamoom, Farah, Ahmad and Hassan, on one hand, and Lauren, Noam, Mike and Laurenn, Michelle, and Avi on the other. Organizations related to Noor and Shoresh included Reh’ma Community Services, with Shirin Mandani at the helm; Judy Perley at the Free Times Café; and Fahim Alwan of Blossom Pure Organics. Sites included Noor’s transformation of a Japanese-Canadian Cultural Centre with the help of Raymond Moriyama, as well as the Kavanah Garden, and Bela Farm, a 114-acre property in Hillsburgh which is the largest Jewish farm in North America. Too, partnerships with Hazon, United Way, the International Development and Relief Fund, farms including Everdale farm and The Cutting Veg farm, Khaleafah, and Greening Sacred Spaces, show how both Noor and Shoresh’s pursuit of food programming allows them to both engage and transcend the local.

In the introduction I frame my project as a comparative one, and in this framing I push theory of comparison in religious studies from a textual-historical mode toward a more ethnographic mode. Chapters one and two use Talal Asad’s attention to authorization and Katherine Bullock’s theorization of Muslim politics to explore the practice of religion at Shoresh and Noor. In chapter three, I draw on Judith Butler to reflect on the construction of identity in the world of my research, in food access and in culinary culture. In chapter four, I address the construction of religious food practice as ethical. Nearly everyone I met at Noor and Shoresh assumed that halal and kosher food are ethical in the sense of being ethically *good*; this sense
also appears in academic and popular literature. In a pluralist context (as treated by Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen) I explore the ways my interlocutors present religious food practice as ethical, linking with anthropology’s ethical turn via Michael Lambe, Saba Mahmood, and Amira Mittermaier. In chapter five, I draw on ideas of culture and capitalism from Marshall Sahlins and David Miller, and David Graeb’s theorization of value, to help me show how such ethical, feeling subjects slide between three senses of value as they make their critiques of the market and of authoritative religion.

By studying lived religious foodways, and in particular by historicizing halal and kashrut as discursive achievements, I argue for the expansion of scholarly analyses toward foodways more generally. I show how kashrut and halal are (re)interpreted and deployed within and alongside eating Jewishly and eating in an Islamic paradigm; what food acts and food stories have to do with being Jewish or Muslim; and what value and values have to do with the formation of religious food as ethically good.

**Industrialized Orthodoxy**

Looking forward, can contemporary industrial kashrut and emergent industrial halal exist inside eating Jewishly and eating in an Islamic paradigm, with points of tension thrumming but intact? Can eating Jewishly contain kashrut’s set-apart-ness without losing itself there and coming apart at the seams of its meaning? And what of halal and the Islamic paradigm? Will the moderate practice of halal be facilitated by the industrialization of halal, or give way to a trajectory of increasing stricture?

As happened with the industrial tightening of kashrut, especially toward glatt standards for meat in particular, the industrialization of halal seems likely to narratively manage
possibilities and solidify boundaries. Religious slaughter laws and industrial kashrut both smoothed the path along which halal certification now skims with increasing weight and increasing speed. Does the historical particularity of the “global assemblage” of halal, in the moment of the greening of Islam, offer any new toehold on which particular Jewish foodways might similarly gain purchase? Anecdotally, the experiences of people like Rabeya in chapter two suggest that industrialization of halal is already facilitating more strident halal observance in the older generation of Muslims in Toronto. This seems to be, as Asad argued, the function of orthodoxy: to establish the canonical narrative by which right practice is measured. In what is styled as the secular space of global industrial food, authorities of national, corporate, and religious stripe are already jockeying for position in the rapidly-expanding market, and, purposefully or inadvertently, making rules that reflect in people’s foodways on the ground.266

What does industrialization hold for women in particular? Food is often thought of as women’s work, and as food is taken more seriously, women’s power over it may seem to recede. In one view, therefore, as industrialization consolidates possibilities into regulation, flexibility recedes, and so does women’s decision-making power. On the other hand, if industrialization decouples women from women’s work, it may offer new kinds of constraint and new kinds of freedom. When particular flexibilities go away, others can come about. Women find ways to speak back, and although Noor and Shoresh are mutually open to multigendered participation, they are comparatively clear examples of women’s food work and religious leadership.

266 As with Riaz and Chaudury, through Ong and Collier and Bergeaud-Blackler et al., in the introduction.
From Orthodoxa to Orthopraxis to Orthophagy… and back

If we paid as much attention to the rituals of cooking and eating as we do to the rituals of speaking and reading, we might find a way to integrate the intellectual and embodied dimensions of [...] religious lives.\(^{267}\)

At stake, for those whose religious selves are a source of social power in a field of forces governed partly by the doctrine of pluralism, are several large and abstract questions about Judaism and Islam, kashrut and halal, and what is meaningful and valuable. Also too, a set of smaller daily contingencies make up the field of how religion is lived. The orthodoxies here rewritten, resisted, or fulfilled also arose to mitigate harms and respond to a perceived need. While in continuity with historical forms, Orthodox Judaism is a relatively recent phenomenon; a response to Reform Judaism, the hope of enlightenment, and the threat of assimilation. Similar continuity, response, and debate happen in Islam, about reform or revival, and in the most recent iteration, about the capacity of an Islamic tradition to withstand, protect against, or assimilate to neoliberalism. Resistances are again resisted, and all the while, people live their lives.

I focus my analysis on the social valences of the food practices and ideas I encountered, in order to better understand the uses to which food is put. Much of the social valence of food I found was connected with ethics. In the end, I have suggested that here ethics do not necessarily compete with desires and appetites, so much as they present further somatic options for manifesting desire. One thread of contention here is therefore the way things like desire and ethics are to be understood as embodied experience. I take this thread to run through the heart of the question of religion in contemporary religious studies and the anthropological study of contemporary lived, embodied religion. Meals matter, and meaning-making is never finished.

\(^{267}\) Klassen, “What’s Bre(a)d in the Bone: The Bodily Heritage of Mennonite Women.”


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