Article:

Community cookbooks: a new lens on postwar South African Jewish culture

Gavin Beinart-Smollan¹,*


Published: 12 January 2024

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal’s standard double blind peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright:

© 2023, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2024v55.05.

Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: gavinb@nyu.edu
¹New York University, USA
Community cookbooks: a new lens on post-war South African Jewish culture*

GAVIN BEINART-SMOLLAN

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons there were WZO [Women’s Zionist Organization] meetings that could never be missed, no matter what, and once a year, with great fanfare, there was the publication of the famous New International Goodwill Recipe Book, or the Yeoville Book, as it is known throughout South Africa. First published in 1950, the latest 326-page edition came out in 1982, updated and matriculated, with kosher recipes submitted by the ladies of Johannesburg, all of which, according to my mom, were useless. What Jewish woman, she wanted to know, would give away her most precious culinary secrets in a society where small talk was king and talk about food was almost a religious experience?

Hirsh Goodman, Let Me Create a Paradise, God Said to Himself (2009)

After the Second World War, South African Jewish women began to put out community cookbooks en masse. It seemed that almost every branch of every Jewish organization, as well as many a synagogue and Jewish school, needed its own cookbook. This glut of cookbook production was not limited to large urban centres like Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban; women’s groups from Paarl to Port Elizabeth, Vereeniging to Welkom, produced their own recipe compendia. Some of these books, like the “famous” Goodwill, became ubiquitous, selling more than 72,000 copies over the course of its publication history, and holding pride of

* I would like to express my gratitude to the following individuals and organizations: Louise Bethlehem and Anat Helman for their guidance and support in the writing of the MA thesis that was the basis for this article; Charlene Beinart, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, William Pimlott, and Tzipora Weinberg, as well as the journal’s editors, Avril Alba, Shirli Gilbert, and Adam Mendelsohn, and the two anonymous reviewers, for their insightful comments; Jemima Jarman for her administrative support; Isaac Roszler for his suggestions for reading material; the many individuals across the globe who shared their cookbooks with me; and the Center for the Humanities at New York University, and Adam Mendelsohn, Katie Garrun, Alex Abrahams, and Ben Vigne at the University of Cape Town’s Kaplan Centre, for crucial support in creating a digital archive of South African Jewish community cookbooks, located at sajewishcookbooks.org.za.
place on many newly married Jewish couples bookshelves. Others had more modest print runs. The Vereeniging Union of Jewish Women’s Cookery Nook (1980), for example, sold two thousand copies, its editors proudly proclaimed. Dozens of women served as cookbook editors, and hundreds more, perhaps against their better judgment, gave away their “most precious culinary secrets”, as the South African-Israeli journalist Hirsh Goodman wrote in his memoir. South African Jewish women produced more than a hundred individual titles between the 1940s and the end of the apartheid era in 1994.

These women created community cookbooks primarily to raise money for a charitable cause. However, their books served as far more than mere fundraising tools. As Anne Bower argued, the discrete elements of the cookbook – recipes, titles, advertisements, prefaces, and guidelines – combine to tell a story of the lives of the women who compiled it. In their community cookbooks, women claimed the right to self-definition, and to project and transmit their value systems – social, economic, religious, and cultural. In Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s words, cookbooks “reveal with special clarity how the highly perishable and ephemeral medium of food embodies core cultural values”.

Reading community cookbooks provides a window into the lives of South African Jewish women in the postwar period, carving out a space for women within South African Jewish historiography that has, with a few important exceptions, largely overlooked them. Elsewhere, I have argued

2 Erica Cohen, Ethel Jacks, and Noreen Cutler, eds., Eat’s a Pleasure (Vereeniging: Vereeniging Union of Jewish Women, 1980), foreword.
3 Hirsh Goodman, Let me create a Paradise, God said to Himself: A Journey of Conscience from Johannesburg to Jerusalem (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 11.
4 Veronica Belling’s list of cookbooks in her forthcoming updated edition of the Bibliography of South African Jewry helped me greatly in arriving at this figure. I thank Dr. Belling for sharing a draft of this list with me.
that producing and consuming community cookbooks helped South African Jewish women establish a place for themselves in the apartheid system and in the country’s broader white culture. Here, I turn the gaze inwards, demonstrating how women influenced South African Jewish culture and religious practice by creating these books.

Scholars have defined postwar South African Jewishness as being distinctive in three central ways: in its concentrated Litvak (Lithuanian Jewish) character, its ardent Zionism, and its “non-observant” Orthodoxy. Community cookbooks complicate our understanding of all three of these features of South African Jewish life. In their cookbooks, South African Jewish women constructed a connection with their Eastern European heritage more eclectic and multicentric than scholars have previously allowed, while also helping to create the conventional view of South African Jewry’s Litvak character. They offered a style of Zionism that integrated South African Jewry’s Yiddish-speaking past, rather than rejecting it. And they testified to a more active role for ordinary people in shaping South African Jewish religious practice than a “non-observant” label suggests. This approach to reading community cookbooks does not merely add women to the story of postwar South African Judaism. It offers a path forward for rethinking the conventions of that story.

“Traditional” food in the cookbooks

Approximately three million Jews left the Pale of Settlement for a better life in the West in the three decades before the First World War. Forty thousand of those immigrants chose South Africa as their destination. Most came from the Lithuanian borderlands of the Russian Empire, particularly Kovno Province. In both popular memory and scholarship, there is a well-established truism that South African Jewish culture is “genetically” Litvak. Scholars have claimed the community’s

Litvak origins to be determinative of many of its recognizable cultural characteristics, including its commitment to Jewish education, its religious practices, and its dedication to Zionism.\textsuperscript{11} Reading community cookbooks, a more heterogeneous, eclectic picture of South African Jewry’s cultural origins begins to emerge. At the same time, looking at the development of the cookbooks over time reveals how the idea of “traditional” Jewish food developed in South Africa. Cookbook editors and contributors synthesized these eclectic influences into a symbolic canon of traditional Jewish recipes that they presented as a direct line of transmission from their Litvak ancestors.

Some of the early community cookbooks produced in the 1940s and 50s did preserve evidence of a Litvak oral tradition. For example, many Litvaks, especially those from rural areas, spoke a form of Yiddish that other Eastern European Jews derogatorily referred to as “Sábesdiker Losn” (Sabbath language) – the pronunciation of the “sh” sound as “s”.\textsuperscript{12} Such cookbooks thus offered recipes for “Saltanoses”,\textsuperscript{13} a Lithuanian form of the Yiddish Shaltenosses.\textsuperscript{14} The dishes hamentashen, geshimirte matzos, and kiskhe appear in a number of earlier cookbooks as “hamentasen”, “gesmirte matzos”, and “kisker”.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, the 1951 Union Cook Book attributing immutable “genetic” cultural characteristics to Jews in general see Adam Mendelsohn, The Rag Race: How Jews sewed their Way to Success in America and the British Empire (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 1–2.


\textsuperscript{15} Miller and Felder, Favourite Home-Tried Recipes, 17; Miller, Schauder, and Glasser, Magen David Adom Recipe Book, 1st Ed., 51; Gertrude Harvey Cohen, Violet Wittert, and Becky Myers,
featured a recipe for “Carrot Chimmes”, a North-eastern Yiddish dialectical variant of the word tzimmes. By the 1960s, these uniquely Litvak words had disappeared from the pages of South African Jewish cookbooks, replaced by general, pan-Yiddish spellings. They probably disappeared because this culinary culture had come under the influence of the United States, the place to which the great majority of Eastern European Jewish immigrants had gone during the period of mass migration. Hasia Diner has demonstrated how Jewish immigrants arriving in the United States from all over Central and Eastern Europe created an intra-Jewish food exchange. Their eclectic regional cuisines coalesced to form eventually a generic American Jewish repertoire. The homogenizing effects of this American Jewish food exchange spread across the Eastern European Jewish diaspora, in the form of written recipes and cookbooks. As Veronica Belling has noted, South African Jews only began seriously to produce their own cookbooks in the 1950s. Before then, Jewish bookshops imported cookbooks from America. American matza manufacturers distributed brochures with Passover recipes in Yiddish and English in South Africa, and South African Jewish women cut recipes from American Yiddish newspapers. The editors of the South African cookbooks adopted American Jewish recipes and spellings too, mixing them with recipes inherited from their Litvak parents and grandparents.

This process of mixing can be seen most clearly in the example of gefilte fish. In his classic study of Yiddish linguistics (1965), Marvin Herzog argued that the line that divides the Central Yiddish dialect (spoken in what today is Poland) with the North-eastern dialect (spoken by Litvaks in what today is Lithuania, Belarus, and parts of north-eastern Poland) corresponds almost exactly to geographical differences in the preparation of gefilte fish. While Polish Jews added a lot of sugar to theirs, Lithuanian

---

19 Belling, “Recovering the Lives”, 68.
Jews preferred it heavily flavoured with black pepper. South African Jewish cookbooks featured recipes for both kinds. While the imported sugary gefilte fish proved more popular in the long run, the Litvak peppery variety persisted too. Some recipes combined both sugar and black pepper. Gefilte fish and the other Jewish food in these cookbooks had multiple and complex origin points, making them the product of a distinctly modern set of circumstances.

The editors themselves understood the place of “traditional” Jewish food in their cookbooks differently. They claimed that the “traditional recipes . . . have been handed down from generation to generation”. They emphasized that this was food “Just Like Mamma Made”. Contributors eagerly shared recipes from beloved grandmothers. Brandied fruit could be served “as our grandparents would have loved it, with Russian tea”. By contrast, the editors proudly declared the eclectic origins of the non-Jewish dishes in their cookbooks – the fancy French recipes from famous chefs at the exclusive restaurants at which they had eaten, and recipes that they had requested from the wives of foreign diplomats. Sharing the origins of such recipes helped first-generation South African Jewish women demonstrate their newly acquired bourgeois cultural capital. The Jewish recipes acted as the foil to these exciting new foods. They represented the women’s connection to the imagined shtetl – to a fixed, mythologized version of their Litvak past.

I thank Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett for talking through some of the issues with and nuances of this formulation with me.


Judy Druck, ed., The Club and I (Durban: Durban Jewish Club, 1974), 129.

Horowitz, Second Helpings, 62; Kangisser and Wolf, Cookery Capers, 2nd Ed., 81; Cohen and Marshak, King David Schools Recipe Book, 155.


King David Schools Ladies Committee Recipe Book, 158.


A number of scholars have written about the imagined shtetl and the mythologization
these cookbooks’ supposedly “traditional” recipes had no place in this understanding.\textsuperscript{30}

The Jewish food in these community cookbooks can therefore be seen as a kind of invented tradition. As Eric Hobsbawm argued, invented traditions are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations”. They emerge at times of rupture, as part of a deep desire to structure “at least some parts” of the rapidly shifting modern world as “unchanging and invariant”.\textsuperscript{31} The twin ruptures of mass migration and the Holocaust irretrievably altered the relationship of Jewish migrants in the West with their Eastern European Jewish cultural origins.\textsuperscript{32} Like other Jewish immigrant communities in the West, Shirli Gilbert has argued, Jews in South Africa had to figure out how to reconstruct and restore Jewish life after the war without access to their spiritual and cultural “reservoir” in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{33} The rise of the Jewish community cookbook in the postwar period helped to meet this need. Cooking, eating, and writing about “traditional” food offered Jewish women a way to cling to an imagined “traditional” past.\textsuperscript{34}

These ruptures catalysed a process of “formalization and ritualization”, in which unremarkable aspects of daily life became highly self-conscious acts.\textsuperscript{35} Cookbooks turned food that Jews and non-Jews in Eastern Europe


\textsuperscript{32} See Krah, American Jewry.


had once eaten unselfconsciously as part of their daily diet into “Jewish food”. South African Jewish community cookbooks boxed almost all their “traditional” recipes into a special, standalone section. Over time, these cookbooks created and perpetuated a canon of symbolic Jewish recipes. Immigrants, Richard Wilk notes, do not feel a sense of nostalgia for the entire cuisine that they have left behind. Instead, their memories and longings usually revolve round a limited set of emblematic dishes.36 The repertoire of Jewish recipes presented in the South African cookbooks remained remarkably consistent between different books, different editors, different cities of origin, and across time. Almost every cookbook included recipes for perogen, chopped herring, gefilte fish, babke, kugel, p’tcha, kreplach, kichel, tzimmes, kneidlach, blintzes, bulkes, teiglach, pletzlach, and ingberlach (see the Glossary below). Occasionally, a more unusual dish appeared in one of them, like “Peas and Kleis”, “Holishkes”, or “Essig Fleish”, but these were the exceptions that proved the rule. The cookbooks themselves played a crucial role in the formation of the canon. Their editors included certain recipes and excluded others. Earlier cookbooks influenced those published later. Newer books almost never added new “traditional” recipes to the repertoire. These few dishes came to stand for the entirety of Eastern European Jewish cuisine.

“Traditional” Jewish recipes served a ceremonial purpose, brought out on Shabbat and festivals as a way to demarcate Jewish time, fencing it off from the rest of the week.37 A number of cookbooks decorated their Jewish sections with stylized illustrations of holiday symbols – a menorah, a Kiddush cup, a prayerbook, Shabbat candlesticks, and the Star of David.38 By marking the Jewish recipes as separate from the rest of the cookbook, these illustrations distinguished the holy from the profane.

“Traditional” food also symbolized the transfer of heritage from one generation to another: in Eat’s a Pleasure (1980), for example, the “Jewish Traditional and Passover” section is illustrated with a cartoon cat mother and daughter setting the festive table.39 As the first-generation South

---

39 Cohen, Jacks, and Cutler, Eat’s a Pleasure, 209.
African Jews acculturated into white South African society in the postwar period, “traditional” food gained enormous symbolic power. By offering their readers a connection to their “genetic” inheritance through this symbolic “traditional” food, community cookbooks created a usable past for postwar South African Jews.

Zionism and Yiddish culture in the cookbooks

“Traditional” Eastern European food was not the only type of Jewish food present on the pages of postwar South African Jewish community cookbooks. These books also celebrated the food of the new Israeli state. Scholars of Yiddish culture in South Africa have typically understood Yiddish culture and Zionism as being in direct conflict. In South Africa as elsewhere, this conflict played out as a battle between the Hebrew and Yiddish languages. These language wars, they argue, served as a battleground for intra-Jewish class conflict, with the “bourgeois” Zionists pitted against the working-class Yiddishists. Reading community cookbooks complicates this binary. The cookbooks presented Eastern European, “traditional” recipes and Zionist, Israeli recipes in starkly contrasting ways. But “traditional” and Zionist recipes still sat side by side in the same books. Women who led Zionist organizations created cookbooks suffused with nostalgia for their Litvak heritage, and filled with dishes that had Yiddish names. At a time when male leaders were purportedly attempting to suppress Yiddish language and culture in the name of Zionism, community cookbooks offered a more integrated version of South African Jewishness.

Compared to other English-speaking Jewish communities, Gideon Shimoni has argued, South African Jewry had an “overwhelmingly”

Zionist character. Women had long served as the backbone of day-to-day Zionist fundraising in South Africa. In the postwar period, one of the most important women’s fundraising activities was the production and sale of community cookbooks. The sheer number of cookbooks created by women’s Zionist organizations across the country, over more than half a century, testifies to the importance (and effectiveness) of this fundraising method. These cookbooks fostered a sense of pride in the South African Jewish contribution to Israel, by highlighting the specific projects that the proceeds from the cookbook would support.

Buying a cookbook was a serious business. As L. Wunsch, the National Chairman of Magen David Adom South Africa, noted in a foreword to the *Magen David Adom Recipe Book*: “The publication of this cookbook in aid of funds for the Magen David Adom does not only serve a useful purpose in many homes, but also enables us to assist Headquarters [to] carry out its essential services in Israel – a service which contributes to the health of the people and to the security of the State.”

The fledgling State of Israel represented the Jewish future in postwar South African Jewish cookbooks, in contrast to the Eastern European past. Israeli culture seemed new and exciting, and putting “Israel” or “Tel Aviv” in the title could make all manner of simple dishes sound more interesting. Readers could find recipes for “Tel Aviv Cake”, “Israeli Stuffed Cabbage”, “Israeli Shortbread”, “Israeli Nut Rusks”, “Tel Aviv Brinjal” (aubergine), “Israeli Salad”, “Israeli Cheesecake”, “Israeli Roast”, “Tel Aviv Cabbage Stew”, and “Israeli

---

45 Miller, Schauder, and Glasser, *Magen David Adom Recipe Book*, 1st Ed., 5; *Kitchen Glove Recipe Book*, 5; *From Hatikvah’s Kitchen*, foreword; *Just up your Street*, foreword.
Chocolate Cake”. Jerusalem did not feature in these cookbooks. Editors and contributors found inspiration in Israel’s newness, and in the Israeli pioneering spirit, encapsulated in the new, Zionist city of Tel Aviv, not the ancient city of Jerusalem. The cookbooks celebrated Israel’s technological advancements by featuring advertisements for Israeli consumer products like the “Nanas” pot-scourers, which loudly proclaimed the product’s “Made in Israel” status. By purchasing a simple metal sponge, South African Jews could enjoy the fruits of Israeli industry and ingenuity, with the help of a product “far superior to any other available in this country”.

South African Jews could also reconcile their Zionism with their white South African middle-class values. After a trip to Israel in 1953, the South African Prime Minister D. F. Malan explicitly sanctioned South African Jews’ attachment to the Jewish state, remarking that “the Jew can, and does often, become a good national as well as a good Jew . . . a good South African as well as a true son of Israel”. The apartheid system defined the Jewish community as white, and by extension, saw Israel as a white state, notwithstanding the mass migration to Israel of non-white Jews from Arab countries in the 1950s. Bolstered by official endorsement, South African Zionism became a mainstream and respectable pastime. Community cookbooks offered a way into this pastime that went beyond fundraising. Unlike the “traditional” recipes fenced off into a special section, the cookbooks integrated Israeli food into their presentation of the general, aspirational cuisine that would help first-generation South African Jews move up the social ladder. For example, the Recipe Roundabout cookbook (1969) described tahini (or tehina) as “a cocktail dip, to be used as an accompaniment with falafel”, an “Israeli specialty” which “is an ideal cocktail snack”.

---

47 Bloemfontein Cooks Calling, 15; Cohen, Wittert, and Myers, International Goodwill Recipe Book, 2nd Ed., 102; Kangisser and Wolf, Cookery Capers, 2nd Ed., 102, 109; King David Schools Ladies Committee Recipe Book, 8; Rhona Lief and Pam Levitt, eds., Carmel Cooking for Compliments (Pretoria: Carmel Schools, 1968), 77; Druck, Club and I, 79; Kitchen Glove Recipe Book, 64; Brodie, Singing Kettle, 3rd Ed., 75; King David’s Recipe Collection, 89.


49 Lief and Levitt, Carmel Cooking for Compliments, 52.

50 Quoted in Shimoni, Jews and Zionism, 214.


52 Recipe Roundabout, n.p.
Eastern Europeanness occupied a somewhat different position in the white South African imagination. Throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, successive South African governments had come out strongly against continued Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Social commentators of the time cast Jews as a race apart, unable to assimilate into the majority “Nordic” culture. Fears of “race mixing” came to a head with the Quota Act of 1930, modelled on the United States’ Johnson-Reed Act of 1924. The Act effectively halted Eastern European Jewish immigration by imposing a cap on the number of immigrants from “quota” countries, which included Lithuania, Latvia, and Poland. Both the government and the opposition supported the bill, with the aim of preserving South Africa’s “white stock”. Scholars have suggested that South African Jews in the middle of the century tried to distance themselves from their Eastern Europeanness. Joseph Sherman has chronicled what he terms the “radical negation” of Yiddish and Yiddish culture amongst South African Jews. Litvak immigrants to South Africa, Sherman argued, wanted to give their children all the privileges that came with membership in white society. They quickly shed any cultural baggage that might undermine this. Jewish day schools deliberately effaced the language from the curriculum, and most Jewish children grew up without any knowledge of Yiddish. The South African Zionist Federation played the leading role in this campaign against Yiddish instruction, seeing it as a threat to the Hebrew school system.

In mid-century South Africa, the odds were stacked against Yiddish language and culture. Jews there experienced rapid social mobility in the postwar period. As first-generation South African Jews entered the middle class, they left the Yiddish-speaking, working-class roots of their Litvak immigrant parents behind. The Zionist majority overwhelmed the small

---

55 For the similar phenomenon that occurred in the American South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how it affected Jewish food culture, see Marcie Cohen Ferris, Matzoh Ball Gumbo: Culinary Tales of the Jewish South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), ch. 4.
57 Shimoni, Jews and Zionism, 56.
58 Adler, “Lithuania’s Diaspora”, 92.
leftist, Yiddishist, anti-Zionist segment of the Jewish population. But Yiddish culture persisted in the cookbooks. Moreover, it persisted there thanks in large part to women’s Zionist organizations, which published cookbooks filled with Yiddish-inflected recipes in order to raise money for Zionist causes, as noted earlier. By placing “traditional” food in its own special section of the cookbook, and cooking it only for Shabbat and festivals, South African Jewish women literally and figuratively tamed a messy and sometimes uncomfortable history into a carefully controlled and bounded resource. As they explored new and exciting Israeli and global food cultures in their cookbooks, the “traditional” food section offered a comforting cultural touchstone to which they could always return.

One could make a gendered division between the ostensibly masculine sphere of communal policy and official Zionist discourse, which suppressed and ignored Yiddish in favour of Hebrew, and the private, feminine sphere of the home and kitchen, where Eastern European Jewish culture, and remnants of the Yiddish language, persisted through food and oral tradition. The existence of South African Jewish community cookbooks complicates this formulation. The community cookbook acted as a public forum and an official written record. While the subject was the home and the kitchen, women did not compile their cookbooks in an isolated, domestic sphere, but rather as part of their public community roles. In their cookbooks, South African Jewish women created a public space where these two supposedly conflicting forces could mingle and coexist.

**Religious observance in the cookbooks**

As these examples demonstrate, women actively shaped South African Jewish culture through the cookbooks they created. Looking at cookbooks can also help us question predominant views of South African Jewish religious culture. Scholars have typically attributed a passivity to South African Jews regarding religious observance. Like Eastern European Jewish immigrants across the British Empire, most South African Jews

---


abandoned strict adherence to Jewish laws governing personal, private behaviour, while maintaining inherited forms of religious ritual in public. In other words, they became what Jocelyn Hellig has termed “non-observant Orthodox”. Although the majority of South African Jews were affiliated to Orthodox synagogues, they attended synagogue services sporadically, and observed rituals like Shabbat and kashrut selectively. Despite their laxity in religious practice, they demonstrated a deep respect for Orthodoxy, which they viewed as the most authentic expression of Judaism. Summing up the commonly held view, Mendelsohn and Shain have referred to a “muted religiosity”, a “diluted form of orthodoxy” that South African Jews “honoured in the breach more than in practice”.

Even in describing the baal teshuvah (religious revival) movement that took off in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s, scholars have seen the (mostly male) rabbinical leaders as the drivers and protagonists of this revolution, rather than the majority of ordinary laypeople.

The cookbooks complicate this framing. In their cookbooks, ordinary South African “non-observant” women took on an active role in shaping religious practice. Throughout their publication history, these cookbooks featured religious guidelines written by local rabbinic figures. Cookbook editors gave these rabbis a platform to reach a new audience, but it was a platform on which the audience set the terms of engagement. The way that rabbis constructed these guidelines reveals that women in their homes determined the style of religious observance far more than any rabbinic authority figure. In writing about postwar Orthodox Judaism in America, Haym Soloveitchik has argued that the Jewish home “lost its standing as religious authenticator” as Orthodox Jews started to base their practice of Halakhah (Jewish law) on written guidance from rabbis rather than on what they had imbibed mimetically from their parents.

64 See e.g. the outline of the movement in Shimoni, Community and Conscience, 226–40; recently, David Fachler, “Tradition, Accommodation, Revolution and Counterrevolution: A History of a Century of Struggle for the Soul of Orthodoxy in Johannesburg’s Jewish Community, 1915–2015” (Ph.D. diss., University of Cape Town, 2022), 29–31, has gone some way to correct the record with regard to gender in the movement, highlighting primarily the role played by international “superstar” female speakers and local rebbetzins (rabbis’ wives) in Orthodox religious revival.
But community cookbooks show that Jewish women in South Africa maintained a great deal of religious authority in the home, even after the advent of the baal teshuvah movement. Through the cookbooks, South African Jewish women created their own form of religious literature. These cookbooks acted as a form of “lived religion”: what the sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire has called “an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important”.66

As David Fachler has shown, the pragmatic, “accommodationist” postwar Orthodox rabbinate in South Africa knew that it would have little success trying to convince most South African Jews to take on stricter personal observance. Instead, rabbis and their wives focused on promoting the spiritual beauty of Judaism.67 Successive issues of the Goodwill Recipe Book featured an article by Rabbi Dr. Harry Abt entitled “Jewish Festival Fare”, which described the “historic, religious and mythical background of our Jewish Food”, and provided explanations for the symbolic meaning of eating certain dishes on certain holidays.68

In her article on the Passover seder in Cookery Digest (1951), Rose Smith, wife of the Worcester rabbi Mark Smith, offered “a word to the housewife on the symbolism of the evening”, describing the meaning of the various items on the seder plate.69 Other cookbooks devoted to Passover similarly focused on the symbolism of the seder, leaving out any mention of the many Halakhic stringencies of the festival.70

In a separate article in the Goodwill Recipe Book entitled “Ten Commandments for the Kosher Kitchen”, Abt did attempt to impose some

---

simplified rules for keeping a kosher home. However, reading between the lines of these guidelines reveals some of the ways in which Jewish women in postwar South Africa observed a form of kashrut defined more by mimetic inheritance than by rabbinic authority. Abt warned readers to “purchase meat and all meat products from a butcher whose store is under the supervision of the Beth Din (Ecclesiastical Court)”, and “not to think that meat from an animal which has not been ritually slaughtered can be made kosher by soaking and salting it”. He also instructed them to cook meat and milk in separate sets of pots and eat them on separate plates, and to buy separate sets of dishes for Passover.71

The absence of non-kosher recipes in these cookbooks suggests that most South African Jews would not have mixed milk and meat in the same recipe, nor eaten pork and shellfish. But the guidelines reflect the reality that some people cooked and ate their meat, milk, and Passover meals on the same set of dishes, and that many purchased their meat from non-kosher butcheries that did not slaughter their animals according to the laws of shekhitah. Promotions for kosher butcheries and kosher food products sat side-by-side with advertisements for non-kosher butcheries, restaurants, and wine, in the same cookbook.72 In other words, postwar South African Jewish women observed the rules of kashrut that mattered to them, and ignored those that did not.73 They formulated an implicit but commonly accepted set of standards for themselves, one which fell outside rabbinic authority. While these practices could be read as logically incoherent when viewed through the lens of normative Halakhah, they had what McGuire calls “practical coherence”.74 They allowed first-generation South African Jews both to maintain mimetic tradition and adapt it to a new South African lifestyle.

The rabbis themselves believed that women were in the driver’s seat when it came to the religious future of South African Jewry.75 Women’s

---

72 Horowitz, Second Helpings, 39, 78; Miriam Horowitz, ed., The Happy Hostess (Pretoria: Sisterhood of the Pretoria Jewish Reform Congregation, 1952), 24, 39; Kangisser and Wolf, Cookery Capers, 2nd Ed., 48, 72; Lief and Levitt, Carmel Cooking for Compliments, 42, 82; Druck, Club and I, 39, 95.
74 McGuire, Lived Religion, 15.
75 Rabbis in the postwar United States constructed similar messages. The Jewish Home
role in the transmission of religious practice to their children had taken on heightened importance during the migration period, because many immigrant men in South Africa had to work on Shabbat and some of the festivals.\(^{76}\) In the postwar period, rabbinic figures from both the larger Orthodox and the smaller Progressive congregations writing in the cookbooks placed the task of maintaining the family’s religiosity firmly in the hands of the woman of the house. As Rev. Nathaniel Jacobs, minister of the Pretoria Progressive congregation, wrote in *Second Helpings* (1950): “There is a lovely Rabbinic saying: ‘A man’s wife is his home’, and verily the true ‘eshet chayil’ [woman of valour] will maintain and preserve the essentially Jewish atmosphere of the home and make it an abode of sweetness and light; a centre of Jewish traditional observance and spiritual value for her husband and children.”\(^{77}\) In an article that appeared only in the first edition of the *Goodwill Recipe Book*, Abt playfully acknowledged the gap between South African Jews’ abiding cultural traditionalism and their religious laxity, suggesting that “Whole shoals of gehakte herring, hecatombs of gefilte fish, whole pyramids of teiglach, pletzlech and beigel, and gallons of borsht will not lend a Jewish character to a Jewish home, as long as the laws of Kashruth are disregarded”. He argued that “The carrying out of the laws of Kashruth falls naturally and almost exclusively in the woman’s sphere”. But:

> She must be ready to explain her reasons for carrying them out, because on her satisfactory answers to the questions put by her children depends their future adherence to these traditions. Gone is the age when children were content with the reply: “I do this because my mother did it before me, and her mother before her, and we must carry on our customs without question”\(^{78}\).

Abt both acknowledged the mimetic religious authority of women in the home, and argued that unselfconscious passing of tradition from mother to daughter would no longer suffice in the post-Holocaust, post-rupture world. He called on women to maintain the authority of the home while recognizing the necessity of that authority becoming self-conscious.

---

\(^{76}\) Belling, “Recovering the Lives”, 69.

\(^{77}\) Horowitz, *Second Helpings*, 61; see also Brodie, *Singing Kettle*, 3rd Ed.

and explicit. Women publishing religious guidelines and explanations in community cookbooks answered that call.

The advent of the baal teshuvah movement in the 1970s and 80s changed many South African Jews’ attitudes to religious practice. In Shimoni’s telling, the move to greater religious observance came initially from the religious-Zionist rabbis and lay leaders already established among South African Jews, led by the Yeshiva College and its head, the American-born Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, and later by the Yeshiva Gedola (post-secondary yeshivah), led by Rabbi Azriel Goldfein. The larger baal teshuvah movement, which eventually attracted even completely unaffiliated Jews, emanated from the small ultra-Orthodox Adath Jeshurun congregation in Johannesburg. Adath Jeshurun formed a kollel, a group devoted to full-time Talmudic studies, with the mission to bring young Jews “back” to religious observance. In 1972, the Chabad Hasidic movement, which had established a global outreach organization based in New York, sent its first emissaries, Rabbi Mendel and Rebbetzin Mushoi Lipskar, and in 1986 the prominent Jerusalem outreach group Ohr Somayach established itself in Johannesburg. These various organizations attracted thousands of South African Jews to the baal teshuvah movement.

The community cookbooks produced by some of these organizations demonstrate, by contrast, the role that ordinary lay women had in the development of the movement. The publication of Chag Sameach from Yeshiva College in 1984 marked a turning point in the history of South African Jewish community cookbooks. In both structure and style, the book demonstrated the inroads that the baal teshuvah movement had already made. Most of the cookbooks published prior to this point had focused primarily on teaching Jewish women how to cook cosmopolitan, international cuisine, and walled off their “traditional” food into a special, separate section. The editors of Chag Sameach, by contrast, structured their book entirely around recipes for Shabbat and the festivals. “Over the past few years there has been an increased awareness of religion”, Joyce Levin noted in her foreword to the book. “With this new awareness have come the questions of what to do and cook on the various chagim [holidays]. In answer to this, we decided at the Yeshiva College to put together a selection of popular traditional foods as well as more unusual ones”.

79 Mendelsohn and Shain, Jews in South Africa, 186.
80 Shimoni, Community and Conscience, 229–32; see also Fachler, “Tradition, Accommodation”, 91–139.
81 Joyce Levin, ed., Chag Sameach from Yeshiva College (Johannesburg: Yeshiva College PTA,
Each festival had its own self-contained section that featured all the recipes needed for that particular day, recipes both “traditionally” Jewish and those drawn from the secular repertoire. In the Simchat Torah section, for example, readers could find both the typical stuffed cabbage that Eastern European Jews ate on the festival, and recipes like “Stuffed Artichokes with Avocado” that modified the tradition to suit what had become a spring holiday in the southern hemisphere. This structure implied a new, all-encompassing approach to religious practice. The editors took recipes that their predecessors had created for secular dinner parties, and harnessed them for the celebration of religious holidays. Through food, the editors introduced their readers to holidays like Lag BaOmer, Tisha B’Av, and Shavuot that many who had grown up “non-observant Orthodox” had not celebrated.

In *Chag Sameach* these South African Jewish women created a new religious literature for themselves. Every section of the cookbook included “an introduction to each chag [holiday] which we hope will answer many questions people may have about the various dinim [laws]”. These guidelines offered practical Halakhic advice, but also provided a general Torah education for these newly religious women drawn from classic sources. Levin acknowledged that the final authority in Orthodox Judaism belonged to male rabbis, thanking Yeshiva College’s head, Rabbi Tanzer, “who very kindly verified our information”. But the book remained a product of the editors’ own study of Jewish texts. “All of us who have worked on this book have learned something new”, Levin wrote, “and we hope that you too will benefit from our research”. Levin’s statement highlighted the role of the community cookbook as a crucial tool of religious education and socialization for women in the baal teshuvah movement.

Most South African Jews did not become observant. The percentage of those who kept strictly kosher, for example, had risen to 37.7 per cent in 1991, compared to 27 per cent in 1974. But the baal teshuvah movement

---

1984), 2.
82 Ibid., 94–103.
83 Ibid., 2.
84 For an American example of this see Laurence Roth, “Toward a Kashrut Nation in American Jewish Cookbooks, 1900–2000”, *Shefar* 28, no. 2 (2010): 74–5.
Community cookbooks had an outsized impact on South African Jewish religious practice. A study published in 2000 found that many of the parents of South African baalot teshuvah (female adherents) became more religiously committed themselves, without taking on Halakhah in its totality.\textsuperscript{86} South African Jewish community cookbooks in general, including those produced by “non-observant” women, began to push a more stringent approach to kashrut. This change was particularly noticeable in the cookbooks’ treatment of the laws of Passover. As mentioned earlier, community cookbooks from the 1950s to the 1970s discussed the meaning of the seder with little reference to any of the strict laws of the festival. The Kitchen Glove cookbook (1975), for example, told readers merely to avoid leaven and legumes during Passover, advising them that “all other foods may be used in the same manner, as at any other time of the year”.\textsuperscript{87} The Union Jubilee (1982), by contrast, detailed with great specificity how one should make one’s home kosher for Passover, including instructions on the thorough cleaning required, which utensils may be “koshered”, when, and the correct procedure for each type of utensil.\textsuperscript{88}

In a special Passover message for Herzlia High Schools’ Pesach, Passover Recipe and Guide Book (1990), the Chief Rabbi of South Africa Cyril K. Harris noted that the book would not merely provide Jewish women with Passover recipe ideas, but would “help to fulfil the main purpose of the Festival, that in going back we gain strength to continue our traditions in the future”.\textsuperscript{89} This statement suggests that the Chief Rabbi and his colleagues recognized the key role that these books played in South African Jewish religious practice over the second half of the twentieth century. Thanks in part to the community cookbook, women in the home did not lose their “standing as religious authenticator”, at least not in the South African case. On the contrary, rabbis had to seek the authentication of the women who wrote and edited community cookbooks to reach their intended audience. Thanks to the enormous and consistent popularity of these cookbooks, and their ubiquity in South African Jewish households,

\textsuperscript{87} Kitchen Glove Recipe Book, 82.
\textsuperscript{89} Pesach, Passover Recipe and Guide Book, 2.
they arguably shaped ordinary South African Jews’ religious practices far more than other, more typical rabbinic texts.

Conclusions

Anne Bower has called the community cookbook “a subtle gap-ridden kind of artifact”.90 Since it is primarily not a narrative or discursive form, it does not always lend itself to easy interpretation. But reading community cookbooks brings to the surface aspects of the cultural and religious practices and beliefs of its editors, contributors, and readers that other forms of writing tend to obscure. The more discursive aspects of these cookbooks, the prefaces and guidelines, made normative claims about cultural, Zionist, and religious ideologies. They claimed to pass down “traditional” recipes from mother to daughter, to champion Zionism in negation of diasporism, and to instruct readers in normative, rabbi-produced Halakhah. The non-discursive elements of the books – their recipes, advertisements, structures, and publication contexts – undercut or complicate some of these claims. They show that women participated in a complex Jewish multinational culinary culture, preserved Yiddish culture within their Zionist beliefs and commitments, and formulated their own type of Jewish law.

South African Jewish community cookbooks thus reveal characteristics of South African Jews and Jewish communities that the existing South African Jewish historiography, based primarily on classic, discursive sources, has not fully noticed. They offer a new lens through which to observe the cultural and religious evolution of the South African Jewish population in the postwar period. Community cookbooks taught South African Jewish women how to be Jewish in ways that subtly tweaked the messages that women heard from their rabbis, synagogues, Zionist organizations, and Jewish day schools. These cookbooks reflect postwar South African Jewishness not as a set of abstract principles or characteristics, but as South African Jewish women practised it in their everyday lives.

90 Bower, “Our Sisters’ Recipes”, 140.
Glossary of food terms

Babke/babka – a sweet yeast cake
Blintzes – thin crepes folded over a cheese or fruit filling and baked or sautéed
Borscht – a soup made with beetroot, sometimes with the addition of meat
Bulkes/bulkas – yeast buns
Essig Fleish – Sweet and sour roasted beef chuck
Gefilte fish – quenelles of poached, deboned fish
Gehakte herring – chopped herring, normally sweetened and served with kichel (see below)
Gesmirte Matzos/Geshmirte Matzos – moistened matza baked with cheese, sour cream, and raisins
Hamentassen/Hamentashen – lit. Haman’s ears, triangular-shaped biscuits filled with sweet fillings or poppy seeds, eaten at the festival of Purim
Holishkes – stuffed cabbage rolls, normally filled with minced beef
Ingberlach – a homemade sweet made of ginger and carrots
Kichel – a sweet biscuit made with eggs and sugar, rolled out thin and cut into diamond shapes; South African Jews typically serve kichel with chopped herring
Kugel – a baked pudding or casserole, typically made with noodles (lokshen kugel) or potatoes
Kneidlach – or matza balls, a soup dumpling made with matza meal, eggs, water, and fat
Peas and Kleis – a dish of peas with flour dumplings
Perogen – small pies filled with meat or other fillings, baked, and served in chicken soup or as a separate dish
Pletzlach – a homemade sweet made of dried apricots
P’tcha – jellied calf’s foot
Saltenosses/Shaltenosses – dumplings filled with cheese, served in a milky sauce
Teiglach – small, round biscuits boiled in syrup
Tzimmes/Tsimes/Chimmes – sweet stew made with carrots and other root vegetables combined with dried fruits; may also be made with the addition of meat

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.